



R E M E D I A L
Christianity

Correcting Deficiencies in Popular Christianity

#10 — Led by the Spirit or by the Law?

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
7/13/2003*

Led by the Spirit or by the Law?

A False Dichotomy

Somewhere in a sermon I had given the impression that people should try to obey God's law. Shortly after the service a couple of young Christians stood before me with Bibles opened. I must say I admired their courage and resolve. I admired that their hands held Bibles. I admired that they sought to gently and lovingly correct me. This type of thing ought to happen to pastors with regularity. Unfortunately they, like so many of us, were Remedial Christians. I was gently accused of seeking to put Christians under the law. We are to be led, not by the law, but by the Spirit was their thesis.

Pitting the Spirit of God against the Law of God may be one of the greatest errors promoted by the purveyors of Remedial Christianity. Logic books can use this error as an example of the informal logical fallacy of the false dichotomy – you're either led by the Spirit or by the law – one's gotta go. Remedial Christians have decreed "Out with the law."

The law of God is viewed among Remedial Christians as cold, external, and superficial. It is equated with the flesh and should be set aside by true believers – after all "**...the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6)**". There are so many passages in Scripture which, if skimmed¹ instead of scanned,² seem to place God's Spirit at odds with God's law that it makes God out to be a bit schizophrenic.

Preview

Presently I would like to: 1) show that being led by the Spirit includes obedience to the law of God; 2) reveal what the passages which appear to pit the Spirit against the law are actually seeking to accomplish; and, 3) give a brief description of the arsenal God provides for spiritual warfare.

Spiritually Obeying God's Law

Somehow we remedials came to the conclusion that reading God's law and doing our best (heart, soul, mind, and strength) to obey it was a mistake – it was relying on our own strength. What Christians supposedly should do is trust in the power of the Spirit. Instead of excelling in obedience to the revealed law of God, one must excel in appropriating the power of the Holy Spirit.

Seeking to obey the law of God is actually just the opposite of relying on your own strength. It is relying on God's wisdom and strength. When I do what God's law says I ought to do instead of what I feel like doing (even if I try to interpret that feeling as something spiritual) I am being led by the Spirit. What we will find is that obedience to the law of God is a characteristic which reveals that the Spirit of God is working in us. This is one of those attributes the Bible teaches the gospel will produce in a person.

¹ To pass lightly and quickly over.

² To examine closely.

I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them* (Ezekiel 36:27).

Some might seek to argue that a statute is distinct from a law but it would be a foolish argument; the words are synonymous.

Statute, custom, law, decree (ASV and RSV translate also ordinance, due and bound.) The masculine noun *hoq* is from the root *haqaq* which means "to scratch" or "to engrave," hence "to write."³

The Apostle Paul drives this point home with the rhetorical question.

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? ² Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it (Romans 6:1, 2)?

Paul continues:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. ¹³And do not present your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God. ¹⁴ For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace (Romans 6:12-14).

What it means to not be under law but under grace we'll address in a moment. For now it should be clear that a Spirit-led person seeks to avoid sinning. And what is sin? We must let the Scriptures define it.

Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

Sin is defined as a violation of the law of God. Perhaps you've heard that when Jesus came he ended the law (a poor interpretation of Romans 10:4). What He actually taught was,

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill (Matthew 5:17).

Jesus also taught,

Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12).

Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."³⁸ This is *the* first and great commandment. ³⁹ And *the* second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor

³ Harris, R. L. 1999, c1980. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Page 317). Moody Press: Chicago

***as yourself.*"⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).**

Jesus had ample opportunity to tell people to forget about the law, yet He never did. Hyper-remedials will advise Christians to forget about the law and merely imitate Jesus. But what is it about Jesus that we're supposed to imitate? Jesus was born under the law (Galatians 4:4) and always did that which pleased the Father. It is His moral law-keeping that we are to imitate. In fact there are many things Jesus did which we need not imitate (circumcision, dietary restrictions, etc.).

Paul also viewed God's law as something holy.

Therefore the law *is* holy, and the commandment holy and just and good (Romans 7:12).

Notice Paul doesn't shrink back from appealing to the law in his arguments about the behavior of Christians.

Do I say these things as a *mere* man? Or does not the law say the same also? ⁹ For it is written in the law of Moses, "*You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain.*" Is it oxen God is concerned about (1 Corinthians 9:8, 9)?

James also has godly respect for the law of God.

But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues *in it*, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does (James 1:25).

There are innumerable passages in both the Old and New Testaments which indicate that the spiritual man will seek to walk in the law of God. In fact every command in Scripture makes the assumption that those led by the Spirit will regard God's law as commands which are to be obeyed. And the remedials, though they often argue against the law of God, will seldom put their theory to practice. They'll always agree that it's wrong to steal.

Bottom line here is that the man who is led by the Spirit in his ethics is led to know, agree and trust in God's law.

Spirit Versus Law

So what do we make of the passages which appear to pit the Spirit against the law? Verses like,

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law (Galatians 5:18).

For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God (Galatians 2:19).

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. ³ For what the law could not do in that it was

weak through the flesh, God *did* by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:2, 3)...

For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Romans 10:4).

Remember how I was accused of seeking to put Christians under the law? These are the verses used against me. What does it mean that we are not under the law? When Saul of Tarsus fell to the ground having been confronted by Jesus – when he was converted – when he was delivered from the law – does anyone actually think Paul’s response to this was that he was now given a green light to disobey God’s moral law?

Did Paul say to himself, “Thank goodness I can finally follow false gods, worship with idols, use God’s name in vain, ignore the pesky Sabbath, dishonor my parents, murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, and covet?”

Time does not allow me to go into detail, but a brief examination of the context of these passages should illuminate the matter.

Under the Law

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law (Galatians 5:18).

The context of this verse is found in the opening verses of the chapter.

You have become estranged from Christ, you who *attempt* to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace (Galatians 5:4).

Paul is not arguing that Christians shouldn’t seek to obey the law. He is arguing against the folly of seeking to obey the law in order to be justified. Now we remedials are bothered to find out what justification is. Justification is God’s declaration of acquittal. Those who put their faith in Christ alone have been pardoned by His blood. Those who trust in their own efforts are still under law.

In short, being under law or under grace is referring to the terms of a covenant. Are you under a covenant of law? Do you trust in your own efforts to stand approved before God. If such is the case you are surely fallen. Are you under a covenant of grace? Do you trust in the cross of Christ? If such is the case, you will not be judged. Jesus said it plainly:

He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:18).

In other words, using the law to try to save yourself leads to ruin. Using the law as a system of ethics is holy and good. If I tell you to run to get in shape it might be good advice. If I tell you to run to the moon...well, you get the picture.

Dead to the Law

We see the similar thought in the next verse.

For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God (Galatians 2:19).

Notice the context.

I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness *comes* through the law, then Christ died in vain (Galatians 2:21).

Again, if I think I can be declared righteous before God through the law, Christ died in vain. Paul died to the law in terms of seeking to keep it to save himself – not as a rule of ethics.

The Law of Sin and Death

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. ³ For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God *did* by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:2, 3),...

What is the law of sin and death? It is the law, or covenant, which states that if you sin you die. It is the one given to Adam. God told Adam, “On the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” What we were too weak in our flesh to do, God did by sending Jesus. This has nothing to do with whether or not we should abandon our efforts to obey God’s law. We’re instructed to have faith in the law-keeper.

End of the Law

For Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Romans 10:4).

This verse is continually quoted as if Christians should ditch the Ten Commandments. Again, look at the context.

For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God (Romans 10:3).

Paul is addressing people who are trying to “establish their own righteousness.” Paul’s point is that the Old Testament (whether “law” refers to ceremonial laws or the entire Mosaic system doesn’t really matter here) had Christ as its chief end (end meaning purpose [*telos* in the Greek], not extermination).

Conclusion

The end of the matter is this: if one thinks he is spiritual yet ignores the law of God, he deceives himself. The person who is led by the Spirit will, among other things, have the same view of the law as Paul.

Therefore the law *is* holy, and the commandment holy and just and good (Romans 7:12).

The person led by the Spirit will have the same view of the law as David.

The law of Your mouth *is* better to me than thousands of *coins of gold and silver* (Psalms 119:72).

This needs to be understood, however, in the light of the weakness of the law to save. When one views their keeping of the law as their hope of righteousness, the law becomes their executioner. Praise God, One was executed on our behalf. Amen.

Questions for Study

1. Is seeking to obey God with all your heart the same as relying on yourself rather than God (page 1)?
2. How is it “spiritual” to seek to obey God’s law (pages 1, 2)?
3. Define *sin* (page 2)?
4. Was Jesus for or against the law? What about Paul or James (pages 2, 3)?
5. What does it mean to be “under the law” (page 4)?
6. In what respect are we to be “dead” to the law (page 5)?
7. What is the law of sin and death (page 5)?
8. How is Christ the “end” of the law (page 5)?
9. Sum up how the law should and should not be used (pages 5, 6).