Keep off the Grass

I was driving past a turf farm today when the teenager who was in the car with me asked, “Why don’t they have a sign that says Keep off the Grass?” Immediately Romans 7:8 popped into my head:

But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me all kinds of rebellion

I explained that there is an unspoken rule in life that says “If it says don’t do it then you’re going to want to do it.” I know I’m not the only person guilty of seeing a ‘keep off the grass’ sign and then reaching my foot out and standing on it just because it told me not to. Why do we do that? It really is a very strange phenomenon.

I began to wonder about the reasons that people put up signs like this one. I guess the main reason is because if they didn’t, people would generally assume that the grass is there to walk on without realising that they are doing the wrong thing by the owner. But everyone knows that signs like that don’t stop people from trespassing, they just provoke them to do the very thing you don’t want them to do! So why put it up in the first place?

Well some people have attempted to get around this little problem with the use of reverse psychology. This is where, rather than telling people what you don’t want them to do, you tell them what you do want them to do. So instead of saying keep off the grass, you would say keep to the path. It sounded good in theory but it turns out that didn’t solve the problem either. Why? Well you see the command which says do is too demanding, and the command which says don’t is too restrictive. Even God instituted both do and don’t laws, neither of which Israel were able to keep.

So what really is the purpose of the law then? Well I think it varies slightly depending on whether you are talking about God’s law or man’s law. A quick glance at man’s law reveals three main purposes:

1. to make you aware that there is a universal moral law to which you are constrained
2. to tell you what the requirements of that law are
3. to curb your behaviour and make you submit, by punishing you if you don’t keep it

God’s law also has three purposes; the first two are the same as above, but the third one regarding behaviour management and punishment, I believe, has a slightly different purpose.

It is true that God’s laws were accompanied by punishment, but I’m not convinced that they were necessarily designed to curb our behaviour or make us submit to Him. In fact, I think the main purpose of God’s law was to make one simple point: we can’t keep it. Physical punishment was simply there to represent the eternal judgement which God’s Holiness demands against those who transgress His law.
That sounds a little rough though hey? God institutes a law that no one can keep and then punishes them just to make a point. But therein lies our problem... we have missed the point.

As I thought longer about the keep of the grass sign I realised that there was a deeper and more important reason for God’s Law.

The keep off the grass sign revealed that I have something living inside me which compels me to rebel against any laws imposed on me. I then realised that that thing is what Paul describes as the ‘law of sin that dwells in my body’ (Romans 7:23).

Think of it this way: if no one ever put up any signs like keep of the grass, I would never have known that I have a natural bent to rebel against them. This of course is exactly what Paul says in Romans 3:20 and 7:7, that through God’s law we become aware that we are naturally driven to sin. This is the prime purpose of God’s law.

So God’s whole plan of salvation makes far more sense when we realise that the reason we struggle to keep His law is because we actually aren’t free to do so. We are literally owned by another master and bound to obey his law. Jesus came to free us from our old master.

This also gives me a better understanding of what Paul meant when he said, "the power of sin is the law" (1 Cor. 15:56). While I live my life attempting to keep the law to earn my salvation I actually give sin more power in my life because that is where sin comes alive: in the presence of the law (Romans 7:9-10). But of course that doesn’t mean that I am not bound by any law, but that I am under a new and living law. And that my friend, is a discussion for another day.

But it’s funny you know; it was only last night that I was asking God what He meant by ‘the law of sin’ that dwells in my members, and now I know.

Who would have guessed that He would use a teenager and a passing turf farm to tell me that?