

YES, WE ARE UNDER LAW!

The thoughts here are related to the lessons concerning Abraham's justification, but I have given this a distinctive title. This will further deal with our understanding of terms and their contexts relating to justification.

Paul declared unequivocally, "*For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law*" (Rom. 3:28). Further, he wrote, "*For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace*" (6:14). Various other familiar references reinforce that we are not under law.

In this same setting (4:15) he explains, "*For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.*" John adds, "*Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin lawlessness*" (1 John 3:4-NIV). An infant cannot sin because no law has ever been addressed to a baby. Likewise, if we are not under law, we cannot sin for no law has been addressed to us. One cannot violate a law which does not exist.

In the next sentence after declaring that they were not under law but under grace, however, Paul continues, "*What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness*" (6:15-6). He admits that they could choose to sin. How could they sin if they were not under a law which they could violate? He concludes with, "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (6:23). One of Paul's many warnings about sinning was, "*Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions*" (6:12). Does Paul contradict himself? When he wrote, "*If you are led by the Spirit you are not under law,*" was he admitting that there was law but that the Spirit led them to be above the law instead of being obedient to it? If yes, what is that law?.

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Paul urged, "*Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the LAW OF CHRIST*" (Gal. 6:2). In the very same epistle he had declared, "*You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by law; you have fallen from grace*" (5:4). A few sentences later he commends fulfilling THE LAW OF CHRIST! That was no slip of memory. He added to that: "*To those outside the law I became as one outside the law -- not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ -- that I might win those outside the law*" (1 Cor. 9:21). In establishing the new covenant, the Lord had said he would put his laws in their minds and write them on their hearts (Heb. 8:8-12). James speaks of "*the perfect law, the law of liberty*" under which we will be judged: "*So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty*" (James 1:25; 2:12). This is all in harmony with Jesus' own declaration that "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*" (John 14:15). Do not authoritative commandments have the force of law?

No doubt, you agree that Paul is not contradicting himself. Let's see if we can agree on the insight that may clear any confusion.

The term "law" can have different shades of meaning. It can mean a specific CODE OF RULES like the Law of Moses. This is the way Paul used it most of the time in dealing with Jew - Gentile issues as we have discussed. But Jesus' commandments and the "law of Christ" as Paul and others wrote about related to more general PRINCIPLES OR RULES OF ACTION. The Jews enumerated 613 specific laws in the code delivered through Moses. Although those who think Jesus gave a similar code of law have been challenged to make a list of them, no one, to my knowledge, has ever attempted it. He did not give us such a codified law, and even if he had, no one could be saved by keeping it because law cannot save. A code of law only points out what is sin, and sin brings death, not life.

A concise statement of principles is: "*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love*" (Gal. 5:6). The principle of works of law is ineffective but the principles of justification by faith and obedience of faith motivated by love prevail in our relationship with God. Scanning this chapter gives us a better understanding of these principles.

In his allegory in Chapter 4 Paul concludes that we are not children of the slave but the free woman. The slave woman represented bondage to the Law while the free woman represented the spiritual Jerusalem which came down from heaven from God. He concludes that anyone seeking justification by the law had given up freedom and had fallen away from grace. He then pointed to the principles quoted above. But their liberation was not freedom from principles to guide and limit their conduct -- like "*but through love be servants of one another.*"

He continues, "*For the whole law (not the law of Moses but the law of Christ, his rule of action - ch) is fulfilled in ONE WORD, 'You shall LOVE your neighbor as yourself.'*" After initiating our relationship with him through baptism, all that Jesus requires can be accomplished by letting love rule our conduct. It is not an easy route, for there is conflict between the spirit and the flesh. "*But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under law.*" There is no code of laws as a checklist for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these attributes of character. Let every decision be guided by the principle of love and don't worry about defining codes! Effort to live by checklists is frustrating slavery.

The alarming truth is that all disciples do not follow the leading of the Spirit into practice of the principle of faith working through love. Their selfish lack of love leads to works of the flesh -- "*immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like.*" These are contrary to love. Can a believer do those things? If not, Paul must have been terribly stupid for mentioning them! The seriousness of the possibility deserved double warning, "*I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.*"

The basic “law of Christ” is love -- love God and love man. The scriptures give directions, instructions, commands, examples, etc. as to how love can be demonstrated but they suggest no point of completion at which time one can cease to love. May we love enough to earn forgiveness of sins. No. Then does love have anything to do with our eternal salvation. Yes. Selfishness produces works of the flesh which bar one from the kingdom. Eternal life is to know God (John 17:3), but *“He who does not love does not know God, for God is love”* (1 John 4:8). Love is the bond of our relationship for *“He who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him”* (1 John 4:16). Will hatred alienate us from God? Yes. *“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen”* (4:20). *“He who does not love remains in death. Any one who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him”* (1 John 3:15). *“Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth”* (3:18).

Since our eternal relationship depends upon our following the principle of love in all our conduct, does it become meritorious? No more than faith does. Does either principle “help God to save us”? No, for both principles recognize that Jesus accomplished the salvation for us which we must accept through faith working by love.

Does this concept not revive all the old feelings of insecurity that legalism instills? Can a person ever be sure he has loved enough? We have to ask the same question about faith. Can a person be sure his faith is strong enough? Faith and love require the same answer!

Since Paul set forth the principle of justification by faith working through love, we will point to three of his own many expressions of both vulnerability and confidence. Like a runner or boxer seeking victory, he says of himself, *“I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified”* (1 Cor. 9:27). In the next chapter he tells of the many Hebrew ancestors chosen of God who sinned and were overthrown. Learning a lesson from them, he warns, *“Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall”* (10:12). Though he gave many such wise warnings, his confidence was unshakable as his death approached: *“For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing”* (2 Tim. 4:6-8). That was not confidence in self but trust in the gracious and righteous Judge.

You and I can fight our fight and run our race with the same confidence. Because of God’s grace through Christ, I share Paul’s fearless trust and confidence as I, too, am fighting the final round and running the last lap.

[For sake of brevity, I have used few references. More details are given in *Free In Christ*, Chapters 3 and 4.]

(Cecil Hook; September 2002) []

