

GRACE TO YOU

ROMANS 7:7-13

# ARE YOU A HERETIC?



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**FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH**

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# INTRODUCTION

"What is your hope of heaven?" I asked this dying 80+ year old lady who'd been a faithful church attender all of her life. She must have heard the Gospel thousands of times and yet her answer to this question was "Well I've always gone to church and tried to support the church. I've been good to my family and neighbors. I worked hard and haven't hurt anyone." It was early in my ministry and I was devastated that someone who'd heard the Gospel so many times from her earliest years in Sunday school right up to Bible studies in her eighties could still have some faith in herself. Almost 30 years on, I'm no longer shocked at such answers because I've heard multiple versions of it on multiple continents from multiple people.

These experiences have changed the way I now answer the question, **What is the most common heresy?** A heresy is a belief or teaching that contradicts one of the primary doctrines of orthodox Christianity. It's not a mere mistake and it's not a simple error in belief or practice. Mistakes and errors in our faith are dangerous and damaging but not necessarily disastrous and damning. A heresy is a willful and serious departure from historic Christian faith in a central important area of truth that is spiritually disastrous and eternally damning.

So **what is the most common heresy?** In seminary I would have said, "Rejection of the Trinity," or "Denial of Christ's divinity or humanity" or "Rebuttal of Christ's resurrection," or "Refusal to accept the deity of the Holy Spirit." All of these are serious heresies, but as I learned in pastoral ministry, they are not the most common. The most common heresy is the denial of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. To put it another way, the most common heresy is the false doctrine/belief that we can be saved by being good enough or doing good enough.

I've met very few people in the church over the years who have denied Christ's virgin birth, Christ's deity, Christ's humanity, Christ's resurrection, and so on; but I've met many thousands who have denied Christ's sufficiency as their Savior by putting some of their faith in their being good enough or doing good enough. I cannot tell you the number of conversations I've had with people who have been in faithful churches for decades and yet are still putting at least some of their faith in being good enough or doing good enough.

My experience has taught me that there's a high probability that some of these heretics are sitting here in this church. I want to use Romans 7:7-13 to turn you from soul-damning heresy to soul-saving truth. If you are sound in the faith in this area, I hope you will use this sermon to warn you about the very real dangers of veering away from faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone. Use these words to keep you firm in the faith.

## BACKGROUND

The background and context to Romans 7:7-13 Romans is as follows:

- Romans 5: Grace frees us from the law's **penalty** for sin.
- Romans 6: Grace frees us from the law's **powerlessness** over sin.
- Romans 7: Grace frees us from the law's **provocation** of sin.

Given this background and context, we may understandably ask the question: Is the law sin? If grace frees us from the law's penalty for sin, the law's powerlessness over sin, and the law's provocation of sin, **"What then shall we say? That the law is sin?"** (Romans 7:7) That's the question the Roman believers were asking. Paul gives a short answer in three words, **"By no means!"** then a longer answer in verses 7-13.



Is the law sin?



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# 1. THE LAW REVEALS SIN (7)

Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet" (7).

## Outward perfection

Speaking of his pre-conversion life as Saul of Tarsus, the Apostle Paul says he did not know the law or sin. This cannot mean that he had no knowledge of the law or of sin. In another biographical section he tells us he was "**circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless**" (Phil. 3:5-6). He could go through the ten commandments ticking nine of the boxes and giving himself a 4.0 GPA. But there were times when he hesitated over the tenth box. He could say he kept all the others because he could keep them all externally. But the tenth had no external component. It was not about outward perfection.

## Inward imperfection

Unlike the other nine commandments which could be interpreted outwardly, and even kept outwardly, the tenth was all inward, invisible, inaudible. "You shall not covet," dealt with secret thoughts, private passions, hidden delights, invisible lusts. Saul viewed all the other nine commandments as merely external and therefore laws he could obey. But the tenth said, it was wrong to even love, desire, or want what the other commandments forbid.

## CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

**Praise God for his Law.** Although the law cannot save from sin, or sanctify from sin, yet the 10th commandment shows us what sin in a way that nothing else can. You can be a perfect Pharisee with the first 9 commandments, but the 10th punctures and deflates the Pharisaical balloon and leaves us flat on the floor.

**Share God's view of sin.** The Christian Reformed Church passed a Human Sexuality Report last year that made many clear courageous points. But one thing it got wrong was asserting that homosexual activity was wrong but not homosexual desire. The report says as follows:

*The Christian Reformed Church's 1973 synodical report on homosexuality made an important distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity: "We must distinguish between the person who is homosexual in [their] sexual orientation and the person who engages in explicit sexual acts with persons of the same sex." In other words, there is no sin in being attracted to the same sex. We only sin if we act on our sexual attractions.*

Paul would say, "You need the 10th commandment here, brothers and sisters, if you want to align with God's view of sin being not only external but also internal. Men look on the outward appearance but God looks on the heart.

THE LAW CAN ONLY SHOW SIN  
IT CANNOT SAVE FROM SIN



When law reveals sin, does that make us want to stop sinning?  
The opposite. It makes us want to sin all the more.



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## 2. THE LAW FUELS SIN (8-11)

### Paul was alive

**"I was once alive apart from the law" (9).** "Apart from the law" does not mean Paul had no knowledge of the law or that he never practiced it. He had his Bar Mitzvah at aged 12 making him a "Child of the Law." To be "apart from the law" meant to know only the outward meaning and yet be totally ignorant of its spirituality, its reach into the thoughts, desires, loves of our hearts and minds. It's not just the visible tip of the iceberg that's sin but all the stuff below the surface we can't see.

"I was once alive" does not mean Paul actually was spiritually and morally alive and healthy. Rather, in his own opinion, he was. He could see no sin in his life, he had no conviction of sin, no painful conscience, no guilt, no fear of judgment. He was a picture of tranquility, peace, and security. He was complacent, patted himself on the back and said, "Congratulations Saul. You are a perfect man!"

### Sin came alive

**"When the commandment came, sin came alive" (9).** When Paul refers to the time "the commandment came," he is not saying he did not know the commandments before this time, but that they now came with deep understanding, and painful conviction. Paul's little ship sailed easily past the first nine rocks but was shipwrecked on the tenth. Nothing of this rock was above the water. It was all underwater and addressed motives, aims, attitudes.

"Sin came alive" does not only mean that as Paul grew in his understanding of the law, he saw more of his sin, guilt, and condemnation. It's not just that he saw more sin; he did more sin. Sins that had lain dormant and inactive before he knew the law in this deeper way, suddenly were stirred up and started spouting hell on earth. Like a poker stirs up a fire, so the law stirred up sin. The law poked Paul's sinful nature and kindled a fire that previously looked stone cold dead. Just as a weightlifter has to exert more strength the heavier the weight he's lifting, so those feeling the weight of conviction fight harder against conviction to resist it and do the opposite.

The law kindles in a corrupt nature the very desires it's designed to suppress. **"But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead"** (8). Prohibition increases the desire for the prohibited. There's nothing so attractive to us as the forbidden, as even perfect Adam and Eve found out.

### Paul died

**"Sin came alive, and I died" (9).** The law did not kill Paul, but revealed he was already spiritually dead and doomed to die eternally. This killed his confidence, his pride, his self-image, his arrogance, his religion, his hopes. The law knocked him morally and spiritually flat on his back. He saw himself dead in sin, desiring sin, doing sin. **"The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me" (10).** Sin picked up the law that he was relying on and turned it into a weapon against him. **"For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me" (11).**



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## CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

**God's law is not the problem.** It is "**holy and righteous and good**" (11). There's nothing wrong with God's law, and everything right with it if used in the right way.

**We and our sin are the problem.** When the law comes into our lives to do us good, sin seizes it as a weapon and takes the opportunity to produce more sin (8), to deceive us (10), and to kill us (10).

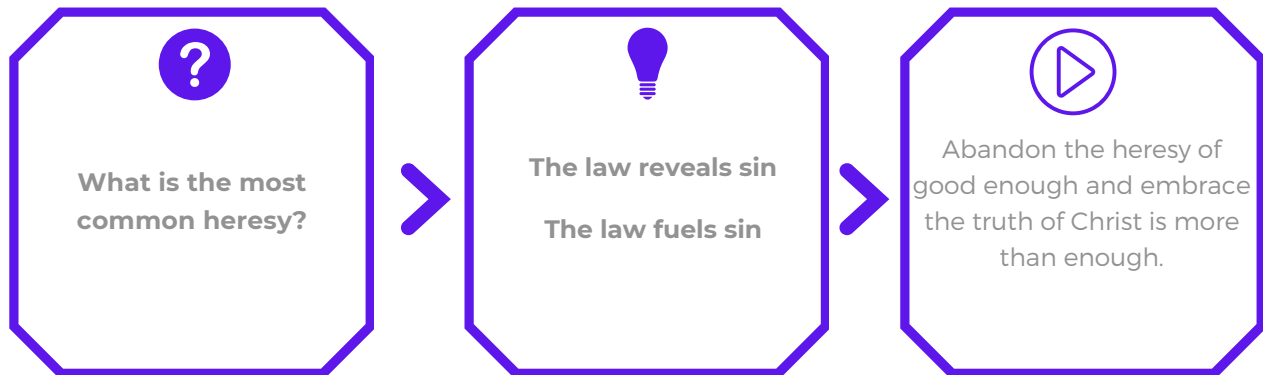
**God overrules the problem.** God uses the law's deadly results "**that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure**" (13). The sinfulness of sin is clearly seen in its making the worst conceivable use of the best things (like the law). But then when we see how bad we and our sin are, we realize we cannot save ourselves from sin and hell, but only Christ can.

THE LAW SHOULD PUT A BRAKE ON SIN  
BUT INSTEAD PRESSES THE ACCELERATOR



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## SUMMARY



## A NEW CHAPTER

**See the seriousness of this heresy.** It's dangerous, damaging, damning. It's not something to tolerate or trifle with. It's not something to have as a back up plan or insurance policy. It's something to abandon immediately and guard against constantly. If it wasn't such a fatal danger, Paul would not address it so frequently

**See the beauty of truth.** As we are repulsed by this heresy, let's embrace the beautiful soul-satisfying, heart-exciting truth of Christ is more than enough.

**Prayer.** Lawmaker, Lawgiver, and Law-judger, turn me and keep me from the good-enough heresy, and help me to embrace the Christ-enough truth.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is "good enough" such a dangerous heresy?
2. How did the law show you your sin?
3. What's the problem with the CRC statement on immoral sexual desires?
4. Can you tell your story of (1) I was alive; (2) Sin came alive; (3) I died
5. Give an example of how the law fueled sin in your life (or someone else's)
6. How will you protect yourself and others from the "good-enough" heresy?

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