

Chapter Nine

The One Commandment

“For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter” (Romans 7:5-6).

When God gave the Law to Israel He knew that not one single person would be able to keep that Law perfectly. Though He demanded obedience to that law, under penalty of death, He knew before hand that they were unable to keep it. This does seem, on the surface, an unreasonable demand, unless we understand the purpose of which the Law was given. It was not given to *save*, but to show the need of salvation. It was not given to take away sin, but to reveal sin, for by the Law is the *knowledge of sin* (not salvation from sin). We therefore ask the question that was already anticipated by Paul in Romans 7:7

“What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet...For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died” (Romans 7:7& 9)

The Law did not produce sin, but instead it revealed the true nature of sin. Paul says, *“When the commandment came it slew me.”* What did Paul mean by *the* commandment? The two tables of the law are called the Ten Commandments. Which of these did Paul refer to when he said, *“the commandment?”* I believe Paul indicates clearly to which one he referred to. It is the last one – *“thou shalt not covet,”* because he says, “

I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet” (Romans 7:7)

That was *the* commandment that caused sin to revive, *“and I died”* says Paul. Paul could claim perfect obedience to the first nine commandments as far as *outward* observance was concerned. He could say honestly,

“Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Philippians 3:4-6).

Paul could claim *outward* observance to the Law. He, evidently, had kept every one of the commandments and could say, *“as touching the Law, I am blameless.”* He could say he had never broken the first commandment – had never owned any other God. He

could claim the second – he had never worshiped graven images. He could claim perfect obedience to the third – he had never taken the name of the Lord in vain; and so with the fourth – he had never broken the law of the Sabbath. And so on, with the fifth, honoring father and mother; and the sixth, thou shalt not kill; and the seventh, adultery; and the eighth, stealing; and the ninth, bearing false witness, lying. To all these he could say, *“I kept every one of them. No one can accuse me of not keeping those laws.”* But it applied only to outward observance, and now comes the tenth commandment, which Paul calls,

The Commandment.

It was a new view of sin, and revealed that sin was a matter of the heart and the mind, and not only the overt act itself. The commandment said, *“Thou shalt not covert.”* Evil desires, covetousness, jealousy, wrong thoughts, sinful motives – (even if never carried into action) – are sin! *The* commandment now reveals that sin is not an *act*, but an attitude. Sin is a matter of the mind and heart, rather than just of the body. Before the act of murder is committed, there is the sin of hate that prompted it. Before a person steals, there is of all the sin of covetousness. Before the act of adultery is committed, there is the sin of lusting.

Jesus emphasized this aspect of sin when He said:

“For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are the things which defile a man” (Matthew 15:19-20).

When Paul came face to face with *the* commandment, he had no more boasting of his outward observance of the Law. Up to now Paul could say, *“I never cursed, broke the Sabbath, worshiped idols, stole, or murdered anyone.”* He could say, *“as touching these things, I am blameless,”* but then *the commandment* came, and revealed to Paul the real nature of sin, that even evil desires is sin. This is the meaning of Romans 7:9-14:

“For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me. Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful. For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin”

The Law Stirred Up Sin

We see then that the Law brought to light the real nature of sin, not as an act but a condition, or an attitude. This is again expressed in Romans 7:5,

“For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death” (Romans 7:5).

Notice carefully the words, *“the motions of sins which were by the Law.”* The motions of sins were caused by the Law. The Law was not sin, but it did set in motion the activities of sin. In verse 8 Paul says, *“without the Law sin was dead.”* The meaning is that sin was quiescent – it did not appear in its true light as sin. Then the Law came and *stirred up sin*, so it became apparent and visible. The law did not cause or create sin, but it set it in motion – *“drove it out of hiding,”* as it were. Son in answer to the question, *“Wherefore then serves the Law?”* We add that it was:

Revelational

We have already studied that the law was *national* in character, *dispensational* in its ministry, and *exemplary* in purpose. Now let’s consider its *revelational* character. It revealed sin as it had not been seen before. Paul says, *“the motions of sins which were by the law.”* Before the Law, says Paul, sin was dead; that is, inactive and not visible. Sin was there, but the law makes it visible, *“stirred up”* by the Law. An illustration may help. Imagine that I have a glass of water on my desk. It has stood there for a number of days, quiet and undisturbed. It has not been agitated, and we could call it *“dead water.”* It looks clear and sparkling, but it is in reality badly polluted and unsafe to drink! It contains a large amount of impurities and particles of dirt. These filthy components are not visible to the eye, for they have all been deposited as a layer of sediment at the bottom of the glass. Because the water was dead, undisturbed, all the particles had gravitated to the bottom of the glass, quiet, undetected.

Now I take a teaspoon and begin to stir the water, and lo, immediately the film of milky, filthy material clouds the glass of water while in repulsive stench issues from the water. Now what have I done? I have stirred up something I did not know was there before. With the teaspoon I put in motion the pollution and impurities in the glass. Now notice carefully, the teaspoon did not corrupt the water or increase its pollution. Neither can the teaspoon purify the water. In order to do that, I remove the spoon and lay it aside. It was not intended to cleanse but to reveal. You see now what Paul means by the expression, *“the motions of sins, which are by the Law”* – not the sins which were by the law, but *“the motions of sins..”* The spoon revealed the filth; but to purify the water, it must be distilled and the pure separated from the impure. This is not the ministry of the Law, for by the Law is the knowledge of sin.

The Spoon is the Law

The illustration of the water and the spoon is a picture of the human heart and the ministry of the Law. The glass of water is the human heart. The law is the spoon that stirred up this sin within the heart. There is nothing wrong with the spoon, and there is nothing wrong with the Law. The Law cannot correct, or remove sin from the heart, just as the spoon cannot remove the impurities in the water. To purify the water

takes *distillation*; to correct the sin in the human heart requires *regeneration*. The Law then, instead of correcting the pollution, stirs it up.

The depravity of the human heart has done strange things to men. It has twisted and perverted his nature so that a forbidden thing seems more appealing than the things that are not prohibited. If you put up a sign on a fence, “*Do Not Touch – Wet Paint,*” it is a sure thing that someone will want to touch it to see if it is really wet. A sign “*Keep Off the Grass,*” is an invitation to walk on it, so we have to build a little fence around it, in addition to the sign. Prohibitions are invitations to the sinful heart of man, to do the things they would not even think of doing, if they were not forbidden.

If you want to test out this propensity of the human heart, you can try it out in a very simple way. Suppose on the top shelf of your cupboard are several pots and pans. They have been there for quite a while and have never created a desire in the heart of, let us say, your six-year-old son. But now you say to him, “*Jimmy, do you see that gray pot, the one next to the end one, on the right? Well, I don't ever want you to look inside it. You are not to touch it or try to find out why you are forbidden to do so.*” Now what have you done? You have created in the heart of that child a desire for something he never knew before, an insatiable desire to look into that jar and find out why mother doesn't want him to know what is in it. Just as sure as he is a chip off the old block, he will await his opportunity, and when he feels he is safe from detection, he will climb up and find out. Not as a mother, you have a right to forbid him to look into the jar or bowl, in order to teach him to know something about his own heart. This is the meaning of Paul's words, “for the motions of sins, which were by the Law, did in our members to bring forth fruit unto death” (Romans 7:5). And then notice the question of Paul,

“What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid” (Romans 7:7).

There was nothing wrong with your demand for obedience concerning the bowl or the cookie jar. No, there was nothing wrong with the Law – there was nothing wrong with the teaspoon. It was sterling silver. But the teaspoon did bring to light the Impurities of the water, and so too the Law “stirred up the sin” that was not evident until the commandment came.

What The Law Could Not Do

With this in mind, let's refer again to the statement that the Law was never designed to give life. It was a ministry of condemnation for the transgressor. Notice carefully Paul's statement in Galatians 3, After asking the question in verse 19, “*Wherefore then serves the Law?*” and the answer that we are studying, when Paul says,

“Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe” (Galatians 3:21-22).

Could anything be clearer than this? If it were possible to give a Law that could justify a sinner, then Christ would not have needed to die, but now salvation is free to all who turn away from the Law as their hope of salvation to faith in Jesus Christ.

“For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Romans 8:3-4).

