Sin Is Also Lawlessness

The Books of Romans and Galatians emphatically teach that New Testament believers are not under the Law of Moses. For example, Romans 6:14-15 states: “…for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!” But note here Paul says being free from the Law of Moses, does not mean we are free to sin.

Sin is not limited to disobedience to God’s commands or laws. Sin also involves anything in which we are not conforming to God’s holy, perfectly right nature and character. But the New Testament contains many verses which teach sin is also lawlessness. 1 John 3:4 states: “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.”

One aspect of sin was disobedience to the Law of Moses. But John here explains sin also involves disobeying God’s laws or commands in a more general sense, not just those found in the Law of Moses.

Lawlessness is not only related to disobediences to Moses’ Law

In 2 Peter 2:7-8, Peter shows lawlessness is not just related to Israelites disobeying the Law of Moses: “and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed with the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds).”

Peter states the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were lawless. This is despite the fact these people had never heard the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses was not written until hundreds of years later. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were lawless in the sense of disobeying God’s laws written on their hearts and consciences (see Romans 2:11-16).

Jesus’ Final Judgement

Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:21-23 prove that at the Final Judgment, one of the main criteria by which He will distinguish between the living faith of real Christians and the seemingly vibrant but actually dead faith of miracle-working supposed “Christians” is their attitude to lawlessness: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

In Greek, the word “practice” in Matthew 7:23 is in the present tense. The Greek present tense usually signifies a continuous or repeated action. Christ is here referring to those who claim to know Him but who continuously practice lawlessness.

In Matthew 13:37-43, Jesus explained to his disciples the parable of the wheat and tares or weeds: “…He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels.
Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father...”

In these verses, Jesus stated that at the end of the age He would have His angels separate people into two categories – the sons of the kingdom of God and the sons of the evil one. But note that in verse 41, Jesus used the word “lawlessness” in relation to the sons of the evil one. The sons of the kingdom of God do not have continual lawlessness as the standard feature of their everyday lives after conversion.

Both legalists and pagans are lawless

In Romans 6:19, Paul wrote to the Roman Christians: “…For just as you presented your members as slaves of…lawlessness leading to more lawlessness…”

The Christians at Rome were either Jews who had been under the Law of Moses (see Romans 2:17-3:4) or non-Jews (see Acts 28:25-30). So when in Romans 6:19, Paul said they had previously been in slavery to lawlessness, he was showing that Jews and pagan Romans were both in total bondage to lawlessness.

The depth of their bondage to lawlessness can be seen in the repetition of the word “lawlessness” in this verse.

All or many of the Pharisees loved lawlessness

Many Christians will be surprised to find that Jesus regarded all or many of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law as lawless. These Pharisees and the teachers of the Law amended some of the Old Testament teachings into a subtle form of false legalistic religion. But despite this, Jesus said in Matthew 23:28 that many or all of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were full of lawlessness: “Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

You may ask, “In what ways were all or many of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law lawless?” The answer is many of them:

- proudly rejected Jesus Christ Who was God’s will for them as Lord and Saviour.
- added all of their own man-made religious laws to God’s Laws (see Matthew 15:1-20).
- refused to humble themselves before God (see Matthew 23:5-11).
- turned God’s commands into a form of self-righteousness as Luke 18:9-14 shows.
- only obeyed the Law of Moses in less important matters as Matthew 23:23-24 shows: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”
- did not practice what they preached about many things, as Jesus revealed in Matthew 23:1-4.
made many of their own man-made exceptions to God’s commands (see Mark 7:9-13 and Luke 13:10-17).

Many or all of the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees were very religious outwardly but inwardly loved various sins and disobediences to God’s known will. They were legalists who loved lawlessness in matters that suited themselves.

Jesus hates lawlessness

Hebrews 1:9 reveals Jesus Christ hates lawlessness: “You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness.” 1 John 2:6 says: “He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.” This verse reveals all believers should aim to walk as Jesus did. Therefore, because Hebrews 1:9 says Jesus hated lawlessness, believers must also.

Not under the Mosaic Law but not without law

We are no longer under the Law of Moses (see Romans 6:14-15, 7:4 and 7:6). But despite this, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:21: “To those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law;” Here Paul states that when he ministered to Gentiles who were not under the Law of Moses, he acted as one free from the Mosaic Law.

Even though he was a Jew, Paul behaved as though he was without law in relation to the Law of Moses when with non-Israelites. But Paul qualified this by saying he was not “without law” in relation to God but under Christ’s Law.

Under the New Covenant, lawlessness involves a continual careless attitude to disobediences to the commands or laws of God spoken through Jesus Christ and other New Testament writers.

Christ purchased us from a state of lawlessness

In Titus 2:14, Paul stated that Jesus Christ gave Himself to redeem us from all lawlessness: “Who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed…” Here the great apostle of grace emphasised that Jesus purchased us from a life focussed on disobedience to God’s laws or commands.

Forgiving and not remembering our lawlessness anymore

Romans 4:7 refers to God forgiving the lawless acts of a person who in faith receives God’s unmerited grace in Christ: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered”. In Hebrews 8:12 and 10:17, God promises to remember believers’ lawlessness no more after they have turned to Him.

Whether you have been converted very recently or been a Christian for many years, these marvellous promises of God are for you. If as a Christian, you have committed adultery or
taken drugs or murdered someone or fallen into crime or aborted a child or done similar
dreadful things but sincerely repent, God will forgive you of your lawlessness.

**The secret power of lawlessness**

In 2 Thessalonians 2:7, Paul prophesied about the secret power of lawlessness that will
prepare the world for the coming of the Antichrist: “*For the mystery of lawlessness is already
at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way.*” In Matthew
24:12, Jesus says lawlessness in the world will be one of the signs of His Second Coming.

**A heart attitude to God and delegated authorities**

Lawlessness begins as a heart attitude towards God and His delegated authorities such
as police, teachers and parents. The more such attitudes rule individuals in a society, the more
lawlessness manifests itself in crime and other forms of evil.

On January 26, 1997, the Sunday Telegraph in Australia, ¹ reported the comments of
New South Wales Police Commissioner, Peter Ryan: “*Voicing deep concern at a youth crime wave,
Mr Ryan yesterday urged the judiciary to abandon ‘a softer line’ on young offenders, particularly those
charged with violent or sex offences. ‘They might repeat again, and the last person you want to be
playing with, near or alongside your child is someone like that,’ he said… ‘It’s a total lack of respect for
anybody in authority, including their parents – and it’s a very worrying trend, because it’s absolute lawlessness.’*”

**The relevant Greek words**

There are two main Greek words used in the New Testament in relation to lawlessness.
These are “anomia” and “anomos”.

Vine says the Greek word “anomia” means “the rejection of the law, or will of God and
the substitution of the will itself”. ² Bauer defines “anomia” as “lawlessness as a frame of mind,
a lawless deed”. ³ “Anomia” is used in Matthew 7:23, 13:41, 23:28, 24:12, Romans 4:7, 6:19, 2

Vine defines the word “anomos” as “not simply that of doing what is unlawful, but of
*flagrant defiance* of the *known* will of God.” ⁴ Louw and Nida say “anomos” means “living
without regard to law, in the sense of refusing to obey laws”. ⁵ “Anomos” is used in Acts 2:23, 1
Timothy 1:9, 2 Thessalonians 2:8 and 2 Peter 2:8.

**Bible Study Questions**

1. What does 1 John 3:4 teach us about sin?

² Vine, page 357.
³ Bauer, pages 71-72.
⁴ Vine, page 357.
⁵ Louw and Nida, page 758.
2. Is lawlessness only related to disobeying the Mosaic Law? What verses support your answer.

3. Explain what Jesus taught in Matthew 7:21-23 and 13:37-43 about lawlessness and His attitude to it at the Final Judgement.

4. Does God regard all unbelievers as lawless?

5. What Biblical evidence is there that all or many of the Pharisees were lawless in God’s eyes?

6. What does Hebrews 1:9 reveal about Jesus’ attitude to lawlessness in people’s lives?