

"I don't have to do that since I'm not under law but grace."

Christians have often used this verse from Romans to justify many things, including refusal to tithe or offer money to the Lord, reluctance to pray or read the Bible, adultery and fornication, gluttony, and refusal to attend church or rejection of so-called "institutional Christianity."

But there's a problem: That interpretation of Romans 6:14 is the opposite of its meaning. In context, it is an appeal to pursue personal holiness, not to avoid some task or duty that we find distasteful. Let's look at the passage itself:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but grace. (Romans 6:12-14, emphasis mine)

There are several implications of this passage, but none of them is "you don't have to follow that rule."

True Freedom

Quick show of hands: How many of us have thanked Jesus for freeing us from the Law? We see all those rules and regulations—what to wear, how to plant crops, which portion of the sacrifice to eat—who wants to be bound by all that? Thank God that because of Jesus, we can ignore all that stuff!

The only problem is, Jesus didn't come to free us from the Law. He came to free us from sin. He didn't need to free us from the Law because the Law never enslaved us in the first place. Sin enslaves. Our freedom in Christ is freedom from sin, not freedom to ignore the holiness of God.

After all, in this passage, Paul is writing to the Romans. The majority of the Romans were not Jews; they had no Law from God to keep. Similarly, many in the Church today never had to keep God's Law, as it was given solely to his chosen people, the Israelites.

"Jesus didn't come to free us from the Law; he came to free us from sin."

The Law was never slavery but a gift from God. The Law is part of what yokes the people of Israel to God and sets them apart. It makes them distinct from all other nations and identifies them as God's chosen people: "...Behold, a people who dwells apart and shall not be reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9).

The people of Israel were instructed in holiness from the moment the Law was given, and this continues even today. The trouble is, no one can keep it perfectly (Joshua 24:19; Acts 15:10). The Law itself implies this by the existence of a sacrificial system to make atonement for sin. That is a perfect example of the grace of God revealed through the Law.

Remember in the Old Testament, there was no permanent indwelling of the

Holy Spirit. (This remains true today for anyone, Jew or Gentile, who does not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.) What difference does that make, you may ask?

All the difference in the world.

Powerful Grace

Jeremiah 31:31 promises a New Covenant with the houses of Israel and Judah. In this New Covenant, God says the Law will be written on their hearts. The Israelite festival of Pentecost commemorates the giving of the Law of Moses at Sinai. It is fulfilled in Acts chapter 2 when the Holy Spirit descends on the fledgling Church and indwells the believers gathered there.

Jesus Christ kept the Law perfectly, and those who believe in him are born again into a new life—into his life. The righteousness of Christ is imparted to all those who believe, and the Holy Spirit lives permanently in their hearts. This is the New Covenant, the Law “written on their hearts,” not just on tablets of stone. It is power—the power to cease from sin, to escape its clutches, to no longer be mastered by it. Believers in Jesus, from this time forth, are schooled in holiness by the Holy Spirit of God. The Law is a map for living; the Spirit provides the power necessary to follow it.

Now, this doesn’t mean that how we live under the New Covenant doesn’t matter. The difference is not that one covenant has a law and the other does not. The difference is the Old Covenant forms people in holiness from the outside in, and the New Covenant forms them from the inside out. This is where it’s important to grasp the purpose of the Law, so we don’t get bogged down in specifics.

Worshipful Lives

The Law of Moses outlines a life in which every single act, no matter how ordinary, is elevated to an act of worship. How the people are to eat, dress, wear their hair, and plant their crops is right in there alongside the sacrifices, the design for the tabernacle, and the role of the priesthood. There is no aspect of life untouched by the commandments. The details matter, but they aren’t important for their own sake. The point is for everyone to think of the Lord in all things, to seek to please him in all things. It’s a life of worship, and it is a beautiful way to live.

However, the Law cannot change our sinful nature. The Law and the traditions of the elders gave the people the habits of holiness, you might say, and they knew and loved the Lord—yet without the indwelling Holy Spirit, they lacked the power to cease from sin.

When a Gentile comes under the New Covenant, the training in holiness comes from the Spirit of God dwelling inside them (Titus 2:11-12). It is not the case, then, that a believer in Christ can say, “I live as I please since I’m not under law but grace.” No, the Christian will say, “Because I am under grace, I’m no longer a slave to sin. Therefore, how can I live to please God?”

A person who has come under the New Covenant is still a sinner by practice and by habit. But they carry a new nature, a new Spirit, given by God, which seeks God and his righteousness. The believer in Christ is “a new creation” and “has ceased from sin”—not that Christians don’t commit particular sins, but they are no longer slaves to sin. It is no longer their master.

Their master is God, who will bring them back from sin every time, through the blood of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.