

Christ, *the Law and the Gospel*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rom. 7:7–12; Deut. 30:15–20; Matt. 7:24–27; Acts 10:34, 35; John 15:10; Eph. 2:1.*

Memory Text: “For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (*John 1:17, NKJV*).

A century before Christ, Roman poet Lucretius wrote a famous poem “On the Nature of Things” that was lost in history until the Middle Ages. Though often accused of being an atheist, Lucretius didn’t deny in his poem the existence of the gods; he just argued that by virtue of being gods, they would have absolutely no interest in anything human.

In contrast, the Bible argues that there is only one God, and that He’s fervently interested in what happens here. And two manifestations of that passionate interest in humanity are found in His law (which is to guide how we live) and in His grace (His means of saving us even though we have violated that law). Though often seen as contrary to each other, law and grace are inseparably linked. Their methods of operation may be different, but together they reveal that righteousness must triumph over sin. The manifestations of God’s law and His grace provide powerful evidence of His love for humanity and His desire to save us into His eternal kingdom.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 31.

Sin and the Law

Read Romans 7:7–12. What is Paul saying here about the relationship between sin and law? Why would he even ask such a question as, “Is the law sin?” (*NKJV*)?

Paul so closely relates the law and sin that he asks the rhetorical question, “Is the law sin?” The answer, of course, is that it’s not; on the contrary, at the end of the section he says, “Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (*NKJV*). The “therefore” shows the conclusion of his argument: that, far from being sin, the law is indeed holy and good.

What Paul says here is analogous to the relationship between criminal law and crime. Something is criminal only if a law depicts it as such. You might go to jail in one country for doing something that in another country is legal. The reason: one country has a law forbidding that action, the other doesn’t. It is the same action but with two different consequences. What makes the difference? The law.

A crucial point to remember, too, is that just because something is a law doesn’t make it good. In early America, a law required people to return escaped slaves to their masters. It was the law; yet, it was hardly a just one. In the case of God’s law, however, we know that it reflects His loving character. Thus Paul’s words that the law is holy and good; what else could it be, considering who created it?

What significance is there in the commandment that Paul uses in Romans 7:7 to prove his point about the law? Why does he use that one instead of another, such as “Thou shalt not steal”?

Perhaps Paul uses that specific commandment instead of some of the others because it’s not so obvious that it’s wrong. Many people, in and of themselves, might not believe that coveting is wrong. Murder, stealing, yes; one generally doesn’t even need the Ten Commandments to know that. But coveting? So it is a perfect example to make his point that it’s the law that shows us what sin is. Otherwise, he might not have known that coveting was wrong.

The Law and Israel (Deut. 30:15–18)

The giving of the law to Israel was a special act. Just before He gave the law to Moses, God reminded His people that they are “ ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ ” (Exod. 19:6, NKJV). Among all nations on the face of the earth, it was to Israel that God specially revealed His law (Rom. 9:4). The law was not intended to be a burden to the people but to be a tool through which the chosen nation would reveal to the masses the moral code that is the foundation of God’s government. Israel was to be a partner with God in the mission of universal evangelism, and God’s law was to be the identifying mark for God’s spokespersons.

According to Deuteronomy 30:15–20, what is the relationship between the law and the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Also, even more crucial, how do these principles apply to us today as well, under the new covenant? See Matt. 7:24–27.

God chose Israel to be His representatives. Israel would be the people through whom the nations of the earth received the blessings promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, the blessings were by no means automatic. As a chosen nation, Israel was expected to walk in harmony with the Lord’s will. Moses made it clear that life and prosperity would come to the people only if they observed God’s “commandments, decrees, and ordinances” (Deut. 30:15, 16, NRSV).

Given the numerous stories of rebellion that mar Israel’s history, Israel as a nation failed to live up to the covenant conditions. Yet, we must not forget that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23, NKJV). No nation on earth has fulfilled the will of God. Even in recent history, nations that profess to be Christian have misrepresented the cause of God with warmongering, prejudice, and oppression.

In your own experience, how are obedience and faith related? That is, when you obey, what happens to your faith in contrast to when you disobey? How does obedience strengthen faith?

The Law and the Nations (*Acts 10:34, 35*)

Read Acts 10:34, 35; 17:26, 27; Romans 1:20; and 2:14. What is the central teaching of these texts?

Despite Israel's mistakes, God did not leave the people in other nations without a witness. Those who were not privileged to receive God's written revelation received divine messages through the pages of natural revelation (*Rom. 1:20*). God's book of nature contains enough information to direct a person to Him.

God has also instilled a measure of spiritual desire in every human being. According to Paul, those who sense God's indwelling Spirit will engage in a quest to find Him (*Acts 17:27*). So many people sense an emptiness in their lives that nothing this world offers—fame, power, money, sex—can ultimately fulfill. At its heart, this was the message of the book of Ecclesiastes. This emptiness, this dissatisfaction, often leads people in a quest for something beyond, for something that transcends everyday existence. They are drawn to revealed truth in a desire to quell the longings and emptiness of their souls.

Whether God's will is revealed through written documents or nature, the person who receives it has the responsibility to live it. Truth is truth, regardless of the vehicle that delivers it, and those who suppress the truth will experience the wrath of God (*Rom. 1:18*). Consequently, although many people may not have received the Bible or the Ten Commandments, God still holds them accountable for the portions of truth that they have gleaned. Ultimately, everyone will be judged, and the standard of judgment will be law: either the law God expressly revealed through His prophet Moses, or, for those who are ignorant of the written law—the law of conscience, which has been developed by listening to God's voice in nature.

What great disappointments have you faced that have helped you see just how untrustworthy and unsatisfactory the things of this world really can be? How can you learn from these disappointments about what truly matters?

Grace and Truth *(John 1:17)*

John condensed the history of salvation into one verse: “The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (*John 1:17, NKJV*). As a result of Adam’s sin, all humanity has been affected by the curse of death. The curse is intensified by the fact that no one born to human parents, except Jesus, has been free from sinful inclinations. Therefore, God selected a people to whom He revealed His law, intending that those elected would be His light to the other nations. God did not give the law to Israel as a means to salvation but as a constant reminder of their need for righteousness.

What do **Philippians 2:8**, **John 15:10**, and **Matthew 26:39** tell us about the kind of life that Jesus lived?

When he disobeyed the express command of God, the first Adam plunged the entire world into disarray and bondage. On the other hand, through His obedient life, the Second Adam, Jesus, came to deliver the world from the bondage that the first Adam had brought. When Jesus walked this earth, He voluntarily subjected His own will to the will of His Father and chose not to sin. Unlike the first Adam, who brought condemnation and falsehood into the world, Jesus brought in “grace and truth.” Grace and truth did not supplant the law. Jesus showed, instead, why the law alone was not enough to procure salvation. The truth that He brought was a more complete understanding of grace.

According to **Romans 6:23** and **Ephesians 2:8**, what is the nature of the grace that originates in Jesus? How did Jesus supply grace for humans?

The Greek word translated as “grace” (*charis*) can also mean “gift” and is related to the term for joy (*chara*). The gift that Jesus gives to humanity is eternal life. Further, grace manifests itself as the indwelling presence of Christ that enables the individual to participate in the righteousness that the law promotes. Paul states that in condemning sin in the flesh, Jesus has made it possible that “the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us” (*Rom. 8:4, NKJV*). Grace not only frees us from the condemnation of the law, but it enables us to keep the law in the way that we are called to do.

The Law and the Gospel (*Rom. 1:16, 17*)

No matter how “good” our lives are, none can escape the constant reminders of sin. Inevitably, happiness is interrupted by sickness, death, disaster. On a personal level, feelings of spiritual security are often challenged by memories of past sins and, even worse, by the urge to sin again.

In what ways do Romans 6:23, 7:24, and Ephesians 2:1 describe the impact of sin?

A person living in sin, in unrighteousness, is merely a walking corpse just waiting for the day when the last breath exits his body. When Paul assesses the human condition, he cries out in desperation, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (*Rom. 7:24, NKJV*). This is a cry for liberation from unrighteousness. Paul quickly realizes that deliverance comes through Jesus (*Rom. 7:25*).

This is the gospel. The good news is that we who have been trapped in bodies of unrighteousness can be covered with the righteousness of Christ. The gospel is the guarantee that we can escape the condemnation of the law because we now possess the righteousness that the law promotes (*Rom. 8:1*).

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, the story of Jesus’ death was still being circulated throughout the empire. Those who had heard were fully aware that the way He had died was scandalous. People whose loved ones had been executed on a cross were often left to a life of shame. However, Paul and countless other Christians understood that Christ’s “shameful” death was the most powerful event in human history. That is why Paul declares, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes” (*Rom. 1:16, author’s translation*). And the heart of that gospel is the great promise that in the end, death will not have the final say and that those saved by Jesus will live forever in a new earth.

Many people believe that life is meaningless because it always ends in death. So, nothing we do will matter in the long run. It’s hard to argue with that logic, isn’t it? If everything we have ever done and every person we have ever influenced will all forever be lost and forgotten, what can life mean?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Preaching the Distinctive Truths,” pp. 231, 232, in *Evangelism*; “The Faith That Works” and “How Faith Is Made Perfect,” pp. 88, 89, in *The Faith I Live By*.

“Let the subject be made distinct and plain that it is not possible to effect anything in our standing before God or in the gift of God to us through creature merit. Should faith and works purchase the gift of salvation for anyone, then the Creator is under obligation to the creature. Here is an opportunity for falsehood to be accepted as truth. If any man can merit salvation by anything he may do, then he is in the same position as the Catholic to do penance for his sins. Salvation, then, is partly of debt, that may be earned as wages. If man cannot, by any of his good works, merit salvation, then it must be wholly of grace, received by man as a sinner because he receives and believes in Jesus. It is wholly a free gift. Justification by faith is placed beyond controversy. And all this controversy is ended, as soon as the matter is settled that the merits of fallen man in his good works can never procure eternal life for him.”—Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, p. 19.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell on the Ellen G. White statement in Friday’s study. Think through the wonderful and hopeful truths found in these words for even the worst of sinners. How can we learn to claim these promises for ourselves and live as if we really believe them?
- 2 Although God gave His law to Israel through Moses, the Bible suggests that He uses other methods to reveal His will to people who may not have access to His written revelation (for example, *Rom. 1:20; 2:14; Acts 17:26, 27*). If God does indeed speak to all people, what is the purpose of missionaries and evangelists?
- 3 John 1:17 states that “grace and truth” originated with Jesus Christ. Using that text, many people place the law in opposition to “grace and truth.” Why is this a false dichotomy? In what ways do the law and “grace and truth” all work together to reveal to us the character of God as seen in the plan of salvation?
- 4 Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky created a character who wanted to study why more people *didn’t* kill themselves. As an atheist, he couldn’t understand why people would want to live meaningless lives that were often so full of pain. Discuss the logic of this thinking.

The Stolen Watermelon

Mpo [*m'POH*] and Tendai [*TEN-dai*]* live in Zambia. One day they were hot and thirsty after playing. They sat down in the shade to rest. Then Mpo jumped up. "There's a *b-i-g* watermelon growing in a field near here. Let's go get it!"

The two boys set off toward the field. Mpo ran ahead and grabbed the watermelon from the vine and raced toward the bushes. Tendai followed his friend. He wanted to ask permission to eat the watermelon before taking it, but when he reached his friend, Mpo had already broken the watermelon open. The sight of the juicy melon made Tendai's mouth water. He scooped up a piece of melon and ate it. Soon the boys had eaten the entire watermelon. They sat back, full and satisfied.

It was getting late, and Tendai hurried home. When he arrived home, his mother said, "Dinner is almost ready."

"I'm not hungry," Tendai said. "I ate with Mpo."

Mother frowned. "OK," she said. "Then do your chores and come inside for worship."

After worship, Tendai lay down on his straw mat and fell asleep. He dreamed that his family went to heaven, but he couldn't enter because he had stolen the watermelon. He awoke with a start, crying. The next night and the next he had the same dream. He awoke the third morning knowing that he must tell his mother about the stolen watermelon.

"We must tell the farmer whose watermelon you stole," his mother said. They walked to the farmer's house. Tendai confessed that he and his friend had stolen the watermelon. "It was wrong," he said. "I'm sorry."

The farmer nodded. "It was wrong to take the watermelon. Now I must buy another one. Do you have the money to pay for a watermelon?"

Tendai shook his head.

"Then you will work to pay for the watermelon," the farmer said. His mother nodded at Tendai. "I need a new rubbish pit. I'll show you where to dig it." Tendai took the man's shovel and followed him to a field. He began digging. It was hard work, and the sun was hot on his back. But he kept digging until the rubbish pit was done. Then he gathered the rubbish from the land around the pit.

Now when Tendai is tempted to do something wrong, he remembers the hot sun beating on his back as he dug the rubbish pit. He remembers his dreams, too, and he turns away from temptation, for he doesn't want to miss out on heaven.

* *Not their real names. This story was told to Adventist Mission by Mirriam Kashweka.*