

A Slice of Grace with a side of LAW?



by Ken Armstrong

If you want to see the tension between grace and law in operation, observe any freeway at rush hour. The guiding principle for most drivers is “grace for me—law for you.” Behind the wheels of their private bubbles, people arrogantly justify their every behavior while condemning the drivers around them. The freeway is the ultimate lab for the study of me-first behavior.

Well, *almost* the ultimate lab. There’s also *church*.

Whether we want to admit it or not, most people want to be just a little better than their neighbors in God’s eyes, and the only way we can think of to do that is to apply a huge side of law to someone else’s slice of grace. Law allows us to set our own gold standard for pleasing God. It allows us to hold up a yardstick and find others lacking. It gives us a way to feel good

one-size-fits-all proposition. Law is no respecter of persons. Law has no passion, no conscience, no room for love. It merely divides the lawful from the lawless. It is both a spotlight and a mirror, shining a bright light on the errors of others, while simultaneously reflecting the truth about the one who dares to use it.

That’s why Jesus warned us, “For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Matthew 7:2). If we use the spotlight, we can’t get away from the mirror.

Laws are Not Written for “Good” People

But, one might argue, God’s laws are good. They’re right there in the Bible, and if we’re good, we will obey the law. The problem with that

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about ourselves by contrast with the poor, sinful soul being measured and found lacking.

But the problem with law, whether on the freeway or in a church, is that it’s pretty much a



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by the law in order to set us free. He gave to everyone who will receive it a sort of diplomatic immunity that says, "They're mine. The law doesn't apply to them."

In a perfect world, having made our point, we could stop here. But in a perfect world, there would be no tension between law and grace in the first place. In fact, our world is far from perfect and so the *debates*

People are called to account for performing the wrong style baptism, worshiping on the wrong day, eating the wrong food, listening to the wrong music.

The Deadly Message of Religious Legalism

Perhaps the ancient enemy whispers in the ears of some, goading them to assert their righteousness of works. Just as he convinced

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about law rage on in the most unlikely places—among those who should be bathed in grace. Among those who call themselves

by the name of the Messiah who redeemed them. Among *Christians*.

Twenty centuries ago, Jesus faced down the Pharisees who loved to use God's law to make themselves look and feel superior. He called them a "den of vipers" (fighting words in those days). He challenged them, and all who would hear, with a new commandment—to love one another (John 13:34). "Love God with everything in you," he said, "and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself" (Mark 12:30-31).

Faced with the stoning of a woman caught in adultery—the penalty prescribed by the law—Jesus again faced the pious crowd of accusers and said, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). When Jesus himself stood accused for performing a miraculous healing on the Sabbath, he told them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," turning their system of blind legalism on its head (Mark 2:27).

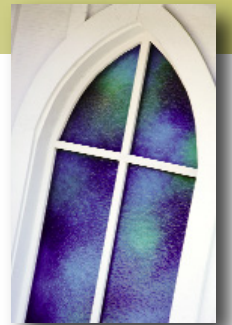
Everyone with a Bible can read these accounts, and yet the battle rages on, in buildings adorned with crosses. Doctrinalism has given birth to denominationalism. Walls are built. Signs are painted. Bylaws are printed and distributed.

Adam and Eve that God hadn't meant what he said in the garden, perhaps now he is convincing some that they can improve their stature before the Almighty King by pointing out the shortcomings of others.

After all, the enemy is the one who accuses us before God's throne. In fact, there can be little doubt that many of the "flaming arrows" Paul mentions in Ephesians 6:16 are tipped with the poison of religious legalism. Paul tells us it takes the "full armor" of the true Gospel to protect us from the attacks of the evil one.

Without a doubt, the enemy has two favorite messages with which he bombards the world moment by moment. The first is the secular message that there is no such thing as sin, and that Christ's death on the cross was unnecessary foolishness. Most of the world accepts this message, either consciously or unconsciously, giving things like wealth, prestige and politics the highest priority in their lives—in effect making those things their gods.

The second message is the enemy's fall-back position. It's the one he uses when someone slips past the secular message. For those who have become aware of their need for God, this message is an



logic is that the law wasn't written for good people. It was written for lawbreakers. Why would we have ever needed the law, if everyone was going to obey it anyway?

The apostle Paul agreed that the law is good (Romans 7:16), but Paul also wrote to his young pastor friend Timothy that, "law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers..." (1 Timothy 1:9). And he told the believers in Corinth, "That's the way some of us were..." (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Before we go another step, let's remember where Jesus set the bar on sin. "If you even thought about it or harbored an evil thought, you did it," he tells us (Matthew 5:22, 28, paraphrased). If the Law of Moses applies even to our most private thoughts, who among us comes away blameless?

Paul continued in his letter to the Corinthians, "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." That's the way some of us were—lawless ones—but Jesus, through his death and resurrection, paid the full price required

effective and powerful snare. It is the message that we are so lowly and undeserving that Christ's death and resurrection are not enough to save us—that we must add something in order to make God's gift effective.

Few who believe in Jesus would actually *say* those words, but a shockingly large number live and even teach as though the Lord's sacrifice wasn't enough. Have you been a victim of this type of message? Sometimes subtle, often loud and direct, here are some of the ideas which damage believers daily:

- There is only one correct Sabbath. To be truly accepted by God we must worship on that specific day (Romans 14:1-10).
- To be truly spiritual, you must fast and keep certain feasts and celebrations. Without these, your worship is not acceptable to God (Colossians 2:16-19).
- To draw close to God, we must eat only certain types of foods.

Those who eat other foods are not as spiritual as we are.

- To be truly spiritual, we must attack sin in the world and pass laws against sin (Romans 1:1-2:4, John 3:16-18).
- To be accepted by God, you must accept a particular prophetic view. Everyone not sharing that view is to be shunned (Romans 14:1, Colossians 2:16-17).
- People who have committed a certain type of sin are never qualified for ministry (Psalm 103:1-12).

Does this list look familiar to you? I'm sure you could add other performance-based messages you have heard, and even many you have believed.

But not only does God tell us we can't add anything to make our salvation complete, he even tells us why he did it that way—he didn't want us to have anything to brag about (Ephesians 2:8-9).

From a Rogues' Gallery to a Life of Grace

Have you ever noticed that the great patriarchs of the Bible look a lot like a rogues' gallery? Abraham, who gave his wife to another man (*twice!*) to avoid trouble. Moses, the murderer. David, the adulterer and murderer. Rahab, the prostitute whose name is proudly displayed in the Messiah's genealogy. Matthew, the corrupt tax collector. Paul, who murdered Christians and held the coats while others stoned Stephen. Why would God choose to use such a tarnished group of people as the role models of our faith?

So that we could add our names to the list, that's why! So that we could realize that despite their transgressions, God counted their *faith* (not their *works*) as righteousness (Romans 4, Hebrews 11), and in realizing that, we could assume our place in the family of God, washed

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We don't really need to go to a freeway. Life right where we are is a traffic jam with horns blaring and everyone jockeying for position. But God never intended for his people to live that way. That's why he paid the price for the law, effectively erasing it (Hebrews 8:13) and replacing it with a simple, new commandment, "Love one another. As I have loved you, you must love each other" (John 13:34).

Jesus said, "I didn't come to condemn the world, but to save it" (John 3:17). God's grace is served up all by itself with nothing else to make it complete. If we add even the slightest legal requirement on the side, it's no longer grace on the plate but law. And if we choose to walk in the law, we are in darkness, and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:5-7).

"Love each other as I have loved you," Jesus said. We start by dropping back and letting others into the traffic in front of us. □

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