

Law and Grace—A Bible Contrast

BY MERRILL F. UNGER*

In the study of the Holy Scriptures, as indeed in any other study, it is of paramount importance "to distinguish carefully between things that differ." Unless this is done, untold darkness and confusion will result, where otherwise there would be perfect light and clarity. And untold darkness and confusion have arisen over the subjects of law and grace, because God has set forth these two principles in obvious and striking contrast, and men have attempted to join together in confused and unholy wedlock that which God has determined shall be forever put asunder. The profane and unsanctified offspring, moreover, of this unblessed and man-made union have plagued the Christian Church, and played havoc with her peace and unity. What God hath separated, let not man join together!

The contrasting principles of law and grace are so diverse that they characterize the two most important dispensations, the Jewish and the Christian. "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). This does not mean that there was no law before Moses, any more than that there was no grace and truth before Jesus Christ, but it *does* mean that the law was given from Sinai, and dominates and characterizes the time from then to Calvary, just as Christ brought grace into operation, and it dominates and characterizes the period from Calvary to the out-taking of the Church. It is, moreover, very necessary to remember that the Word of God never, in any dispensation, mingles these two principles. Invariably law is presented as having a place and work distinct from grace, and is set forth as wholly diverse from it in every respect.

Let us consider, then, first

I The Contrast Between Law and Grace

1. *They Present an Independent and Different Rule of Life for the Specific Period They Represent.*

Law is connected with Moses and works; grace with

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Christ and faith (John 1:17; Rom. 10:4-10). Law demands righteousness from man; grace bestows righteousness upon man (Rom. 3:22, 31; 8:4; Phil. 3:9). Law blesses the good; grace saved the bad (Exod. 19:5; Ephes. 2:1-9). Law requires merit; grace is without human merit. Law demands its blessings be earned; grace is a free gift (Deut. 28:1-6; Ephes. 2:8; Rom. 4:4, 5). Law is negative, grace is positive. Law is prohibiting and demanding; grace is beseeching and bestowing. Law ministers condemnation; grace provides forgiveness. Law curses; grace blesses. Law kills; grace makes alive. Law shuts every mouth before God; grace opens every mouth to praise God. Law makes guilty man tremble; grace makes him rejoice. Law puts a great and guilty distance between man and His Maker; grace brings guilty man near to his Maker. Law says, "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"; grace says, "If thine enemy hunger feed him, if he thirst, give him drink." Law utterly condemns the best; grace freely saves the worst (Luke 23:43; Rom. 5:6; 1 Tim. 1:15). The Law was addressed to Israel only from Sinai to the Cross, and accomplished a peculiar purpose in condemning and leading to Christ. Grace is addressed to all kindreds and tribes, to "whosoever will," and is designed to save the worst and the most helpless, whom the Law condemns.

2. *They Present a Reversal in the Order of Divine Blessing and Human Obligation.*

The varying order is simply stated thus: Law says, "Do and live," where the divine obligation is given first, and the divine blessing is made to depend on the faithful discharge of that obligation. Grace, in contrast, says: "Live and do," where the divine blessing is poured out *first*, and the human obligation follows. The law said: "If you do good, I will bless you," but grace says: "I have blessed you, now do good!" Law is thus seen to be on a conditional covenant of *human* works, while grace rests upon an unconditional covenant of *divine* works.

3. *They Present Different Degrees of Difficulty in the Divine Requirement, and Different Degrees of Divine Enablement in Its Accomplishment.*

The Mosaic Law was addressed to even the natural man,

and its requirements evidently exceeded man's limitations, for there was universal failure on man's part, except in Christ's case, to keep the requirements, because of the weakness of the flesh. The divine enablement seemed nil; and man was left to his own unaided flesh, which thus became a universal demonstration of man's inability to keep the law, and to be saved by human merit. In contrast, grace has incomparably higher requirements, and its teachings are addressed only to the born-again man, who has, as the divine enablement, nothing less than the infinite power of God's indwelling Spirit.

Next, observe very briefly

II. The Errors Arising from Failure to Observe the Salient Contrast Between Law and Grace

1. *Antinomianism.*

This fails to see the right relationship between the two systems. It denies all rule over the lives of believers, and goes to the extreme in affirming that, because saved by God's free grace, wholly without merit, men are not required to live holy lives (Titus 1:16; Jude 1, 4).

2. *Ceremonialism.*

Its incipient form (Acts 15:1) insisted that believers keep the Levitical system, but its present form is manifest in attaching saving virtue to ordinances, making them essential to salvation.

3. *Galatianism.*

This is the heresy that mingles law and grace, making justification partly by law and partly by grace, or insists that grace is given to enable an otherwise helpless sinner to keep the law (Gal. 1:6-8; 3:2, 3).

In conclusion, observe

III. The Purpose of Law and Grace

1. *The Purpose of Law is:*

First, to bring to guilty man the knowledge of his sin, and then second, fully to demonstrate his utter helplessness in view of God's just requirements. It was a stern schoolmaster to drive helpless humanity in its *helplessness to Christ*, to be saved by grace (Gal. 3:16, 19; Rom. 3:19, 20; 2 Cor. 3:7-9).

2. *The Purpose of Grace is:*

First, to demonstrate the great loving heart of God, in the infinite depths of His lovingkindness, and to give opportunity for the expression of God's essential nature as *love*: "God is love" (1 John 4:8). The gracious display of this unfathomable love upon utterly helpless sinners, by virtue of the finished redemptive work of the spotless Lamb (John 1:29), brings glory to God. Therefore, grace is bestowed that God Himself might find infinite delight in this work of rescue, and that His own great name might be glorified.

So, if the first reason is *God's glory*, the second is *man's welfare*. Grace meets man, where law leaves him, utterly condemned, cursed, helpless, dying, like the man who fell among thieves. Grace plays the part of the Good Samaritan, and does all for him who can do nothing for himself and who, moreover, is worthy of nothing.

 IN SHADOWED PLACES

BY CONSTANCE CALENBERG

"After that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect" (1 Peter 5:10)

In shadowed places, Lord,
 My soul must learn
 The lessons born of trial,
 And there to turn
 From every cherished idol of my heart;
 O God, in shadowed places
 I must part
 With things held dear;
 For in the depths of sorrow,
 Human fear
 Must cling to Thee for mercy
 And for aid,
 And in the shadowed places
 Earth doth fade from view,
 As once again I prove
 That Thou art true.
 In shadowed places, Lord,
 My heart knows pain;
 For, as upon the altar all is lain,
 My soul, through testings sore,
 Is purged from sin,
 And I am conscious of
 Thy strength within.
 O God! I thank Thee
 For the tear-stained days,
 And for the shadowed places give Thee praise.