

Law and Grace

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NO subject is more intimately bound up with the nature of the gospel than that of law and grace. In the degree to which error is entertained at this point, in the same degree is our conception of the gospel perverted. An erroneous conception of the function of law can be of such a character that it completely vitiates our view of the gospel; and an erroneous conception of the antithesis between law and grace can be of such a character that it demolishes both the substructure and the superstructure of grace. Nothing could advertise this more than the fact that two of the major Epistles of the New Testament, and the two most polemic, have this subject as their theme. Our attention is irresistibly drawn to the gravity of the issue with which the apostle is concerned in his Epistle to the Galatians when we read at the outset, 'But even if we or an angel from heaven preach to you any gospel other than that which we have preached to you, let him be anathema. As we have said before, so now again I say, if anyone preach any gospel to you other than that which ye received, let him be anathema' (Galatians 1:8, 9). And we are no less startled when we read in the same apostle's Epistle to the Romans, 'I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience bearing witness with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing pain in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were anathema from Christ on behalf of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh' (Romans 9:1-3). What was the question that aroused the apostle to such passionate zeal and holy indignation, indignation that has its kinship with the imprecatory utterances of the Old Testament? In a word it was the relation of law and gospel. 'I do not make void the grace of God: for if righteousness is through the law, then Christ died in vain' (Galatians 2: 21). 'For if a law had been given which could make alive, verily from the law righteousness would have been' (Galatians 3: 21). 'By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified in his sight' (Romans 3: 20).

The simple truth is that if law is conceived of as contributing in the least degree towards our acceptance with God and our justification by him, then the gospel of grace is a nullity. And the issue is so sharply and incisively drawn that, if we rely in any respect upon compliance with law for our acceptance with God, then Christ will profit us nothing. 'Ye have been discharged from Christ whosoever of you are justified by law; ye have fallen away from grace' (Galatians 5:4). But lest we should think that the whole question of the relation of law and grace is thereby resolved, we must be reminded that Paul says also in this polemic, 'Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid, yea we establish the law' (Romans 3:31). We are compelled therefore to recognize that the subject of law and grace is not simply concerned with the antithesis that there is between law and grace, but also with

law as that which makes grace necessary and with grace as establishing and confirming law. It is not only the doctrine of grace that must be jealously guarded against distortion by the works of law, but it is also the doctrine of law that must be preserved against the distortions of a spurious concept of grace. This is just saying that we are but echoing the total witness of the apostle of the Gentiles as the champion of the gospel of grace when we say that we must guard grace from the adulteration of legalism and we must guard law from the depredations of antinomianism.

In relation to the topic with which we are concerned now it is the latter that must claim our attention. What is the place of law in the economy of grace?

It is symptomatic of a pattern of thought current in many evangelical circles that the idea of keeping the commandments of God is not consonant with the liberty and spontaneity of the Christian man, that keeping the law has its affinities with legalism and with the principle of works rather than with the principle of grace. It is strange indeed that this kind of antipathy to the notion of keeping commandments should be entertained by any believer who is a serious student of the New Testament. Did not our Lord say, 'If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments' (John 14:15)? And did he not say, 'If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love, even as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love' (John 15:10)? It was John who recorded these sayings of our Lord and it was he, of all the disciples, who was mindful of the Lord's teaching and example regarding love, and reproduces that teaching so conspicuously in his first Epistle. We catch something of the tenderness of his entreaty when he writes, 'Little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and truth' (I John 3:18), 'Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God' (I John 4:7). But the message of John has escaped us if we have failed to note John's emphasis upon the keeping of the commandments of God. 'And by this we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that says, I know him, and does not keep his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keeps his word, in him verily the love of God is made perfect' (I John 2:3-5). 'Beloved, if our heart does not condemn, we have confidence toward God, and whatsoever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do those things that are well-pleasing in his sight . . . And he who keeps his commandments abides in him and he in him' (I John 3:21, 22, 24). 'For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments' (I John 5:3). If we are surprised to find this virtual identification of love to God and the keeping of his commandments, it is because we have overlooked the words of our Lord himself which John had remembered and learned well: 'If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love' (John 15:10) and 'He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me' (John 14:21). To say the very least, the witness of our Lord and the testimony of John are to the effect that there is indispensable complementation; love

will be operative in the *keeping* of God's commandments. It is only myopia that prevents us from seeing this, and when there is a persistent animosity to the notion of keeping commandments the only conclusion is that there is either gross ignorance or malignant opposition to the testimony of Jesus.

A great deal of the antipathy to the idea of obligation to keep the commandments of God has arisen from misconception regarding the word of the apostle Paul, 'Ye are not under law but under grace' (Romans 6:14). And much apparent support may be derived from this text to justify and reinforce this antipathy. It is easy to see how an insistence that believers are under obligation to keep the law of God would seem to contradict the express statement of the apostle that believers are not under law. In like manner, when Paul says that 'before faith came we were kept in ward under law, shut up to the faith about to be revealed' (Galatians 3:23), it is obvious that the bondage implied in being kept in ward under law is terminated with the revelation of faith. Hence to speak of the believer as bound to the obedience of God's law is to bring the believer again into that bondage which it is the great burden of Paul in both Romans and Galatians to resist and controvert! 'For freedom has Christ made us free: let us stand fast therefore and not be entangled again in the yoke of bondage' (Galatians 5:1).

It must be appreciated that when Paul says in Romans 6:14, 'Ye are not under law but under grace', there is the sharpest possible antithesis between 'under law' and 'under grace', and that in terms of Paul's intent in this passage these are mutually exclusive. To be 'under law' is to be under the dominion of sin; to be 'under grace' is to be liberated from that dominion. What then is the antithesis and how does it bear upon our question? To answer this question it is necessary to establish what law as law can do and what law as law cannot do.

What law can do is in some respects quite obvious, in other respects frequently overlooked. (1) Law commands and demands; it propounds what the will of God is. The law of God is the holiness of God coming to expression for the regulation of thought and conduct consonant with his holiness. We must be perfect as God is perfect; the law is that which the perfection of God dictates in order to bring about conformity with his perfection. (2) Law pronounces approval and blessing upon conformity to its demands. The commandment was ordained to life (Romans 7:10), and the man that does the things of the law will live in them (Galatians 3:12). Law not only enunciates justice; it guards justice. It ensures that where there is righteousness to the full extent of its demand there will be the corresponding justification and life. Only when there is deviation from its demands does any adverse judgment proceed from the law. (3) Law pronounces the judgment of condemnation upon every infraction of its precept. The law has nought but curse for any

person who has once broken its sanctity; he who is guilty at one point is guilty of all. 'Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them' (Galatians 3:10). (4) Law exposes and convicts of sin. It exposes the sin that may lie hid in the deepest recesses of the heart. The law is Spiritual and as the word of God it is living and powerful, searching the thoughts and intents of the heart (cf. Romans 7:14; Hebrews 4:12). It is this discriminating and searching function of the law that Paul describes when he says. 'I had not known lust except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet' (Romans 7:7); the law lays bare the self-complacency that blinds us to the depravity of our hearts. (s) Law excites and incites sin to more virulent and violent transgression. Law, of itself so far from renewing and reforming the depraved heart, only occasions more intensified and confirmed expression of its depravity. 'But sin taking occasion through the commandment wrought in me all manner of lust' (Romans 7:8; cf. verses 9, 11, 13). The law, therefore, instead of relieving or relaxing our bondage to sin, intensifies and confirms that bondage. The more the light of the law shines upon and in our depraved hearts, the more the enmity of our minds is roused to opposition, and the more it is made manifest that the mind of the flesh is not subject to the law of God, neither can be.

What law as law cannot do is implicit in what we have found to be the utmost of its potency. (1) Law can do nothing to justify the person who in any particular has violated its sanctity and come under its curse. Law, as law, has no expiatory provision; it exercises no forgiving grace; and it has no power of enablement to the fulfilment of its own demand. It knows no clemency for the remission of guilt; it provides no righteousness to meet our iniquity; it exerts no constraining power to reclaim our waywardness; it knows no mercy to melt our hearts in penitence and new obedience. (a) It can do nothing to relieve the bondage of sin; it accentuates and confirms that bondage. It is this impossibility to alleviate the bondage of sin that is particularly in view in Romans 6:14. The person who is 'under law', the person upon whom only law has been brought to bear, the person whose life has been determined exclusively by the resources and potencies of law, is the bondservant of sin. And the more intelligently and resolutely a person commits himself to law the more abandoned becomes his slavery to sin. Hence deliverance from the bondage of sin must come from an entirely different source.

It is in this light that the apostle's antithetical expression 'under grace' becomes significant. The word 'grace' sums up everything that by way of contrast with law is embraced in the provisions of redemption. In terms of Paul's teaching in this context the redemptive provision consists in our having become dead to the law by the body of Christ (Romans 7:4). Believers died with Christ and they lived again with him in his resurrection (cf Romans 6:8). They have, therefore, come under all the resources of redeeming and renewing grace which find their epitome in the death and resurrection of Christ and find

their permanent embodiment in him who was dead and is alive again. The virtue which ever continues to emanate from the death and resurrection of Christ is operative in them through union with Christ in the efficacy of his death and the power of his resurrection life. All of this Paul's brief expression 'under grace' implies. And in respect of the subject with which Paul is dealing there is an absolute antithesis between the potency of law and the potency of grace, between the provisions of law and the provisions of grace. Grace is the sovereign will and power of God coming to expression, not for the regulation of thought and conduct consonant with God's holiness, but for the deliverance of men from thought and conduct that bind them to the servitude of unholiness. Grace is deliverance from the . dominion of sin and therefore deliverance from that which consists in transgression of the law.

The purity and integrity of the gospel stand or fall with the absoluteness of the antithesis between the function and potency of law, on the one hand, and the function and potency of grace, on the other. But while all this is true it does not by any means follow that the antithesis eliminates all relevance of the law to the believer as a believer. The facile slogan of many a professed evangelical, when confronted with the claims of the law of God, to the effect that he is not under law but under grace, should at least be somewhat disturbed when it is remembered that the same apostle upon whose formula he relies said also that he was not without law to God but under law to Christ (I Corinthians 9:21). This statement of the apostle demands careful examination because it bears the implication that Paul was under law to God and he expressly states that he was under law to Christ. It would seem as if he said the opposite of what he says in Romans 6:14. But in any case what Paul says to the Corinthians prohibits us from taking the formula 'not under law' as the complete account of the relation of the believer to the law of God.

Paul is affirming that he was all things to all men—to Jews as a Jew, to those under law as under law, to those without law as without law. There is an anomalous contrast here; his conduct at one time would seem to be the moral opposite of what it was at another time. In relation to some he was 'as under law' (ὡς ὑπὸ νόμου), in relation to others he was 'as without law' (ὡς ἄνομος). And it is not only the apparent contradictoriness of the modes of conduct that strikes us as strange; the expressions in themselves are anomalous. How can Paul speak of himself as acting at any time as one 'under law'? And how can he speak of himself as acting 'without law'? It is not only we, his readers, who sense the anomaly; Paul himself anticipates the question and the implicit objection. Hence he is well aware of the necessity of guarding both expressions from misunderstanding. He adds in reference to the first, 'not being myself under law', and in reference to the second, 'not being without law to God but under law to Christ'.

Examination of this passage will disclose something very important respecting Paul's use of the expression 'under law'. When he says that for those under law he behaved as one 'under law', he cannot mean that he behaved as one 'under law' in the sense in which he uses that expression in Romans 6:14. In that passage 'under law' bears the sense, or at least the implication, of being in bondage to sin. But Paul in I Corinthians 9:20, 21 cannot in the least be suggesting that he behaved as one under bondage to sin. Such a thought is inconceivable and therefore completely removed from the universe of discourse. So he must be using the expression 'under law' in some sense other than that of Romans 6:14. And the precise meaning is not obscure. He means 'under law' in the sense in which Jews who had not yet understood the significance of the death and resurrection of Christ for the discontinuance of the Mosaic rites and ceremonies considered themselves to be under law, and therefore obliged to keep the rites and customs of the Mosaic economy. When Paul characterizes the people in question as those under law, he is not reflecting upon their moral and spiritual state as one of bondage to sin. All unbelievers are in that category of being in bondage to sin and therefore 'under law' in the sense of Romans 6:14 consequently the characterization, 'under law' of Romans 6:14 would not differentiate between the diverse sorts of people whom Paul has in view in I Corinthians 9. It must be therefore that 'under law' in this latter instance carries the import of being under the rites and ceremonies of the Mosaic economy. We are not to suppose that Paul is admitting that any at that stage of redemptive revelation were in reality bound to the observance of the Mosaic rites; he is reflecting simply upon what a certain group of people considered to be their obligation. And when he says that he was for such as one under law, he means that he accommodated himself to the customs and rites which these people observed and to which they considered themselves obligated.

This force of the expression 'under law' throws a great deal of light upon the same expression in Galatians 3:23: 'Before faith came we were kept in ward under law'. The context makes it abundantly clear that what Paul means by the law in this context is the Mosaic economy. In the preceding verses he asks the question, 'What then is the law?' and he answers, 'It was added on account of the transgressions' (Galatians 3:19). He is thinking of that economy which was instituted four hundred and thirty years after the giving of the promise to Abraham (cf. verse 17), that economy which, he says, was 'ordained through angels in the hand of a mediator' (verse 19). When, in verse 23, he says that 'before faith came we were kept in ward under law' he is contrasting the pedagogical nonage and tutelage of the Mosaic economy with the mature sonship and liberty enjoyed by the New Testament believer. He is not here equating the 'under law' of which he speaks with the same expression in Romans 6:14; he is not suggesting, far less is he intimating, that the people of Israel who were kept in ward 'under law' were under the bondage of sin which is

the obvious import of the 'under law' of Romans 6:14.

In like manner when Paul says in I Corinthians 9:20 that he became to those under law as under law, he is referring to those who had not yet recognized the epochal change that had been signaled by the New Testament redemptive events, and to his own behaviour in conforming by way of concession to the prejudices and customs of those who considered themselves bound by what were in reality only the temporary provisions of the older economy. And when he appends the qualifying clause, 'not being myself under law', he means that, though accommodating himself by way of expediency to these customs, he did not consider himself under any divine obligation to observe such rites and practices; he was not himself under that law. Again we see how impossible it is to apply the same sense of 'not under law' in Romans 6:14 to the 'not under law' of I Corinthians 9:20. For if we were to do this then we should have to understand Paul as adjusting his behaviour to the practices of those who were under the dominion of sin, an utterly impossible and unthinkable supposition.

The second qualification which Paul felt constrained to make in I Corinthians 9:20, 21 is the one that is more directly germane to our topic: 'not being without law to God but under law to Christ'. He is guarding himself against the inference that, in becoming to those without law as without law, he recognized himself as free from obligation to the law of God and of Christ. What he means when he says that to those without law he became as without law is that, in his relations with such people, he did not conform to Mosaic customs and ordinances. 'Without law' in this case is the contrary of 'under law' in the same context. And since 'under law' means conformity to Mosaic rites, 'without law' means the opposite, namely, nonconformity with such rites. But lest this assertion of nonconformity should be misunderstood as implying release from all conformity to law he immediately adds that he is bound in and to the law of God and of Christ. Paul is not lawless in respect to God; he is law-bound in respect to Christ.

The expression Paul uses, 'under law to Christ', is a particularly impressive one. It is as if he had said 'inlawed to Christ', 'bound in law to Christ', 'under the obligation of the law of Christ'. The intent of Paul's terms is not to contrast the law of God and the law of Christ, as if he had said, 'not under law to God but rather under law to Christ'. The negative clause is not at all, 'not under law to God', but 'not without law to God'. The implication is that he is under law to God and this 'under law to God' finds its validation and explanation in his being under law to Christ. Paul asserts most unequivocally, therefore, that he is bound by the law of Christ and of God.

The conclusions to which we must come are as follows. (1) In one sense the believer is not under law. To be 'under law' in this sense is correlative with the dominion and

bondservice of sin. The believer has been discharged from the law (Romans 7:6), he has been put to death to the law through the body of Christ (Romans 7:4), and therefore he has died to the law (Romans 7:6). Having died to the law he died to sin (Romans 6:2), and sin will not have dominion over him (Romans 6:14). (2) In still another sense the believer is not under law; he is not under the ritual law of the Mosaic economy. This pedagogical tutelary bondage has been terminated by the epochal events of Calvary, the resurrection, and Pentecost. Christ redeemed them that were once under this law so that all without distinction may enjoy the mature and unrestrained privilege of sons. Freedom from the law in this specific sense is just as absolute as freedom from law in the preceding sense. (3) There is another sense in which the believer is 'under law'; he is bound in law to God and to Christ. The law of God and of Christ binds him precisely because of his relation to Christ.

This third conclusion is not only derived from I Corinthians 9:21. There are several other considerations which demand the same conclusion. The fallacy of the interpretation that Paul conceives of the believer as in no sense under law and seeks to derive this from Romans 6:14; 7: 1-6 should have been corrected by a more careful study of the context in which these same passages occur.

(1) Romans 6:14 cannot be dissociated from Romans 6:15: 'What then? shall we sin, because we are not under law but under grace? God forbid.' The apostle repudiates in the most emphatic way any insinuation to the effect that grace gives licence to sin or provides an inducement to sin. Grace intervenes and rules over us to deliver from the dominion of sin, and therefore establishes and promotes the opposite of sin, namely, righteousness. Deliverance from the dominion of sin does not leave the person in a vacuum or in a state of neutrality; it is deliverance *to* if it is deliverance *from*. And it is deliverance to holiness and righteousness. It is this thought that Paul develops in the succeeding verses. He speaks not only of deliverance from sin but of its positive counterpart. 'Being then made free from sin ye were made bondservants to righteousness' (Romans 6:18; cf. verse 22). Here he is saying not simply that believers became the servants of righteousness; he is saying that they were the subjects of the action of God's grace so that they were bound over to righteousness. How can we understand righteousness as the positive opposite of sin unless we construe it as the opposite of what sin is? And if sin is the transgression of the law, righteousness must be conformity to the law. The law of God which Paul characterizes in this Epistle as Spiritual, that is to say, divine in its origin and nature, and holy and just and good after the pattern of him who is its author (Romans 7:12, 14), must be regarded as the criterion of righteousness no less than it is the criterion of sin.

(2) If Paul thought of himself as released from obligation to the law of God, how could he ever have confessed as a believer, 'I consent unto the law that it is good.. . I delight in the law of God after the inward man.. . Consequently then I myself with the mind serve the law of God' (Romans 7:16, 22, 25)? It is fully admitted that the inner conflict and tension delineated in Romans 7:14-25

pose acute exegetical difficulties; but there is surely little room for question that when Paul describes his most characteristic self, the self that he most centrally and fundamentally is as one united to Christ in the virtue of his death and the power of his resurrection (cf. Romans 6:2-6), he describes himself as delighting in the law of God and serving that law with his mind. This service is one of bondservice, of commanded commitment; and yet it is not the bondservice of enforced and unwilling servitude. It is service constrained by delight and consent in the deepest recesses of heart and mind and will. It is total commitment, but it is the commitment also of spontaneous delight. The restraint which Paul deplors in this context and which compels him to exclaim 'O wretched man that I am' (Romans 7:24) is not the restraint which the law of God imposes, but the restraint arising from the lack of conformity to it, that he wills the good but does not carry it into effect. The burden he bemoans is not the law but that which is its contradiction, the other law in his members warring against the law of his mind (Romans 7:23).

(3) It is eloquent of what Paul had in view in these protestations regarding his delight in, and service of, the law of God that in this same Epistle Paul furnishes us with concrete illustrations of the law to which he refers and of the ways in which conformity to the law is expressed. He does this in the more immediate context of Romans 6:14 when he says, 'I had not known lust except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet' (Romans 7:7). But in that part of his Epistle which deals directly with the details of Christian conduct his reference to at least four of the commandments is even more illuminating. 'Owe no man anything, but to love one another. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not covet, and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this word, in this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' (Romans 13:8, 9). What is of particular interest to us at present is to note that Paul regards these precepts of the decalogue, four of which he quotes, as relevant to the behaviour which exemplifies the Christian vocation. The emphasis falls upon the fact that love fulfils them and that they are summed up, or summarized, in the word, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'. But, if love fulfils them, we must still bear in mind that they are fulfilled; and if they are fulfilled they exist as precepts which call for fulfilment: and if they are summarized in one word, the summary does not obliterate or abrogate the expansion of which it is a summary. It is futile to try to escape the underlying assumption of Paul's thought, that the concrete precepts of the decalogue have relevance to the believer as the criteria of that behaviour which love dictates. And it is all the more significant that these criteria should have been enunciated by the apostle in a context where the accent falls upon love itself: 'Owe no man anything, but to love one another' (verse 8).

Other passages in Paul's Epistles yield the same lesson respecting his conception of the place of law in the realm of grace. The situation in the church at Corinth made it necessary for Paul in his first Epistle to devote a considerable part of it to questions which fall within the realm of ethics and in several particulars he was called upon to administer reproof and correction for the misconduct of believers. He takes the occasion to remind them that the unrighteous shall not inherit the

kingdom of God. He lists for us a catalogue of sins, thereby illustrating the unrighteousness which excludes from the kingdom of God—fornication, idolatry, adultery, effeminacy, sodomy, thievery, covetousness, drunkenness, reviling, extortion (I Corinthians 6:9, 10). His intent is to illustrate the character and conduct which identify those who have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God (cf. verse 10), and he is saying in effect: ‘You believers have been washed and sanctified and justified, and you cannot play fast and loose with any wrongdoing; as heirs of the kingdom of God you must behave accordingly; you must appreciate the antithesis between the kingdom of God amid the world’. The point of particular interest for our present study is the criterion, presupposed in Paul’s teaching here, by which this antithesis is to be judged. We need but scan the sins which Paul mentions to discover what this criterion is; the precepts of the decalogue underlie the whole catalogue. Idolatry—the first and second commandments; adultery—the seventh commandment; theft and extortion—the eighth; reviling—the ninth and possibly the third; covetousness—the tenth. Hence it is only too apparent that the criteria of the equity which characterizes the kingdom of God and the criteria of the iniquity which marks off those who are without God and without hope in the world are those norms of thought and behaviour which are epitomized in the ten commandments. And it is Paul’s plea that the operations of grace (cf. verse 11) make mandatory the integrity of which these precepts are the canons. It is not grace relieving us of the demands signalized in these precepts, but grace establishing the character and status which will bring these demands to effective fruition.

If it should be objected that Paul in this same Epistle provides us with an example of love as exercised in abstraction from law when he commends abstinence from meat offered to idols lest the eating of such meat should be a stumblingblock to the weak, we have not read the passage with sufficient care (I Corinthians 8). It is true that there is no law against the eating of meat offered to idols; the apostle contends in this matter for the liberty of the strong and intelligent believer. No idol is anything in the world, and there is no other God but one. The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof. For the man who entertains this faith, meat is not contaminated by the fact that it was offered by another, who is an idolater, to an idol; he may freely eat and give the Lord thanks. Yet there are certain circumstances under which considerations of love to another will constrain the strong believer to abstain. It might be argued that here love operates in complete abstraction from law and therefore we have an illustration of love acting on the highest level apart from the direction or dictation of law.

Examination of the passage in question will expose the fallacy of such an interpretation. The law of God in its sanctity and authority underlies the whole situation. Why is the intelligent believer enjoined in the circumstances to abstain? Simply and solely because there is the danger of the sin of idolatry on the part of the weak brother, the danger of wounding his weak conscience in the eating of meat as offered to an idol. In other words, it is the danger of transgression, on the part of the weak believer, of the first commandment, ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me’. Remove

that fact from the situation and the whole argument of the apostle is nullified. The law requires that we ourselves abstain from idolatry; but it also requires that we love our neighbour as ourselves. Therefore when our doing what, so far as we ourselves are concerned, is a perfectly innocent act, becomes, and that to our knowledge, the occasion for the commission of sin on the part of another believer, love to our neighbour as ourselves will impel us to abstain from so unloving and unworthy conduct. It is not, however, love abstracted from law but love operating under the authority and sanctity of that commandment, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me'.

We have therefore abundant evidence from Paul's Epistles to elucidate what he means when he says: 'Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: nay, we establish the law' (Romans 3:31). This is the protestation with which Paul brings to a conclusion one of the most eloquent statements of the contrast between the function of law and the operation of grace: 'But now without the law the righteousness of God is made manifest'; 'Where then is boasting? it is excluded. Through what law? of works? Nay, but through the law of faith. For we reckon that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law' (Romans 3:21, 27, 28). It is a protestation that Paul fully establishes and verifies in the later portions of this Epistle. But, in manner characteristic of the apostle, he interjects at this early point, at the conclusion of his peroration respecting the impotence of law and the efficacy of grace, the most emphatic warning to the effect that this total impotence of law to justify the ungodly does not carry with it the inference that the law is thereby discarded or abrogated. The inferences so frequently drawn from Romans 6:14 should have been obviated by the reminder which Paul announces in Romans 3:31, and the context of Romans 6:14 advises us of the reasons why grace does not make the law of none effect. 'The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good' (Romans 7:12). 'The law is Spiritual' (Romans 7:14). It is unqualifiedly and unreservedly good (Romans 7:13, 16, 19, 21). And how could the unreservedly good be relieved of its relevance or deprived of its sanctity?

A good deal of the misconception pertaining to the relation of the law to the believer springs from a biblico-theological error of much broader proportions than a misinterpretation of Paul's statement in Romans 6:14. It is the misinterpretation of the Mosaic economy and covenant in relation to the new covenant. It has been thought that in the Mosaic covenant there is a sharp antithesis to the principle of promise embodied in the Abrahamic covenant and also to the principle of grace which comes to its efflorescence in the new covenant, and that this antithetical principle which governs the Mosaic covenant and dispensation is that of law in contradistinction from both promise and grace.¹

It is thought, therefore, that the Mosaic covenant is the outstanding example of works of law as opposed to the provisions of promise and grace. It is easy to see how such an interpretation of the Mosaic economy would radically affect our construction not only of the Mosaic economy itself but also of the Abrahamic

1. See Appendix E in reference to Lewis Sperry Chafer and cf. also The Scofield Reference Bible, pp. 1115, 1244f.; Charles A. Feinberg: *Premillennialism or Amillennialism* (Grand Rapids, 1936), pp. 126, 190. The question is not whether modern

covenant, on the one hand, and of the new covenant, on the other; the Mosaic would stand in sharp antithesis to both in respect of constitutive and governing principle. And the contrast between law and grace which we find in the New Testament would naturally be interpreted as a contrast between the Mosaic economy and the gospel dispensation of grace. In other words, the real contrast between ‘under law’ and ‘under grace’, as it appears in Romans 6:14 and Romans 7:1-4, would be exemplified in the realm of the historical unfolding of covenant revelation in the contrast between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant. This interpretation has exercised a profound influence upon the history of interpretation and it has cast its shadow over the exegesis of particular passages. It is necessary for us to consider this question: What is the governing principle of the Mosaic covenant? Is this principle one of law as contrasted with grace and therefore antithetical to that of the new covenant?

There is a plausible case that could be made out for this construction of the Mosaic covenant. The first express reference to the covenant made with Israel at Sinai is framed in terms of obedience to the commandments of God and of keeping the covenant. ‘Now therefore if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Exodus 19:5, 6). And the engagement of the people is in similar terms: ‘All that the Lord hath spoken will we do and be obedient’ (Exodus 24:7). Surely, we might say, these are not the terms of a covenant of grace but the terms of a covenant of legal and contractual stipulations.² How, we might ask, does the condition of obedience comport with the provisions of an administration of grace? If grace is contingent upon the fulfilment of certain conditions by us, then surely it is no more grace. Hence, it may well be argued, this conditional feature of the Mosaic covenant requires that it be placed in a different category. In dealing with this question we must take several considerations into account.

1. The Mosaic covenant in respect of this condition of obedience is not in a different category from the Abrahamic. ‘And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations’ (Genesis 17:9). Of Abraham God said, ‘For I know

dispensationalists actually maintain that, during the dispensation of law, any were actually saved by works of obedience to law. Dispensationalists will acknowledge that in all ages men were saved by the blood of Christ through the grace of God. In Feinberg’s words, ‘All the blessing in the world in all ages is directly traceable to the death of Christ’ (*op. cit.*, p. 210). ‘Paul’s argument in the fourth chapter of the Romans seeks to make clear that God has always justified guilty sinners by faith’ (p. 202; cf. pp. 217f. and Roy L. Aldrich in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, January, 1955, pp. 49ff.). The question is whether the dispensationalist construction of the Mosaic dispensation is correct and whether the concession that people had been even then saved by grace through the blood of Christ is consistent with this construction. Obviously, if the construction is erroneous, the error involved is of such a character that it must radically affect not only the view entertained of the Mosaic dispensation but of the whole history of revelation, particularly of the revelation embodied in the three pivotal covenants, the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, and the New. For criticism of modern dispensationalism in general cf. Oswald T. Allis: *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia, 1945). On the place of law in Scripture cf. Patrick Fairbairn: *The Revelation of Law in Scripture* (New York, 1869).

2. Cf. my booklet, *The Covenant of Grace* (London, 1953), for a more detailed study of the concept of covenant and of the Mosaic covenant as one of grace.

him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him' (Genesis 18:19). There is nothing principally different in the necessity of keeping the covenant and of obeying God's voice, characteristic of the Mosaic covenant, from what is involved in the keeping of the covenant required in the Abrahamic.

2. The Mosaic covenant, no less than the Abrahamic, contemplates a relation of intimacy and fellowship with God epitomized in the promise 'I will be your God and ye shall be my people' (cf. Exodus 6:7; 18:1; 19:5, 6; 20:2; Deuteronomy 29:13). Religious relationship on the highest level is in view. If the covenant contemplates religious relationship of such a character, it is inconceivable that the demands of God's holiness should not come to expression as governing and regulating that fellowship and as conditioning the continued enjoyment of its blessings. This note is frequent in the Pentateuch (cf. Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7, 26 21:8; Deuteronomy 6:4-15). It is summed up in two words: 'Ye shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy' (Leviticus 19:2); 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might' (Deuteronomy 6:5). And the import is that the holiness of God demands holiness on the part of those who enter into such a covenant relation with him. It is the same principle as that expressed in the New Testament, 'Without holiness no man shall see the Lord' (Hebrews 12:14), and is reiterated in Old Testament terms by Peter when he says, 'As he who hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation, because it is written, Be ye holy, for I am holy' (I Peter 1:15; cf. Leviticus 11:44; 19:2; 20:7). The holiness which is demanded by the covenant fellowship is expressed concretely in obedience to the divine commandments. This is really all that needs to be said to demonstrate not only the *consonance* of the demand for obedience with the covenant as one of religious relationship on the highest level of spirituality but also the *necessity* of such a demand. It is because the covenant is one of union and communion with God that the condition of obedience is demanded.

3. Not only is holiness, as expressed concretely and practically in obedience, demanded by the covenant fellowship; we must also bear in mind that holiness was itself an integral element of the covenant blessing. Israel had been redeemed and called to be a holy people and holiness might be regarded as the essence of the covenant blessing. For holiness consisted in this, that Israel was a people separated unto the Lord. Their election is meaningless apart from that to which they were elected. And this holiness again is exemplified in obedience to the commandments of God (cf. Psalm 19:7ff.).

4. Holiness, concretely and practically illustrated in obedience, is the means through which the fellowship entailed in the covenant relationship proceeds to its fruition and consummation. This is the burden, for example, of Leviticus 26. It is stated both positively and negatively, by way of promise and by way of threatening. 'If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them.. . I will set my tabernacle among you: and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people' (Leviticus 26:3, 11, 12).

We may therefore sum up the matter by saying that the holiness of God demanded conformity to his holiness, that holiness was of the essence of the covenant privilege, that holiness was the condition of continuance in the enjoyment of the covenant blessings and the medium through which the covenant privilege realized its fruition. Holiness is exemplified in obedience to the commandments of God. Obedience is therefore entirely congruous with, and disobedience entirely contradictory of, the nature of God's covenant with Israel as one of union and communion with God.

In all of this the demand of obedience in the Mosaic covenant is principally identical with the same demand in the new covenant of the gospel economy. The new covenant also finds its centre in the promise, 'I will be your God and ye shall be my people'. The new covenant as an everlasting covenant reaches the zenith of its realization in this: 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people' (Revelation 21:3). But we must ask: Do believers continue in this relationship and in the enjoyment of its blessing irrespective of persevering obedience to God's commands? It is one of the most perilous distortions of the doctrine of grace, and one that has carried with it the saddest records of moral and spiritual disaster, to assume that past privileges, however high they may be, guarantee the security of men irrespective of perseverance in faith and holiness. Believers under the gospel continue in the covenant and in the enjoyment of its privileges because they continue in the fulfilment of the conditions; they continue in faith, love, hope, and obedience. True believers are kept unto the end, unto the eschatological salvation; but they are kept by the power of God *through faith* (cf. I Peter 1:5). 'We are made partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of confidence stedfast unto the end' (Hebrews 3:14). It is through faith and patience we inherit the promises (cf. Hebrews 6:11, 12). We shall be presented holy and unblameable and unreprouvable before God if we 'continue in the faith grounded and settled and not moved away from the hope of the gospel' (Colossians 1:22, 23). Paul the apostle could exult in the assurance that his citizenship was in heaven and that one day Christ would change the body of his humiliation and transform it into the likeness of the body of his glory (Philippians 3:20, 21). But co-ordinate with this assurance and as the condition of its entertainment is the protestation, 'Brethren, I do not yet reckon myself to have apprehended; but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press on toward the goal, unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 3:13, 14). Paul knew well that if he were to attain to the resurrection of the dead all the resources of Christ's resurrection power must be operative in him and all the energies of his personality enlisted in the exercise of those means through which he would apprehend that for which he was apprehended by Christ Jesus (cf. Philippians 3:10-12). This is just to say that the goal is not reached, the consummation of covenant blessing is not achieved in some automatic fashion but through a process that engages to the utmost the concentrated devotion of the apostle himself. It is not reached irrespective of perseverance, but through

perseverance. And this means nothing if it does not mean concentrated obedience to the will of Christ as expressed in his commandments. We readily see, however, that the attainment of the goal is not on the meritorious ground of perseverance and obedience, but through the divinely appointed means of perseverance. Obedience as the appropriate and necessary expression of devotion to Christ does not find its place in a covenant of works or of merit but in a covenant that has its inception and end in pure grace.

The disposition to construe the demand for obedience in the Mosaic economy as having affinity with works rather than grace arises from failure to recognize that the demand for obedience in the Mosaic covenant is principally identical with the same demand under the gospel. When we re-examine the demand for obedience in the Mosaic covenant (cf. Exodus 19:5, 6; 24:7) in the light of the relations of law and grace in the gospel, we shall discover that the complex of ideas is totally alien to a construction in terms of works as opposed to grace. Obedience belongs here no more 'to the legal sphere of merit'³ than in the new covenant. The New Testament believer is not without law to God but under law to Christ. He delights in the law of God after the inward man and he therefore reiterates the exclamation of the Old Testament saint, 'O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day' (Psalm 119:97). And he also is not forgetful that he who was the incarnation and embodiment of virtue, he who is the supreme and perfect example, said, 'I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart' (Psalm 40:8).

3. Geerhardus Vos: *Biblical Theology. Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, 1954), p. 143. The context is worthy of quotation. 'It is plain, then, that law-keeping did not figure at that juncture as the meritorious ground of life-inheritance. The latter is based on grace alone, no less emphatically than Paul himself places salvation on that ground. But, while this is so, it might still be objected that law-observance, if not the ground for receiving, is yet made the ground for retention or the privileges inherited. Here it can not, or course, be denied that a real connection exists. But the Judaizers went wrong in inferring that the connection must be *meritorious*, that, if Israel keeps the cherished gifts of Jehovah through observance of His law, this must be so, because in strict justice they had earned them. The connection is of a totally different kind. It belongs not to the legal sphere of merit, but to the symbolico-typical sphere of *appropriateness of expression*.'

This is chapter 8 of his book *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics*, pp. 181-201, first published by Eerdmans Publishing in 1957.



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