

The Grace of The Law¹

Timothy Keller, January 1, 2009

At Redeemer we talk a lot about how we are saved by grace, not by our good works or obedience to the law. Indeed, Paul says we are not *'under law'* but *'under grace'* (Romans 6:15.) But what does that mean as far as having an obligation to submit to God's will as written in his Word? Do we still have to obey the law? Absolutely.

To be *'under the law'* refers not to law obeying but law relying (Galatians 3:10-11). When we think we can win God's approval through our moral performance and obedience becomes a crushing burden, then we are *'under law.'* But when we learn that Christ has fulfilled the law for us and that now we who believe in him are secure in God's love, then we naturally want to delight, resemble, and know the One who has done this. How can we do this? By turning to the law! Paul puts it this way. Though he is not under the law, *'I am not free from God's law, but I am under Christ's law'* (1 Corinthians 9:21.) Though he is not *'under'* the law (as a way to earn salvation) he now is freed to see the beauties of God's law as fulfilled in Christ, and submits to it as way of loving his Savior. How does this work?

First, we embrace the law of God in order to learn more about who our God really is. Leviticus 19 is a magnificent chapter which both expands on all the Ten Commandments, and also summarizes them into *'love your neighbor as yourself.'* It shows how God's law was not a matter only of ritual purity, but was to transform every corner of one's practical life. In Leviticus 19:2, however, God introduces the whole law by saying, *'be holy, for I am holy.'* In other words, if you want to know who I am, what I love and hate, if you want to know my heart and become like me, obey my law.

Second, we embrace the law of God in order to discover our true selves. Deuteronomy says, *"What does the Lord require of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you this day for your good?"* Here we see that the law of God is a gift of grace that is the foundation of human flourishing. It is not *"busywork"* assigned just to please the arbitrary whims of a capricious deity. The law of God simply shows us what human beings were built to do—to worship God alone, to love their neighbors as themselves, to tell the truth, keep their promises, forgive everything, act with justice. When we move against these laws we move against our own natures and happiness. Disobedience to God sets up strains in the fabric of reality that can only lead to break down.

Third, we understand the law of God as fulfilled in Christ. This means two things. One we already mentioned. Christ completely fulfilled the requirements of the law in our place, so when he took the penalty our sins deserved, we could receive the blessing that his righteousness deserved (2 Corinthians 5:21.) However, we also recognize that many parts of the Old Testament law no longer relate directly to us as believers. Since Jesus is the ultimate priest, temple, and sacrifice, we observe none of the ceremonial, dietary, and other laws connected to ritual purity. Also, Christians of all nations are now members of the people of God, and God's

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community no longer exists as a single nation-state under a theocratic government. Therefore, the ‘civil legislation’ of the Old Testament is no longer appropriate. Adultery in the Old Testament was punishable by a death, but in the New Testament it is dealt with through exhortation and church discipline (1 Corinthians 6-7.)

Fourth, we realize that the law’s painful, convicting work is ultimately a gracious thing. When we fully comprehend the kind of life the law requires of us, it can be intimidating. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus expounds the Ten Commandments in this comprehensive way. He shows us the attitude we should have to the world, being salt and light, investing ourselves in the needs of our communities. He shows us that if we even disdain and ignore our neighbors, calling them ‘fools’, we are attacking their creator, in whose image they are made. He calls us to never look on another with lust, living lives of purity and chastity. He insists we should speak with as much honesty in all our daily interactions as if we were testifying in court under oath. We are told to forgive and love our enemies, turning the other cheek rather than seeking revenge. We are to give to the poor without expecting any thanks or acclaim. We are to give our money away in astonishing proportions, and carry on a dynamic, secret, inner prayer life. We are never to be judgmental or condemning of others, and we are to live a life free from worry. One minister said, after reading through Matthew 5-7 carefully, “God save us all from the Sermon on the Mount!” If you listen at all to the law of God, you will feel naked and exposed, ashamed and helpless, and you will seek out the mercy of God. That is why Paul says that though the law, when listened to, is devastating (Romans 7:9-11) it is nevertheless ‘spiritual, righteous, and good’ (Romans 7:12, 14) and its work is ultimately gracious (Romans 7:7.) It acts as a kind but strict schoolmaster who leads us to Christ (Galatians 3:24.)

Fifth, we turn to the law of God in order to get a true definition of what it means to love others in our relationships and in society as a whole. There was once a school of ethics called ‘situation ethics’ that rejected the Biblical law as too rigid. Instead, we were told, we only need to always do the loving thing, what is best for the person. But this begs the question—‘how do you know what is the best thing for a person?’ Is sleeping together with someone before marriage the best thing or the worst thing for him or her? How do you know? The law is God’s way of saying, ‘If you want to love others, act this way. I created people. I know what the best thing for them is.’ That is why Paul could write the commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. Romans 13:9-10

The law of God, then, gives Christians guidance not only in personal relationships, but helps us as we seek to make our society a more just and merciful one. What do people need? What does it mean to treat people with dignity? The law informs Christians’ political and social involvement.

Finally, we turn to the law of God because sometimes we need to do things just because God says so. In the garden, God told Adam and Eve not to eat the tree, but he never told them why. Some of us simply hate to follow a direction unless we know all the reasons why the direction was given, how it will benefit us, and so on. But God was saying to Adam and Eve, I think, ‘Obey this direction, not because you understand, but because you recognize that I am your God and that you are not.’ They failed in this. But every day we have the opportunity to put this right.

Do God's will, not because it is exciting (though it will eventually be an adventure) not because it will meet your needs (though it will eventually be a joy) not because you understand why this is the path of wisdom (though it will eventually become more clear.) Do it because he is your Lord and Savior and you are not. Do it because it is the law of the Lord. And if you do it—if you obey him even in the little things—you will know God, know yourself, find God's grace, love your neighbor, and simply honor him as God. Not a bad deal.



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