

## Law and Gospel ~ Foundations for Ethics

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### The Use of the Law

Christians have always had the same difficulty as the Pharisees in keeping the Law in its place and not allowing it to obscure the Gospel. Let us define Law in this chapter and hold the definition of Gospel for the next. Paul, the former-Pharisee-turned-Christian, defines Law for us in a series of rhetorical questions:

*Why then the Law? It was added because of transgressions, till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made. ...Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not, ...the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian. (Galatians 3:19, 21, 24-25)*

The Law of God was given to His holy people as a fence or boundary beyond which people were not to go without defiling themselves before God. Christians have called this use of the Law a *curb*. The Commandments curb outward behavior, our symptomatic sins. The Commandments tell us where we may not go and what we may not do. The Law as curb is one of the legitimate ways we may understand ethics as setting limits to our understanding of good and evil. This use of the Law as a curb makes possible an orderly and outwardly moral society. The function of the Law as curb is applicable to Christians and non-Christians alike. The difference between the two is that the former seeks forgiveness when they violate the Law and the latter do not seek it. Even though people in a post-modern age may not acknowledge the Law as a curb because they reject all absolutes, most will accept the notion that behavior ought to be limited either by civil and criminal law or by the self-legislating autonomy of the individual. Such individualism is extremely subjective, yet it attempts to maintain an inner governance of human behavior. Even ethics committees in hospitals still follow the institutional rules as formulated policies and procedures, remnants in principle of God's Law. This use of the Law is the first step necessary in securing a society's orderly, continued existence.

Another use of the Law, particularly for those responsive to God's Word, is that of a *mirror* to show us our sin. We look at the Ten Commandments, for example, as a reflection of how we measure up to the obedience expected of us by God. And if we are honest with ourselves, we are often forced to admit that we have broken the spirit, if not the letter, of the Law and need to admit it to God in hope of His forgiveness. In the use of the Law either as curb or as mirror, the Law always accuses us of Sin. It tells us, because of sinful human nature, what the limits are and it shows us how we have violated them. The Law cannot declare us to be ethical or moral people; it always accuses.

There is a third uses of the word Law that is more controversial among Christians. It seems to justify the use of the Law to address, not the limits God has set but the self-transformation of the person as person. By this way of thinking the Law can do more than merely control outward behavior; it can serve as guide to change the heart as well. If this is true, then it is hard to see why the Gospel is necessary, for the Gospel claims that unique function exclusively.

This third use of the Law is considered, by some, to be beneficial as a *guide* causing Christians to behave more as God expects of them. But the Law is not beneficial as a motive for change of behavior, and the use of the Law as a guide is deceptively misleading. In the use of the Law as guide, the Christian attempts to change his moral being through the guidance of the Law. This person claims to base his life on the Gospel for heaven, but turns back strictly to the Law as a guide for his daily Christian life here on earth. As we shall see in the next chapter, the Gospel is no confined to heaven; it applies and transforms us for life on earth as well. To revert to the Law, in this case as guide, can imply that all we really need is a little more guidance and added effort on our part to change man's sinful nature.

The Law as *guide* seems to be a kinder, gentler form of the Law as curb and mirror. The truth is that the difference between the Law and the Gospel is that the Law in any form fails to change the heart. The Gospel was given to do what the Law could not. "By grace... not because of works, lest any man should boast," Paul warns those tempted to revert to living under Law rather than under Gospel (Eph. 2:8-9). For Christians to be become preoccupied in their understanding of ethics as Law rather than focused on the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to repeat the disobedience of our first parents, to experiment with good and evil rather than to trust what God has done for us.

The chaos of Eden following the fall is reflected by the moral chaos in which ethics finds itself today. Much of ethical inquiry throughout history is nothing more than a preoccupation with the distinction between good and evil. In this preoccupation human beings are always tempted to grasp from the hands of God the determination of what is good and what is evil. The command of God, "You shall not eat of the tree" was not enough to prevent it from happening. Nor is the Law as commandments sufficient. Law has become an idol in ethics. At least we may, with enough practice, live by the Law and avoid certain symptomatic behaviors called sins, but we cannot avoid them. The Law is inadequate to address the heart and the heart is where the sickness has taken its deadly hold on us. The Law is the MRI or CAT-scan that reveals the malignancy, but the Gospel is the cure that gives us back our lives.

### The Gospel and Ethics

So now that we have this promise of God's victory, how are we to live ethically? As Christians we need not concern ourselves merely with what to do or not do. Rather, we keep our eyes on what God has done. Ethics for the Christian is primarily about Gospel, not primarily about Law, primarily about what God has done, not primarily about what we do.

The Christian's ethics is to live by Faith in Christ even as Christ lives in us. Our ethic is to repent daily and believe the Gospel. The promise is sure: through Baptism God makes us his holy people. In the Lord's Supper God feeds us with the holy food of heaven for life on earth. God's promise has been fulfilled—"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."

Ethics for Christians is not about what we do for God, but about what God has done on the cross and how that applies to us. It is the death of Jesus on the cross that transforms our lives, and it is the Holy Spirit who makes Jesus' death applicable for holy living. As Christians then, we are holy people, living holy lives.

### Living Holy By Faith

*What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him therefore by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:1-4)*

How does this new ethic work? Isn't there anything that we must do? Yes, "the righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17). Faith trusts in Jesus Christ when we are faced with ethical dilemmas. Faith is not passive, going with the flow as New Age passivity invites us to do. Faith faces and wrestles with the incongruities of living between the realities of what God as our origin intends and what life in a fallen world has become.

Living by faith is not easy. We do not hide from the pain and suffering of this world, erasing pain and suffering simply by erasing the people in who we find it. It is difficult to live by faith, to see at times the problem so clearly and yet, perhaps, to do nothing but wait, letting God do or not do instead. It is more natural in a fallen world to grasp control away from the hands of God and take charge, trying to make things happen regardless of consequences. But that is the way of Adam and Eve's sin, and ours.

Faith is trust, but it is not trust disembodied from its source. Faith is a relationship. It is the relationship of trust we have in God. This relationship shapes our actions and decisions in day-to-day living. Laws, rules, and principles are signs of the relationship, but they are not the relationship itself; it is the relationship that changes the heart of the Christian and the core of who we are as human beings. It is the Gospel, not Law, that ultimately makes us good or moral or ethical people in God's eyes.

### Gospel Meaning for Ethics

The moral chaos we experience today is not merely due to the complexity of technology, but to the loss of a relationship with God that is revealed in the mystery Story God tells, the Bible. Having been seduced by post-modernism, many think that the old faith is not enough for today's problems. In fact, Christians do not lack what they need to resolve the conflicts. What people may lack is a biblical perspective that re-shapes them at the core. We will surely need rules and civil or criminal laws to prevent sinful human nature from outwardly distorting what God has created. The ultimate solution is not the Law; rather, it is Gospel. The task of Christians is to know and live the Gospel in the face of the loss of meaning around us.

### Sinner and Saint Simultaneously

Christians may appear to others to be hypocrites. That is, it will always be evident to any critical observer that there is a difference, at least at times, between the confessed faith of the Christian and the life a Christian lives. But the Christian is the first to point this out, and has a way of willingly doing so. Although a Christian may know the right, he or she does not always do it. It would be foolish and out of character for a Christian to claim that although he or she sins, he or she is at least better than others who are not Christians. While the cynic might accuse a Christian of feeling this way, no Christian could rightly claim this view. The apostle Paul, speaking to Christians in Rome, honestly admitted his frustration over being a Christian and not always acting like one.

*I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ... it is ... sin which dwells within me."*  
(Romans 7:15-20)

What Paul has identified in himself is a dualism in his nature as a Christian. Paul is, along with all Christians, sinner and saint simultaneously. What this means is that even as Christians sin, they are saints who are simultaneously forgiven by Christ. Does this mean we can do whatever we want because God will forgive? The key word here is 'want.' It is not what the Christian 'wants' that is a problem, but what a Christian ends up doing that is sin. The Christian as saint wants to do the right thing, but finds that it cannot always be done. The reason, says Paul, is that 'sin dwells within me.' The Old Adam in us as an agent of the Evil One wars against the saint that God has created in us.

It is easy to become discouraged with the incongruity between what we intend to do and what we end up actually doing at times. The best repellent for discouragement and guilt is to speak back to the Old Adam in us with the reminder, "But Christ died for me and my sins are forgiven." The Christian need not become depressed or preoccupied with guilt; one continues to believe and rejoice in the victory of Christ over sin. The conflict between the Old Adam and the New Man in Christ will not go away until Christ returns and makes all things new on the Last Day. In Christ's return the saint finds hope, comfort and joy.

G.K. Chesterton noted that the sinfulness of human nature is the only teaching of the Christian faith that can be proven empirically beyond a shadow of a doubt. It requires no great insight to demonstrate that Christians are sinners like everyone else, and it is not always outwardly evident that they are Christians at all. Even Christians must cling to faith in order to be convinced of their new status as holy people. No matter how conscientious they are, Christians continue to be sinners even while God calls them saints. Having said this, however, one would hope that there would be improvement of behavior in those areas of a Christian's life where there is a clear need for change.

The basis of sainthood is not behavior, but the forgiveness of sins. Because Jesus Christ, the core of the Christian's life is no longer dominated by the power of Sin; we live by the grace of God's forgiveness daily. Christians are therefore, saints or holy people. Realization of this paradox of the Christian as sinner and saint simultaneously ought to cancel the notion that we can reach outward perfection in this life. Christians who are continually discouraged with their *spiritual progress* have not learned to live with the sinner-saint paradox described by Paul and demonstrated in the lives of the faithful from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses to all of God's holy people who have ever lived.

The energy of the Christian life and the focus of holy living does not consist in trying harder to be good. It is humbling to have to admit to oneself that spiritual self-improvement is an impossibility. It may be pride, as much as conscientious desire for self-improvement, that cause us to refuse to believe our holiness is a gift of God in Christ, enjoyed and lived by faith, not by our own efforts. Faith requires us to entrust our lives to God, relying on the Holy Spirit to transform us. As our faith takes charge, we leave behind the narcissistic preoccupation with self-evaluation and put our spiritual energies into serving the needs of others.

As the Christian life is a matter of living by faith in the promises of God, so ethics for the Christian is a matter of living under God's grace in decision-making. Neither sincerity nor good intentions nor following ethical guidelines to the letter of the law will guarantee that our ethical decisions are pleasing to God. We can never be certain whether our thoughts, words or decisions are more influenced by the sinner in us than by the saint. Therefore, Christians do not waste time in justifying decisions, but they live in humility through daily repentance. The Christian thinks, speaks and acts in the confidence that the Holy Spirit is at work within and that sins are forgiven in Christ. The truth is that all a Christian can do is to examine critically the dilemma, evaluate it in the light of the Bible, and in good conscience make the choice believed to be consistent with the will of God.

### **Law and Gospel for Christians**

This brings us to the question, "Does the Christian still need to live under the law or is he now only under the Gospel?" Is ethics for the Christian a matter of following laws or is it something deeper that transforms the inner person to think and act differently? The answer is based on the paradoxical nature of the Christian's life until Christ returns. Insofar as the Christian is a sinner he still needs to be guided by the Law, but in so far as he is a saint he is being transformed by the Gospel. We may ask, "how will I know which is operative?" The answer is, "you won't." Therefore the Christian lives a life of daily repentance, honestly examining his life, confessing his know sins, and receiving the absolution God gives in Christ.

The function of the Law for the sinner-in-the-Christian is same as that for the non-Christian. It serves to curb behavior that is wrong and mirrors the need for repentance when we have done wrong. The Law, for Christians and non-Christians, always accuses. It never gets to the core of the problem and it never transforms the inner life, but we need it until Christ comes again and makes our whole being new.

The Gospel, on the other hand, makes its appeal to the saint, the new man within the Christian. The Gospel of Christ's victory over sin, death and the devil frees us to live by faith in the God's promise of forgiveness. The Gospel gives us truth insight into the underlying issues. It opens up to the eyes of faith the proper significance of Christ for our understand of how to live in faithfulness until the end. Because of the sinful self that still resides within, the Christian needs the Law, but the Christian, because he or she is also saint, thrives on the Gospel as the only real good news there is in this world.