

Sin and Death
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Editor's note: The following essay is John's answer to a reader on an Internet forum who asked for clarification regarding the place of law in a believer's life. J.A.

Dear Josh (not his real name),
I am finally getting around to addressing your question regarding how I could presume to place the Law or law (generically) on the sin and death side of the page as opposed to the righteousness and life side. First, let me say that the case I present concerns Law in its purest form: that which God gave to Israel through Moses and also law in the generic sense. Paul clearly seems to include both in his theology since at times he drops the article "the" and simply refers to law in all the forms that it appears.

Specifically these are the passages of scripture that lead me to believe that God places the law on the negative side of the ledger. As such, it is still good and spiritual, for it comes from Him and will serve His ultimate purpose, but since He consigns all men to disobedience that He might have mercy on all (Rom. 11:32), clearly everything He uses toward that end is holy, that is, it is sanctified (set apart for His purpose).

So on to the specific verses:

Rom. 7:9-14: "And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. For we know that the Law is spiritual but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin." Commentary:

Clearly the Law is presented as spiritual and holy and not to be identified with the evil that uses it. It is the law of sin and death in our flesh that does that, but that law of sin and death finds its opportunity through the law because the law does not stimulate our spiritual man (the man in union with Christ), it arouses the fleshly man to try to independently please God through observation of an outward standard, i.e. "this commandment..... proved to result in death for me." Read it carefully. "effecting my death through that which is good."

Man must be confronted with what he becomes when faced with an external standard of righteousness, and opts to live according to it. Inevitably it arouses something in him which is the direct killer, sin. But they always work together. The Law, or law (generically), always works together with the law of sin and death. Whereas the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus always works together with the righteousness of God. Now, please note the verse that proceeds the passage above, Vs. 8:

"But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind, for apart from the Law sin is dead."

Commentary:

If one wants to afford sin an opportunity, then the more legal-minded we become the more ground we give to sin.

On we go: II Cor. 3:7, "But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how shall the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory." Commentary:

The entire Chapter Three of Second Corinthians is devoted to presenting the contrast of the ministry of the law as opposed to the ministry of the Spirit. One is a ministry of death, the other a ministry of life.

They were not intended to be finally mixed together in the New Covenant walk with God. Paul always goes back to God's relationship with Abraham before the law as his point of reference regarding how God relates to the believer in the New Covenant and

how the believer is to relate to God. Read the account of God coming to Abraham. There is no law there.

There is no mention of a sin problem. Only PROMISE, which Paul says is the essence of the life of faith, that which lives by the promise of God in Christ. If one looks for a blessing based upon living according to the law, he will be subject to the curse of the law, for Paul says that it is not of promise. Grace, Spirit and life follow the promise of God.

Promise is antithetical to law. God grants us concession to mix the two for a season until we realize that they don't mix and we abandon ourselves to nothing other than the life of Christ within.

More scripture: I Tim. 1: 9-12, "realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted." Commentary:

What possible reason would a disciple of Christ, who has been declared righteous in Him, want to be named among such a company? Why is the law made for them? It is made for them "so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful" (Rom. 7:13). Commentary:

The law exposes sin. It does not energize righteousness. It exposes sin by appealing to the energy of the flesh and once the flesh is aroused, it trips on its own efforts trying to prove that it can please God. Of course, we Christianize the process by asking God to help us obey the law but God isn't into that. He is only into cultivating the life of Christ in us. CHRIST DOES NOT LIVE BY THE LAW AND HE DOES NOT LIVE BY THE LAW WHEN HE'S LIVING IN US EITHER. He is the fulfillment of the law and as such He does not refer us back to it. The law takes us by the hand and leads us to Christ and then turns around and leaves.

When Paul says that we are no longer under the law but under grace (Rom.

6:14), he's not merely referring to the condemnation of the law, he's referring to the totality of the law, including its appeal to us to try to live pleasing to God. That verse reads that sin shall not be master over us for we are not under law but under grace. Most Christians take that to mean that grace merely saves us from condemnation, but grace is the divine influence on the soul whereby God does in a man what the law could only preach about.

1 Cor. 15: 56, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law." Commentary:

This is a fascinating verse. Here we're given the picture of something that stings. Death is the thing that does the stinging, and the actual sting is sin, but the power of sin is the law. The law actually provides the force by which death (the stinging creature) injects its poison in the form of sin. How could that be? By appealing to our mind to serve the law and when in our mind we agree to serve the law we inescapably act autonomously and, being weak in the flesh, we receive the penetrating sin-sting of death.

One of our friends said that he decided to seek the blessing of God by obeying the commandment to honor his mother in the sense of being reconciled to her, but the law itself has no reconciling power. No matter how he explains it, God was not promising to bless him because he obeyed the law; God was bringing Him into communion with the reconciling One, Christ.

Now at this point I will concede something, and that is that the Spirit of God can quicken a promise to us through the words of a commandment, but those words are made to be vehicles of the Spirit of life; they are transformed into promise so that they are no longer a demand placed upon us but they become as intended, a shadow of the substance which is Christ.

Back in the First Timothy passage, that context ends with the words "according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God." Allow me to explain the end-all of the good news. It is this: Christ now sits at the right hand of the Majesty on High as the perfected God-Man, Man and God in perfect glorified union. That's the reason that the Spirit was not given until Christ was glorified (John 7: 39), because the

ministry of the Spirit of God in the New Covenant was to be the ministry of Christ, not only as the Son of God, but also as perfected Humanity.

This is the Spirit of Christ. Christ transmits (Original Greek) Himself to the believer as God who became glorified Man so that the believer will live by that life. In the exalted and enthroned life of Christ there is no place for the law of Moses. There is only communion and participation in the divine nature. Law- consciousness only serves to dilute that and throw a monkey wrench into the process.

John 16: 14, "He (the Spirit of Truth) shall glorify Me for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose (reveal, show and transmit) it to you." What Jesus was referring to by the words "take of Mine" is that very relationship that He has with the Father. He transmits that very communion life by which the Son lives by the life of the Father. John 5:

26 says, "The Father has life in Himself and gives the Son to have life in Himself." That's the "Christian life," living by the life of the Father in the Son in us. When we return to the written law, we're saying that the Father actually refers to words on tablets of stone to determine how He should act.

Ultimately what we're talking about is the way to spiritual maturity and that way goes in the direction AWAY from legislation and IN THE DIRECTION OF COMMUNION. I can tell you that it is terribly frightening to the flesh to deprive it of a means by which it can validate itself.

It always involves an awesome crisis to let go of all that purports to assist Christ and purports to do its part so that Christ can succeed in His purpose for us. Sure, I refer to the Law and commitment to it as legalism. That's what legalism is. It's about law.

It can be in the its pure Mosaic form or in some "Christianized" form of it that always, in effect, tells us what we can do so that God can get on with what He wants to do. Do such and such and you'll be blessed.

Don't do such and such and you'll be blessed. (See Deut. 28.) The law has to do with doing; grace has to do with being. We are human beings, not human doings.

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John R. Gavazzoni