

## The Law and the Gospel

Deuteronomy 4:1-14

One of the most difficult and most frequently debated questions among true believers is the relationship between the law and the gospel. Perhaps it is the most difficult issue of all to resolve. It's not a simple matter, and simply quoting individual Bible verses isn't enough, because you can quote verses that appear to say different things. The trouble, of course, is not with the Bible, but with us. The Bible is perfectly consistent, but our understanding can still be incorrect or unbalanced.

So what is the relationship between the law and the gospel? If the subject is justification, how a believer gains a right standing with God, then they are separate and distinct. We are justifying by faith, according to the promise of God in the gospel. That's why we're studying the book of Galatians in the afternoon service, along with Deuteronomy in the morning. Paul is pretty clear and plain when he writes,

Gal. 2:6 "...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified."

Similarly, Rom. 3:28 "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law."

But don't ignore what Paul writes just three verses later, Rom. 3:31 "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law."

So...there is a brief introduction to the apparent dilemma. As Christians, we are saved by grace according to the promise of the

gospel, but still we establish the law. We uphold the law. We preserve the law, and we are obligated to obey it. But, and it is very important qualification, we are not saved by means of our obedience to the law.

Eph. 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

But, and it is a very important emphasis of Jesus himself, in his own words,

Mat. 5:17 "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. 18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. 19 Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

So what is the relationship between the law and the gospel for the Christian today? I want to answer that question by emphasizing three things that you absolutely must understand, and the first is simply what I call the connection.

### I. UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL.

And I have tried to emphasize that connection each sermon that I have preached so far in Deuteronomy. There is a connection, and inseparable connection, and that connection has been evident thus far in the history of Israel as it is recorded in Deuteronomy. So look at the big picture for a moment. Israel has been delivered out of Egypt. They have been redeemed. They are, as a nation, the people of God. God's special treasure. And God has promised them a great inheritance, the land of Canaan.

Yet even more so, God has already begun to fulfill that promise, by enabling his people to defeat the kings and the nations that live in the land. Remember King Sihon and King Og,

Deut. 2:31 “And the Lord said to me, ‘See, I have begun to give Sihon and his land over to you. Begin to possess it, that you may inherit his land.’”

Also,

Deut. 3:1 “Then we turned and went up the road to Bashan; and Og king of Bashan came out against us, he and all his people, to battle at Edrei. 2 And the Lord said to me, ‘Do not fear him, for I have delivered him and all his people and his land into your hand; you shall do to him as you did to Sihon king of the Amorites, who dwelt at Heshbon.’”

The overall idea was very clear.

Deut. 3:21 “And I commanded Joshua at that time, saying, ‘Your eyes have seen all that the Lord your God has done to these two kings; so will the Lord do to all the kingdoms through which you pass. 22 You must not fear them, for the Lord your God Himself fights for you.’”

The people of God were not left without the encouragement of the promise of God.

Deut. 1:29 “Then I said to you, ‘Do not be terrified, or afraid of them. 30 The Lord your God, who goes before you, He will fight for you, according to all He did for you in Egypt before your eyes, 31 and in the wilderness where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, in all the way that you went until you came to this place.’”

It was the same encouragement the people of God had received when they first left Egypt,

Ex. 14:13 “And Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid.

Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever. 14 The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace.”

So here is the point. Here is the absolutely necessary starting point for understand the connection between the law and the gospel. Here is the thing you must have perfectly clear in your mind if you are going to answer the question correctly.

### **A. The promise of the gospel preceded the giving of the law.**

Did you get that? Repeat. In other words, when the people of God received the law at Mt. Sinai, they were already the people of God. When they received the law, they had already been redeemed. So the law was not the means by which they became the people of God. Obedience to the law was not the ground upon which they became the people of God. The promise of the gospel came first! They were, indeed, saved by grace through faith. They were not identified and accepted as the nation of God’s people because of their law keeping, but because of the promise of God’s grace to them. The promise of the gospel preceded the giving of the law.

Go back with me to the ten commandments, what we call the preface to the 10 commandments,

Ex. 20:1 “And God spoke all these words, saying: 2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

The promise comes first. The gospel comes first. As we read in,

Deut 1:5 “On this side of the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses began to explain this law, saying, 6 “The Lord our God

spoke to us in Horeb, saying: ‘You have dwelt long enough at this mountain. 7 Turn and take your journey, and go to the mountains of the Amorites, to all the neighboring places in the plain, in the mountains and in the lowland, in the South and on the seacoast, to the land of the Canaanites and to Lebanon, as far as the great river, the River Euphrates. 8 See, I have set the land before you; go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to your fathers—to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—to give to them and their descendants after them.’”

That’s the promise of the gospel. And that’s the basis upon which receive the law, not as a means of salvation, but as a definition of God’s will for the lives of those whom he has redeemed by grace. And, in that context, as the very way that those whom God has redeemed show to him their love and gratitude.

The law came to a nation who were already redeemed!. The promise of the gospel came first, then the giving of the law. You have to understand that and be absolutely confident of what that means. And then realize how inseparable they are. That the law actually defines the covenant relationship between God and his people. In fact, according to our text this morning,

**B. The commandments of the law are the stipulations of the covenant.**

They are the terms of the covenant. The definition of the covenant itself.

We call it a covenant of grace, to be sure. The covenant by which God promises to redeem a people for himself. And yet, in that covenant relationship, those who are redeemed have the responsibility to obey the law. Or, I should say, to demonstrate their love, because those two things means the same thing.

1 John 5:3 “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.”

John 14:15 “If you love Me, keep My commandments.”

That’s the context for Jesus’ words I read just a few moments ago,

Mat. 5:18 “For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.”

Look at our text,  
v.11-14

Again, “He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone.” The ten commandments are identified as the covenant. And they were to be taught to the people as they entered the land of promise.

There are two extreme errors whenever you look at the law and the gospel, opposite errors, if you will. The first error, typically called legalism, is when law-keeping really does become the ground of your justification and standing before God. Somehow, in that wrong understanding, you are able to earn or merit your acceptance by God with a sufficient degree of your own law keeping. The trouble is, of course, that God’s standard is perfection, and, therefore, if you try to live by the law you will die by the law.

The other error is to ignore the law. Or at least to severely downplay it or diminish its importance. Typically that is called antinomianism, or a position of anti-law. Many people today fall into that danger, afraid to emphasize the law for fear of being

called a legalist, but also failing to emphasize the law sufficiently to rightly demonstrate a genuine and sincere love for God. Understanding the connection between the law and the gospel avoids both those dangers. The promise of the law precedes the giving of the law, such that the law is given to those who are already redeemed by the promise of God's grace.

Then, the second thing to rightly understand—motivation.

## **II. UNDERSTANDING THE MOTIVATION FOR OBEYING THE LAW.**

If the motivation is NOT an attempt to earn your salvation, then what is it? Again, back to our text.

v.3

In other words, you have seen the work of God in your salvation. You have seen the work of God fighting for you, to call you to be his own. It is,

### **A. A personal awareness of God's grace and mercy.**

"Your eyes have seen what the Lord did." That's where proper motivation for law-keeping begins. Again, you are not trying to earn God's grace. You are not trying to accomplish something by your own effort or performance. Rather, you have seen God's work of salvation.

Let me encourage all of you who are believers to reflect a moment upon this thought of God's work in your life. Whether it was a specific moment in time when God saved you, or whether it was a longer process or even something you grew up in your own family. Those details will vary for everyone, but the key theme should be consistent. "Your eyes have seen what the Lord did."

John Newton never lost that awareness, did he? He would

write one of the most familiar hymns of all time, "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, Was blind but now I see."

And the Apostle Paul never lost that sense of God's grace and mercy either, writing to Timothy,

1 Tim. 1:12 "And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, 13 although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. 14 And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. 15 This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. 16 However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. 17 Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."

Beloved, that's where the motivation for obedience begins! With a personal awareness of God's grace and mercy. And then with,

### **B. A personal awareness of the blessings of faithfulness to God.**

I read earlier from,

1 John 5:3 "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome."

Indeed, they are not. In fact, they bring much blessing. Look at how that is expressed in our text.

v.4

That's a simply point, but remember the overall story of the 40 years in the wilderness. The whole generation died, as an appropriate discipline for their unwillingness to obey, and to go up to the promised land to fight for the victory which God had promised. They were afraid, and they complained. And they stayed put. And they did. "But you who held fast to the Lord your God are alive today, every one of you."

An effective motivation for obedience has to have this awareness. It is the awareness of the psalmist writing,

Ps. 19:7 "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; 8 The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; 9 The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. 10 More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. 11 Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward."

And,

Psalms 119:92 "Unless Your law had been my delight, I would then have perished in my affliction. 93 I will never forget Your precepts, For by them You have given me life. 94 I am Yours, save me; For I have sought Your precepts. 95 The wicked wait for me to destroy me, But I will consider Your testimonies. 96 I have seen the consummation of all perfection, But Your commandment is exceedingly broad. 97 Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day. 98 You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; For they are ever with me. 99 I have more understanding than all my teachers, For Your testimonies are my meditation. 100 I understand more than the ancients, Because I keep Your precepts. 101 I have restrained my feet from every evil way, That

I may keep Your word. 102 I have not departed from Your judgments, For You Yourself have taught me. 103 How sweet are Your words to my taste, Sweeter than honey to my mouth! 104 Through Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way. 105 Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path."

With that awareness there should be,

### **C. A personal awareness of the benefit of wisdom.**

Again, do you see how positive all of these things are. Not the begrudging duty of a harsh and arbitrary taskmaster. Not a hardship at all. But a delight. A realization of how good it is when you walk in God's ways, in obedience to his word.

And surely the benefit of that wisdom is obvious. Others will see it.

v.6-8

Sometimes, our own wisdom will seem contrary to the wisdom of God in his law. Sometimes, we think that we can assert our own autonomy, and make up our own laws. Or ignore some of God's laws. We think we know better. And we make a mess of it. I suspect all of you know something about that.

We see this idea later in the chapter,

Deut. 4:39 "Therefore know this day, and consider it in your heart, that the Lord Himself is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. 40 You shall therefore keep His statutes and His commandments which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which the Lord your God is giving you for all time."

Likewise,

Deut. 12:28 “Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God.”

This idea remains prominent in the NT as well, when Paul teaches us,

Eph. 6:1 “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 “Honor your father and mother,” which is the first commandment with promise: 3 “that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.”

A promise! Not that you will get everything on your Christmas list. Not that your troubles will necessarily go away. But that it will go well with you when you walk with the Lord. The commandment comes with a promise. That’s the motivation for obedience. That the the personal awareness that, sometimes, we need to specifically cultivate when it is lacking. God’s ways are right. “The law of the Lord is perfect.”

If you understand this motivation for obeying, then you will not likely get misled or deceived regarding the relationship of the law and the gospel. And, with that understanding of the proper motivation for obeying the law, it allows me to emphasize and stress the proper,

### **III. UNDERSTANDING THE OBLIGATION OF OBEYING THE LAW.**

Unfortunately, as soon as you go here, stressing the obligation of obeying the law, some people start screaming “legalism.” Some people start getting stubborn, so emphasizing grace that they don’t ever want to hear an exhortation unto obedience.

The problem for them is, of course, that the Bible is full of exhortations to obey! For example,

1 Cor. 6:18 “Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. 19 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”

1 Peter 1:13 “Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; 14 as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; 15 but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 because it is written, “Be holy, for I am holy.”

How about, James 1:21 “Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. 22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.”

There is something you need to avoid, however. Something that does rightly go by the name of legalism. Adding to God’s law. Or, for that matter, taking away.

**A. Do not add or take away from God’s commands.**

v.2

This is a really important point. People do, of course, take away from God's laws, ignoring laws they want to violate. But for true Christians, for godly folk, the greater danger is the opposite. Adding to God's commands. Requiring things of yourself, or others, that God doesn't require. Going beyond the Scripture.

Col. 2:20 "Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations— 21 "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," 22 which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? 23 These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."

The Bible doesn't tell you what foods you can eat or can't eat. It doesn't tell you what clothes you have to wear, what music you ought to listen to, or a host of other things that Christians often make rules about. You can't play cards. You can't dance. You can't drink alcohol. Etc. That is where legalism really does kick in, and that is where your understanding of God's word and God's law is so crucial. You have to know what God commands or forbids. And in every other area, you have Christian freedom to choose what you wish. Do you add to the law of God as it is revealed in Scripture.

But don't take away either. Which means that you must,

**B. Be diligent in the practice of obedience.**

And beloved, the Scripture does call you to diligence!

v.9-10

The writer of Hebrews puts it this way,

Heb. 12:12 "Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, 13 and make straight paths for your

feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. 14 Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: 15 looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; 16 lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright."

Jesus puts it this way,

Mat. 5:20 "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

Eph. 5:1 "Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. 3 But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; 4 neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. 5 For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. 6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. 7 Therefore do not be partakers with them. 8 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light 9 (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), 10 finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. 11 And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. 12 For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret."

I could go on and on. The point is that we are called to love God, and to love him by obeying his commandments. Never as

the means by which we are saved, but always as the response to that salvation. With gratitude for his grace and mercy that was perfectly shown to us in Jesus.

So the words Joshua spoke as they crossed the Jordan River are words with direct and helpful application to us today,

Joshua 1:6 “Be strong and of good courage, for to this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. 7 Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go. 8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. 9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”