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The Functions of God's Law'

(Part II)

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New Testament Opposition to God's Law

The New Testament, as does the entire Bible, surely supports the continuing validity of God's law. To say this is simply to submit one's thoughts to the Lawgiver Himself—it is not "legalism." And yet the New Testament contains passages which certainly seem to be taking a decidedly negative attitude toward the law of God. Paul declares that he "died unto the law that I might live unto God" (Gal. 2:19). He says, "you are not under law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14). Again, "we have been discharged from the law" (Rom. 7:6). For those who believe, we can conclude apparently, "Christ is the end of the law" (Rom. 10:4). In light of such passages some believers are led to see promotion of the law of God as our standard of morality as legalistic bondage. How can Scripture's seeming ambivalence toward God's law be understood in a way which absolves it of contradiction? How can the Bible contain two completely different evaluations of the law of God'?

Paul himself supplies the resolution to the apparent problem when he delivers his categorical conclusion regarding the status of God's law for the Christian today. He says, "We know that the law is good, if a man uses it lawfully" (1 Tim. 1:8). It is indisputable and well established that the law is a good thing, reflecting perfectly the righteous standards of our holy God, the Creator of all men and Redeemer of His chosen people. Paul says "we know" that the law is good. It should be common knowledge that a positive attitude and submission to the law of God are called for in us. The law is indeed good! To follow it and endorse obedience to its dictates cannot be disapproved as bad. The law of which Paul speaks is clearly the Old Testament commandments, as the mentioned illustrations in verses 9-10 demonstrate. These commands are known by all to be good (cf. Rom. 2:14-15; 7:12).

Yet Paul immediately qualifies his endorsement of the good character of God's law. He says that the law is good if it is used lawfully. That is, when the law is used according to its own direction and purpose—when the law is lawfully applied—it is a perfectly good thing. However

Paul's words imply that there is an unlawful use of God's law, a use which runs counter to the law's character and intent, so that the law's good nature might be perverted into something evil. The abuse of the law is indirectly condemned by Paul.

What might such an abuse be? Where do we find an unlawful use of the law? We need not look far in the pages of the New Testament. Throughout the ministry of Christ and persistently in the epistles of Paul we encounter the Pharisaical and Judaizing attitude that one can by performing works of the law find personal justification before God. Amazing pride and self-deception led the Jews to believe that they might appear righteous in the judgment of a holy God if they but strove diligently to keep the commandments (or at least their external requirements).. The Pharisees liked to justify themselves before men (Luke 16:15); they trusted in themselves that they were indeed righteous (Luke 18:9)—so much so that they had no more need for a Savior than a healthy man needs a physician (Matt. 9:12-13). How ever God knew their hearts all too well. Despite outward appearances of cleanliness and righteousness, they were inwardly foul, spiritually dead, and full of iniquity (Matt. 23:27-28). Because they went about trying to establish their own righteousness, the Pharisees could not submit to the righteousness of God (Rom. 10:3).

Within the early church there soon arose a party from among the Pharisees that insisted that the Gentiles could not be saved without being circumcised and keeping in some measure the law of Moses (Acts 15:1,5). Justification may be by grace, they would teach, but not completely so; works of the law were also necessary. Because they would compel the Gentiles to live as Jews in this sense (Gal. 2:14), they were designated "Judaizers." Paul himself could understand this mindset, for it had been his own prior to conversion. He was brought up as a Pharisee concerning the law (Phil. 3:5); at the feet of Gamaliel he was "educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers" (Acts 22:3). His own testimony was this "I ad-

vanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers" (Gal. 1:1-4). He made his boast in the law (cf. Rem. 2:17-20, 23), and from the perspective of one spiritually dead he could claim that "as to righteousness under the law" he was—in a word—"blameless" (Phil. 3:6). He was once, apart from the law, so deceived as to think he was spiritually alive and righteous, but under the influence of God's Spirit the commandment came home to his consciousness and killed his self-righteous complacency. "I was alive apart from the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died" (Rem. 7:9).

What Paul discovered is that he had simply not understood the law correctly in the first place. That is why in the midst of his most earnest writing against the Judaizers he can appeal repeatedly to the Law itself (e.g., Gal. 3:6-14, alluding to Gen. 15:6; 12:3; Deut. 27:26; Hab. 2:4; Lev. 18:5; Deut. 21:23). The Old Testament, seeing that in God's sight no man could be justified (Ps. 143:2), promised justification grounded in "the-Lord-our-righteousness" (Jer. 23:6). Righteousness had to be imputed even to the great father of the Jews, Abraham (Gen. 15:6). Thus the Old Testament, abundantly testifying that God's saints were men of faith (cf. Heb. 11), taught that the just shall live by faith (Hab. 2:4). Isaiah proclaimed: "In the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified. . . . This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord" (45:25; 54:1-7). The ceremonial law delivered by Moses made these truths manifest over and over again during the Old Testament era. Men were not righteous in themselves but needed to be circumcised. Even in their most natural habits their sinful pollution called for ceremonial cleansings. To be found just in the sight of God they had to abhor their sinfulness and seek forgiveness through sacrificial substitution and priestly intercession. In such things the law possessed "a shadow of the good things to come" with the saving ministry of Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:1).

By the regenerating and enlightening work of the Holy Spirit Paul came to realize that the law never intended for men to seek personal justification by meritorious works of the law. The law itself presented salvation as a gift rather than as wages. Accordingly, those who prided themselves in the law were in truth the most extreme violators of the law! "Is the law against the promises of God?" Paul asks.

Does it teach a method of justification contrary to the gracious way of salvation found in God's promises? Paul's reply is "May it never be!" (Gal. 3:21), "for if there had been a law given which could make alive, verily righteousness would have been of the law. But Scripture shut up all things under sin in order that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe." Far from distracting from justification by grace through faith, "the law became our tutor to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (v. 24).

So let us return to Paul's declaration in I Timothy 1:8, "We know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully." By implication there is an unlawful, distorting use of the law—one which abuses it, even while pretending to honor the law. Paul would surely identify the abusive use of the law as the Pharisaical and Judaizing attempt to make law-works the ground of one's own justification before God. "If righteousness is through the law, then Christ died for nothing" (Gal. 2:21). But "no man is justified by the law" (Gal. 3:11). The fact that God justifies the ungodly (Rem. 4:5) plainly shows that justification must be grounded in the alien righteousness of Jesus Christ (by His shed blood and resurrection, Rem. 4:25; 5:9); His righteousness is imputed to those who believe upon Him (Rem. 4:3-5, 5:1-2; 2 Cor. 5:21). Consequently, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rem. 10:4).

Those passages in Paul's writings which seem, then, to take a negative attitude toward the law of God can be correctly harmonized with Paul's equally strong endorsements of the law by distinguishing at least two (among many) uses of the word "law" in Paul's epistles. The revelatory use of "law" is its declaration of the righteous standards of God; in this the law is good. The legalistic use of "law" refers to the attempt to utilize the works of the law as a basis for saving merit; this is an unlawful use of the law and receives Paul's strongest condemnations. Paraphrasing I Timothy 1:8, Paul says that we know the law—as a revelation of God's unchanging will—is good, as long as one uses it lawfully instead of legalistically.

(For further reading along these lines see chapter 4 of Theonomy in Christian Ethics. The book may be ordered from me at 2244 East Grove Ave., Orange, CA 92667, for \$9.50; include check and address.)

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