

Holiness and the Law

By Jane Titrud

The Christian is called to be holy, just as God is Holy: *“As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY”* (1 Peter 1:14-16 NASB).

One way or another, this would seem to involve keeping the commandments of God. Not only is obedience the objective of this verse, but the Apostle John also says that this is how to tell whether we have come to know Him and if we abide in Him: *“By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments, The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked”* (1 John 2:3-6).

At the same time, an important part of the Gospel is the fact that Believers have been released from the Law: *“Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God”* (Romans 7:4), *“but now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter”* (Romans 7:6). *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE’”* (Galatians 3:13). *“When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross”* (Colossians 2:13, 14).

If the Law is said to be a curse leading to bondage and death – a curse from which we have been freed by what Christ accomplished on the Cross – how is it then that we are still expected to keep His commandments? The commandments are an important part of the Law. So, just what exactly is the relationship of the Believer to the Law now that one is said to be “under grace?”

Since Christians can still sin, we must have some relationship to the Law: *“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us”* (1 John 1:8). The Law is what brings about the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20; 7:7).

Yet, fleshly efforts to keep the Law do not lead to victory over sin and increasing holiness. On the contrary, the Law tends to stimulate the sin nature when addressed to the flesh (Romans 7:8-11). The problem is not the Law: *“So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good”* (Romans 7:12). It is the condition of the flesh: *“For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin”* (Romans 7:14).

Therefore, the Christian relationship to the Law must not involve keeping it in the flesh, *“because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so”* (Romans 8:7). There must be another way to achieve God’s will with respect to holiness.

In other words, approaching the Christian life by setting up a bunch of rules and regulations to follow—or even the Laws of God—and attempting to keep them by exercising personal willpower over sin is not the answer to growing in holiness. All this does is put one under the

curse associated with the Law, for one is then obligated to keep the whole of it: *“For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM’”* (Galatians 3:10).

Yet, by the same token, if we live as if the moral Law has no more relevance to the Christian life at all, then we become vulnerable to sin. That is because without the guidance of the moral Law with respect to what constitutes sin, there would be no way of telling whether we were living according to the will of God or not.

The solution to this apparent dilemma is found in Romans 8 and Galatians 2: *“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so **that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit**”* (Romans 8:2-4, bold emphasis added). *“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly”* (Galatians 2:20-21).

So the answer according to these verses is that we are to walk by faith in the power of the Spirit. Herein is victory over the desires of the flesh. Moreover, this is how we fulfill the Law without coming under the bondage of the Law. All is by faith in the provision of God. And, we are told not to nullify the grace of God by trying to perfect righteousness by keeping the Law.

Under the Gospel, the purpose of the moral Law is merely to provide guidance, not condemnation (Romans 8:1). In other words, it stands as a set of principles by which we can tell whether we are following the Spirit or the flesh. Nevertheless, we definitely have a responsibility to follow the Spirit. We are not free to do whatever we want: *“for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live”* (Romans 8:13). *“For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law”* (Galatians 5:17-18).

Hence, we must learn to walk in the Spirit. This is the essence of a process of growing in holiness called “sanctification.” Participation in this process is not an option, for we are told to *“pursue peace with all men, and **the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord**”* (Hebrews 12:14, bold emphasis added). It is just that we must pursue sanctification by faith. Walking by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit is what leads the Christian to victory over sin. We must allow our failures to drive us to the Holy Spirit rather than to fleshly efforts in trying to keep the Law.

Unfortunately, a lack of understanding in this area due to a prevailing absence of adequate teaching has led many a Christian to turn to the wisdom of the world and self-help groups instead of the Spirit. These basically try to fix up the flesh but to no avail. They might appease the conscience temporarily by achieving a certain amount of victory over a besetting sin. Yet, this is not the way to achieve righteousness before a Holy God (consider the example of Israel as described in Romans 9:30-33).

Sanctification and justification are actually both part of the same Gospel. Just as we first received justification by faith, so we are to walk in God’s provision of the Holy Spirit by faith ever after (Galatians 3:3). The former saves us from the penalty of our sins while the latter saves us from the power of sin. That way, the requirement of the Law is not only fulfilled during the

process of sanctification, leading to increasing holiness in practice, but everything about the Gospel is accomplished by the power of God instead of the works of the flesh. Hence, there is no reason for anyone to boast about personal righteousness and holiness. Whatever glory there is belongs to Him. And blessed be His holy name for His marvelous provision and awesome Gospel! Amen.