Law and Grace

The “Law” in the New Testament

The Jews often divided the Old Testament into either two or three sections; “the Law and the prophets” (Matt. 5:17; Act 28:23) or “the Law, the prophets, and the psalms” (Lk. 24:44). “The Law” referred to the Law of Moses, that is, the first five books of the Old Testament, commonly called the Pentateuch. However, any portion of the Pentateuch could also be called the Law. For example, in Matthew 12:5 Jesus only quotes two verses (Num. 28:9-10) but calls it “the Law.” (also see Ro. 7:7 cf. Exo. 20:17; I Cor. 9:9 cf. Deut. 25:4, etc.). On rare occasions, the entire Old Testament was called the Law (Jn. 10:34 cf. Ps. 82:6; I Cor. 14:21 cf. Isa. 28:11-12). But putting these few exceptions aside, one could safely say that the Law in the New Testament always refers the Law of Moses, the Pentateuch.

There are two teachings that have contributed to the confusion over the Law of Moses and the Christian’s relationship to it. The first is to divide the Law into moral, ceremonial and civil aspects, and then claim that the Christian is free from the ceremonial and civil commandments but is still bound by the moral commandments of the Law. The second teaching is that the Christian is still under the Ten Commandments but not under the other 603 commandments that appear in the Old Testament. However, neither of these ideas can be supported in the Bible.

Though there are moral, ceremonial and civil elements within the Law, there is no scriptural justification for such a division. Neither is there justification in selecting some of the 613 commandments and make them binding on believers today.

In the Bible the Law of Moses is one Law; it is an indivisible unity. This unity is clear from a number of New Testament passages. James 2:10 says, “. . . whoever keeps the whole Law, and yet stumbles in one point, he is guilty of all.” “All” in this verse refers to “all of the 613 precepts in the Law of Moses.” To break one commandment is to break them all. Likewise, Paul states in Galatians 5:3 that every Jew had to keep every commandment; “And I testify again to every man who is circumcised, that he is a debtor to keep the whole Law.” Paul saw no divisions in the Law. Neither did Jesus.
Matthew 5:19 says, “Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. . .”

To bring this point closer to home, if a person eats ham (which was forbidden by Mosaic Law) he has broken the Ten Commandments, though the Ten Commandments do not mention ham at all. This is because the Law is a unit. To break one commandment is to break them all.

Because the Law is a unity, certain commandments cannot be separated from the others and given a different status. The Ten Commandments are not above the dietary restrictions. All are the Law of God.

Furthermore, the Law cannot be divorced from its penalties. Galatians 3:10 says, “For all who rely on the works of the Law are under a curse. . .” Elsewhere Paul says, “. . .the Law brings about wrath. . .” (Ro. 4:15). In other words, God’s wrath must fall upon every man who does not keep the Law in its entirety.

To summarize, “the Law” in the New Testament refers the 613 commandments found in the Law of Moses. To break any of these is to be guilty of all and face the wrath of God.

The Law and Life

The question arises as to the relation of the Law to eternal life. Can someone gain eternal life through the Law?

Hypothetically, the Law could give life. Leviticus 18:5 says, “You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the LORD.” Ezekiel says the same thing in chapter 20:11; “I gave them my statutes and showed them my ordinances, by whose observance everyone shall live” (also see Ezek. 20:13, 21). Jesus said to the rich young ruler, “if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” (Matt. 19:17b). The commandments to which He referred were the Law of Moses. The apostle Paul summarizes, “For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the
Law, "The man who does those things shall live by (i.e. by means of) them." (Ro. 10:5).

Though life could be found in obedience to the Law, such obedience had to be flawless. Paul said, "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" (Gal. 3:10). Furthermore, this perfection in obedience included one's inward attitude as well; that is, it included both the thought and the deed (Matt. 5:28). In other words, in order to gain life from the Law a person had to live in perfect obedience to it his entire life.

The Bible is very clear that no one except Christ has ever kept the entire Law perfectly. Romans 3:23 says that all have sinned. I John 1:8 and 10 say, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. . . If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us." Because all men sin all are under condemnation.

Now it is true that the Law provided a means to atone for failure through sacrifice, but it must be remembered that (1) the smallest failure meant that the Law was broken and (2) the blood of animals brought forgiveness that was only temporary, external, and legal in nature. Sacrifice alone was not sufficient for salvation. Sin could only be fully atoned for by the blood of Christ.

Therefore, though hypothetically those who kept the Law would live, in reality it was powerless to save a sinner. Romans 3:20 says, "... by the deeds of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight..." and Galatians 3:11 states, "... that no one is justified by the Law in the sight of God is evident..." (cf. Gal. 2:16). Calvary should make this abundantly clear to all, "for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died in vain." (Gal. 2:21).
The Nature of the Law

If the Law could not save, was it therefore defective?

The Law is not to blame for its inability to bring salvation. The Law is "perfect" (Ps. 19:7), holy, just and good (Ro. 7:12). The weakness was not in the Law. The fatal weakness was in man! The Law’s demands could not be relaxed to accommodate the weakness of the men (Gal. 3:21b; Ro. 2:11-12). For that reason it could not save.

The Purpose of the Law

If the Law can neither save us nor help save us, why should we even care about it? Or as Paul asks, “What purpose then does the Law serve?” (Gal. 3:19a).

There are a number reasons why God gave the Law.

1) Galatians 3:19 says that the Law “. . . was added because of transgressions . . .”

What was the Law added to? The Law was added to the covenant and promises of God (Gal. 3:19). In other words, the covenant and promises of God came first and then the Law. The reason the Law was added to the covenant was “because of transgressions.” That is, the Law came so that sin might be seen as a transgression and men will know that they had fallen short of God’s righteous standards. Sin is always sin, but it is not a violation of Law unless there is a Law to break (Ro. 4:15). The Law was given so that sin might take on the character of disobedience to a standard.

Thus, one reason the Law was given was so that men would know that they have transgressed the Law of God.

2) Secondly, the Law was given for the lawless and ungodly, for Paul says, “. . . the Law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers (etc) . . .” (I Tim. 1:9-10). The main idea here is
restraint. The Law was given to benefit humanity as a whole, to restrain evil and protect society, which the imperfect Laws of the nations could not do.

3) Another purpose of the Law was to give men the knowledge of sin (Ro. 3:20; 4:15; 7:7). Men who do not have the Law are aware that they are sinful but the Law was given to increase this knowledge. Through the Law man becomes more fully conscious of his sin and his need of help from something beyond and outside the Law. In this sense the Law prepares men for the gospel for it makes men aware of their need.

4) A fourth purpose of the Law is to show the terrible nature of sin (Ro. 7:8-13). Though the Law is holy and good it fails to eliminate sin. In fact, it actually causes men to want to sin more. When the Bible says “do not covet” the commandment actually caused men to covet all the more (Ro. 7:9). This demonstrates the depravity of man: for sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produces all kinds of evil desires in us (Ro. 7:8). Apart from the Law sin is dormant (“dead” - Ro. 7:8).

One might wonder how the Law can both restrain sin (number 2 above) and stimulate it. The answer is that the Law contains two elements that have two different effects. The two elements are the command and the penalty. The command stimulates rebellion in the heart, the penalty forces external compliance.

5) From a different perspective, the Law also reveals the vast number of sins men commit. Though the Law provokes man to sin, it does not make him a sinner. Rather it shows how bad man really is (Ro. 5:20).

6) A sixth function of the Law was to shut every mouth and establish the guilt of the world (Ro. 3:19). In modern English when we say that someone is guilty we usually mean that he has broken the Law. When the Bible says that someone is guilty it means that he has both broken the Law and is under obligation to suffer the penalty for what was done. Thus the Law proves that God is just to judge humanity for all are under a judicial sentence.

It isn’t easy to get men to admit that they have sinned, but it’s even harder to get them to admit that they are deserving of punishment.
However, at the judgment when the Law is held up to our thoughts and actions there will be no defense, no excuse. Every mouth will be stopped. The Law will prove that man is a lawbreaker and deserving of judgment.

7) The Law also kept men under guard until they could find freedom in Christ. “But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the Law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed.” (Gal. 3:23-24). The Law, by revealing sin, kept men imprisoned and is thus likened to a jailer. This guarding was not necessary once men found freedom in Christ.

The Law also functioned as a guardian who watches over a child to restrain him. In the New King James Version, Galatians 3:24 reads, “Therefore the Law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” A schoolmaster was usually a slave entrusted with the management of a child.

The words “to bring us” in Galatians 3:24 do not appear in the original text and are misleading. The Law does not bring men to Christ, but imposes a restraint upon them until they find Him. Paul is emphasizing the temporary character of the Law as well as its inferiority.

8) The Law was also a witness of the saving righteousness of God in Christ. “But now the righteousness of God, apart from the Law, has been revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.” (Ro. 3:21).

The righteousness that is apart from the Law is righteousness “through faith in Jesus Christ” (Ro. 3:22). This righteousness has nothing to do with the Law though the Law testified of it.

The Law testified of righteousness through faith in Christ in the sacrificial system. The sacrificial system looked forward to the righteousness of God in the sacrifice of Christ. God’s righteousness in saving men was never derived from the Law. When men offered a sacrifice God would forgive their sins based on their faith in offering the sacrifice, not on the death of an animal (see notes on salvation in the OT). It was a righteousness based on faith that saved (Ro. 4:3), not a righteousness derived from the Law.
9) The Law acted as a barrier to keep the Jews distinct from the Gentiles. Ephesians 2:14-15 says, “For He Himself (i.e. Jesus) is our peace, who has made both (Jew and Gentile) one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation . . . that is, the Law of commandments contained in ordinances. . . “ The wall of separation (the Law) has been broken down by the death of Christ so that both Jew and Gentile form a new man, the church (Eph. 2:15-16).

The Law and Israel

Many are of the opinion that the Law has always existed. It has not, though Law as a principle has always existed. For example, God commanded Adam to refrain from eating from the fruit of the tree in the garden. That was Law. But the Law, that is, the legal code recorded in the Pentateuch, came into being with Moses (Ro. 5:13-15). The Bible states: “For the Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn. 1:17). This does not imply that Law did not exist before Moses any more than it implies that grace was non-existent before Christ came. What it means is that the Law as recorded in the Pentateuch did not exist until Moses.

It is of utmost importance to realize that the Mosaic Law was not given to all mankind but to the nation of Israel. Exodus 19:3 and 5 states, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel . . . if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine.” Deuteronomy 4:44-45 says, “Now this is the Law which Moses set before the children of Israel. These are the testimonies, the statutes, and the judgments which Moses spoke to the children of Israel after they came out of Egypt.” Jesus called the Law “their” (the Jews’) Law (Jn. 15:25). The giving of the Law was specifically tied to the covenant God made with the nation (Exo. 34:27; Deut. 31:26) and was therefore a legal matter that included penalties and curses. The blessings mentioned in it were tied to Israel’s obedience (Exo. 19:5-6; Deut. 28:1-14). Viewed as a Law code it was given to Israel because of sin (Gal. 3:19). This Law as a legal code was binding upon the Jews even when Paul wrote to them (Ro. 2:12b; 3:19).
The Law and the Gentiles

If the Law was given to Israel, does that mean that Gentiles are free of it?

First of all, it should be noted that the Law given by Moses made provision for Gentiles to receive its benefits and be under its restraints. For example, the same rules applied to both Jew and Gentile for the free-will offering (Lev. 17:8, 10; 22; 18-22; also see Exo. 12:48-49).

Secondly, though the Gentiles did not have the written Law, Paul says that they show the work of the Law written on their hearts (Ro. 2:14-15). All men, even those who have never seen the Bible, have a standard of righteousness which they show in their conduct. Though they do not have the Law they are a law to themselves. Everything good that has ever appeared in the Gentile world is a reflection of the same Law written in the Bible. God does not have one standard for Jews and another for Gentiles. There is only one divine Law. This Law was recorded perfectly in the Old Testament for the Jews. It was recorded imperfectly in the Gentile heart, but it is recorded none the less.

Therefore, we must conclude that the Gentiles are also under the Law but in a slightly different sense than the Jews. The Jews are judged for the perfect Law recorded by Moses. The Gentiles will be judged by the imperfect record of the Law written in the hearts, revealed to them by their consciences. In either case the result is the same. Both fall short of the standard they have and so both are guilty before God and both will perish (Ro. 2:11-16). So ignorance of the Law does not save the Gentile. Rather, there is no hope in the Law for either Jew or Gentile.
The Law and the Christian

Is the Christian under the Law? Most of the answers we find in Christendom come from an inadequate definition of the Law.

1. Various views

   a. Some argue that the Christian is under the moral but not the ceremonial Law.

   b. Some say that we are under the moral Law but not its penalties.

   c. Some say we are under the moral Law as a rule of life, but not as a way of salvation. That is, we are sanctified (made holy) by the Law, not justified (declared righteous) by it.

   d. Some say we are under the Sermon on the Mount but not the Law at Mt. Sinai.

   e. Another rather curious view is that we are under the "Law of God" but not the "Law of Moses." By this it is meant that we are under the Ten Commandments, not the Law as written in the Pentateuch. This view is clearly refuted in scripture where the "Law of Moses" is called "the Law of the Lord" in the same context (Lk. 2:21-24, 39; cf. Mk. 7:8-13 where what "Moses said" is called "the commandment of God" and the material quoted includes both one of the ten commandments and the death penalty from the civil code).

Careful study of the Bible demonstrates that all the above views are erroneous.

2. the meaning of “under the Law”

The expression "under the Law" appears a number of times in the Bible. Though the English is constant there are two separate Greek prepositions that translate as "under" – 

\( \text{en (e\text{v})} \) and \( \text{hupo (u\text{po})} \). \( \text{En (e\text{v})} \) indicates the sphere in which the subject is acting and dwelling. This accurately describes the condition of the Jew. The Jews' existence and
actions happened in the sphere of the Law. *Hypo* (ὑπό), on the other hand, refers to being *subject to the power of* something or someone. An excellent example of how this is used is in Matthew 8:9 where it says, "For I also am a man *under* (*hypo* - ὑπό) authority, with soldiers *under* (*hypo* - ὑπό) me..." just as the centurion was under the power and authority of the military Laws so were his soldiers under his authority.

Thus to be under the Law is to be under the entire Mosaic legal system in its totality and to be subject to its penalties. It is to live and act in its sphere.

Now the Bible makes it extremely clear that the Christian is not under the Law: "sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under Law but under grace" (Ro. 6:14); "Should we sin because we are not under Law but under grace?" (Ro. 6:15); "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law." (Gal. 5:18); "To those under the Law I became as one under the Law (though I myself am not under the Law) so that I might win those under the Law." (I Cor. 9:20).

When the Bible says we are not under the Law it means that we are not under any aspect of the Law in our salvation experience.

First, we are not declared righteous (justified) by the Law. Romans 3:20 says, "no human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the Law."

Secondly, we are not sanctified (made holy) by the Law: "For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under Law but under grace." (Ro. 6:14). Notice carefully that this verse says that the reason sin will not have dominion over us is because we are not under the Law. If we were under the Law sin would have dominion over us! And if sin has dominion over us we are not being sanctified. Being free from the Law gives us freedom from the bondage of sin which results in sanctification. Galatians 3:2b-3 also denies that sanctification comes through the Law: "Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" The believers of Galatia had begun their Christian life by faith not by keeping the Law. Why now would they be deceived into thinking that what had begun
in the Spirit apart from the Law could be perfected by the flesh under the Law? This is the force of the whole argument in Galatians. The believers in the church were not trying to be saved by the Law, but trying to please God and grow in holiness by seeking to live under the Law. Paul calls this accursed (Gal. 1:8-9; 5:12).

Lastly, the Law cannot preserve us in salvation. Romans 8:3-4 states, “For what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Christ came as a sacrifice for sin and it was His work on the cross that fulfilled the Law and condemned sin.

According to Romans 7 we have been become dead to the Law (Ro. 7:4) and delivered from it (Ro. 7:6). Romans 10:4 sums up the argument; “Christ is the end of the Law (i.e. the termination or cessation of the Law) for righteousness to everyone who believes.” (For an excellent summary of Romans 7:1-6 see Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: the Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, 643)

The conclusion must be that the entire Law for the Christian is no longer binding. This includes even the moral Law. This is clear in II Corinthians 3 where the “tables of stone” (i.e. the 10 commandments, the moral Law) which guided the Israelites are called the ministry of death (II Cor. 3:7, 9) and have been done away with (II Cor. 3:7, 11). The great Accuser, Satan, used the Law to condemn us, but the charges against us have been nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14) so that we are free from judgment which the Law demands.

At this point one may wonder in what sense were the Jews under the Law? As we have seen, the people who lived in Old Testament times were under the Law from the time it was given till Christ died on the cross (Gal. 3:17-23). To be “under the Law” could only mean one of two things to a Jew; either it was (1) the way of salvation or (2) a rule (or guide) of life. We know for sure that it was not the way of salvation (see notes on “Salvation in the OT”). Therefore, we must conclude that the Jews were under the Law as a rule of life. Our conclusion is that the change from the Age of Law to the Age of Grace does not mean that before Christ people were saved by obeying the Law. As we have already seen the Law saves no one in any age.
What it means is that in the Old Testament period people were under the Law as a rule of life, today we are not.

3. distinctions of Law and grace

a. Law is distinct from grace in what it requires. Under the Law a man must “do and be” in order to receive the blessings of God. In other words, under the Law, man is seeking to gain acceptance with God through the works of the flesh. The person under grace, however, must “be to do.” That is, his actions flow from who he is as a new creature in Christ. That is, they come from the transformation of heart wrought by the living God.

The Law carries the sense of paying a debt required by God. With grace all the requirements of the Law have been met by Christ.

b. Law also differs from grace in the enablement it gives to those under it. One can search for even the slightest hint of divine enablement in keeping the 613 commandments in the Law and not find it. On the other hand, though the requirements of grace are above the Law, God has given abundant enablement. When a Christian is walking by the Spirit, he is empowered to do every good work that God requires of him (Phil. 2:13; II Thess. 2:16-17). What the Law could not do because of the weakness of the flesh, God did (Ro. 8:3-4).

c. The Law also differs from grace in that the Law was only temporary. Galatians 3:19 says that the Law “... was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made. . .”

Since the Law “was added” to the promises and covenants and would end when the Seed to whom the promise was made came, we see that the Law was intended to be temporary. It had a beginning and an end, but was neither the beginning nor the end in God’s dealing with the salvation of sinners. It was not the permanent means by which God would control human conduct but would serve its purpose until the Seed (Christ - Gal. 3:16) came. After He came the Law was terminated.

d. The results of Law and grace differ as well. The Law results in death, grace brings life (II Cor. 3:6)
4. the Christian's standard of life

The question naturally arises, if the believer is not under the Law in any sense of the term (ceremonially, morally, or civilly), then what is his standard of conduct? How does he determine what pleases God?

Though we are not under the Law of Moses we are under the Law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). Some say that this means that we are now under a new set of Laws given by Christ and the Apostles. But for all practical purposes, this is simply a move from one legal code to another. The change brought by grace is more fundamental than that. It is a change from the Law governing our lives by external restraint to the transformation of our hearts by the Spirit of God. The Law is no longer the rule of life, Christ is. And if Christ governs our lives then Christ's conduct is determined by His will not external commandments. This is not to say that the Law is no longer important for the will of God is found in the scripture which includes the Law. II Timothy 3:16 says that “all scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” Notice how sweeping Paul's statement is. He says “All scripture . . . is profitable.” “All” means that every part - even the Law of Moses with its moral, civil and ceremonial elements - are to be used for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that we may be adequate, equipped for every good work. We are not under the Law, but because the Law is inspired it is full of valuable doctrine and lessons for us.

James says that the Bible is like a mirror by which we able to see ourselves as we really are (Ja. 1:23-25). Our thinking and conduct should be molded by the Word of God. Though the Law is abolished (II Cor. 3:11, 13) it still remains part of the mirror of the Word of God and as such is profitable to us. But our conduct is also molded as we look in the mirror at Christ. From Him we learn that we ought to walk as He walked (I Jn. 2:6), suffer as He suffered (I Pet. 2:21), love as He loved (I Jn. 4:9, 10; 3:16) and keep His commandments (Jn. 14:21, 23) as He kept His Father's commandments (Jn. 14:31).

To be sure there is a progress in revelation and the believer's expression of faith varies in different ages; some things are superseded;
some may be abolished; some things are more important than others. But all things are governed by the will of God as revealed in the Scripture and the person of Christ.

Such freedom is fearful to some. If we are not under some type of code, wouldn't some take this freedom as license to sin? Surely some will. Even in Paul's day people argued "let us do evil that good may come." (Ro. 3:8a). Paul said, "Their condemnation is just" (Ro. 3:8b). Elsewhere he also admonishes us to not use our liberty as an opportunity for the flesh (Gal. 5:13).

For the true Christian, however, the doctrine of grace is not dangerous for only the grace of God can give life, transform, and empower us to please God. Those who desire to sin by using grace as an excuse only demonstrate that the grace of God is not in their lives. If it were there would be accompanying signs of a transformed life.

We are not under Law but under grace. Grace is the only environment in which the will of God can be most fully realized in the Christian life.

In the context of grace we grow (II Pet. 3:18); we stand (I Pet. 5:12); we are built up (Acts 20:32); we are made strong (II Tim. 2:1); we are made perfect (I Pet. 5:10); we find freedom from sin's dominion (Ro. 6:14); we find complete liberty from legal bondage (II Cor. 8:9); we find an enabling power for Christian living (II Cor. 12:9); we find recovery when we fall (Heb. 4:16) and we have assurance of the final outcome of our life (Acts 20:32).

For further reading:

1. Alva J. McClain, Law and Grace

2. Charles L. Feinberg, Millennialism: Two Major Views, 211-228


4. G.J. Wenham, NICOT, Leviticus, 32-37 (for a slightly different view on specifics)