

Law and grace Exemplified.

Deut. 21: 18-21, Luke 15: 11-32.

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In looking through the various laws and ordinances of the Old Testament, we cannot fail to observe the intense spirit of holiness which they breathe; the most trifling ordinance, apparently, was calculated to impress Israel with a sense of holiness. God's presence in their midst was ever to be the spring of holiness and separation to His people. Hence we read, in this passage of the book of Deuteronomy, "So shalt thou put away evil from among you." And again, in the ordinance of the manslayer, we read, "Defile not, therefore, the land which ye shall inhabit, wherein I dwell: for I the Lord dwell among the children of Israel." (Num. 35: 34.) *God's dwelling place must be holy*; and "without holiness no man shall see the Lord." There can be no alteration in this. Dispensations may change, but God, blessed be His name, can never cease to be "the holy, holy, holy Lord God of Israel;" nor can He ever cease in His effort to make His people like what He is Himself. Whether He speak from amid the thunders of Mount Sinai, or in all the gentleness and grace of the blood-sprinkled mercy-seat in the heavens, His object is still the same, — viz., to make and keep His people holy.

Very different, however, is the mode of acting in the law, from that which we find in the gospel. In the law, God was calling upon man to be what He desired him to be; He set before him a high and holy standard, no doubt, but yet a standard to which man could not attain. Even though he might aspire most ardently after what the law set before him, yet, from the very fact of what he was, he could not attain to it. All his efforts were based upon the unholiness of a nature which was perfectly irrecoverable. The law was like a mirror, let down from heaven, to show to all who would only look honestly into it, that they were, both negatively and positively, the very thing which the law condemned and set aside. The law said, "Do this," and "Thou shalt not do that," and man's only response, uttered from the very depth of his nature, was, "Oh wretched man that I am!" In short, the law, like a plumb-line, measured the human character, and showed out all its crookedness and imperfection. It was not, by any means, its province to make the sinner better. No; its province was to reveal his sins, and put him under the curse. "The law entered, that the offence might abound." And again, "As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse." This is very plain. Have anything to do with law, and it will prove you to be a poor helpless sinner, and put you under the curse. It can really do nothing else, so long as God and man, holiness and sin, continue to be what they are. We may seek to confound law and grace, in our ignorance of the true genius of each; but it will prove, in the end, to be most thoroughly vain. As well might we seek to cause light and darkness to mingle, as to make law and grace combine. No; they are as distinct as any two things can be. The law can only point out to man the error of his ways - the evil of his nature. It does not make him straight, but only tells him he is crooked; it does not make him clean, but only tells him he is defiled. Nor was the law designed, as is often imagined, to lead sinners to Christ. This idea is founded upon an erroneous quotation of Galatians 3: 24. It is not said, "The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ," but "the law was our schoolmaster unto (or until) Christ." The words, "to bring us" are in italics, and do not appear in the original. This is important, as helping my reader to understand the nature, object, and scope of the law. How could the law bring a man to Christ? All it did for him was to shut him up under the curse; his finding his way to Christ was the result of quite another ministry altogether. The law acted the part of a schoolmaster from the time it was given until Christ came, by keeping souls under a restraint from which nothing could deliver, save the spirit of liberty imparted through the gospel of Christ.

However, by a simple comparison of the two Scriptures which stand at the head of this paper, we shall have a very striking proof of the difference between the law and the gospel. The case presented in each, is that of a son who was disposed to do his own will and enjoy his own way. This is no uncommon case, The prodigal desired to have his portion, and to be away from under the eye of his father. But, ah I how soon he was called to learn his folly! "When he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he began to be in want." Just so; how else could it be? He had left the only place in which all his need could be supplied, even the father's house. He had made his portion and the father's to be separate things, and hence he was compelled to learn that the former was capable of being exhausted. We can get to the bottom of all human circumstances and resources. There never was a cup of human or earthly happiness — be it ever so deep — ever so abundant in desirable ingredients — which could not be drained to the bottom. There never was a well of human, or earthly refreshment, of which it could not be said, "He that drinketh of this water shall thirst again." Not so, however, with the cup which redeeming love puts into our hand — not so with the wells of salvation from which the Gospel invites us to draw. These are exhaustless, eternal, divine. As the countless ages of eternity roll along, God's cup shall be full, and his wells shall send forth their streams in immortal freshness and purity. My reader, how sweet — how ineffably sweet — to partake of these!

But the prodigal "began to be in want." And what then? Did he think of the father? No. So long as he had any other resource, he would not think of returning home. "He went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine." This was terrible. Thus does Satan crush the spirits of his votaries. Every one who is not walking in communion with God and subjection to the Gospel of Christ, is thus engaged in the service of Satan. There is no middle ground. Reader, who are you serving? Are you serving Christ or Satan? If the latter, oh *remember the end*. Remember, too, the Father's love — the Father's house. Remember that "God willeth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his evil ways and live." This you may learn from the prodigal. The moment his necessities led him to think of returning home, that home was open wide to receive him. And, observe, it was simply *his need* that caused him to say, "I will arise and go to my father." It was not any longing desire for the father's company, but merely for the father's bread. Many are vainly looking within for some rising emotions of affectionate desire after God, not knowing that our very necessities — our very miseries — our very sins render us suited objects for the exercise of Divine grace. Grace suits *the miserable*, because the miserable can magnify grace.

And here we have arrived at a point, at which we may appreciate the contrast between our Scriptures. How would the law have dealt with our prodigal? The answer is simple. "Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place. And they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard. And all the men of the city shall stone him with stones, that he die; so shalt thou put away evil from among you; and all Israel shall hear and fear." The law could speak of nought but judgment and death. Mercy was not within its range, nor at all in accordance with its spirit. "The soul that sinneth it shall die," was its stern language. And again, "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them."

But how does grace deal with its object? Oh, for hearts to adore our God, who is the fountain of grace!

"But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him." In short, the mode of treatment is the very opposite. The law said, "Lay hold on him" — the Gospel said, "Embrace him;" the law said, "Stone him" — the Gospel said, "Kiss

him;" and yet, be it remembered, we meet the same God in both. The God of Israel speaks both in Deuteronomy and in Luke; and, moreover, we must remember what has already been stated, viz., that we trace the same object in both, which is, to give full deliverance from the power of evil. The stone of judgment and the embrace of love were both designed to put away evil; but, ah! how much more fully was the latter in sympathy with the Divine mind, than the former! Judgment is truly God's strange work. It was far more congenial to Him to be on the neck of the poor returning prodigal than to be within the enclosure of Mount Sinai. True, the prodigal had nothing to commend him — he had proved himself to be all that the law condemned, — he had been "a glutton and a drunkard" — the rags of the far country were upon him, and, were the law but to take its course, instead of the affectionate embrace of love, he would have to meet the stern grasp of justice; and instead of the father's kiss, he would have had to meet the stone of judgment from the men of his city, in the presence of the elders. Hence we see the contrast between law and grace — it is most striking.

But here, let us ask, how could all this be? How can we reconcile the marvellous difference in the principles of acting here set before us? Whither must we turn for a solution of this apparent contradiction? How can God embrace a poor sinner? How can He shield such from the full action of justice and the law? In other words, how can He be "just and the justifier?" How can He pardon the sinner steeped to the lips in iniquity, and yet not "clear the guilty?" How can He, who "cannot look upon sin," but with abhorrence, and "in whose sight the heavens are not clean," sit down at the table with a poor wretched prodigal? Where, my reader, shall we find an answer to these questions? In *the cross of Calvary*. Yes: there we have a precious — a divine reply to all. The Man nailed to the tree settles everything. Jesus bore sin's tremendous curse upon the cross — He exposed His own bosom to the stroke of justice — He drained to the dregs the cup of Jehovah's righteous wrath — "He bore our sins in His own body on the tree" — "He hath made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." Was not this a vindication of the law? Did ever the words, "So shalt thou put evil away," fall with such impressive solemnity upon the ear, as when the blessed Son of God cried out, from amid the horrors of Golgotha, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Oh! never, never. All the stones that were ever cast at offending sinners — all the penalties that were ever inflicted - yea, we shall proceed further, and say, that the eternal punishment of the wicked in the lake of fire, could not afford such a solemn proof of God's hatred of sin, as the scene on the cross. There it was that men and angels might behold God's thoughts of sin, and God's thoughts of sinners. His hatred of the former, and His love for the latter. The very same act which shows out the condemnation of sin, shows out the salvation of the sinner. Hence the Cross, while it most fully vindicates the holiness and justice of God, opens up a channel through which the copious streams of redeeming love can flow down to the guilty sinner. "Mercy and truth met together; righteousness and peace kissed each other," when the Son of God offered up Himself as a sacrifice for sin.

And, if it be asked, What proof have we of this? What solid ground of assurance have we of the full forgiveness and perfect acceptance of the believer? The answer is, *Resurrection*. Jesus is now at the right hand of the majesty in the heavens; and there, moreover, on behalf of the believer. "He was delivered for our offences," and, could we go no further than this, we might despair; but it is added, "He was raised again for our justification." Here we have full peace — full emancipation — full victory. When God raised Jesus from the dead, He declared Himself as "the God of peace." Justice was satisfied, and the sinner's Surety was set down at God's right hand; and all who, by the operation of the Holy Ghost, believe in His death and resurrection, are looked at in Him, and seen to be as free from every charge of sin as He is. Most marvellous grace! Who could have conceived such a thing? Who could have thought that He, who is "the brightness of God's glory, and the express image of His

person," should come down and put Himself in the sinner's place, and bear all the wrath, curse, and judgment due to sin, in order that the sinner might be set down in the very presence of the holiness of God, without "spot or wrinkle or any such thing," so that God might be able to say of him, "Thou art all fair; there is no spot in thee?" My reader, was ever love like this? Truly, we have here, love in its fountain — love in its channel - and love in its application. The Father is the eternal fountain, the Son is the channel, and the Holy Ghost is the power of application. What divine completeness! What perfect peace! What a solid resting-place for the sinner! Who can raise a question? God has received His prodigal — has clothed and adorned him — killed the fatted calf for him — and, above all, has given utterance to the words, "*It is meet* that we should make merry and be glad" — words which ought to dispel every shadow of fear and doubt from the heart. If God can say, in virtue of the finished work of Christ, "It is meet," who can say it is not meet? Satan may accuse, but God's reply is, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" In short, the soul that believes in Jesus is lifted into a perfectly cloudless region, where, it may be truly said, "there is neither enemy, nor evil occurrent;" and in that region we can see no one so exquisitely happy in the divine results of redemption as the blessed God Himself. If the prodigal could possibly have retained a feeling of doubt or reserve, what could have so effectually banished it as the father's joy in getting him back again? Neither doubt nor fear can live in the light of our Father's countenance. If we believe that God rejoices in receiving back a sinner, we cannot harbour suspicion or hesitancy. It is not merely that God *can* receive us, but it is His joy to do so. Hence we not only know that "grace *reigns* through righteousness," but that all heaven rejoices in one repenting sinner. Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift?

And now, one word, in conclusion, as to the way in which God secures holiness through grace. Is sin made light of? Is it tolerated? Does the blessed God, when He receives a returning prodigal to His bosom, in sovereign grace, without one upbraiding look or expression, lead us to suppose that sin has become a whit less odious or abominable? By no means. We have already seen how the Cross has added force and solemnity to every one of the divine statutes against sin. God has proved, by the bruising of His beloved Son, that His hatred of sin was only to be equalled by His love for the sinner. *A crucified Christ*, declares God's hatred of sin; *a risen Christ*, declares the triumph of His love for the sinner. The death of Christ vindicates the law; His resurrection emancipates the soul of the believer, while both these together, form the basis of all practical holiness, as we learn in Romans 6. "How shall we that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" "We are buried with Him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also should walk in newness of life." "That the body of sin might be destroyed, that we should no longer serve sin." When the father received the prodigal, he did so in a way altogether worthy of himself, and of the honour of his house. He could not receive him otherwise. He could not allow him to continue in the rags of the far country, nor in the habits thereof either. The husks and the rioting had all to be laid aside. His dress and habits were now to correspond with his new position. *Fellowship with the father* henceforth became his grand characteristic. He was not put under a dry code of rules as a servant, as he himself had sought to be. No; the manner of his reception, the principle on which he was to be dealt with, and the position to be assigned to him, were all in his father's power, and, being in his power, we can easily see what his *will* was. He should either be received with a kiss or not at all; he should either be seated at the table, or not enter the house at all; he should either get the place of a son or nothing. In short, it was the father's grace that arranged all for the prodigal, and happy was it for him to have it so.

But, oh! how could the prodigal think lightly of sin in the light of such extraordinary grace? Impossible. He was most effectually delivered from the power of sin by the grace which reigned in his reception, and in his position. It was truly such as to set sin before him in the most fearful colours. "Shall we sin because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid." Yes, God forbid. It

cannot, it must not be, my reader. Grace has set us free — free not only from the penalty of sin, but free from its power — free from its present dominion. Blessed freedom! The law gave sin power over the sinner; grace gives him power over it. The law revealed to the sinner his weakness; grace makes him acquainted with the strength of Christ, the law put the sinner under the curse, no matter who or what he was; grace introduces him into all the ineffable blessedness of the Father's house — the Father's bosom. The law elicited only the cry, "O, wretched man that I am!" grace enables him to sing triumphantly, "Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory." These are important differences, and such as may well lead us into deep thankfulness for the truth that "we are not under the law, but under grace."

If anything were needed to prove that nothing but grace can form the basis of holy service, the spirit and bearing of the elder brother in our beautiful parable would most fully prove it. He thought he had ever been a very faithful servant, and his heart rebelled against the high position assigned to his younger brother. But, alas! he understood not the father's heart. It was not the cold service of formalism or legalism that was needed, but the service of love — the service of one who felt he had been forgiven much — or rather those deep affections which flow from the sense of redeeming love. All practical Christianity is comprehended in that word of the apostle, viz., "We love Him because He first loved us." God grant that we may all enter more into the sacred power of these simple, but most precious truths!