

Holiness and Law

Reading: Rom. 7:7-12

⁷What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."⁸ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.¹⁰ The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.¹² So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

It is possible that some of us may be struggling with the studies so far because I have not made any comments regarding the way we express ourselves as God's holy people. I have deliberately done it this way, i.e. refrain from commenting on the expression of holiness in our lives. The reason is simple. We do not subordinate the teaching of scripture to our culture, i.e. the way we express ourselves, because that will be different in various cultures. We need to be aware of that as our world is getting smaller with people from different parts of the world coming into our midst. We need to see what is given to us in scripture first and then work out how we are to express ourselves in the context of our culture. In other words, our culture has to be subordinated to scripture. I will deal with that in the last study next week. Furthermore, we need to see the place of law before we can go any further and that is what we are going to do this morning.

We need to say something about holiness and the law. This is because so much of the teaching on holiness involve the law, i.e. what one needs to do to be holy. We have already refuted this approach in the previous studies. While we may say that we are not under law, yet legalism abounds in our outlook and church management. I know that all of us have to struggle with this. While we say that we are justified by faith, yet we have often looked at others through our legal prism.

On the other hand, there are also those who assert that we are not under law but under grace, since sanctification as well as justification is by faith. They have put law and grace at opposite ends of the spectrum of divine providence. The 'law and gospel' debate has been a contentious issue in many circles. Part of the difficulty lies in trying to see sanctification by faith and apart from the law.

We have held fast to Luther's 'justification by faith' in the Reformed tradition. We have also seen last week that sanctification is also by faith. However, before we go further, when we consider the doctrine of justification by faith, we need to see another of Luther's dictums, i.e. *simul justus et peccator*, which in Latin means simultaneously righteous and sinner. This is confusing for most people because how can one be righteous and sinner at the same time. Calvin made this clearer for us.

But even while by the leading of the Holy Spirit we walk in the ways of the Lord, to keep us from forgetting ourselves and becoming puffed up, traces of our imperfection remain to give us occasion for humility. Scripture says: There is no righteous man, no man who will do good and not sin (1 Kings 8:46). What sort of righteousness will they obtain, then, from their works? First, I say that the best work that can be brought forward from them is still always spotted and corrupted with some impurity of the flesh, and has, so to speak, some dregs mixed with it. Let a holy servant of God, I say, choose from the whole course of his life what of an especially noteworthy character he thinks he has done. Let him well turn over in his mind its several parts. Undoubtedly he will somewhere perceive that it savors of the rottenness of the flesh, since our eagerness for well-doing is never what it ought to be but our great weakness slows down our running in the race. Although we see that the stains that bespatter the works of the saints are plainly visible, though we admit that they are only the slightest spots, will they not offend God's eyes, before which not even the stars are pure [Job 25:5]? We have not a single work going forth from the saints that if it be judged in itself deserves not shame as its just reward. (Calvin, *Institutes*, III, xvi, 9)

That is a long-winded way of saying, 'None is righteous, no, not one' in Rom. 3:10. That is because sin continues to indwell us.

This saying of Luther has been interpreted in various ways. One way that might make sense is to hold that we are partially sinner and righteous. This would make a perfect excuse for our indifference to the things of God. It would also infer a partial holiness which we have rejected in a previous study. The other way is to take it as wholly righteous and wholly sinner. This would make it even more difficult as how is it possible to hold together two

states which are mutually exclusive. One cannot be a sinner and righteous at the same time. Either way we have a problem in understanding Luther.

First of all, we need to note that this saying of Luther is a confession of our faith, very much like what we have in the Nicene Creed confessing that Christ is wholly man and wholly God. We affirm that through the teaching of scripture. We do not try to explain it. So, this saying of Luther affirms our justified status before God through the work of Christ on the cross. While this is so, it also says that the sinful nature remains in us. We are to hold these two states together like the way we hold together the humanity and divinity of Christ.

In holding to justification by faith, we cannot infer from this that there is any intrinsic righteousness in us, i.e. we have become righteous. No, we do not become righteous. We are only declared righteous. We have often misunderstood Paul's reference to Abraham when he said, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness' (Rom. 4:3). The word 'counted' is declared, not become. The root is *lego*, to say. We may paraphrase the verse this way, 'Abraham believed God, and it was said that he was regarded as righteous'. We are only righteous in a forensic sense meaning that the work of Christ has covered our sins in judgment. We embraced that by faith and we become united with Christ. As a result, we are sanctified in Christ. We have said before that union with Christ, justification and sanctification happen together.

As sin remains in us, our efforts towards sanctification count for nought in the sight of God. That is why the phrase in Rom. 6:19, 'now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification' cannot be interpreted as progressive sanctification as the process cannot achieve the intended result as our best works are tainted with sin. On the contrary, it is because we have been sanctified that we have the desire to 'present our members as slaves to righteousness'. In other words, all that we do cannot count towards our sanctification. Rather, our works display our sanctified state. It is because of our sanctification that we present ourselves as a living sacrifice showing forth the Christ who sanctified us. We have already mentioned this in the study last week.

The problem for us is that we equate sanctification with the absence of sin. In this way of thinking then it is impossible to reconcile Luther's statement. Paul addressed the Corinthian Christians as saints, i.e. holy ones, even though he was well aware that there were still sinful issues to be resolved within the congregation. Paul knows very well that sanctification is grounded in the work of the Triune God and not in the works of those whom he addresses.

In holding to our sinful state, we are saying that original sin is not removed even though forensically our sinful state do not appear before the judgement of God. It is still possible for us to sin, the *posse peccare*, not the *posse non peccare*. In holding to our sinful state, we do not despair, but we must continually look back to the cross as John assured us.

¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. (1 John 2:1-2)

John was writing to his little flock and was aware of their liability to sin. So, looking back to the cross enables us to hold to our righteous state by the grace of God. It keeps us humble knowing that we liable to do the same as the other person. As we are aware of our weakness, we also look forward to the eschaton when everything will be restored in Christ. We live in this tension between the cross and the eschaton, as both sinner and righteous. As we face the temptation and trials in this life, and as we win a victory over them by the grace of God and in faith, we are affirming the truth of this statement.

So, we see that Luther's *simul justus et peccator* is not just a theological formulation, but is rooted in scripture. This being so, the proper response to sanctification is not works but repentance that flows from faith as John pleads with his little children. The solution to this formulation is not by working out how it can be in a mechanical way, but by accepting our existence between the cross and the eschaton. It is living in the Sabbath of God and our keeping the Sabbath holy is by our dependence on all that God has already bestowed in us through Christ. Any deviation from this is unholy.

In our confession as simultaneously righteous and sinner, we are affirming our inability to do anything for our

holiness as our best effort is tainted with sin. This puts us totally in the hands of the Saviour to work it out for us. We can only look back to the cross and forward to the eschaton when He comes in glory.

We need to affirm this confession as we wrestle with the place of the law in our sanctification. Earlier on I have said that some have put the law and grace at opposite ends of God's spectrum of divine providence. Rather, we should see law as the grace of law as I will explain shortly. The rejection of law gives rise to forms of antinomianism. For a start we need to look at what John says in the prologue of his gospel.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

This is John's prologue to his gospel. Unlike the other gospels, John did not start with the incarnation. He went right back not just to creation, but to eternity past which he called the beginning, and gave us just a glimpse of the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. Christ's coming revealed the glory of God, full of grace and truth. However, it seems that John then put the law in opposition to grace, as is commonly understood when he wrote, 'the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). If that is so, how then do we understand the phrase, 'grace upon grace (*charis anti charistos*)' which precedes this statement. Admittedly, the word *anti* translated as upon is a difficult one. One can put it literally as 'grace instead of grace' which makes it even more difficult to understand. It is grace upon grace because of what follows, law and grace. We have put law and grace in antithesis. Now if we change that supposition to understand law as grace, then it makes perfect sense. What John is saying is that the grace of Jesus has come upon the grace of law. Put it in another way, the grace of Jesus has come on top of the grace of law. What was given to us in shadows is now made evident in Christ. The argument that John is making is that the law is glorious but with the coming of Christ it is even more glorious.

We have already seen in a previous study on Deuteronomy that the giving of the law by Moses is the grace of God. The whole of Deuteronomy (Second Law) speaks of the 'Triumph of Grace' or 'Grace in the End', to use the titles of two excellent books on Deuteronomy. We cannot split the bible into law and grace. Right from the beginning of Genesis it is the grace of God in operation. There is an intrinsic unity between the Old and the New Testaments.

With this preamble we can now go into the theme of this study, 'The grace of law'. I am here using the title of a book written sixty years ago.

The Grace of Law

The term 'law' in scripture is used in a few senses this needs to be defined before any discussion on the subject. Otherwise, we will be talking of different issues and the discussion will get rather confused. Firstly, it is used of the law of Moses, referring to the Ten Commandment. Secondly, it is used in reference to the ceremonial law. Thirdly, it is used for the laws derived from the commandments, eg. the Pharisaic code or the laws of the community and even church orders. Lastly, it is used for a principle, eg. the law of the mind.

For our discussion, we will refer only to the first, the law of God. This is the sense that Paul referred to in his epistles and this is the issue under discussion here. The law when used unqualified in most cases refers to the law of Moses. We know that the ceremonial laws of the tabernacle do not apply to us in a direct way, i.e. we do not carry out those rituals anymore because they were a shadow of the Christ who came. However, the principles of those rituals still apply to us today though we do not practise them. The third and last use of the law, that is, the laws that we derive from the preceding, are devised by us for the regulation of the community. However, the principle behind them remains the same in their days as ours.

Having said all that, we need to note that the Ten Words written by the finger of God and given to us through Moses do not change. It was written in stone.

²² “These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me. (Deut. 5:22)

¹⁸ And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. (Deut. 31:18)

The permanence of the Ten Words cannot be contested. After the years of wandering in the desert and on the verge of entering the promised land, the new generation of Israelites were told to write the Ten Words again on stones.

⁸ And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly.” (Deut. 27:8)

The permanence of the law is not to be forgotten. It was written by the finger of God on tablets of stone. Whatever else might be said about the law, this fact remains. We need to say something as to why this is so. Alex Moyter once said, ‘Man is the personal living image of God; the law is the written, perceptual image of God.’ The law given by God reflects the nature of God, i.e. who God is. As such this is unchangeable.

We have noted that John said the law was given through Moses. We need to ask was there a law before Moses gave it. If we say that the law reflects the image of God, then it must have been there since the beginning of time, i.e. creation. ‘... for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given’ (Rom. 5:13). There was transgression against God since the fall. There must have been a standard or boundary which was transgressed. So where was this law? Hebrews says,

¹⁰ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord:
I will put my laws into their minds,
and write them on their hearts,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people. (Heb. 8:10)

Though this may be written with reference to Israel, yet this principle has never changed. We are created in the image of God and this image includes the perceptual image. It was this way since the beginning of time. And so, it was with Israel and with us as well as Hebrews continues,

¹⁵ And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying,
¹⁶ “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord:
I will put my laws on their hearts,
and write them on their minds,” (Heb. 10:15-16)

Paul says that this is so with the gentiles, ‘they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts’ (Rom. 2:15). Of course, they do not show that perfectly, but it is possible to have the law written on their hearts as this is part of the blessing of humanity created in the image of God. The law was given as a means of grace. It was given to show us what it is to be the people of God. The law is holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7:12, 16). It is also spiritual (Rom. 7:14). At the same time, it also highlights the transgression.

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

So, while the law is holy and good, and was given by the grace of God to steer us towards himself, yet at the same time, because of sin in the human heart, it compounded the trespass. Paul says that there is ‘another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin’ (Rom. 7:23). Here Paul is not talking about the law of God but the law as another principle. So, he further elaborates that the purpose of God could not be done through the law because of sin.

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, (Rom. 8:3).

God’s purpose in dealing with the sin of humanity cannot be accomplished through the law. The law was never designed to accomplish that. We have noted that justification is by faith alone. We have also noted that we cannot

maintain holiness by our conformity to the law, i.e. by our works. As we are sanctified in Christ, Christ sustains us in that relationship.

As the law is the perceptual image of God, for now it continues to function in a sapiential manner. What this means is that the law now becomes the wisdom of God given to guide us. We have been sanctified by faith and we cannot increase this progressively by works. We remain in this sanctified state not by our continuing effort but by the continuing work of the Spirit in our lives, i.e. the Spirit's work in us to maintain this sanctified state. We need to embrace this by faith. We have been awakened to the relationship we have with Christ. And it is because of this new relationship in Christ that the law is now reinterpreted in this way.

²⁹ Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12 29-31)

The Ten Words given by God to Moses has now been reduced to two – loving God and loving the other. In other words, the rule of God is summarised in loving the Creator and the community. Christ fulfills this in loving the Father and the created community. It is the work of Christ and the Spirit in restoring us back into union with the Triune God. We have also noted that this is not just for the individual but for the community of God's created people. Therefore, the acknowledgement of God in this divine work of sanctification together with the acknowledgment of all who are sanctified in Christ is mandatory for our expression of this work of God, i.e. our sanctification. Sanctification, understood in this way, does not have the law external to us, but internal in our being.

This is not to say that we no longer need the law. As the writer to the Hebrews says, 'I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds' (Heb. 10:16). The law of God, the perceptual image of God, is now etched into our being. As we have sung earlier,

Need I that a law (<i>external</i>) should bind me Captive unto Thee? Captive in my heart, rejoicing Never to be free.	Not a-nigh me, but within me Is Thy joy divine; Thou, O Lord, hast made Thy dwelling In this heart of mine.
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It has taken me a long way to say this. The internalisation of the moral laws, the perceptual image of God, must be integral to sanctification. If that does not happen, then it begs the question, when will it happen? Since sanctification is union with Christ, and as Christ is 'the image of invisible God' (Col. 1:15), then this internalisation of the law must happen at the same time.

What about good works?

As we remain in our sinful state, all our works are tainted with sin and we cannot rely on our works for our sanctification. Again, does this mean that good works have become unnecessary once we are in Christ. On the contrary, good works have become the expression of what we are in Christ. It is the law of 'love your neighbour'. We do this because we have been empowered by the Spirit in us and what God has prepared for us to do.

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:8-10)

²¹ Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. (2 Tim. 2:21)

We will discuss these issues in our last study next week.