

# How Did the Early Church Understand the Law of God and Grace?

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A teaching of particular importance related to God's laws and commandments is found in Matthew 5:18. Here Christ said, "Until heaven and earth pass away, not one iota or one point will pass away from the law, until everything is accomplished". Therefore, whatever "the law" is, we can be certain it will not pass away anytime soon and must be something God's church continues to teach today (Heb. 13:8).

The New Testament contains many witnesses to the fact that the early church served Almighty God by living in accordance with the law. The apostle Luke quotes the apostle Paul in Acts 24:14, saying.

But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets; <sup>15</sup>having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. <sup>16</sup>In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience *both* before God and before men (NASB).

Jesus Christ said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (Jn. 14:15). The commandments he referred to are the same commandments his Father gave Israel; for Christ was perfectly obedient, speaking and doing only that which he received from the Father (Jn. 5:30; 6:38; 14:21; Heb. 5:8).

The early church understood the law of God is a system of life (Mk. 10:17-22; Rom. 8:1-17). Within in the law are found the commandments of God, which teach how to love God and how to love our fellowman (De. 7:9; 11:1; Ne. 1:5; 1Jn. 5:3). When a commandment of God is broken, a sin has been committed and it carries the penalty of death (1Jn. 3:4; Rom. 6:23).

One of the least understood and most frequently misrepresented teachings of the NT is that of the relationship between the law of God and His grace. It is commonly asserted that God's law is somehow opposed to grace. In other words, the law of God no longer has jurisdiction over His people and has been replaced by grace. This conclusion is erroneous for several reasons, including that it is a contradiction in terms. The problem lies in the fact that the fundamental purpose and meaning of God's law is not correctly understood.

Contributing to this dilemma is the widespread misapprehension that the term "under the law" means to be under obligation to live in accordance with it. The truth of the matter is the term "under the law" refers to being under the consequences for having broken the law (Rom. 3:19). All too often the meaning of words are assumed and accepted as correct because they appear self-evident, thus very little time and study is devoted to examining how a particular word was used by the writers of the New Testament.

A similar dilemma exists with the terms "the law of Moses" and, "works of the law." The common misunderstanding is that the "works of the law" refers to those things which are done in obedience to the commandments. This too is false.

A primary function of the law of God in the first covenant was to provide a means for purification

from sin. This was made possible by the sinner bringing the appropriate sacrificial offering to the temple, placing his hand upon the animal and confessing his sins, and then killing, skinning, and dividing it between himself and the priests (Lev. 1:2-9 cf. 16:21). This required a considerable amount of effort on the part of the sinner. What developed over time was reliance upon the physical act of sacrifice for atonement rather than seeking the meaning behind the requirement and faith in God. In other words, many Israelites, and later the scribes, Pharisees etc. placed their faith in the sacrifices for righteousness, rather than upon the one who the sacrificial system pointed to – Jesus Christ. Thus many came to believe the “works of the law” provided salvation, rather than Almighty God through Messiah (Rom. 9:30-33). It is by God’s grace (having sent Jesus Christ as our sacrifice) that forgiveness and salvation from the penalty of the law is made possible, not by offering the blood of animals (Heb. 9:13-22). The law (sacrificial system or “law of Moses” cf. Ac. 13:39-40) was a tutor or disciplinarian that was to guide adherents to developing faith in the prophesied Messiah, who is the perfect sacrifice required for salvation. Once Christ (characterized by faith) has come, no longer is there a need for a tutor (sacrificial system; cf. Gal. 3:22-26).

Man’s first sin occurred in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12). As they were no longer without sin, this breach fundamentally changed the course of Adam of Eve, placing them under the law (death penalty). As a result, from this point forward all people (the offspring of Adam and Eve) are likewise under the law (Rom. 3:19). Consequently, since all have sinned (Rom. 3:23), everyone is under the law and facing the death penalty because the law requires the life of the sinner as payment for breaking God’s divine commands (Gal. 4:4-5). This is the problem with evil. In order to be saved from the wages of sin,

a means by which our debt can be paid is required so that we no longer remain under the law (Rom. 6:23; 2:12; Gal. 3:23; 4:4-5). This debt was paid by Jesus Christ (Col. 2:14).

Upon repentance, baptism and continuing obedience, Almighty God delivers sinners from the penalty of the law (death - the consequence of sin), through the offering of His son Jesus Christ. This is an act of grace (Ps. 56:13; Ac. 2:38). Thus, if we are lead by God’s spirit, we are no longer under the (penalty of) law (Gal. 5:18), but rather, under grace, having been forgiven. Shall we then sin because we are no longer under the law but under grace? May it never be! For sin shall not be master over you, for whoever you present yourself as a servant under obedience, you are a servant of the one whom you obey; either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness (Rom. 6:14-16; Jn. 8:34-36).

The law which Christ came to fulfill was the law of sacrifice (Mt. 5:17) not God’s commandments. By his death Messiah fulfilled the first covenant sacrificial system and became the mediator of the second covenant, thereby making it possible for fallen man to be freed from the slavery and death penalty of sin (Heb. 10:1-10).

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