

## The Proper Use and Application of the Old Law

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

Wayne Brewer

### Introduction

It is amazing how one little word can make a difference in a sentence, and in effect change the meaning of the sentence. In the beginning God had said to Adam, *"but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die"* (Genesis 2:17). In the very next chapter we find Eve repeating those words, but then something happens. Satan adds one little word, the word "not." Satan said, *"Ye shall not surely die"* (Genesis 3:4), and as a result of adding that one little word, "not", Eve was deceived into eating of the fruit.

Years later Jesus said, *"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved..."* (Mark 16:16), however, many theologians and religious people have in effect removed the "and" from Jesus' statement because they do not want to link baptism to being saved. So they say, "he that believeth shall be saved."

Many religious people, and some among churches of Christ have removed or changed the word "first" in a statement regarding the observance of the Lord's Supper, where the Bible says, *"Upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread..."* (Acts 20:7). Some have removed the word "first" and have replaced it with fifth, sixth, or seventh day of the week. Changing one word changed the will and plan of God.

The same is true with the word "except" which is the study of this Lectureship. Removing that word from a sentence, from a verse, can change the truth of God into error. Our study for this hour is the proper use and application of the Old Law. The proper use and application of the law can be accomplished by at least three important areas of our study of Romans 7:7.

### THERE IS THE CONTEXT OF THE WORD OF GOD The Apostle Paul is Writing in a Context

Essential to any understanding any verse or Bible passage is the context, that is: who said it, to whom was it spoken or intended, when was it spoken and what were the circumstances regarding the statement? For example God said, *"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy"* (Exodus 20:8). The context was that of God giving of the Law of Moses to the Israelites (Exodus 20:1-2). The command was limited by its context of to whom was it spoken. The command was limited by the meaning and context of the word "sabbath", which is our present day of Saturday. One little verse, yet when taken out of context can bring about at least two false doctrines. First, that Christians are to keep the Sabbath, and, second, that the sabbath is Sunday.

Our text was written in a context. Paul wrote, *"What shall we say then? Is the law sin? 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*" (Romans 7:7). The context of this verse and chapter is that Paul is teaching regarding the Law of Moses. Several times throughout this chapter Paul refers to the law, which has reference to the Law of Moses (Romans 7:1,4,6,7,8,9,12,14,16,25). It was a common practice for Paul and other New Testament writers to refer to the Law of Moses simply as "the Law", "for the law was given by Moses..."(John 1:17).

### **The Context of Paul's Words is The Law of Moses**

There are several points that Paul is making in our text (Romans 7:7). The overall context is that Paul was and had made the point that neither Jew nor Gentile Christians are under the law (Romans 7:1-4). This truth can be seen in many other New Testament passages (Matthew 5:17, Acts 7:37, 2 Corinthians 3:6-14, Galatians 3:19-27, Colossians 2:12-17, Hebrews 7:19-22, 8:5-13, 9:11-15, 10:1-10). The proper use and application of the Law of Moses is that any and all commands found in the law are not binding upon anyone, Jew or Gentile today. Jesus fulfilled the law, taking it away, nailing it to the cross of calvary and instituted a New Covenant by his blood (Matthew 26:26-29, Acts 20:28, Colossians 1:13). Only in principle or by transcending truths is there any application.

The secondary context of the passage is that although the Law of Moses was taken away, this does not mean that the Law of Moses was evil or wicked. Paul wrote, "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid..."(Romans 7:7). The law of Moses was and is inferior to the Law of Christ, to Christianity (Hebrews 8:6-7), however, it was good in that it called the Israelites back to God, pointed out sin and guided them to Christ (Galatians 3:24). It was good for its purpose intended by God, within that context. "...I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet" (Romans 7:7). The proper use and application of the old law, the Law of Moses, demands recognizing the context of the verse and the chapter in which the verse is found.

### **THERE IS THE NEED FOR THE WORD OF GOD**

#### **The Apostle Paul is Writing to Express the Need for the Word of God**

"What shall we say then? Is the law sin? 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" (Romans 7:7). There was a great need for the word of God in the past and there is a great need in the present. Humanity is always in need of the word of God. Although the Law of Moses as a law and as a system of religion has been taken away Paul is making the point that we must have the word of God, the word of God is essential in order for us to understand of the will of God. We need the word of God in order to understand how we are to be pleasing to him, to understand our own frailties, errors and sins. As Paul wrote, "I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet" (Romans 7:7).

Paul is writing of the time before he was a Christian, when as a Jew he was living under the Law of Moses. The point being that he as a human being needed the word of God in order to know how to live, and the Law of Moses provided that information. The phrase "but by the law" and "except the law had said..." indicate that it was only by means of, or from the word of God, which at that time the Law of Moses, that Paul could know the will of God. The words "but by" and "except"

mean only by means of... only by means of the Law of Moses, or the word of God. The old law had a purpose and value because, first, it was the word of God which revealed the will of God, and second, because by means of that word the Israelites could respond to God in faithful obedience (*Romans 10:17*).

### **The World and the Church Need the Word of God Today**

The truth set forth by Jeremiah expresses this truth, *“Oh Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is no in man that walketh to direct his steps”* (*Jeremiah 10:23*). That is exactly what Paul was saying (*Romans 7:7*) and it is still true today. Without the word of God we don't know how or where to walk.

The psalmist wrote, *“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path”* (*Psalms 119:105*). The wise man wrote, *“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart: and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths”* (*Proverbs 3:5-6*). The principles and truths taught in these verses indicate that God directs our path only through his holy word, and so to reject the word of God is to reject all hope of salvation and eternal life.

### **THERE IS THE AUTHORITY OF THE WORD OF GOD The Apostle Paul is Writing About the Authority of the Word of God**

*“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”* (*Romans 7:7*). Paul's point is that yes, the Law of Moses as a law, as something binding, has terminated, but in making that point Paul is also teaching that when the law was in effect that it was the authoritative word of God. The Law of Moses was the word of God that defined right and wrong for all who were under it, and the transgression of that law brought about sin into their lives, because the law was the authoritative word of God. The Law of Moses, of which Paul was writing, was at that time the authoritative word of God. John wrote of this truth, *“Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law”* (*1 John 3:4*).

An example of the law of Moses being the authoritative word of God can be seen when Nadab and Abihu chose to not follow the law, but rather to follow their own will (*Leviticus 10:1-2*). The verse says that Nadab and Abihu *“...offered strange fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded.”* Nadab and Abihu knew very well the commandment of the Law of Moses regarding how and what to sacrifice. They knew that the Law of Moses was the ultimate and final word of God regarding these things, yet, they chose to reject the authority of the word of God, follow their own will, for which they suffered the consequences of death. The point that Paul is making is that even though the Law of Moses is no longer in effect, is not binding upon Christians, that when it was binding, it was the authoritative word of God by which he, Paul, learned right from wrong. This is the proper use and application of the Law of Moses (*Romans 7:7*).

### **The Word of God Has Been and Is Authoritative in Every Dispensation or Age**

God meant exactly what he said in the Garden of Eden (*Genesis 2:15-17*), and when Adam and Eve disobeyed the authoritative word of God they suffered the consequences of their sin (*Genesis 3:16-19*).

We have seen the example of Nadab and Abihu's disobedience (*Leviticus 10:1-2*), but there is also the example of the ten spies during the time of the Law of Moses who were afraid to do the will of God, and came back from Canaan with an evil, or a negative and discouraging report (*Numbers 13:32*). As a result of their fearful disobedience to the word of God, the ten faithless spies were not allowed to enter the land of Canaan (*Numbers 14:23*), and only Caleb and Joshua were allowed to enter the promise land (*Numbers 14:24,38*).

God said regarding his law, "*Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that he may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you*" (*Deuteronomy 4:2*). These are but a few of the many examples that illustrate the authority of God's word and that there are severe consequences for disobeying God. The principle carries through to the Christian age or the New Covenant (*2 Timothy 3:16-17*) because it is this word of God that we are to obey, and it is this word of God that we are to preach (*2 Timothy 4:2*).

The proper use and application of the old law is important, but a proper use of the new law, the new covenant is important as well. The church of Christ has been given the responsibility to be the "*pillar and ground of the truth*" (*1 Timothy 3:15*), but in order to accomplish that there must be respect for the authority of the word of God above all else. The authority of God's word is higher than the traditions of men in or out of the church, higher than the desire to have full church buildings and bank accounts and higher than self.

### Conclusion

In order to understand the New Testament we must first have a proper understanding and application of the Old Law or the Old Covenant. Most people in the religious world try to bind some aspect of the old law upon Christianity today, which always places them and their doctrine in conflict with a New Testament doctrine.

In order to have the proper understanding and application of the Old Law, and the message of Paul (*Romans 7:7*) there must be an understanding of the context in which the words were written, that there was and is a need for the word of God, and that word of God is authoritative in every age.

May we study the word of God so as to understand and apply it to our lives, obeying it that we might be eternally saved.