

# **THE STRUGGLE TO BALANCE LAW & GRACE:** *Learning to Distinguish Law and Gospel*

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Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God apart from law, has been made known to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. Romans 3:20-22 NIV

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. Romans 10:4 NIV

## **THE STRUGGLE WITH THE LAW**

Then Jesus said to the woman, “Go now and sin no more, and then I will not condemn you.” No I am not inventing a new translation. This is not what Jesus really said. But, the way many hear salvation preached, these words of Jesus may be more fitting. When we misunderstand the relationship between the Gospel and the Law, we in effect reverse the words of Jesus and turn the grace of God inside out. This in turn leads us to a struggle in balancing Law and Grace. Instead of a healthy, confident faith in the Gospel with a good conscience (1 Timothy 1:5, 19), there is confusion and damaged consciences while wrestling with the issues of Law and Grace.

I have received a variety of letters from people who are struggling with this issue. One man wrote to me about his struggle with the requirements of his church. His pastor said that he doubted that anyone who did not keep the “standards” of their denomination was a true Christian. In a sermon his pastor preached, he heard it expressed “that by living a ‘holy life’ the members of his church were ‘exceeding the righteousness of the Pharisees.’”

I received another letter from a pastor. In writing about the subject of grace he shared that there seemed to be a “slippery slope to keep folks thinking grace and at the [same] time continuing to realize the importance of pressing toward a Christ-like life which embodies abstaining from physically self-destructive behaviors in a lesser measure that they did when they were in bondage altogether.” His concern was about grace being used to excuse behavior that was obviously harmful.

In another situation, a young woman who is a pastor’s daughter said, “It really bothers me that some of the most trivial things are taught to be of the greatest importance.

We're talking about a difference between heaven or hell on whether a woman wears a pair of blue jeans or not. I have trouble believing in or trusting a God that trivial." She could not reconcile the legalism she was under with the God of the Bible.

These folks are not alone in their struggle. The place of the Law in a Christian's life is one of the church's most debated subjects throughout its history. A wide variety of opinions are held concerning the Law: it is abolished, still in effect, no longer important, a guide to right living or even replaced by Christ's law. My concern is not with categorizing the viewpoints, but to come to an understanding of what Scripture says about the relationship of the Law to the Christian life. The primary reason for my concern is that most of the deviations from the biblical Gospel emerge from an ignorance of this relationship.

Equally, most of the problems Christians have in living their faith arise from some failure to understand the Law-Gospel relationship to Christian life. A broad range of questions address this issue: "Since we are not saved by obeying the Law, does that mean the Law is bad?" "Is it no longer part of the Christian life?" "If we are to live "in Christ" what are the principles for living "in Christ"?" "Since we live out of the Gospel, how are we to do this?" "Is the Law – the 10 Commandments – no longer valid for Christians?" "Are there any commands to which a Christian is obligated?" "If we walk in the Spirit then what principles do we live by?" These questions and many more illustrate the importance for the believer to find solid answers concerning the role of Law in Spirit or Gospel living.

This issue is often seen in the common question, "How should a Christian balance Law and Grace?" The better way to frame this question is to ask, "How should a Christian distinguish between Law and Gospel?" In order to learn how to distinguish between Law and Gospel, we must know what "Law" is and what "Gospel" is. Then, we will need to identify the ways that Law and Gospel differ. Only then, can we begin to learn how to distinguish Law from Gospel in our lives as Christians.

## **WHAT IS THE LAW?**

First, let us look at what the Law is. Clearly God is a God of law. Abraham asked, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:25) No one could hope to find vindication before Yahweh, the righteous Judge: "Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for in thy sight shall no man living be justified." (Ps. 143:2)

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To the men of the Old Testament God was a God of law, and a very great deal in their religion cannot be understood if this is lost sight of.<sup>1</sup>

The Law as revealed in the Old Testament is God's Law. At first the Law was written on people's hearts (Rom. 2:14-15). Then God revealed it to Moses and it was written on stone. It was the will of God embodied in a written code and given to Moses. "The law was given through Moses." (John 1:17 NIV).

This Law was given as a covenant of works.

"He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets." (Deuteronomy 4:13 NIV)

"And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant-- the Ten Commandments."  
(Exodus 34:28 NIV)

The Law of Moses functioned in three spheres of life: the moral, the ceremonial and the political. These three spheres of life point to the fundamental requirement of the Law. The requirement of the Law is nothing less than *absolute and perfect love for the LORD*. Jesus summarize the essence of the Law in Matthew 22:35-40:

One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.

The Law requires total devotion to God with our mind, heart, soul and strength. This devotion was to be maintained every minute, of every day, from the beginning to the end of our lives. Those who fall short of this requirement break the Law and the covenant of works.

The tragic reality of Human history is that no one could keep this Law. While God expects us to keep His Law perfectly (Lev. 19:2), no one has, and no one can. We cannot

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<sup>1</sup>Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 3<sup>rd</sup> 1965, rep. 1983), p. 253.

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because of the power of sin that reigns over every human mind and heart. Because we are so blind to our sinfulness, the Law is necessary to show us our sinfulness.

What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise. What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. (Gal. 3:17, 19 NIV)

The law was added so that the trespass might increase. (Romans 5:20 NIV)

No one can be saved by the Law. Instead all are condemned by the Law:

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. (Romans 3:20 NIV)

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." (Gal. 3:10-12 NIV)

One of the best definitions of Law is found in the Formula of Concord:

“A divine doctrine in which the righteous, immutable will of God is revealed, what is to be the quality of Man in his nature, thoughts, words and works, in order that he may be pleasing and assessable to God. And it threatens its transgressors with God’s wrath and temporal and eternal punishments. It is the divine doctrine which teaches what is right and pleasing to God and reproves everything that is sin and contrary to God’s will.”

“Everything that reproves sins is and belongs to the preaching of the Law.”<sup>2</sup>

According to Luther there were three basic purposes of the Law. First, it was to control the flesh and maintain public order (1 Tim 1:9; Rom. 2:14-15). Second, it accuses us that we might see our sin (Rom 3:20; Rom. 7:7) . Third, Luther said that the Law is a guide to the Christian of what one should or should not do “to lead a God-pleasing life.”

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<sup>2</sup>Formula of Concord

(Living this life {as Luther taught} must done in the power of the Gospel.) Above all, the ultimate purpose of the Law is to lead us to Christ:

But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, (Galatians 3:22-26 NIV)

The Law does guide the Christian in what the Christian life should look like. Still we must remember that the likeness of Christ is greater than the Law. And the work of the Spirit to renew us in that image is greater than the Law can perform. Law keeping cannot transform us into Christ likeness. *This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having **begun in the Spirit**, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?* (Gal. 3:3,4 KJV) Nevertheless, walking in the Spirit and living in the likeness of Christ will not take a form contrary the God's Law. It will always demonstrate the goodness of the Law. The greatest role of the Law in relation to the Gospel, is to show us how desperately and utterly we need Christ and to drive us totally to the Gospel for help.

## **WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?**

The Gospel for Paul was the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ *on our behalf*:

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. (1 Corinthians 15:1 NIV)

This was the Gospel Paul received, preached to them, and on which they had taken a stand (all past tense). It is also that by which they are being saved (present tense). This gospel is a series of historical facts - Jesus died, was buried, rose again, and appeared.

These historical facts witness to God's revealed truth that Christ acted in His death, burial, resurrection and ascension on our behalf. Scripture emphatically points to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus as the work of God for our salvation. Luther said that, "the Gospel is the good news of our salvation in Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:16; 6:63; Rom. 1:16; Col. 1:6)." This is the fundamental nature of the Gospel. The Formula of Concord states about the Gospel:

Such a doctrine as teaches what man who has not observed the Law and therefore is condemned by it, is to believe. Namely that Christ has expiated and made satisfaction for all sins and has obtained and acquired for him without any merit of his forgiveness of sins, righteousness that avails before God, and eternal life." [Formula of Concord]

The Gospel is about Jesus Christ. It is only in the Gospel where God offers forgiveness of sins. The subject of the Gospel is Jesus and the action is what He has done to save us. He is the only way to God (John 14:6). He alone is the truth. He is the only way to salvation (Acts 4:12). The Gospel is God's promise (2 Cor. 1:20) that those who trust in Jesus are right with Him (Rom 5:1). The Gospel tells us what God did for us in Christ:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them . . . God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:18-21 NIV)

The Gospel is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." (Rom 1:17) It is not about our power. It is God's power. It is what God does for those who believe in what He does. It is not about what we have done or what we must do. It is about what Christ has done for us and that we trust in what he has done. The Gospel is based on Christ's performance. It is not what God does in us. But, it is what God did in Jesus. It is what Jesus did in perfect obedience, in keeping the whole Law and pleasing the Father in every way.

The Gospel is what Jesus did in our place. Karl Barth said that the essence of the Gospel is summed up in the Greek word *huper*. It means "in behalf of, for the sake of." This is prefigured and promised in Isaiah 53:5: *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,*

*and by his wounds we are healed.* Christ acted in our behalf and for our sake in order to save us.

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died **for us**. Romans 5:8 NIV

He died **for us** so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.  
1 Thessalonians 5:10 NIV

Who gave himself as a ransom **for** all men-- the testimony given in its proper time  
1 Timothy 2:6 NIV

Who gave himself **for us** to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. Titus 2:14 NIV (all bold mine)

## CHRIST, THE END OF THE LAW

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.  
Rom. 10:4 (NIV)

Charles Spurgeon said that this passage signifies three things about Christ and the Law: 1) That Christ is the purpose of the Law; 2) Christ is the fulfillment of the Law; 3) and Christ is the termination of the Law.

First, Christ is the purpose of the Law. The Law was not able to produce acceptable righteousness. That was not because the Law was bad or flawed, but it was because we are sinners. After Adam's Fall the Law shows a sinner his need of Christ. How does it do that? It does it through proving to him that he in a fallen and sinful state can not keep it in the entirety which God's justice demands. The Law says to us everyday, "You are a sinner, you need a Savior." It tells us that there is no other possible way to be saved. Once the Law has delivered us to Christ, it's function in salvation is done. This is the point of Galatians three:

Wherefore the law was our **schoolmaster** to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a **schoolmaster**. For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. Gal 3:24-26 (KJV)

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Second, Christ is the fulfillment of the Law. *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.* (Matt. 5:17 NIV) This means that Christ has come to give us the righteousness the Law demands. He came to do the Father's will. (Heb. 10:7-9) He kept the Law completely and perfectly (Jn. 5:30; 8:29). He did not sin. (Heb. 4:15) This made him, as a man, righteous before God (Is. 53:11). Because of Him our sins are not counted against us. (2 Cor. 5:19-21) Why? Because by his righteous obedience Jesus fulfilled what was required of us under the Law. Our works do not count for righteousness, but only Christ's righteousness. (Rom. 4:6) He then on our behalf counts this righteousness to us when we trust in him. (Rom 4:23,24).

There is another way Christ fulfills the Law. When he takes or has our sins counted toward him on the Cross (1 Pet. 1:24), he suffers the judgment and the wrath of God which the Law demands. (Rom. 5:9) He takes the curse of God which was due us. (Gal. 3:13) He fulfills the Law in that he paid for our violations of the Law and honored God's justice (Rom. 5:18).

Third, Christ is the termination of the Law. A new covenant is begun in Christ and the old covenant is passed away. Paul says that as Christians we are not under the Law:

For sin shall not be your master, because you are not **under law**, but under grace.  
Romans 6:14 NIV

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not **under law**. Galatians 5:18 NIV

Those who would attempt to be right with God by the Law fail, and their failure incurs the curse of the Law. But those who trust in Christ are free from the curse because he has taken the curse of the Law on himself on the Cross. He has given us the Blessing by giving us his righteousness which fulfills the Law:

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (Gal. 3:10-13 NIV)

## CONFUSING LAW AND GOSPEL

The evidence that one does not understand how to distinguish between the Law and the Gospel usually manifests itself in a struggle to understand the proper place of the Law in the Christian life. Throughout Church history two contrasting errors have emerged in Christian teaching: 1) Legalism, and 2) Antinomianism.

### Legalism

Under legalism the Bible becomes a rule-book for living or God's manual for life. The Law is preached among legalists to instruct believers in the way to remain in the favor of God. It is also preached to improve the Christian's moral qualities and to build character. Through the Law, Christians solve the problems of the flesh by learning how to keep the flesh in submission through obedience. It is taught by the legalist that this is "walking in the Spirit." But, it looks more like the law-keeping of the Galatians, than the "Spirit walking" as taught to the Galatians by Paul. For too many, the commands of the Law are preached as necessary to "remain" saved. As for motivations, the legalists fear the extreme position of the antinomians (lawless) and react by attacking rule-breakers. In turn, the antinomians (lawless) fear the extremes of legalism and react by attacking rule-keepers.

At the heart of Legalism rests any attempt to be right with God by means of law-keeping. Legalism is believing that one is able through one's own obedience to please God. By keeping the Law one made and remains righteous and therefore is acceptable to God on the basis of one's personal merit. I need to make this clear: God's Law is good and those who keep God's Law perfectly will be righteous, merit God's favor, and earn entrance into Heaven. Here's the catch: **Only Christ accomplished this.** He is the only proof that it is possible to be righteous by keeping the Law. The problem is not in the Law itself, but with our inability to keep it. The problem with legalism is that it is naive about the sinfulness of sin and the true holiness of God. Legalism assumes that one is not as radically sinful as the Bible declares. It also does not fathom the infinite nature of God's holiness. Humanity's sinfulness is diametrically contrary to the beautiful, sovereign and holy God. Because of this disparity, no one can hope to be as holy as God requires.

An extreme legalist position is epitomized by a British ascetic name Pelagius. He was at the center of a great debate which occurred in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century. His foil was a

teacher from North Africa named Augustine. Pelagius “called for a strict standard of moral perfection for all Christians.”<sup>3</sup> He said that “it was the obligation of every Christian to achieve perfection by keeping all the commandments of God.”<sup>4</sup> Pelagius taught that God accepts us on the basis of our own righteousness. In other words, as Alister E. McGrath says,

Pelagius believed that God gives grace to nice people. God will accept a person if that one makes a significant effort toward God. He believed that people have a basic ability to respond to God without any help. He saw grace as guidance; as example of what we should do. God likes people who improve themselves. You have the ability to become a good person so do it and God will accept you and give you grace (or salvation). In essence this is THE JUSTIFICATION OF THE GODLY. (Caps mine)<sup>5</sup>

The Roman Catholic church rejected Pelagius as heretical. They believed that we are saved by grace, our salvation is through Christ, and we come to Christ by faith. The RCC believes this even today. The significant difference is that the RCC does not believe in grace ALONE, faith ALONE, or Christ ALONE. They believe that we are “infused” with grace in baptism, which we maintain by the mass, confession, and penance. The grace of God that saves us, therefore, must have our cooperation. We must obey the teaching and practices of Christ (really the RCC) for the grace of God to remain in force. If one does obey, there is a possibility of justification - right standing before God. (Unless of course, sin is still present after death. Then purgatory may be necessary to remove or purge the remaining sin in order for the believer to be considered justified.

In effect, Jesus is the giver of an easier law which we keep through God’s grace.

In much of medieval preaching, the Law and Gospel were so confused that the "Good News" seemed to be that Jesus was a "kinder, gentler Moses," who softened the Law into easier exhortations, such as loving God and neighbor from the heart. The Reformers saw Rome as teaching that the Gospel was simply an easier "law" than that of the Old Testament. Instead of following a lot of rules, God expects only love and heartfelt

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<sup>3</sup>Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th Ed., p. 206.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Audio cassette, distributed by CURE.

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surrender. Calvin replied, "As if we could think of anything more difficult than to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength! Compared with this law, everything could be considered easy...[For] the law cannot do anything else than to accuse and blame all to a man, to convict, and, as it were, apprehend them; in fine, to condemn them in God's judgment: that God alone may justify, that all flesh may keep silence before him." [Calvin, 2.7.5 of the 1536 Institutes, trans. by F. L. Battles (Eerdmans, 1975), 30-1; cf. 1559 Institutes 2.11.10.] Thus, Calvin observes, Rome could only see the Gospel as that which enables believers to become righteous by obedience and that which is "a compensation for their lack," not realizing that the Law requires perfection, not approximation.<sup>6</sup>

Among legalists there is more to "law" than the Law of God. I call this "extra-law," because it consists of rules or "standards" of behavior and lifestyle which are not clearly expressed in the Law of God. (and in many cases they are found no where in the Bible at all), The legalist believes these extra laws are implied by or run parallel to the Law of God. Extra-law would include rules of public morality (don't smoke, drink, gamble), 'hedge-laws' of denominations (don't play school sports, visit amusement parks, attend places that serve alcohol) and 'house-rules' of local churches (no facial hair for men, wearing (or not wearing) certain clothes or wearing them a certain way, no T.V. allowed by members).

I want to make it clear that I am not speaking against morality, true holiness, or even the right of Christian groups to formulate policies for conduct. But there is a significant difference between adopting moral principles that will reflect God's glory and requiring non-biblical rules and laws of those we accept into the Christian fellowship. You may ask, "What's wrong with having convictions and standards to encourage godliness?" Certainly there is nothing wrong with encouraging biblical godliness. However, I am not addressing the propriety of groups to set policy or guidelines for their churches. Also, I am not saying that all my examples are either right or wrong. (That is not the purpose of this paper.) I am pointing out that what I call "extra-rules" are obligations imposed on the consciences of Christians as though they are stated explicitly in Scripture as the commands of God, **when they are not**. Doing this is a form of legalism.

Extra-rules are usually constructed out of a particular interpretation by some Christians who think they are consistent with the morality of the Bible. But, we must be very careful when we add to God's Law. To say something could be a principle drawn from Scripture and to say something is a direct command are two very different things

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<sup>6</sup>Michael S. Horton, *Law & Gospel*, © 1996 CURE (originally published in "The Horse's Mouth)."

altogether. To not discern this difference leads to legalism, false guilt, and a false witness against God. We have no authority to place our personal convictions, interpretations of morality or standards of behavior on par with God's Law.

In many cases, Christians who attend legalistic churches suffer great guilt for breaking the extra-laws of the church. The tragedy is, they can't receive forgiveness from God for breaking these extra-rules because God did not require those rules of them in the first place. On the other hand, they may ignorantly break the real Law of God by having other gods in their lives (such as following leaders who add to God's Law), but they do not feel guilty because their church does not properly preach God's Law. Many churches preach a false guilt which drives people to more law-keeping and away from freedom from guilt through the grace of God. These people have is no assurance of salvation, because there is always a rule or a nuance of a rule which one has missed. In fact, one can spend most of one's time just learning the complex applications of the rules of these churches. At the same time, the true Law of God is not preached in all of its power and terror. Consequently, the hearers are not driven to the Gospel as a refuge from God's wrath.

Another equally tragic result of preaching extra-laws as God's Law is that those people who keep them believe they are keeping God's Law. Through this misconception they believe they are justified through personal holiness. All the while, in reality, they are failing at God's Law and are truly sinners. The very act of keeping human extra-laws and claiming righteousness through them is sin itself. While these people confidently keep human laws, they maintain a sense of self-righteousness that gives false assurance. Rather, they should be driven by the preaching of God's Law to the biblical grace of God for their rightness with God.

Paul emphatically states that *no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law*. The Law (Included in "the Law" are also those many rules, "principles," customs, policies, and extra-laws which Christian groups require of their constituents.) cannot make anyone right with God for one fundamental reason: Everyone is a sinner (Rom. 3:23). In Creation God made us to keep His Law. But, by the first or the original sin of Adam and Eve , (Rom. 5:12,17) human nature was corrupted (Eph. 2:1-3) and rendered incapable of obeying the Law (Rom. 3:10-12; 7:18,19). As Paul goes on to explain, *through the law we become conscious of sin*. (Rom. 3:20) Now fallen humanity can only know sin by the law.(Gal. 3:19) Our sinfulness is so great that even our righteousness is sin.

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. (Isaiah 64:6 NIV)

The Law's function for the sinner is to reveal sin's sinfulness as well as the supreme righteousness of God. Because of this, God provided the righteousness of Christ to save us:

But now a righteousness from God apart from the law, has been made known to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. (Rom. 3:21,22 NIV)

The Law works to drive us to the Cross of Christ, because through the Law we realize that the terrible wretchedness of our sins puts us in need of a merciful, righteous Savior. When we see our own unrighteousness through the preaching of the Law, we appreciate what God offers us through the preaching of the Gospel - redemption through the imputed righteousness of Christ.

## **Lawlessness**

To the other extreme is antinomianism. The word "antinomian" comes from two Latin words: *anti* = "against" and *nomos* = "law." It is an important historical fact that the antinomian controversy was the first major controversy of the Reformation. A man named Johann Agricola taught that after New Testament times the moral law had no value. He said that repentance should only be induced by the preaching of grace. Martin Luther opposed him and taught the "threefold use of the Law." They were: 1) To reveal sin; 2) To establish general decency in society; 3) To provide a rule of life for those who have been regenerated through faith in Christ. Agricola did not believe that the Law was necessary to convict a sinner, but that sinners only needed to hear the Gospel. Luther strongly rejected this by insisting that a sinner needed to hear the Law in order to be shown why he needed the Gospel.

We hear the echo of this erroneous teaching today in some of the so-called "grace" churches. In these churches there is no frequent, thorough, biblical exposure to the Law of God. Instead, everyone is now "free" to follow their own "convictions." In practice, it

often turns out that many have less and less convictions and seek more and more of their personal desires as motivated by the flesh. The Old Testament becomes a forgotten book or is reshaped into mere illustrations to support whatever good moral the preacher is wanting to express. The theology of these churches is that since Jesus has come, the love of God does away with the Law. Now that we have “grace” the Law is obsolete and no longer binding. The Christian is no longer expected to respect the Law. (And for some no laws). The only “requirement” for the antinomian is a sentimental or romantic idea of “love” incompatible with that taught in Scripture.

However, many Bible-believing Christians today recognize that the antinomian’s greatest problem in failing to grasp the nature of grace was misunderstanding the nature of justification by faith and true sanctification. The antinomians were correct in recognizing that justification is granted apart from the works of the Law. However, they failed to realize that biblical sanctification does involve acknowledging the moral principles of the Law.

Sadly, there is a fatal misconception in each of the camps of legalism and antinomianism. That failure is to properly discern the place of the Law in the life of the Christian. The tragic result is a confounding of Law with Gospel, which eventually leads to a distortion of the Law, and even worse, a loss of the Gospel altogether.

## **A GREAT HINDRANCE TO THE GOSPEL**

The greatest truth in the Bible is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. No other truth begins to approach this singular truth in importance. All of the truth of Scripture is a vital prelude to the symphony of the Gospel. It is God’s masterpiece; His *magnum opus*. Nevertheless, the euphony of God’s great truth is being broken by dissonant sounds of ignorance. It is an ignorance concerning **the clear distinction between what is Law and what is Gospel**. If there is one ability that most Christians lack, it is the discernment of the biblical difference between what is Law and what is Gospel. It is extremely vital for a proper reading of the Bible, for understanding the Person and Work of Christ, and to have proper faith in God’s promise of salvation to all who believe in Christ. All that is important in the Christian faith depends on this distinction.

There are many things that hinder our understanding of the Gospel. Out of all of them, I can’t think of a greater hindrance than the constant confusion and confounding of the Law with the Gospel. This is a constant pitfall. It is a frequent mistake committed by many in a variety of settings: small group Bible studies, pastors in their teaching of local

churches, as well as, most media preachers in their preaching. Unfortunately, it even occurs in seminary instruction. And where there is misunderstanding concerning the place of God's Law in redemption, the Gospel is hidden, blurred, or distorted in many people's minds. If there is one truth I could get across to my friends who are still a part of the religious group to which I once belonged, it would be this one. This is also the case for many other Christians and fellow-travelers of Christianity. It may be that this confounding of Gospel with the Law confuses more people about the Gospel than almost anything else.

The great Scottish preacher, John Colquhoun, said of this distinction:

To know the difference so as to be able to distinguish aright between the law and the gospel is of the utmost importance to the faith, holiness, and comfort of every true Christian. It will be impossible otherwise for a man so to believe as to 'be filled with joy and peace in believing.' If he does not know the difference between the law and the gospel he will be apt, especially in the affair of justification, to confound the one with the other. The consequence will be that in his painful experience, bondage will be mixed with liberty of spirit, fear with hope, sorrow with joy, and death with life. If he cannot so distinguish the gospel from the law as to expect all his salvation from the grace of the gospel, and nothing of it from the works of the law; he will easily be induced to connect his own works with the righteousness of Jesus Christ in the affair of his justification. This was the great error of the Judaizing teachers in the churches of Galatia. They mingled the law with the gospel in the business of justification, and thereby they so corrupted the gospel as to alter the very nature of it and make it another gospel.<sup>7</sup>

The great harm of mingling Law with Gospel is to "teach men to join the works of the law to the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ as the ground of a sinner's title to justification in the sight of God. . ."<sup>8</sup> To add any human works to the righteousness of Christ is to make the sacrifice of Christ of no effect. To rely on the smallest fraction of one's own doing undermines the completeness of Christ's perfect righteousness for sins.

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<sup>7</sup>John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, reprint, (Morgan Park, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1999, p. 141.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

An illustration might help clarify this. There is a person who owes the king twenty million dollars and the debtor is about to be killed for defaulting by midnight of a certain day. But because of his appeal and their compassion, several rich people get together to pay nineteen and half million. He then goes to the Governor and the Governor collects three hundred thousand through a state campaign. Next, he calls to his local community and the community gives one hundred thousand out of compassion. Still not enough. So he asks his family and friends and they put together ninety nine thousand and nine hundred and ninety nine dollars. There would still be one dollar less the total debt. Since the debt is not paid, and it is 11:58 of that day, he is about to die. In despair he jams his hands into his pockets and feels a wad of paper there. He pulls it out and to his surprise it is a dollar bill. The bill is paid. He is saved! The point of the story is: Even though his amount was very small, don't you think that the man will tell everyone about that one wrinkled dollar that HE gave to spare his life?

That is the problem with adding our works to the righteousness of Christ. We as sinners tend to look for our part and what we do in salvation rather than looking to what has been done already for us. One little bit of goodness, one small fraction of our work, will tempt us to build some part of our hope on ourselves. The one who does this,

will always be in danger of building his hope and comfort partly – if not wholly – upon his own graces and performances, instead of grounding them wholly on the surety-righteousness of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup>

## **THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LAW AND GOSPEL**

I believe that the truth of Law and Gospel is so fundamental to all of Scripture, that we should divide all the doctrine of both testaments in to Law and Gospel. Rather than speaking of Old and New Testament, we should speak of Law and Gospel. The primary reason is the there is both Law and Gospel in each Testament. There are promises and grace in the old and commands and judgments in the new. God chose Israel out of mercy and justified Abraham by faith in the Old Testament. Jesus commands us to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength in the New Testament.

The idea of making a difference between Law and Gospel may seem simple on the surface. But, actually discerning the difference is quite challenging. Luther said:

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

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This difference between the Law and the Gospel is the height of knowledge in Christendom. Every person and all persons who assume or glory in the name of Christian should know and be able to state this difference. If this ability is lacking, one cannot tell a Christian from a heathen or a Jew; of such supreme importance is this differentiation. This is why St. Paul so strongly insists on a clean-cut and proper differentiating of these two doctrines.<sup>10</sup>

The great Lutheran scholar C.F.W. Walther said,

Rightly distinguishing the Law and Gospel is the most difficult and the highest art of Christians in general and of theologians in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience.

One of the basic ways to discern the difference is to ask yourself: “Am I talking about something that I do?” If so, then you are talking about Law and not Gospel. Scripture teaches that Law is everything that demands perfect obedience to God. (Gal 3:12), pronounces God’s curse upon all transgressors (Gal. 3:10), renders all the world guilty before God (Rom. 3:19) and mediates knowledge of sin (Rom 3:20). I have created a brief chart attempting to identify some of the differences between Law and Gospel. You can see this chart by clicking on [Chart of Law and Gospel](#).

As you can see in the chart, on the left side stands Law, and on the right side is Gospel. By contrasting the features of each we can obtain a sense of the differences between them. The relationship between the sinner and the Law is sharply distinct from that with the Gospel. On the one hand, the Law commands and demands, while on the other hand the Gospel promises and offers. The focus in the Law is on the sinner’s performance. The focus in the Gospel is Christ’s performance. What the Law seeks is obedience, but the Gospel seeks faith. The Law can only kill while the Gospel results in only life. The favor of God is gained through the Law by our achievement. The favor of God is gained in the Gospel by the achievement of Christ.

It is foolish to return to the law again as a means to be accepted by God when the purpose of the law was to crush your hopes of being accepted by God on your terms and to drive you to Christ that you may be accepted on his terms, by his provisions. It is foolish to exchange what is free for the relentless demands of the law. The Gospel of grace says: God give and gives! The law says: you must do

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<sup>10</sup>Martin Luther, *Sermon On Galatians*, 1532.

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and do! Law demands. It's avaricious; it never quits; it always wants more. It is foolish to exchange the good news of heaven for the bad news of my own strength. It is foolish to exchange the infinite merit of Christ for my infinite demerit before God.<sup>11</sup>

Paul sets up this Law-Gospel distinction in Galatians as an answer to the Judaizers' teaching that believers must keep the Law of Moses. He says speaking of the Law: "The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, 'The man who does these things will live by them.'" Then, speaking of the Gospel he says, "Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because 'the righteous will live by faith.'" The Law's slogan is "justification in our righteousness alone, by our works alone, through our obedience alone, to our glory alone." The Gospel's slogan is "justification in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, to God's glory alone."

Obedience must be placed in the category of Law, which not only condemns us but guides us as Christians. The Law will never produce new life. The Law will never produce the fruit of the Spirit. Only the Gospel can. Nothing that happens within us is, properly speaking, Gospel. That is why Luther thundered to Melancthon, "The Gospel is entirely outside of you." The Gospel is not what has happened to you or happened to me, but what has happened to Christ. He was crucified for our sins. He was raised for our justification. The effects of the Gospel are what are produced in us, as a result of our faith in Christ.

Michael Horton asserts that the question "How can I be saved?" is answered differently by the Law and Gospel. Law pronounces a curse on anyone who has kept anything less than absolute obedience to the absolute Law of God. Perfect obedience to the letter of the Law has to be done out of a heart of perfect love for God and care for 100% of our neighbor's good and not 1% of our own. It says,

"Be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect."

"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not see the Kingdom of God."

"Do these things and you will live, don't do them and you will die." (Lev. 18:5)

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<sup>11</sup>David. B. McWilliams, *Christ Alone!*, "Modern Reformation," Vol. 8, No. 5, p.6.

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“It is harder for a rich man to be saved than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” “Who then can be saved?”

“If your right eye offends, pluck it out.”

“None is righteous, no not one.”

The chief purpose of the Law is to reveal sin. In the third question of the Heidelberg Catechism (one of the greatest resources for teaching the Gospel to children, new and old Christians) we read that we know our true condition through the Law:

Question: “How do you come to know your misery?”

Answer: “The law of God tells me” (Romans 3:20; 7:7-25) Without the Law we would not know what sin is. And if we do not know what sin is, we cannot know what the real human problem is, and we cannot be prepared for God’s answer. We must also understand that we cannot obey the Law perfectly. Again, the Heidelberg Catechism asks:

Question: But can those converted to God obey these commandments (the Ten Commandments) perfectly?”

Answer: “No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience (Ecclesiastes 7:20; Romans 7:14-15; 1 Corinthians 13:9; 1 John 1:8-10). Nevertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God’s commandments.” (Psalm 1:1-2; Romans 7:22-25; Philippians 3:12-16).

The Law is a tutor to lead us to Christ. *So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.* (Gal. 3:24 NIV). The Law is a guide for the Christian life. The Law works to show us throughout our lives as Christians just how sinful we are and how much we must look everyday to the supreme work of Christ for our salvation. The Law will make us hunger even more for the forgiveness through Christ. It will drive us from our own righteousness and to the righteousness of Christ alone for our sanctuary. Also, the Law will constantly work to awaken us to ever strive against sin, while praying for the grace of Holy Spirit to transform us into the image of God. While

we cannot obey the Law perfectly, the Law must be preached in its fulness to keep us constantly turned to grace.

## **DISTINGUISHING LAW AND GOSPEL**

The question at hand is, “How do we distinguish Law from Gospel?” The most common solution to this question is to attempt to balance the two. The idea behind this is that one can avoid the extremes of legalism and lawlessness if one keeps a healthy mixture of Law and Grace. The more one holds to 50% of Law and 50% of Gospel the safer one will be of extremism and error. The image here would be scales which shows both sides perfectly balanced, with Grace on the one side and Law on the other. Another analogy would be that of a pendulum. A swing too far to the left is legalism and too far to the right is lawlessness. The Law-Grace problem is solved by not allowing the pendulum to swing too far one way or the other.

The motivation behind these ideas may be noble, but they misunderstand one essential truth. God’s Word gives us a full dose of both Law and Gospel. We need both in full force, undiluted or fractionalized. They are not to be weighed against one another. They are not to be muted or subdued by their mixing. They should never be neutralized equilaterally. Scripture presents them both to us at full strength, to be received without inhibition, confusion or mixture. They are not to be balanced against each other, but both must be preached together against sin. We must use both in wisdom as the message in preaching to the sinner and the Christian. The key word is **distinguish**. We should not try to emphasize one over the other, ignore one or the other or balance the one against the other. We must preach each equally while making a clear differentiation between them. Law should awaken a sinner to the righteousness of God and his own sinfulness, causing him to cry out for help. The Gospel must be preached as the gracious offer of a merciful God of who justifies us by the blood and righteousness of Jesus.

Michael Horton states that what we hear too often among Christians is neither Law nor Gospel. It is “Glawspel” - a mix of Law and Gospel. (Because I believe that this is such a very important subject and because Michael Horton is very articulate about this matter, I would like to encourage you to read his article entitled, [\*Law & Gospel\*](#) ) We hear or preach Glawspel because there is failure to correctly, biblically distinguish between Law and Gospel. Both must be preached. And both must be clearly distinguished. But tragically, preachers try to balance them or overemphasize one over the other.

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It is absolutely crucial to our preaching, worship, Scripture reading and study, evangelism, and the whole scope of our Christian living that we make sure we are properly differentiating between Law and Gospel. I would like to offer a number of principles or tests for recognizing when we are mishandling both the Law and the Gospel. I give credit to the marvelous and inspired work of C. F. W. Walther - *The Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel* - from which I have drawn the article *How We Know When Law is Confounded with the Gospel*. This is probably the best book ever written on this subject. I trust that these will be helpful to you in this most vital calling to all who would follow the truth of God's Word.