

God Provided the Law so Sin Would Increase

Romans, chapter 5 verse 20 expresses a concept quite difficult to understand when first read, or even after some amount of rereading and contemplation. The King James Version says, "*Moreover the law entered that offense might abound, but when sin abounded grace did much more abound.*" The NIV expresses the same thing but in words more common to the present day terminology. "*The law was added so that trespass might increase but where sin increased grace increased all the more....*" Does that mean that people chose to sin more because God, through Moses, provided them with a set of laws which identified and listed what was sinful? That seems to be what the Holy Spirit, through Paul, is telling us. But there is something wrong with that picture. The God I know is love, truth and righteousness. He is not a God who would give His law for the purpose of making His creation increase their sinfulness.

Perhaps a brief look back at man's origin and history up to the giving of the law will help to establish a basis for understanding the true meaning of this troubling verse.

We know from Scripture that Adam and Eve were made perfect, or sinless. However, even as with the angels, God gave them a free will and ability to choose their own thought and actions. It was through their choices that they disobeyed God regarding one and only one condition He imposed on them. Given everything in the world that they might consider doing, this was the only one choice, which He asked them not to make. The moment they made that one transgression, they realized that it was a huge mistake, because they suddenly saw themselves stripped of the glorious cloak of perfection with which God had clothed them. Here was the first sin, the going against God's will, and the feeling of guilt, which necessarily accompanied it. How do we know that? Because among their first thoughts was to cover themselves with fig leaves and to hide from God. The whole universe "groaned" and continues to groan (earthquakes, volcanoes, etc.) as a result of what that sin did (Romans 8:22). It activated a great curse on all of creation. Entrophy, that is the winding down, and eventual death of all existence was the physical result. Their immediate moral and spiritual death through the severing of the spiritual

linkage between God and man was the additional price that all mankind was to pay for that one sin.

In Genesis 1 God tells us that His creation was “good,” when He created it. That would mean perfect from our perspective. Life was made to be eternal, no death, no winding down, only eternal perfection in every sense. But now, sin had permeated every aspect of creation, even to the very DNA of Adam and Eve, so that their offspring throughout history would have a built-in propensity for sin, and but for God’s selective grace, they would also inherit the inevitability of death. But God in His divine mercy and foreknowledge also put in each soul a conscience, that is an internal sense of what is right and what is wrong. The first two people, in hiding themselves from God, revealed the first inkling of that sense. Cain also demonstrated guilt when he avoided God’s question to him as to where was his brother Abel. He further exposed the fact that the internal sense of right and wrong was present in others when he pleaded with God to protect him from the people who would know of his transgressions and seek to punish him (Genesis 4:14).

And so we can see that all through the biblical period, down to the giving of the law through Moses, God had endowed man with the knowledge of His omnipresence, as well as a clear sense of right and wrong, through that facility we call conscience. This was to guide him spiritually in his thoughts and actions. In effect, one could say that the basic precepts of the law, as articulated to Moses, were already in the hearts of man from the very beginning. But as it was then, and probably is even more so today, through his innate propensity to sin, man chose more often than not to override that internal directive. Eventually this override would sear or dull the conscience making it, to varying degrees, and sometimes permanently, quite insensitive to its calling. And so without the actual formality of law, the “desperately wicked heart” (Jeremiah 17:9) could, with seeming impunity, rationalize almost any of its wicked ways.

But until the law came, was such a violation of that internal sense a sin? Could sin be imputed based solely on one’s violation of that internal conscience? From God’s perspective, I believe the answer is yes. This is because man is judged from two

perspectives, both related to what he does with the amount of light he is given. He is judged by both his faith and by his works. By God's grace mankind is saved to eternal life in heaven through faith alone. It is his works, that is what he does with the light and with the spiritual gifts he is given, which determine his position in heaven, as these will be judged by Jesus as soon as the soul enters heaven. For those who are not saved, they too will be judged similarly regarding their works by Jesus from the Great White Throne at the end of the tribulation. The quality of their works will determine their relative positions in the lake of fire. God put this procedure in place long before the law was given.

The great patriarchs of the Old Testament such as Enoch, Noah, Job, Moses, Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph, each in his own way are examples of men of both faith and law-filled consciences, all prior to the formalized giving of the law. Certainly each one, with the possible exception of Enoch, did sin. They all admitted their transgressions and sought forgiveness.

So now why does Scripture tell us that the law was given so that sin might increase? It must be remembered that before the law, although the conscience was there as a guide regarding right and wrong, sin as such was unrecognized. The horrible nature of every sin as a damning transgression against God, and what could be done about it, was not yet fully understood. It took the law to bring this out and into the minds and hearts of those willing to accept this revelation. Putting the law "on paper" so to speak caused an end to the mystery and too much of the rationalizing which a weaker conscience could hide behind.

Now, "the law served to give to sin a specific character of transgression, thus deepening the sense of guilt and unworthiness" (HH Ironsides lectures on Romans pg. 87). What increased was the recognizing or awareness of sin. Suddenly sin seemed to be everywhere. Things of a seemingly minor nature, ignored by the imperfect conscience, were now identified as serious sins.

Some commentators conclude that because of man's depraved nature, the identifying of sin caused him to rail against such an imposition on his freedom of choice, and that this in turn, caused him to defy the law and to sin even more. Perhaps this is true in some cases, but I prefer the idea that the law simply intensified the sense of wrong, which had been suppressed by the conscience. I like Matthew Henry's commentary as the best expression of what God meant by the subject verse:

The moral laws showed that many thoughts, tempers, words, and actions, were sinful, thus transgressions were multiplied. This was not making sin to abound the more, but exposing the sinfulness of it, just as letting a clearer light shine into a room, exposes the dust and filth which were there before, but were not seen. The sin of Adam, and the effect of corruption in us, is the abounding of that offense which appeared with the entrance of the law. And the terrors of the law make gospel comforts sweeter. Thus God the Holy Spirit has delivered to us a most important truth, full of consolation, suited to our need as sinners. Whatever one may have above another every man is a sinner against God, stands condemned by the law, and needs pardon. A righteousness that is to justify cannot be made up of a mixture of sin and holiness. There can be no title to an eternal reward without a pure and spotless righteousness: let us look for it, even to the righteousness of Christ.

Remember this, when God gave the law, He gave it along with a sacrificial system, which when properly adhered to, covered man's sins. Then Christ, to fulfill the law and end the sacrificial system, sacrificed Himself so that all who believed, past, present and future would, through faith, have their sins completely forgiven. This is the blessed grace, which increases ever more and can save even the very worst of sinners. Thus, we all have the opportunity to be delivered from the guilt of sin, although not from our nature to sin. That old sin nature remains with each of us to the end of our mortal lives. But now those who are saved have the indwelling Holy Spirit to hold that evil nature captive, to keep the conscience increasingly sensitized against sin, and to give spiritual strength to overcome the temptations of the world.