

By Law or Grace?

The Pursuit of Salvation: Human Effort versus Divine Initiative

Introduction

Previously we did a deep dive into the conditions God offers to receive salvation, discussing what it means to obey the gospel. In modern times, some have shied away from using the term *obeying* the gospel, out of fear of implying works salvation. This fear is unwarranted. Both Paul and Peter used it, Romans 10.16; 2 Thessalonians 1.8; 1 Peter 4.17. The primary objective in obedience is *submission*. In **obeying the gospel**, we engage in the process of submitting to Jesus as our *sin offering* to be saved by Him. Our actions in following the conditions (or terms) are responses to, and express reliance upon Christ crucified.³² Redemption is an expression of God's grace, which is the **basis** for our salvation. *By grace you have been saved*, Paul says in Ephesians 2.8. He is referring to a *method* or *system* of salvation, the *system of grace*.

Seeking Salvation: Two Different Approaches to God

Before we go farther, it is important to consider the two ways we relate to God in seeking salvation. One way is initiated by us and is characterized by personal achievement, being motivated primarily for human purposes and glory. The other way is initiated by God and accomplished by God for the purpose of His own glory. The first way focuses on rule keeping, ritual, and works.³³ The second depends upon God and His work on our behalf. One concentrates on

Two Different Approaches to God

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Initiated by man• Stresses personal achievement & glory• Depends on Rule keeping; Ritual; Works• A WAGE to be received, i.e., we get what we deserve, eternal death• God is holy & just | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Initiated by God• Stresses God's achievement & God's glory• Depends on God and His work on our behalf• A GIFT from God, i.e., we receive what we do not deserve, eternal life.• God is a loving gift-giver |
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SYSTEM OF LAW

a system that stresses obedience to one's law code as the way to salvation

SYSTEM OF GRACE

a system that stresses dependence on Jesus being the satisfactory offering for our sin, received by faith, as the way to salvation

law, the other on *grace*. In Romans 3.27, Paul mentions the two systems. Here he refers to them as *the law of works* and *the law of faith*. These are the only two ways humans can approach God for salvation. The *system of law* sees salvation as a **wage** that is to be received. The *system of grace* views it as a **gift** from God, Romans 6.23. If we relate to God on the basis of wages, then we will one day receive what we deserve. If we relate to God on the basis as a loving gift-giver, we will one day receive that which we do not deserve – eternal life. Every person must make the determination as to what system he or she is going to follow in seeking salvation.

Now, let us contrast these two differing approaches to God.

The System of Law

The system of law relates to God from the standpoint of *holiness*. Cottrell writes, “The holy God gives us what we deserve, or the wages we have earned by our works of obedience to his commands.”³⁴ The emphasis is on *doing*:

... Moses writes about the righteousness that is from the law: **The one who does these things will live by them,** Romans 10.5.

If one chooses to pursue this path of acceptance by God, his or her salvation depends on performance to whatever *law code* he is under. He or she believes that by following the commandments of law, they can gain eternal life as a rightful reward. This system operates on the principle of “accomplish these specific tasks, and heaven will be your earned destination.”

By virtue of being created beings, every human being is under or responsible to a code of law given by God. A **law code** is a set of commandments every person is obligated to obey by the decree of God.

An Important Distinction

We must not confuse a *law code* with a *law system*. There are differing law codes in the Bible. In the book of Romans, we observe different law codes for different people. For example:

- There is the law given to those without *special revelation*,³⁵ i.e., the law of the Gentiles, Romans 2.15. This law code is in the heart of every human being and is the result of having been created in the image of God.
- There is the law given to the Jews under the Old Testament, i.e., the law of Moses. This law was fulfilled by Christ and ended at the cross, Matthew 5.17-19; Romans 10.4.
- There is the law given to Christians found in the moral and religious teaching of Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament, John 14.15.

Law Codes in Romans

1 Those without *special revelation*, i.e., the law of the Gentiles, Romans 2.15.

2 Jews Under the Law of Moses.

3 Christians Under the Authority of Christ.

All individuals are always under a law code.

Paul's teaching in Romans applies to ALL law codes.

It is also important to understand all individuals are always governed by some form of law code. No one chooses to be under a law, it is inherent in being a created being. God has given each person the free will to choose how to respond to it — either keeping it — or violating it. Law codes assist in defining our existence under the authority of our Creator. He is God. We are not. We are subject to His laws simply by the virtue of being His creation. Finally, Paul’s teaching in Romans applies to **all** law codes, encompassing but not limited to the Law of Moses.

May we come to understand and view *law* as a good thing. It has been given to us by God for our benefit.

Law:

- **Teaches us about God, defines sin, and points to a Savior**, Romans 3.20; Galatians 3.24.
- **Provides us with boundaries**, providing our lives and communities with order. Law is given to restrain sin. *Without guidance from God, law and order disappear, but God blesses everyone who obeys his Law*, Proverbs 29.18, CEV.³⁶
- **Shows us how to live**, providing us with a standard of right and wrong. God is the Creator, who has created us in His image, Genesis 1.27, for the purpose of being holy, Ephesians 1.4; 2 Corinthians 7.1; Hebrews 12.14; 1 Peter 1.15-16. Following through on God's expectation to *be holy* leads to fellowship or communion with Him since He cannot be connected to sin, 1 John 1.5-6. To facilitate that holiness, God has given us a law code – a set of commandments – that every person must obey regardless of who they are.

But problems arise when we try to use *law* for the purpose of being a *law system*, or a means by which we are saved. The law demands perfection and supplies no forgiveness. This is why Paul's writing in Romans 6.14-15 is wonderful news. Here, he refers to *law* as a **law system**, which is the effort to use obedience to one's law code as way of salvation.

For sin will not rule over you, because you are not under the law but under grace. What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? Absolutely not!

When Paul says *you are not under the law*, he is not saying we are no longer under a law code. Also, while the Jewish Christians in Rome were no longer under the law of Moses, this is not under view either. What Paul is saying, is that since God's people have decided to trust in Jesus for salvation, they are not under the *system of law*, but under the *system of grace*.

For this we should be eternally thankful. Notice how Paul summarizes the law system:

God... will repay each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, He will give eternal life; but to those who are self-serving and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, He will give wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of mankind who does evil, for the Jew first and also for the Greek, but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who does what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, Romans 2.5b-10, NASB 2020.

How do you get to heaven under a system of law? *Do good*, or “keep the commandments” of whatever law code you are under. If you fail to do good, i.e., *do evil*, you will suffer *wrath, indignation, tribulation, and distress*. There is no in between. One violation of law makes one guilty of all:

For whoever keeps the entire law, and yet stumbles at one point, is guilty of breaking it all, James 2.10.

The Law System is Powerless to Save

In theory, the law system could provide a way of salvation, *if* a person were able to perform all the commandments. Paul says, *doers of the law will be justified*, Romans 2.10. But, beware. If you choose to approach God this way, you are under obligation to keep it all, James 2.10; Galatians 3.10. What Paul says in Galatians is expressive. Approaching God via the law system actually leads to ruin, because the person who *does not do it all is cursed*. No one, save Jesus, has ever kept it; *all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*, Romans 3.23. Therefore, we read:

- Romans 3.20 – *by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight.*
- Galatians 3.11-12: *Now it is clear that no one is justified before God by the law, because the righteous will live by faith. But the law is not based on faith; instead, the one who does these things will live by them.*
- Galatians 3.21: *For if the law had been granted with the ability to give life, then righteousness would certainly be on the basis of the law.*³⁷

Romans 3.20 is the summary of Paul's teaching in Romans 1.18-3.20. All are under sin, 3.9. No person will be saved because of law-keeping — no matter what law code they are under, 3.20. Moser has written:

Law can convict man of sin, but it can neither overcome the power of sin in the soul nor furnish a sacrifice that can take away sin.³⁸

The System of Grace

The bad news of the gospel is that all are under the penalty of sin: lost and awaiting eternal death or separation from God. So, what makes the news of the gospel *good*? The gospel tells us God has created another way for salvation—the way for sinners to enter—by grace. This is what Paul covers in Romans 3.21-5.21. The system of grace is the way of salvation created by God by in providing His Son as the satisfactory offering for our sin to be received as a gift by faith.

We must not turn the system of grace into an updated system of law

Of this, Moser has written:

And if grace is but another name for a legal religion, then man is still under condemnation. The surest way to nullify grace is to make it law. 'But if it is by grace, it is no more works: otherwise, grace is no more grace,' Romans 11.6. It was as necessary that man be freed from a law religion as it was that he have a Savior. 'You were also made dead to the law through the body of Christ; that you should be joined to another, even to him who was raised from the dead, that we might bring forth fruit unto God,' Romans 7.4."³⁹

Grace is not a law code that has replaced the law of Moses. It is a completely different system, that is actually *the opposite* of the system of law. Instead of justifying us via a system of getting what we deserve (fairness), God has made it possible for us to escape the penalty *we deserve* because of our sin. We each deserve hell. In his writing, Cottrell quotes Ranny Grady who says, *grace is not just "unmerited favor"; it is "favor bestowed when wrath is owed."*⁴⁰ We who have broken God's commandments, get to escape the penalty we deserve. This should bring each of us unbridled praise! And it all goes back to Jesus:

He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God, 2 Corinthians 5.21.

This presents the scriptural basis for the concept of grace. Jesus, who was sinless and obedient to the commandments, was made to bear the burden of sin. Why? It was to enable "us" – those who have failed to keep the commandments – to be transformed into the embodiment of God's righteousness, thus avoiding the consequences of our transgressions.

2 Corinthians 5:21 highlights the contrasting ways God treats Jesus and sinners. Jesus, the divine, deserving of honor as the Creator, instead faced crucifixion and bore God's wrath, being treated as a sinner. His experience was marked by humiliation, shame, and immense suffering. In the starkest of contrasts, we sinners, who rightly deserve the torment of hell, are instead offered the gift of eternal life and heavenly splendor under grace. God regards us as righteous.

The essence of grace is a profound exchange: Jesus endures what we deserve, allowing us to be treated as He should be. As Jesus faced the cross, treated contrary to His worth, we receive grace, which is far beyond what we deserve. It's as if Jesus swapped places and identities with us. On the cross, God saw our sins in Jesus and inflicted our deserved punishment on Him. Consequently, when God looks at those embracing His grace, He sees Jesus' righteousness. This divine exchange grants us the assurance of salvation, ensuring that we will receive what Jesus has and is accomplishing, both now and at the final judgment.

This divine exchange doesn't just happen upon our baptism, it continues throughout the Christian life through our continued faith (dependence) upon Him.

... because he remains forever, he holds his priesthood permanently. Therefore, he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, since he always lives to intercede for them, Hebrews 7.24-25.

We must not dilute the system of grace

Diluting the System of Grace

- **Jesus + Works (i.e., Galatianism)**
- **Salvation is obtained as a gift; then then is *retained* by obedience to the law of Christ**
- **Salvation reverts back to personal righteousness, performance, and command-keeping**
- **A relationship with God depends on whether our obedience is *good enough* ... leads to a “balance-scale” approach ... no assurance whatsoever**
- **Leads to hopelessness, fear, dread, and guilt**

Unfortunately, what has come about in many circles of the restoration movement is a teaching that encompasses a combination of grace *and* works.⁴¹ This was the problem of the churches of Galatia, of which Paul confronts in his letter in the New Testament. The Judaizers taught that salvation came by Christ *only* if a person kept certain commands of the Old Testament law. Today, many maintain that salvation is *initially* obtained as a gift of grace and

then that salvation is retained by obedience to the commandments of the law of Christ. So, grace covers a person to the point of the cross—whereby a person receives forgiveness for all his past sins—and from there a person will be saved because of personal righteousness via his performance and command-keeping.⁴²

In the churches of Christ, this view goes all the way back to Alexander Campbell, who wrote:

Sinners are justified by faith, and christians by works.⁴³

This belief places our salvation back into our hands and we can only enjoy a relationship with God if our obedience is good enough. Basically, it forces a person to revert to the task of having to make sure the

number of his good works add up to more than the number of sins he has accumulated. There is no security or assurance in this approach.

This completely ignores Jesus' teaching in Luke 17.7-10:

“Which one of you having a servant tending sheep or plowing will say to him when he comes in from the field, ‘Come at once and sit down to eat’? Instead, will he not tell him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat, get ready, and serve me while I eat and drink; later you can eat and drink’? Does he thank that servant because he did what was commanded? In the same way, when you have done all that you were commanded, you should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we’ve only done our duty.’”

Can we see the principle here? Even perfect adherence to God's commands does not generate extra merit to compensate for past transgressions. This is because each act of goodness is a debt we already owe to God, as we are instructed to strive for perfection, Matthew 5.48, and emulate the holiness of God, 1 Peter 1.15–16.

The concept of a balance-scale judgment is flawed. Our virtuous deeds cannot offset even the smallest sin, as these deeds are obligations to God. It's impossible to use the same 'currency' to settle both our obedience and sin debts. This clarifies why salvation under a law system is unattainable. A single sin incurs a penalty beyond our capacity to repay through actions. Hence, our sole path to heaven relies entirely on the grace of Jesus Christ, *independent of our efforts*.

Coming to Embrace the Grace Mentality

Inside the restoration movement, this may be one of the greatest challenges many face. For those who have been raised under the faith + works mentality, embracing the grace mentality can be a paradigm shift of monumental proportions. Those who still relate to God from the viewpoint of law or personal performance will be dominated by dread, doubt, and anxiety — because they are still thinking from the standpoint of getting what they deserve. They are still thinking in terms of all they must do “to be good enough.” They have reverted to, without realizing it, a system based on doing things to avoid punishment. Living from this perspective is no way to experience the fullness of joy that God intended. Oh that more Christians truly grasped Paul's message of Romans 6.14, *you are not under (a law system) but under (a grace system)*.

In contrast, the Christian who lives by the system of grace is no longer dominated by hopelessness, fear, and guilt—instead he or she is filled with hope, joy, peace, and assurance. Of this, Cottrell has written:

Those under law should be filled with despair, and those under grace with ecstatic joy. The paradox here is that probably more Christians are plagued by the law mentality than pagans and hardened unbelievers. Even though they are Christians, they just don't get it! Though they are in reality under God's grace, they do not understand what this means and still have the mental attitude of law. Their mentality does not match their reality.⁴⁴

Finally, what Moser wrote a century ago is very appropriate:

Let us not annihilate grace by making it identical with debt, and faith by making it equal to works. This is to make void the blood of Christ. . . . Grace is grace, not debt; faith is faith, not works; blessings are blessings, not curses; and Christ's death is not in vain. So, on God's part, salvation is by grace — that is, God saves man by having mercy upon him; or in other words, God saves man by saving him. On man's part salvation is by faith. Grace calls for faith. Faith means trust, and trust, too, in the blood of Christ.⁴⁵

What's In This for Us?

In this lesson we have attempted to gain understanding that obedience is more about submission to Jesus and His sacrifice than about earning salvation through our own work. This understanding leads us to embrace God's grace as the foundation of our salvation.

Embracing God's Grace in Daily Life

Recognize that every act of kindness or goodness is not a means to earn salvation but a response to the grace we've already received. Shift focus from trying to earn God's favor through deeds to expressing gratitude for His grace through our actions. In moments of failure or sin, remind yourself that God's grace, not your performance, secures your salvation.

Understanding Our Relationship with God's Laws

Study and follow God's laws not to earn salvation but as a guide for living a life that reflects His character. Teach others that God's laws reflect His nature and our response to His love, rather than a checklist for salvation. When following biblical commandments, always filter them through the lens of grace and Christ's sacrifice.

Dealing with Guilt and Assurance of Salvation

Regularly affirm the assurance of salvation based on Christ's sacrifice, not on personal merit. When feeling guilty, turn to prayer and Scripture to remind yourself of God's grace and forgiveness. Share your understanding of grace with others who struggle with guilt and legalism.

Sharing the Message of Grace

Share your testimony and how understanding grace has changed your relationship with God and others. Be prepared to explain the concept of grace to those who may not understand it, using simple and relatable terms. Do good deeds to all, demonstrating God's grace through acts of service and love, Galatians 6.9-10.

Conclusion

Embracing the grace system over the law system profoundly affects how we live and interact with God and others. It's about living in a state of gratitude and freedom, knowing we are saved through faith in Christ's sacrifice. This understanding should permeate every aspect of our lives, leading us to live joyfully, serve graciously, and share the message of grace with others.

For Class Interaction and Discussion

Lesson Outline:

1. Introduction

- Understanding the Concepts: Law and Grace in Salvation
- Overview of the Two Systems: Law-Based vs. Grace-Based Salvation

2. The System of Law

- Definition and Characteristics
- Biblical Examples and Implications (Romans 10.5, James 2.10)
- Law Codes in the Bible (Romans 2.15, Matthew 5.17-19, John 14.15)

3. The System of Grace

- Definition and Characteristics
- The Role of Jesus and His Sacrifice (2 Corinthians 5.21, Hebrews 7.24-25)
- Embracing Grace in Daily Life and Overcoming Legalism

4. Contrasting Law and Grace

- Analyzing Paul's Teachings in Romans
- Understanding the Inadequacy of the Law System for Salvation

5. Practical Application

- Embracing Grace in Daily Christian Life
- Transforming Our Understanding of God's Laws

Defining Terms

Lesson 1

Sin: An act or a state of disobedience or transgression against God's divine law. It refers to any thought, action, or intention that goes against or falls short of God's moral precepts or ethical ideals.

Lesson 2

Salvation: a gift based on the sacrifice of Christ that brings deliverance from sin and its consequences.

Seal of the Spirit: a mark of ownership by God.

Faith: trust in the One who saves us or dependence on Christ crucified for salvation and accepting His atonement for our sins.

Repentance: a turning away from or repudiation of sin and preparing our hearts for God's mercy.

Baptism: immersion in water, acting in conjunction with faith and repentance, for the remission of sin.

Lesson 3

Propitiation: the removal of wrath by the offering of a gift.

Lesson 4

The *Ground* or *Basis* for Salvation: the work by God Himself that accomplishes salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The *Conditions* for Salvation: the means by which we receive salvation and personally apply its promise as a part of our life.

Conversion: The exact moment when a person is changed/transformed from an unsaved state and condition to a saved state and condition.

Regeneration: The giving of life, spiritual life, to those who are dead, spiritually dead, through their trespasses and sins.

Works: any effort we make to save ourselves.

“Good Works”: the things we do in daily life that reflect the relationship we now have with God. These are the works of Ephesians 2.10 and the “doing good” of Galatians 6.9-10 that reflect the fruit of the Spirit. Good works work *from* salvation not *for* it.

Lesson 5

Obeying the Gospel:

Law Code:

Law System:

Grace System:

Thought Questions for Discussion

1. How do you understand the difference between being saved by law and by grace?
2. Why is it impossible to earn salvation through the law system?
3. Discuss how Jesus' sacrifice changes our relationship with God's laws.

4. In what ways can legalism subtly influence our Christian life?
5. How can we practically embrace grace in our daily lives?
6. What are the dangers of viewing obedience as a means to earn salvation?
7. How does understanding grace change our view of God and ourselves?
8. Discuss the role of faith in the system of grace.
9. How can we help others who struggle with a legalistic view of salvation?
10. What does living under grace look like in practical terms?

Group Activities

1. **Debate Session:** Organize a friendly debate on the merits and challenges of the law system and the grace system.
2. **Group Reflection:** Share personal experiences where understanding grace profoundly impacted your life.

Final Encouraging Word

Remember, your salvation is a gift of grace, not a result of your works. Embrace grace, letting it transform how you live and view your relationship with God. In Christ, you have been given freedom from the burden of trying to earn God's favor and are called to live in the joy and peace of His unending love. Let this understanding of grace guide your steps and fill your heart with gratitude and love.

³² Moser, *The Gist of Romans*, p. 9.

³³ Every human-invented religion is a religion of works.

³⁴ Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All*, p. 309.

³⁵ Special revelation is supernatural communication from God that has been given to humanity. This communication can come in either oral or in written form. The truths revealed by special revelation could not be known through looking at unwritten tradition, nature, providence, history, our conscience, or by any reasoning process. God must directly reveal them to us. See Hebrews 1.1-3.

³⁶ *The Holy Bible: The Contemporary English Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995.

³⁷ While all three of the passages just listed are worded *the law* in the CSB and have direct application to Paul's addressing Jews who were trying to persuade Gentiles to keep certain aspects of the Law of Moses for salvation, the principle is the same for every law code. That a *law system* is in view is reflected in the NASB 2020.

³⁸ Moser, *The Gist of Romans*, p. 16.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All*, p. 312.

⁴¹ I believe much of this has come about because of our emphasis in countering Calvinism and other denominational teaching. While these false doctrines must be resisted, we must guard against going to the other extreme and negating salvation by grace through faith by over-emphasizing works.

⁴² This faith + works formula is at the core of Catholicism and Seventh Day Adventism. It is also popular in many circles of the restoration movement.

⁴³ Campbell, Alexander. "To Paulinus." *The Christian Baptist*, May 7, 1827. As quoted by Cottrell in *The Faith Once for All*, p. 316. See also Campbell's writing, "The Three Kingdoms" in *The Christian Baptist*, June 1, 1829.

⁴⁴ Cottrell, *What the Bible Says...*, p. 61.

⁴⁵ Moser, *The Way of Salvation...* p. 40-41.