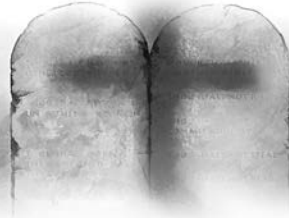


Law and Grace



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ezek. 28:15, 16; Deut. 4:44; Rom. 3:20; Deut. 10:1–15; Deut. 5:6–22; Deut. 9:1–6.*

Memory Text: “‘I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain’ ” (*Galatians 2:21, NKJV*).

Christians of most denominations talk about law and grace and understand the relationship between the two. The law is God's standard of holiness and righteousness, and violation of that law is sin. “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness” (*1 John 3:4, NKJV*). And because we all have violated that law—“but the Scripture has confined all under sin” (*Gal. 3:22, NKJV*)—it's only God's grace that can save us. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (*Eph. 2:8, NKJV*).

(Of course, there is the “slight detail” of the seventh-day Sabbath as part of the law. Yet, for various reasons, many Christians are determined, at least for now, to reject the seventh-day Sabbath, coming up with all sorts of weak excuses to justify their rejection. But that's all another topic.)

Even if expressed in different ways and in various scenarios, the theme of law and grace certainly is found all through the Bible, including the book of Deuteronomy. Yes, Deuteronomy, too, presents the relationship between law and grace but in a unique context.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 13.

Law in Heaven

God is a God of love, and love is the overarching principle of His character and the foundation of His government. And because God wants us to love Him in return, He has created us as moral creatures with moral freedom, the freedom inherent in love.

And central to the idea of moral freedom is moral law. Subatomic particles, ocean waves, kangaroos, though following to some degree *natural* law, don't follow or need *moral* law. Only moral beings do, which is why even in heaven God has a moral law for the angels.

Read Ezekiel 28:15, 16, which talks about the fall of Lucifer in heaven. “Iniquity” was found in him, and he also “sinned.” What does the use of these words here, in the context of heaven, reveal about the existence of moral law in heaven?

Both “iniquity” and “sinned” are words used here among us humans. But Scripture used the same terms for what happened in heaven, in another part of the creation itself. This should tell us something about what exists in heaven, as well as on earth.

“What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, ‘You shall not covet’ ” (*Rom. 7:7, NKJV*).

How might the same idea, at least in principle, exist in heaven, where moral beings—angels—exist, as well?

As Ellen G. White explains: “The will of God is expressed in the precepts of His holy law, and the principles of this law are the principles of heaven. The angels of heaven attain unto no higher knowledge than to know the will of God, and to do His will is the highest service that can engage their powers.”—*Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 109.

Heaven, earth—it doesn't matter: if God has moral beings, He will have a moral law to govern them, and violation of that law, in heaven or on earth, is sin.

Why is the idea of a moral law inseparable from the idea of moral beings? Without that law, what would define what is moral and what is not?

Law in Deuteronomy

The Hebrew nation on the borders of Canaan, God's chosen people, are finally about to inherit the land that God had promised them. And, as we have seen, Deuteronomy is Moses' final instructions to the Hebrews before they take the land. And among those instructions were the commands to obey.

Read the following texts. What point is expressed again and again and again, and why is this point so important for the people? *Deut. 4:44, Deut. 17:19, Deut. 28:58, Deut. 30:10, Deut. 31:12, Deut. 32:46, Deut. 33:2.*

Even the most cursory reading of the book of Deuteronomy shows how crucial obedience to the law was for the nation of Israel. In a real sense, it was the people's covenant obligation. God had done so much for them and would continue to do so much for them—things that they couldn't do for themselves and that they did not deserve to begin with (which is what grace is: God giving us what we don't deserve). And what He asked in response was, well, obedience to His law.

It's no different now. God's grace saves us, apart from the works of the law—"therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (*Rom. 3:28, NKJV*)—and our response is obedience to the law. We obey the law, though, not in a vain attempt to be saved by it—"therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (*Rom. 3:20, NKJV*)—but as the result of the salvation that we so graciously have been given. "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (*John 14:15, NKJV*).

Deuteronomy could be seen as one big object lesson in grace and law. By grace God redeems us, doing for us what we couldn't do for ourselves (any more than Israel could have escaped from Egypt by themselves), and in response we live, by faith, a life of obedience to Him and to His law. From the fall of Adam onward, up to those who live through the time of trouble and the mark of the beast, a people depicted as those who "keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (*Rev. 14:12, NKJV*)—God's relationship with His covenant people is one of law and grace. God's grace forgives us for having violated His law, and God's grace enables us to obey His law, as well, an obedience that arises from our covenant relationship with Him.

How can we avoid the trap of legalism as we obey the law?

L^etov Lak

Skeptics, those looking for reasons to reject the Bible, often point to some strong words of God that appear in the Old Testament. The idea is that the God of the Old Testament was harsh, vindictive, and mean-spirited, especially in contrast to Jesus. This isn't a new argument, but it's as flawed now as it was when first promoted many centuries ago.

Again and again, the Old Testament presents the Lord as loving His ancient people Israel and wanting only what is best for them. And this love appears powerfully in the book of Deuteronomy.

Read Deuteronomy 10:1–15. What is the immediate context of these verses, and what do they teach us about how God felt toward His people, even after their sin? What do they teach us, indeed, about grace?

God's grace and love for Israel exudes from these texts. Notice, particularly, verses 12 and 13. They are really one long sentence, a question, and the question is simple: *What am I, the Lord, asking you to do but the following . . . walk in My ways, love Me, serve Me, and keep My statutes for your own good?*

All through the Hebrew in these verses the words for “your” and “you” are in singular form. Though God certainly is speaking to the nation as a whole, what good will His words do if the people, each one individually, don't obey them? The whole is only as good as the sum of the parts. The Lord was speaking one-to-one, individually, to Israel as a nation.

We can't forget, either, the end of verse 13: keep these things *l^etov lak*, that is, “for your good.” In other words, God is commanding the people to obey because it is in their best interest to do so. God made them, God sustains them, God knows what is best for them, and He wants what's best for them. Obedience to His law, to His Ten Commandments, can work only to their benefit.

The law often has been compared to a hedge, a wall of protection, and by staying within that wall, God's followers are protected from a raft of evils that otherwise would overtake and destroy them. In short, out of love for His people, God gave them His law, and obedience to His law would be “for your good.”

What are ways in which we can see for ourselves how obedience to God's law has, indeed, been for “our own good”?

A Slave in Egypt

In the book of Deuteronomy, one theme appears and reappears: that of the Lord redeeming His people Israel from the land of Egypt. Again and again, they are reminded of what God has done for them: “ ‘ “So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with an out-stretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders” ’ ” (*Deut. 26:8, NKJV; see also Deut. 16:1–6*).

All through the Old Testament, in fact, the story of the Exodus has been referred to as an example of God’s mighty deliverance, by His grace, from the slavery and oppression of Egypt: “For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, I redeemed you from the house of bondage” (*Mic. 6:4, NKJV*).

Even in the New Testament, this idea appears, with the exodus of Egypt by God’s great power a symbol of salvation by faith in Christ: “By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, whereas the Egyptians, attempting to do so, were drowned” (*Heb. 11:29, NKJV; see also 1 Cor. 10:1–4*).

Read Deuteronomy 5:6–22, where Moses repeats the law, the Ten Commandments, the foundation stipulation of their covenant with Yahweh. Notice the fourth commandment and the reason given here for it. What is being said here that reveals the reality of law and grace?

Moses repeats the basic commandment to rest on the seventh-day Sabbath, but he gives it an added emphasis. That is, though it has been written in stone in Exodus, here Moses is expanding on what already had been given them. Keep the Sabbath, not only as a memorial of Creation but also as a memorial of redemption from Egypt. God’s grace saved them from Egypt and offered them rest from their works (*Heb. 4:1–5*). Now, in response to the grace God gave them, they needed to extend that grace to others.

In this case, then, the seventh-day Sabbath becomes not just a powerful symbol of Creation but a powerful symbol of Redemption and grace. Everyone in the household, not just the children—but the servants, the animals, and even the strangers among them—can rest. The Sabbath extends to others the grace given to the Jews, as well, even to those outside of the covenant people themselves. And it is found in the heart of God’s law. What God has graciously done for them, they need to do for others. It’s that simple.

Read Matthew 18:21–35. In what way is the principle in this parable revealed in the Sabbath commandment, especially as emphasized in Deuteronomy?

Not for Your Righteousness

Central to the Christian religion, to all biblical religion, actually, is the great theme of justification by faith alone. “For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (*Rom. 4:3*).

Ellen G. White famously expressed it like this: “What is justification by faith? It is the work of God in laying the glory of man in the dust, and doing for man that which it is not in his power to do for himself. When men see their own nothingness, they are prepared to be clothed with the righteousness of Christ.”—*The Faith I Live By*, p. 109.

Beyond question, when you consider who God is and how holy He is, in contrast to who we are and how unholy in contrast to Him we are, it would have to take an amazing act of grace to save us. And it did: that act of grace happened at the cross, with Christ, the innocent One, dying for the sins of the guilty.

With this context in mind, read Deuteronomy 9:1–6. What is Moses saying to the people here that reveals in a dramatic way the reality of God’s grace for the unworthy? How does what happened here reflect the principle of justification by faith?

If one could encapsulate Paul’s teaching on the gospel, perhaps it could be found in the phrase from Deuteronomy 9:5, “not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart” (*NKJV*) is God going to save you. Instead, He is going to do it because of the promises of the “everlasting gospel” (*Rev. 14:6*), a promise given us “not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began” (*2 Tim. 1:9, NKJV; see also Titus 1:2*). If the promise was given us “before time began,” it certainly couldn’t be from our works because we didn’t even exist “before time began,” and thus had no works.

In short, despite your faults, your flaws, your stiff necks, the Lord is going to do this wonderful work for you and in you. Thus, as a result, the Lord commands you to obey Him and His laws. The promise already has been given and delivered: your works, your obedience, even if they were good enough (which they aren’t), aren’t the means of your salvation. They are, instead, the result.

The Lord has saved you by grace; now, with His law written in your heart and His Spirit empowering you, go and obey His law.

Further Thought: “The enemy of Christ, who rebelled against God’s law in heaven, has, as a skilled, trained general, worked with all his power, bringing out one device after another, full of deception, to make of none effect the law of God, the only true detector of sin, the standard of righteousness.”—Ellen G. White, “A Peculiar People,” *Review and Herald*, November 18, 1890.

Two trillion galaxies burnish the cosmos. One hundred billion stars comprise each galaxy. That’s 100,000,000,000. Two trillion galaxies, of 100 billion stars each, come to 200,000,000,000,000,000,000 stars.

Now, it’s a principle of existence: whatever conceives of and creates something must be greater than and transcend what it conceived of and created. Picasso is greater than and transcends an artwork by Picasso. The God who conceived of and created our cosmos must be greater than the cosmos and transcend it, as well.

With that in mind, think of the following text: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (*John 1:1–3, NKJV*). That is, the God who created all that was created, the 200,000,000,000,000,000,000 stars and everything else—He did what? He “shrank down,” became a human baby, lived a sinless life, then died on the cross, bearing in Himself the penalty for our sins and evil so that we can have the promise of eternal life.

Before us is this great truth: the grace given us in Jesus Christ on the cross. And what does God ask from us in return? “Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind” (*Eccl. 12:13, NIV*).

Discussion Questions:

- ① In class, go over the question at the end of Monday’s study, about how people who believe in keeping God’s law, the Ten Commandments (including the fourth), can avoid the subtle traps of legalism. How does obedience, even strict and unwavering obedience, differ from legalism, and how can we know the difference between the two?
- ② What are some stories you have heard (or known firsthand) about how those who have violated the Ten Commandments suffered terrible consequences from that violation? What should this teach us about how the law reflects the reality of God’s love for us?
- ③ Why should the cross show us the futility of trying to earn our way to heaven?