

Law & Grace

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"Through the law cometh the (full) knowledge of sin." (Rom. 3:20).

Perhaps some summer evening you have been watching the skyline of a nearby hill. The twilight has deepened and you do not see clearly. The outlines of the trees, shrubs, poles, and houses are there on the hillcrest against the faint line of the horizon. But they are buried in shadows so deep that you cannot discern them with any degree of distinctness. Suddenly from the depths of a storm-cloud which has been hanging in the sky back of the scarp of the hill there bursts a flash of lightning. Instantly the whole sky is a glare of light and every object on the hillcrest stands forth with startling and minute distinctness. The shadows have fled. Everything is revealed by the flash.

Such is the picture of the work of the Law of God. Before it came, men had sin. For "until the Law sin was in the world." But in the depths of their consciences there was but a dim, shadowed consciousness of that sin. For there was no written standard to make sharp and clear the sinfulness of their deeds. Then God gave the law. Immediately "by the Law came the full knowledge of sin." It was God's lightning flash

upon the dim skyline of the human conscience. As the same objects were on the horizon before the lightning flash came, but you did not see those objects until the glare of the flash lit up the heavens, so sin was in the depths of the human heart, and the acts of the human will, but men did not see it in its full sinfulness until the light of God's law brought them the "full knowledge" of sin.

Here is a man walking in a public park. All about him are beautiful trees, shrubs and lovely flowers. By and by comes the impulse to pluck one of these lovely roses. He does so; puts it into his buttonhole; and strolls on through the park. Now suddenly he comes face to face with a large placard reading like this: "Five dollars fine for breaking shrubs, or plucking flowers in the park." Immediately the law does its work. It convicts him of wrongdoing. Up to the time he saw that sign he had only a dim consciousness that it would not be right to pluck that rose. But now the law brings him the "full knowledge" of wrong. It *reveals* to him his misdemeanor.

One evening I was riding in a railroad train by the banks of a river. As I looked into the car window I could see, in obscure fashion, the objects in the car. True the vision was not clear. I could see only white objects, such as a man's collar, or a lady's handkerchief, and the like. Everything was dim and shadowy; I was seeing in a glass darkly. But suppose, as I sat there peering out in the twilight, some mystic hand had suddenly put a coat of quicksilver on the

outside of that window pane. Instantly the whole situation changes. The shadowed window becomes a perfect mirror. Everything inside of that railroad car stands out clear and distinct. I have now a "full knowledge" of all the objects in the car where before all was dim and uncertain.

Just so was it with God's great Law. The Law put a coat of quicksilver on the back of the human conscience so that it saw sin as it had never seen it before. Mr. Moody used to say on this point, "The Law is like a mirror let down from Heaven. It shows us the dirt on our face, but cannot wash it off." I had not known sin, but by the law, says Paul (Rom. 7:7). Mark, he does not say, "I had not *had* sin" for "until (that is, 'before') the Law sin was in the world" (Rom. 5:13). What he does say is, "I had not *known* sin." The Law *revealed* the sin which was already there but not fully known and recognized as such.

The Law, therefore, is the revealer of sin. It is a straightedge, which shows the crookedness of the self-life; a spirit-level which discloses its departure from the horizontal; a plumbline which indicates its lean from the vertical; a mirror let down from God to show how distorted from Christ's image is the image of the man after-the-flesh. It is the beam of sunlight which lights up the darkened room and reveals the unseen motes and specks of dust which were all the while floating there in the darkness. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, strength, and mind."

Lay that down alongside a sinner's life and note how it reveals his utter failure to meet God's standard. "Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not covet; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not commit adultery"—what a mighty searchlight from God upon the human heart! How it reveals the hideous creeping things which lurk in that heart's inmost depths and which squirm and wince under the blazing light of God's revealing Law. The Law does not create this sin. For, as already noted, sin was in the world before the coming of the Law. But the Law unmasks the sin which is already there and drags it forth from the darkness of its hiding place into the open condemning light of day.

Here is another thing the Law does—

The Law multiplies transgression.

"Where no law is, there is no transgression" (Rom. 4:15). "The Law came in besides that the trespass might abound" (Rom. 5:20 R.V.).

Here is a city which has no law against an autoist passing a discharging streetcar. For years the auto driver has been doing this thing. He has a kind of dim consciousness that he is a wrongdoer in so acting. For every time he does it he imperils the lives of men, women, and children. But the city statute books have no law against it. So he keeps on doing it. Now he is a wrongdoer. But he is not a transgressor. For transgression is the breaking of a law. "And where there is no law, there is no transgres-

sion." But now something happens. The city council passes an ordinance forbidding auto drivers from passing a discharging trolley car under a penalty of twenty-five dollars. The date is fixed upon which this law is to take effect. Immediately when that day comes hundreds of auto drivers in that city are haled into court and fined. The city is filled with transgressors, who were not such before. The law has made transgression to abound. True the transgression is not the fault of the law; it is the fault of the driver who breaks it. But the transgression is the sequence of the law, for, to repeat, "where there is not law there is no transgression."

Now this is exactly what the Word says is done by the Law. On the way from Abraham to Moses "the Law came in besides that *the trespass might abound*." God's Law drove sin out into the open. It tore the mask from sin and revealed it as a transgressor of God's perfect Law. And so "every mouth was stopped and all the world became guilty before God."

This is strikingly exemplified in past-day conditions under the prohibition law. Men were wildly clamoring for the repeal of that law, claiming vehemently that it was responsible for an enormous increase in law-breaking throughout the land. They did not see that this law was doing exactly what the Word of God says concerning law. It reveals sin; it multiplies transgression. And how strikingly true this has been. First it has revealed the tremendous and humiliating fact that there are untold thou-

sands of men throughout this broad land who are so enslaved by the appetite for drink that, not knowing Jesus Christ and His power to save, they have been utterly unable to break away from its thralldom. The law has revealed as never before the sin of the land as to strong drink. Second, as long as there was no law these men were not transgressors. But as soon as the law came "the trespass abounded," and the land was filled with thousands of transgressors. Straightway the cry is raised that the law is filling the land with lawlessness and should therefore be repealed. Hear God's answer to this through Paul. "*Is the Law sin? God forbid, but I am carnal; sold under sin.*" The trouble is not with the Law. It is with the man who breaks the Law! *The Law* is not sin, but the man is enslaved by "the flesh of sin." It is true that the Law has driven sin into the open arena of transgression. But it is this old human heart of sin that is responsible for the transgression. The Law is not the cause of sin. It is only the revealer of the sin in the natural heart which flames forth into transgression as soon as Law is placed upon it.

The Law is God's great mouth-stopper.

"That every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God" (Rom. 3:19).

Recall the rich young man who came to Christ to know the way of eternal life. He came speaking. But he went away silent. That is he

came appealing to the Law. But note how quickly the Law stopped his mouth. He avowed that he had kept all the Law from his youth up. But he seemed to overlook what that Law required. It demanded that he love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, strength and mind. So Christ put him to the acid test. He told him to go sell all he had; give to the poor, and come follow Him. That is, He told him to show he loved his God more than he did his possessions. And the young man broke under the test. The searchlight of the Law lit up his heart and showed him that where his treasure was there also was his heart. He loved his gold more than his God. He came confident; he went away condemned. He came speaking; he left in sorrowful silence. The Law had done its work. It proved itself to be God's mouth-stopper.

And for the unregenerate soul this must ever be true. For the Law is "a ministry of condemnation," but never of salvation. It condemns; but it never can pardon. Even in human law this is true. The law sentences and then stands silent. You must look to grace for pardon. Only the king, the governor, or the pardon board can do that. But while the Law condemns, Jesus Christ pardons. The Law reveals sin; Jesus Christ forgives it. The Law multiplies transgression; Jesus Christ gives victory over it. The Law stops our mouths; Jesus Christ opens them. These three things then the Law does—

It reveals sin.

It multiplies transgression.

It stops men's mouths.

But there is one great thing the Law cannot do. "By the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified." That is

The Law cannot save.

Listen to this most tragic verse in the New Testament

"By one man sin entered into the world and death through sin."

The world's supreme tragedy is the tragedy of sin. Men are undone today because of the *guilt* of sin, the *power* of sin, and the *death* of sin. Now the Law cannot save because it utterly fails to meet and solve this tremendous problem of the world's sin. Let us note in detail how it so fails—

*The Law cannot save, for the Law cannot
cleanse us from the guilt of sin.*

A missionary in Africa had gone to a distant village to preach the Gospel. The people had never before seen a white man. He roped off a space and began to busy himself with preparation for his stay among them. The little black children gathered around in open-eyed wonder at the vision of a man working with a pair of hands that were absolutely white. Such a sight they had never before gazed upon. By and by one little fellow mustered up courage to crawl under the ropes. Slowly and timidly he crept

across to the grass to where the missionary was working. Presently the latter felt the touch of little fingers upon the leg of his white trousers. Little by little they crept up the trouser legs, and then they took hold of that wonderful white hand. A moment they clutched fast. Then a little childish voice piped out, "Oh, missionary, won't you please tell me the name of the river where you washed your hands!"

Friend, will you tell me the name of the river where you washed your sullied soul? Was it a river of water or one of blood? Was it called Law, or was it named Grace? Can a law give the guilty conscience peace? Can good works atone for a sin-stained past? Can the Commandments wash away the deep-dyed stains of a sinner's soul? Surely not. Only Jesus Christ can do this.

The most stupendous experience of all your human experience was the realization that by simple faith in Jesus Christ the consciousness of guilt had been forever swept out of your soul. What agony of conviction you had known; what bitter repentance from past sin; what remorse for wasted days and life; what unavailing struggles to make amends for wrong and for failure. The past seemed irremediable; the present held no peace, the future was a pall of darkness and hopelessness. And then to have the consciousness of all this forever swept out of your innermost soul in an instant of time; to realize that another had "made peace by the Blood of His Cross." That peace you had sought for years in vain: to

actually know in your innermost being that there was "no more conscience of sin"—that was the transcendent experience of all time for you! And its blessedness has never faded. The passing years have only mellowed the freshness of its joy into the richness and fullness of an abiding, imperishable peace.

The Law cannot save, for it cannot deliver us from the power of sin.

A man was preaching in the slums of a great Scotch city. He had been exhorting his listeners to make a new start; to use their will power to the utmost; to "turn over a new leaf," and the like. On the outskirts of his crowd stood a poor fallen woman of the street. She stood this preaching of the Law as long as she could. Then from the depths of her despair and failure she cried out, "Your rope's not long enough for me!"

No rope of the Law is long enough to reach down into the abyss of despair where the struggling soul is fighting its desperate battle against the power of indwelling sin. Only the far-flung lifeline of Jesus Christ, "the power of God unto salvation," is sufficient for that. Can a commandment curb the maddening surge of lust in the heart of the libertine? Can a law stay the fierce tide of appetite in the veins of the drunkard? Can a good resolution break the fetters of gold-lust which bind the heart of the miser? Nay, the Law cannot do this. Only Jesus Christ can. For what these poor slaves need is a

new life within. "If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness would have been by the Law." But no law can give life. It can exhort to obedience, but it cannot give the life with which to obey. It can call for victory, but it cannot give strength to conquer. It can urge the will to act. But it cannot triumph over the sin "in the members." The Law indeed is holy and just and spiritual. But it cannot triumph over the "law of sin and death" which is arrayed against it. Nothing but "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" can make us free from this law of sin and death. He, and He alone, can supply the victory of life and cause us by His blessed Spirit to "walk in newness of life."

*The Law cannot save because it cannot
redeem us from the death of sin.*

Physical death is separation of the spirit from the body. Spiritual death is separation of the spirit from God. There are untold thousands of men walking the streets of this wide world in the full flush of physical strength and vigor. Yet in God's sight they are dead, "dead in trespasses and sins." From such death no law can redeem them. They are bound hand and foot by death-fetters that no law can break. Only the voice of Christ can raise such from their spiritual death. Only the power of the Spirit of God can "quicken" them, and translate them from the kingdom of death into the Kingdom of the Son of His love. He that

believeth in the Lord Jesus Christ is passed from death unto life. But he that believeth not shall not see life and the wrath of God abideth on him. The Law cannot break into the realm of "sin and death" and snatch their victims from their remorseless grasp and give them that gift of God which is "eternal life in Christ Jesus." Christ alone can do this. He alone is the conqueror of spiritual death as He some glad day shall be of physical death. And not only in this but also in other tremendous issues of the soul let us notice that—

What the Law cannot do, Jesus Christ does.

It is a far cry from the Law of Moses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And we only realize how far when we come to think of the things which the Law cannot do that Jesus Christ does. "He loved us and washed us from our sins in His own Blood;" could the Law do that? "The law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death;" could the Law do that? "He that believeth in the Lord Jesus Christ is passed from death unto life;" can the Law do that? When we believed on Jesus Christ we "were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise;" could the Law give us such a seal? He "hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father;" could the Law confer such lofty honor? "Ye are all sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus;" could the Law bring us into the family of God with all the royal rights of sonship? "In whom we have

redemption through His Blood;" was the Law our Kinsman Redeemer to buy us back from eternal death? "I have chosen you and ordained you that ye should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide;" could the Law have made us abiding fruit-bearers for all time and eternity? "Created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them;" could the Law prepare a life-plan of service for us from before the foundation of the world? Nay, the Law could not do these mighty things.

*But what the Law cannot do,
Jesus Christ does.*

*"Grace there is my every debt to pay;
Blood to wash my every sin away;
Power to keep me spotless day by day—
For me; for me."*

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