

Law and Grace

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The distinction between law and grace is a Bible teaching that, if misunderstood, can put you in real danger of spiritual bondage. The apostle Paul gives us a very solemn warning that we should take very seriously: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Galatians 5:1).

Are you in danger of falling from the freedom you have in Jesus Christ? Are you being brought under a yoke of slavery? You may be in more danger of this than you realize. There are preachers, churches, and entire denominations that will bring you into bondage if you are not careful. But what is the yoke of bondage? and how can we make sure we are standing fast in freedom?

A Yoke of Bondage

In Galatians 5:1, Paul writes, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." What is the yoke of bondage that Paul has in mind? If we look at the surrounding verses and chapters in Galatians, we very quickly see that Paul is writing about the law. The law is the yoke of bondage. For example, in Galatians 5:4, we read, "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." That is, Paul was saying that we cannot depend on both the law and grace to justify us. It is either one or the other. And the choice of which one it should be is made clear in Galatians 2:16: "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."

Paul contrasts law and grace. If we are under the law, we are in bondage. If we are under grace, we are free. But how do we become free from the law? Paul shows us in two very interesting illustrations.

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Dead to the Law

One of the great tragedies in the church today is its not fully comprehending the implications of Romans 7:1-4. This is the first illustration I mentioned. In verses 1-3, Paul says, "Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man" (Romans 7:1-3).

Paul is speaking in terms we can easily understand. A law binds us only as long as we live. The law of our marriage vows is only "until death do us part." But Paul's focus is not marriage. He uses this only as an illustration. The apostle is trying to teach us something about our relationship to the law. Notice verse 4: "Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God" (Romans 7:4).

As shocking as it may sound, Paul is saying that by the dead body of Christ, we have become dead to the law, and we are now married to the living, resurrected Christ. How can this be? Many Scriptures tell us that we who are in Christ died with Him in his death and now live a new life with Him in His resurrection.

One such passage is found in Romans 6. Notice verses 5 and 6: "For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin." So, what Paul is saying is that, when our old sinful self died with Christ, we were released from the law that bound us. Can this possibly mean that the Old Covenant law, with its Ten Commandments, is not binding on us? Yes.

Notice what the Baptist preacher, Gilbert Beebe, wrote in 1869: "There are but few lessons in the gospel, which the saints have been more slow to learn and fully comprehend, than that of our release from the law, and marriage to Christ." ("Loosed From the Law," <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/loosedlaw.html>).

Beebe's claim that this is a lesson that the saints are slow to learn can be seen in the battle Christian conservatives have fought to allow the Ten Commandments to be posted in public places. I understand the issues of religious freedoms and free speech involved, but why the Ten Commandments? Why not the Sermon on the Mount? Or the Golden Rule, "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (Luke 6:31). Another example can be heard in many churches every Sunday morning. If you attend one of these churches, you will likely see the pastor stand at the pulpit and read the Ten Commandments every Sunday morning. But this is an error. The Ten Commandments, as God gave them to Moses and the children of Israel at Sinai, are not binding on Christians. We are dead to the law. Frankly, most Christians today are not Jews, so God never gave the Ten Commandments to them anyway. But I don't want to get off on too much of a tangent. I'll just say that Jesus freed us from all sorts of law, and Paul, writing in Galatians 4, lumps both Old Covenant law and the laws of the heathens together under the terms "elements of the world" and "beggarly elements," and he says we should not turn back to them.

Our New Husband Fulfilled the Law for Us

Before entering into Christ's death by God's gracious gift of faith, we were bound by law and condemned by it. But when we believed that Jesus Christ died for our sins, our relationship to the law ended. On the cross, Jesus took upon Himself the full condemnation of the law in our stead. The law spent itself out on Him. The law can no longer condemn us because it already condemned our Head, Jesus Christ. He fulfilled every jot and tittle of the law, living a righteous life and dying for our transgressions of the law.

This is why Jesus said, in Matthew 5:17 and 18, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled." Jesus did not come to destroy or tear down the law. He came to fulfill it. For example, if I have a debt and pay it off, I have fulfilled my obligation to my creditor. I didn't destroy the obligation before paying it off. I fulfilled it. Jesus fulfilled the law in two ways. First, He lived under the law perfectly. He obeyed every bit of the law. Secondly, He paid our penal obligations under the law by dying in our stead. Because of our transgression of the law, because we have all sinned, our obligation under the law was to die and spend eternity in hell. Jesus fulfilled that obligation for us by what He went through on the

cross. And when Jesus died on the cross, we died with Him. We died to the law.

We could not rightfully be married to Christ until our marriage to the law ended through our death in Christ. With the resurrection of Christ, we rise as new creatures, the Bride of Christ. As Gilbert Beebe wrote, the church "could not be legally wedded to Christ in the New Covenant relation, until every jot and tittle of the law was fulfilled. The marriage nuptials of the Lamb could not be legalized until the covenant she was under to Moses was lawfully annulled.... As a woman who has a living husband cannot be married to another man without involving the guilt of adultery, so neither can we be married to Christ until we first become fully dead to the law, and the law dead to us. Such a union would be unlawful and adulterous."

The church must not try to commit adultery by digging up her old husband. Moses was the embodiment of the law. He struck the rock in the wilderness, just as the law struck Christ. Moses had to die before the children could cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. Moses' death symbolized the death of the law. The children of Israel crossing over the Jordan without Moses were a type of the church entering God's rest by faith and without the law. The church has left the dead law behind and entered into God's rest led by Jesus (Joshua, who led the children of Israel into the Promised Land, was a type of Jesus, and, in fact, the names Joshua and Jesus are the same). Let us not go figuratively searching on the wrong side of the Jordan for the body of Moses. We are not to dig up the law, but leave it buried.

To quote Gilbert Beebe again, "Who that has been slain by the law, and raised from the dead by the resurrection life of Christ, would wish to leave his sacred embrace, to go in search of the dead body of Moses [in other words, law keeping and dead works]? Our dead husband never blessed, but always cursed us. Our living husband always blesses and never curses. The former [meaning the law] required everything, but furnished nothing; but the latter [meaning the grace we have in Jesus] furnishes everything freely, and demands nothing in payment. Then let us with cheerful hearts love, honor and obey him in all things, and never seek another lover."

The Error of Covenant Theology

But there are many who would bring us back under the law. Some months ago, I heard a minister in a local church preach that we should look to the Pharisees as a good example because of their zeal for

keeping the Sabbath. Such attitudes are the result of the fact that much theology was formulated and codified in the 16th and 17th centuries before the Protestant church had completely shed itself of the thinking that had dominated the Roman church-state for centuries. As a result, many churches, in spite of their saying that they follow the Bible alone, are really holding onto unbiblical church traditions as much or even more than they are adhering to the Bible.

Specifically, the artificial system of theology known as Covenant Theology, in saying that the Old Covenant and the New Covenant are merely administrations of the one Covenant of Grace, keeps its adherents bound to the laws of the Old Covenant. In effect, Covenant Theology is guilty of attempting to commit spiritual adultery and even necrophilia by digging up our old husband (the law) and trying to be married to him and to Christ at the same time! By the way, when I say this I do not want to be misunderstood as criticizing the Five Points of Calvinism, which I hold to be true. Neither am I judging anyone's Christianity. What I am criticizing is the non-biblical idea of Covenant or Reformed Theology that there is but one Covenant of Grace that stretches from right after the Fall of Adam in the Garden until now and which includes the Old Covenant given at Sinai. Our theology should be New Covenant oriented, or New Covenant Theology. Lord willing, I will have much more to say in the future about this topic.

Two Distinct Covenants

Now let us look at Galatians 4. This is the second illustration I mentioned at the beginning. Here, Paul almost appears to be directly addressing the leaders of some of today's churches. Let's read verses 21-24: "Tell me, you who wish to be under the law, do you not hear the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by the servant girl, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the servant girl was born according to the flesh, and he of the free woman through the promise, which things are symbolic. For these are two covenants: one in fact from Mount Sinai, bearing children into slavery, which is Hagar" (*English Majority Text Version* used from here to end unless otherwise noted).

Paul uses this allegory to drive home the point that the Old Covenant was a covenant of bondage to the law. Ishmael, the son of Hagar the bondmaid, was "born according to the flesh." That is, he was the product of Sarah's faithless idea to produce the heir God had promised. Instead of waiting on God in faith, she told Abraham to have sexual relations with Hagar. In other words, it was an idea based on

human works rather than on genuine faith. Isaac, on the other hand, was the true son of Sarah, the freewoman. He was the product of God's promise. He was born despite the fact that Sarah and Abraham were too old to produce a child. Paul goes on to explain that Hagar, the bondmaid, corresponds to Mount Sinai, the place where God gave the law to the Israelites, establishing the Old Covenant.

As Paul says, "for Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, and is in slavery with her children—but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written: 'Rejoice, O barren, who does not give birth; break forth and shout, who does not have birth pangs; because the children of the desolate are many more than those of her who has a husband'" (verses 25-27). The Old Covenant is the covenant of bondage, the covenant that bound the Jews (called Jerusalem in these verses). It is the covenant of law keeping and faithless works. But Christians, as was Isaac, are the children of the free woman (Sarah) and of promise. We are the children of the Jerusalem that is above, the New Jerusalem. We are under the New Covenant, the covenant of faith and of resting in Christ for our salvation.

"But we, brothers," Paul continues, "like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as then the one who was born according to the flesh persecuted the one born according to the Spirit, so it is also now. But what does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the servant girl and her son, for the son of the servant girl will certainly not inherit with the son of the free woman.' So then, brothers, we are not children of the servant girl, but of the free woman" (verses 28-31). We Christians are not the children of the law, or Old Covenant, but we are the children of the Gospel believed through faith by grace. That is why we must never mix the Old Covenant and the New Covenant together as one supposed covenant of grace. To say that the Old Covenant was a covenant of grace is total confusion; it was a covenant of works and of bondage. Only the New Covenant is a covenant of grace and of freedom.

No Condemnation

Hear this wonderful news from Paul: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and of death. For what was impossible for the law to do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of

sinful flesh, and concerning sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:1-4).

Does this mean that we now run amok, giving in to fleshly desires? No, just the opposite! Paul continues, "For those who are fleshly set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace" (Romans 8:5-6).

What preachers of the law have not realized is that the Bible teaches that it is the law that leads to sin. "But sin," Paul taught, "taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me every kind of lust. For apart from the law sin was dead. For I was alive apart from the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived, but I died" (Romans 7:8-9).

But being freed from the law, living by the Spirit, produces the fruit of the Spirit. As Paul says in Galatians 5:16-26,

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall by no means fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these things oppose each other, 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. Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are: adultery, fornication, immorality, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envies, murders, drinking bouts, revelries, and the like; which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—against such things there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and lusts. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

This does not mean that we are perfect and will never sin. It means only that sin is no longer a way of life for us. And when we do sin, we

abhor it. It also means that when we sin, it does not condemn us. Notice what the apostle John writes in 1 John: "If we claim that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). But John also says, "Everyone who abides in Him [in Jesus] does not sin; everyone who sins has not seen Him nor has he known Him" (1 John 3:6). This is not a contradiction. It simply means that sin is not our way of life, and that when we sin, it is not counted against us to condemn us. John says this again a couple of verses later: "No one who has been born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9).

From our point of view, we see our faults, our sins. But because we are in Christ, God sees His Son's righteousness upon us and counts us as sinless.

Stand Fast in Your Freedom

Let no man ever put you back under the Law of Moses, even if he calls it the law of God or uses the fabricated term "moral law." Do not get dragged under the bondage of the Old Covenant by those who would remind you of your so-called "obligation" to your long-deceased husband, the law. This is just what the Pharisees were saying. In Acts 15:5 we read, "But some of those from the sect of the Pharisees rose up, saying, 'It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.'"

Remember, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and of death" (Romans 8:1-2). Not only is the law dead, but also you are dead to the law, and you have now been raised to newness of life in Christ Jesus! "Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

How do we stand fast in our freedom? By making sure that we have not fallen from complete and faithful reliance on grace to rely in any way on the works of the law. We must remain faithful to Jesus Christ, our Husband who has set us free from the law of sin and death.

Yes, as Jesus Christ said in John 8:36, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (KJV).