

The Relation of Law and Grace

(by Bob Pulliam)

The Bible clearly teaches that we are under a law (see [Legalism](#)). However, this assertion must be reconciled with Paul's statement in Romans 6:14, "for you are not under law but under grace." Could it be possible that both statements are correct? It is, and they are! How can we not be under law and under grace at the same time? The answer comes in understanding what Paul is referring to in Romans 6:14 ("you are not under law"), and seeing the relationship sustained by law and grace.

The Concept of Law...

The concept of law in Romans slips by many people leaving them with a great misunderstanding. If this is the case with you, don't feel bad; some of the greatest theologians around have missed Paul's point regarding "law". This point is not recognized because of the great body of doctrines that people want to justify as they read their Bibles. However, when one reads to understand what Paul has to say, the matter becomes much more clear.

The book of Romans deals extensively with the idea of trying to be justified (i.e. saved) by keeping the law of Moses perfectly (i.e. never breaking a command). From this standpoint, the law is called a "law of works" (Rom 3:27f). "Works" is used for the idea of "earning or meriting". The law of Moses was a law in which one had to keep the law perfectly to be sinless. But if the person kept the law of Moses perfectly, then they had earned their salvation. They could, as a result, say to God, "You owe me salvation!" (Rom 4:4). But such is never the case, for man is not a perfect creature (Rom 3:23). This is why Paul wrote, "Therefore by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin." (Rom 3:20). This last statement is also considered later, when Paul wrote, "I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me." (Rom 7:9 - 11).

The Basis of Law...

The process of the law causing death without any recourse is brought about by the basis for the law. We think of Law as law, with no differences in any laws. But Paul is contrasting a law of works (where one must keep the law perfectly) with a law of faith (where one trusts in another for justification). Nowhere is this more clear than in Romans 3:27 & 28: "Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law." (emph. mine bp) Here we see the law of works and the law of faith side by side. On the one hand there is a law where you cannot make a mistake, and if you do you are condemned. On the other hand there is a law where you can be forgiven if you trust (have faith) in another. The basis for the law of Moses was perfect law keeping. All the law did was spell out transgression and it's punishment. There was no sufficient means of removing sin once a person transgressed the law (Heb 10:1 - 4). You might keep all of the law, all of your life, and stumble over only one point. Even so, you would stand condemned before God (Jms 2:10f). The basis of the law, then, is what caused death in those who were under the law (see also Gal 3:10 - 12).

In the book of Romans, Paul tells his readers that we are no longer under a law of works (Rom 3:27f; see also Gal 2:16). Instead we are under a law of faith. It is a law whose basis is faith in the work of another (i.e. Jesus Christ). So we are under a law!... But it is not the law being referred to in Romans 6:14 when Paul wrote "for you are not under law". It is referred to simply by the term grace as Paul writes "but under grace". This "law of faith" that Paul referred to in Romans 3:27 can also be called a "law of grace". The basis for this law's ability to justify is the grace of God and the faith of man. It is a law based on the sacrifice of another (i.e. Jesus Christ), instead of sacrifices we offer that are insufficient. Romans 6:14 could be worded, "you are not under the law of Moses, but under a law of grace."

That Paul sees a law in the context of this grace we are under is clear from verse seventeen: "But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered." The word form in this verse means, "'a blow' (from a root tup, seen also in tupto, "to strike"), hence, (a) an impression, the mark of a "blow," Jn 20:25; (b) the "impress" of a seal, the stamp made by a die, a figure, image, Acts 7:43; (c) a "form" or mold, Rom 6:17 (see RV); (d) the sense or substance of a letter, Ac 23:25; (e) "an ensample," pattern, Ac 7:44; Heb 8:5, "pattern"; in an ethical sense, I Cor 10:6; Phil 3:17; I Th 1:7; 2Th 3:9; I Tim 4:12, RV, "ensample"; Titus 2:7, RV, "ensample," for KJV, "pattern"; 1Pet 5:3" (Vines, p363). This form was something that was set and unchanging to which the Romans had become obedient. An obvious reference to law. In this case the law of grace.

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Many people labor under the delusion that law and grace are mutually exclusive (usually basing their conclusion on Romans 6:14). But law and grace are not mutually exclusive. The reason law and grace are mutually exclusive in Romans 6:14 is that the law referred to is based on works (merit, earning), which excludes grace (favor, giving). In God's plan, Grace actually requires law, and law requires grace.

That law requires grace should be evident. Without a basis of grace, law is simply a system of condemnation. The law says that the blasphemer shall die, and there is no means of actually taking away the condemnation. Grace provides that mechanism, however. The word grace simply means favor. But it refers to the means God has used under the New Testament to redeem mankind from sin: the sacrifice of His Son. Without this sacrifice, man is totally without hope. Grace has not been put in place without law.

Why? Because if there was no law there would be no boundaries to grace; and salvation would be universal. Grace does not exclude justice. Sin must be punished (Rom 6:23). Law defines sin (I Jn 3:4), but it also provides the boundaries within which grace will operate to justly remedy sin's wage. Even in providing a sacrifice for sins, God was careful to be just in the means he used (Rom 3:26). God couldn't just overlook sin. If he did, He wouldn't be righteous or just (v25f). In order to be just in removing sin, He provided the life of His Son as a sacrifice to atone for sin. This was an act of grace; but it was carried out because of the necessity of justice and righteousness. God has delivered the principles of justice and righteousness to us... we call such law. Law, then, is a boundary set by the justice and righteousness of God, and that boundary is the means by which His grace is dispensed.

Conclusion...

We are presently under a law that has grace as its basis. This law provides for the element of grace, and makes demands of mankind with regard to salvation. This law provides the bounds for the grace of God. Rather than extending universal salvation, law is God's means of regulating access to grace. And it will be the means of judgment in the end.