



Wesley on Romans: The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law Romans 7:13-25

Rev. Thomas G. James
Washington Street UMC
July 9, 2017

*All words printed in *italics* come from Wesley's original publication.

The question of whether faith alone can hold one in relationship with God, or whether good works are also necessary, has long been a debate of the worldwide religious community. One of the important factors in this discussion is the purpose and rigidity of law. If the law is ignored because of too much emphasis on forgiveness through Christ, or too much emphasis on God's grace, the result is what is called 'antinomianism,' or, lawlessness. In a state of lawlessness, there becomes no need to live in right relationship with God, one another, or creation, because of the belief that God will forgive you nonetheless. If there is too much focus on the law, and not enough focus on God's grace, you end up with legalistic moralism. In such a case, one is chastised for even the smallest slip in language or character, and God's grace is marginalized and seen as unable to save us from our sin.

In the 1740s, John Wesley was debating with other religious leaders about the distinctive importance of faith and good works. For Wesley, this debate hinged on the balance between Law and Gospel. So, Wesley published three sermonic essays on this topic, including today's sermon, titled, "The Original, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law," which was first published in 1750.

May God open our ears to hear the words of Wesley that we may grow in our faith and our understanding of God's great love.

In Romans 7, verse 12, the Apostle Paul writes, "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good." To understand what Paul is trying to say, we must first come to an agreement regarding which law Paul is referencing. It is often assumed Paul is speaking about the Jewish customary laws. With such a thought, many faithful Christians ignore what Paul has to say, believing themselves no longer obligated to uphold the ancient Jewish laws. Others say Paul is speaking about the Roman law; that is, the governmental laws that ruled society in the first century. Again, like the Jewish law, Paul is then ignored because the Roman law is no longer the governing law of the land.

However, both of these assumptions are wrong. Anyone who pays close attention to the Apostle would be able to see that Paul is not speaking about Jewish customs or the Roman law. Paul is referencing the ceremonial law of Moses, that is, the law of God. This should be simple to understand with a quick look back at verse 1 of this 7th chapter in Romans, where Paul writes, "Do you not know, brothers and sisters – for I am speaking to those who know the law – the law is binding for a person only during their lifetime?" If Paul is speaking to those who know the law, the law cannot be the Jewish law or the Roman law, for he isn't writing to the Jews or

those who claim Roman citizenship. He's writing to Gentile Christians who, although they live in Rome, claim citizenship in Christ. Not the Jewish or the Roman law; Paul is talking about the moral law.

Interestingly, in verses 4-11, Paul questions our need for maintaining the moral law. He states that through the body of Christ, we have died to the law. Through a back and forth argument with himself, Paul questions the validity of the law for faithful Christians going forward. He ultimately comes to this foundational conclusion in verse 12, naming how the law is not something to be rejected, he says, "*the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.*"

Paul's writing is confusing, and his argument hard to understand. So, I will *endeavor to show, first, the original of this law; secondly, the nature thereof; thirdly, the properties, that it is 'holy, and just, and good,'; and fourthly, the uses of it.*

First, let's consider the origin of the law. Some may think that the law originated with Moses and the inscribing of the Decalogue on the stone tablets. This is good thought, but would be wrong. We know this isn't where the law originated because before Moses, Noah declared the law; before Noah, Enoch spoke it. Truly, the law can be traced back to the very foundation of the world *when 'the morning stars' first 'sang together', being newly called into existence.* In the creation, the Creator made humanity intelligent beings, so that we might know the God who created us. In our creation, we were made with the ability to discern truth from falsehood, and good from evil. Along with such knowledge, we were given *a capacity of choosing the one and refusing the other.*

To help us use such faculties as knowledge and will, God gave us a law, *a complete model of all truth.* Amidst our ability to follow the law, God also set in place that we would increase in happiness through compliance to the law, as every instance of obedience would allow us to live into the perfect nature and image in which we were first created. At that time, the law was not inscribed on stone, but was *[engraved on our hearts] by the finger of God.*

This is where the law of God originated. It was set in place at the same time that God first created humanity and nature itself. But, we know it didn't take long for humanity to rebel against the law. Through intentionally breaking the law, the law was erased from our hearts and humanity went forth from the garden to dwell in the darkness of sin and death. In the darkness God did not alienate us, but instead worked to reconcile humanity to eternal love through the Son. Through the Son, the law was re-inscribed on the hearts of God's sinful creation. In doing so, God has made it known to us what is good – showing us that to do good is *'to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.'*

Not only did he show this to all those who have come before us, but truly God continues to make the truth known to each person who enters the world today. To help our stubborn and sinful ways, God wrote the perfect law on the stone tablets, and instructed the recorded law be taught to each generation. This is how the law of God is still made known today, by hearing

what was so long ago written. Yet, you and I both know that the written law is not sufficient for helping us fully comprehend the law. Our full understanding can only be accomplished by the work of the Spirit in our lives. And God upholds this promise, having made a new covenant by water and the Spirit, God instills in our hearts the true understanding and knowledge of the law.

We've shown that the law originated with the creation of the heavens and the earth. Second, we will consider the nature of the law. As a word of clarification regarding Paul's writing, a commandment should be understood as any subset of the law. For the purposes of Scripture and our studying of it, we should see the words law and commandment used in an equivalent nature, both implying one and the same thing.

This law is an incorruptible picture of the high and holy One. The law is the face of God unveiled; God manifested to his creatures as they are able to bear it; manifested to give and not to destroy life; that they may see God and live. The law, at its essence, is the heart of God disclosed to [humankind].

The law of God, if not better defined in any other way, is *divine virtue and wisdom assuming a visible form*. When talking about the law, we're not talking about alternative facts, suggestions, or half-truths. The law is the compilation of eternal and undeniable truth. Considered another way, we can say that the law of God is *supreme unchangeable reason*. It is unalterable rightness and moral perfection.

Look, I know that I can use any metaphor or human expression for perfection to describe the law of God and I would still fail to accurately depict the true nature of the law of God. But given our human capacity to understand, we have no better way to try. It is very clearly articulated in Scripture that we will only ever know in part the will of God, for as humanity we are not capable of knowing fully as God knows. In the same manner, our articulation of God's perfect law will always fail to fully communicate a perfect understanding of the law.

But as best as we can sum it up, *the law of God is a copy of the eternal mind, a transcript of the divine nature*. The law is a delight to the angels of heaven as well as the glory and joy of every person who knows the will and love of God.

Third, let's take a look at these three properties of the law. As Paul says, the law is 'holy, just, and good.'

The law is Holy. Here, Paul is speaking not of the effects of the law, but is still focusing on its nature. The law is *indeed in the highest degree pure, chaste, clean, [and] holy*. If it were not all these things, the law would not resemble God, who is at the core, holiness expressed. The law is free of sin: clean and spotless from any evil.

It often seems that the law is akin to sin because it is the law that sheds light on sin. It is suggested using the principle, 'it takes one to know one,' that law must be sin, because it

identifies sin. Since the law drags sin into light, law is equated to sinfulness. But this is not true of the law of God. "Even if it is by the law that sin appears, that does not mean the law is sin."ⁱ The law of God is holy.

Secondly, the law is just. The law *prescribes exactly what is right, precisely what ought to be done, said, or thought, both with regard to [God], with regard to ourselves, and with regard to every creature* made by God. The law is suited for all circumstances, and is prepared to engage with all forms of relationships. Nothing in the law of God is arbitrary, but all things are in accordance with the will of God.

We may not fully understand God's will, but as we pray, "Thy will be done," we do believe that God's will is right and just. If the will of God is just, then so too must be the law of God, which stems from the very being of God.

Not only is the law holy and just, but it is also good. We know the law is good because it is the replication of God's-self. It was love that moved God to issue the law; it was love that moved God to call prophets to teach the law; it was love that led God to call preachers like Enoch and Noah to speak the law; it is the goodness of God's love that calls faithful people, like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to bear witness to the law. It was love which brought forth the only-begotten Son to confirm the law in fullness and to write once more the law on the hearts of humanity.

The law, which *the goodness of God gave at first*, brings forth all forms of love in the world. The law breeds faithful people who are mild and kind. It is filled with things that are wholesome and of good report. The law brings forth good because it is filled with the divine wisdom, knowledge, and love. The law is good in its effects, for from a law of love flows the effects of love.

But the law is good not only in all its effects, it is also good in nature. Think of a tree. If a tree is bearing good fruit, the tree itself must be healthy. *The law itself is righteousness, filling the soul with a peace that passeth all understanding, and causing us to rejoice evermore in the testimony of a good conscience toward God.* The law is God made manifest in our flesh, which brings forth eternal life and perfect love.

The law is holy, just, and good.

Finally, it only remains to show, what are the uses of the law? Without question, the first use of the law is to convict the world of sin. It is the *peculiar work of the Holy Ghost* to use the law to help us identify in our hearts our brokenness. Through the presence of the Spirit, the law helps us discover the sin in our lives. *All [our] fig leaves are torn away*, and we see ourselves as mere sinners, guilty before God.

But if the first use is to convict us of sin, to help identify our brokenness and our being dead to God, the second use of the law is to give us new life, through Christ. Like strict parenting, the

law is built upon rules, but it is love that undergirds the law, which is designed to save us. It is the spirit of love that teaches us of our need, and leads us to new life in Christ.

Not only does the law offer new life, but thirdly, it keeps us alive. I know this is one of the hardest things to understand about God's eternal will and law. Many believe that once we come to Christ for new life, the law subsides and we live eternally outside of the law, being united as one with Christ. There is a bit of truth here; Christ has come to offer new life through justification, which speaks new life where the law should have brought death. But having brought us to Christ, the law has the purpose of keeping us focused on Christ. It continues its work by continually showing us of the height, and depth, and length, and breadth of the love of God.

Though the law has led us to Christ, and in Christ we have been given new life, the law does not subside. The law continues to convince us of the sin that remains in our hearts and lives; it continues to help us maintain the commands of God; and it continues to offer grace upon grace amidst our failures until we join eternally in God's perfect love.

We can say that we hate the law because it is restricting, and that the law is full of judgment. But hear this, the law is from God. If you love God, you too should love the law, for the sake of the one from whom it came, and for the sake of the one to whom it leads.

And if we are convinced that the law comes from God, that it is a copy of God's imitable perfections, then the Apostle is right: the law is holy, just, and good. Hold fast to the law, and you will ever be close to Christ. Let the law confirm your hope, that the Spirit may continue to work in you the love of God.

And ultimately, rejoice in the good news of the law. The Lord has fulfilled his word; God has written his law of love on your heart. Rejoice in the law that frees you from the power of sin. *Stand fast in loving God with all your heart and serving him with all your strength.* This is perfect freedom, to keep the law of God, to walk perfectly according to the commandments, to be freed from the bondage of sin, and to grow in grace in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. May you ever be filled with such love defined by the law, that you may witness to such love in all the world. Amen.

ⁱ Thomas C. Oden. *John Wesley's Teachings: Volume 4, Christ and Salvation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014, pg 293.