

## Law And Gospel

The Law!

The word has power, doesn't it?

Can you imagine hearing someone say: "*The law is after you*"? Whew!

It's bad enough when you see a police car with a flashing red light coming up fast behind you as you drive down the road.

Your adrenalin starts pumping, your mouth tastes like brass and you pray that they'll go on past you because they're after someone else.

And usually they do.

But then there's that time that they come up right behind you and you know YOU'RE THE ONE!

You pull off the side of the road, roll down your window, hand over your license, and after a thousand people have driven by gawking at you, "the law" hands you a ticket and says "*Have a nice day, sir.*"

Don't you just HATE that!

Down deep, we all resent the law.

It has the power to make us do things we don't want to do and to keep us from doing things we would rather be free to do—even if we don't intend to do them.

The law has authority over and we don't like being under authority.

It even has the power to make us feel guilty when we disobey it, and we don't like feeling guilty.

The problem is that there's not much we can do about it.

Or is there?

Today's *Old Testament* lesson from *Exodus* recounts how God gave the Law to the Israelites.

To say that it was a terrifying experience for them would be an understatement.

God descended on Mount Sinai with thunder and lightning and smoke and made the whole mountain shake as if it were in the throes of an earthquake.

Then a piercing sound issued forth that Moses compares to “a loud trumpet blast” and grew louder and louder.

(Does anyone remember “Close Encounters of the Third Kind?”)

Then, in a thunderous voice, God proclaimed to the Israelites the Ten Commandments. “Thou shalt not...Thou shalt... Thou shalt not...”

The Israelites were so shaken by what God said and how He said it that they begged Moses to keep Him away from them in the future: “*Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.*”

Now we all know the Ten Commandments.

We also know that we have a devil of a time obeying them.

We shouldn't, but we do.

We KNOW that by following them we could live a perfect life without guilt or pain or fear—or, for that matter, death—and you'd think that that would be a pretty strong motivation to do so.

But we just can't find it in ourselves to do it.

Instead of treating the Commandments like an instruction manual for living, we treat them like a traffic jam on our way to an amusement park.

We're like a man who buys a new lawnmower and when he reads the instruction manual and comes to the part about putting oil in the crankcase blurts out, “*Nobody tells me what to do!*”—and throws the manual away

The engine will burn up of course, but he sure told them, didn't he?!

Now he's on his 27<sup>th</sup> lawnmower.

There is something very powerful inside us that rebels against the law.

Something called sin.

Sin is a spiritual cancer that we're born with, a malignant rebelliousness against God and His Commandments that goes bone deep.

That cancer was there in the zygote, the original fertilized cell from which we all came, and it spread from there through every cell in our body.

So sin isn't just something we DO; sin is what down deep we ARE.

We don't become sinners by sinning; we sin because we are sinners to begin with.

Now since God knows everything, he knows this.

He knew it when He gave us the Ten Commandments.

He knew that we couldn't obey them—that they would have the same effect on us that a red cape has on a bull.

That when we saw them and heard them we would charge, even though we knew that we would end up like the bull.

So the question is: why would God give us commands that He knew we couldn't keep?

The answer will surprise you; it's in our Epistle reading for today which is taken from Paul's letter to the Church at Rome: "*The law was added so that sin might increase.*"

Did you get that?

God added the Law, the Ten Commandments, *so that people would sin more that they already did.*

What in the world does Paul mean by that?

First of all, what does he mean when he says that the law was "added"? Added to what?

Well, that part's pretty simple: God added the Law to the covenant He made with Abraham when he chose Abraham to be the father of a nation He would call "Israel."

He promised Abraham that the Israelites would be a great nation and that one particular Israelite would be a blessing to everyone on earth.

This promise was unconditional: it wasn't contingent upon anything the Israelites would do or not do.

God—Who created everything and who controls everything—would make Israel a great blessing to all the people of the earth.

No ifs, ands or buts. It didn't depend on anything Israel would do, but upon what God promised to do.

And God always honors his promises.

There's another word for this promise: it's called the Good News—the Gospel.

God promised to bless his chosen people so that they would become a blessing to other people.

He gave that Gospel promise to Abraham over 600 years before he gave the Ten Commandments to Moses and the Israelites.

The promise was eternally binding on God—and God cannot lie.

But the Ten Commandments were very different from the promise to Abraham.

The Ten Commandments said that the Israelites would be blessed ONLY IF they obeyed the commands.

If they didn't, they would be cursed.

Listen to Moses, speaking to the Israelites before they entered the promised land of Canaan: *"If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you IF you obey the Lord your God....HOWEVER, IF YOU DO NOT OBEY THE Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees...all these curses will overtake you: You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country....The Lord will send on you curses, confusion and rebuke in everything you put your hand to, until you are destroyed and come to sudden ruin because of the evil you have done...."*

Now THAT is pure Law, and it's a whole lot different than the Gospel.

Blessings for obedience; curses for disobedience.

Quid pro quo. Tit for tat. No exceptions.

The Gospel is free and unconditional: I will bless you with no strings attached.

The Law is conditional: if you do obey it, you'll be rewarded; if you disobey it you'll be punished.

In the business world we called it "performance management."

And performance management is a good system as long as one has the ability to perform according to the requirements of the job.

But God's requirement is that we live a morally perfect life in all our thoughts and words and actions, and since we're sinful to the core, there's no way we can possibly do it.

We've been given a goal we can't possibly achieve!

We're under a reward-punishment system that will only deliver punishment.

So there's no doubt that sin would increase once the Law was added to the Gospel promises of God to Abraham..

But why would God **want** sin to increase?

The answer to that question is mind-boggling.

Paul gives it in the very next verse: *"But where sin did abound, grace might superabound, so that just as sin reigned through death, grace might reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord."*

God allowed sin to increase so that grace would increase even more.

In effect, He *caused* sin to increase so *that he might give more forgiveness to His people!*

In Paul's words: "He has bound all men over to sin so that he may have mercy on them all."

Now this thought is so far beyond our comprehension that it makes us uncomfortable.

In the first place it seems to lend itself to misuse.

After all, what about those people who will use God's grace as an excuse to sin all the more, telling themselves that they can have it both ways: enjoy their sins and have salvation as well.

*"I like to sin, God likes to forgive: what a nice arrangement!"*

Well, just a few verses later, Paul warns us against this kind of thinking in the strongest possible terms.

He writes: *"What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?"*

Then he answers his own question with the strongest adversative in the ancient Greek language: "□□□□□□□□□□"—which translates roughly as "God forbid!"

Anyone who seriously pursues that line of thinking understands neither the seriousness of sin nor the blessing of God's grace.

Still, we fear what people might do if the threat of punishment was no longer hanging over their head for doing it.

With no punishment to act as a deterrent, wouldn't the result be chaos?

All gifts are subject to misuse and grace is no exception.

Wouldn't people run hog-wild?

The answer is that **God's love is more powerful than our desire to sin.**

God is gambling everything on the power of His love to steer us away from sinning.

He bases his whole plan of salvation on His hope that you and I will allow His unconditional love to transform us into people who will choose to love and serve each other rather than exploit each other.

One of the most radical statements ever made is: *"You are not under law, but under grace."*

God has removed the control of the Law so that we may yield ourselves up to the control of love, because only people who know that they have been freely loved know how to love freely.

The Good News of God's unconditional love for us—which he promised to Abraham and delivered through Christ Jesus—is the heart and soul of everything the Bible teaches.

It is foreign to our natural way of thinking; it seems like foolishness.

But as Paul wrote: "...the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."

God, who is Himself love, has sent His love into the world to change it.

And where there is love, there is no need for law.

Amen.