

Laws of Grace?

By Nathan Warner

*“Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, **grace** abounded all the more.” (Romans 5:20)*

We are all under law or standard of some sort or other. When we think of “law,” we have a tendency to think of religious commandments, like those from Leviticus. Most Christians would say they live solely under grace and are not under any form of law, but law is any standard that measures us – anything we measure ourselves by and find some form of comfort in conforming to. After all, we like to know where we stand, don’t we?

Sometimes we find ourselves lacking according to the measurement, while other times we feel secure in full measure. We must understand that anything we endeavor to do and accomplish in ourselves is a law that we hold ourselves to. We judge ourselves “good” or “bad” by how well we keep these laws.

For example, a law in my life when I was younger was that I would never drink alcohol or even be seen near a liquor store. I also would never be seen in the company of known sinners or in a place where it might be assumed I was sinning. I put a great deal of stock in how things were perceived and what people might think. In the process of measuring myself against these “laws,” I felt more secure in my “standing” when I successfully avoided these things. I felt pretty good about myself if I saw everyone else doing the things I felt were wrong, but I wasn’t doing them.

The problem is these laws assert a form of “righteousness” in our lives if we follow them. If we succeed in any of our laws, we have accomplished something in ourselves. The result is we are lulled into a false sense of security – a security outside of grace, and here the Devil springs on us.

An excellent example of how these “laws” lead us into dangerous territory are the vows King David makes in Psalm 101. Here, he forges standards of righteousness for himself that he judges himself successful by:

“I will sing of steadfast love and justice;
to you, O LORD, I will make music.
I will ponder the way that is blameless.
Oh when will you come to me?
I will walk with integrity of heart
within my house;
I will not set before my eyes
anything that is worthless.
I hate the work of those who fall away;
it shall not cling to me.
A perverse heart shall be far from me;
I will know nothing of evil.
Whoever slanders his neighbor secretly
I will destroy.
Whoever has a haughty look and an arrogant heart
I will not endure.

I will look with favor on the faithful in the land,
that they may dwell with me;
he who walks in the way that is blameless
shall minister to me.
No one who practices deceit
shall dwell in my house;
no one who utters lies
shall continue before my eyes.
Morning by morning I will destroy
all the wicked in the land,
cutting off all the evildoers
from the city of the LORD.”

What a testament this Psalm is against our ability to keep ourselves righteous. Perhaps David was lulled into a false sense of security after he became king. It was likely shortly after writing this psalm that David fell into adultery, deception, and murder – all things he swore he’d never allow in his kingdom, to say nothing about doing himself. It is a warning to us that any comfort we get out of following standards for our direction may misguide us into dangerous self-righteousness. This psalm should be a stop sign against holding ourselves, measuring ourselves, and judging ourselves by standards instead of the grace of the Lord.

This is not to say that we cannot notice a failing in our lives or in someone else’s life and seek to correct it. The danger is when we do so in ourselves and not in Christ. We must only measure ourselves by Jesus Christ, because we will ALWAYS be wanting and without righteousness in comparison with Him – always in need of infinite Grace because there is no way we can ever make ourselves like Jesus. This is the way it MUST be. We can do nothing but accept God’s gift of Grace to make us like His Son.

When struggling with law in our lives, it helps to reflect on Jesus’ life. He didn’t live His life by any self-righteous laws, but the people around Him sure did. Take for example my self-imposed law that I wouldn’t be seen in a bar. Jesus ate with publicans and sinners, until the Jews said, “*Look at Him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!*” (Luke 7:34b) What Christian would live their lives so such a thing could be said about them by the people they were trying to bring to salvation? Very few, I imagine. Yet this is what Jesus did, for He said, “*The Son of Man has come eating and drinking*” (Luke 7:34a). This is not to say that Jesus was a glutton or a drunkard. Most certainly He was not, but He visited the places associated with sin and revelry because these were the people that needed the Gospel most. How uncomfortable this must have made His disciples! How uncomfortable it might make many a Christian! Especially those like me who have lived “secure” in self-imposed law by standards of righteousness.

Another law I had in my life was that I most certainly wouldn’t be seen in situations that might be construed as taking advantage of a woman or that might raise suspicions about my intentions. If I kept myself from these situations then I would have a tendency to count myself honorable and free from any shame.

How interesting it is that Jesus did not care what people thought, even on this issue. Take for example the fact that he allowed women disciples to follow him. Any review of Jewish customs during the time shows this was scandalous behavior for a Rabbi. It was also a serious offense to speak to a woman in public who was not a relative, yet Jesus takes the opportunity to talk with

the woman at the well – a very awkward and compromising situation as we see his disciples react: *“Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, ‘What do you seek?’ or, ‘Why are you talking with her?’”* (John 4:27) Jesus did not explain Himself to them. He did not say, “Oh, hey, everybody...uh, this woman was just getting me some water, that’s all.” He didn’t even try to clarify it for gossip’s sake, though He knew what each of them was thinking.

Why did Jesus not care what other people thought? Why wasn’t he living His life by laws and standards to avoid gossip and misunderstandings? The answer is because He only cared what His Heavenly Father thought. He understood that nothing anyone thought mattered in eternity – only what God thinks matters. Jesus would perform His Father’s will regardless of what people might insinuate, suspect, murmur, or mock. The damage to reputation from gossip or slander did not matter to Him because He knew His Heavenly Father would honor Him regardless of what men thought or said.

May we also live our lives so focused on Jesus as our infinite measuring stick that the possible slanders to our reputations do not matter. May we accept the complete and pure grace of God in our lives as the only honor we need and the only standard that matters, *“so that, as sin reigned in death, **grace** also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”* (Romans 5:21)