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The Functions of God's Law

(Part III)

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What the Law Cannot Do

We have seen that even the good law of God can become an evil thing when abused—when put to a use which is contrary to its character and purpose. It will prove beneficial to try and summarize just what the law cannot do in itself so that we might not fall into the error of using the law unlawfully.

(1) In the first place, as discussed just previously, the law cannot contribute anything toward the personal justification of one who stands under its curse for violating its precepts.

Before the standard of God's law the sinner will always stand condemned rather than being judged righteous. "By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified in His sight" (Rom. 3:20). Those who hope to find acceptance with God on the basis of their own good deeds cannot find His favor. "You have been discharged from Christ whosoever of you are justified by the law you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4). The very attempt to gain justification in this manner is futile, for "a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2:16).

(2) Nor can the law break the stranglehold and power of sin in a person's life. The principle of Christ's life-giving Spirit set Paul free from the principle of sin and death. Thus he said, "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son... condemned sin... in order that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled by us who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3-4). By the "flesh" Paul means the sinful nature within man which is at war with God and rebellious against His righteous standards (cf. w. 6-8). The law of God simply could never overthrow this sinful nature and bring about conform it to its pattern of righteousness. The law could not empower obedience and put a decisive end to the power of disobedience. The law could show what was right, but the faulty character of the sinner prevented the right from being performed. In the face of this failing the law was helpless to amend the situation. However God did condemn sin and destroy its dreadful power by sending His own Son to save sinners. The Son supplied His Spirit to believers to give them the enabling power of obedience to the law. Where they were once impotent, they are now em-

powered. We must ever remember that the law is a pattern only; it cannot supply the power to follow the pattern.

Paul elsewhere expressed this truth by saying, "You are not under law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14). The person who is "under law" is one whose resources and powers are determined exclusively by the law. The context of Paul's declaration is the key to understanding it correctly. Being "under law" takes a parallel position to having sin reign within oneself (v. 12), to sin having dominion over oneself (v. 14a), to being a servant of sin (v. 17). Instead of being "under law" and by its impotence enslaved to sin, Paul sees the believer as "under grace" instead—that is, under the determining power of God's merciful and mighty work of salvation. This grace makes one over into a servant of righteousness and obedience (w. 13, 16-18). Now one is under the enabling power of God's grace just so that one can obey the previously transgressed law of God. This conception of Paul's meaning helps us to see his declaration's appropriate place and function in its local context. In its full form, Paul's point is this: "Sin shall not have dominion over you because you are not under law but under grace. What then? shall we sin since we are under grace and not under law? God forbid!" (vv. 14-15). In context it is clear that being under law is a position of powerlessness wherein the bondage to sin remains unbroken, whereas being under grace supplies the spiritual strength to break off from sinning and now to obey the righteous standards of God (found in His law).

(3) Finally, it is important to remember that the law delivered by Moses never could actually make anything perfect (Heb. 7:19). While it beautifully foreshadowed the saving ministry of Jesus Christ in its ceremonial enactments, the law could never by its repeated sacrifices secure the eternal redemption needed by God's people (Heb. 9:11-12; 10:1-12). Only the coming of the promised Savior, His atoning death, and justifying resurrection could accomplish the hoped for salvation of believers. The law could not accomplish the remission of sins but only witness to its coming reality. Accordingly the ceremonial portion of the Old Testament law was never meant to be literally followed forever in the same manner as it was by Old Testament

saints. It was "imposed until a time of reformation" (Heb. 9:10). With the coming of the Savior, the shadows are left behind. The ceremonial system is put out of gear and made inoperative. To insist on keeping these ordinances in the same way as did Old Testament believers would be to dis-close in oneself a legalistic attitude toward salvation (Gal. 4:10, 5:1-6). It would be retrogressive and disdainful of Christ, to whom the Old Testament ceremonies pointed.

In 1 Corinthians 9:20 Paul describes himself as "not being myself under the law," even though he became to the Jews as one who was under the law in order that he might win some Jews to Christ. In the next verse he continues to describe himself, now as "not being without law to God, but under law to Christ." If nothing else, this verse refutes any idea that Remans 6:14 ("you are not under law, but under grace") can be interpreted as implying that the person under grace has been released from moral obligation to the law of God. Paul affirms his submission to the law of Christ and thereby to every detail of the Old Testament law as well (Matt. 5:17-19). Indeed, he was not at all without the law of God (cf. Rem. 3:31, 7:22; 8:4). What then does he mean when he says in 1 Corinthians 9:20 that he is not "under the law"?

It would not appear that this expression ("under law") is being used in the same manner in both Remans 6:14 and 1 Corinthians 9:20. In the former passage it implies bondage to the power of sin, and this is far from what Paul is saying about himself in the latter passage! Those enslaved to sin are lawless, but Paul unmistakably asserts that he is not without God's law in Christ. The phrase "under law" in Remans 6:14 applies indiscriminately to all unbelievers, but in 1 Corinthians 9:20-21 it applies to only one category of unbelievers—while "without law" describes the remaining category of unbelievers.

What, then, does Paul mean in 1 Corinthians 9:20 by asserting that he himself is not "under the law"? Paul is showing how he became all things to all men for the sake of the gospel (vv. 22-23). "To the Jews I became as a Jew,

that I might gain Jews" (v. 20). When with them he acted "as though under the law," even though with others he acted "as though without the law." Does Scripture help us understand how Paul was not thereby acting inconsistently, immorally, and with duplicity? Yes, it does. The unbelieving Jews had not recognized as yet the dramatic change brought in by the redemptive realities of the New Testament; although Christ had realized all that the Mosaic ceremonial law had anticipated, unbelieving Jews continued to follow these rituals. In dealing with such men Paul accommodated himself to these customs to gain a hearing for the gospel, even though he fully knew that they were not in themselves obligatory any longer. The shadows had given way to the Savior. For instance Paul would carry out purification rites (e.g., Acts 21:20-26) and take certain vows (e.g., Acts 18:18) which he knew to be morally indifferent, and he did so to preserve a hearing for the gospel among the Jews. Among the Gentiles, however, he behaved "as though without the law." There was no advantage to pursuing the ceremonies in their presence. They were not like the Jews in this respect—not "kept in ward under the law before faith came," "under a tutor" until arriving at the mature sonship of New Testament believers who enjoy freedom from that tutor of the law (Gal. 3:23-26). The Jews lived under the ceremonial rituals handed down by Moses. In 1 Corinthians 9:20 Paul, recognizing that these rituals could not actually accomplish salvation and that they were rendered inoperative by the atoning work of Christ, says that nevertheless he acted as though "under the law" in order to gain the Jews for Christ. With some men he conformed to these rites, but with others he did not. He was all things to all men—without ever losing sight of the fact that he was "in-lawed to Christ" and thus not at all failing to submit to God's law.

(For further reading along these lines, see chapter 10 of Theonomy in Christian Ethics. The book maybe ordered from me for \$9.50 at 2244 East Grove Ave., Orange, CA 92667; include check and address.)

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