

## Distinguishing Law, Gospel, and Grace



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### **Distinguishing Law, Gospel, and Grace**

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Precise interpretation is essential to a proper understanding of God's Word. An indispensable element in correctly interpreting God's Word is identifying and distinguishing passages as law, gospel, or grace. In this article Dr. Myron Houghton, senior professor of theology at Faith Baptist Theological Seminary, carefully guides us through a proper understanding of law, gospel, and grace and gives us a framework for correctly interpreting the Scripture. You will find additional information and help in this important area by reading Dr. Houghton's new book, *Law & Grace*, published by Regular Baptist Books.

"Now behold, one came and said to Him, 'Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?' So He said to him, 'Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments'" (Matt. 19:16, 17).

If someone asked you how to obtain eternal life, what would your answer be? We know<sup>1</sup> that eternal life comes by believing in God's Son, as John 3:14–18 tells us, rather than by keeping the commandments. We know this is true because we were saved by believing in Christ, not by trying to keep God's commands. So how are we to understand the words of Christ to this person? This passage is one in which acquiring the skill of identifying and distinguishing law, gospel, and grace is crucial to its understanding.

## What Are They?

Romans 3:20 teaches us two truths about God's law: (1) by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in God's sight, and (2) the law brings an awareness of sin. Law always refers to some demand by God which brings condemnation and death (cf. 2 Cor. 3:7–9). Now we understand that the words of our Lord about keeping the commandments and obtaining eternal life were actually an attempt to show the young man his sin and need of a Savior.

On the other hand, gospel does not make demands but rather refers to what God has done by sending His Son to die for our sins and to be raised from the dead (1 Cor. 15:1–4). The law says “do” while the gospel says “done.” Trusting in Christ is not a demand but a response to the gospel.

Grace, however, does make demands upon the believer in light of the gospel, but they are demands to obedience motivated primarily by love and gratitude (1 John 4:14–19). This understanding is why the Bible can describe today's believers as under grace rather than under law (Rom. 6:14).

In summary, keeping these three distinctions in mind will help us properly understand the Bible.

- Law makes demands from God that bring condemnation and death.
- Gospel does not make demands but rather refers to what God has done by sending His Son for our sins.
- Grace makes demands of obedience prompted by love in light of the gospel.

Now let's apply these concepts to three theological systems.

## Law, Gospel, and Grace in Catholic Theology

Sometimes people say that Roman Catholicism denies salvation by grace and teaches salvation by works. But a careful look at the Catechism of the Catholic Church shows that this statement is not entirely true. For example, paragraph 2010 states,

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

In paragraph 1996 we read, “Our justification comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, in Catholic theology saving grace is a God-given help or ability. However, for Bible-believing Baptists, saving grace is not a God-given help or ability but rather refers to Christ's death and resurrection for us. Thus, in Titus 2:11 the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared. It is an event: Christ's coming to die for our sins. To say we are saved by grace is to say we are saved by Christ's death and resurrection for us.

In paragraph 847 we read, “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.”<sup>4</sup>

According to this paragraph, people who try in their actions to do God's will as they know it through their conscience achieve eternal salvation. We might ask, “Is this not salvation by works?” But the informed Catholic responds, “Did you not see the qualifying words, ‘moved by grace’?” The phrase is there, but saving grace in Catholic theology does

not necessarily exclude human good works. To Bible-believing Baptists, this concept is a mixing, yes, a confusion of law and gospel.

### **Law, Gospel, and Grace in Reformed Theology**

Reformed theology does not confuse law and gospel. The law does not save or help to save. People are justified for Christ's sake alone. When they rest upon Christ and His righteousness alone, their sins are pardoned and they are accounted as righteous.

Nevertheless, Reformed theology is confused about the primary use of the law. This system contends that law is not to show lost people their sinfulness, but rather it is to guide Christians, as chapter 19:5 of the Westminster Confession of Faith states,

The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither doth Christ, in the gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.<sup>5</sup>

This understanding of law is in contradiction to what Paul said in Romans 3:20 and in Galatians 3:19 where he wrote, "What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come."

In Reformed theology the law is connected with a Covenant of Works that God made with Adam before the Fall. Chapter 7:1 and 2 of the Westminster Confession of Faith reads,

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant. The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 19:1 of this Confession states, "This law, [the covenant of works] after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man."<sup>7</sup>

Rather than seeing the law as given because of our sins, Reformed theology views the law as a perfect expression of God's will, and thus the primary purpose of God's law is to guide the believer. Bible-believing Baptists see here a confusion of the purpose of God's law.

### **Law, Gospel, and Grace in Dispensational Theology**

Dispensational theology not only clearly distinguishes law from gospel, but it also distinguishes grace (guidelines for living the Christian life) from the gospel. The gospel refers to Christ's death and resurrection for our sins and does not make demands. Grace, as a rule of life, guides believers today and as such, makes demands upon them. However, believers today must be viewed as free from the law as a condemnatory rule of life and thus eternally secure in Christ (Rom. 6:14–16; 7:4–6; 1 Cor. 6:9–20).

Note Paul's response to the affirmation that the believer is not under law but under grace:

For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness? (Rom. 6:14–16).

## **An Implication**

Distinguishing law, gospel, and grace has wide implications in Bible study. One issue relates to the Judgment Seat of Christ. Note how Paul described this event in 2 Timothy 4:7 and 8, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing."

Based on these verses, I believe the Judgment Seat of Christ is similar to an athletic awards ceremony.<sup>8</sup> So, in one sense no punishment (no law) is in view here. All of our sins have been washed away in the blood of Christ (gospel). Nevertheless, those who have lived for Christ will be rewarded more than those who have been unfaithful (grace). And this reward, which is an evidence of grace, may be expressed in an increased capacity to reflect Christ's glory, a capacity observable throughout eternity.

J. Dwight Pentecost says:

In Revelation 4:10, where the elders are seen to be casting their crowns before the throne in an act of worship and adoration, it is made clear that the crowns will not be for the eternal glory of the recipient, but for the glory of the Giver. Since these crowns are not viewed as a permanent possession, the question of the nature of the rewards themselves arises. From the Scriptures it is learned that the believer was redeemed in order that he might bring glory to God (1 Cor. 6:20). This becomes his eternal destiny. The act of placing the material sign of a reward at the feet of the One who sits on the throne (Rev. 4:10) is one act in that glorification. But the believer will not then have completed his destiny to glorify God. This will continue throughout eternity. Inasmuch as reward is associated with brightness and shining in many passages of Scripture (Dan. 12:3, Matt. 13:43; 1 Cor. 15:40–41, 49), it may be that the reward given to the believer is a capacity to manifest the glory of Christ throughout eternity. The greater the reward, the greater the bestowed capacity to bring glory to God. Thus in the exercise of the reward of the believer, it will be Christ and not the believer that is glorified by the reward. Capacities to radiate the glory will differ, but there will be no personal sense of lack in that each believer will be filled to the limit of his capacity to "show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).<sup>9</sup>

In 2 Corinthians 4:17 Paul stated that the afflictions we experience here and now are light and momentary compared with the heavy weight of eternal glory. How we respond to our present circumstances will determine the extent to which we are able to radiate the brightness of Christ. May we be motivated to be faithful to Christ now so we may more elegantly display Christ's glory throughout eternity.

## *End Notes*

*1 Every believer has an anointing from the Holy One and instinctively "knows" all things as they relate to Jesus being the Christ and His promise to us of eternal life (1 John 2:20–27).*

*2 Catechism of the Catholic Church. <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p3s1c3a2.htm>. Accessed August 8, 2011.*

*3 Ibid.*

*4 Catechism of the Catholic Church. <http://www.catholicdoors.com/catechis/cat0781.htm>. Accessed August 8, 2011.*

*5 Westminster Confession of Faith. <http://opc.org/wcf.html>. Accessed August 8, 2011.*

*6 Ibid.*

*7 Ibid.*

*8 I believe the Judgment Seat of Christ is similar to an athletic awards ceremony because (1) the Scripture uses two athletic metaphors in verse 7: a boxer and a runner; (2) "crown" in verse 8 is the Greek word referring to an olive branch twisted in a circle, adorned with flowers, and placed on the head of the Olympic winner, and (3) the Lord, as Judge in verse 8, distributes these awards.*

### **A Test Case for Distinguishing Law, Gospel, and Grace: Hebrews 10:1–39**

1For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. 2For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purged, would have had no more consciousness of sins. 3But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. 4For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.

5Therefore, when He came into the world, He said . . . 9“Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God.” He takes away the first that He may establish the second. 10By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

11And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, 13from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool.

14For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. 15And the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after He had said before, 16“*This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them,*” 17then He adds, “*Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.*” 18Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin.

19Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21and having a High Priest over the house of God, 22let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. 24And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

26For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. 28Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? 30For we know Him who said, “*Vengeance is Mine; I will repay,* says the Lord.” And again, “*The Lord will judge His people.*” 31It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

32But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: 33partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; 34for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven. 35Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward. 36For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise: 37 “*For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry.*” 38Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.” 39But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.

## **Gospel**

In the first eighteen verses of this chapter, the writer compares the gospel and its benefits enjoyed by believers today to benefits enjoyed by Old Testament believers. We know these verses are related to the gospel because they do not make demands, but instead they assure us our sins are forgiven because of Christ's death and resurrection on our behalf. Note the following facts:

(1) Year-by-year sacrifices in the Old Testament were only a shadow of good things to come and therefore could not reach the two-fold goal (the verb translated "make perfect" means to reach a goal) of a once-for-all purging of sins and bringing an awareness of that once-for-all purging (vv. 1, 2).

(2) While the year-by-year (Day of Atonement) sacrifices brought God's promise of cleansing from all their previous sins because the sacrifice was an atonement, or covering, for sins (Lev. 16:30), those sacrifices could not actually take away sins (Heb. 10:4). The annual sacrifice also reminded the worshiper that last year a sacrifice had to be made (Heb. 10:3), implying that between now and next year another sacrifice would have to be made.

(3) Christ came to do God's will (vv. 7, 9), and by that will we have been sanctified by the once-for-all offering of Jesus Christ for our sins (vv. 10–12). By His once-for-all offering Christ has reached the goal that the year-by-year sacrifices could not reach (cf. vv. 2, 14).

(4) The Holy Spirit witnesses to us that our sins are no longer remembered by God because they have been pardoned and taken away, which we call remission of sins (v. 18).

## **Grace**

Grace makes demands of today's believer in verses 19–25. Notice that these demands are in the form of the "let us" exhortations. However, these demands are not threats to terrify us, but rather they describe things God has made available to enable us to live for Him.

(1) Since we have boldness to come directly into God's presence because of Christ's death for us and because we know Christ our High Priest is ministering on our behalf, "let us draw near" (vv. 19–22). God has made prayer available to us.

(2) "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful" (v. 23). God has made His Word available to us, and God's faithfulness is attached to His promises.

(3) "Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works." God has made His people available to us, and therefore we should not forsake the assembling of ourselves together (vv. 24, 25).

## **Law**

Law is recognized by the demands and threats that terrify. These demands and threats are not directed to the believer but to those Jews on the fringe who have rejected the gospel and now wish to return to Judaism. Notice the words in verses 26–28: "For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses."

Some think this text is a warning to believers, but note well the three-fold description of the person in view: "Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?" (v. 29).

We also recognize law in this chapter by God's statement, "But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him" (v. 38). That this statement is directed to unbelievers can be seen in the writer's closing remarks: "But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul" (v. 39). Note the distinction between those who believe to the saving of the soul and those who draw back to perdition.

Since the writer's audience is composed of both believers and unbelievers, it should not surprise us that even in a law section we can find grace encouragement: "But recall the former days"(v. 32) and "do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward" (v. 35).

From this passage we can see how to distinguish statements of law from principles of grace because, while both make demands, the one terrifies while the other encourages.

Using this framework of law, gospel, and grace will enable you to correctly interpret and understand Scripture passages.

### Purchase Your Copy of Law & Grace

In 2011 Regular Baptist Books, a division of Regular Baptist Press in Schaumburg, Illinois, released Law & Grace, Dr. Myron Houghton's book that explains in detail the concepts in this Faith Pulpit article. As stated on the back cover of the book, "Law & Grace explores a core theological subject from several perspectives. After discussing how Law, Gospel, and Grace are viewed in Roman Catholic and Reformed theology, Myron Houghton uses an exposition of Romans to distinguish key theological concepts from a dispensational and Baptist viewpoint. Pastors, church leaders, and ministry students will appreciate the author's thorough exegesis and practical applications, including advice on tithing, Sabbath-keeping, and the believer's responsibility to follow grace principles for godly living."

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