

Lesson 12—Relation of Law to Promise

Over the past couple sessions, we have examined the first 2 volumes of the 7 volumes of the sayings of God: Promise and Law. Tonight, before we move on to volume 3—Poetry—we are first going to take time to examine the relationship of Law to Promise. We are going to do so because these two volumes—Law and Promise—make up the basic foundation of the Old Testament, which means that the rest of the Old Testament (approximately 80% of the entire Bible) is based on these two volumes. And in our exploration of these two volumes, we discovered that the appropriate response to the Promise of God is faith in God’s character and ability to do what He says He will do while the appropriate response to the Law is commitment-based obedience to God; indeed, the combination of these two responses show us the pattern not only for the rest of the Old Testament, but for the entire Bible, meaning that we are always, and always have been, expected to respond to God in faith that is followed, or proven, by commitment-based obedience. Just by way of example, we see that, in the book of Numbers, Israel did not go into the Promised Land at first due to their rebellion and unbelief: in **Numbers 14:9**, Joshua and Caleb—the two spies who brought back a good report of the Promised Land and trusted God for it—pleaded with the rest of Israel “...do not rebel against the LORD...” while in **Numbers 14:11** the LORD Himself asks, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?” Then, in the New Testament, we see Jesus proclaiming salvation in Him through repentance and belief: in **Mark 1:15**, Jesus says, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

So, clearly the Promise and Law are foundational components of Scripture and therefore worthy of the special attention we are devoting to them tonight. Another major reason that we

are devoting special attention to them tonight is because, in addition to presenting us with foundational principles found throughout the entirety of Scripture, the first two volumes of Law and Promise also present us with a rather substantial potential conflict that is dealt with significantly in the New Testament primarily by the Apostle Paul as he addresses the relationship of Promise (or the grace of God—‘I will’) to Law (obedience to the commandments of God). He does so mainly in Romans chapters 4-7 and Galatians chapters 3-4, revealing that this is not only a significant issue (Paul actually spends more time talking about this issue—the relationship of Law and Grace—than he does talking about spiritual gifts, which remains a rather hot-button topic in the Church today), but also a rather complex one due to its deep roots in the origins of the redemptive operations of God on earth.

The potential conflict seemed to have been much greater during the time that Christianity was new and flourishing (especially considering that the first Christians were exclusively Jews for a while and Jews have a special attachment to the Law), but the issues still exist today, as far as I can tell, in these two major forms: 1) some insist on keeping the Law in addition to the receiving of God’s grace by faith for salvation (aka legalism—Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8); 2) some insist that the Law no longer has any place in Christianity since we are under grace and not under the Law (aka antinomianism—Romans 6:1, 15).

First, let’s address legalism, or the belief that one must keep the Law in addition to the receiving of God’s grace by faith for salvation. While it is clear that the Bible contradicts this issue that people have, it is still a significant issue and worthy of our time and attention, for God did give the Law and He did give the Promise, and many, many people throughout history have struggled with how they coexist in God’s plan for redemption. To see how they do, we are going

to look primarily at Paul's arguments in Galatians 3-4 and glean 5 guidelines to help us in our thinking about this issue.

- 1) **Galatians 3:6-7:** “⁶ just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? ⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.”
This shows us that salvation/redemption from God has always been by grace through faith, starting even with Abraham. God did not, at some point in history, like the coming of Jesus, switch from salvation by works of the law to salvation by grace through faith. He has always saved humans by grace through faith—in the promise of the coming of Jesus before Jesus and in the person and work of Jesus now that he has come and ascended back into heaven. Abraham was counted righteous because of his faith before circumcision and 430 years before the Law was given, showing beyond a shadow of a doubt that God has always saved by grace through faith.
- 2) **Galatians 3:15-18:** “¹⁵ To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. ¹⁶ Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. ¹⁷ This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. ¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.” This shows us that even though the Law came after the Promise, it did not replace the promise; Law did not set Grace aside.
- 3) **Galatians 3:19:** “¹⁹ Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in

place through angels by an intermediary.” The Law was placed alongside of the Promise because of sin; **Romans 7:7** says, “⁷ What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” So, the Law was added to the Promise and does not negatively affect the Promise/grace of God, but rather, it is meant to go hand in hand with the Promise to show us our sin and to make us keenly aware of it.

- 4) **Galatians 3:21**: “²¹ Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.” Here, we see that the Promise and the Law are not antagonistic, but they are complimentary; the Promise has one role while the Law has another, complimentary role: the role of the Law never has been nor can ever be to make alive or save from sin. Rather, it is to show us that we are dying due to sin. It shows us what we are really like; there is no hiding our sin when we look at the Law. Almost like looking in a mirror only shows you what you actually look like (not what you think or wish you looked like), looking at the Law only shows us what we actually look like in our sin. The Promise, on the other hand, gives grace and makes us alive in God and empowers us to live for God. To put it simply: the Law reveals our need while Grace provides for our need.
- 5) **Galatians 3:23-26**: “²³ Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are

all sons of God, through faith.” Before Jesus, the Messiah, the object of our faith, came, we were like children in a play-pen with the Law as our guardian/babysitter. Now, under Christ, we are sons (and daughters) of God and the Law is taken away. Just like with Abigail and Elena, Hannah and I dictate every little thing that they do: when they eat, what they eat, what they wear, where they go, when they go there, when they go to bed, etc. But as they get older, like many of you are now experiencing, we will be less and less strict with them, but we will nonetheless expect the same level of obedience from them even in their freedom. Paul is saying that the Law was like this historically: before Christ came, the Law served as our guardian, dictating our behavior as though we were small children in need of such strict guidance and protection. But now that Jesus, the object of our faith has come, we have been made sons of God—we have matured in Christ—and we no longer need the Law because faith has come.

Now, before moving on to discussing the second main issue that springs from misunderstanding how the Law and Promise relate to one another, I would like to spend a bit more time explaining my response to legalism because I have found that approaching this topic from multiple angles helps greatly. When we go back and observe the role of the Law alongside of the Promise historically, I believe we gain helpful insight in understanding their relationship: first, what did God Promise? He promised back in **Genesis 12:1-3** that He would make a great nation out of Abraham and that He would use that nation to bless the whole world. We also know from Scripture that the blessing God promised was the coming of Jesus and the salvation provided for our sins through Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection from the dead three days later; **Galatians 3:16** says, “¹⁶Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It

does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ," showing us that the coming of Jesus to earth was the intended consequence of God's promise to Abraham, and **Titus 2:11** says, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people," showing us that the intended consequence of Jesus coming as a result of God's promise to Abraham was to provide salvation for all people; therefore, we can say that God's promise to Abraham to bless the whole world through the nation he would bring from him meant that he would provide for our salvation from sin through Jesus' death and resurrection.

What is interesting about this 'salvation for all people,' though, that Jesus provided through his death and resurrection is that not all people benefit from it. In fact, Jesus himself taught in **Matthew 7:13-14**, saying, ¹³"Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." I bring this up for good reason: what makes the difference between those who benefit from the salvation Jesus provided and those who don't, or what is the difference between those who enter by the wide gate of destruction versus those who enter by the narrow gate of life? According to Jesus in **Mark 1:15**, those who benefit from the salvation from sin that Jesus provides and thereby enter through the narrow gate of life are those who "repent and believe in the gospel." Repent from what? Your sins. Believe in what? That Jesus died for your sins and has provided for our rescue from the wrath of God and eternal punishment.

Now, let me ask you: do you think that you would be willing to repent from your sins if you don't believe that you are a sinner? Or, even if you do believe that you are a sinner, but you aren't convinced of the reality of God's wrath against it, would you take it seriously enough to

turn away from it and turn to Jesus by faith? In all likelihood, no, you wouldn't. Therefore, it makes perfect sense when we read Paul say things like this in **Galatians 3:19**— “¹⁹ Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary.”—and **Romans 7:7**— “⁷ What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” So, then, we see that God gave the Law after he made his promise to Abraham that he would bless the whole world through the nation that would come from him in large part to show us that we indeed are sinful and that, as sinners, we stand condemned before God and deserve the curse that is upon us before one day facing his wrath and eternal punishment. Then, hopefully convinced of this truth, we would truly appreciate God's promise to bless the whole world by undoing the curse of our sin through Jesus' death and resurrection, and out of that appreciation, we might actually 'repent and believe in the gospel.'

So, let's recap: God makes a promise to Abraham that he will bless the whole world—we know from Scripture that this promised blessing is being fulfilled through the salvation from our sins provided for us through Jesus' death and resurrection—we also know that this salvation is only effective for people who repent from their sin and believe in the gospel—therefore, it makes perfect sense when we realize that God gave the Law in large part to help make us aware of our sin, for only those who believe that they are sinners and deserve God's wrath because of it will be willing to repent and believe in the gospel.

So, it is clear that although the Law does play a significant role in God's plan for redeeming humanity, it does not actually save us, but rather it shows us that we need to be saved; the Law shows us our need while the Promise—or grace—of God provides for our need. So, the

question tonight is: once we are saved—once we have repented from our sin and turned to Jesus in faith and have been brought back to God—what role does the Law play in our lives? There are those who believe that the Law no longer plays any role in the life of the Christian, and they will reference verses like **Romans 6:14** which says, “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace,” and **Galatians 5:18**, which reads, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” They will say that since we are now under grace and not under the law that the law can and should be disregarded, ignored, or, in some cases, even thrown out. However, I do not believe that these verses teach that; while I wholeheartedly agree that the Law does nothing to save you, but only makes you aware of your need to be saved, I cannot agree that it serves no purpose in the life of the Christian who is now ‘not under law but under grace.’

In **Matthew 5:17-20**, Jesus says, “¹⁷ ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” He makes it very clear here that the Law of God is still to be obeyed, and that relaxing even the least of the commandments and teaching others to do the same is not a good thing. But here is the catch: even though we are still expected to obey the Law of God, our obedience is to look and be different since we are ‘not under law but under grace.’

This is why Jesus tells us that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees: they kept the letter of the Law very strictly, even creating extra laws for themselves and their people as barriers to keep them from even coming close to disobeying the Law of God, and therefore, they expected their own righteousness to make things right with God. However, this was never how God intended for His Law to be obeyed. Rather than keeping the letter of the Law, we are to be "...obedient from the heart..." according to **Romans 6:17**, and **Romans 7:6** tells us that⁶ "...now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code." There is the difference: we are to serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code, which means that the Law still applies to Christians, but we are not expected to keep the letter of the Law in the old way of the written code. I believe the Apostle Paul gives us a great example of this in **1 Timothy 5:17-18** when he writes, "¹⁷ Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'" Here, Paul directly quotes from the Law of God, Deuteronomy 25:4 to be exact, and it seems fairly obvious that he has no expectation that we literally keep the letter of this law and work to make sure that we don't muzzle our oxen while they tread out our grain. Rather, he applies the Spirit of the Law to the Christian Church, those 'under grace,' and teaches us that we should pay our pastors for their service in preaching and teaching the Word of God.

This is why, in **Romans 13:10**, Paul tells us that "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law," and in **Galatians 5:14**, he tells us that, "¹⁴ ...the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,'" and Jesus, in **Matthew 22:36-40**, responds to an important question: "³⁶ 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in

the Law?”³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.³⁸ This is the great and first commandment.³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” I believe that Jesus and Paul are both making it clear what the Spirit of the Law is: love God and love others. So, in order for us, as Christians, as those ‘under grace,’ to obey the Law of God, we are to practice love for God and for those around us, and we do so not by disregarding the Law, but by embracing it and understanding and applying it the way the God has always intended.