

Law Versus Grace in Christian Living

by
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Christian Conduct

It is God's desire that each believer live an exemplary Christian life. As obedient children, believers are not to live according to the former strong desires consistent with unsaved mankind, but are to live a holy life (1 Peter 2:13-16).

The only truly successful Christian life is the grace life. For the maturing believer, the mere appearance of the avoidance of wrongdoing is not sufficient. The inner control of the Holy Spirit is necessary in order for the Christian to be successful in overcoming the sin problem. Avoidance of the "works of the flesh" (Galatians 5:19-21) can only be accomplished in a God honoring way by walking by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16). Likewise, overcoming Satanic attacks in areas such as lying and stealing (Ephesians 4:25-28) can only be accomplished consistently by applying the grace provision of the "whole armor of God" (Ephesians 6:10-17). Other methods are employed that have the appearance of success. But they do not use God's methods, and therefore, *they do not honor God*. It is not enough to do good or not to sin. It is necessary that the believer do good and not sin using God's revealed grace procedures.

The Christian and Law

The Bible teaches that the Christian is not under any "quality of law." Paul writes in Galatians 5:16-18, "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law." (NKJV) A closer look at the phrase "you are not under the law" shows that in the original Greek the word "law" does not have the article. It actually reads, "you are not under law." According to Greek syntax, the quality of law is being emphasized. Paul is not saying that a believer is not under the Mosaic code only; he is saying that the believer is *under no legal code at all*.

It is the unfortunate tendency of the natural mind to attempt to place oneself under law as a means of living the Christian life. Rather than rely on the Spirit's ministry, the individual tends to self-effort in fulfilling God's requirements. As a result, the struggle to do the right thing continues. Sometimes the individual may even appear to be winning the struggle. He may be successful in overcoming the "big ones" such as avoiding sexual immorality, drunkenness, and the like. However, the struggle continues until grace principles are applied.

For this reason Paul writes in Romans 6:14, "For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace." Again, the believer is not under any quality or principle of law, but is under the principle of grace. In Romans chapters 6-8 Paul explains in detail the method for overcoming sin in the life of the believer. Romans 6 teaches the application of grace methods. Romans 7 describes the believer who attempts to live under law principles. And Romans 8 presents the successful condition of the maturing believer who applies grace principles to the sin problem.

Paul makes it clear that the law is "weak through the flesh" (Romans 8:3). This means that the law appeals to the flesh *to control itself*. Such an attempt is tantamount to giving over the running of the jail to the inmates. It smacks of the self-righteous indignant cry, "Control

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yourself!” The righteous requirements of the law are fulfilled in us (not by us) when a person walks according to the Spirit rather than according to the flesh (Romans 8:4).

The term “under law” as used by Paul means to attempt to use *legal principles* applied by *self-effort* in order to please God by not committing sins or doing good works. “Under grace,” therefore, carries the idea of using grace provisions in order to bring pleasure to God by applying His techniques to the problem of sin and the servant lifestyle. While it is beyond the scope of this short paper to address the various grace issues that confront the believer, each Christian is urged to study Scripture in this area.

The Charge of Antinomianism

A common charge against those who teach the doctrine of grace is that they are teaching antinomianism. Antinomianism is the idea that since Christians are under grace they have no requirements to live right. The accusation has been made that those who teach grace principles believe and teach that Christians may do anything they desire. Such an accusation is false, and made in ignorance of what it means not to be under law, but under grace.

The phrase “under law” means contextually to use law keeping as a way of pleasing God. Likewise, the phrase “under grace” means, in its context, to use grace principles as the manner of pleasing God. *There are requirements under both law and grace.* The difference is between the *methods* of meeting those requirements.

Law, whether Old Testament Mosaic requirements, or requirements indicated by the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospels, carry no ability or provision to perform them.¹ They carry penalty, to be sure, but that penalty is an external rather than internal force. Its basic motivation is fear of the death penalty.

Grace, on the other hand, has many (though not all) of the same requirements as the Mosaic Law. The major difference is that “under grace” an internal provision is made to meet the requirement. The law was “weak through the flesh.” That is, the law provided no provision other than external for overcoming the flesh. But grace is based on the provision of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which was not true for the Old Testament believer.

Biblical Christians are under *no kind of law today*. Grace requirements are requirements with provisions to perform them. Under the current program of grace, God requires nothing of an individual unless He supplies the ability to perform the requirement. When a believer reverts to the Old Testament legal system, or, for that matter, the legal system taught in the Gospels, which looks forward to the earthly kingdom, he is forsaking grace for law. He is truly “fallen from grace” (Gal. 5:1-4).

The Function of Law

Law has no power to enable Christian living. Law only promises punishment for wrongdoing. James 2:10 says “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.” It is the nature of law to condemn the transgressor. In the Old Testament, when one committed adultery the punishment was death. Likewise, if a child cursed his father and mother, the penalty was death. There was no distinction between “levels” of

¹ Or for that matter, dress codes and codes of conduct drawn up by churches, schools, and other kinds of organizations, who require their adherents to “sign on the bottom line.”

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wrongdoing. For this reason in 2 Corinthians 3:7 Paul calls the Ten Commandments a “ministry of death.”

Here then we have the basic distinction between law and grace. Law says “do this or die.” Grace says, “do this, and here is the ability.” Law is a ministry of fear and death. Grace is a ministry of the Spirit and life.

The Abolishment of Law

It is often taught that the New Testament quotes the Old Testament law to reinforce the morality that is required for the believer today. While this has the appearance of spirituality, it is actually a misunderstanding of the purpose for such quotations. Paul makes it clear that Christ has “abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances” (Ephesians 2:15). Law, which was never intended as a spiritual basis for Christian living, has been abolished. But does this mean that requirement, per se, has been abolished?

The answer is an emphatic “no.” The Mosaic law is not simply a list of requirements, but a system of enforcing certain moral and non-moral requirements. Some (not all) of the same requirements exist today that existed under the law. Paul quotes some of those requirements, not to place the believer under law, which has been abolished, but to show that some grace requirements are in agreement with law requirements. However, the law requirements are no longer in force. If they were, once an individual violated one of them, he should be put to death. Thus, when in Ephesians 6:2,3, Paul quotes the “commandment with promise” from the Ten Commandments he is not putting Christian children under law. If he were, the penalty of death would be imposed on those children who cursed their father and mother. He is simply saying that the law had the same requirements as grace in this area.

The “Laundry List” Approach to Christian Living

It is sometimes urged that a list of things that a Christian should avoid be included in a “code of conduct” of some kind. And many, if not most, Christian institutions have such a list.² After all, they insist, one cannot obey the spirit of the law unless he has the letter of the law to consult. It appears to be the desire of the human mind to have a “law book” available to guarantee Christian conduct, or at least to inform Christians what is right and wrong.

Such thinking is specious and clearly contrary to the grace teaching of Scripture. Scripture teaches that rather than attend to the requirement the believer should attend to the grace provision. When one is consulting the “law book” one is not paying attention to the solution. Both Romans 6 and Colossians 3 teach that the believer should place his attention on God rather than the legal requirement. One cannot put to death “the members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry,” unless he has previously set his mind on things above (Colossians 3:2). The believer is to present himself to God the Father as alive from the dead (Romans 6:13). As a result of this New Testament

² We do not mean a list of procedures, or some such, so as to get a particular job accomplished. Rather, we are referring to the list of do’s and don’ts so often provided by institutions to their members to bring about practical conformity. The author well remembers his experience in Bible Institute with such an approach. The threat of dismissal hung heavy over the head of the student body if anyone should slip into one of the “big sins” that were forbidden. Fear was the motivating factor at that institute. Unfortunately today, not only Bible Colleges promote such a practice; even many local churches have produced such moral laundry lists.

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opportunity to present oneself, the believer is said not to be under law, but under grace (Romans 6:14).

One cannot have it both ways. One either lives according to law, which is to say by self-effort, or one lives according to grace. If one is walking by the Spirit, grace abilities are being provided by the Holy Spirit to overcome all the spiritual enemies of the believer.³ We do not need to check the law book to make sure we are pleasing God.

When the works of the flesh are listed in Scripture, as in Galatians 5:19-21, they are not provided as a legal document that the believer should sign,⁴ and therefore agree to keep. These various lists are provided not as a method of overcoming the enemy, but of recognizing the nature of the temptation. They are truly *works of the flesh*. And the flesh can only be consistently controlled by grace principles.

The basic fallacy of the “laundry list” approach is simple. It lists a few of the “big sins” and implies that if we do not perform these “nasty nine” we must be spiritual. The danger in this approach is obvious. It does not take into account the real nature of the problem as stated above. When the fallen human nature is not under the control of the Spirit, it will find a way to express itself, no matter how strong the legalistic effort to suppress it.

In addition, in the Galatians 5:19-21 passage seventeen works of the flesh are mentioned. And the final statement in verse 21 indicates that there are many more. In fact Scripture names more than 50 different works of the flesh. Add to this the various satanic attacks and the problem of the world system, and it can be seen that listing a few “big ones” is clearly inadequate. It tends to a false view of spirituality, and a false confidence that one is being successful spiritually.

The principles of grace living seem foreign to many believers. It is sad, but true, that many Christians have never even heard of living by grace rather than according to legal standards. The Bible teaches believers to learn to live according to principles of grace. And when believers personify grace principles in their lives, they are not only giving a good testimony about themselves, but infinitely more importantly, about the Lord Jesus Christ as well.

The grace Christian should avoid having regular fellowship any teachers, churches or other organizations that promote even a hint of law for living the Christian life. Like leaven, legalism permeates the entire Christian experience. It only takes one subtle inconsistent application of a legal passage in the Bible to invalidate grace. And no believer, no matter how mature, no matter how biblically aware, can stand long under the onslaught of legalism if he regularly fellowships with those who teach and practice it.

³ For a thorough discussion of the three enemies of the believer, see this author’s work *Grace and the Enemies of the Believer*.

⁴ One method the legalist loves to use to promote his legalism is the act of signing on to the code of conduct. This is essentially making a pledge to keep the rules. However, if a believer is not walking by the Spirit, such keeping of the rules is but a spiritual sham, designed to give the appearance of success. And if a believer is walking by the Spirit, he doesn’t need the rulebook in the first place! The biblically oriented grace believer will not associate himself with such practices nor with those who promote such practices. Grace is sufficient!