

The Heart of Living in a God-Pleasing Way

Right Use of Law and Gospel

The heart of living in a God-pleasing way is a right understanding of God's threats and promises, and their relationship to what Jesus Christ has done. A person who does not see the relationship between "God will judge you" and "God will not judge you", or understand that "the love of God" can mean either "God's love to him" or "his duty to love God" will have endless confusion.

One of functions of the Law of God is to work as a mirror. It shows us how God regards our thoughts, feelings, words, and acts. When it gives commands and prohibitions, it tells us what we should do and not do. It also tells us facts, that we are sinners, that God is angry at sin, that God condemns sinners, and that sin brings eternal death. When the Law makes promises, they are conditional. It promises eternal life to people only if they keep it perfectly. It promises God's blessing in this life to people if they fear, love, and trust Him. Because we are sinners, we resent God's demands on us. The effect of God's Law is to make us realise that we are more sinful than we thought. Paul wrote, "The Law was added that the transgression might increase" (Rm 5:20). When we speak the Law as mirror we are pessimistic about any possibility of good in human beings. We are realists about original sin and sinful human nature.

The Gospel works in two ways. The first is the answer to the Law as a mirror. It is good news, as absolution. It is about the grace of God. It tells us what God has done for sinners, to save them. The Gospel shows us our Saviour, Jesus Christ, and His obedience in our place. It tells us that God has declared the whole world not guilty because of what Jesus has done for all people, and that God justifies wicked, ungodly people and will give believers in Christ eternal life. The Gospel is absolutely unconditional. It absolves sinners no matter what they are or what they have done.

Another function of the Law of God is like a ruler when it marks out a straight line, or like a signpost, which indicates which way God's people should walk. It shows the direction a believer in Christ should go if he is to please God. Although the Gospel tells him that he is free from the condemnation of the Law, the Ten Commandments tell the Christian that he should delight in serving God and loving Him, and loving his neighbour as himself. He should be a humble servant of everyone else. A God-pleasing life is necessary for him, and should be as natural as it is for a living tree to have leaves. However, this is not easy, because Christians continue to sin. They still have the sinful nature, which is subject to death. So serving God is an ongoing struggle. They do not struggle in order that they may have eternal life. That is God's gift in Christ.

Next we come to the second function of the Gospel. It provides the motive and the power for the new life. Reading the laws of the game of cricket cannot give the ability to play the game well. The Law can only prescribe, or give commands. The Gospel, however, inscribes. The Holy Spirit shows Christians Christ's self-effacing work for them, which supplies the motive, the power, the joy, and the gratitude to please God as response. Here more must be said about the struggle mentioned in the previous paragraph. Although Christians continue to be sinners, God credits them with Jesus' righteousness. In God's sight they are saints, free from God's wrath, the power of sin, condemnation of the Law, and from death. They are free lords over all things in Christ. They know that their continual sins in weakness are forgiven and that they are in a state of grace. Knowing this enables them to see the wisdom in the Law of God and rejoice in it.

The Law of God can and should provide reasons for people not to live in certain ways. Paul does that when he writes, (with the Law-reason in capital letters: "Be sure of this, that no one who is immoral, impure, or greedy (such a person is an idolater) has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ, and of God. Do not let anyone deceive you with empty words. **FOR BECAUSE OF THESE SINS GOD'S ANGER COMES UPON DISOBEDIENT PEOPLE.** Therefore do not be partners with them" (Eph 5:5-7). However, that is not the most prominent kind of motivation in the New Testament. Such reasons do not supply the power for joyful right living as response.

A careful reading of the sections of the letters in the New Testament that exhort Christians to live in God-pleasing ways shows that the writers regularly appeal to the Gospel as the reason for them. The epistle for today, Romans 12:1-8 is the point in Paul's great systematic doctrinal letter where he proceeds from the Gospel truth that the sinners whom God declares righteous will live through faith in Christ to their sanctified lives. Now he begins to speak about the life in this world of the person who is righteous through faith and will have eternal life. Christ is his sanctification, and this affects his desire to live in a holy way. The first verse appeals to the Gospel as the reason (printed here in capitals): "Therefore I appeal to you, fellow-Christians, **BY THE MERCIES OF GOD,** to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God" (Rm 12:1). The appeal is Law, but

the reason is Gospel. Similarly, in the parts of Paul's epistles that admonish and encourage, like Galatians 5-6, Ephesians 5-6, and Colossians 3, we find the interplay of Law as rule or signpost and Gospel motivation. The admonitions keep coming either fortified with a Gospel statement followed by "Therefore", or the admonition comes first, and is followed by a Gospel reason.

Consider the following examples from the epistles of the New Testament, printed with the Gospel parts in capitals. "Forgive one another if anyone has a complaint against another. You also forgive, **JUST AS THE LORD HAS FORGIVEN YOU**" (Col 3:13-14). "Each of you must put off falsehood and speak the truth to his neighbour, **FOR WE ARE MEMBERS OF ONE ANOTHER**" (Eph 4:25). "**AS THE ELECT OF GOD, HOLY AND DEARLY LOVED**, dress yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Col 3:12). "**CHRIST ALSO HAS SUFFERED FOR YOU** and has left you an example in order that you may follow in His footsteps" (1 Pt 2:21). "**HE HAS DIED FOR ALL**, so that those who live may no longer live for themselves, but for **HIM, WHO HAS DIED FOR THEM AND HAS BEEN RAISED**" (2 Cor 5:15). "**We love BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US**" (1 Jn 4:19). When we keep looking to the Gospel motive and power, our response should be joyful and willing.

Many people seem to think that right bringing up of children is chiefly teaching them right from wrong. Wrong! When parents reflect about how they have dealt with their children when they have done wrong, they will find that the Gospel in both its functions has too often been omitted. It cannot simply be taken for granted and left unsaid. We hear such things: "Tell Julia that you are sorry." "I'm sorry, Julia." "Now, don't do that again!" After "I'm sorry, Julia" two very important things have been omitted that Christian children have a right to hear. They are: 1) "I forgive you." (This is the Gospel as good news or absolution). And then 2) "Because of what Jesus has done for you" before "Don't do that again!" (This is the Gospel as power and motive for the new life). Christian children have a right by virtue of their baptism, which began their new lives in Christ, to hear the Gospel as it relates to the ways in which they live. Parents who ponder with regret why their children have gone off the rails may find the reason right here in these two great omissions, and will be forced to acknowledge that they themselves may not have been free from blame.

The Gospel impels a Christian person to gratitude. He or she thinks, "I live only by God's forgiveness. In His love God has forgiven what I have done. I have been bought at a great price. Therefore I want to glorify God by doing so and so in future." Paul expresses it this way: "**YOU HAVE BEEN BOUGHT AT A PRICE. Therefore glorify God with your bodies**" (1 Cor 6:20).

When we rebuke another person with the Law as a mirror, it is important how we say it. If we speak as if we are proud Pharisees, as if we were without blame ourselves, the person who hears us will easily perceive us as hypocrites. Therefore we speak it as sinners to other sinners.

When we speak the Gospel as absolution, God's word of forgiveness, we speak as saved people to other saved people.

When we use the Law as a rule or signpost that points towards better behaviour in the person whom we admonish and encourage, using the Gospel as power and motive, we again say our piece as saved people to other saved people. Is that not how Paul approaches his readers at the great point of transition in Romans 12:1? "I appeal to you, **FELLOW-CHRISTIANS**, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God." Here "fellow Christians" is, literally, "brothers." The person whom we admonish and encourage and we are together children of God, and heirs of eternal life. We speak as optimists who never give up, because of the power of the Gospel. This is the heart of living in a God-pleasing way.