

Are Grace and Law Mutually Exclusive?

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Introduction

The prevailing attitude in society concerning morals and behavior in our time is tolerance (except, of course, toward those who dare to expose the fallacy of their misplaced tolerance). This attitude is also widespread in religion, even among those who profess belief in the Christ and His Word. *Authority, law, obedience, commandments*, and like terms relating to religion represent to millions of folk negative and repugnant concepts, long since outmoded. There is a technical name for this attitude: *antinomianism* (from two Greek words that, when combined, mean “against law”). Because of this belief system, modern theologians (as well as popular writers on religious themes, such as Max Lucado) emphasize God’s grace almost to the exclusion of His wrath and judgment against sin and error.

Implications of the *No Law* Mantra in the Church

These attitudes have seriously infiltrated the church of the Lord by means of some vigorous liberal elements. Various congregations, schools, journals, and individuals seem dedicated to advancing these erroneous “no-law” notions as rapidly as possible. These views of God and His Word imply certain corollary concepts, which various erstwhile brethren have not been timid to iterate. The *all grace-no law* premise implies all of the following conclusions, as well as many others:

- The New Testament is not to be viewed as a body of spiritual law, but merely a “love letter” from Heaven
- God has no pattern for His church, the plan of salvation, or anything else
- Faithful children of God are scattered through all of the denominations
- We can have fellowship and be united with those who are in damnable doctrinal error
- We must adopt a new hermeneutic for understanding the Bible in this modern era
- The role of women in the church, our worship practices, and such like should reflect current cultural influence, just as the New Testament record of such things reflects the cultural influence of the first century
- We must make drastic changes in the church if we hope to appeal to people in the twenty-first century
- God does not really mean what He has said in the New Testament about the necessity of obeying His Word and the reward of wrathful judgment if we refuse to do so

- One may believe or practice almost whatever he desires, and God will be pleased as long as one is sincere and has a “loving attitude”
- Restoration of the New Testament church is unnecessary and undesirable – if not impossible

Those who would still condescend to try to furnish Scriptural justification for such anti-Biblical emphases seem especially drawn to Romans 6:14–15 (note how nimbly they run to Scripture when they perceive its agreement with their agenda, while otherwise having little use for it): “For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under law, but under grace. What then? shall we sin, because we are not under law, but under grace? God forbid.” They allege that Paul is here teaching that grace and law are mutually exclusive and that, since we are under grace, we are not under law – any law – in the Christian Age. They aver that there are no restrictions upon us. Admittedly, at first glance – and removed from context (both immediate and remote) – this may appear to be what Paul was saying but let us examine the passage more closely.

That Which Paul Cannot Be Teaching

We may begin by noticing that whatever Paul is teaching here about law and grace, he **cannot** be saying that we are not obligated to law or a system of law of any sort in the Christian Age. (*Law* in this passage should not be limited to the Law of Moses, but it surely includes it.) Paul had just warned them not to yield to sin (vv. 12–13), but this would be nonsense if they were under no law, simply because sin cannot occur in the absence of law (3:19; 4:15; 5:13; 1 John 3:4).

Further, the antinomian view would constitute a most glaring Pauline self-contradiction, even in the immediate context. In Romans 6:16–18 Paul commended the Roman saints because they had obeyed a “form [pattern, ASV fn] of teaching,” whereby they were made free from sin and became bondservants of righteousness. These statements imply a norm, a standard, commandments, a **law** system to which they were accountable. Not only would Paul contradict himself were he denying our accountability to law, but he would also contradict the Lord Himself, as well as every other New Testament writer in passages too numerous to cite.

Consider how consistently and frequently Paul states that we are under law: In Romans 3:27 he argued that we are justified by “a law of faith.” In Romans 8:2 He wrote of “the law of the Spirit of life” and said it was the means by which we have been made free from “the law of sin and death.” This is equivalent to his declaration in 1:16: “The gospel...is the power of God unto salvation.” It is also parallel to Jesus’ announcement in John 8:32: “The truth shall make you

free.” Thus, we have the law, the Gospel, and the Truth used interchangeably. Since, therefore, one is subject to the Gospel or the Truth under Christ, he is subject to law, because *law* is but another term for *Gospel* and *Truth*.

But someone may say: “These things were true of them **before** they came under grace and were necessary to bring them under that grace. After coming under grace, they were no longer under law.” This will not work, either. This same Paul wrote of himself (one who was under God’s saving grace) that he—as a Christian—was “under law to Christ” (2 Cor. 9:21). Further, he urged the Galatian saints to continue to “fulfil the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). James wrote of “the perfect law, the law of liberty” in which Christians must continue (1:25) and of “a law of liberty” by which we will be judged (2:12). We learn from these passages that Christ has a law and that Christians are obligated to keep it, as are all men. Again, his meaning in Romans 6:14–15 cannot be that Christians are not under law in any and every sense.

That Which Paul Is Teaching

What, then, is the meaning of Romans 6:14–15? In Romans 1 and 2 Paul demonstrated that Gentile and Jew alike had miserably failed to obey perfectly their respective systems of Divinely imposed law. He concluded in chapter 3 that both Jew and Gentile were under the condemnation of God because they had sinned (violated His law) (vv. 9, 23) and could not be justified by any system of mere law (v. 20). In that same chapter he began elaborating on the great principle of justification by faith, as opposed to justification by law (vv. 21–30), which he had set forth as the theme of his letter in chapter 1 (vv. 5, 16–17). He continued to build upon this great theme through chapters 4 and 5.

Since Paul had so strongly taught that law was insufficient for justification because none could perfectly keep it, he anticipated that some might erroneously conclude that law was worthless, which misunderstanding he answered in 3:31: “Do we then make the law of none effect through faith? God forbid: nay, we establish the law.” He could just as well have asked and answered this question about *grace* as about *faith*, for the point is equally valid in both cases. When he states in 6:14 that we are not under law, he immediately cautions us not to infer erroneously that we can therefore sin. He says, “God forbid” (the strongest negation possible in the Greek language) to dispel any such false conclusion. The very fact that he warns us not to sin implies that he was not teaching that we are under no law.

In what sense then are we “not under law”? In the sense introduced in chapter 3 – we are not under law in order to be justified from sin. In other words, we cannot be justified from sin by relying on a system of law; we must (and do) have a system of grace. However, this gives no one an excuse for, nor an encouragement to, discount the law and excuse the practice of sin. Since Paul says we (as Christians) can sin, it must follow that we are under law in some sense, for, as already seen, where there is no law there is no sin.

Paul’s seeming exclusion of law with God’s provision of grace (Tit. 2:11) is an expression that employs a literary device in which one element is de-emphasized in order to emphasize another. Such is not unique to Paul or to Romans 6:14. John employed the same device in 1 John 3:18: “My Little children, let us not love in word, neither with the tongue; but in deed and truth.” Surely, even the ripest liberal would not argue that John here excludes the use of the tongue in expressing love. Nor is he teaching that the only legitimate means of expressing love for one another is by our deeds. Even a novice in the Word of God can perceive that John is saying that we must not employ words and tongue alone, but we also use appropriate deeds to express our love one for another. Thus in Romans 6:14, Paul is de-emphasizing law (rather than totally excluding it) in order to emphasize the grace whereby we are justified.

MacKnight, though not a member of the Lord’s church, gives the following paraphrase of Romans 6:14, which has merit:

Besides sin shall not lord it over you, for this reason, that ye are not under a dispensation of law, which gives no assistance against sin; but under grace, which affords all the aids¹ necessary for subduing sin.

Paul is by no means teaching that this system of grace is free of law or commandment. I have found no better comment on Paul’s “law-grace” statement than that of the late R.L. Whiteside:

This verse [Rom. 6:14] does not mean that we are free from all law. Grace predominates. Where law condemns, grace makes pardon possible. If we were under no law, we would be guilty of no sin, and there would be no need of grace to forgive our sin. This verse is a figure of speech in which the less is denied so as to emphasize the greater. We are not merely under law, but more especially under grace.²

Conclusion

Paul’s point in this passage then is that, in the Christian Age, men are no longer solely under a system of law (which characterized the situation of all men, Jew and Gentile alike, before the cross). While there were many expressions of God’s grace in the lives of the patriarchs and toward Israel under their respective systems of law, God still dealt with those

ancients primarily through law. Law alone was – and is – insufficient to justify men from sin; it only condemns the sinners, which term describes us all (Rom. 3:23) before our redemption. The Son of God brought and empowered a system of grace and law in happy and perfect combination, wherein justification was fully supplied to “make up the difference” between God’s perfect law and man’s failure to keep it flawlessly. This fact is the very thing that makes the Gospel “good news.”

The Law of Christ includes a form/pattern of doctrine, which the Romans had obeyed in being justified from their sins and added to the church (Rom. 6:16–18). This pattern involved hearing and believing the Gospel (10:11–17), confessing one’s belief in Jesus (vv. 9–10), dying to sin in repentance, and being baptized into Christ and into His death in order to be cleansed by His blood (6:3–4). The law of Christ also teaches us that, upon arising from baptism, we must live a new life that rejects the practice of sin (vv. 4, 12–13). He has made all of these wonderful commands of His law the keys to obtaining and maintaining His grace. Herein is illustrated the wondrous balance between Divine law and grace.

Endnotes

1. James MacKnight, *Apostolical Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1949 reprint), p. 87.
2. Robertson L. Whiteside, *A New Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Saints at Rome* (Clifton, TX: Mrs. C.R. Nichol, 1948), p. 137.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the December 2003 issue of *The Gospel Journal*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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