

Do Christians need the Ten Commandments?

by Ray C. Stedman

The seventh chapter of the book of Romans deals with the very knotty problem of whether Christians need the Ten Commandments any longer.

If you haven't discovered already, I am sure you'll soon recognize this as a sure-fire question with which to start a religious argument. Any time you want to enliven a dull evening, I suggest you pose this question as a topic of conversation, and you'll find that everyone in the room soon chooses up sides – and off they go. Most people who discuss this question, I have discovered, follow the same method: If they persecute you in one verse, flee to another! And so it goes all evening long – the discussion generates more heat than light.

But this is a very important question, and I hope we can see it now in line with the apostle's whole argument in this section of Romans.

You'll notice that Chapter 7 begins with a question:

Do you not know, brethren ... that the law is binding on a person only during his life? {Rom 7:1 RSV}

If you have taken note, three times in this section, Paul asks that type of a question, and it is important to trace his argument that way.

Back in Chapter 6, you remember, it begins that way in Verse 3:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? {Rom 6:3 RSV}

There Paul is telling us that the old life that we all inherited from Adam (this life of independence from God) ended when we believed in Christ's

death – *so we cannot go on unchanged!* As Charles Spurgeon said, "An unchanged life is a sign or an unregenerate heart." Though you may have made a profession of faith in Christ (whether as a young person or as an adult, it makes no difference), and, since that time, your life has not changed, then you have just been kidding yourself: You are not a Christian because an unchanged life is a sign of an unregenerate heart. That is what Paul says, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" {Rom 6:1 RSV}. God forbid! Certainly not! It can't be *because we have entered into his death.*

In Chapter 6, Verse 16, he asks a similar question:

Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? {Rom 6:16 RSV}

Here again he is pointing out something that rests upon the death of Christ – the fact that the whole of the old life must go, completely, in the death of Christ, and that, therefore, as Christians, *we no longer have any excuse whatever* for failure in our lives. As long as we excuse any degree of failure at all, we are slaves to it. That is what he is saying here. We are bound by it. You see, it is not a case of "I can't" any longer. If we still continue to live in failure after we have become Christians, it is not because *we can't* have victory, it is because *we won't!* We won't be delivered. That is what Paul is saying.

Now, in Chapter 7, he has this other question:

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Do you not know, brethren ... that the law is binding on a person only during his life? {Rom 7:1 RSV}

And in Verse 4 you get the other side of it:

Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law ... {Rom 7:4a RSV}

In other words, the Ten Commandments are no longer necessary as a guide to proper behavior in the Christian life *for we are not under law but under grace*.

The reasons why this statement is true are given in the section that follows. If you will permit me to just give you briefly the divisions of this section, perhaps you can follow a little easier:

Verses 1-3: The illustration that clarifies;
Verses 4-6: The explanation that verifies;
Verses 7-13: The application that glorifies.

(By now I am sure that you are saying this outline is the alliteration that terrifies! But I think that, as we go through this, you will see what I mean.)

First of all, in Verses 1-3, we have **the illustration that clarifies**:

Do you not know, brethren – for I am speaking to those who know the law [that is, the Jews] – that the law is binding on a person only during his life? Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives, but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. {Rom 7:1-3 RSV}

Now, this is a simple picture. It is a case of a woman who is married twice. The apostle points out that, in her first marriage, she was bound to her first husband as long as he lived.

Now, perhaps this phrase “bound by law” is hard for us to understand in these days of easy divorce, but, unquestionably in God’s sight, marriage is intended to be for life. That is what is meant, of course, when you married people stood before a preacher, or a justice of the peace, and you said

that you were taking each other “for better or for worse until death do us part.” That is for life. However, we have some modern versions of that. Hollywood says “for better or else.” Or, as some woman has put it, “I took him for better or worse, but he is much worse than I took him for.” We are inclined to tone it down like this, but, in God’s sight, it is true that *marriages are for life*. The only exception which the Lord gives us is that of a marriage broken by unfaithfulness – when a man no longer is a husband, but he becomes a philanderer.

But the central point here in Romans 7 is not marriage; marriage is just the illustration. The key point is that the woman who is married is helpless to change her situation until her husband dies, and any attempt on her part to do so beforehand only violates the law and makes matters worse. She becomes an adulteress if she tries to live with another man while her husband is still alive.

It is obvious, as you apply this, that we believers in Jesus Christ are portrayed in the woman.

Well, the question then is, “Who is the first husband?” And here you get a difference of opinion – some say it is the Law, and some say it is something else. But I think, if you have followed along in the argument of the apostle in these chapters, it is obvious that the first husband is *not* the Law (the Law is what holds the two together), but it is our old man – our old self – our old life received from Adam. What the Scripture calls “sin,” *that* is our old husband, the old life that we inherited from Adam. We were bound to it, linked to it, as a wife is to her husband, and there was nothing that we could do about it.

Now, this is true, isn’t it? We have to live with ourselves. And all that we are, despite the fact that it may not be very nice sometimes, is what we have to live with. There is no running away from it, or trying to flee from it. We are bound to this, apart from the work of Christ.

Up to this point in our studies of Romans we have been calling this life “our old self” as though it really were us who were like this. But I think, at this point, we need now to understand that this is really “a false self” – what we would call a pseudo-self (pseudo means false). The Scriptures tell us (now this is God’s view of things as they really are, not as they appear to us, but as they really are) that sin, or this old life, is *an alien invasion* of human nature. Sin inhabited man’s spirit at the fall and

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has been passed along to every human being born on this earth ever since (with the exception of Jesus Christ); it has reigned there, undisturbed and unchallenged, until challenged by Christ.

Now, we have lived so long with this old life that we identify it with ourselves – we think it is us – this continual urge to be the center of everything is what we call “our self.” In a sense, we do this because it is the only nature we have, the only guiding principle that is in us as fallen men and women. We just feel that this must be us because we feel so driven to be the center of life, the center of interest, and the center of attention:

- We want to be regarded with favor.
- We are continually relating everything to ourselves.

As someone said of the last German Kaiser, who was a very vain man, “When he goes to a christening, he wants to be the baby. When he goes to a wedding, he wants to be the bride. When he goes to a funeral, he wants to be the corpse. He wants to be the center of everything.” How clearly we understand this feeling!

Now, living that way, we have all occasionally felt the Spirit of God (from the outside) making us hungry for true righteousness. I don’t think there is a man alive who doesn’t some time say to himself, “I wish I were not what I am; I wish I were different.” All of us have the consciousness of wanting to be more than we are, and we admire true righteousness. This is what made Jesus Christ the attractive person that he was; people wanted to be like him. He fascinated men, he attracted them, he drew them to him.

The Scriptures speak of “the beauty of holiness” {1 Chr 16:29, 2 Chr 20:21, Psa 29:2, 96:9 KJV}, and I think, if you realize what holiness is, you can see that this phrase is true. Holiness is health of being or of spirit. And this beauty of holiness was perfectly expressed in Jesus Christ.

Now, all of us have felt the hungering to be like Christ, or to want true righteousness. But all the efforts that we make to be good, or to do good things, only really serve to brand us as hypocrites, because, until we have come to know Christ, though we try outwardly to be good, inwardly we know that we are still the same old self-centered creatures we always were. And that describes a

hypocrite, “an adulterer” Paul calls it. We are an adulterer, you see, we are still married to the old life within, which lives only for self and its advancement. We want something else, but the law of our being keeps us from getting it.

Now, when Christ came (this is the story of the Scriptures), he lived a perfect life without any conscious effort to do so. He completely fulfilled the Law, as naturally and as easily as we live our Adamic lives. But, just before he died, while he was hanging on that cross, suspended between heaven and earth, we are told that he took upon himself our old nature. One of the most amazing sentences in all of Scripture is this: “He who knew no sin was made sin – *was made sin* – for us” {cf, 2 Cor 5:21}. And when he became what we are, he became our old husband, then he died. Thus, when Christ died, our old husband, that false self, the self-centered ego died, and we were set free. This became true for us when we received Jesus Christ into our life as Lord.

Not only are we free from the rule of the old husband, but also we are free from the law that bound us to him and controlled our life with him, and we are now free to marry another. This time it is Jesus Christ, risen from the dead – the risen Christ – so that just as he once became our old self on the cross, now he lives to become our true self, living that same wonderful, perfect, holy, attractive, mighty life through us again in this 20th century, right in this very hour – today – now!

This is the amazing declaration of Scripture – Jesus Christ, entering your life and mine, by faith in his word, usurps this alien invader and sin must leave when he takes his rightful place in the very core of our being, the very center of our life.

Sin is now on the outside calling to us and influencing us. We are not delivered from the sound of its voice; we can still feel it, and hear it, and it can influence us. If we yield to it, now that Christ has come, we are again an adulterer, a hypocrite – pretending to be something that we really are not.

Do you follow me? I realize that this is a bit complicated, but it is a tremendously important truth, and perhaps the next section will help make it clear.

Let's look at **the explanation that verifies** in Verses 4-6:

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Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. {Rom 7:4-6 RSV}

Notice how that fits the illustration: “Through the body of Christ” we are told – that body that was put to death on that bloody cross – we died to the Law which bound us to the sin within us. For, every time that we tried to be good (before Christ came in), the Law simply showed us how far short we came. It exposed our inner sin, and we realized that, even though, outwardly, we could meet the demands of other human beings around us, inwardly, we were still the same miserable, self-centered, troubled, unhappy people that we had always been. Do you see?

Now, since Christ has come, we belong to another. It is he who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. This is a wonderful truth! In other words, the only life that is fruitful in God’s sight is the life of Jesus Christ in you and me!

May I say that again? This is *so* important that, if you don’t get it, you are going to spend a long, long time trying to serve God, and be acceptable to him, and get nowhere! The only life that God says is fruitful and acceptable and worthwhile in his sight is the risen life of Jesus Christ lived again through you and me. All other effort, any other way of living, is fruitless. Jesus said to his disciples:

He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit. But without me ye can do nothing. {cf, John 15:5 KJV}

How much? Nothing!

Isn’t it amazing how busy we can be doing nothing! You see, while we were living in the flesh, as Paul says, while we were living what we call a natural human life, all our struggles to be good resulted only in fruit for death. There was fruit, but it was fruit for death, and, as we have seen all

along in this letter, death is a symbol for barrenness:

- Much effort, but little effect,
- Much sincerity, but no real accomplishment.

Fruit, you see, but it was fruit for barrenness, and worthlessness, and uselessness. We never really *did* anything! We never really *got* anywhere!

This is the experience of so many. And the more we read the Ten Commandments, and the more we tried to follow the Sermon on the Mount, the more condemned we felt because we were struggling to do something that we could not do. Even as Christians, we will discover that this is what self-effort brings us – *we produce fruit for death*.

The wonderful, transforming truth is that, if we lean back upon the mighty, refreshing, indwelling, conquering life of Jesus Christ within us, quietly counting on him to live and work through us to do all that needs to be done, we no longer need the written code of the Ten Commandments, or any other code, to direct our conduct because, as Paul says, we walk “not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.”

Now, let me ask you this question: “When Jesus Christ was here on earth, did he need the Ten Commandments?”

Now, I didn’t ask you, “Did he believe in the Ten Commandments,” or, “Did he fulfill them?” Of course he fulfilled them because love is the fulfilling of the Law.

Any time you act in love, you don’t need a law to tell you what to do. You just act out of the heart of compassion that love gives, and you will automatically do what the Law wants done. Of course, Christ fulfilled the Law, but he didn’t need the Law, you see, for if the Ten Commandments had never been given he would have been the same wonderful, mighty, attractive person that he was. He wasn’t struggling each day, as we sometimes do, to try to be good. He *was* good – everywhere he went. His nature is good. His nature is love. He didn’t have to work up feelings of love for some of those old hard-crusted, embittered Pharisees. He just loved them.

As Dr. Sanders said last week, “Even though he was sometimes angry with them (and anger is not incommensurate with love), he still loved them, for he looked on them and was grieved because of

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the hardness of their hearts.” Grieving is an activity of love. You see, Jesus didn’t have to *try to be* this, he *was* this, and he will be this *through our lives*.

So, if Jesus Christ is living his life through me, I don’t need any outward law to direct me. If I love my neighbor, I don’t need any sign that says, “Keep off the grass.” I won’t walk on his lawn because I am concerned for his welfare as much as my own. I would no more think of walking on his lawn until I wore a path through it than I would on my own. Do you see?

If I love my neighbor, I don’t need any Law that says, “Thou shalt not steal” {Exod 20:15 KJV}, or “Thou shalt not covet” {Exod 20:17 KJV}, or “Thou shalt not lie” {cf, Exod 20:16 KJV}. If I love, I will do these things automatically.

Well, then, should we throw the Law out? Should we just sneer at every attempt to quote it to us, and remind anyone who questions any of our attitudes that “we are not under law but under grace”? Well, let me ask you this: Did Christ? What did he do? What was his attitude toward the Law? Even though he didn’t need it, how did he regard it? You know the answer: He honored it; he highly regarded it.

Paul moves on now in this last section, Verses 7-13, to **the application that glorifies:**

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead [i.e, undiscovered, inert]. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might be-

come sinful beyond measure. {Rom 7:7-13 RSV}

Is that hard to understand? Let me explain it. You see, here we learn the true purpose of the Law.

Paul says, “if it had not been for the Law, I should not have known sin.” Now, he knew that there were sins in his life (i.e., occasional wrong deeds). All of us know that. But if it had not been for the Law he would never have learned that those sins came from *a nature of sin* within. That is what he is saying.

And this is the problem, isn’t it? Isn’t it amazing how all of us are always right in our own eyes? If we were our own judges, how easily we would get by on everything. We might admit to a few mistakes once in a while, or even an occasional fall, but our hearts are right, aren’t they?

A couple of weeks ago at Mount Hermon, Don Moomaw was speaking to the high school group and he told us about an incident in his own life just after he was married:

He and Carol, his wife, were on their honeymoon down in Palm Springs, and they went into a restaurant in the center of the city and got into the honeymoon corner, way back in the dark. They were enjoying talking to each other, discussing their new life together, and saying all those things that honeymooners say to one another. They finally become aware of a rather large and noisy party of people that were seated at the table next to them (or under it, I don’t know which). They had been there for some time and they were well inebriated – drunk, in common parlance. They were discussing all kinds of things – politics, what went on in the neighborhood, and so on. Finally, they got around to the inevitable – a discussion of religion. Don said that there was one woman who dominated the discussion, and they were going on at great lengths about the faults of the church, and everything else that was wrong here and there. Finally, she made the statement: “Well, I don’t care what the Bible says, or what all these other people say, or what the church says, I just let my conscience be my guide.” Or, as she said it, “I jush leth my conshush be my glide.”

You see, if we live according to our own light, everyone does what is right in his own eyes. But Paul says, “One day it came home to me that the Law says, ‘Thou shalt not covet’ and I realized that this meant not to desire something which belongs to

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another – his wife, his property, his honor, his position of favor, anything that belongs to another. ‘Thou shalt not covet.’”

And Paul said, “I set out to obey that, confident that I could do it like I had been fulfilling the other parts of the Law – thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not lie, thou shalt not bear false witness, commit adultery, and so on. But the first thing I knew,” he said, “I found myself saying, ‘Oh, I wish I had that.’ I envied another one’s success. I found myself maneuvering behind the scenes to get another person’s property. I chewed my fingernails because another fellow got the job I thought I ought to have. I was depressed over the popularity of another man.”

And, as he says in Verse 8, “sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Everywhere I turned, I found I was coveting.”

And, finally, he said, “The more I tried to suppress it, the worse it got until, finally, I saw that the trouble was myself, my own selfish heart, *my sinful nature.*”

That is what the Law taught him, and so he thanks God for the Law. He glorifies it. It is holy and just and good: *There is nothing wrong with the Law!*

And Verse 13 reminds us again of **the purpose of the Law:**

Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. {Rom 7:13 RSV}

That is what the Law is for.

So many think that God gave the Ten Commandments to the human race in order to keep men from sinning. He didn’t at all. Notice Verse 20 of Chapter 5: “Law came in to increase the trespass.” – to increase the trespass – that is what the Law is for! It was given to arouse the sin which was in man, and, thus, in making him sin all the more, it made him discover the utter futility of trying to please God by self-effort.

As long as sin, in our sight, is just mere peccadilloes – trivialities, just slight blemishes in our

character – we never get serious about doing anything about it.

But:

- When sin becomes sinful beyond measure,
- When we see that the reason why we have so much difficulty getting along with somebody is because we are so contrary, so ornery, so self centered, so mean, so desirous that somebody be moved through the screws and be subjected to pain because we have been hurt,
- When we begin to become aware of how our own life is what is creating the problem in somebody else’s life, and they are loveless because we are so loveless to them,

Then:

- We get serious about finding out God’s process of casting it away and we fling ourselves in helplessness upon the mighty indwelling life of Jesus Christ to simply be himself in us!

Now, I recognize that when we, as Christians, choose to walk after the flesh, the Spirit sometimes uses the Law to show us our folly, and rebuke our barrenness, and bring us to our senses again. That is why Paul, over in First Timothy, says,

Now we know that the law is good, if anyone uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murders of fathers and murders of mothers, for manslayers, immoral persons, sodomites, kidnapers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, {1 Tim 1:8-10 RSV}

Whenever we get into that state we need the Law, even as Christians. But when we walk in the Spirit, allowing Jesus Christ to live his life again through us, we need no law. If we attempt to put that life back under the Law, what we are really trying to do is to be faithless to our new husband, the risen Christ.

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You see, he will be himself in us, and what he *is* is perfectly acceptable to the Father. So, as A. B. Simpson once put it:

Once 'twas busy planting,
Now 'tis trustful prayer.
Once 'twas anxious caring,
Now He has the care.
Once 'twas what I wanted,
Now what Jesus says.
Once 'twas constant asking,
Now 'tis ceaseless praise.
Once it was my working,
Hence it His shall be.
Once I tried to use Him,
Now He uses me.
Once the power I wanted,
Now the mighty one.
Once for self I labored,
Now for Him alone.

Prayer:

Our Father, in the confusion of our sin-burdened minds, we sometimes have difficulty laying hold of the truth that you declare to us, and perhaps this morning some of us are struggling to understand what this means. Father, we pray that thy Spirit may clarify it to us, and that we will simply receive it, and certainly not struggle against it and try to argue against it as though it were not true. For we know that those who discover this wonderful life of Christ within begin to experience the fullness of blessing of the Christian life, and Christ becomes real and vivid and clear to us once again. We thank you for that. We pray now that this may be the experience of each of us, as we turn from the old nature and from the old law and rejoice in the full deliverance that has come to us in Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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