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2 Timothy 3:16-17

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The Gracious Ethic of Faith and Love

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Those who are genuine believers in Christ know very well that their salvation cannot be grounded in their own works of the law: "not by works of righteousness which we did ourselves, but according to His mercy He saved us, . . . that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:5-7). The believer's justification before God is grounded instead in the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:11; Rom. 5:19); it is His imputed righteousness that makes us right before the judgment seat of God (2 Cor. 5:21). "A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Rom. 28). Consequently, a truth that is dear to the heart of every Christian is the summary provided by Paul in Ephesians 2:8-9, "by grace have you been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not of works, lest any man should boast." Salvation is grounded in the grace of God, and the instrumental means by which we gain it is saving faith. The law does not save us but rather strikes us dead (Rom. 7:9; 2 Cor. 3:6-7).

It is true, therefore, that the Christian life and ethic should be characterized by the grace of God and saving faith; the believer's behavior should be a reflection of his faith in the mercy of God. The Christian ethic ought not to stand in opposition to salvation by grace through faith. As Paul said, "by the grace of God we have had our behavior in the world" (2 Cor. 1:12), and the Christian life can be designated "the good fight of faith" (1 Tim. 6:12). However this does not mean that the Christian life is one of antagonism to the law of God, as many people seem to infer. It is too often thought that, since the law condemns us and cannot save us, grace and faith release us from any obligation to God's law. A gracious ethic of faith, we are told, cannot tolerate rules, regulations, or commands from God -- that would be "legalism," it is said. But such thinking and reasoning is not biblical. Such antinomian implications must be corrected by God's word.

God's law defines my sin and thereby my need for the Savior. Christ has saved me from the guilt and power of

sin just because the law of God is so important; it displays the kind of life required by God, and the consequences of disobedience to it cannot be ignored. In being saved from the wrath of God upon law-breakers, I will naturally desire now to keep the formerly transgressed standard of God's law. In that light we can observe that Scripture portrays law and grace as **correlative** to each other. God's grace operates within the parameters of His law -- in justifying His people God does not violate His own justice (Rom. 3:26). And God's law is gracious (Ps. 119:29). The two support each other: the law promotes the fulfillment of God's promise (Rom. 5:20-21), and God's grace works to fulfill the law (Rom. 8:3-4).

When Paul says that we are saved by grace through faith, he immediately adds that as God's workmanship we are expected to walk in good works (Eph. 2:10). Although it is popular today to look upon the law as an intolerable burden for modern man, the beloved apostle wrote that for the believer God's law is not burdensome (1 John 5:3). When the Psalmist reflected upon the loving kindness of the Lord, he longed to be taught His statutes and rose at midnight to render thanks for His righteous ordinances (Ps. 119:62-64). Moses viewed the giving of God's law as a sure sign of His love for the people (Deut. 33:2-4). All of God's people, throughout both testaments, have a heart which longs to obey the commandments of the Lord, for the law is established against the background of God's mercy toward His people (e.g., Ex. 20:2). The first-hand experience of God's redemption is a strong motive for keeping the law (Deut. 7:10-11). The grace of God, that is, brings men to exclaim: "I long for thy salvation, O Lord, and Thy law is my delight" (Ps. 119:174). Paul, for example, wrote "I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Rom. 7:22). God's law, you see, had been graciously written upon his heart (Heb. 10:16).

In Romans 6 Paul discusses the implications of being under God's grace. He begins by asking whether we should continue in sin (law-breaking) so that grace might

abound; his answer is a dramatic "God forbid!" (vv. 1-2). Those who have had their old man crucified with Christ, those who are united with Christ in His death and resurrection, those who have risen with Him must walk in newness of life, no longer in bondage to sinful living (vv. 3-11). So Paul exhorts us, "Let not sin reign in your mortal body so that you should obey its lusts; neither present your members unto sin as instruments of unrighteousness." Those who are saved by grace from the power of sin should be finished with violating God's law. Instead they must, as alive from the dead, present their members as instruments of righteousness (vv. 12-13). Now why is this? How can it be that we are obliged to obey the righteous requirements of God's law if we are saved by grace? Paul answers: "Because sin shall not have dominion over you: you are not under law, but under grace" (v. 14). Ironically, although many groups have used this declaration out of context to support release from the law's demand, the verse is one of the strongest biblical proofs that believers must strive to obey the law of God! Because we are no longer under the curse of the law and shut in to its inherent impotence in enabling obedience -- because we are under God's enabling grace, not under law -- we cannot allow violations of the law (i.e., sin: I John 3:4) to dominate our lives. It is in order that the righteous ordinance of the law be fulfilled in us that God has graciously put His Spirit within our hearts (Rom. 8:4). "So then, shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? God forbid!" (Rom. 6:15). "The grace of God has appeared unto all men, bringing salvation, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age," for Christ has "redeemed us from every lawless deed" (Titus 1:11-14). God's grace upholds His law.

It is to be expected, therefore, that Paul would ask the following question and supply the obvious answer: "Do we then nullify the law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary we establish the law" (Rom. 3:31). Faith which does not bring obedient works -- that is, faith which is divorced from God's law -- is in fact insincere and dead (James 2:14-26). This kind of faith cannot justify a man at all. The Westminster Confession of Faith is true to Scripture when it teaches that "good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith" (XVI.2). By saving faith, the Confession says, a man will yield obedience to the commands of Scripture (XIV.2). Genuine saving faith always is accompanied by heart-felt repentance from sin and turning

unto God, "purposing and endeavoring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments" (XV.2). We conclude, then, that the Christian's life of grace and faith is not one which is indifferent or antagonistic to the law of God. God's grace and saving faith establish the validity of the law.

The same can be said for the basic Christian ethic of love. Because God has shown His love toward us, we are now to live in love to Him and our neighbor (Eph. 5:1-2; I John 4:7-12, 16-21). On these two love commandments -- toward God and toward our neighbor (as taught in the Old Testament, Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18) -- hang all the law and the prophets, said Jesus (Matt. 22:37-40). Indeed, "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10). But in the thinking of Jesus and the apostles does this mean that Christians can dispense with the law of God or repudiate its details? Not at all. Moses had taught that loving God meant keeping His commandments (Deut. 30:16), and as usual Jesus did not depart from Moses: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). The love which summarizes and epitomizes Christian ethics is not a vague generality or feeling that tolerates, for instance, everything from adultery to chastity. John wrote: "Hereby we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and do His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments" (I John 5:2-3). Love summarizes the law of God, but it does not abrogate or replace it. As John Murray once wrote, "the summary does not obliterate or abrogate the expansion of which it is a summary" (*Principles of Conduct*, p. 192). God's commandments give the specific character and direction to love as exercised by the believer. Rather than being a law unto itself (autonomous), love is a reflection of the character of God (I John 4:8) and must therefore coincide with the dictates of God's law, for they are the transcript of God's moral perfection on a creaturely level.

God has loved us in that He saved us by grace through faith. Accordingly the Christian life ought to reflect the principles of grace, faith, and love; without them it is vain and insignificant. However, far from eliminating the law of God, a gracious ethic of faith and love establish the permanent validity of -- and our need for -- the Lord's commandments.

(For further reading along these lines, see *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. Craig Press, 1977, esp. chapter 11. It may be ordered from me for \$10.50 at 1219 Pineview Dr., Clinton, MS 39056; include check and address.)

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