

In living the Christian life we can become confused about the proper relationship between the concepts of law and grace. Are these opposing principles, or are we just having a problem with interpretation? In the days of Christ, the Pharisees bound the people with an extremely legalistic approach to interpreting God's law. We have those that do the same thing today. There are also many today who preach a message of no obedience at all! These are two extreme interpretations of law and grace that are incompatible; like oil and water they do not mix. But the right interpretations of these ideas are compatible, and mix completely together to form a unified whole.

In Romans 6:14-15 we read that we are not under law, but under grace. This does not mean, however, that God does not earnestly desire and expect obedience! We need to find the right interpretation of grace which keeps us striving to obey God's commands, and even more, trying to please God's slightest wishes. If we attempt to live under law, as the Jews tried to do, then we feel we must obey in order to avoid condemnation and punishment. If we attempt to live under grace, as we should now do as Christians, then we will want to obey because of the promise of eternal life with God and his Goodness.

In Matthew 12:1-14 we read where Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this they accused the disciples of doing what was unlawful on the Sabbath. Jesus answered them by showing them what David did when he and his companions were hungry and ate consecrated bread from the house of God. He also brought up the fact that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple worked yet were not condemned. He reminded them of God's words 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' and claimed that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. Afterwards he went into the synagogue and healed a man with a shriveled hand. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

This is another occasion in the great struggle for power between Christ and the Jewish leaders. There was a great difference in their philosophies of how to approach God's law. The first accusation centers on the disciples' plucking grain as they walked along. According to the definitions that the Jewish leaders had developed, this was work. Did the disciples really break the law of God? And did Christ condone what they did? If you examine the Old Testament very carefully, you will not find that the disciples were breaking God's law here.

What Christ does is show to the Pharisees very graphically their own inconsistency in interpreting the law. He puts their own heroes on the stand to witness against them; and they cannot utter a word because they do not want to condemn themselves or their leaders. David especially is totally above criticism, because he is the great king. If you look at what David did you can see that he could only be accused by using the Jew's own standard, but they will not accuse him as they did the disciples of Christ. Then Christ brings out the same point with regard to the priests, who profane the Sabbath by offering sacrifices and performing circumcision.

The problem is that God did not give a detailed definition of the word 'work.' Man wants to have every possible action covered by a rule. We have to learn to interpret things properly; so many times we draw a line somewhere in a shadowy region. And we force others to walk the chalk as well. We must be careful not to add to (or take away from) the words that are written in the book. The fact is that the Pharisees totally missed the point about what it was that God wanted out of them through the existence of the law. What Jesus says about mercy and sacrifice illustrates this. God wanted the obedience of sacrifice, but not if the main point of God's will was ignored. Mercy and Goodness are the core of God's law. Christ himself said that the law and the prophets were based on two great laws: loving God and loving man.

We must realize that the rules are made for best operation of the machine that God himself designed. In the parallel passage in Mark 2:27 we read, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.' The law does not exist merely to make us jump. When we were growing up, it seemed that our parents made rules just to make our lives miserable. But they were really made for our own good. God is no different in this respect. Christ says that he is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the representative of the one who made the rules in the first place. It is he, and he alone, who can properly interpret the law, and he shows us what he means in these passages. We will study further on this in the next article.

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