

The Law & Grace Dilemma

By Gilbert P. Carthigasu

One major dilemma facing the church today is the relationship between law and grace. Most understand that the two are somehow opposed to each other and that grace has superseded the law. I would like to try to help us better understand this issue so that we have a balanced walk of faith.

I. The Law

Let's begin by looking at the word "law" as it is used in the Bible. The English translators used this word to translate the Hebrew word "Torah". Torah refers primarily to the first five books of the Bible or; the books of Moses. But the word "law" is actually not a good translation of "Torah". A better word would be "instructions".



Torah Scroll

When we think of "law" we would immediately associate that word with punishment; if you break the law you face the consequence of it. The Torah does contain consequences for offences but there is much more. If we were to take time to read the Torah we would find that it contains much more than just laws and consequences. It contains many instructions for daily living, such as how to do business, how to deal with your neighbour, how to deal with medical issues such as skin diseases and even how and where to dig a lavatory.

A. The People

The Bible gives us seven feasts, or appointed times, that God's people were to observe. These feasts which can be found in Leviticus and Exodus are; Passover, First-fruits, Unleavened Bread, Pentecost (Weeks), Trumpets, Day of Atonement and Tabernacles.

Passover commemorates, the time God brought the Israelites out of Egypt. During that time God instructed Moses and Aaron to have the Israelites kill a lamb as a sacrifice and smear the blood on the doorpost of their houses. When the angel of death saw the blood on the door posts he would pass over that



house. Why did God require that? Did He not know which structures housed the Israelites and which contained Egyptians or other gentiles? Of course He did! He is the omniscient God. The smearing of the blood was an act of faith, simply hearing and obeying God's instructions. Everyone agrees that Passover is a picture of our salvation by the blood of the Lamb, Yeshua.

For the Jewish people the Feast of Weeks, which Christians call Pentecost, is a celebration of the day when God gave them the Torah on Mount Sinai. God did not give them the Torah while they were in Egypt. He gave them the Torah after He brought them out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. Then He brought them to Mount Sinai and gave them the Torah there. The Apostle Paul likens their passing through the Red Sea to water baptismⁱ.

So the picture we get from these three events is this; the people were saved by the blood of the Lamb (Passover), and went through water baptism (crossing the Red Sea) before being given the Torah.

We can conclude that the Torah (law) was not given to unsaved people but to those who had already experienced the salvation of God through the blood of the Lamb.

This does not mean that we as born-again, water baptized gentile believers are required to keep all that is in the Torah; particularly things like circumcision and the dietary laws. The Apostles dealt with these issues at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. In the book of Galatians we see that Paul strongly rebukes the gentile believers in Galatia for trying to find salvation by keeping the law and practicing circumcision.

B. The Purpose

God's purpose for His people was to make them His Kingdom priestsⁱⁱ. However, when Jacob and his sons went to Egypt, they did not really know God or how to worship Him. Four hundred years on, that lack of knowledge prevailed. This is evident when Moses met God on at the burning bush. He asked God for His



name so he could tell the Israelites. In Egypt, the Israelites saw many gods, so their presumption was that He was one of those gods.

God then brought ten plagues upon the Egyptians. Each one was a strike against the Egyptian gods. In doing so He was not just proving to the Egyptians but to the Israelites as well that He was greater than those gods.

For God to fulfil His purpose of world redemption, He needed a people, through whom He could send Messiah. From the earliest days He chose Abraham and His descendants. He promised them that they would be a blessing to the nationsⁱⁱⁱ; this blessing is Messiah, Yeshua. Because of this, Israel could not live like any other people. They had to live differently, to be an example for us in the nations, of a people who know God and His ways.

Salvation is an instantaneous event which happens when we put our faith in Yeshua. However, our minds take a longer time to change. In Romans 12^{iv} the Apostle Paul tells the Roman believers to renew their minds. How do we renew our minds? Most of us will answer that it is through reading the Bible. This is true, but what Bible was Paul referring to? There was no New Testament at the time he wrote Romans. So it had to be the Old Testament and in particular the Torah, the Law, because the Torah teaches us how to live according to God's ways.

C. Law in the New Testament

Some of us believe that the New Testament is all about grace and not law. The truth is there is law in the New Testament as well. Yeshua was born to be king, and kings give commands which are the laws of the kingdom. However, this king wants us to obey his laws out of love; He said we would obey His commands if we love Him^v. Yeshua also told us when He gave the Great commission to teach people to obey everything He taught. He placed great value on obedience.

Also, the Apostles, inspired by the Holy Spirit also gave commands to the church, for example we are told in the epistles to forgive one another and to bear each other's burdens. These are not recommendations these are commands, laws.



D. Yeshua & The Law

Most Christians today believe that Yeshua put an end to the law. This is partly due to Romans 10:4 which says; “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” (NKJV). This does not actually mean that Yeshua put an end to the law; the Greek word used for “end” is “telos” which is better defined as the “destination” of the law. In other words the law was meant to lead us to Messiah.

Yeshua said the following which relates to the law.



Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. (Matthew 24:35 NKJV). Here He was actually quoting from Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 40:8. When God spoke those words through Isaiah He was referring to the Old Testament which includes the Torah. Yeshua Himself, being God, was the author of the Torah and when He spoke He was referring to the Old Testament.

The second thing He said was; "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law (*Torah*) or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. (Matthew 5:17-18 NKJV)

Yeshua came to fulfil the requirement of the Torah which says that the only way for sin to be removed is by death. Yeshua came as the perfect Lamb and the final sacrifice.

Yeshua not only kept the law, he actually raised the bar on it. In His sermon on the mount He said that if anyone looks lustfully at another, that person has already committed adultery. If anyone curses another he/she is liable for punishment in hell^{vi}. His Jewish audience would have wondered: “who then can be saved? This is beyond the law that Moses gave us”.

This is where grace comes in.



II. Grace

A. Old Testament Definition

Christian theologians have defined grace as “unmerited favour”, or receiving something that one does not deserve. The Hebrew definition is similar but with a slightly different connotation. The Greek word is “charis” which means graciousness. In Ephesians 2:8 the Bible says we have been saved by “charis” meaning the graciousness of God.

The Hebrew word translated as grace is “chen” (hen). It gives a slightly different meaning; it implies a situation wherein one who is stronger comes in to help someone who is weaker. Chuck Cohen in his book “Roots of Our Faith” quoting the New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology said:

“This word clarifies the meaning of grace in history and action. It denotes the stronger coming to help the weaker who stands in need by reason of his circumstances or natural weakness. The stronger acts by a voluntary decision, though he is moved by the dependence or request of the weaker party.”^{vii}

In the Old Testament it is often translated into English as “finding favour”, one good example is in Genesis 6:8 where it says that Noah found favour in God’s eyes. Taking it from the Old Testament viewpoint, we see that ultimately Noah was saved by the grace of God, not because of his actions but because of his faith. This was the same for Abraham.

In fact if we look carefully, Israel was saved out of Egypt by faith; they did not deserve it. They were not righteous. In fact they did not really know God. But because of His grace, He provided a way out for them. We see in the burning bush account how God said to Moses that He had seen the oppression of the people and heard their cries, so He moved to help them^{viii}. This is the grace of God in action. God, the stronger, sent them a saviour; Moses, and gave them a way out, the Passover Lamb. Israel, the weaker, was not saved by their works but by the grace of God.



Yet it was to these people, who had been saved by God's grace that He gave the Torah.

B. Sacrificial System

Most Christians today understand that salvation in the Old Testament was based on the works of the people, particularly the system of animal sacrifices. I must make mention that the Jewish people did develop a religious system based on works, but this is not biblical. They developed this system whilst they were exiled in Babylon. They call it the Oral Torah. In the eyes of Jewish religious leaders, it is equally as authoritative as the written Torah. In this they sought to gain salvation by doing good works, prayers and so on. This was developed at a time when the Temple had been destroyed and they were outside of Judea and needed a way to serve God without the Temple and the sacrificial system. This "Oral Torah" was in place during Yeshua's time and in the gospels we often see him coming against it.

The sacrificial system that Israel practiced in the Old Testament days was actually an act of grace. God the stronger knew that Israel was too weak and unable to save themselves. And since it was not yet time for Him to send Messiah, He instituted this stop-gap measure which we find in Leviticus. He provided this system out of His graciousness.

In this system, people needed to sacrifice animals, whether sheep, goats, cattle or birds. Humans could not create those animals but could only breed them. Those animals were created by God and given by Him to the people out of His grace.

Then the person had to believe that God's Word is true - that if the person should lay his hand on the animal and confess his sin or even the sin of the nation, as the High Priest did every year on Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), and killed the animal, God would forgive their sin. There was no way for them to prove the veracity of this but they took the God's Word by faith. Therefore, salvation in the Old Testament was by God's grace, through man's faith in Him, just as it is today.



Another point to note is that it was the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah who wrote that all man's righteous works are like filthy rags before the Lord^{ix}, so we see that even in the Old Testament God told His people that good works could not save them. There were times recorded in the Old Testament where God rebuked Israel and rejected their sacrifices. One such time can be found in Malachi 6. However, this was due to Israel not acting in faith and only worshipping Him out of vain religion. Yet the truth is that it was God who established the system, human failure does not negate the work of God.

III. Striking A Balance

How then do we strike a balance between law and grace? Are they really opposed to each other or are they compatible and necessarily co-existent? I'd like to share two illustrations that help us better understand this.

A. Suspension Bridge

I am not an engineer by any means, but what I understand is that suspension bridges, such as the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, must be kept at a certain tension. If the cables are too loose or too tight, the bridge could collapse in a heavy storm or earthquake. Yet at the right tension, the bridge can sway yet not collapse. In the case of the Golden Gate Bridge there are two towers along which the cables are strung.

So if we take the Golden Gate Bridge to represent our life journey from earth to eternity, the two towers represent law and grace. Like the bridge, we must live in a place of holy tension between the law and grace so as not to topple when the storms of life come.



B. Electric Train

The second illustration is that of an electric train. In Singapore, as in most major cities, we have a transit system using electric trains. Trains need tracks to run on and electricity to propel them. And they stop at various stations during the journey from one end to the other.



If we liken our lives to a train's journey, we have two stops - the first is salvation, when we come to faith in Yeshua and the second is the completion of His work in us when we become like Him^x. Just as the tracks keep the train on the right path to get to its destination, so the law helps us stay on track.

The power that keeps us moving forward in life is the grace of God given by the Holy Spirit working within us. The Holy Spirit helps us to keep us moving so that we will reach our destination.

So it is law and grace working together in our lives that transform us and make us into the people that God has designed us to be. When the Bible says we are not under the law but under grace^{xi}, it does not mean that the law does not apply to us. Rather, the Apostle Paul was telling believers that we are not to try to find salvation by keeping the law.

IV. Conclusion: Not in Opposition but In Accord

In conclusion, law and grace are not in opposition to each other, God has set it up so that we know His standard for righteous living and to come to the understanding that we are not able to reach His standard. This then makes us realise that we need His grace to attain it.

Without either one we will falter in our walk. If we only have law, we will become legalistic we will continuously be trying to please God through our works, which is impossible. If we have grace without law however we will become lawless, we will have a faith that no longer requires us to change our way of thinking, our habits and our actions.

God has provided both law and grace for us to make us more like Yeshua. As long as we maintain this balance we will reach our final destination.



References

- ⁱ 1 Corinthians 10:1,2
- ⁱⁱ Exodus 19:6
- ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 12:3
- ^{iv} Romans 12:2
- ^v John 14:15
- ^{vi} Matthew 5:21-30
- ^{vii} Roots of Our Faith, Chuck and Karen Cohen, CFI Jerusalem Publishing 2002, Page 38.
- ^{viii} Exodus 3:7,8
- ^{ix} Isaiah 64:6
- ^x Romans 8:29
- ^{xi} Romans 6:14

