

A Study in the Book of Romans

14

Romans 6:12-23

Key Verse

“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires... For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”

In this next section of his letter, Paul expounds on a concept he has already introduced earlier – the fact that the premise of the Gospel is based on a new covenant totally different from the old covenant of Law. Now in **6:12**, on the basis of the **know-count-offer principle** we discovered in **ES109-13**, Paul writes:

“Therefore *do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires...*”

This remarkable statement can only be understood in the light of the revelation that Paul has brought so far concerning God’s righteousness and the Law of Moses. In review, let’s take a look at what Paul has already stated.

Read Romans 2:13,15
Read Romans 3:19-23,28
Read Romans 4:13-16

Now Paul, in **6:14**, makes his principal declaration regarding the how God has designed the Christian life to work:

“For sin shall not be your master, *because you are not under law, but under grace.*”

Introduction

The Gospel’s Three Revelations

▶ **The Gospel’s Three Answers** ◀

The Gospel’s Answer to Israel

The Gospel in Action

Conclusion

We can only truly comprehend the sin-conquering power of the Gospel when we understand the quantum leap from law to grace. Law and grace are two totally different approaches to righteousness and two totally opposed ways of life. Now, starting in **Romans 6**, and continuing through the next two chapters, Paul illustrates the difference between these two approaches to life.

Two Distinct Covenants

The difference between the two approaches – law and grace – lies in the distinction between two covenants that God has made with his people. A covenant is a contract between two or more people in which each party promises to fulfill certain conditions in order to enjoy the benefits of the agreement. In the Scriptures, God has made numerous covenants with people (for example, his covenants with Noah in **Genesis 8:20-9:17** and with David in **2 Samuel 7:4-29**). But in **6:14**, Paul refers to the two major covenants God has made with man – distinct in their content, and distinct in the group of people to whom they apply.

Read Galatians 4:22-28

As we saw in **ESI09-08**, Paul here describes how the two covenants of law and grace are pictured in two women – Abraham’s wife, Sarah, and her servant girl, Hagar – and the two sons they bore to Abraham – Isaac and Ishmael (read also **Genesis 16** and **21**).

Let’s take a closer look at this allegory as Paul paints it in his letter to the Galatians.

Covenant of Law – Hagar, the slave woman

God made a covenant with the people of Israel when Moses went up onto Mount Sinai. Israel’s side of the covenant was to keep the Law that was given to Moses, summarized in the Ten Commandments of **Exodus 20:1-17**. God’s side of the covenant was his promise to bless them and make them his holy people (**Deuteronomy 28:1-14**). But part of the covenant’s stipulations was that if the people of Israel failed to keep their side of the covenant they would be cursed, not blessed (**Deuteronomy 28:15-68**).

The Covenant of Law, then, meant that the people could, by their good works, earn the blessing of God and the right to be made righteous. The alternative was the judgment of God.

Covenant of Grace – Sarah, the free woman

A different covenant, however, had been made with Abraham (see **Genesis 12:1-3; 15:3-6; 17:4-6**). God’s side of the covenant with Abraham was that he would bless him and, through his seed, all the nations of the earth. In this covenant, not only would Abraham receive the promise of earthly blessing, but also a spiritual and eternal inheritance, as described in **Hebrews 11:8-10**:

“By faith Abraham...made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with

him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

Abraham’s side of the covenant was simple. Just *believe* the promises that God had given him! In response to Abraham’s faith, God’s grace was released to him, and he was declared righteous in God’s sight and thus inherited the Promise.

God made this Covenant of Grace with Abraham and his “Seed,” whom Paul later identifies as Christ (**Galatians 3:16**), thus embracing all those who are in Christ, including you! As Paul makes clear in **Galatians 3:29**:

“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

The Two Covenants Do Not Mix!

In **Galatians 3:15-17**, Paul makes it very clear that the two covenants – the one based on grace and the other based on law – do not mix. The *New International Version* renders this important passage with these words:

“Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: *The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise...What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come...*”

Let’s take a look at how J. B. Phillips’ *The New Testament in Modern English* words this passage:

“Let me give you an everyday illustration, my brothers. Once a contract has been properly drawn up and signed, it is honored by both parties, and can neither be disregarded nor modified by a third party. Now the promises were made to Abraham and his seed. (Note in passing that the scripture says not ‘seeds’ but uses the singular ‘seed,’ meaning Christ.) I say then that *the Law, which came into existence four hundred and thirty years later, cannot render null and void the original ‘contract’ which God had made, and thus rob the promise of its value...Where then lies the point of the Law? It was an addition made to underline the existence and extent of sin until the arrival of the ‘seed’ to whom the promise referred...*”

What Paul is saying is this. The Covenant of Law was introduced to Israel’s experience 430 years *after* God made his Covenant of Grace with Abraham. And note what Paul says:

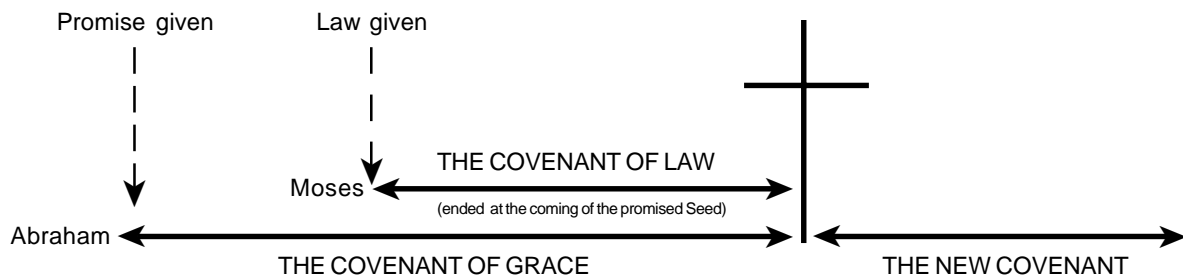
- The Law was an “addition” (or what *The Message* calls an “addendum”) to

the original covenant made with Abraham, but as an addition does not annul or modify that original covenant in any way.

- The Law was given for a specific purpose – to “underline the existence and extent of sin.” As we have already seen in **Romans 3:20**, the Law was given to reveal sin so that men and women would turn to the One who could save them under the Covenant of Grace!
- The Covenant of Law was time-limited. Unlike the Abrahamic Covenant (which was an eternal covenant), the Covenant of Law was only temporary! It had a use-by date, and that use-by date was the Cross of Christ!

The two covenants do not mix. While one – the Covenant of Grace – is eternal, spanning from Abraham right through to our time and beyond, the other – the Covenant of Law – was temporary and simply added to preserve Israel (and reveal man’s need of grace) until the coming of Christ – the “seed” named in the original Covenant of Grace. When God gave the Law to Moses, says Paul, it did not even interfere with the Covenant of Grace he had already made with Abraham. That Covenant of Grace continued, untouched, through Christ and now to us who are in Christ.

Let’s look at an illustration of how this works:



The Covenant of Law has nothing to do with the Christian at all! This Paul bluntly declared in **Galatians 2:21-3:5**, as translated by J. B. Phillips:

“...I refuse to stultify the grace of God by reverting to the Law. For if righteousness were possible under the Law then Christ died for nothing! O you dear idiots of Galatia, who saw Jesus Christ the crucified so plainly, who has been casting a spell over you? I will ask you one simple question: did you receive the Spirit by trying to keep the Law or by believing the message of the gospel? Surely you can’t be so idiotic as to think that a man begins his spiritual life in the Spirit and then completes it by reverting to outward observances...I simply cannot believe it of you!”

Just so that we can be absolutely clear of the facts, let’s review them as Paul presents them in **Romans** and **Galatians**:

- The Promise was original given to Abraham, 2000 years before the coming

of Christ. This was the beginning of the Covenant of Grace.

- The Covenant of Grace was made between God and two parties – Abraham and Christ (the Seed of Abraham).
- 430 years later, the Covenant of Law was added “because of sin.” This Covenant did not alter or supersede the original Covenant of Grace in any way.
- The Covenant of Law was a temporary covenant, destined to be fulfilled and completed in the Cross of Christ. This means that the Covenant of Law lasted only some 1,500 years until the coming of Christ.
- The New Covenant, established by Christ, is based on the Covenant of Grace, not the Covenant of Law. The New Covenant is the fulfillment and continuation of the Abrahamic Covenant of Grace.

The Flaw of the Law

One of the most important things for us to understand about the Law, as revealed in the New Testament, is that as a lifestyle it simply doesn’t work. Anyone who places themselves under law finds themselves, as Paul puts it, under a “yoke of bondage” (**Galatians 5:1**).

Remember, when we are speaking of the Law, we are referring to two things:

- The Law as a Covenant
- The Law as an approach to the Christian life

We have already seen how the Law was added as a temporary restraint until the coming of Christ and was never intended by God to be the continuing basis of relationship with him. Yet while most Christians today recognize that the Covenant of Law (with its detailed regulations regarding sacrifice and social behavior) was fulfilled and completed at the Cross, many Christians still continue to live under the conceptual framework of the Law. They don’t bring the sacrifices required by the Law, because they know that these are no longer required, but they continue to live under the stricture of complex rules and regulations (mostly of their own making) as a means to gain favor with God (and with others). They have an Old Covenant mentality and an Old Covenant lifestyle.

What every Christian must understand is that the Law (as both a covenant and a lifestyle) is flawed. The Law of Moses itself is not flawed – in fact, the Bible describes it as perfect (**Psalm 19:7; Romans 7:12**). The problem is not with the Law itself, but with us. The flaw of the Law is you!

Read Romans 8:3

The *New International Version* describes the flaw of the Law in this way:

“For what the law was *powerless* to do *in that it was weakened by the sinful nature*, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man...”

The *New Testament in Modern Language* expresses **8:3** with these descriptive words:

“The Law never succeed in producing righteousness – the failure was always the weakness of human nature...”

Likewise *The Message* says:

“...In his Son, Jesus, [God] personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity in order to set it right once and for all. The law code, weakened as it always was by fractured human nature, could never have done that. The law always ended up being used as a band-aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it. And now what the law code asked for but we couldn't deliver is accomplished as we, instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in us.”

The problem with the Law was a human one, what *The New Testament in Modern English* calls “the weakness of human nature” and *The Message* calls a “fractured human nature.”

But that's not all! The problem with the Law was not just that it was ineffective as a means to gain God's blessing. It was not just ineffective; it was counter-productive. It didn't just bar us from the blessing of God; it actually brought down the curse of God's judgment upon our lives.

The Curse of the Law

Read Galatians 3:10

No wonder Paul said the Galatian Christians were foolish for reverting to the Law, for under its light two things are revealed:

- God's righteous standard and judgment
- Our inability to reach that standard, making us deserving of judgment

John tells us point blank in **1 John 3:4**:

“Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.”

And yet earlier in his letter, in **1 John 1:8**, he informs us:

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

What happens when sinners come into contact with God's Law? Sin and lawlessness – in other words, the breaking of the law. And where there is a breaking of the Law, judgment is demanded.

James is very clear about what it means to attempt to keep the Law of God in human strength. Targeting just one type of sin – the showing of favoritism – he points out **James 2:9-11**:

“But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is *guilty of breaking all of it*. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.”

Paul himself points out this problem when he states that even those who hold the Law in high esteem do not keep the law! (**Galatians 6:13**). Yet in order to living under the authority of the Law, you *must* abide by the *whole* Law! (**Galatians 5:3**).

This is the thing that most people don’t understand about a legalistic approach to life. You cannot be selective. It is not a pick-and-choose lifestyle. It is all-or-nothing. And sadly, because of the Adamic inability to keep all the Law, it ends up being nothing – failure on a grand scale. This is the curse of the Law.

Read Galatians 3:11-13

But the incredible news of the Gospel is not just that the Covenant of Law was ended at the Cross (see **Ephesians 2:15**), but that the *need* for the Covenant of Law was ended at the Cross! As Paul points out in **1 Timothy 1:9-11**:

“We also know 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, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.”

God ended the Covenant of Law once and for all at the Cross. The curse of the Law was taken by Christ. The written code was nailed to the Cross. We have been released from the Law so that we can enter into the fullness of the Promise through grace.

Read Colossians 2:14

Comparing the Covenants

The Covenant of Law is based on one simple premise: I try by my own self-effort to reach God’s standard. The Covenant of Grace is based on an entirely different premise: I cannot do anything to help myself, but I trust in the grace of God to do the work in my life.

Read 2 Corinthians 3

Here Paul shows the contrast between the two covenants. He sums up this contrast in **verse 6**:

“...the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

The letter kills

When Moses came down from Sinai, holding the Law written on tablets of stone, he found the people worshipping the golden calf – the very thing that the Law forbade them to do (read **Exodus 32:15-28**). Because of this transgression of the Law, 3000 people died that day.

The Spirit gives life

But on the Day of Pentecost, when all Israel was celebrating the giving of the Law to Moses (read **Acts 2:1-40**), God poured out his Spirit, and his Law was written on “tablets of human hearts” (**Jeremiah 31:3-4**). This is what the Father had promised would happen (**Luke 24:49**). And through the preaching of this Covenant of Grace, 3000 people were made “alive” that day!

Another way to compare the two covenants is to pinpoint how each covenant handles the problem of human weakness.

- Law highlights our defects – the human frailties that make it impossible for us to reach the holy standard of God – and then turns the focus upon the judgment of God against all contraventions of the Law. This is because the very nature of law is to bring punishment against lawbreakers.
- Grace also highlights our defects – but then turns the focus upon the power of God to enable a person, despite human weaknesses, to reach the holy standard of God. This is because the very nature of grace is to take the problem of human weakness into account and bring God’s power to bear in the very points of weakness that would hinder a person from reaching the required standard of holiness.

We see this special attribute of grace at work in **2 Corinthians 12:9-10**, where Paul writes:

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Only the Covenant of Grace takes into account the weakness of human nature. Only the Covenant of Grace has the promise from God: “...for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Only the Covenant of Grace enables the Christian to be able to declare: “For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

The Result of a New Covenant

Read Romans 6:14

In the first 13 verses of **Romans 6**, Paul has been answering the objection, made by some Christians, that God’s grace is an invitation to sin more (see again **6:1**).

He has shown how our identification with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection has set us free from sin's power over our lives, and how, as we offer ourselves to God:

“...sin shall not be your master...”

Now, in **6:14**, Paul brings his focus back to the original thought that had prompted his explanation of Christ's work on our behalf:

“...because you are not under law, but under *grace*.”

In other words, Paul is showing that the opposite of their objection is in fact true. Rather than grace being an invitation to sin, grace is the very reason why sin no longer has power over us! Let's see how this works.

Not Under Law

To the Jews of Paul's day, as to many religious people today, to say that we are no longer under the Law meant the same as giving a license to sin. Before Christ came, the Law was the only control man had. It acted as the controller in the same way that the laws of the land control man's behavior. A person may want to steal, but because there is a law against it that threatens imprisonment to the thief, he may not do what he really wants to do because he fears the consequences. The law doesn't *change* him, but it does *control* him.

It's like the story of a little boy who was told by his father to sit down. Because he was threatened with a spanking, he reluctantly obeyed. “I'm sitting down,” he said, “but I'm standing up on the inside!”

The problem is that the Law, while it acts as man's controller, only serves to emphasize the desire to sin that already exists within man. The more a person is told that he is not allowed to do something, the more he wants to do it. As **1 Corinthians 15:56** declares:

“...the power of sin is the law.”

But Under Grace

The grace of God is a far more powerful force than law. It is not, as some had interpreted Paul's message, that God turns a “blind eye” to sin. This misconception arose from viewing grace as only a loving God reaching down to forgive us, even though we didn't deserve it. Of course, this is true – grace is God's unmerited favor – but that is only *half* the story!

Grace is also God's love in action! It is God himself at work in us, doing what we cannot do ourselves no matter how much we desired it or strived to attain it.

So, Paul says, the very fact that we are not under law (us struggling in our own strength to attain God's holiness) but under grace (God's power released in us to conform us to his standard of holiness) means that we are set free from the mastery sin had over us. Because we are no longer under law, but under grace, we have

been given the power to live exactly the kind of life that pleases God!

Read Galatians 5:18

Do you notice who it is that Paul says is “not under law”? It is those who are “led by the Spirit”! If you connect **Galatians 5:18** with **Romans 6:14**, you discover that being “under grace” is equivalent to being “led by the Spirit.” This is something that Paul will explain in full detail in **Roman 8**.

This is why Paul was able to say in **Philippians 3:8-9**:

“...I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, *not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law*, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

Held Prisoner

Galatians 3:23-24 summarizes the purpose of the Law. The *King James Version* describes it beautifully:

“But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up until the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster.”

The Law operated as mankind’s “schoolmaster” (the one put in charge of a son’s schooling until he had come of age), but Paul is clear that this arrangement lasted only until the coming of Christ. And so, as we have seen, the Law had two clear purposes:

- The Law acted as the controller of sinful man – keeping sin from having its full expression.
- The Law taught man concerning his great need of help beyond himself, and pointed him to the one who would come to help him.

Read Galatians 3:22

Do you notice how Paul describes the human condition? He says that “the whole world is a prisoner of sin.” In the next verse, Paul then describes exactly how the world is a prisoner of sin. It is through the Law of God that we were “shut up” until faith was revealed. In fact, the *New International Version* is explicit in describing the jailkeeper function of the Law. It says:

“Before this faith came, *we were held prisoners by the law*, locked up until faith should be revealed.”

Because of the righteous Law of God, which was against us (**Colossians 2:14**), we were locked up until the time of God’s judgment. But the marvelous news of

the Gospel is that the time of our incarceration is over. Faith has indeed come, and we have been released from the chains of God's Law and freed into the super-charged Covenant of Grace.

The Freedom to Choose

Read Romans 6:15-23

Once again Paul shoots down any thought that grace is an excuse to sin. That anyone would take the lax attitude toward sin – believing that God's grace, having brought us forgiveness, now meant that we could sin as much as we liked because God would keep forgiving us – was, to Paul, a crazy notion. But since was obviously the attitude of some (6:15), Paul goes to great lengths to describe the Christian's altered relationship to sin.

In 6:12-14, Paul has already spoken of the importance of offering ourselves to God, but now, in 6:16-19, he goes on to emphasize what this really means. God's grace, having set us free from sin's control, has placed us in a position where we are free to choose who will be the master over our lives.

To the people of Paul's day, the picture of a slave and his master was a very real one, for slavery was very much a part of the society in which they lived. Though, as Paul admits, it is not a perfect illustration of the wonderful life now open to us as children of God (verse 19), he uses it to describe the importance of our choice.

As Paul's Roman readers knew so well, a master had complete control over a slave's life. The slave went where the master told him to go, and he did what the master told him to do. And everyone in the world, says Paul, is under the control of one of two masters – sin or righteousness. Before the Cross, every human being was in servitude to the harsh master, sin. But when Jesus Christ paid the "redemption price" that secured our release from our old master, sin, he placed us under the control of another master, righteousness (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

In the same way that sin was once a master over our lives and we lived under its dominion and control, God's grace has now placed righteousness as a master over us – a power within us that is directing us, leading us and prompting us throughout our lives.

If you look back at Romans 6:14, you will notice that Paul words things in a very specific way. He explains that the reason sin shall no longer be our master is because we are not "under law" but "under grace." He does not say "in grace" (which is, of course our experience as described in Romans 5:1-2), but rather "under grace."

This term "under grace" could be translated as "under the control of grace" or "under the discipline of grace." It is describe much more than just a *position* of grace that the Christian has because of Christ. It is describing a whole new dynamic.

In Titus 2:11-12, Paul describes the *disciplinary* power of grace:

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age...”

Do you notice that it is no longer the Law that teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions? Rather it is the grace of God! Whereas the Law commanded us to avoid ungodliness and worldly passions, but had no power to assist us in this command, grace cooperates with the command of God to bring about exactly what the command demands. The requirement for us to be holy is still there (**1 Peter 1:15-16; Hebrews 12:14**) – but the disciplinary dynamic has totally changed. It is grace, not law, that is now the restraining influence! It is through grace, not law, that the holiness of God becomes a reality in our lives! This is why Paul is able to say, in **Titus 2:14**:

“...Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us *to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that his very own, eager to do what is good.*”

Whole-Hearted Obedience

Read again Romans 6:17

In the same way that we once gave total obedience to sin, we are now to give total obedience to our new master, righteousness (note the principle of **Matthew 6:24**).

The Christian’s life is not a struggle between two masters pulling for control over him. The glorious truth of the Gospel is that Christ has set us free from our former master, sin. Now, Paul exhorts us, don’t give yourselves back to sin again, but live in daily surrender and obedience to your new master, righteousness. The benefit we reap will be a life of holiness, resulting in eternal life.

Paul then ends his explanation of the difference between the old way of law and the new way of grace with this wonderful quotation, known and loved by so many Christians:

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

¹ *NIV Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994).

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