

Are We Under Law or Grace?

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

Why do some insist that Christians are under law today? We are not under law, but grace. The law came by Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus (Jn. 1:17).

We must respectfully point out that the question recorded above reflects a serious misunderstanding of the nature of both law and grace. And it misrepresents the nature of the religious system to which men are amenable today.

It is a tragedy of enormous magnitude that some, waving the banner of grace, argue that they are free from the constraints of sacred law and thus are at liberty to forge their own route along the religious terrain.

One cannot but be reminded of Jude's indictment of certain persons who pervert God's grace to accommodate their own sensual goals (Jude 4).

John 1:17 — Law and Grace

The beloved apostle records these words in John 1:17:

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Here, the terms "law" and "grace" are employed to designate the **predominate systems** of divine, written revelation—namely the two covenants.

The first covenant was that given through Moses at Sinai, commonly known as the law of Moses. The second was a universal covenant for mankind that issued from Jesus Christ, and was ratified by the Lord's death (Mt. 26:28).

Jeremiah referred to these respective systems as "the covenant" that Jehovah made with the fathers when he brought them out of Egyptian bondage, and the "new covenant" which later would be world-wide in scope (Jer. 31:31-34).

The writer of the book of Hebrews referred to these laws as the first and the second (Heb. 8:7), or the old and the new (Heb. 8:13).

In the text under review (Jn. 1:17), the two covenants are designated respectively as "law" and "grace." And there is a very logical explanation for these appellations. It has to do with the **prevailing themes** characteristic of these systems.

The function of the Mosaic law was as follows:

1. To demonstrate that the violation of divine law separates the perpetrator from God (Isa. 59:1-2).
2. To declare that written law is needed to define sin (Rom. 7:7).
3. To show, by recorded precedent, that sacred justice requires that a penalty be paid for law-breaking (Rom. 3:26; 1 Cor. 10:5ff).

On the other hand, the dominant design of the New Covenant is to stress the **redemptive mission** of Christ as the only remedy for the human sin problem (Mt. 26:28; 1 Cor. 15:3). The wonderful plan of salvation is the result of Heaven's grace (Eph. 2:8-9), not human merit. No richer term, than that of grace, could be employed as a synecdoche (the part put for the whole) for the summation of God's thrilling scheme of redemption.

It is entirely reasonable, therefore, that these two systems should be set forth in a contrasted fashion, such as law and grace.

Abusing the Text

It is a baffling mystery as to how anyone, with even a cursory knowledge of Scripture, should not understand that there was an abundant measure of grace under the law of Moses.

Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord long before the Mosaic system was birthed (Gen. 6:8), but it was not the modern sort of cheap grace that disavows obedience (Gen. 6:22; cf. Heb. 11:7).

Scores of Old Testament passages stress the pouring out of Jehovah's grace in ancient times upon those who responded in obedience to his will (cf. Ex. 33:13; Dt. 7:12; Jer. 31:3).

It is no surprise that many today are ready to repudiate the idea that man is responsible to sacred law. Outlaws despise law!

The reality is, this irresponsible suggestion — that folks today are “under grace” as **opposed** to law — is so trifling that it would scarcely be worthy of a rebuttal were it not for the fact that it is so common.

The notion has absolutely no sanction in Scripture.

No Law Today?

Were it the case that man is not under law in this era of time, then it would follow necessarily that **sin would not exist today**, for sin is a transgression of the law (1 Jn. 3:4). As Paul once noted, where there is no law, there is no sin (Rom. 4:15).

By way of contrast, since it obviously is the case that men (even Christians) do sin in this era (1 Jn. 1:8—2:2), the compelling implication is that there is a divine law to which men now are amenable.

The Christian-era Law of God in Prophecy

The Old Testament prophets, in previewing the coming of the Christian age (“grace”), spoke of a time in which the **law of God** would be **obligatory**.

Isaiah, for instance, spoke of the days of the new covenant, when Jehovah's “law” would go forth from Zion (Is. 2:2-4). The term “law” renders an original term suggesting “instruction” considered as a “rule of duty” (Young 1965, 106).

Similarly, when Jeremiah spoke of the “new covenant” (Jer. 31:31ff), he made it the equivalent of God's law, which would take up residence in man's heart (Jer. 31:33).

A King Is on His Throne

When Jesus Christ is repeatedly depicted as a king in the biblical record, clearly the concept is set forth that he exercises an **authority** to which men are expected to comply.

If this is not law, there is no meaning to such terms as king, rule, reign, submit, obey, etc. (see Mt. 2:2; 28:18; Lk. 19:14, 27; Eph. 1:20-23; Phil. 2:9-10; Heb. 5:9; Rev. 1:5; 19:16).

Law Respected By Apostles

The inspired writers of the New Testament viewed the authority of the regime of Christ as one of law.

Our freedom from the condemning effect of sin is the result of our submission to the “law of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:2). The expression “law of the Spirit” is the same as the gospel, the new covenant system.

It is “of the Spirit” because it was conveyed by the Spirit's direction. It is designated as law because it is an “expression of the divine will” and a “rule of conduct” (Lard n.d., 247).

Elsewhere, Paul acknowledged that he was “under law to Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21). Additionally, to the Galatians he gives this admonition:

Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the **law of Christ** (Gal. 6:2).

Finally, if the inspired James is not referring to the present order of things, when he alluded to the "perfect law" (Jas. 1:25), of what was he speaking?

Conclusion

A consideration of the foregoing facts ought to enable the conscientious Bible student to see John 1:17 in a balanced light.

Furthermore, it should forever banish the absurd notion that our modern world is exempt from the restraints of sacred law.

Related Articles

- [To What Law Were the Ancient Gentiles Accountable?](#)
- [The Last Will and Testament of Jesus Christ](#)
- [Should the Ten Commandments Be Posted?](#)
- [Why Does Hebrews 8:13 Use the Present Tense?](#)
- [The Value of Old Testament Study](#)
- [The Old Paths: Obsolete or Pressing Need?](#)
- [Is Christian Worship Regulated by New Testament Law?](#)
- [Behold, the Man!](#)
- [Was There Forgiveness Under the Law of Moses?](#)
- [The Significance of the Day of Pentecost](#)

Works Cited

- Lard, Moses. n.d. *Commentary on Romans*. Cincinnati, OH: Standard.
- Young, E. J. 1965. *The Book of Isaiah*. Vol. I. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Scripture References

John 1:17; Jude 4; Matthew 26:28; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:7; Hebrews 8:13; Isaiah 59:1-2; Romans 7:7; Romans 3:26; 1 Corinthians 10:5; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Ephesians 2:8-9; Genesis 6:8; Genesis 6:22; Hebrews 11:7; Exodus 33:13; Deuteronomy 7:12; Jeremiah 31:3; 1 John 3:4; Romans 4:15; 1 John 1:8; Isaiah 2:2-4; Jeremiah 31:31; Jeremiah 31:33; Matthew 2:2, 28:18; Luke 19:14, 27; Ephesians 1:20-23; Philippians 2:9-10; Hebrews 5:9; Revelation 1:5, 19:16; Romans 8:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21; Galatians 6:2; James 1:25

Cite this article

Jackson, Wayne. "Are We Under Law or Grace?" *ChristianCourier.com*. Access date: February 11, 2022. <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/738-are-we-under-law-or-grace>