

Chapter Seven

The Power Of The Law

Is the believer in Christ Jesus under the Law or is he under grace? this is the question of our series. From the days of the apostles there have been many views held by various groups: and even though the Bible is crystal-clear on the subject, still there are different interpretations persist, and there are still the widest differences of opinion on the matter. In general, we can classify the errors concerning Law and grace under three heads. There are three erroneous interpretations proposed by three school of thought.

1. The first of these is "Legalism."

This interpretation teaches that we are saved by our own works, by keeping the Law, and observing the Ten Commandments – or – perhaps, a set of rules and regulations that some organization has set up. This error was already present even before the day of the apostles, and the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write one while epistle to refute this gross soul-destroying error. It is the epistle to the Romans. The entire thrust of the epistle of Romans is simply this, "*We are saved by grace wholly apart from the works of the law.*" Paul gives us the conclusion of his whole argument in that well-known verse:

"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:28).

2. The second error with regard to the ministry of the Law is call "antinomianism, that is the exact opposite of legalism.

The theological term, "antinomianism" comes from two Greek words – "anti" (meaning "against") and "nomos" (meaning "the Law") – and literally means, "against the Law." It teaches that since we are saved by grace, it makes no difference how a person lives or behaves. This is also a soul-destroying error, and again the Holy Spirit has devoted one whole book in the New Testament to refute this doctrine of antinomianism. This is the epistle of James, in which the Lord sets forth the fact that although we are delivered from the Law of commandments by the work of Christ, we are not then left without any law, and become lawless, but instead we are placed under a new law, that law of a new life, called the royal law of liberty. The new law that James speaks of is the law of love and gratitude in response to our salvation by grace alone. God's Word teaches that while works have no part in obtaining or retaining salvation, they nevertheless must be the result and the fruit of our salvation. James sums up the matter in that much-misunderstood verse:

"Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (James 2:24).

On the surface this verse does seem like a flat contradiction of Paul's statement, "*Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the Law is the knowledge of sin*" (Romans 3:20). How can we reconcile the teaching of Paul's

“justification by grace without works” and the teaching of James “justification by works?” Do they contradict each other? To understand this Scripture as well as any other, we must always ask two questions. First, “To whom is he talking,” and second, “What is he talking about?” Apply this rule to the teaching of Paul and James. Paul in the book of Romans is telling us how one can be justified in God’s sight, and, he says, it is by faith alone. The key phrase is, “in His (God’s) sight.” How can one be saved and justified in God’s sight? The answer is: “By faith, and faith alone!” But James is discussing the question, “How can this believer, already justified in the sight of God, now be justified in the sight of men?” The answer is: “By works.” God see faith in the heart of the repentant sinner, and declares him justified; but men will never know it, until they see it in the conduct and works of this saved person. We are justified in God’s sight by faith; only our works justifies us in the sight of men. Faith is the *root*, and works are the *fruit*.

Both Paul and James refer us to the life of Abraham as an example of justification of faith and by works. Paul calls our attention to an entirely different incident in Abraham’s life than does James. Abraham was justified in the sight of God when he believed what God said concerning a promised son. Romans 4:3 says,

“...Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.”

It was faith without works. But when James uses Abraham as an example of justification by works, he refers to an experience in Abraham’s life that was many years after. It was his sacrifice of his son, Isaac, in obedience to God. This was the public demonstration of his faith. By this act of supreme sacrifice Abraham proved to men that reality of his faith in God. James therefore says:

“Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?” (James 2:21).

Note these words, “when he had offered his son.” Abraham had been justified by faith in God’s sight over thirty years previously, but now when (the is, “after”) he had offered up his son, he justified his faith in the sight of all men. This is the answer to the error of antinomianism that teaches that since we are saved by grace, it makes no difference how we live. It is an error just as serious as “legalism.”

3. There is a third error in the days of Paul concerning the ministry of the Law. In addition to the error of *legalism* and *antinomianism*, there is another called in the theological language, “Galatianism,” because it was most prevalent in the churches in Galatia.

It teaches that we are saved by grace without works, but then after we are saved we must be kept by perfect obedience to the Law. In simple language, it is “*saved by faith and kept by works;*” or “*saved by grace and kept by keeping the Law.*” This is a subtle deception of the enemy of our souls, for, having once been delivered from the Law, it would put us back again under its legal bondage for our ultimate and final salvation. It is a flat denial of salvation by grace, for in the end our salvation becomes dependent upon our behavior and the works of the Law.

To refute this evil error of “*saved by grace – kept by works*,” the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write one whole epistle to show the terrible mistake of making salvation partly dependent on our behavior. It is the epistle to the Galatians. The Galatians had believed Paul’s teaching of *salvation by grace alone!* But then false teachers had come in who said, “No, **no**, Paul was mistaken; it is true that we are saved by simple faith without works, but after that, you are on your own. Whether or not you will finally arrive, now depends on **you** and your perfect obedience to the Law.” Listen to Paul’s stinging answer in Galatians 3:

“O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?” (Galatians 3:1-3).

“What!” asks Paul, “Do you think that God would save you by His grace, and then make the future possession of this gift dependent upon **us**?” And to clinch the folly of trying to hold on, and keep from losing our salvation, he says:

*“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, 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 imagine that we can hold on to our salvation by our own behavior in keeping God’s Law, we should read this verse slowly and carefully, emphasizing the words: “*cursed*,” “*everyone*,” “*continueth*,” “*all things*.” We need to ask our self the question that Paul asks, “*Are you so foolish, having begun in the Spirit (by grace), are you now made perfect (kept to the end) by the works of the Law?*”

The Truth of Grace

Having seen the three errors that have plagued the church since the days of the apostles, we turn to the glorious truth of our deliverance from the curse of the Law, from beginning to end. Whenever we say that we believe that we are **kept**, as well as **saved** by grace, there are those who accuse us of a dangerous doctrine because, they way, it teaches a license to sin. This accusation is not a new one, the apostle had to face the same criticism. After his statement, “*Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the Law*” (Romans 3:28), he anticipates an objection and, says:

“Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law” (Romans 3:31).

When this verse states that no man can keep the Law of God perfectly, does downgrade the Law? Does it make void the Law? Does it by this assertion weaken the Law or accuse it of imperfection? Does this text belittle the law, when it states the Law is so high, so holy, and perfect, that no man can attain unto it in his own ability? Paul says, “*God forbid!*” The very opposite is true – “*This verse establishes the Law.*” It proves the Law’s perfection – its holiness – its high standard – by exalting it far above the attainment of sinful man. Because the Law is holy, sinful man cannot keep it. Because it is perfect, no imperfect mortal can satisfy its perfect requirements. Because it is just, it

must condemn and punish the unjust sinner. “Yea,” says Paul, “*we establish the Law.*” We prove its perfection.

Kept By God's Grace

Paul knew better than to claim salvation by his own efforts. He rested completely in the grace of God, not only to save him, but to keep him as well. He said,

“For the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day” (2 Timothy 1:12)

And again he said,

“Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

No, says Paul, it is all of grace, from the beginning to end, or it is not grace at all. There is a question that is sure to be raised. “*Are we then without duty or obligation to keep God's Law?*” The answer is that the Law still stands to condemn sin, and the sinner. But the believer, delivered from the judgment and penalty of the Law, now is living under a *new Law* – namely, the Law of liberty and of love. To be sure, the believer desires to keep God's Law, but his motive is entirely changed. He does not strive to keep God's Law in order to earn his salvation or to escape judgment, but now he seeks to keep that Law and to please God, because of gratitude to God for His deliverance from the curse of that Law. The Law of love now takes the place of the Law of sin and death.

Here is an illustration. Let's say that some rather small metal object is lying quietly before us – (a nail, or a needle) – held down by the law of gravity, a pull from below – the attraction of the earth beneath. As long as this law alone operates it will hold that object down. But it can be overcome by another law. If we take a magnet, hold it above that needle, and we overcome the law of gravity by a more powerful force, the pull of magnetism from above. Now, we did not abolish the law of gravity, or suspend it, but it is overcome by the law from above. The gravity, the pull from beneath, is not diminished; it is still as powerful as ever. So, too, when we are saved, we do not dishonor the Law by saying we are not under its power any more, but we are now under the higher law of love. The believer now seeks to please God, because of His love and not because of fear of condemnation. One verse should clinch the matter for us:

“For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love works no ill to his neighbor: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:9-10)

If we love God we will seek to obey Him. If we love our neighbor, we will not seek to harm him. The more love, the less Law; and the less love, the more the Law is needed. Why do you seek to obey God and keep His commandments/ Is it because of fear and punishment, fear of chastening, fear of losing your salvation? Or is it because *“perfect love casts out fear”* and now your motive is gratitude and love for such a great salvation? Ask yourself the question today, *“Why do I seek to live a life pleasing to God? Is it fear, or is it love?”*