

Law and Grace

Genesis 35:1-8

Jacob had promised to build a house for God. After his dream of the ladder that went from the earth to heaven, after God's promise of the land given in that dream, and after God's promise that he would never leave or forsake Jacob, Jacob made a vow.

Gen. 28:20 "Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going, and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on, 21 so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God. 22 And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You."

"This stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house." Jacob made that vow at a place which he named Bethel, which means, the house of God. But then he moved on and spent 20 years working for Laban in Padan Aran. Then he spent about 8 years in Succoth. Then he went to Shechem, where a very unfortunate incident took place.

Now, finally, in chapter 35, he heads back to Bethel, at the Lord's direct command. Now, finally, he would build that house, that temple or altar, which would be used for the faithful worship of God.

v.1

This return to Bethel brings up a very relevant subject. It's one of those subjects that I need to come back to time and time again. It's one of those subjects that few Christians really have a full understanding of, a subject that any of you would likely find difficult to explain to someone asking difficult questions. The subject is this, the relationship between law and grace.

This subject comes up in all sorts of ways, with all sorts of different contexts. In one form or another, this is probably the question I've had to deal with the most in my whole ministry. The relationship between law and grace. There are two extremes, to use big words, legalism and antinomianism. That second word simply means anti-law. It's the idea that the obligation of external law-keeping is removed in Christ, since we are saved by grace and not by observing the law. The opposite extreme would essentially be the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, who attempted to use the law as the system of obtaining salvation, which I call legalism. I should note that legalism usually includes adding to God's laws, and implies if not directly teaches that your relationship to God is very much dependent upon your law-keeping, at least external law keeping.

Well, where's the proper middle ground? That's our subject this morning. Law and grace. At times this morning, you might think I'm contradicting myself. I hope that is not the case, though I admit that what I say might appear that way if you don't listen carefully, and if I don't speak clearly. So I'll try to be plain and clear. First, from Jacob's example, let me say that,

I. THE LORD HAS THE RIGHT TO GIVE AUTHORITATIVE COMMANDS.

And he does. He has the right to speak the law.

v.1

That's not a suggestion. That's not God's wise counsel or good advice. It's a command. An authoritative command. That is, the giving of the command requires that it be kept. God, the law-giver, has that authority. He has the right to tell Jacob where to go. When to go. And what to do when he gets there.

Now, there is a sense in which the Lord is rebuking Jacob in

this, for he is commanding Jacob to do that which he had previously promised to do, referring back to Genesis 28. In actuality, such a command should have been unnecessary, for what you promise to do, you obligate yourself to do. It is entirely possible that Jacob is negligent in keeping that promise, perhaps even as one commentator suggests, intentionally. For he lived in Succoth and Shechem, and must certainly have travelled to Hebron to see his father Isaac during those years. Bethel is right between the Shechem and Hebron. Surely Jacob would have passed by over the years, particularly since we see Rebekah's nurse Deborah living with him in Shechem.

v.8

Deborah was undoubtedly a godly, faithful servant, who had cared for Jacob since his infancy, for she was the nursemaid for his mother. Her presence also seems to indicate that Rebekah herself had died, and that Jacob had visited Hebron and brought her back with him to Succoth or Shechem.

And Jacob's promise remained unfilled. So the Lord commands him. Authoritatively commands him.

Now, remember, Jacob himself represents God's people. He himself is Israel. His twelve sons are the twelve tribes of Israel. He is the preeminent child of God, the one whom God loved from his mother's womb, the one who exemplifies the doctrine of election. He is the one God predestined, in love. But, nonetheless, his life is under the authority of God. And he, therefore, represents all of us. The general point is that,

A. The Lord directs all areas of our lives.

The Lord has the right to give us any number of commands, as he did Jacob. He has the right to determine where we will live and what we will do. Sometimes, that's hard. Some

circumstances are hard. Some obligations and responsibilities God imposes upon hard. Yet the point is that he has the right to determine every area of our lives. Thus our relationship with God, however you define it, must include God's right to command.

Later on in the life of the nation of Israel, those commands were specified and written down, in what we still call the ten commandments. And that moral law is still binding upon us today. I've got a long way to go this morning in defining our relationship with the Lord, but I want to make this starting point just as clear as I can. God the Lord has the right to give authoritative commands in every area of our life.

And especially in worship. As we see again in verse 1,

B. The Lord regulates our public worship.

v.1

Build and altar there! One of the very important aspects of OT worship was that God would determine the place. Over and over again, God would emphasize the importance of that, never more clearly than in,

Deut. 12:1 "These are the statutes and judgments which you shall be careful to observe in the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. 2 You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. 3 And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. 4 You shall not worship the LORD your God with such things. 5 "But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there

you shall go. 6 There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks. 7 And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice in all to which you have put your hand, you and your households, in which the LORD your God has blessed you. 8 “You shall not at all do as we are doing here today —every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes. [The Lord continues.] 13 Take heed to yourself that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every place that you see; 14 but in the place which the LORD chooses, in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you.”

That chapter continues with its emphasis on “the place,” the place for worship which God prescribe. Such regulations include how to worship, when to worship, what to sacrifice, and who should do it.

Deut. 12:32 “Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.”

God has the right to give authoritative commands. And he does so with regard to every area of our life, and especially to our public worship. That was true in Jacob’s day. It remains true in our day. And the corresponding side of that understanding of God’s authority is that,

II. WE ARE OBLIGATED TO OBEY THE LORD’S AUTHORITATIVE COMMANDS.

That follows logically, of course. If God has the right to speak authoritatively, then, of necessity, we are obligated to obey. Authority can be defined as the right to require obedience. Jacob gives us a very worthy example of proper obedience, the proper response to God’s command.

v.5a “And they journeyed...”

Notice the depth of Jacob’s obedience. “God said go, so he went.” Yet he was not content with mere outward obedience. Outward obedience wasn’t deep enough. Obedience must be internal also, and therefore must include a sense of repentance, for genuine obedience from the heart would carry the obvious awareness of past disobedience. And in this situation, when at the very least there is an implied rebuke to Jacob for failing to keep his promise for so many years, when God commands,

A. We should respond with genuine repentance.

Jacob’s response is so appropriate, so godly. So humble.

v.2

It seems there was a good bit of idolatry still going on in the family. Remember Rachel stealing her father’s household gods, those idols use for worship. Evidently there was much more. And Jacob was aware of it. The sacking and looting of the city of Shechem no doubt added to their collection. So when the command from the Lord came to build an altar, Jacob knew what had to be done. Get rid of it. Get rid of all the idols, all the statutes, all the images. All the earrings and charm necklaces. All the objects of pagan worship that were in their possession. All the foreign gods.

It would be a complete purging. And they would be buried.

v.4

The point is well made that true worship requires the renunciation of false worship. When it came to the practices of pagan worship, God’s people were to renounce them. Put them away. Destroy any semblance of them. Eliminate them completely.

Going back to,

Deut. 12:29 “When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, 30 take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ 31 You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.”

All too often that is exactly what the church of our day is doing, worshiping the LORD our God in our own way, the way of the world. All too often, the church takes the methods of the world in which we live, and incorporating them into worship. Things like choreographed drama. Live performances and entertainment. Even film clips, costumes, and television style interviews. All of that specifically designed to make people comfortable, particularly non-Christian people. But that isn’t worship, the worship of God. The point of our worship is to glorify God, by doing what he prescribes for us to do. And the church of our day should join Jacob, and bury all the remnants of worldly worship and idolatry. That would be genuine repentance.

Jacob’s call to repentance went further. Not merely the external removal of the idols, but purification of the heart and appropriate changes in outward actions.

v.3 “Purify yourselves and change your garments.”

Purify yourselves means to cleanse yourself of anything filthy. In the OT, it was symbolized by the need to wash your hands. To change your garments means to actually bring about a change in the way that you live. For repentance means turning away from

sin, it means stop doing it! The people were so filthy that they had to change their clothes! And, I might add, put on fresh clothing.

I immediately think of,

Ps. 24:3 “Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? 4 He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, Nor sworn deceitfully.”

Simply put, to worship God acceptably, you must come to him with this sort of radical repentance. Genuine repentance. Genuine change. Sinful things have to stop. False worship and idols have to be destroyed. And you need to be cleansed, inwardly and outwardly. And, then, when the Lord commands,

B. We should respond with specific worship. v.3

Jacob and his family resolved to to to Bethel, build that altar, and offer their sacrifices of worship.

All too often, in our day, we minimize sin. We trivialize it. We eliminate the need for genuine repentance by refusing to insist upon cleansing and a change of clothes. When we come to worship, we need to change our clothes. Our own clothes are dirty, that is stained by sin. Sometimes, ongoing sin. Unconfessed sin. Unrepentant sin, that is sin that you have not turned away from. And therefore your hearts are also dirty, stained by sin.

Sometimes you might have dirty hands. That is, hands involved in sin. Ongoing sin. Sins of impurity, sins of uncleanness, sins of immorality--in which you find enjoyment and

pleasure in things that contradict the law of God. Or sins of idolatry--in which your loyalty is to something else other than God. You have a higher allegiance than God, perhaps to yourself, or to something or even someone.

Perhaps there is a stubbornness in you, that refuses to submit to the authoritative commands of God. Whatever that command might be. You're resisting. You are failing to surrender, hanging onto control, maybe just in one area of your life. Maybe just one small area. So listen to Jacob.

v.2-4

So if you have foreign gods, put them away. Put them to death. Dig a hole and bury them. Do it as the commitment of your heart and the decision of your will. Learn to obey all the Lord's commands, so that you can come to him with clean hands and a pure heart.

Now, at this point, I need to ask, "What about grace?" I haven't talked to much about grace yet, have I? I have only told you that the Lord has the right to give authoritative commands and that you are obligated to obey them. That's the law. What about grace? If God has authority to command, and we have the obligation to obey, then where does grace fit in? Where does it fit in for Jacob?

Is there a contradiction? Well, if I ended at this point, I would hope that I would leave you rather confused and frustrated, because I have intentionally left out the context of grace so far, so that I could say this right now. Everything I have said so far today is in the context of grace. There is no contradiction between law and grace. God's giving his commands is in the context of grace. And our obligation to obey those commands is in the context of grace. In fact,

III. OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD IS GOVERNED BY GRACE.

Again, this text is an encounter between God and the one man who, more than other, symbolizes his grace, Jacob.

Rom. 9:10 "And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac 11 (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), 12 it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." 13 As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."

Rom. 9:14 "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! 15 For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." 16 So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy."

Jacob was chosen by grace, grace which was magnified by the extent of his own sin. For he was a terrible rascal, a deceitful schemer, and anything but a godly, faithful young man. But the nation of Israel would be built through him. By God's grace. And to look at this text specifically, we find that,

A. The Lord issues his commands in the context of grace.

Notice the command,

v.1

As he gives the command, God identifies himself. He is the God "who appeared to you when you fled from the face of Esau your brother."

In other words, he is the God who saved you by grace from

the fury of your brother Esau. And in his grace, God made Jacob such a wonderful promise when he appeared to him.

Gen.28:13 “And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: “I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. 14 Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. 15 Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you.”

God graciously promised Jacob these great and magnificent covenant blessings, and in that context, he commands Jacob to worship him. To explain it very simply, the God who gives authoritative commands is the God who has, first of all, saved us by his grace.

Those commands are not the means by which we are saved. They are not the means by which we enter into a relationship with God. And they never have been. Rather, they are the consequence of being brought into that relationship, a relationship which the Bible describes as adoption, a father and a son.

So does the law contradict grace? Does the God who gives the law eliminate grace? Absolutely not. The Lord issues his commands in the context of grace. That is shown so clearly in the preface to the ten commandments.

Exod. 20:2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”

That’s how the law starts. God establishes the relationship based on grace. And as the gracious God who has graciously chosen this group of people to be his own, and after he has

graciously redeemed them out of Egypt, he authoritatively commands them how to live. Jacob understood that. It is obvious that he understood that,

B. We obey the Lord’s commands in the context of grace.

Jacob’s example proves that God’s people don’t obey in order to secure their position. They don’t obey in order to establish their relationship. That would be legalism. Rather, they obey in the context of that relationship. Just like Jacob.

v.3

Jacob realizes that God has kept his promise. Jacob realizes that he has failed, and that his family has failed. And in his genuine repentance, which his commitment to new obedience, he magnifies the grace of God. For he acknowledges that it is God “who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me in the way which I have gone.”

Because God has been gracious to him, he will obey! Because his relationship with God has been established by grace, and because it is kept secure by grace, because of that, he will obey. And such obedience is delightful, not the least bit oppressive or burdensome. And it should be the same for us. Knowing that we are saved by grace through faith, by grace alone through faith alone, in Christ alone, knowing that, being absolutely convinced of that, you should delight yourself in obeying God’s laws.

And you should grievously repent when you are made aware that you have sinned against that God of grace.

The giving of the law does not contradict grace. Nor does our obligation to obey it. Let me read what our Confession says as a conclusion to the chapter on law. There are a few places in the

Confession that stand out above all the others, in terms of clarity, wisdom, and even beauty of language. This is one of them. “Neither are the aforementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requires to be done.”

We obey the Lord’s commands in the context of grace, for those commands were given in the context of grace. And one final point from Jacob’s example,

C. In our obedience, the Lord protects us in the context of grace.

Notice how God protects Jacob.

v.5

That was a supernatural terror, induced by the power of God’s Holy Spirit, for Jacob himself was not a formidable force, and he could have been easily overtaken by any of the surrounding cities, whose armies had far more men than David’s family. But God kept that from happening. So they arrived safely.

v.6

And the altar was built.

v.7

And there again, we have a repeated reminded of God’s grace, for “there [at Bethel] God appeared to him when he fled from the face of his brother.” This altar, built in obedience to God’s command, is a testimony of God’s grace.

So is there any contradiction between the law and grace? Absolutely none. Indeed, as people saved by grace alone, our

delight should be in the perfect law which God has revealed. And so I will preach grace so that you might learn to love the law, and sing with David,

Ps. 119:97 “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.”