

# How Sin Uses the Law to Deceive You

Determination can get you into trouble. When I turned 50, I hit that phase of life when you start to come to terms with not being young, but there's still that part of you that wonders if you can turn the clock back. Deep down, I wondered if it was possible to get back in the kind of shape I was in when I was in my 20s. Around that time there was a boot-camp type of fitness class that had started meeting at James River, and the people in it kept asking me to join. Eventually, I gave in and decided, *I'm going to do this thing.*

All my life, it has been my style to attack anything I do head-on. So when I went to that first class, I tackled it with the same kind of enthusiasm and grit I always had. Who cares about being 50? And as advertised, boot camp put me through the gauntlet: push-ups and sit-ups, mountain climbers, bear crawls, floor sweepers, squats and a lot of running in between. In typical Lindell style, I went after it as hard as I could. I've always been competitive, and I've got enough pride not to let myself be outworked! It was exhausting, of course, but when it was all said and done, I felt pretty good. "I'm not 30 anymore, but I've still got it"—or so I thought.

Later that day, my wife and I headed out of town to celebrate our anniversary. We enjoyed a beautiful dinner by the river and afterwards decided to take an evening stroll along the promenade. That's about the time it hit me—my quads were on fire. My hamstrings were so tight that you could've played the "Orange Blossom Special" on them! As we came to some steps, I realized that my legs were so sore, I needed to take the wheelchair ramp just to get to the top. All the while I was thinking, *How am I going to get onto the platform to preach on Sunday?*

Ultimately, nothing was bruised except my ego. It wasn't a big deal. But in microcosm it's an image of how many Christians end up trying to take on a life of holiness. We grit our teeth, clench our fists and determine we are going to get it right this time—no matter what it takes. But instead of getting stronger and faster, we only get more exhausted, overextending ourselves until we can barely move.

## **Sin's Deceptions**

The law, in and of itself, is good. It shows us what a righteous life looks like and sets borders and parameters for our lives. But the law, for all of its intrinsic good, does not have the power to save us. It can tell us what to do, but it cannot empower us to get it done. Neither does it have the ability to transform us. It shows us how far off we are from hitting the mark, and in the words of Romans 3, shows us just how true it is that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (v. 23). Worse yet, even when we know the law, we can't keep it.

In Romans 7 Paul makes a fascinating statement: While the law in and of itself is good, sin actually tries to use the law against us. He writes, “I was alive without the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was intended for life, proved to be death in me. For sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and killed me through it” (Rom. 7:9-11).

It makes sense when we consider that all the enemy ever really does is distort and pervert the very things God intended for good. There is nothing Satan is not willing to try to use against us.

According to Paul, the law is actually the mechanism God uses to reveal sin to us. It tells us what things are sin, to be sure, as we see in the Ten Commandments. But there is also a deeper kind of “knowing” of sin that the law makes possible.

Romans 7:7-8 says, "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid! But I did not know sin, except through the law. I would not have known coveting if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of coveting. For apart from the law sin is dead."

That second kind of knowing implies a firsthand knowledge, an experiential knowledge. In the Garden of Eden, Adam "knew" Eve. They made love; they experienced each other. This is not head knowledge but lived experience—like "knowing" what it is to touch a hot stove and be burned!

Intrinsically our human nature makes us want to have something the moment we are told we cannot have it. Anybody who has ever raised a child knows this is true on an almost primal level. The moment we are given a concrete limit, our hearts are inclined to test it.

A hotel on Padre Island, Texas, sat right on the water. Given the proximity, the owners knew people would inevitably try to fish from the hotel balcony. So they put up signs everywhere that said, "No fishing from the hotel balcony." Sure enough, within days you could see fishing lines coming from all over the hotel balcony; everybody was fishing. Finally they took the signs down—and people stopped fishing from the balconies of the hotel! It's human nature.

This is why a rules-based approach to godliness will inevitably fail us every time. Law, as opposed to love, doesn't actually motivate us to keep the law of God, but to break it!

Paul takes this a step further in Romans 7:11. Sin can deceive us; it can use the law deceitfully in all directions. It can deceive us about righteousness—causing people to think too highly of themselves on the one hand and to condemn themselves on the other hand. Either method is equally effective because

so long as righteousness is based on our own performance, we lose either way—whether through hubris or indulgence.

Sin can also deceive us into thinking the law is unreasonable, as if God is a cosmic killjoy trying to keep us from having fun. This is especially unfortunate because what we see in Scripture over and over again is a God relentlessly committed to human flourishing. In Jesus we have a God whose stated goal for us is that we “may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10, ESV).

God has created so much for us to enjoy. The truth is, sin diminishes our humanity in a way that numbs our senses to joy and beauty. That is part of the deceitfulness of sin. The nuances of ways sin can deceive us seem endless. Sin can fool us into thinking God is against us, or just make itself appear more attractive!

Because Paul was “a Hebrew of Hebrews; as concerning the law, a Pharisee” (Phil. 3:5b, MEV), he knew all too well how the law could be commandeered for sinful purposes. In his former life, he actually killed Christians in the name of keeping the law. So he was ever-vigilant and aware of the ways the law itself could be used to keep us away from God and His purposes for our lives.

## **True Love**

Without wanting to overstate the case, the choices couldn’t be starker: We will go either the way of the law or the way of love. And sadly, without love, the law that reveals and provokes sin in us won’t do us any better in the grand scheme of things than lawlessness does.

Anybody who ever attempts to follow the law—even just to be a “good,” moral person—has the same experience: It turns out to be self-defeating. Our good just isn’t good enough.

No matter how valiantly or vigorously we attempt to keep the

commandments in our own strength, it always ends like my first day at boot camp—we are so exhausted from trying to get it done in our efforts that we give out and are unable to move forward.

As a pastor, one of the things I love about serving the same church for many years is seeing how people learn to love at different ages and stages of life. More recently I've been inspired by the way some couples I've known have loved each other in their twilight years. It has been beautiful to watch.

The generation now in their 80s and 90s had different roles and responsibilities during their prime earning years than those we have now. In their generation, it was more common for the man to go off to work and the woman to take care of the house while he was away.

So it was moving to see, when an elderly woman in our church was physically failing, the tenderness with which her aged husband cared for her. He had his own health problems to contend with, but he was right there by her bedside at the hospital. The doctors told him she would be going home soon, and he would need to be physically strong to care for her: "You have to get your own rest," they said. But he couldn't leave her, for no other reason than that he wanted to be there. Even as one night became two nights, and two nights became three nights, and three nights became four, he could not bear to leave her side.

When you see that kind of love, what you see is not the strength of a vow. That kind of commitment is not about mechanically trying to keep your word just for the sake of words that were spoken long ago. There was something much, much deeper that motivated him.

He was there not because it was a matter of law but of love. Love fulfills the law—you end up there because you want to be there and choose to be there. The secret to the Christian life

is not to master the rules but to fall more deeply in love. The rule of law, however hopeful it might seem from afar, ultimately cannot liberate us. In fact, it is the very thing Christ came to liberate us from!

## **No Condemnation**

That perfect love renders Satan's accusations powerless against us. For most of us, however, the real threat of condemnation is not external, but internal. Sometimes it is not Satan's condemnation that we can't seem to get out from under but our own.

Scripture anticipates this, which is why the apostle John wrote these words: "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, then we have confidence before God. And whatever we ask, we will receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight" (1 John 3:21-22).

Our hearts know things about us that others do not know. John doesn't encourage us to ignore those thoughts that are generated in our hearts but to meet them by realizing God knows more!

God is not less acquainted with our failures and shortcomings than we are, but much more so. He knows them better than we do and can see us so much more clearly than we can see ourselves. God has access to all the information, to every mangled motive and even the slightest self-deception. He knows all of this and more. And yet God also knows the sacrifice His Son already made for us and the verdict already rendered. He knows how completely He loves us.

So if our hearts do condemn us, what should we do? In that moment, we rest in the fact that God's judgments are infinitely higher than our judgments, and God is greater than our hearts!

The book of Hebrews tells us that because Jesus was tempted as

a man, He is sympathetic to our weaknesses. He understands the frailty of the human condition in an experiential, first-person way. In the words of Psalm 103:14b, "He remembers that we are dust."

He is not detached or distant from us. He knows life on earth is no cakewalk. He knows what it means to be tired, hungry, misunderstood and rejected. He is able to enter into solidarity with us, to be moved by that which moves us, touched by that which touches us.

Romans is a brilliant book. But for all of its genius, it would be tragic to see it as just "heady" at its core; it is first and foremost heart. Specifically, it lays bare the heart of God—a God who knows everything there is to know about you—the good, the bad and the ugly—but loves you anyway.

He is for you. There has never been a moment of your life when He wasn't thinking about you. There is nothing He would not give to get to you. He chose you and loved you before you took your first breath. As as you navigate this life, He will never stop reaching out to you in love.

Romans makes it clear that by putting your faith in Jesus, you can experience more than just forgiveness of sin. Forgiveness of sin is wonderful, but your salvation is so much more! You are now a completely new person, one who is righteous before God. You don't earn His favor; you have it already. You don't outrun or overcome your sin; it has already been removed.

The Spirit lives in you, is at work in you and is changing you! At times it can seem that you have taken two steps forward and one step back (and on bad days, that you took one step forward and two steps back!), but the God who began His work in you is continually at work in you. It is all part of His work of grace in you.

It is grace that made you aware of God's love, it is grace that drew you to receive God's gift of salvation, and it is

grace that stirs in you. It is a grace greater than your sin and grace more powerful than your best performance. So, my friend, celebrate that grace, grow in that grace and rest in that grace. It is not only greater than your sin, but it is grace that will lead you home. {eoa}

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