

Faith Pulpit

Distinguishing Law and Grace

Biblically law can refer to: (1) the Ten Commandments [Romans 7:7–13], (2) the civil law of the Old Testament [Leviticus 11:46 , cf. vv 1–45], (3) the ceremonial law in the Old Testament [Leviticus 6:9, 14], (4) the first five books of the Bible [Romans 3:21c], (5) any statement in Scripture that condemns or makes a person feel guilty [Romans 4:14,15], (6) God’s Word in general [James 1:25], (7) the righteous standard of moral law [Romans 8:4], (8) a principle or fact [Romans 8:2a] and (9) Christ’s command for believers to love one another [Galatians 6:2].

It is crucial to separate the different uses of law in the Bible because there is a sense in which believers today are not under law as a rule of life but under the rule of grace. Believers are described as “not under law but under grace” [Romans 6:14] and are said to be “dead to the law...that we should bring forth fruit unto God” [Romans 7:4]. But at the same time, the Bible teaches that Spirit-controlled believers will be fulfilling in their lives the “righteousness of the law” [Romans 8:4; 13:8–10]. Living “under grace” is not lawlessness!

In the Bible grace refers to God’s undeserved favor and kindness to us. This grace includes any and all of God’s promises of comfort to us, but especially focuses on the Lord Jesus Christ, who is full of grace and truth [John 1:14] and Who, without ceasing to be divine, became human [2 Corinthians 8:9] to bring salvation to all [Titus 2:11] by His death as a sacrifice for our sins [Titus 2:14] and His resurrection from the dead [1 Corinthians 15:1–4]. Grace also refers to the benefits believers receive. Grace cannot be earned [Romans 4:4] and is in contrast to good works [Romans 11:6; Ephesians 2:8, 9].

In the mid-1640s Edward Fisher wrote *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. In it he gives two good reasons for distinguishing law and grace. He says, “First, because if we are ignorant thereof, we shall be very apt to mix and mingle them together, and so to confound the one with the other....Secondly,

because if we know right how to distinguish betwixt them, the knowledge thereof will afford us no small light towards the true understanding of the Scripture” (p. 337).

1 Corinthians 6:9–20 As Our Model

When these verses are examined, the following principles can be seen:

1. Those who defend their sinful lives will not enjoy eternal life—verses 9 & 10. In these verses the law is being forcefully presented, not concerning the Corinthian believers themselves but warning them against those who were trying to persuade them that God approved of their sinfulness [cf. “Know ye not . . . be not deceived”].
2. Forgiveness and victory are available—verse 11. Here grace as salvation is being proclaimed. Forgiveness is one aspect of being “justified in the name of the Lord Jesus” while victory is possible because we have been “washed” and “sanctified by the Spirit of our God.”
3. God’s law will not send a believer to hell for sin; nevertheless believers should not sin because—verses 12–20:
4. all things are not expedient or helpful—v. 12a.
5. some things enslave—v. 12b.
6. as our Creator, God has a right to prohibit immorality—v. 13.
7. the power that guarantees our resurrection is available now for victory—v. 14.
8. a believer’s immorality makes the Holy Spirit an unwilling witness—vv. 15–17.
9. there are inevitable natural consequences to immorality—v. 18.
10. God’s Spirit indwells our bodies, making godliness possible—v. 19.
11. as our Redeemer, God has a right to tell us how to live—v. 20.

In these verses, grace provides principles for godliness. In Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith Stephen Westerholm comments, “Paul concedes the truth of the slogan ‘All things are lawful for me’ . . . even though he is quick to point out its inadequacies as a guideline for Christian behavior: not everything is profitable or edifying, and some practices would lead to a new bondage....What makes Paul’s refusal to reject the slogan ‘All things are lawful’ even more astonishing are the contexts in which it is raised: discussions of fornication with prostitutes (1 Corinthians 6:12–20), and of the propriety of eating food offered to idols (chs. 8, 10). Surely if Paul was ever to ‘lay down the law,’ if Torah was to be invoked in any sphere as the standard for Christian behavior, then the subjects of sexual immorality and commerce with idolatry presented him with opportunities without equal. But Paul declined the temptation. His argument from Christian principles is both more complicated and less decisive than a simple reference to the prohibitions of God’s law would have been. Clearly Paul’s proclamation of freedom from the law left him with no other choice” (p. 208).

Conclusion

Law must be presented in its full force to those who are unbelievers to show them their sinfulness, and then grace as salvation should be presented. But to believers, grace as a guide for godliness must be proclaimed. This includes a healthy fear of the natural consequences for disobedience but excludes fear of eternal punishment and loss of salvation. God trains His children by chastening—motivated by His

love [Hebrews 12:5], and its goal is holiness [Hebrews 12:10, 11]. The major emphasis in grace is the power of God available for victory over sin.

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Dr. Houghton was promoted to Heaven on July 13, 2020, leaving a legacy of service and faithfulness to the thousands of men and women who he impacted during his ministry.