

Not Under Law But Under Grace

by Walton Weaver
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The liberty described in the New Testament and outlined in the previous chapter is far from what many who have been writing on this subject in recent years would have us believe. Most of these writers are advocates of a freedom of a different kind. They contend that the New Testament teaching on this subject gives them and others the “right” to believe and teach whatever they want to believe and teach. They also believe that this freedom demands that each Christian be willing to give all other Christians the “right” to believe and teach whatever they wish to believe and teach. Is this the “freedom” we read about in the New Testament?

The verse of scripture often quoted in an attempt to bring us to this conclusion is, “for ye are not under the law, but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). John 1:17, “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ,” is also sometimes used for this purpose. From such statements we are supposed to conclude: therefore we are not under law today; or, if we are under law, it is not a law where strict obedience matters. Under the gospel exact obedience to God is not required. This is the dispensation of grace. This approach usually runs along the following lines of argument.

Letter vs. Spirit

Romans 7:6 is also used to show that what has taken the place of the old law system is a new relationship with Jesus Christ: “But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.” This relationship is entered into by the new birth through faith. But instead of being a legal relationship, we are told, it is a spiritual relationship.

What is Paul telling us in this passage? A careful reading will show us that Paul is contrasting the former life of the Jews under the law of Moses with their present life in Christ. “In the flesh” (v. 5) describes the time they were under the law. This is shown by how verse 6 begins: “But now we are delivered from the law.” For Paul to use the word “flesh” to describe the Jews under the law is a good way to represent them since they were members of the covenant by virtue of the fact that they were connected to Abraham by the flesh. Circumcision in the flesh was a sign of their membership in the covenant.

Some versions render the word “spirit” with a capital “S,” but there does not appear to be a reference to the Holy Spirit in this passage. The “new life of the Spirit” should be “new life of spirit” (small “s”) as the KJV renders the terms. Paul is describing the life these Christians now had; a new life they had possessed since they were brought into Christ — the new life of the spirit into which they were raised at their baptism (6:4).

This new “relationship,” according to this line of argument, is supposed to do away with an emphasis on “keeping commandments,” or practicing strict or exact obedience, in order to receive God’s approval. The contrast with “the oldness of the letter” is thought to establish this point. But does it? The context suggests that these words simply mean the old law. It is true, however, that our service has been brought to a higher level, and there will be plenty of evidence for this conclusion as we proceed. In this dispensation of grace there is a greater emphasis on the spiritual aspects of our worship and service.

Paul points this out in Philippians 3:3, “For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.” Our service is different from that rendered under the law. We are not in “a legal relationship,” if by this one means that we are not bound to a legal system where forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ is not available, and that there is no power under a mere law system that is sufficient to enable us to live successfully before God. But this is not what those who make this argument mean. They mean that the new law (as they would define it, of course) does not require exact obedience.

But our study has already shown otherwise. As we have seen, we are “under [the] law of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21). See Chapter 7, “Free In Christ . . .,” p. 87. While the New Testament claims that the system of law has given way to a system of grace, it still affirms that only those who “do the will of the Father” will be accepted by God (Matt. 7:21-23 — more on this verse later). How could Jesus make such a statement if giving attention to details, or practicing exact obedience, no longer matters? It is one thing for us to say that man will be saved on the basis of law-keeping (perfectly keeping God’s law, Gal. 3:10-13), and another to say that he will be saved as a result of his obedience to God. The very purpose of gospel preaching is the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5; 16:25-26).

One will not be saved on the basis of perfect law-keeping, but if he is saved he will be saved on the condition that he has obeyed the gospel of Christ (Rom. 6:17-19; 1 Pet. 4:17; 2 Thess. 1:7-9), and on the condition that he has been faithful in his service to God as a Christian (Matt. 7:21-23; 25:23; 1 Cor. 15:58; Col. 1:23; Jas. 1:25-27). God expects us to obey him even in details, and to be found *faithful* as stewards in this way (1 Cor. 4:1-5; 1 Pet. 4:10).

Oldness of Letter vs. Newness of Spirit

Another line of argument on this subject is that our relationship to God is a covenant relationship, not a relationship based on a written code of law. Some use the statement, “for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Cor. 3:6), to make this point. The false assumption in this argument is that under the New Covenant we cannot have a relationship based on both covenant and law, or that there is some kind of radical difference between God’s New *Covenant* and his New Testament *law* today. In this case, as in many others, we have a wrong conclusion derived from a faulty interpretation of a passage of Scripture.

Again the word “spirit” should read “spirit” with a small “s” as the KJV renders it, although some versions say “Spirit.” Hughes is clear on this point, when he says, “the contrast is still (as in verse 3) between what is external and what is internal; and the interpretation which we have offered is confirmed by the Apostle’s use of similar terminology in Romans 2:28f., where he writes: ‘He is not a Jew who is one *outwardly*; neither is that circumcision which is *outward* in the flesh: but he is a Jew who is one *inwardly*; and circumcision is that of the heart, *in the spirit, not in the letter*’” (101).

Under the New Covenant God’s work is basically that of making one new from within; this is his primary aim. Inward renewal, or making one into a new person by changing his heart, is accomplished by the gospel in a way that was not possible in and through the old law. The gospel, or New Covenant, is more adapted to this kind of work than was the law.

Even though Paul states as a matter of fact that Christians “serve in newness of spirit, not in oldness of the letter” (Rom. 7:6), there is still need for improvement once one has become a Christian. As a matter of fact, because Christians have new spirits (they have “newness of life,” Rom 6:4) from the time of their conversion (we are called “new creatures” in Christ, 2 Cor. 5:17), *as long as they keep faith in Jesus Christ* they continue to improve in their service to God. Though Christians already are God’s workmanship (Eph. 2:10), they are yet admonished to put off the old man (Col. 3:9) and put on the new man (Col. 3:10). They also are called on to be renewed in the spirit of their minds and to put on the new man which was created according to God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:21-24).

Because Christians have new spirits they now have a positive attitude toward God’s law. This newness, as Cottrell points out (commenting on “newness of life” in Rom. 6:4), “results in a major change in our motivation for obedience: from ‘have to’ to ‘want to,’ from ‘got to’ to ‘get to.’ We now obey as willing slaves who have voluntarily attached ourselves as life-slaves to God because of our grateful love to him (Deut. 15:16-17)” (Cottrell *The College Press NIV Commentary: Romans I:429*).

Paul is not contrasting the external and internal aspects of *a command* in his use of the terms “the letter” and “the spirit.” Some have argued this from this passage, and they have made it mean that in this age God is only concerned with man carrying out the *internal meaning* of a command. If this is what is meant, then to carry out the external meaning would be deadly since the passage says that the letter “killeth.” Would anyone say that the command to be baptized (Acts 2:38) which is an outward act is deadly? Or that the command to sing (Eph. 5:19) or eat the Lord’s supper (Matt. 26:26-30), which are also external acts, are deadly?

In the very next verse Paul shows that what killed was that which was “written and engraven in stones,” or the decalogue. In v. 9 this is called “the ministration of death” which was also written in stones (cf. vv. 3 and 7). This again was the Ten Commandments written on tables of stone at the time Moses’ face shined (vv. 7 and 13 with Exod. 34:27-35). The Old Covenant, which was not meant to be permanent (v. 7, “which glory was to be done away”),

passed away, or has been abolished (vv. 11, 13). The New Covenant abides (v. 8 with vv. 6 and 11). So in 2 Corinthians 3 Paul is *not* contrasting the internal and external aspects of a command, but the Old Covenant with the New Covenant.

Covenant Relationship vs. Code of Law

What is meant by the statement, “our relationship to God is a covenant relationship, not a relationship based on a written code of law”? If all that were meant is that we are no longer under a legal system that requires perfect obedience, we would agree, for that is true. Where a system of grace is provided, perfect obedience is not required because forgiveness through the blood of Christ is now available. But those who make these kinds of statements usually have something quite different in mind. This becomes clear when such writers go on to say that the only kind of law we live under today is law as a “principle of action.” What they mean by this and the application they usually make of it is to be taken up in the next section.

Are we in a relationship with God “based on a written code of law”? The position we are reviewing says, no, we are not under such a “code of law.” But what is meant by the terms “code of law” in such statements? A law that contains commandments? A written or external law? If so, then we must strongly reject such a conclusion. *We are under a written law; even a written law that has commandments.* Yet, we also are in a new kind of spiritual relationship with God, as we have just explained. Hebrews 8:10, “I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts,” does not mean that we are not under a written law today.

If by the statement “we are not under a written code of law today” one means that Christians are not under a written law that includes commandments from God, then this statement is not true. While we are not under a legal system where the only way of salvation is sinless perfection, we are under law of some kind (1 Cor. 9:21; James 1:25), *and that law is a written law.* Did not Paul tell the Corinthians, “the things that I *write* unto you are the *commandments* of the Lord” (1 Cor. 14:37)? Furthermore, if we are not under law, then there would be no such thing as sin, since sin is a transgression of God’s law (1 John 3:4; Rom. 4:15). But what else could God’s law be today, but those things that have been *written* by such men as Paul? To the Ephesians he said, “How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I *wrote* afore in a few words, Whereby, when you *read*, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph. 3:3-5).

I have emphasized the words “wrote” and “read” in this quotation because it emphasizes the fact that even in the Christian dispensation what these men of God received by revelation would not have been conveyed to the Ephesians (nor to us, for that matter), unless it had been *written* down and passed on to them (and to us) and *read* by them (and by us). Apart from this *written* revelation we would not have God’s law for us today, and without his *written* law (since this is the only law God has conveyed to us) there would be no sin, because sin is a transgression of law. And, allow me to ask for the sake of emphasis: Are we not also under

law *that has commands*, commands that *must* be obeyed, and obeyed *exactly* as they are revealed?

On this subject, what do these words from Peter tell us:

Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things (such things as, the heavens being on fire and dissolved, and looking for new heavens and a new earth — *www*), be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless. And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. Ye therefore, beloved, see ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever. Amen” (2 Peter 3:14-18).

If the law we are under today is only a “principle of action,” the principle of love, and not a law that is written down, how are we to account for the “error” Peter is warning these brethren against? Was the “error” that threatened these brethren that they might fail to love as they ought; fail to “love” either God or their fellow man? The careful reader will note that Peter does not say anything, not even one word, about love anywhere in this warning. The danger was not failure to love, as though the only law they were under was the “principle of love,” but failure to heed *teaching* that they had received from Paul on the very subject Peter is here *writing* to them about in his own *letters*. Paul had also *written* on this same subject in all of his *epistles*. We are indeed under a *written* law today — written law that requires *strict* obedience!

System of Law vs. System of Faith

What made the law of Moses a “legal system”? It was not that God demanded that Israel keep *all* of it. Nor was it because it was a “code of laws.” The law of Moses was a legal system because *apart from Christ* the only way one could be justified under it was to *actually keep* all of its laws. If one were to ask, what is the difference between the two systems, a system of law, like the law of Moses, and the law of faith, like we have in the New Testament, what would the answer be? Simply put, *the answer is Christ and his sacrifice*. Under the gospel, keeping God’s law perfectly is not required *because one can find forgiveness in and through the blood of Christ*. This provision for sins was not offered to man *while he lived under the old law and under the terms of that law*. If man were to be justified by law while he was under such a system, he had to keep it all. In other words, once a person under that law became a

lawbreaker there was no way provided *in the law itself, and on the basis of what was provided in that law*, whereby he could be forgiven. This is what made the law a legal system.

Though God still deals with man through “law,” it is not a *law system* like that just described. Since it is not law itself that makes a system a legal system, there is no contradiction between law and grace. This is not the meaning of the statement, “grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). Paul affirms that we are “saved by grace through faith” (Eph. 2:8), and that “after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (Gal. 3:25), which is the law. The law had served a good purpose in bringing man to Christ that he might be saved through him, but it had served its purpose and was therefore set aside once “faith,” or the system of faith, had come. This faith, or system of faith, has taken the place of the system of law known as the law of Moses.

In the present age we have come to what is called “faith” — what we may describe as a system of faith as contrasted with the former system of law. It nonetheless is a system that involves law. This is verified by the fact that Paul says that he was “under [the] *law* of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21), and James speaks of “a perfect *law* of liberty” (Jas. 1:25). See Chapter 7, “Free In Christ . . .,” for a discussion of these verses.

A few verses before Paul’s statement that since faith has come we are no longer under the law (Gal. 3:25), he had discussed how man had been brought under a curse by the law. His statement is important because he describes for us how it was that the law became a curse for those who were under it:

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘*Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.*’ But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for *the just shall live by faith.*’ Yet the law is not of faith, but ‘*the man who does them shall live by them.*’ Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘*Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree*’ (Gal. 3:10-13, NKJV).

These verses give a perfect contrast between the two systems involved, the system of law and the system of faith. These are systems wherein men seek justification before God. Those who “are of the works of the law” seek justification on the basis of perfect obedience. But this system is doomed to failure. The reason one cannot be saved on this basis is that no one keeps the law perfectly. Once one has failed, or he has sinned against God, the law he has violated condemns him. Paul quotes from the Old Testament to show that the law itself pronounced all to be under its curse as a result of their failure to keep it.

The other system is that of faith, “for the just shall live by faith.” This is a quotation from Habakkuk 2:4. As used in this passage it is describing how one is accepted as righteous before God. The word “faith” as used here means trust, confidence, plus conviction. It is placing one’s trust in Jesus Christ (Jn. 8:28), believing in the power of God, in the conviction that God

has raised Him from the dead (Col. 2:12). It represents man as being just before God as a result of taking God at his word and habitually doing what God says.

The law system, Paul says, “is not of faith.” How could it be when it does not envision justification on the basis of forgiveness through faith? To follow a law system, or attempt to be justified on the basis of perfect obedience, is to assume that one is not a law-breaker, for once one breaks the law then the only way to be justified is through forgiveness, and this is to be saved by grace through faith. This involves admitting that one is a sinner and in need of God’s grace, and then seeking his favor through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul explains in v. 13 how Christ did for man what the law had not done: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.”

The only thing a law system can do is condemn, or pronounce as guilty, the one who breaks the law under that system. It holds him under this curse without the hope of being redeemed from its condemnation. But through the system of faith Jesus became a curse for us, he took our place, he suffered in our stead, and in this way redeemed us from the curse of condemnation brought upon us by our sin (Rom. 3:23-26; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:10-13; 1 Pet. 2:20-22). With Paul we cry out, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 7:25), and “thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift” (2 Cor. 9:15)!

— * *That They All May Be One*, pp. 67-74 (Copyright 2003)