

The Commands of Christ

The Spirit and the Law

Part Two
Galatians 5:18-21

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
310. 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
6/14/2009*

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But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, ²¹ envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:18-21)

Preface

The late Apologist and theologian, Dr. Greg Bahnsen, in one of his many appearances on the radio show, *Religion on the Line*, was confronted with a bitterly caustic caller. The man was blatantly anti-christian and accused Dr. Bahnsen of being an intellectual Jimmy Swaggart--something he clearly meant to be an insult. His attack on the Christian faith was based upon a hideous picture he had seen at his job, in a court-house evidence exhibit room, involving an abused baby. He asked Dr. Bahnsen how he could worship a God that would allow such a vile thing to take place.

Dr. Bahnsen took an interesting approach in his answer. He asked the caller how he came to the conclusion that the picture he just described was vile. This question seemed easy enough, but the caller had a difficult time coming up with an answer. After all, it should be obvious to anyone. Dr. Bahnsen also asked how he came to the conclusion that a God who would allow such things shouldn't be worshipped. Again, the answers weren't readily forthcoming. The caller finally gave the answer that he simply thought it was wrong. Dr. Bahnsen then asked, "So you set the standard?" The caller then took a deep breath and answered "Yes, I guess I do."

Dr. Bahnsen's response was stupefying! "Let me tell you what happens in a world when people think they can set the standard for what is right and wrong" explained Dr. Bahnsen, "You have just described a pretty disgusting picture to me. That disgusting act was done by a person who thought he could set the standard for what

is right and wrong. And the thing you must realize is that your criteria and his criteria for setting standards are the same...yourselves.”^[1]

At the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gives the Great Commission. Christians are to bring the good news of the gospel to all the nations that men might believe and be baptized. But the grace of Christ’s gospel is always accompanied by the grace and wisdom of Christ’s law. Jesus would not leave His followers in the ethically vacuum of this caller. We are certainly saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But Jesus also rescues us from moral and ethical ambiguity with the instructions “**teaching them (disciples) to observe all things that I have commanded you**” (Matthew 28:20—parenthesis mine).

We previously discussed how the commands of Jesus, as the eternal Son of God, began at the beginning of history. It’s a mistake to restrict our study of God’s law to the New Testament. Certainly many modes have changed, for example, we no longer kill lambs. But the heart of that law (even in the ceremonies) still remains. There is still the need for the shedding of blood for the forgiveness of sins.

The unbelieving world never has had any objective basis for morality. This is repeatedly unearthed in our current culture by the absurd arguments seeking to rationalize abortion, gay marriage, pornography, etc. And though we will eventually address these political issues as they surface in our discussion of the Ten Commandments, the ungodly nature of our government is not my initial concern here.

My initial concern, at least as it relates to this morning’s message, is with Christians and the methods which have become popular in terms of determining how we ought to think and determine our values. Certainly if the church has no objective^[2] standard for ethics, the culture which the church is to influence has no hope at all. So our first concern is the church. I would, therefore, like to turn our thoughts toward a phrase which, in my opinion, has become one of the greatest enemies of Christian ethics and the peace and harmony which naturally rests, at some level, within a people who know right from wrong. The phrase is “led by the Spirit.”

I. Led by the Spirit

With all charity, let me state that I am not suggesting that sincere Christian who use the phrase “led by the Spirit” are knowingly arguing against God being the ultimate source of human ethics. I think there would be uniformed agreement among all Christians that the almighty, all-wise, ever-present God is, and should be, to be the giver of good standards?

Yet, as we examine the role of God's law (i.e. what is right and wrong—moral and immoral) in the life of a Christian, we see a very subtle method of determining morality creeping into the church and supplanting God's law. This method is very similar to the method of the aforementioned caller. Many who name the name of Christ, dismiss God's law as the standard for love and righteousness and replace it with the notion of being led by the Spirit (Romans 8:14, Galatians 5:18).

I would like to convey this gently but also very forthrightly. Those who use this method are in danger, like the caller, of setting their own standards. The unbelieving world has no fear of setting their own standards, but the idea should be appalling to Christians.

Proverbs teach, **“There is a way *that seems right to a man*, But its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12)**. Solomon doesn't write that there is a way which seems “wrong” to a man, but “right” which is the way of death. Keep in mind that just because you think, feel, or are convinced something is right—even as a Christian—doesn't make it right.

Universal and Transcendent

Of all people on earth, it is the Christian who should recognize that there are objective moral standards. These moral standards are universal and transcendent. In other words they apply to everyone and are above and independent of anyone. If I replace the law of God in the name of being led by the Spirit, the standards becomes neither universal (they only apply to me) nor transcendent (they originate with me).

Someone might argue that the law didn't originate with them, but God granted this information to them. If this is the case, they are putting themselves in the place of a prophetic law-giver. And in the same way all of mankind was obliged to respect and obey the law given to Moses, we are all obliged to respect and obey the law given to those who are led by the Spirit. You can imagine the can of worms this opens. All you need are two Spirit-led law-givers who disagree before this whole system falls apart.

The Sins of Others

Furthermore, people who determine right and wrong through the unmediated (without the benefit of the written law) leading of the Spirit have no basis for determining the sins of others^[3]. I know of a professing Christian woman who believed that God, by His Spirit, led her out of her marriage (without sufficient

biblical warrant) into the arms of another man. She praised God for this. We might say that's wrong. But how do we know it's wrong? By the leading of the Spirit in us? Then we merely have dueling spirits and we're at an impasse. We know it's wrong because the law of God declares it to be wrong. What she did was not an act of love for her husband or for God.

By now we must begin to realize where this method leads. It's all hypothetical when we discuss the actions of an unnamed woman, but what if you were the husband or wife? What if another Christian were to lie to you or gossip about you? To what standard could they possibly be held? The 'led by the Spirit' method easily and almost inevitably leads to lawlessness.

In all of this I don't wish to sound harsh or critical. All I am trying to show is that if we genuinely desire to love God and love others, we must have a standard that extends beyond our own impulses. We ultimately have only two options, our own law or God's law.

What does 'Led by the Spirit' Mean?

A fair and necessary question should be asked—what does it mean when the Bible speaks of being led by the Spirit? What do we make of Romans 8:14 and Galatians 5:18? Briefly, a study of Romans 8 reveals that Paul is pitting walking in the flesh (*sarkos*) against walking in the Spirit. Walking in the flesh means doing what you feel like doing, regardless of what's right. Walking in the Spirit means doing what God wants you to do, regardless of how you feel. Walking in the Spirit does not mean rejecting the law of God. Paul goes so far as to describe the carnal mind as one that is not subject to the law of God (Romans 8:7).

In short, being led by the Spirit means, by God's grace, you will, and to a certain extent can, walk in righteousness and put to death the deeds of the body (Romans 8:13). And as discussed earlier, the only objective standard for righteousness is the law of God. Paul teaches in verse 14 that those who are led by the Spirit are sons of God. In other words, seeking to walk in the law of God is how I can begin to have assurance of my own salvation. As John writes,

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments (1 John 2:3).

Similarly in Galatians 5, Paul is pitting walking in the flesh against walking in the Spirit. What is interesting here is that Paul describes what walking

in the flesh actually is. Paul, right after telling them they're not under the law, gives them a list of laws they are to keep.

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, ²¹ envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:18-21)

We'll discuss being under the law in a moment. But again, we must emphasize that being led by the Spirit does not mean we are allowed to somehow conceptualize (out of our own minds or hearts) what is right and wrong. What it does mean is that, by God's grace and power, we will seek to walk in what God has revealed to be right.

It's also worth noting that, at least in the above passage, Paul is not telling Christians to be led by the Spirit or how to be led by the Spirit. He merely informs them that if they "are led" (*agesthe*—passive, indicative) they are not under the law. He then gives a list of laws which give evidence of the spiritual versus carnal man. This is not to be understood as some secret intuitive pursuit.

Words of Caution

Two words of caution: First, this does not mean that those who profess to walk in the Spirit versus the law are not saved. For it seems very clear that people who utilize the 'led by the Spirit' method, will almost all try to walk in God's law whether they admit it or not. Secondly, if you have been presented a brand of Christianity which suggests that the effort to walk in God's law is of no consequence, and you take it seriously, you're soul is in great peril. Again, read the Apostle John.

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments (1 John 2:3).

If you're not seeking to walk in His commandments, you don't know Him. These are very sobering words. It's important to note here that John is not

expecting his readers to keep the law perfectly. This is obvious when we read verse one of the same chapter.

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1).

There is an expectation, regardless of how feeble the effort, that a true believer will begin to seek to walk in God's law. Now another question must be asked, 'If we seek to walk in God's law, or encourage others to walk in God's law, are we seeking to put ourselves or others under God's law (by this, I mean in the negative sense which Paul writes against)? This is the common accusation against those who freely use God's law as a system of ethics.

II. Under the Law—Done in a Second Sermon

Let's discuss what it means to be under the law. I believe it was Martin Lloyd Jones who said, something to the effect, "If a preacher is not, once in a while, accused of being a legalist^[4] he must not be preaching the law. And if he is not, once in a while, accused of being anti-nomial (anti-law) he must not be preaching the gospel."

In other words, the law should be preached with such great obligation to keep it, that the listener might (mistakenly) begin to think he needs to keep the law to be saved. We see examples like this in James and in the parable of the unmerciful servant, as well as many other places including the Lord's Prayer. Yet at the same time the gospel can easily be preached in such a way as to make the listener (mistakenly) think that obedience to the law is totally unnecessary at all in any respect. We see this through most of Romans.

Am I a Legalist?

So I must ask myself if I am a legalist. As Christians, I don't think we should shrink back from using the word 'law'. It's used over two hundred times in the New Testament and almost always in a positive sense. Yet I must say, that even though I believe we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, my continual usage of the word 'law' has caused many to accuse me of seeking to put people back under the law. If I am doing that, I most certainly need to repent.

But before I can determine whether I am seeking to put people under the law, I must find out what that means.

Under the Law?

Am I to understand that if I, as a Christian pastor teach a brand of Christianity which suggests that we ought not follow other gods, make graven images, use God's name in vain, neglect the sabbath, dishonor our parents, murder, commit adultery, steal, lie or covet, that I am trying to put people back under the law? Does merely trying to obey what God commands mean you're under the law? Let's briefly examine the 'not under law' passage in Romans 6:12-16.

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. ¹³ And do not present your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God. ¹⁴ For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. ¹⁵ What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! ¹⁶ Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin *leading* to death, or of obedience *leading* to righteousness (Romans 6:12-16).

Are we to understand Paul's words here to mean that if Christians try to obey the law of God, that they are putting themselves under the law? How does that jibe with the main point of Paul in this passage, which is to be obedient? Verse 16 seems to indicate that obedience will evidence who your master actually is. Similar to the words of Jesus,

He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me (John 14:21).

Obedient to What?

It would seem a bit inconsistent of Paul to tell us we're not under the law, while in the same paragraph give us all sorts of admonitions to be obedient. Obedient to

what? Our own hearts? A new law? Are we to look to Paul for our law? Are we to look to the New Testament (which wasn't even written yet) for our law? But the law was given through Moses, grace and truth through Jesus. Why would we go to Jesus for law when it was already here? Jesus didn't come to bring the law.

Under the Terms of a Covenant

So what does it mean to be under law? A study of Romans and Galatians (as well as other epistles) reveals to us what was taking place. In short, Judaizers (Jewish influences in the church—some perhaps Christian Jews) were persuading Christians that they had to fulfill some of the old covenant requirements (mainly circumcision) in order to actually be justified before God. But their understanding of the role of the old covenant requirements had become perverted, since even Old Testament saints were not saved by works but by faith (Hebrews 11).

In a nutshell, being under law means being under the terms of a covenant which states, 'if you violate the law, you will die (or are eternally damned).' It was the covenant given to Adam. It is the covenant that all of mankind is under until they trust in Christ. Being under the law does not mean you're doing your best to obey God unless you're doing your best in order to save your own soul. A child who is working very hard to win their parent's love is under law. A child who is working very hard because their parents love them is under grace.

It is a great error to view God's law as obsolete; to do so, simply leaves us with no standard at all. But it is a still greater error—perhaps the greatest error in the entire Christian faith—to think that we are saved by our own law keeping.

There is a great peace for those who take rank with Job when he contemplates just how bad he would lose the argument with God when it came to his own righteousness:

...how can a man be righteous before God? ³ If one wished to contend with Him, He could not answer Him one time out of a thousand (Job 9:2, 3).

And the Psalmist states the obvious with the rhetorical question followed by the gracious solution:

If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But *there is* forgiveness with You, That You may be feared (Psalm 130:3, 4).

One wonderful thing about preaching the law in its full force and seeking to keep it with all our hearts is that it punctuates the stark reality that in God's sight **"no one living is righteous" (Psalm 143:2)** and that all have need for a Savior whom God graciously provides in His only Son (John 3:16; 1 John 1:9). Since the law plays such a critical role in the gospel, should it not be approached with fear and reverence?

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss Dr. Bahnsen's response to the caller. Is it possible for there to be absolute standards apart from God? Why or why not (pages 2, 3)?
2. Romans 8:14 and Galatians 5:18 refer to being led by the Spirit. Can you see a connection between a misunderstood notion of being led by the Spirit and the method of the caller (pages 4-7)?
3. What are some difficulties with the idea of dismissing the law and replacing it with being led by the Spirit (pages 4-7)?
4. What does it mean to be led by the Spirit (page 6)?
5. Discuss the two 'cautions' given regarding this subject (page 7).
6. What's a legalist? What does it mean to be anti-nominal (pages 6, 7)?
7. Discuss Martin Lloyd Jones' comment (pages 7, 8).
8. Is seeking to obey the law the same as being under the law? Discuss your answer (pages 8, 9).

[1] This is a rough interpretation from Dr. Bahnsen's appearance on the Religion on the Line—Does God Punish & Reward in This Life? (Covenant Community Tape Ministry, 434 Greenwood Ave. Nash, TX 75560). #00928.

[2] The difference between objective and subjective is the difference between fact and opinion. Two plus two equals four is a fact—chocolate is better than vanilla is opinion. We live in a culture which approaches ethics the way they approach ice.

[3] The value of determining the sins of others comes into play when we, as loving brothers or sisters, seeking to correct (Galatians 6:1).

[4] A legalist is one who believes you're saved by your own law-keeping.