

Paul's Writings: Grace or Law which is it?

Introduction

For centuries, readers of the New Testament have wrestled with a seemingly profound paradox within the epistles of the apostle Paul: the relationship between law and grace. On one hand, Paul dynamically proclaims that believers are justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law; on the other hand, he strongly upholds the sanctity and necessity of God's commandments. To understand this properly, one must recognize that Paul did not take away the requirement of the law. Instead, his writings reveal that the ultimate purpose of human creation—both in the beginning and continuing today—is for humanity to be transformed into the complete and perfect image of God. The law remains essential because it defines the very character and mind of God, which believers are commanded to develop.

The Purpose of Creation and the Role of the Law

The foundation of Pauline theology is deeply rooted in the original design of creation. God's purpose for mankind is spiritual maturity and configuration to His own likeness. Paul emphasizes this in his letter to the Romans:

"For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren." (Romans 8:29, KJV)

Because Jesus Christ is the perfect expression of the Father, conforming to Christ means taking on the mind and character of God. The law of God is not an arbitrary set of rules designed to restrict humanity; rather, it is a transcript of God's holy, righteous character. Paul explicitly defends the law against any accusations of being obsolete or evil:

"Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good." (Romans 7:12, KJV)

Furthermore, Paul acknowledges his internal alignment with this divine standard, stating, "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Romans 7:22, KJV). The law illuminates the mind of God, providing the boundary lines for righteousness and defining what love looks like in action. Without the law, there would be no definition of sin, and consequently, no standard against which to develop divine character.

The Impossibility of Earning Salvation through Works

While the law defines righteousness, it lacks the power to grant eternal life to a broken humanity. Paul makes it abundantly clear that no human being can earn salvation or justify themselves through their own works or perfect adherence to the law. The reason is universal and absolute: every person has failed to keep it perfectly.

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;" (Romans 3:23, KJV)

Because the law requires total perfection, a single transgression brings condemnation. Therefore, relying on law-keeping for justification is futile, as Paul writes:

"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:20, KJV)

Human works cannot erase past transgressions or bridge the gap created by sin. Salvation cannot be standard compensation earned by effort; it must come through a completely different mechanism—God's unmerited favor.

Justification by Grace, Repentance, and Baptism

Since salvation cannot be earned, God provides it entirely as a gift through His grace, made available by the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ. As Paul proclaims:

"Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;" (Romans 3:24-25, KJV)

However, receiving this grace requires a profound personal response: a commitment to genuine repentance. Repentance is not merely feeling remorse; it is a literal turning away from our own self-willed ways and turning toward the ways of God. It is an internal decision to stop violating God's law and to begin keeping it through faith.

This commitment is formalized and enacted through the ordinance of baptism. Through baptism, an individual is fully immersed into the body of Christ, legally and spiritually partaking in His death, burial, and resurrection. Paul beautifully outlines this transition:

"Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:3-4, KJV)

By dying to the old self in the waters of baptism, the believer is freed from the penalty of past sins and is resurrected to walk in a completely new way of life—a life empowered to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law through the Holy Spirit.

Enduring to the End

Finally, Paul emphasizes that salvation is an ongoing relationship that requires lifelong faithfulness. The initial grace received through baptism must be maintained through enduring commitment. Believers must hold fast to their covenant with God until the very end of their lives. Paul warns and encourages the Colossians that they will be presented holy and unblamable only if they continue steadfastly:

"If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister;" (Colossians 1:23, KJV)

A temporary belief or a short-lived reformation is insufficient. The transformation into the complete image of God is a lifelong process of spiritual growth, requiring an enduring dedication to God's commandments and a continual reliance on His grace.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, Paul's writings demonstrate that grace and law are not opposing forces, but harmoniously integrated components of God's master plan for humanity. Grace does not abolish the law; rather, it establishes, pardons, and empowers the believer to fulfill it. The law remains the unchanging definition of God's perfect mind and character—the ultimate standard into which mankind is being created. Because all have sinned, salvation is completely unattainable by human effort or deeds, making the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ absolutely indispensable. Through heartfelt repentance, baptism into Christ's death and resurrection, and a steadfast commitment to hold fast until the end, the believer successfully navigates the Christian journey, moving ever closer to the ultimate goal: being fully made in the image of God.