

# Law and Gospel

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## Introduction

There are a number of passages in the New Testament that make it seem that we have been freed from law. We read passages such as 1 Cor 15:56 ("The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law")<sup>1</sup> and come away thinking that if we ever want to be freed from death, we must first be freed from law.

We should be careful how we say such things, because the non-Christian world is listening to us. When people who are not Christians hear us say we are freed from law, it would be possible for them to think they are freed from law too. It is a mistake to think so. What the Bible actually says is that Christ came to free us from sin. "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21). Jesus came to free us from our sins, not from His law. In fact our sins are the breaking of His law. Sin is our enemy, because it leads to death. Paul calls death "the last enemy," i.e., the ultimate enemy. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor 15:26). The last enemy to be destroyed is not God's law.

## Some Passages

### The Golden Rule

In the Old Testament we have vengeance, while in the New Testament we have love and the Golden Rule. True or false? Well, it seems to be true – on the surface. But consider a couple of passages. Luke 6:31 gives us the Gold Rule; so does Matt 7:12. Both are quoted below, but notice that in Matthew Jesus adds something at the end.

Do to others as you would have them do to you. (Luke 6:31)

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (Matt 7:12)

Why does Jesus add, "For this sums up the Law and the Prophets"? He appears to be saying that the Golden Rule of doing to others what we would want them to do to us is what the Law and the Prophets (our Old Testament) are all about. If we had to summarize what the Old Testament is about, we could say: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matt 7:12). Or did I get this wrong? Is there some other meaning in Christ's words that I'm missing?

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## Righteousness apart from law

What about Paul's statement that, "now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known" (Romans 3:21)? This statement is true, but we need to interpret it correctly. There are ways to get it wrong. Let me illustrate what I mean. A young woman is about to go into an abortion clinic and on the way in she thinks, I know this is wrong. I shouldn't be doing this. But then she remembers hearing her pastor say, "Now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known." So she goes in and has the abortion. She can be righteous apart from law. It doesn't matter whether she keeps the law or not. Has she interpreted Paul's words correctly? Does it matter what we do? It matters to her unborn child.

Why not say-- as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say-- "Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is deserved. Rom 3:8)

Before we leave this verse, let me quote the rest of it.

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. (Rom 3:21)

The Law and the Prophets, again, are our Old Testament. If the righteousness Paul refers to requires us to set all law aside in the first clause of this verse, then what is the second clause saying? The Law and the Prophets contain the law. How could Paul do away with the one and keep the other?

What Paul means is that the law can only help you by showing what to do. But once you break it, the law is powerless to make things right. It shows us that we've sinned, but can't bring about forgiveness. For that we need Christ. This is exactly what law is for, i.e., it drives us to Christ by showing us that we need Him. If we've sinned and need Christ, would we want to know? Or would we want to be unaware?

## An illustration

Leprosy is a disease that prevents people from feeling anything. They can burn themselves without knowing it, because there's no information coming back from their fingers to tell them something is hot. This is what sin does. It makes wrong things seem acceptable and deadens our sensibilities so we think everything's alright when it's not.

Without the law we are spiritual lepers. We sin and don't realize that what we've done is unacceptable to God. Or perhaps we have some general sense that something is wrong, but don't know what it is that bothers us. The law supplies this missing information. The law tells us that sin is unacceptable to God. It helps us understand the difference between right and wrong. So do we still need law? We do if we still sin. Do we sin? Paul says we do (see Rom 3:23).

Paul speaks in another passage about the law being "put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Gal 3:24). The law is powerless to help us once we've sinned. That's not what it's for. It's not about solving problems, but only about pointing out the fact when a problem exists. So let the law do what it does, and let Christ do what He does. The two working together make a good combination. The law

tells us we need Christ, and when we go to Him He supplies our needs – with abundant forgiveness and pardon. And strength. Jesus can help us rise above our life of sin and have a new life with Him.

### Christ's new commandment

Jesus once said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). I've heard people say that this new commandment means we don't need to keep any of the old commandments (the ten commandments) any more. That was not Christ's intent!

Notice the way Paul says it: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law" (Rom 13:8). If the new commandment to love one other sets aside the law, why would Paul add the last clause? Why is fulfilling the law still an issue in Paul's day if Christ's new commandment displaces everything God said previously? Why are we still talking about fulfilling the law if the law has been set aside? Paul obviously thought that fulfilling the law was a good idea and he says that we love one another, that attitude toward other people fulfills the law.

There's a question what it means to "fulfill." When something is fulfilled, does that mean it goes away? If it does, what does Jesus have in mind when He says (to John the Baptist), "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). If fulfilling all righteousness makes righteousness go away, we have a problem. If it doesn't make righteousness go away, then fulfilling the law shouldn't make the law go away. Actually what "fulfill" means is to "fill full." By doing what He does, and by saying what He says, Christ fills our concept of righteousness with meaning – by showing in His own life what righteousness actually looks like.

In the say way, Jesus fills the law with meaning. Filling the law with meaning doesn't mean we can ignore what it says. Instead it means having an intelligent idea of what the law was talking about all along. What it was talking about was a life like the one Jesus lived. But we had no idea what such a life would look like until Jesus came and showed us. By doing this He filled the law full of meaning. He gave us a correct understanding of what the law was talking about.

Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' [Deut. 6:5] <sup>38</sup> This is the first and greatest commandment. <sup>39</sup> And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' [Lev. 19:18] <sup>40</sup> All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" Matt 22:37-40).

### Paul's gospel

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God-- <sup>2</sup> the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures <sup>3</sup> regarding his Son, . . . (Rom 1:1-3)

If I'm reading this passage correctly, there is no conflict between the gospel and the "prophets in the Holy Scriptures" which tell us about the gospel. The one source of information supports the other. They are not at odds with each other.

## No law, no transgression

In another passage Paul says that law brings wrath. And that's good! If there's going to be wrath, you would want to know. So that's what the law tells us. He then goes on to say, "And where there is no law there is no transgression" (Rom 4:15). Think for a moment about what this means and what the results would be if the law of God really were set aside, as some well meaning people would have us believe.

Those who teach the people to lightly regard the commandments of God, sow disobedience, to reap disobedience. Let the restraint imposed by the divine law be wholly cast aside, and human laws would soon be disregarded. Because God forbids dishonest practices, coveting, lying, and defrauding, men are ready to trample upon his statutes as a hindrance to their worldly prosperity; but the results of banishing these precepts would be such as they do not anticipate. If the law were not binding, why should any fear to transgress? Property would no longer be safe. Men would obtain their neighbor's possessions by violence; and the strongest would become richest. Life itself would not be respected. The marriage vow would no longer stand as a sacred bulwark to protect the family. He who had the power, would, if he desired, take his neighbor's wife by violence. The fifth commandment would be set aside with the fourth. Children would not shrink from taking the life of their parents, if by so doing they could obtain the desire of their corrupt hearts. The civilized world would become a horde of robbers and assassins; and peace, rest, and happiness would be banished from the earth.<sup>2</sup>

This statement was first published in 1888. It might have been a prediction then, but it's not a prediction now. We can see the results of misguided theology all around us. Any theology which teaches people to ignore God's requirements is misguided. Those who teach from the pulpit that God's law is no longer binding after the cross have themselves to thank for the results that follow when people believe them. We have said there's no more law,<sup>3</sup> perhaps in order to avoid keeping some parts of it ourselves (like the fourth commandment). Let's face it, keeping the Sabbath holy is not convenient. Saturday is the busiest day of the week. But the principles we establish to get out of inconvenient obligations cut both ways. People around us have believed what we said and followed their implications through to results we didn't anticipate. If we say it, and they believe it, we are responsible for their actions.

Law is something people need – Christians no less than others. At least it's something that we would want everyone around us to believe they need. We might not want to obey the law ourselves, but we certainly want all our friends and neighbors to obey it. Who would want a neighbor who really believes that God's law has been set aside? But this is what we're telling people. To get rid of the Sabbath, we get rid of the law, and then wonder why people all around us don't obey it. To understand all of this we will have to reason from cause to effect.

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<sup>2</sup> Ellen White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 585.

<sup>3</sup> By "we" I mean fellow Protestants.

## Conclusion

Quite apart from any sins we may have committed in the past, in the present also we can't keep God's law without God's help. What we needed before, we still need today. This is another thing about the law that drives us to Christ. We need the Holy Spirit bringing us to Christ before we sin – in order to live a holy life, and we need the Holy Spirit bringing us to Christ after we sin – to receive forgiveness and grace. We are completely helpless without God. But telling ourselves there is no standard of right and wrong doesn't help us achieve either goal.

All of what I've said here is consistent with the idea of maintaining a complete Bible. By "complete" I mean a Bible contains both Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament points forward to Jesus; the New Testament fulfills the Old and shows what it was talking about. If the Old Testament is obsolete and shouldn't be studied, why do people translate it? If there's a reason for translating it, there must be some reason for studying it. Let's do that.