

Lawyers, Law, and Principle

The Law of Moses could save no one. Neither can the law of Christ. Law has no power to save. It can only define guilt (Rom. 3:20).

Even if they could have kept it perfectly, no one was saved by keeping the Ten Commandments and the Law of Moses, yet upright Jews who lived under those laws were saved by the grace of God in Christ. Grace is not a quality of law. As it was with Abraham, their father and our father, their faith was rewarded. In his epistle to the believers in Galatia, Paul, emphasizing that salvation is through faith rather than works of law, reveals, *“But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons”* (Gal. 4:4f).

Under a system of law, sin has dominion over a person for one cannot live free from guilt. Under graceless law guilt could only accumulate. However, to disciples Paul assured, *“For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace”* (Rom. 6:14). If God replaced the Code of Moses by a Code of Christ, we would still be under the dominion of sin. *“But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit”* (Rom. 7:6). We would still be under the rule of sin if we had been given another code of law, but God had something better, *“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”* (John 1:17).

How could I have ever been so misdirected to think one code, set, listing, or book of law replaced the other when Paul says so plainly that God *“has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life”* (2 Cor. 3:6)? Further, the new covenant, or new testament, is not the New Testament scriptures. So when I held up the New Testament scriptures and declared them to be the law of Christ, I was lost in the fog of legalism! The old covenant was based on law while the new covenant is based on grace. If you have not read Carl Ketcherside’s *The Death of the Custodian*, please read it at my site or order a copy from me. It may bring exciting enlightenment to you as it has to thousands.

“Don’t the scriptures speak of the law of Christ in Galatians 6:2?,” you may rightly ask. Yes, and it may seem contradictory that Paul would refer to the law of Christ in the very letter he was writing to warn against efforts to attain justification by keeping law. So we must look for the distinction Paul makes.

As we have already noted, Paul says God has not imposed a written code upon us. In the new covenant the Lord says, *“I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts”* (Heb. 8:10). Does he write them on our hearts by our thorough study of a written code in the New Testament? I once knew a wonderful brother who had memorized the whole book we call the New Testament. Was God’s entire law written in his heart? Not necessarily!

There is something greater than encoded law. It is the principle on which law is based. A principle of action is the higher law of the heart, the principle and motivation by which we judge every thought and action. Look again at the instructions, commands, exhortations, warnings, and “precedents” in the New Covenant scriptures which you might have considered to be parts of a code of law. Does not each of these point to a higher principle? And what is that higher principle? Paul’s passage gives a clue: “*Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*” By loving concern for others, we fulfill the law written on the heart. There’s no code that defines it giving particulars as to how to fulfill it and when it is done satisfactorily.

Consider this example: if a code demanded specifically that you give a needy person a certain percentage of your income, you might give that with no love but in order to be legally right – justified by law. That would eliminate grace, for you would be justified by keeping law correctly. Paul would declare you fallen from grace! Do you respond to Paul’s exhortation because a law demands it or out of willing desire to help a burdened person?

God wrote his law / principle of action in our hearts. In our being justified by faith, “*God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us*” (Rom. 5:1). “*We love, because he first love us*” (1 John 4:19). Ours is a responsive action of love rather than an effort to gain justification by keeping a code of law. Our worship, good deeds, and dedication to right living are a loving response to grace, a fulfilling of the law of Christ, a rule by the highest principle on which all law is based, rather than an effort to keep details of a code of law for continued justification. That would be legalism.

The principle of love has always been higher than specific laws. Jesus spoke of love being the Great Commandment. His “commandments” (plural) are really only the same principle directed two ways -- to God and to man -- guiding the spiritual and the moral. These were not new to Jesus, but were from Moses, for “*On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets*” (Matt. 22:37f).

This higher principle has always been allowed to over-ride specific commands. It offered the only aspect of grace and mercy to law, not by forgiving infractions but by the avoidance of guilt because of higher motivation. For example, the law said specifically, “*Thou shalt not kill.*” That is inflexible and universal in its statement, but flexibility resulted from application of the higher principle of love. We know that there are instances in which killing was not accounted as a sin, some even being directed by God himself. Yet the code in stone still forbade killing.

“Well”, one counters, “we know that it meant that one should not murder, so it should be translated, ‘You shall not murder.’” Killing and murder are differentiated by motivation. The motivation of the higher principle avoids the guilt from killing. It is never sinful to act on the highest principle of conduct – love! As a simple example, traffic laws are for the good of citizens, but the higher good may be served in ignoring them when you are rushing your critically injured child to the hospital. Yet, the love for your child should not recklessly over-power your concern for other persons you may endanger along the way.

Most everyone agrees that one has the right to protect his family or other innocent people. But where do the New Testament scriptures teach us that we may kill or wound or deceive an attacker to protect the innocent? It is not there in code, but it has always been there in principle! It is not a violation of “*Thou shalt not kill*” to take life in following this higher principle upon which all moral law is based.

Here is where we begin to hear screams of “situation ethics,” “antinomianism,” “relativism,” and “Joseph Fletcher”! Though I could never scream very loudly, I once was among the screamers. Well, at least, I whimpered! I was so conditioned by the teaching that we must follow an inflexible, graceless code that I resisted any new thought on the subject. I don’t know exactly what Joseph Fletcher taught but only what others represented him as teaching. I do know Paul taught that love fulfills all law and that there is no law against love (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; 5:22f). I do know what Jesus taught, and if application of his higher principle of conduct be situation ethics, then let it be! To disparage the following of the principle of love Jesus and Paul taught, and the law and the prophets promoted, as antinomian is evasive and deceptive – even when I did it!

Jesus deliberately tested the Sabbath law to teach that doing good on the Sabbath, even the caring for a distressed animal, was not a violation of the law. (You may check out these and related references: Matt. 12:1f; 12:9f; Luke 13:10f; 14:1f. All of this is treated more fully in the first chapters of *Free In Christ*. You may read it on the web or order it from me. Please read it.

Objectors are quick to rebut that Jesus did not violate the Sabbath but only the traditions the Jews had bound about it. That might be good to know, but where did you get that information? Why didn’t Jesus say that he was only violating traditions? Instead, he defended his actions using other violations of law as his precedent, such as David eating the holy bread which was unlawful for him to do.

Yes, Jesus was sinless. He did no sin. That only emphasizes the point: there is no guilt in acting on the higher principle of law although it may over-ride a command in a specifically worded code, even as we have illustrated about killing. The stated code about the Sabbath sponsored no mercy. Grace is not a part of law. But the higher principle allows for mercy and grace. Jesus emphasized that. He declared that man was not made for law, that is, to keep arbitrary law regardless of the circumstance. On the contrary, law was made for man, that is, for the good of man in his varying situations.

My use of Rahab as an illustration of this principle has drawn strong objections from some sincere persons who think I have jumped the track. They believe a lie is a lie, hence an infraction of divine law, which is a sin under any circumstance. I can appreciate such conviction. If a legal code always prevails, they are right. But the preservation of God’s approved people was a higher motivation than keeping a specific law. Why should this be harder to accept than the action of David and many others who violated the code by killing in promoting the welfare of God’s people? To maintain that Rahab sinned, but later repented of it, is an assumption devised to uphold an unwarranted conclusion.

It is of interest that objectors do not make their case on David eating the holy bread. Jesus said it was unlawful for him to eat it, but Jesus used David's action as an approved precedent for his Sabbath violations (Matt. 12:1-8). It is hard to explain that away!

Why is it easier to justify God, who prohibited killing, for killing Nadab and Abihu and many others, than to justify Jesus for Sabbath infractions? Jesus declared, "*The Son of man is lord even of the Sabbath*" (Mark 2:28). He was not ruled by law but by the lofty principle that fulfilled all law.

God has shown us how we can express the higher principle of love through commands, exhortations, instructions, and examples, but if these are followed as a code of law, the higher principle is lost. Perhaps you were taught, as I was, to think that all the writings of the New Testament were Christ's law. We were to search through biography, history, letters of love and correction to persons and congregations, and prophecy to find and piece together a legal system of Christ. We who claimed to speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where it is silent developed a hermeneutic, or method of interpretation, which is not found in those scriptures. It is the fruit of human logic.

Next week, if the Lord wills, I will deal more with our hermeneutic of *command, example, and necessary inference*. []

(Cecil Hook; September 2006, a revision of FR 25 of September 1997.)