

Chapter Five

Sin As – “A Transgression of The Law”

Is the believer under the Law? This was a burning question even in the days of Paul, and while the Bible gives a clear and unmistakable answer, the question is still being asked today by thousands of earnest, sincere, but mistaken, believers. Some say, “Yes, we are under the law for salvation. If we are to be save, we must do so by keeping the law.” But the Bible says,

“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” (Galatians 2:16).

Then there are others who teach that we are saved by grace, but then after that we are kept saved by keeping the Law – or by rules and regulations. However, the Bible says:

“...Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” (Galatians 3:10).

If we are to be kept by the Law, - or by rules and regulations – our obedience must be perfect, continuous and uninterrupted. And this brings us right back to the vital question with which we began this study, “What is the Law good for? Why was it given? What did it accomplish? If it cannot save a man, or keep a believer, or make a person better, but only punish them, then what is the purpose of the law.” This is the question, or as Paul puts it:

“Wherefore then serveth the Law?” (Galatians 3:19)

The answer is, “It was added because of transgression.” In other words, it was added to reveal sin as a transgression against God. Before the Law was given, there was sin in the world, but there was no transgression of the Law. This is made clear by Paul when he write in Romans 4:13-15:

“For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect: Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression.”

There is no mistaking these words, “where no Law is, there is no transgression.” Sin was in the world before the Law was given, and the penalty of sin was death. How clearly Paul states it in Romans 5:12-13:

“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (For

until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law."

In order to show man the real nature of sin, that he did not realize, God gave him the Law. There are three different words in the Greek language that are translated for sin. The most common Hebrew word that is translated as "sin" is "hattah," and the word literally means, "missing the mark." God has placed a target, as it were, for man to shoot at. If he misses, he has failed of a perfect score. He has missed the mark, and an inch is as good as a mile. The target that God has given may be said to be the Law. It is the perfect expression of God's perfect will. To fail to make a bull's eye by a perfect hit is missing the mark. To miss – by even a hair – makes one a loser in this marksmanship. The target that God sets up – the Law – is so high that sinful man cannot begin to live up to it. It must be a perfect hit. Coming close will not do, remember the Word says:

"Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Galatians 3:10 (KJV))

The requirement is absolute – it must be perfect obedience; it must be continuous obedience, it must be uninterrupted. James says:

"For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10).

The Law is a unit. Like a chain, it consists of different links, but it is still one chain, and it takes only one broken link to break the whole chain. Do we suppose that "almost" keeping the Law is enough – that keeping all the commandments except one, will do – or keeping it all your life, except for one minute, can satisfy its demands? No, it must be a bull's eye – perfect obedience. Sin, then is "coming short" of God's perfect demands.

A second Greek word that is translated for sin is, "avon," and means, "a flaw or irregularity." It is a deviation from a straight line, and therefore suggests crookedness. The Law demands that we walk in a perfectly straight line, according to its demands of perfection, and one misstep makes us sinners. The slightest deviation from the straight line of God's Law places us under judgment.

Transgression

The third Greek word that is translated for sin is, "pesha," and it is translated as "transgression." It means to trespass upon forbidden ground. It means cross a line or violating a boundary. The Law sets up a boundary of holiness and perfection. It demands a man that he will not cross the line that God has set. It is like the signs we see along the roadside – "Private Property – Do Not Trespass – Keep Out – This means you!" Now if there is no fence, or a plain line to show the limits of the forbidden property, one cannot know when he is trespassing. Before the Law came, sin was sin, to be sure, but the line had not been clearly drawn – no fence had been erected to show the exact limit of the forbidden ground. Then God put up a fence, in giving Israel the law of the Ten Commandments. It defined the exact limits, and to go beyond this was sin. Before the law, sin was sin, but it was not a transgression of the Law. I emphasize this aspect of the

matter of sin and the Law because certain legalistic Law-teachers continually quote the verse:

“...for sin is the transgression of the Law” (1 John 3:4).

This verse is quoted as though all sin is transgression of the Law. But transgression, positive disobedience of the Law, is only one aspect of sin. There is also a *negative* aspect of sin – “coming short of the demands of the Law.” Sins of *omission* are as much sins as sins of *commission*. It is as much a sin to “fail to do good” as to be guilty of doing evil. And so we call your attention to the complete verse in 1 John 3:4. It not only says, “For sin is the transgression of the Law.” But it is preceded by the first part of the same verse.

“Whosoever committeth sin transgression *also* the Law” (1 John 3:4).

Sin was not always a transgression, but it was always sin, even before the Law. So remember that sin is a transgression only since the giving of the Law, but it is more than a transgression. Transgression is the legal definition of sin. Sin was always morally wrong, but not legally. This the Law brought about. We repeat, a thing may be morally wrong, but not be the breaking of any Law.

Slavery

Consider an illustration. Up until January 1, 1863 it was legal to own and traffic in slaves in the United States of America. You could own slaves, buy them, sell them and treat them in any way you pleased. It was legal. It was not a transgression of any law on our books. Then came the “*emancipation declaration*,” and the passage of laws against slavery with its appropriate penalties and punishments. And now it became legally wrong, and a crime to traffic in slavery. Now slavery was *always* wrong, but it was not always *illegal*. It was not a breaking of any Law. But now the law enters and it becomes a transgression of the law. I repeat, slavery was *just as wrong* before the laws were passed as after. It was always *morally* wrong. When the law came, it did not change the nature of the practice or affect the moral question of slavery, but it only made it *illegal* as well as immoral.

Or take another illustration, Before World War I, it was now a transgression of the law to make, buy, sell, and drink liquor and alcoholic intoxicants. But after that way “*prohibition*” came in, making the manufacture, selling, and buying of whiskey, beer, and wine for beverage purposes illegal and punishable by fines and imprisonment. And then to America’s everlasting shame, the 18th Amendment was repealed and the liquor traffic once more became legal. The law against liquor was no more. Now, passing the law and repealing the law did not affect by one iota the righteous or the wrongness of the liquor traffic. It was *morally* wrong during prohibition, and it was legally wrong as well, for it was a transgression of the law. But the liquor traffic today, although legalized, is still just as *morally* wrong, wicked, inexcusable, and damning in its results as when it was illegal in those prohibition days. The law cannot change the moral nature of a thing that is intrinsically wrong.

Not too many years ago there were no laws to prevent child labor, sweat shops, and starvation wages. Of course, it was *morally* wrong, but it was not *illegal*. There were no laws prohibiting the practice, and where no law is, there is no transgression. Then the law entered, and that which was always *morally* wrong also became *legally* wrong. I have taken a great deal of time to deal with this aspect of transgression to show that you cannot *legislate morality*. We cannot change the hearts of men by laws and regulations.

Law Cannot Change The Heart

A law can restrain and discourage sin, but it cannot remove the desire to sin. If the penalty for an infraction of the law is made severe enough, it can inhibit, or reduce, an infraction of the law, *if one* can break the law without danger of detection or prosecution. For instance, prohibition could forbid the manufacture and use of intoxicants, but it did not stop it or change man's desire for it. It merely drove it underground in an effort to escape the penalty of the law. The law prohibiting liquor under penalty stopped its practice for some, but it could not stop their thirst. The law failed to put an end to the perverted appetites of men, and it blossomed out in an age of bootlegging and flagrant violations.

Need A Change Of Heart

I want to make it clear that, even though, according to the Bible, God's grace is imperative for our salvation, this does not laws are *not* good and just and right. In the kind of a world we are living, we need laws – to restrain, to inhibit, to discourage crime – but, what I am saying is that it takes *more* than laws to change the heart of man. There are some things that a law cannot do. It cannot do a single thing to improve the sinful heart of man. The very purpose of God's giving of the Law was to prove that we couldn't - and can never - legislate *goodness*. We cannot pass any laws that will make us love our neighbor or seek to please God. The Apostle Paul sums it all up when he says in Romans,

“For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Romans 8:3-4).

“For what the Law could not do,” says Paul. This comes as quite a surprise to many who have the mistaken notion that the keeping of the law can save a person. And indeed it is true that *if* a person could be found who kept the Law of God flawlessly, perfectly, and continuously all his life, he could claim salvation on the basis of his perfect, sinless holiness, and keeping of the Law. But such a person never lived. We are born with Adam's sin imputed to us, and under the sentence of death. David said,

“Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalms 51:5).

In 1 Kings 8:48 we read,

“...for there is no man that sinneth not...”

Solomon tells us that,

“An high look, and a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked, is sin” (Proverbs 21:4)

And in verse 9 of chapter 24, he tells us”

“The thought of foolishness is sin...(Proverbs 24:9).

David says in Psalm 14,

*“The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God”
(Psalms 14:2).*

And what did the Lord find as He looked down upon the children of men? Read it:

“They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Psalms 14:3)

God said that no man can be saved by his good deeds, or his good works; no one can be saved by keeping the Law – or a set of rules and regulations. Our only hope is the grace of God. To be saved we must first acknowledge our total depravity, our complete inability to please God by the works of the Law, and then abandoning all hope of saving our self, throw our self upon the mercy and grace of God and say:

Rock of ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Cleanse me from its guilt and power.

Not the labors of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

This is your only hope, Abandon all hope in self and say:

Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!