

6 Law and grace

The school inspector had heard the teacher give a lesson on the Ten Commandments. He decided to test the class with a question himself. ‘Who keeps the Ten Commandments?’ he asked. One small boy put his hand up. ‘Teacher does, in the cupboard,’ was the answer.

Are rules and regulations a good thing? Petty restrictions imposed by bureaucracy (what we call ‘red tape’) do not seem a good thing. On the other hand, safety regulations can be vital. And ‘the rule of law’ is essential for democratic government.

The nation of Israel had a collection of laws which they were given by God himself. These are to be found in the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch). These laws were central to the life of the nation, and may be referred to collectively as the Law (with a capital ‘L’).

The nature of the Law

The part of the Law with which we are all most familiar is the ten commandments. These are listed in Exodus 20 and repeated in Deuteronomy 5. With commands such as ‘you shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal’ these seem timeless in their relevance to all people.

The Law is much more than these ten commands, though. There are hundreds of other commandments of various kinds. There are regulations for the animal sacrifices, for the ministry of the priests in the tabernacle (and later, the temple) and for the regular feasts. There are instructions governing fair dealings between people. Various punishments are detailed for offences.

There are lists of clean and unclean animals, so that, for example, it is all right to eat venison (Deuteronomy 14:4-5) but not pork (v. 8). Instruction is given for those encamped in the wilderness as to how to relieve themselves (go to a designated place outside the camp, and use a shovel to cover it over—Deuteronomy 23:12-13).

The Law is very detailed, covering a great many situations. Knowing and understanding all these laws and their implications is a lifetime study. Being able to keep them all is a different matter entirely.

It was by the Law that Israel learned God’s standards. More than that, Israel learned that the Lord is a God of justice, that he cares about how people live, and that he has a heart for the downtrodden and the poor. The Law also contained much which looked ahead to God’s future provision of grace.

Central to the Law are the two concepts of blessing and curse. Those who kept the Law would be blessed. Those who did not would be cursed. When the Israelites came into the land the blessing and the curse were publicly read out on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal (Joshua 8:33–5). These were the blessings and curses

which Moses had declared in Deuteronomy chapter 27 (for the curses) and chapter 28 (for the blessings). Being under the Law was a very serious business indeed.

The unity of the Law

If you are arrested on a charge of speeding, it is no use pleading in your defence that you have not murdered anyone. You are charged under the law which you have broken, and the fact that you have kept other laws is quite irrelevant.

When we come to the Law revealed in the Bible, the situation is even sterner. Despite the diversity of laws, 'the Law' is a unitary whole. If you are going to fulfil the requirements of the Law, you cannot pick and choose. It is all or nothing. 'I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law' (Galatians 5:3). The opposite side of this coin is shown in James 2:10: 'Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.'

If out of all the hundreds of commandments there is just one which you do not keep, you will be charged not just with breaking this one, but with breaking the Law as a whole.

What use is a balloon with one part of its surface missing? What can you expect if you cut a piece out of a soap bubble? How can a clock function if you remove one cog wheel from the middle of the train? In just such a way, the Law is a whole in which every part is vital.

The covenant of law

A covenant is an agreement between two parties, each side promising to play his part. The duties to be performed by one party might be very different from those of the other party, but each side agrees to do what has been promised.

God made a covenant with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai after they had come out of Egypt. This covenant was based on the Law which was given then. In fact the Ten Commandments are described as 'the words of the covenant' (Exodus 34:28). Israel's part in the covenant was to keep the Law, and the Ten Commandments served as a summary of that Law.

In Leviticus 26 we have a fuller description of the covenant and the responsibilities to which each side was a party. Blessings would come from God 'if you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands' (v. 3). In particular, God promises, 'I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people' (v. 12).

Under the old covenant, life was promised to those who kept the Law. 'Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them' (Leviticus 18:5).

Some laws were of particular importance. Keeping the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant between God and his people at Mount Sinai (Exodus 31:13–17). Circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham (Genesis 17:11), but also became part of the law (Leviticus 12:3).

Christ emphasises the Law

At times Jesus emphasised the Law and its strictness. He recognised the Law as being given by God and affirmed it: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished' (Matthew 5:17–18).

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7) Christ pointed out that mere external observance of the Law was not enough. God requires the intention to be right also. It is not enough to avoid murder: anger and insult must be avoided also (Matthew 5:21–2). It is not enough to avoid adultery: lustful looks are equivalent to adultery (Matthew 5:27–8).

When a man asked Jesus what he should do to get eternal life (Matthew 19:16), Jesus' reply was, 'If you want to enter life, obey the commandments' (v. 17), and particularly mentioned some of the ten commandments (vv. 18–19). However, Jesus' final word was the necessity to dispose of his riches and follow him (v. 21).

One day an expert in the Law asked Christ which was the greatest of the commandments (Matthew 22:35–6). His reply was, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart' (v. 37). The second most important commandment was 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (v. 39).

Christ himself added a new commandment for his followers: 'A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another' (John 13:34).

Christ's attitude was that the Law showed the moral nature of God and his intentions for his people. However, those who intended to observe the commandments needed to do so wholeheartedly and with complete thoroughness.

Christ annuls the Law

Christ indicated that the era of the Law was coming to an end. His attitude towards the Sabbath was regarded as unorthodox. In the view of the Jews he was 'breaking the Sabbath' (John 5:18), both by healing on that day (John 5:9 and many other references) and by not stopping his disciples from doing on that day what the Jews regarded as work (Mark 2:23–4). He declared that 'the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27), and announced that he, the Son of man, was 'Lord even of the Sabbath' (Mark 2:28).

Part of the Law was a poll tax (Exodus 30:12–15). Everyone had to pay half a shekel (or its equivalent, two drachmas). The rich were not to give more, nor the poor less (v. 15). Christ's disciples encountered those collecting this tax (Matthew 17:24–7). Peter, when questioned, was sure that his teacher would pay the tax (vv. 24–5). Later, in private, Jesus asked Peter, 'From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?' (v. 25). 'From others,' Peter replies. 'Then,' says Jesus, 'the sons are exempt' (v. 26). In order not to give

offence to the tax-collectors, Christ has Peter pay the tax, but the implication remains. Those who are children of the King are free from the Law.

Clearer still is Christ's attitude towards the food laws. In response to the Pharisees who performed elaborate cleansing, Christ tells the crowd that nothing physically entering a person can make him (ceremonially) unclean (Mark 7:14–19). Mark adds, lest we fail to see the significance of these words, 'In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean" ' (v. 19). This the Law certainly did not do.

So Christ considered the Law as showing what the heart should be like before God, rather than a requirement that all its commands be obeyed literally. Moreover, he shows that he considers the legal requirements (concerning food at least) to be abrogated from now on. As we have seen, the Law is a unitary whole. If those parts of the Law concerning food and the half-shekel tax are no longer in effect, how can any part of the Law still be operative?

Christ's effect on the Law

In the Old Testament, God's people were obliged to keep the Law as their part of the covenant entered into at Sinai. The New Testament declares that Christ brought to an end this state of affairs.

The Law brought a curse on all those who did not keep it. Now Christ has bought our freedom from any such curse: 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" ' (Galatians 3:13).

Paul pictures the Law's demands on us being nailed to the cross, and thereby annulled: 'God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross' (Colossians 2:13–14).

'Christ is the end of the law' (Romans 10:4). The word 'end' (Greek *telos*) may have either of two senses, and both are fitting here. On the one hand, the 'goal' at which the Law aimed, a life of complete righteousness, was fulfilled in Christ. Besides this, Christ is the 'termination' of the Law for us. Christ's way of making Jew and Gentile one is by 'abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations' (Ephesians 2:15).

Grace

Now we come on to something which seems too good to be true. It is so unusual that some fail to understand it. It is so unexpectedly good that some, when they understand it, refuse to believe it. Yet it is undeniably what the Bible teaches.

Since Christ died and rose again, God does not deal with his people on the basis of the Law. He deals with them according to grace. What is grace? It is kindness you don't deserve, unmerited favour. 'The law was given through Moses,' says the apostle John. 'Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17).

That we are undeserving is made abundantly clear. We have broken God's laws; we are sinners. There is only one way we can be saved, and that is by God's intervention on our behalf. 'All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus' (Romans 3:23–4).

Throughout the epistles the message is plain. We had sinned, and deserved to die. Christ died in our place, taking the punishment which was our due. Paul describes it as follows: 'You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich' (2 Corinthians 8:9). Christ came to fulfil the Law (Matthew 5:17), and he has fulfilled it on our behalf.

Some have used the letters G-R-A-C-E to spell out what the word means: *God's Riches At Christ's Expense*.

Is it fair? If you mean by fair 'an adequate return for services rendered', then of course it isn't fair. According to this definition of fairness, punishment for wrongdoings would be fair; forgiveness and mercy are not fair.

Is it unjust? By no means. Sin has not been overlooked, but has been punished. God has shown himself to be both 'just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus' (Romans 3:26).

An illustration of this has appeared in very many sermons. A judge had a son who left home and gave himself up to a life of dissipation. He fell foul of the law. When he appeared in court, it happened that his own father was the judge. His father heard the case thoroughly, pronounced his son guilty, and ordered him to pay the largest fine allowable for the offence. Then the judge declared the case closed, came down into the floor of the court, took out his cheque book and himself paid the fine.

Saved by grace

In our day and age, despite all the offers of 'free gifts' (what other kind of gift is there?) which are part of advertising, we are assured that 'you get what you pay for' and 'there is no such thing as a free lunch.' We are immersed in a culture of paying for goods and for work done.

This was very much the situation with regard to God's laws. 'The man who obeys them will live by them' (Leviticus 18:5). Salvation in those days (being part of God's people and looked after by him) was supplied to those who paid the fee—obeying the Law.

This is an arrangement which has so been drummed-in to us that we find it extremely hard to accept a salvation which is not on the basis of payment for work done. However, in the New Testament there is great emphasis on salvation by grace, not by obeying the Law. 'It is by grace you have been saved, through faith' (Ephesians 2:8) Paul declares. 'And this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no-one can boast' (vv. 8–9).

‘He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy’ (Titus 3:5). We are ‘justified by faith apart from observing the law’ (Romans 3:28). God’s grace and mercy is the reason for our salvation. Our faith is simply the straw by which we drink it in.

(Some knowledgeable reader may be saying here, ‘But what about James?’ Patience, friend; the matter will be dealt with later in this chapter.)

Christ, by his death on our behalf, has paid all there was to pay to secure your forgiveness and new life. What could your good deeds add to what he has done? If, by grace and favour, you were invited to a state banquet, would you consider leaving a tip for the Queen? That would be insulting. It is equally insulting to think that your good works can fill up any inadequacy in Christ’s sacrifice.

What use is the Law?

If God no longer saves his people through them keeping the Law, what is the value of the Law to us today?

The Law revealed in no uncertain way what God is like. He is the God with high moral standards, who hates stealing, murder and adultery. He is the One who alone is to be worshipped, and who offers cleansing from sin by the offering of a perfect substitute as a sacrifice. He is concerned about personal relationships, even between those at enmity with one another. Above all, he is the God of justice.

Paul reveals that the Law was God’s instrument in causing him to realise that he was a sinner (Romans 7:7-13). He would not have thought of coveting were it not that the Law said ‘Do not covet’ (v. 7). When you tell a child specifically not to do something, you can be sure that that is the very thing which they want to do. So it was with Paul regarding coveting.

We could not become righteous by observing the Law, but the Law could show us our sinful nature and how much we needed to be saved. ‘Through the law we become conscious of sin’ (Romans 3:20). So ‘the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith’ (Galatians 3:24).

Not under the Law

It is plain that we cannot earn our salvation by keeping the Law. However, if the Law shows God’s character, as Christians should we not be bound by the Law? Should not we who are made righteous through the atoning death of Christ show our gratitude to God by keeping the Law?

It is very difficult to shake off the idea that we still are subject to the Law in some respects. Some have suggested that the ceremonial law no longer applies to us, but the moral law does. The problem here is, how do you decide which laws are moral and which ceremonial? No such distinction is made in the scriptures.

Some would say that it is the ten commandments which are binding on us. These are, however, only part of the Law. There are other commandments have a

relevance to us today such as not showing favouritism in a lawsuit (Exodus 23:3). How do we decide which part of the Law is binding on us and which not?

Others have suggested that we have to keep that part of the Law which Christ did not fulfil. We are free of the laws which Christ fulfilled for us, they say, but the other laws still apply. Once again, we have the difficulty of knowing which laws are which. There is a law against boiling a young goat in its mother’s milk (Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:21). Did Christ fulfil this law or did he not? Are we obliged to keep this law because Christ did not fulfil it? We are into the realm of the ludicrous.

These attitudes neglect the fact that the Law is a unitary whole. The Law which Christ fulfilled was the *whole* Law. But ought we still to keep that Law?

This matter came to a head in the early church when some, notably Paul and Barnabas, preached the good news of Christ to Gentiles. The opinion of some Jewish believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees was that ‘the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses’ (Acts 15:5). The apostles and elders in Jerusalem gathered to discuss this problem (v. 6) in what has been called the Council of Jerusalem.

Peter’s reaction to this matter was that requiring the Gentiles to keep the Law was ‘putting upon the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear’ (v. 10). So even for the Jews the Law had become an intolerable burden. The decision of the council was that Gentile believers did not need to keep the Law of Moses. However, it was pointed out that they should avoid conduct which would particularly offend Jews, many of whom then shared the faith with them.

The Galatian Christians had been paying attention to some people (the ‘circumcision party’) who insisted that believers should keep the Law, and in particular, should be circumcised. You may see little harm, when people have already been saved through faith in Christ, in requiring them keep one or two little parts of the Law. What does it matter? Paul saw it quite differently. He considered that the circumcision party were preaching ‘a different gospel’ (Galatians 1:6), that they wanted ‘to pervert the gospel of Christ’ (v. 7), and as for every one who taught such things, ‘let him be eternally condemned!’ (v. 9). A requirement to keep part of the Law is a requirement to keep all of it: ‘I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law’ (Galatians 5:3). In fact, such a turning back to the Law implies a turning away from Christ (Galatians 5:2-4).

Any requirement that we *must* keep part of the Law, no matter how small a part, implies that our salvation through Christ is inadequate. It is not acceptable to say, ‘Christ has purchased all your salvation for you, so it is available free to you—except that you *must* fulfil this part of the Law.’ This is very important to keep in mind when we consider some of the subjects in the next few chapters.

Law in the heart

One of the most wicked characters in history was the Russian monk, Rasputin. Yet he preached the doctrine of the grace of God. His idea was that when he sinned, then repented and was forgiven, he received more of the grace of God. So, according to Rasputin, the more sin, the more grace.

Paul faces this suggestion in Romans 6. ‘What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?’ he asks (v. 15). His conclusion is decisive: ‘By no means!’

God is a God of justice, who commands, ‘Follow justice and justice alone’ (Deuteronomy 16:20). We have seen that the Law gives an indication of his standards. Yet we are not tied down to the Law any more. How is God to achieve righteousness in our lives?

When a person believes in Christ, ‘his faith is credited as righteousness’ (Romans 4:5). We exchange our sin for Christ’s righteousness through his sacrificial death on our behalf. ‘God made him who had no sin to be [a sin offering] for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Corinthians 5:21). If God went to such lengths to put righteousness to our spiritual bank account, would he not also see to it that we were able to live out righteousness in our daily lives?

One of the clearest indications of how God accomplishes this is to be found in Jeremiah 31:31-4 (quoted in Hebrews 8:8-12). Here God declares that he will make ‘a new covenant with the house of Israel’ (v. 31). This will not be like the old covenant based on the written Law, which Israel had broken (v. 32). This time God says, ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts’ (v. 33).

Rather than imposing external demands on people to keep the Law, God is going to use a different strategy altogether. He is going to work from the inside. He is going to change the hearts of people so that they will do what is right. This he will do by causing the Holy Spirit to be resident within them. ‘I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees’ (Ezek. 36:27).

One should not suppose from these Old Testament references that God intends all his regulations to be so imprinted on the hearts of his people that their obedience will be a literal one, keeping every last rule to the letter. Rather, their hearts will be changed so that they will want to do the will of God: ‘It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose’ (Philippians 2:13). It is because of this that James refers to ‘the law that gives freedom’ (James 1:25; 2:12).

God’s purpose throughout has been: ‘That the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit’ (Romans 8:4). In particular, God produces this in our hearts by means of love. ‘God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 5:5). Christ’s summary of the Law was wholehearted love for God and our neighbour (Matthew 22:35-6). This is echoed by Paul: ‘He who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law’ (Romans 13:8-10).

We who belong to Christ, who have his Spirit within our hearts, are the only ones who have the power to live so as to please God: ‘Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law but under grace’ (Romans 6:14). This is the argument in Romans chapters 6 to 8. Through Christ we have died to sin and been set free. We have died to the Law and have been raised so as to bring forth fruit for God. We are not now to live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. His Spirit will give life to our mortal bodies and cause us to live for him.

God did not intend the good news of freedom from the Law to develop into an excuse for licentiousness. Far from it! ‘Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature’ (Galatians 5:13). ‘Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil’ (1 Peter 2:16).

And James?

Paul declares, ‘We maintain that a man is justified by faith’ (Romans 3:28). James, on the other hand, declares, ‘You see that a person is justified by what he does’ (James 2:24). Martin Luther, eager to assert justification by faith, called James’ letter ‘an epistle of straw’, or, to choose a fruitier translation of Luther’s words, ‘a right strawy epistle’.

How can we reconcile these two statements which seemingly are poles apart? We decided in Chapter 2 that we need to start with what is clear. Both statements are clear enough, though seemingly contradictory. However, Paul goes into great detail and has considerable arguments to show that the Law is not the way to be justified (declared righteous) before God. So could it be that we have not investigated James’ statements in sufficient depth?

The passage in question is James 2:14-26. What James is questioning is the value of claiming to have faith when this is not backed up with deeds (v. 14). What we *think* James is doing is contrasting faith and works. If you look more closely at the passage you will see that James is contrasting faith unaccompanied by deeds with faith demonstrated by deeds. ‘Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead’ (v. 17). ‘Faith without deeds is useless’ (v. 20).

True faith should be accompanied by deeds. James is not speaking of deeds without faith. He says, ‘I will show you my faith by what I do’ (v. 18). In this way, Abraham was shown to be righteous by what he did ‘and not by faith alone’ (v. 24). ‘His faith was made complete by what he did’ (v. 22).

We are declared righteous (justified) in God’s eyes when we believe in Christ. We are declared righteous in men’s eyes when our faith results in actions. We are saved by faith alone, but true faith never will rest alone. How can it be seen that God has forgiven us and made us new creatures in Christ unless his Spirit living in our hearts makes a change in our lives?

So Paul and James can shake hands. They are not teaching contradictory doctrines, but only emphasising the two sides of the one truth.

Conclusions

The Law was given in the Old Testament to demonstrate God's standards and to show his requirements of holiness for his people. However, the Law is no longer the way God deals with his people, the church. We are not under any obligation to fulfil the Law, but rather we need to receive God's grace toward us and to live in the light and power of that grace.

This is a point very forcefully made in the New Testament. To return in any way to living under the Law is a denial of God's grace. To consider that God lays the law down for his children is to turn our backs on his kindness and love in Christ.

We are in no way to consider that God's kindness is an excuse for conduct which displeases him. Our lives are to be beyond reproach. But this is to be accomplished not by a slavish adherence to rules and regulations, but by means of God's Spirit empowering us to live for Christ.

Lessons so far

In these last four chapters we have been investigating major themes which run through the Bible. We have been trying to get things straight from the Bible, seeking to deal honestly with what the Bible presents. As we have done so, differences between the Old and New Testaments have become apparent.

The Testaments are interlinked, but their approaches are very different. One provides a commentary on the other. As an old rhyme puts it:

The New is in the Old concealed;

The Old is in the New revealed.

There is a phase change between the Old and New Testaments. A phase change is seen when ice melts to become water. Both substances are chemically the same, but their physical properties are radically different. The New Testament very commonly focuses on what is spiritual rather than on what is literal. Often, matters which are shown literally in the Old Testament (the temple, sacrifices for sin etc.) are seen to be spiritually understood in the New.

We need to bear this phase change in mind when considering other themes. As Christians we need to make sure that our interpretations lie comfortably alongside the New Testament.

The major themes which have been hammered out in these four chapters are like great girders forming part of the skeleton of a skyscraper. Interpretations of other themes should be locked securely into these if they are to be secure. The themes we have found are:

- a Christ is the *major theme* of all the scriptures.
- b Christ offered *one sacrifice* for sin, once for all.
- c There is *one way of salvation* through Christ.
- d There is *one people of God*, the whole church of Christ, Jew and Gentile.
- e We are now *not under the Law, but under grace*.