

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. Ian Britton

Things which accompany salvation: Law and Grace

Introduction

Law and grace are often contrasted in the Bible, perhaps most starkly in the epistle to the Galatians. We tend to think of the Law as bad, or at least resulting in a bad outcome, and grace as good. But does this mean that the Law has no good purpose at all, or that grace is the only important thing connected to salvation? The answer to both these questions has to be, "No!" So, let's work through a series of things that the Law does and doesn't do, and then do the same for grace.

1. Five things the Law does not do:

- a. The Law does not save anybody;
- b. The Law does not act as a heavenly bank account;
- c. The Law does not have a flexible marking scheme;
- d. The Law does not provide the standard for Christian behaviour;
- e. The Law does not get downgraded by the gospel.

a. The Law does not save anybody!

Let's get this clear from the start. Nobody ever got to heaven because they kept God's Law. Nobody! And nobody ever will. The reason for that, is that nobody ever kept the Law to perfection. Not Moses, not Abraham (who actually lived before the Law was given), not Joseph; certainly not David! They were all human beings, with the same, sinful human nature that we have all shared since Adam fell (see Genesis 3:1-7). All those Old Testament worthies, and some of them were very great men, depend for their salvation on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now, of course, they didn't know anything about Jesus, and could not exercise faith in Him in the way we are called to, but it is still His cross that their salvation is founded on. They all sinned. They all needed forgiveness. The only righteous basis for that forgiveness is the cross of Christ.

b. The Law does not act as a heavenly bank account

Perhaps I should explain! Many people, even many Christians, seem to think that the Law acts like some kind of supernatural savings scheme. The logic runs like this: Every time I keep the Law (i.e. do something good), I chalk up a positive and put my account into credit. Then, when I inevitably fail, I use up some of that credit, and my balance drops a little. The game is to always try and keep out of the red. The fundamental flaw with this thinking is that the Law carries a 100% pass mark. That means I need to maintain 100% compliance just to "break even". Building up "credit" is a logical impossibility! Have you ever wondered why the book of Leviticus has so many offerings detailed in it? One of the reasons is that the Law was always bound to be broken, on a regular basis. The offerings were essential to deal with this, at least on a ceremonial level. Don't forget my earlier remarks about true forgiveness always being based on the offering by Jesus Christ of Himself! Those sacrifices didn't build up credit, they simply cancelled out the deficit. At least they did until the next sin occurred.

Many Christians fall into a similar logical flaw when thinking about their life as believers. They reason that when they have done things to serve or honour God that He somehow "owes" them some blessings - they have built up some credit. We will see in a few moments why that is not the case.

c. The Law does not have a flexible marking scheme

The Americans use an expression, "grading on a curve". It means, more or less, setting the pass mark and the grade boundaries, according to the scores a class achieves. For example, the top fifth of the class get a grade A. So, if most candidates scored less than 25% then a score 40% might get you an A!

The Law has no such concept. We've already seen the pass mark is permanently set at 100%, so no grading is possible apart from pass and fail. This means any arguments along the lines of, "Well, at least I'm better than lots of

other people" won't hold water. We'll return to this later.

d. The Law does not provide the standard for Christian behaviour

Some people teach that once we have been saved, we must keep the Law. Not all the bits about the sacrifices and the food regulations, but the moral code behind the Law of Moses. Not that they are saying keeping the Law gets people saved: rather that when we **are** saved we should keep the moral Law to live as God desires. The scary truth is that the New Testament sets the bar rather higher! Jesus Himself taught that it is our thoughts, rather than just our actions, that God wishes to see brought under control (see Matthew 5:21-48). Not just murder, but anger (see Matthew 5:21-26). Not just adultery, but lust (see Matthew 5:27-30). In fact, the New Testament dwells more on the positive side of requiring love for God and men and women, so that all our actions are properly motivated as well as properly controlled. The wonderful difference for the believer is that we are given a new life and the indwelling Spirit to make these impossible things possible. God's desire now is to reproduce the life of Christ in me and you, and that life went far beyond simply keeping the Law!

e. The Law does not get downgraded by the gospel

The gospel doesn't somehow reduce the standards of the Law to allow more people in. It doesn't introduce the "grading on the curve" we discounted earlier. The gospel has another way of dealing with the requirements of the Law, but we will cover that under the heading of "grace".

2. Six things the Law does do

By now, you might be starting to wonder whether the Law serves any useful purpose at all, apart from completely demoralising anybody who tries to keep it! I believe God had many good reasons for spelling out His Law to Moses. Here are six of them.

- a. The Law controls sin;
- b. The Law demonstrates our need of Christ;
- c. The Law shows God's character;
- d. The Law points towards Christ;
- e. The Law proved Christ's perfection; and
- f. The Law was maintained at the cross.

a. The Law controls sin

The Law imposes some fundamental constraints on human behaviour. It outlaws murder and theft. It puts strict limits on revenge and greed. It sets standards for honest business dealings and how the judicial system should operate fairly for rich and poor alike. Imagine what would happen without this. In fact, there is no need to imagine! Both history, and current conditions, will amply demonstrate what happens when there is no effective Law, and those with most power can do as they please. Many western countries are also starting to demonstrate what can happen when a nation discards the principles of God's Law, and devises regulations based on what they may think most appropriate. The Law cannot remove sin, but it can put some boundaries around it, and the benefit of that should not be underestimated.

b. The Law demonstrates our need of Christ

It may sound a little odd, but one of the main purposes of the Law was to prove that we could not possibly keep it! Human beings are desperately self-centred, with an incurably inflated opinion of ourselves! God had no illusions about how easily we could be convinced of our very deep need. He set apart one nation (Israel) especially for Himself, put them in privileged country, and gave them very detailed instructions on how to please Him. He then instructed, rebuked, judged and forgave them in cycle after cycle, for hundreds of years. He proved, conclusively, that we need more than a Law to transform us. Anybody who doubts this applies to themselves, need only attempt to live by the principles of God's Law for a few days to demonstrate how completely futile it is. As Paul says, in Galatians 3:24, "*The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ.*"

c. The Law shows God's character

Why did God set out such strict a Law with a 100% pass mark? Why could He not make things a little easier for us? The fact is that the Law is based on God's own character. Not that God is harsh, rigid and unforgiving - we shall come to grace very soon! Rather, God is holy, perfect and completely unmarked by sin. If we are to be suitable for God's presence, we must be the same. If we think of the Law as the entrance exam for Heaven, then there would be little point in setting that standard lower than what was needed to enter there. Any law that we could keep, but were not

then suitable for entry into heaven, would be pointless. Remember, God is not being fussy, as though He wanted to keep Heaven free of lower status individuals! It simply isn't possible for sinful people to survive in the presence of the utterly holy God. So, God's Law **must** reflect God's character in its demand for sinless perfection.

d. The Law points towards Christ

We've already noted the number of sacrifices, or offerings, that the Law of the Old Testament required. At one level, these point to human inability to keep the Law, and the need for constant sacrifice to "cover" the guilt of disobedience. At another level, these constant sacrifices pointed out the need for God to do something substantial and permanent, to deal with the huge problem of our guilt. A sacrifice that didn't need constant repetition was required. One that truly removed the guilt of sin, in a way that the blood of bulls and goats never could (Hebrews 10:4). The Passover lamb (Exodus 12), the high priest (Exodus 28), the loving Hebrew servant (Exodus 21), the scapegoat (Leviticus 16), the great day of atonement (Leviticus 23) and many more such details of the Law, all pointed towards the coming Christ, the Saviour of the world.

e. The Law proved Christ's perfection

When Jesus came into this world, He was born into the nation of Israel and lived under the Law of Moses - and He kept it! After centuries of abject failure to live up to God's demands, here was a man who could make the 100% mark, 100% of the time. At the end of His life, when His accusers sought long and hard for something they could convict Him of, they found nothing (see Luke 23:4, Luke 23:14). God opened Heaven and declared Himself, "*Well pleased*" (Matthew 3:17). The Law that had condemned everybody else, demonstrated the perfection of the One who was God, "*Come in the flesh*" (1 John 4:2). He not only fulfilled all the types and pictures of the Law that we were considering a moment ago, He also perfectly kept the Law. Not that He needed to do so to earn a place in Heaven - He was already the King of Heaven! His perfection established publicly, His suitability as the perfect sacrifice to remove sin and all its guiltiness.

f. The Law was maintained at the cross

The Christ and His cross might be, "*The end of the law for righteousness*" (Romans 10:4), i.e. as a method of establishing our own righteousness, but the cross was the place where the righteousness of that Law was fully maintained. When God looked at Christ, who had voluntarily taken on Himself all of my sins, He did not flinch from carrying out the full force of the Law upon them. The Saviour, Who was completely innocent of any offence of His own, bore the guilt of the vast number of our offences, and totally exhausted the righteous demands of the Law against us. Indeed, the New Testament makes plain that if Christ died for me, then I also died (Romans 7:4), and all my sin and all my connections to the Law have been completely removed. I stand in a new life, in a new place altogether.

So much for what the Law does, and does not, do. Let's move on to the beautiful subject of grace. Here we will start with...

3. Seven things grace does do

- a. Grace shows God's heart;
- b. Grace provides what the Law could not;
- c. Grace meets my every need;
- d. Grace continues after my initial salvation;
- e. Grace reaches out to everybody;
- f. Grace obliges me to do for others what was done for me; and
- g. Grace goes together with truth.

a. Grace shows God's heart

If the Law demonstrated the righteousness of God's character, grace displays the love of His heart! God's love meant that He wanted us to be with Him in heaven, even while His righteousness excluded us. His grace allows Him to reconcile the two positions. Grace really is one of the loveliest words in the Bible. It describes God's eagerness to give us what we could never hope to deserve. A new and everlasting life, forgiveness, a home in heaven, the Holy Spirit to live within us: all these are ours on the basis of grace.

b. Grace provides what the Law could not

All the things that the Law could not provide, starting with salvation, can be ours through grace. If it had been possible for us to earn our salvation, it would have been to our own credit and praise. Since it is given to us by free grace, the

credit and the praise all belong to God.

c. Grace meets my every need

There is a concept in my professional world of software development, that goes by the slightly unattractive name of Minimal Viable Product, or MVP for short. It refers to producing the smallest possible piece of functionality for the users, that you can then return to and add more functionality later. Anything smaller would not be any practical use. When God determined to meet our need for salvation, He certainly did not design an MVP solution! God's grace is on a grand, divine scale. My needs for forgiveness, a family to belong to, a sense of security, access to speak to Him anytime I wish, all these and more have been amply provided for. Grace doesn't start with our need, and devise a solution to meet it. Grace starts with God's ability and desire to give, and designs a solution magnificent enough to satisfy Him!

d. Grace continues after my initial salvation

All Christians know that God forgave them freely when they first came to trust Him, through faith in Jesus Christ. We sometimes find it hard to forgive ourselves for the mistakes we make, and the deliberate sins we commit, after we are saved. It's almost as if we can't believe that God's grace continues after we are first saved. Let us be very thankful that it most certainly does! We did not exhaust God's grace towards us the day we were saved.

I will talk a little later about the danger of presuming on that grace, but whenever we feel the need for our Heavenly Father's forgiveness and grace, we can be sure He is ready to show them to us.

e. Grace reaches out to everybody

We are not the only objects of God's grace. One of the wonderful characteristics of God's grace is that there is a limitless supply. Government ministers are always talking about "difficult decisions"! There is a finite amount of public money, and many competing needs. If they spend more on health care, there is less left for pensions. A larger spend on welfare means less is available for new houses. Everybody has their own priorities, and somebody will always be left feeling disappointed and disadvantaged. God's grace is not like that. More grace for me does not mean there is less left for you. God does not ration His grace to certain racial groups, or particularly worthy individuals: it is freely given to whoever will receive it.

f. Grace obliges me to do for others what was done for me

In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus tells a parable about a man who had built up a huge debt to his master that he could never hope to repay (Matthew 18:25). His master takes pity on him and cancels the entire debt (Matthew 18:26). So far, so heart-warming! But this servant then goes out and finds a fellow servant who owes him a small fraction of what he owed his master (Matthew 18:28), and has him thrown into prison for none payment (Matthew 18:30). In response to this shocking hypocrisy, the master says, "*Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?*" Matthew 18:33. God's grace shown to us, places us under obligation to show grace to others. On those occasions when we think to ourselves, "Why should I put up with this?" or, "Why must I forgive this person yet again?", the answer might be, "*[Because] I had pity on you*" (Matthew 18:33).

g. Grace goes together with truth

In John 1:17 we read, "*Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*" So, the Apostle links grace directly to truth and links both firmly to Christ. Romans 5:21 tells us, "*So grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*" Here another Apostle links grace tightly to righteousness, and again, both are linked firmly to Christ. People sometimes make the mistake of trying to make grace stand alone, as if it was the only truth about our relationship to God that really matters, or as if grace somehow out ranked every other truth. God's word makes plain that grace and truth, or grace and righteousness work together as a unit.

4. Five things grace does *not* do

The importance of this will become clear as we turn now to five things grace does **not** do

- a. Grace does not give me licence to do as I please;
- b. Grace does not reduce the Law's standard;
- c. Grace does not excuse my guiltiness;
- d. Grace does not function without the cross; and
- e. Grace does not operate separately from faith.

a. Grace does not give me licence to do as I please

Paul, directed by the Holy Spirit, deals with this subject thoroughly in Romans 6. That chapter begins, *“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who have died to sin live any longer in it?”* (Romans 6:1-2) He picks up the thought again in Romans 6:15, *“What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!”* Any attempt then to reason that God’s grace means I am free to live as I please and flout God’s instructions, is a deliberate distortion of what the Bible teaches. We read previously of how, *“Grace reigns through righteousness”* (see Romans 5:21). Grace should take hold of us and shape our lives around righteousness and truth. Indeed, the idea of “shaping our lives” is a useful metaphor in this context. The Law was like an outside force, or a mould, seeking to shape our lives by setting boundaries and placing restrictions.

The problem was that our lives were made of water! Imagine trying to mould water! New birth means we are now made of a new material. Now we need to think about a living material. When an animal grows, it isn’t shaped by some kind of mould from the outside. The DNA inside its cells sends the instructions about what size and shape of creature should be produced. So grace and truth work in our new life to produce order and beauty that are pleasing to God, not chaos and lawlessness.

b. Grace does not reduce the Law’s standard

To think that grace somehow reduces the pass mark so that we can get into heaven more easily, is to fundamentally misunderstand how grace operates. We have already seen that the Law was maintained at the cross of Christ. There was no lowering of the standard there, but an unflinching application of its judgments. We also seen that the standard of life for believers in the Lord Jesus, is actually much higher than what the Law set out. So, grace does not produce a modified, friendlier version of the Law, it sets it on one side completely and brings in a totally new position. As Galatians 2:19 says, *“I died to the law, that I might live to God.”*

c. Grace does not excuse my guiltiness

Grace isn’t a magical process by which God makes sin less bad, or finds a way to ignore sin and let me in to heaven as I am. Sin remains wicked, and a total affront to God. My sins make me unacceptable to God and, without Christ, I am guilty as charged, and rightly condemned. What makes the difference is the cross!

d. Grace does not function without the cross

The cross is the righteous foundation for grace to be shown. At the cross, sin was not excused, but condemned and judged. God’s grace has a righteous foundation in the death of Christ.

I can’t put it better than in these words from a well-known hymn by CL Bancroft (1841-1923).

*“Because the sinless Saviour died,
My sinful soul is counted free;
For God, the Just, is satisfied,
To look on Him and pardon me.”*

There couldn’t be grace without the cross.

e. Grace does not operate separately from faith

Which is why not everybody is saved. We might reason that, if God’s grace is infinite, and available to all, then all must be saved. But grace operates through the exercise of faith. God’s grace is showered on those who come to Him through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. If grace is founded on the death of that Son, then it is enjoyed by those who have faith in Him. Grace is never separated from faith. Perhaps we should caveat that by mentioning the special case of those who die in infancy - either physical or mental. We believe that those who never have the capacity to exercise faith in the Saviour are included in God’s grace and taken to Himself in heaven. With that one exception, our access into grace is only through faith.

Our God and Father, we thank you that when we were utterly unable to keep your Law, You met us with spectacular grace. Please teach us to show grace to those who are indebted to us. Amen.

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