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Under Law or Under Grace?

by David Dunlap

Reformed theology has long given great importance to the “moral” law given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Reformed teachers argue that obedience to this moral law is an indispensable principle in the life of a Christian. These teachers fully concede that the ceremonial law and civil ordinances and statutes have been done away with by Christ on the cross of Calvary (Rom. 7:4-6, 10:4). However, they contend that the moral law is God's method of leading a Christian into a life of holiness.

Representative of this perspective, the late Reformed preacher David Martyn-Lloyd Jones writes,

The Christian has been delivered from the curse of the law. But that does not release him from the law as a rule of life. Holiness means being righteous, and righteous means keeping the law. The ten commandments and the moral law have never been abrogated.¹

Similarly, Anthony Hoekema, a former professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, writes,

The Christian life must be a law-formed life. Though believers must not try to keep God's law as a means of earning their salvation, they are nevertheless enjoined to do their best to keep the law...the law is one of the most important means whereby God sanctifies us.²

The question naturally arises: What was the purpose of the Mosaic law? Does the New Testament teach that the Christian is under the law today? Let's take a closer look at these and other questions.

The Purpose of the Law

The Mosaic law provided man with God's timeless moral standards in written form. These holy principles had, in part, already been revealed since the time of Noah (Genesis 9:4-6). The Mosaic law was in harmony with what God had already revealed to the patriarchs. However, now the Mosaic law would regulate all moral, civil, and ceremonial life in the nation of Israel. These standards were “holy, righteous, and good” (Rom. 7:12). God's ethical standards were incorporated in the law of Moses so that “every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God”(Romans 3:19). The ultimate purpose of the law was to demonstrate the exceeding sinfulness of sin and to be our tutor to lead us to faith in Christ. Nevertheless, the cross of Christ brought an end to the obligation of the believer to the Mosaic law in its entirety. Paul tells us that, “For

**“...the whole law
whether
ceremonial or
moral, which to a
Christian is utterly
abrogate, for he is
dead unto it...now
to die to the law, is
not to be bound to
the law, but to be
free from it. Let
him that will live
to God endeavor
that he may be
found without the
law, let him come
out of the grave
with Christ.”**

Martin Luther

Commentary on Galatians

Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth” (Rom. 10:4). The believer in Christ is no longer under the law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14). The law has power over a person only when he is alive. Since the Christian has died and is risen in Christ, then the law has no more power over him. In the language of the New Testament, “Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ and married to another, even to Him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God” (Rom. 7:4). Although the Christian is no longer under the law, this does not mean he does not have a responsibility to meet the righteousness contained in the law.

Dispensationalists have long recognized that, except for the commandment to keep the Sabbath, all of the Ten Commandments are included in the New Testament. As a result, Dispensationalists are concerned about maintaining this biblical standard of morality. However, the New Testament never charges the believer to return to the Old Testament Mosaic system of law. The Holy Spirit’s power is God’s method of liberating and energizing the Christian to meet His holy standards. The Holy Spirit’s controlling work in the Christian enables him not only to fulfill the righteousness of the law, but to exceed its righteousness. This leads us to the issue of the Ten Commandments and the moral law.

The Moral Law and the Ten Commandments

We may describe the “moral” law as the eternal principles of righteousness, reflecting the mind and heart of God. This law has always existed and is the essence of the will of God for all believers in every dispensation. Its standards are as high as the glory and character of God. This truth is seen in Paul’s definition of sin when he writes, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Reformed leaders teach that the civil, ceremonial components of the Mosaic law have passed away, but not the Ten Commandments. While Reformed leaders use the Ten Commandments and the moral law of God almost interchangeably, they are not the same. Although it is true that the Ten Commandments, and indeed all of the Mosaic law, are based upon the moral law of God, we must not make the mistake of equating the Ten Commandments with the moral law of God. The moral law is eternal; a higher, more glorious, and fuller reflection of His nature than the Ten Commandments. This is seen in our Lord’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount when He said, “You have heard that it hath been said by them of old time...but I say to you...” (Matt. 5:33-34).

Reformed leaders suggest that the Ten Commandments apply to Christians as fully as they ever did to Israel, and are still binding upon them. However, if the laws of the Ten Commandments are still binding, then all of the penalties must also be in force. The penalty of death was imposed for adultery, idolatry, Sabbath-breaking, and disobedience to parents. The death penalty was imposed on the first four of the Ten Commandments. To change a law’s penalty is to change the law. Martin Luther, the reformer, said that a law without its penalty is only good advice.³ This is not merely theological hairsplitting, but is the very point of the Apostle Paul when he describes the Ten Commandments as “the ministration of death, written and engraved in stones” (2 Cor. 3:7). Strikingly, it is declared three times in 2 Corinthians 3:6-16 that the Mosaic system, including the Ten Commandments, is done away with or abolished (vv. 7, 11, 13). The participle used in each of these three verses is from the verb *katargeo*, which means “to abrogate, to cancel, to bring to an end.” No stronger term could be used to describe the abolishing of the Mosaic law. This word is also used to describe the destruction of the Anti-Christ in 2 Thessalonians 2:8.

“The law not only reveals sin, but it provokes sin...the moment a man tries to be holy or righteous by keeping the law, the very commandment that came to him will provoke him into acts of sin.”

**Alva McClain
(1888-1968)**

Since the day of Pentecost, the spiritual walk of the believer is no longer under any part of the Mosaic law, but is fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit of God. The negative precepts of the Ten Commandments have been replaced with the positive requirements of the ethics of heaven. The Christian is to “bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Every step of his walk is to be by faith, “...for whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23); “for we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). Such a standard of life is as high as heaven itself and has never been perfectly attained, except by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Yet the failure to meet these requirements does not change or lower God’s high standard. The ability to reach, in some measure, God’s standard is only through the power and ministry of the Holy Spirit of God. We read, “...walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16), and “but if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law” (Gal. 5:18).

The passing away of the Mosaic law does not mean the end of the eternal law of God. Only a divinely instituted theocracy could enforce the ten Mosaic laws with their death penalties, and no such government exists today. Yet, the moral law of God belongs to all ages and its authority extends to all. The infinitely high and holy demands of the moral law are more clearly seen in the New Testament than in the Old. The believer’s standard of conduct is the standard of heaven (Col. 3:1). He is not without the law, but is under the “law of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21), the “royal law” of love, and “the law of liberty” (James 2:8, 12).

The Law of Moses and Sanctification

The New Testament makes it clear that a Christian is not under the law in regard to his salvation or sanctification. The law in its entirety (moral, civil and ceremonial) has been done away with (Rom. 6:14). Time and again, the New Testament states that we “are not under law but grace”. This truth includes our justification and sanctification. What then was the purpose of the law? The apostle Paul writes, “What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin but by the law...” (Rom. 7:7). The law can “show sin to be exceeding sinful”(Rom. 7:13)! The law can condemn, penalize, and punish, but it can never make a Christian more holy. Just as our nation’s system of law does not empower men to live moral lives, but punishes transgressors, so too, God’s law cannot make a believer more holy, but reveals him as a sinner. The believer is not under the law for his salvation nor for his sanctification. The book of Romans makes this principle exceedingly clear. The apostle Paul first presents the doctrine of justification in chapters 3:21-5:11; and then in chapters 5:12-8:4 the doctrine of sanctification is expounded. Concerning the doctrine of justification, the apostle writes, “...that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28). The law has no part in the justification of man. Then as he takes up the doctrine of sanctification in chapter six, he writes, “...for ye are not under the law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). Here the law has no part in the sanctification of a believer. He is making it clear that the Christian is not under the law, including the Ten Commandments, for his sanctification. The way to be free from sin’s power and dominion is through the grace of God and the cross of Calvary (Rom. 6:1-13), not through the law given at Sinai. In another place, the apostle Paul writes, “I through the law died unto the law that I might live unto God” (Gal. 2:19). The believer is delivered from the law and its bondage through the death of the old man, under the dominion of sin, and is then free and empowered to live

**“The
Scriptures
teach that in
the death of
Christ the
believer is
delivered,
not only from
the curse of
the law, but
from the law
itself.”**

Henry C. Thiessen

Former Professor of
Theology at Wheaton College

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• INFORMATION •

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for Christ. The Bedford prison's preacher-poet John Bunyan has written:

Run, run and do, the law commands.
But gives me neither feet nor hands.
Better news the grace-gospel brings.
It bids me fly and gives me wings.

How then can a Christian live a righteous life? Through grace's empowering work in the Christian, he is able not only to fulfill the righteousness of the law, but to exceed the righteousness of the law. This transforming grace produces a dynamic, living relationship with the resurrected Christ. It is this power and life flowing out of the indwelling Christ that fits the believer to live for Christ. The Spirit of God in the souls of men does not set the believer's affections upon ordinances, statutes, and regulations, but rather fills him with a vital, living relationship with Christ. This love relationship so completely empowers the Christian that, with a holy desire, he finds himself yielding to the holy and righteous requirements of God. The apostle Paul describes this spiritual phenomenon when he writes, "...that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:4). This powerful reality is surely the New Testament's teaching concerning our new life in Christ. Listen to the apostle: "...for me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21); "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith..." (Heb. 12:2); "the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God..." (Gal. 2:20). It is our focus upon Christ that empowers the believer. As a Christian is taken up with Him, he is transformed "from glory to glory" by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18). This is the secret to power and holiness in the Christian's life.

Endnotes

1. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermon on the Mount*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1979, p. 179
2. Anthony Hoekema, *Five Views of Sanctification*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1987, p. 88
3. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1947), p. 158-159