

## God's View of Law: Part 1

Romans 7:12a

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Let us pray. Dear Father, we trust you to speak through your Spirit to our spirits, so that we will receive something from you that is deeper than the intellectual stimuli that we have experienced during the week, and we will receive something deeper than the emotional signals that we receive from the world around us, and we will experience something from you, yourself for your glory. Amen.

We were sitting down to lunch last Sunday. And wives are your best critic and your dearest comfort, too. But they're your best critic. And my wife said to me in a very diplomatic way, "Don't you think you've been in the law a bit long?" And then she said, "I mean, last Sunday I kind of felt that a lot of us felt, we had heard it before." And I said, "Well, if Paul stayed with it for a chapter, I suppose we should at least try to do the same thing." And yet I was aware myself, that from an intellectual viewpoint, I think we often do deal with ideas and concepts more than we need to, if intellectual understanding is the only thing that is necessary.

But I think it is true, brothers and sisters, that most of us are very slick at grasping a truth intellectually without it ever penetrating down into our lives. I really do believe that what we're involved in here in the theater on Sunday morning -- though it ought to be intellectually valid, and ought, as far as God wants it to be, intellectually satisfying -- yet it seems to me that we're involved in a supernatural miracle, because our job is to so deal with the truth about the Creator of the universe, so that his Holy Spirit will be able to make that truth real to each one of us.

Only the Holy Spirit can do that, and so often, on a Saturday as I sit down and begin to seek God and to find out what he wants to say to you, I really sense him pulling me back from what I would do intellectually, because he knows there's someone here this morning who needs to hear the things said in a different way. So really dear ones, it seems to me, it is necessary to stay with truths that God presents to us as long as his Spirit guides us. And you must admit that many of us get messed up about law.

We really get all twisted up in our own thinking about law. You know how many of us have listened to what are meant to be inspiring, encouraging uplifting talks on prayer or on the spiritual life, and we go home and we turn those truths into laws, with which we beat ourselves, or with which we try to save ourselves.

In other words, we in our generation are just very open to the whole temptation to be legalistic. And you know how many of you get under all kinds of false condemnation, through utterly misusing God's concept of law. So, some of us just live under legalism. Legalism is salvation by works. It's thinking that the things you hear on Sunday morning, if you only do them then God will accept you.

Of course, that isn't true at all. The law is really a description of the kind of life that flows from you when you receive God into your own heart. It's a proof that he is there. But I think there are others of us who have gone to the other extreme. And we have seen people getting under legalism and getting in bondage to legalism and to salvation by works. And we have taken Luther's truth that we are justified in being alive today, and having the opportunity to receive God's kindness, and His

supernatural life, because of our faith in Jesus' death. And we have utterly ignored Luther's emphasis on the kind of life that comes, after that takes place.

So, we have gone to the other extreme to antinomianism. And we have said, "Oh, legalism is wrong, and so we should stay clear of law completely. Law is just bad. It's wrong. You shouldn't emphasize it. You should emphasize that God will accept us, whatever we're like, whatever we do, whatever we ever manage to do or obey."

So brothers and sisters, I think it is true that, even though you might have heard it before, yet we do kind of split into two camps. And some of us are bound in legalism. And some of us are bound in just an unscriptural emphasis on being able to sin with impunity because of Jesus' death.

I think it's just very important that we get God's mind on things. And that's what we need to be concerned with here in the theater. Not, what do you think? Not, what do I think? Not, what does Luther think? What does Calvin think? What does Wesley think? But really, what does God think about law?

However, you will be kind of glad to know -- and my wife especially will be glad -- I am sure she won't come to lunch with me, after this today -- that Paul now, summarizes what he's been saying about law in the verse we're studying today. So maybe you'd look at it. It's Romans 7:12.

You remember, he started with the question in Romans 7:7, "What then, shall we say? That the law is sin?" So he starts with that question. Is the law bad because some people seem to have refused God, and come under condemnation by the law, or because other people seem to have got bound up in a false legalism? And then he answers in Roman 7:12.

"No." "The law is holy and the commandment is holy and just and good." And if we get into agonizing depressions over the law, it's because we are not seeing it in the way that God himself sees it. And we're not seeing it for the function that he wants it to perform. So he outlines just four kind of clear functions of the law. And loved ones I think you should take these seriously and keep yourself clear of misconceptions about the law, by accepting these statements that God makes about it.

He says first of all, the law is holy. I remember reading of a member of a certain sect who was trying to convert the other person and he said, "God is God because he was righteous enough to obey the law, and so he kind of won his position as God." And this is a famous sect, dear ones, that tend to teach this -- well known, I think, by all of us. [Mormonism]

He went on further to say, "That's how we become God. If you can be righteous enough to obey the law, then you can become like God too." And obviously, that last statement comes straight from the Serpent's mouth, "You shall be like God and you shall become just as God himself." (Genesis 3:5) But the first part of the statement has the old heresy, "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" Because, which did come first? Did the law come first or did God come first?

You know we have little doubt in our minds, "In the beginning, God," nothing else before God. God was first. And the law is simply a description of God's nature, and of the kind of life that flows between him and his Son Jesus. So, the law is just a beautiful expression of God's nature.

So when Paul says, "The law is holy", he's just saying the law is like God because "holy" -- the Greek word "hagios", holy -- just means, "like God". That's why you remember, God said, "Be you holy

as I am holy." (1 Peter 1:16) We tend to interpret it, you know, "Be goody-goody or do this and don't do that. Don't do these things and do these things." No, God isn't saying that. That's our idea of holiness. God says, "Be like me; be like me. Be loving like me, be generous like me, be open-hearted like me, be confident like me, be like me." And so, when Paul says the law is holy, he's saying the law is a beautiful description of what God, our Creator, is like.

Now would you look with me at one law and apply that to it? And I think it'll save some of us from a lot of condemnation that we get into. It's Matthew 18, dear ones. There's a law there that is good to look at, in order to see what God himself is really like.

Matthew 18:21, "Then Peter came up and said to him, 'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.'" So old Peter got the calculator out, and kind of, realized that Jesus was saying forever, really. But do you see the point of it? If God told Peter to forgive his friends seventy times seven, that means God himself is like that.

See, I think a lot of you get into all kinds of agonies because you have done a certain thing wrong so often, that you think, "God must have given up on me." Now loved ones, God's law describes God's own nature. God will forgive you until seventy times seven. And really what he is saying is, until seven million times seven.

God has no difficulty in forgiving you as often as you fall. And as long as your heart is soft enough to repent, and tell him you're sorry, and go to him, God will forgive you. Now that's his own word, you see, because the law is a perfect description of God's nature.

So you know, I am thinking particularly of you brothers and sisters who get into besetting sins that you just cannot overcome. You've fallen again and again and again and again. Do you see that that is not God's will for you -- and there is a deliverance through dying with Jesus -- but until that becomes real in your life, as long as your heart is soft enough to be sorry, God forgives you until seventy times seven.

So, if you feel any condemnation, be assured it is not from the Father. Now, it isn't, loved ones. It may be from old ideas that you have in your head from way back. It may be from other people's attitudes, but it isn't from our Father in heaven because he has put you into Jesus. And as far as he is concerned, he has worked out upon you and upon your selfish will, all the wrath that he intends to work out. And the Father himself will forgive you until seventy times seven.

I think a lot of you, you see, hang behind fear and guilt because you somehow get the idea that God will only forgive so often. Now God is like his own law. He will not tell Peter to live a higher kind of life than he himself lives. There is another law that I think would help in a different way.

Matthew 7:7-11, "Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." Those are laws in that sense. They're what God wants us to do. "Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?" And that's another law. A father won't give his son a stone when he asks him for bread. "Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?"

But you kind of pray, "Lord, would you guide me to the right job and to a job that will really fulfill me?" And then a little voice in the back of your mind says, "No, You probably will give me the most miserable job I can imagine having." And you pray, "Lord, will you lead me to the right girl or the right fellow for me, just the right one, the one with whom I'll be really happy, and the one who will really fulfill your plan for my life?" And a little voice says back there, "He is probably not interested in my happiness at all. He'll just give me anybody."

Loved ones, do you see that a lot of you have real difficulty surrendering your lives fully to God because you kind of have the feeling -- I don't know where you get it because God in Jesus is such a beautiful looking person -- but you've kind of a feeling that there's some miserable old Being back there behind the clouds, planning all the things that you don't like, and planning that you will get them. So I don't like tapioca. I hate tapioca. And I should kind of think, "Oh, he is probably loading in tons and tons of tapioca."

Dear ones, God is not like that. The most beautiful things in our world, he gave us them. If there is any mess, it's us that made it. But the beautiful things, he has given us. Look at that sunshine. We can't reproduce it. Look at those flowers. Artificial flowers are nothing compared with those flowers. Look at the beautiful things that he has given you so far.

You know, the Father wants the best for you. He says, "Ordinary, earthly fathers want the best for their children and give them good gifts; your Father is the same. Your Father can be trusted." And really, loved ones, you can trust him to give you the very best for you. But you see, when I say that, you keep hearing another little voice saying, "Yeah, the very best for me, 'That's good for you, take it.'" No, no, God knows you. He knows the kind of person you are. He knows the kind of things that will fulfill you completely. He knows, loved ones. Really he does.

I saw it in my own life. I used to hear that stuff and I used to kind of hear my elders saying, "Yeah, God will give you what's best for you. So, you have to take it." And I knew what they were thinking. I kind of thought, "Yeah, he probably will. And I'd better therefore, look after my own life and try to make sure it goes right." But loved ones, God just absolutely surprised me, and took away many of the things that I thought I needed, and then gave me a beautiful life that was just right for me. And I couldn't have foreseen it. Well, you can see it. None of us could foresee this situation to this morning.

Now it will be like that for you. Don't you sit there and say, "Oh but Pastor, it was like that for you, but it won't..." Loved ones, God is not in the business of contradicting himself or playing favorites. The Father made you as he made me. He loves you as he loves me. He wants the best for your life. He's going to plan the best for you. So, it's good, kind of to see those things.

Maybe we could go a wee bit further, dear ones. We won't get right through, I think, what the Father has given this morning but we can do a little more.

Would you look at Romans 7:12? We're talking you remember, about the uses that God has for the law. And one of the uses we've just talked about, is that the law always shows you what God himself is like. "So, the law is holy and the commandment is holy..." (Now the commandment, you see, is the particular commands that God gives. The law is law generally, but the commandment is particular commandments like, "Love your neighbor," and, "Do not steal.") "And the commandment is holy."

Now holiness is the energy that comes from God and opposes everything that disobeys him. It's

protective. It's like the earth's atmosphere. You know that when a meteorite comes into the earth's atmosphere, it burns up because of the friction. Now, God has a holiness that surrounds him, that acts the same way on everything that would destroy him. It's, if you like, partly a protective and a defensive power.

Now, when Paul says the commandment is holy, he means that one purpose of the law is that it restrains the power that opposes God. It restrains that power. There is an energy in the law that goes forth from God, and restrains any power that would try to destroy God himself.

That's another function of the law. It's outlined in Galatians 3:23. "Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed." That's another function of the law, dear ones. Firstly to reveal God's nature, then to restrain the power of evil in our world -- the power of evil that would utterly destroy us before we could hear God at all, and that would destroy God himself if it could.

One application of it is in the national field or the social field or the cosmic field. Who of us who have studied the Watergate tragedy [American political scandal involving President Nixon] -- that's, I suppose, all one could describe it as really. Who of us who have studied it, would question for one moment that there was an incredible power of law it seemed, that was working all the time against the other tremendously evil force that was working to undermine the American Constitution. I mean it's obvious, isn't it?

At every turn, at every turn when you thought justice had no chance of coming out; at every turn when you felt that the people who were lying and were dishonest were getting the upper hand; at every turn when the whole question of law seemed about to be destroyed completely, there was a Butterfield [White House assistant Alexander Butterfield] who casually mentioned the tapes; there was a Sarica [the judge] or a Jaworski [Leon Jaworski appointed as special prosecutor] who determined to do their job at all costs; there was a Cox [Special Prosecutor] who would not compromise. Dear love him -- I think we have to pray for him more in these days than any before -- there was a Nixon [Richard Nixon, president of the USA] who asked the committee to look into his tax returns. It seems that in an incredible way, all through this national disaster of ours, there has been a force that has been trying to defend honesty and truth and justice, the whole way.

And loved ones, it had to be some supernatural power, because you know, there was just no way of finding out the things that had happened. There was no way of following through the break-in to the Watergate complex. There was no way. There were so many lawyers involved in the whole operation. There were so many high government officials with tremendous power and influence. It was impossible for anyone to track down honesty and truth in the midst of this. But there seems to have been this power of law that was working through the law, and was all the time opposing the very force that was obviously out to undermine, certainly the two-party system, but it seems to undermine the privacy of the individual, to undermine the Constitution, to destroy the very state that God has given us.

So on the national level, loved ones, there is still a power of law that works to restrain the influence of evil and sin. Now, I think we should be wise and see how close as a nation we have come to the state that is described as taking place in the last days. You remember, that will be the -- well that's the state described in Revelation, if you like to look at it. And it might be kind of just a warning to us and sobering for us to read it. It's of course the description of the time when this power of law will be withdrawn from the world for a period of time.

Revelation 13:1-8, "And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon his horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power," (The dragon is Satan) "and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder."

So obviously there will come a time you see, when the whole earth will follow the anti-Christ presumably whom Satan will send. "Men worshipped the dragon for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?' And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months."

So there will be a period of time you see, of 42 months when the Holy Spirit will be withdrawn from the world and the power of law to restrain evil will be withdrawn. "It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the lamb that was slain." And that's the time you see, when authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation. And all who dwell on earth will worship it. And obviously we came very close to the old totalitarian rule that that describes. So I think Hatfield's amendment [The McGovern–Hatfield Amendment sought to end the Vietnam War] and recommendation is an order; whether politically it achieves anything, at least those of us who believe in prayer, should involve ourselves in it.

But loved ones, do you see that law is here in order to restrain sin? It has other functions as well but certainly to restrain sin. So although the police are involved in corruption, too --we need to pray for the forces of law and order, because God is using them to restrain us from total chaos. And it applies in our own lives. I just want to share that with you.

I remember first hearing the truth of being filled with the Holy Spirit, and the truth that you could then obey God effortlessly. And then one or two things came up in my life that I knew I should do. But I kind of felt, "Well, I don't feel like doing it, and I know when the Holy Spirit comes, he's going to make me feel like doing it. So what good is there in obeying if you don't feel it deep down? So I won't bother. And I'll just disobey until eventually the Holy Spirit fills me with himself, and then I'll start obeying naturally and effortlessly."

Now loved ones, it's heresy. The law is there for you and me to obey it even if we don't feel like doing it. Even if we don't feel we're filled with the Holy Spirit, even if it's agony and grinding work to obey it, our job is to obey the law at every point, because the law is working to restrain the effects of sin in your life and mine.

So if you see something that God wants you to do and you don't feel like doing it, don't be bluffed by Satan into thinking, "Wait until the Holy Spirit fills you. Then you'll do it from your real heart of hearts and God will be really pleased with you." No, if you're fighting against a thousand lions inside you, still obey what God is showing you, because one of the functions of law is to restrain sin inside you.

So loved ones, there are other things that we need to share, but I think those are two of the ways in which God wants us to look at law. Every time we see a law, remember, it describes your God to you. It describes our God to us. And every time you see any opportunity to respond to law in the way that God wants, do it. And yeah, that would apply even to the speed limit, you know. That applies even to little things.

Speed limit? Is that the big deal? No, no, but it's the power of law that is working to bring order into the chaos. You oppose that power every time you break the old speed limit. God... I don't know. I don't know that he's concerned with the little thing. He is concerned with the attitude that lies behind the little disobedience, because law really is a power. And loved ones, you know, those of you have done any physics, any chemistry, know that there's an invisible force that is holding together all the protons and neutrons, you know that.

You know that if that force were withdrawn, that microphone would just disappear. You know if that force was withdrawn, we would disappear; the whole thing would fall apart. Now do you see? It's the same with our lives and our behavior and our attitudes. It's the power of the law that holds us back from the chaos that was described in "The Lord of the Flies", or from the tremendous de-humanization that was described in "Animal Farm". It's the power of law that keeps us still something like the children of God.

So will you love it and respect it? And let's build it up you know, rather than tear it down and say it's bad.

Let us pray.