

Under Law or under Grace?

3 Feb. 2008

Ps. 145: 1 - 3

Ps. 119: 1 - 3

Ps. 118: 4 - 6

Ps. 116: 5, 7, 9

Ps. 65: 2, 3

Scripture reading: Rom. 6: 1 - 23

Text: Rom. 6: 14, 15

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

We can only understand the gospel if we understand the relationship between law and grace. A misconception on this point is a misconception of the gospel itself.

A wrong idea of the function of the law can totally destroy any understanding of the gospel.

For this reason our text this morning is of the utmost importance:

“...sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace”.

To understand this text correctly, is to have full assurance of faith; a wrong understanding of this text, however, may lead to death.

Unfortunately this text is one of the most abused and misinterpreted verses in the Bible.

There is clearly a contrast between law and grace in this text, and it is of the utmost importance to understand this contrast correctly.

We need to look at this text, therefore, with careful discernment. The theme will be:

The power of Christ's death and resurrection

We will note...

1. Our final deliverance from the dominion of sin
2. Law and grace contrasted
3. Through grace we are no longer lawless

In the first place we note...

Our final deliverance from the dominion of sin

“...sin shall not have dominion over you...”

It is a statement. In this statement the apostle is telling us that sin is not able to have dominion over us. He says: it is impossible for sin to have dominion over us.

We come to this conclusion only after a careful study of the previous verses. We dealt with Rom. 6: 1 - 4 in a previous sermon, and we are not able to repeat all of that now, but the essence of the apostle's argumentation is this: when we were united to Christ, we were united in His death and resurrection. His death is our death, and His resurrection our resurrection. Therefore, he says, we are dead to sin. There came a final breach between us and sin, so that it is impossible for a believer to live any longer in sin. We no longer live under the control of sin, for our old man died with Christ. Our old man has been buried. Therefore, through our death in the death of Christ we are freed from the dominion of sin.

We were indeed born under the control and dominion of sin, but now, through our union with Christ, we died to sin and are dead to sin. There came a final separation between us and sin. We are no longer in Adam, but in Christ. And in Christ it is impossible for sin to have dominion over us.

Our old man died. Our old man is dead. Yes, in this chapter he is not speaking of a slow death or a process of dying. Scripture does command us to put to death the sin that still dwells in us. But when the apostle is speaking here of our death in the death of Christ, he is speaking of something that is finish and complete. Our old man no longer lives.

I know that there is a passage in Eph.4: 22 - 24 that seems to contradict this statement, but a careful study of that text, as it is found in the original language ¹, will reveal that there also Paul is confirming the same truth which he states here in Romans chapter 6. Also in Col.3: 9, 10 where he refers to the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new man, he refers to it in the past tense. It has happened, he says.

We are not clothed with both the old and the new man simultaneously. Our old man and our new man are not both alive simultaneously. When our old man died with Christ, it was

1. *Eph. 4:20 - 24 should be translated: "But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus, so that you have put off, concerning your former manner of life, the old man who is corrupted according to the lusts of deceit, and are being renewed in the spirit of your mind, and have put on the new man who after God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth".*

not the old man that was again raised with Christ, but the new man! Our old man was not raised after it has been buried with Christ. It seems as if the apostle works with this concept everywhere when he uses the expression old man and new man. But at least we can be absolutely sure that he uses the expression old man and new man with this meaning in Romans chapter 6. Our old man died with Christ and is dead. We are dead to sin, therefore we cannot live in it - verse 2. Our old man was crucified with Christ, therefore we are no longer slaves of sin - verse 6. We died with Christ, therefore we are free from the dominion of sin -

verse 7. Through our death in the death of Christ, we have been set free from slavery to sin (compare also verses 17, 18).

He speaks of our union with Christ in *His* death which happened only once. It is final and irreversible. When we were united to Christ our old man died a final death. The death of our old man in Christ cannot be undone, just as the death of Christ cannot be undone. And the death of our old man is not portrayed as a process of dying; just as Christ Himself is not in the process of dying. He says:

“...the death Christ died, He died to sin **once for all**; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. **Likewise you also**, reckon yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord” - verses 10, 11.

The apostle is not telling the believers to imagine that they are dead to sin, while in fact they are alive to sin. No, he is proclaiming a fact to them: the absolute certain fact of Christ's death and our union with that final death of Christ. In Christ we **are** dead to sin. In Christ it is **impossible** for us to live under the dominion of sin, for our old man has been crucified and has been buried. In Christ it is final and finish. And so, when we died with Christ we were freed from the dominion of sin with a final deliverance.

The apostle is not saying that we are totally freed from our old sinful nature. He does not at all deny that we continue to have a fierce struggle against indwelling sin as long as we live in this body. He clearly states in chapter 7 that in himself, that is in his flesh, nothing good dwells - 7: 18. He also describes his fierce struggle with sin. He continues to stumble and to do what he hates. But, he says, “if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me” - 7: 20. He reckons himself to be a new man, and that it is not the new man who sins, but the indwelling sin of his flesh that makes him to stumble and sin.

That teaching in chapter 7 is not in contradiction with what he says here in chapter 6. Here he clearly states that sin is not able to have dominion over the believer. If we are united with Christ, then we are freed from the dominion of sin.

He says we know this:

“...that our old man was crucified with Christ, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For He who has died has been freed from sin” - verses 6, 7.

This teaching of the apostle Paul is the very foundation for Christian ethics. Our new manner of life in obedience to God is only possible because our old man died with Christ and we were raised a new man in Him living by the power of His resurrection. Our death in Christ and with Christ and our resurrection in Him and with Him is the only reason why sin does not have dominion over us.

To understand Christian ethics we have to understand our union and communion with the death and resurrection of Christ. Only then are we able to have a correct view of Christian ethics. If we understand Romans chapter 6, then we have a total different view of Christian ethics than the man who says: “Don’t try to be too holy, remember, we are all sinners!” No, the logic of Romans chapter 6 is this: you are dead to sin and alive to God, therefore sin shall not have dominion over you; and because it does not have dominion over you, therefore, *let* it not have dominion over you!

When he comes with the command in verse 12, saying: “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body...”, then this command is based on the fact stated before, that they are freed from the power and dominion of sin.

The apostle is not saying that sin is reigning in the believer and that the believer must now stop sin from reigning in him. No, that would be contradicting everything that the apostle has been saying in this chapter.

Sin does not have the dominion - that is the indicative. Let sin not reign - that is the imperative. The *command* (not to let sin reign) is based on the *fact* (that sin does not have the dominion).

It is only because sin does not reign that it can be said: “Therefore, let not sin reign!”

It is the very fact that sin does not reign in the believer, that makes the exhortation possible: **Let** it not reign!

If you would say to a slave who has not been set free from slavery: “Do not behave as a slave!”, then you are mocking him. How can you tell a slave not to act as a slave?!

But if the man has indeed been set free from slavery and you tell him not to act as a slave, then you are telling him to put into effect the privileges and rights of his liberation.

In the same way the apostle Paul is telling us: sin does not have dominion over you, therefore: do not allow it to reign over you!

When he exhorts us, saying in verse 12 “...do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies”, then he is not mocking us. The exhortation simply reckons with the fact of our deliverance to be a fact indeed.

It is now in the context of this teaching that the apostle says in verse 14:

“...sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace”

It is a statement; a declaration of a fact: sin shall not have dominion over you - at least, if you are united with Christ.

Now, the **reason** why sin shall not have dominion over us, is stated in the second clause of verse 14:

“...for you are not under law but under grace”.

To be “not under law, but under grace” is a summary of all that he has been saying in this chapter.

The apostle says that the dominion which sin had over us has been removed, and that it has been removed not by the power of the law but by the power of grace - that saving grace by which we died to sin and was raised as a new man to live for God.

We look at that in the second place...

Law and grace contrasted

The apostle repeats the same statement, just in other words, when he says in chapter 8:

“...what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son...” - Rom. 8: 3.

While the law is perfect and holy and just and good, there is something that the law cannot do. It cannot save sinners. By the law sinners can only be condemned. Law as law, consisting in commandments, can do nothing but to confirm the damnation of a sinner.

The law could not act as our Mediator. The law could not deliver us from our slavery to sin. For those who transgress the law, the law can only administer death.

And as the law exposes sin to be sin, our sin became all the bigger in the light of the law.

Now, because the apostle Paul is zealous to guard the purity of the gospel from any distortion, he makes clear then that our deliverance from the slavery of sin was not achieved by our obedience to the law, but by grace alone. That is the contrast in our text.

Law and grace is contrasted within the context of the question: how was my bondage in sin removed? Not by law, but by grace! And the continuing power that is active in me, so that I am able also to live in this freedom, is the power of God's grace, and not the power of the law. We are under the saving power of grace, and not under the condemnation of the law anymore.

When he says: "not under law, but under grace", he refers to the source of our salvation.

To be under law means, in this context, to be helplessly lost in slavery to sin. To be under grace means, in this context, to be delivered from the dominion of sin. Therefore, the person who is under law - law as contrasted with grace - is still a bondservant of sin. Sin still has dominion over him. The person who is under law is still dead in his sins.

To be under grace, however, is to receive full redemption in Christ; it is to be rid of the old man and to be a new man in Christ. To be under grace is to be controlled by the power of Christ's resurrection unto sanctification and renewal.

Note that the contrast which the apostle makes between law and grace is limited to this context: we are not in slavery to sin under the condemnation of the law, but we are under the controlling power of saving grace. That is the contrast in our text.

But, dear congregation, the apostle is *not* saying: you are not under the obligation of law, but under the obligation of grace. No, such a contrast would be heresy. Our obligation to obey the law still stands. The apostle is not at all contrasting obligation and freedom. He is not at all contrasting duty with spontaneous love or anything like that.

There is a tendency among many evangelicals to view duty and love as excluding each other. True obedience to God, they say, is not exercised with a consciousness of duty, but by spontaneous love. Such a contrast, however, is not Scriptural. Love does not make us unconscious. In fact, the highest and the most perfect obedience to God, is not that which is done with a non-awareness of law, but that which is purposely and intentionally done in obedience to God's

commandments. Adam in his perfect state had to obey God's commandment not only with his heart, and unconsciously, but also with his will and mind. And it is to that perfection that we will again be restored.

Our duty and obligation to obey the law wholeheartedly and carefully is not in the least removed by grace.

Therefore also Paul does not leave grace alone to do its job, but he directs the resources of grace to purposeful and intentional obedience to God's law.

“...just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness” - verse 19.

Paul says: You were transgressors of the law, living lawless lives, but now you have to act as slaves of righteousness, serving God according to the requirements of His law. See how he does it: he puts righteousness and holiness over against lawlessness. Lawlessness is sin; obedience to the law is righteousness. That is the framework of the apostle Paul.

That is the paradigm with which the apostle works. Grace establishes the law and brings its requirements to fulfilment.

Now that you are free from the dominion of sin, not by your own power to obey the law but through your union with Christ, you must now act as a slave of that righteousness which the law demands.

It is clear then how shamelessly this text is abused by those who think that grace deliver us from the law. Grace does not deliver us from law or from duty, but from sin.

It is especially when we deal with a text like this one, that the warning of the apostle Peter applies where he says that there are people who twist the writings of the apostle Paul to their own destruction - 2 Peter 3: 16. And how do they twist the writings of the apostle Paul? He is referring to the false teachers who change

the grace of God into lawlessness. They twist the letters of Paul to proclaim a gospel without law.

Now, if there is any text in the letters of Paul that is twisted by these people, it is this text in front of us:

“...you are not under law, but under grace”.

It is misused and twisted by people who do not want to see themselves as under the obligation to live obedient to the law. This text is abused by people who reckon that Christian liberty is in contrast to strict obedience to the law! “Do not preach the Ten Commandments to us so strictly”, they say, “for we are not under law but under grace!”

But the apostle Paul is far from proclaiming such a heresy.

Let us therefore give our careful attention to what he *does* say in this chapter. In Christ we were delivered from the bondage of sin. His grace makes us servants of righteousness, so that we gladly serve God according to His law.

Through Christ’s death we died to sin and were freed from the dominion of lawlessness. Through the power of His resurrection we were made alive to serve God according to His commandments.

This is quite the opposite of what many has made of these words:

“...you are not under law, but under grace”.

Where then does the misunderstanding come from?

The answer has already been given by the apostle Peter when he said that it is unlearned and unstable people who twist the writings of the apostle Paul. Unlearned and unstable people!

First of all they are unlearned, for they have no clear understanding of the gospel. And therefore they are also unstable, quick to follow heresy.

If we have to read the Scriptures carefully and use it with accuracy, we have to do so especially with the writings of the apostle Paul.

He uses the word “law” in our text with a certain limited meaning. The contrast between law and grace in this text is not a contrast between obligation and freedom, as if he said: you are not under obligation of the law, but under the freedom of grace! No, the contrast is between law and grace as the means by which we were set free from sin. We are free from the dominion of sin not by the working or by the doing of the law, but by the powerful working of God’s grace in Christ.

This text, together with some other texts, is also misused by people who reckon that there is a contrast in doctrine between the Old and the New Covenant, as if the apostle had said: you are no longer under the law of the Old Covenant, but under the grace of the New Covenant. Such a declaration would be heresy!

The contrast between law and grace which is meant here in our text, also applies to believers who lived in the Old Testament. Moses was under grace, not under law.

When the apostle uses the word “law” in opposition to “grace”, we have to realise that in *that* sense there is no difference between the Old and the New Testament. Believers who lived in the time of the Old Testament were also under grace and not under law. They too were delivered from the dominion of sin by grace alone.

We find a certain kind of dispensationalism today which places the New Testament over against the Old Testament with regard to its doctrine. Over against such heresy we again have to confirm that the Old and the New Testament contains only one covenant; one and the same gospel.

The Old Covenant and the New Covenant does not differ in doctrine. Not at all!
The Old Covenant and the New Covenant is the same covenant.

The relation between the old covenant and the new covenant is that of progressive revelation and fulfilment. That which is revealed in the old covenant, the same is revealed more clearly in the new. It is a relation of promise and fulfilment, shadow and reality. That which the Old Testament taught, the same is worked out fully in the new. The Old Testament is not a testament of law, while the New Testament is a testament of grace. Such a contrast between the Old and the New Testament is not Scriptural. In fact, such a view totally destroys the gospel and produces a false gospel.

“...you are not under law but under grace.” Yes, there is still a third way in which this text is abused by many. Many think that we are no longer to live according to the law, but according to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And so they separate the work of the Spirit from the instruction of the law. They will therefore not say: “I do this and that in obedience to the revealed law of God”, but they will say: “The Spirit tells me what is right and wrong. No law has to teach me!” *That* they call the freedom of the Spirit and Christian liberty! We are no longer under law but under grace, they say. And so they change the grace of God to a mystic religion and a mystic obedience where one’s life is not directed by the revealed law of God, but by a mystic law of the Spirit.

Paul, however, is very far from proclaiming such a heresy.

Dear congregation, when the apostle says that we are not under law but under grace, our obligation to obey the law is not in the least removed, neither is the teaching of the old covenant replaced by something different, neither is the revealed law of God contrasted to a mystic obedience through grace.

Positively, there is a very good reason why the apostle does make a contrast between law and grace in the context of our deliverance from sin. The simple truth is that the law cannot contribute anything to our justification or acceptance with God, neither can it - of itself - empower us to break with sin and to obey God’s commands. That happens by grace alone when we are united with Christ

in His death and resurrection. If the law could contribute anything to this deliverance, then the gospel is made void. Therefore we must jealously guard the doctrine of grace against any teaching that we by our obedience to the law can contribute anything to our deliverance from sin. That is what the apostle is doing in our text when he contrasts law and grace.

But the apostle is just as jealous to guard the doctrine of the gospel against lawlessness. As soon as he starts to explain justification by faith, he immediately adds:

“Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law” - Rom. 3:31.

Unfortunately there are not many in our day who share the same zeal of the apostle to establish the law, and therefore they are misled by a false gospel and think that the law is outdated by the newness of grace.

But the grace which Paul proclaims is deliverance from the dominion of sin; deliverance from that which transgresses the law. He proclaims a grace that makes us truly obedient to the law.

While we are not under law, in the sense that we are not turned over to the law for our deliverance, yet we are indeed under law with regard to our obligation to God. Therefore the apostle says that he, Paul, is not free from the law of God, but that he is indeed under the law of Christ - 1 Cor. 9:21. And then he is not contrasting God's law with Christ's law. No, the law of God and the law of Christ is the same law. He simply states that he, Paul, is under the law.

So, he is not under law, in the sense that he is not placed under the power of law for his deliverance, but in another sense, he says, that he is indeed under the law: in the sense that he is not without the obligation to obey God's law.

In fact, Paul uses the term “under the law” in various different ways. Each time the context makes clear with which meaning the expression is used.

Sometimes the expression “under the law” refers to the outward administration of ceremonial laws, and as such the expression then refers to the old dispensation - 1 Cor. 9: 20.

And when he says in Gal. 3:23 that “...before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law”, the context makes it clear that he refers to the Mosaic economy which came 430 years after Abraham. In that context “under law” means something totally different from “under law” in Rom.6: 14!

It becomes clear, therefore, how unlearned and unstable men are misusing this expression “you are not under law but under grace”, when they use it as a general statement and without careful discernment. When these words are made loose of its context, the saying “you are not under law but under grace” becomes a most dangerous instrument for heresy.

We are not under law, in the sense that we are not turned over to law which unable to deliver us. If we turn to other passages of Scripture, we have to conclude that in another sense too we are not under law: we are no longer under the Mosaic economy. But there is another sense in which we are indeed under the law. Like Paul we too have to say that we are under the law of God and of Christ, and that God’s grace makes us obedient to the law.

Now we clearly see the limited sense in which law and grace is contrasted in our text. Grace does not at all take away our obligation to obey God’s revealed law strictly and carefully. Grace is also not something of the new covenant, while law is something of the old covenant.

No! The apostle only contrasts law and grace as far as he is speaking of the means of our salvation. We were saved not by law, but by grace. In all other ways law and grace is a twin, inseparably part of the same gospel, as God’s grace in Christ makes us obedient to the law. By grace we were delivered from sin unto holiness. By grace we are save from lawlessness unto obedience.

By grace we are gladly under the law of God. We note that in the third place...

Through grace we are no longer lawless

In all his teaching the apostle Paul is zealous and careful to guard the gospel against the idea that our obedience to the law can contribute anything to justification before God, or that the law of itself can do anything to deliver the sinner from his sin. But he is just as zealous to guard the gospel against lawlessness. And therefore he immediately adds a correction to any possible misunderstanding. He says, verse 15:

“What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!”

Shall we now reckon ourselves free from the obligations of the law? Shall we now live without law? Shall we now be lawless? Does grace make us indifferent to the requirements of the law? Certainly not!

The grace of which our text speaks, is not only God’s grace *for* us, but also His grace *in* us. It changes our lives. It renews us unto holiness. By grace our old man has been crucified and buried with Christ, and by grace we were raised as a new man in Christ, zealous for good works.

The apostle is not speaking in this chapter only about that which Christ has done for us, but also that which the power of His grace is working in us. If the latter is absent, if a new life of obedience is missing, then such a person is without Christ.

We were made alive and were made a new creation to the honour of God - at least, if we are united with Christ.

When the apostle says that we died with Christ and were raised with Him, he is not only speaking of our legal status before God, but he says that Christ’s death and resurrection has active effect in our lives. Through His death the dominion which sin exercised in our lives has now been removed. There came a very real breach between us and sin. This is not only true with regard to our death in the death of Christ, but also with regard to our resurrection through His resurrection. His resurrection is an active power renewing us, sanctifying us, restoring us to the image of God, making us joyful servants of righteousness.

“...we were buried with Him...that just as Christ was raised from the dead... even so we also should walk in newness of life...”

“...our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin...” (verses 4 - 7)

Because we are freed from the dominion of sin, therefore we are also **able** to obey the command in verse 12:

“...do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts”.

Doctrinally it is true that Christ’s death and resurrection provides the **legal** ground for our sanctification. But we miss the point of Paul’s teaching here in Rom. 6 if we limit Christ’s death and resurrection to provide only the legal ground for our salvation. When Paul is dealing with the newness of life which characterises the believer, his focus is not the fact that Christ died and rose again **for** believers, but the fact that believers died and rose again **with** Christ. That is his focus in this chapter. Christ’s death and resurrection is an active force working in us, sanctifying our lives. And the reason why Christ’s death and resurrection is an active force in us, is because we are united with Him and have communion with Him.

Our new life does therefore not flow forth simply because of Christ’s once-for-all accomplishment **for** us, but most importantly also from our continued communion **with** Him and **from** Him, as He communicates to us the effect of His death, and the power of His resurrection.

We are united to Him through faith, and it is only through faith that the **effect** of His death and resurrection is communicated to us. The Holy Spirit unites us to Christ through faith, so that all the riches of Christ become ours. Christ applies the effect of his death and resurrection to us through the working of His Spirit, and that through the preaching of the gospel. And so we died with Him and we rose with Him when we were united to Him through faith. We died with Him and we rose with Him when we were actively called into communion with Him.

Yet, there is also another sense in which we died with Christ and rose with Him. Just as we were in Adam when *he* sinned, and we all sinned *in him*, so also were we present in Christ, so that *we* died when Christ died on Calvary and we rose on the third day. According to our election in Christ and the death which He died for His elect, there is a real sense in which we were united to Christ before we were even born. There was a legal relationship between Christ and His people when He died and rose again. And so, when Paul says that we died with Christ and rose with Him, he refers not only to the time when we were joined to Christ through faith, but he also includes this relationship between Christ and His elect which was established before time began - an election in order to present us before God: holy and without blemish.

And so, when Christ died on the cross we died with Him.

But, dear congregation, when Paul says that we died to sin and that sin will therefore not have dominion over us, he is speaking of an actual and practical translation from the world of sin into the kingdom of God's own Son. And this did not take place at Calvary.

The virtue of Christ's death and the power of His resurrection are not active *in the hearts and lives* of God's elect until we are called into communion with Christ through faith.

Now, this actual transmission from a life of sin to a life of obedience is just as real and just as final as the death and resurrection of Christ Himself.

Our old man died, and we rose as a new man.

This definitive power of God's grace communicated to us in the death and resurrection of Christ, is what Paul has in mind when He says: **you are under grace!** By grace you died to sin, and by grace you were made alive.

It is a grace by which the breach between us and sin was made final and definitive. Through the effective power of this grace it became impossible for sin to have dominion over us. In the death of Christ we died to sin once for all, and by the

power of His resurrection we are made alive to serve God in a new life of obedience.

It is this grace that empowers us to live a holy life according to God's commandments.

Far from nullifying the law, this grace of which the apostle speaks, renews us in order that we may live according to the righteous requirements of the law. By this grace we happily and zealously obey God's commandments.

But to strip you from all pride and from any confidence in your own abilities, know that this liberation from sin unto holiness is by grace alone. It was given you not by any of your efforts to obey the law, but by faith alone, in the death and resurrection of Christ alone.

That is the meaning of our text: sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not turned over to the law which is unable to save, but you are engrafted into Christ, sharing in both the legal and the effective benefits of His death and resurrection.

By the grace of God your slavery to sin has been stopped, and by the same grace you were made alive to live for God.

In the context of the whole chapter, verse 14 has this meaning: through the grace of God, sin shall not have dominion over you. Instead, by grace the law has its fulfilment in your life. That is: a life free from the dominion of sin; a life devoted to God.

That is the grace which is proclaimed to us.

Does grace make us lawless? Certainly not!

By the death of Christ and by the power of His resurrection we were empowered to live a holy life - a holy life as revealed and clearly spelled out in the demands of the law.

Amen.