

The Proper Relation Of The Law To The Gospel.

Text: 1 Tim 1:8-17

Suggested Hymns:
270, 271, 170, 802 LSB, 324

- 1) The Law is good if properly used
- 2) Not the law, but only the Gospel can save sinners
- 3) Not the Law, but only the Gospel produces true love which alone is the fulfilment of the law

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 1 Timothy 1:8-17, ⁸ *But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, ⁹ knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, ¹⁰ for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹ according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust.*

¹² *And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, ¹³ although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. ¹⁴ And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.*

¹⁶ *However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life. ¹⁷ Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

“Absolute essentials.” That is an expression sometimes heard in our day. Philosophers, politicians, sociologists, and scientists regard

certain behaviours, attitudes, conditions, as absolute essentials for the welfare of mankind.

In our text the Apostle speaks of matters which to a higher degree than any others are **absolute essentials** in the noblest sense of the term.

He speaks of grace, mercy, and peace as gifts from God the Father and Jesus Christ the Lord. He speaks of God as our Saviour and the Lord Jesus Christ as our Hope. And he speaks of righteousness and salvation and life everlasting.

The knowledge of these essentials he had received from the highest source of wisdom, from *the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the God who alone is wise.*

And because He speaks as the messenger of this King, as an Apostle of Jesus Christ commissioned by God, there is a ring of positive assurance from the first *“We know”* to the final *“Amen,”* this is most certainly true.

As an Apostle of Jesus Christ, the only Hope of salvation, he views all things, all events, all persons in the light of the glorious Gospel of the blessed God, committed to his trust, and therefore feels constrained to oppose and warn against certain men who professed to be teachers of the Law, especially the Ceremonial Law.

These men held that this Gospel was not the one and only thing needful for obtaining salvation and eternal life. Next to it, as another absolute essential, they placed the Law of Moses. Their slogan was the same adopted by the believing Jews that had years before disturbed the congregation at Antioch, *“Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”*¹

St. Paul bluntly states that these self-appointed teachers and champions of the Law understand neither what they say nor of what they so positively affirm. They know neither the nature and purpose of the Law nor that of the Gospel.

Since this is a matter of vital importance to the life of the Church and every individual Christian, because these self-styled teachers of the Law were in fact undermining the Gospel of Christ, the Apostle at once, in a passage of remarkable beauty, brings out in the light of the Gospel *The Proper Relation of the Law to the Gospel.*

Let us therefore consider *The Proper Relation of the Law to the Gospel.* May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Law Is Good If Properly Used

We know that the Law is good, says the Apostle, excellent in its nature and characteristics and therefore well adapted to its ends. It was not a vain boast when Moses asked the question, ⁸ *“And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?”*²

In His holy Law God demands a righteousness of life, a perfection of morality, such as is found in no other code. And it is eminently suited to its divinely intended purpose if only, and so long as, it is properly used, used according to the will of God who gave it.

And what is this purpose? God Himself has left us in no doubt. Asking the question ¹⁹ *“What purpose then does the law serve?”* God at once answers, *It was added because of transgressions.*³

And in our text God tells us that the Law was made *“for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, ¹⁰ for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine.”* This is a long list of criminals of the worst sort! For such people the Law is given.

Is, then, the purpose of God’s Law to make saints out of sinners? Certainly not! The Law, it is true, demands holiness. To every human being it addresses the unchanging, uncompromising demand, *“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength,”*⁴ and *“you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*⁵

And it insists on perfect fulfilment every day, every hour, every second of your life. The Lord does not say, *“Of course, if you stop killing, hating, disobeying, then bygones will be bygones.”* His Law says, *“The soul who sins shall die.”*⁶ The Lord makes no exceptions either in His demands or His threats. The constant, unchanging threat is, *“Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.”*⁷

And this applies not only to criminals, such openly unrighteous people as the Apostle names. It applies with equal force to the self-righteous and work-righteous.

There had been a time when Paul was confident that he lacked none of the things needed to merit God's favour and eternal salvation. Was he not a member of God's chosen people? Had he not been circumcised on the eighth day according to the Law? Was not his life as a strict Pharisee blamelessly righteous? And did he not defend God's kingdom against the attacks of that impostor Jesus of Nazareth, who had claimed to be the Messiah?

But there had come a day when the temple of his own righteousness, which he regarded as a safe retreat from God's judgment, had been shattered.

Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified, had appeared to him in a glory such as only the Son of God could display. Jesus, whom he had persecuted, whose followers he had killed, was indeed the Christ. Paul who had regarded himself a pattern of righteousness suddenly saw himself as he appeared to God, a lawbreaker, the chief of sinners, a blasphemer of God, a brazen persecutor and murderer of God's people, utterly lacking that love of God and his neighbour demanded by the Law on which he had based his hope of salvation. That Law now placed him side by side with those who were worthy of death and damnation.

That is the only message the Law has for sinners, for the self-righteous as well as for the unrighteous: the message of God's righteous wrath, of a fire kindled in His anger burning to the lowest hell in penalty for the sins which man has committed and which he cannot undo although he devote time and eternity to this task.

The Law knows of no escape. The Law knows of no deliverance from hell-fire. The Law knows of not a single ray of hope for the agonised sinner. Having opened his eyes to his sinful condition, having condemned him, it has done its work, it has accomplished its purpose.

Is there, then, no hope for the sinner? Must he despair in his sins? Is he hopelessly lost? As far as the Law is concerned, he is. Yet the Law is not the only, nor the last Word of God. There is another Word, a Word of hope, a Word of salvation, the Gospel, the good tidings of great joy, the glad news of the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

2. Not The Law, But Only The Gospel Can Save Sinners

This Gospel brings to every lost and condemned sinner that *faithful saying ... worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*. It directs the eyes of the sinner to that Cross on Calvary on which the Prince of glory died and tells him, *“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”*⁸

It tells him, “Listen! *“The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.”*”⁹ Though your sins be as scarlet, listen to what God tells you, *“I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”*¹⁰ God has wiped even the faintest trace of your sin from His memory. They are forgiven and forgotten.

Come to Jesus and from Him receive deliverance from sin, pardon for your iniquity, forgiveness of all your transgressions. Let Him free you from your sins and make you righteous. Do not fear that He will reject you. St. Paul writes, *for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life*. In other words, “If I, Paul, chief among sinners, a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent man, obtained mercy from my Saviour Jesus, why should any sinner despair? Why should any sinner fear that He will not be accepted by the Lord Jesus?”

The hymnist writes,¹¹

Chief of sinners though I be,
Jesus shed His blood for me,
Died that I might live on high,
Lived that I might never die;
As the branch is to the vine,
I am His and He is mine.

And when the sinner asks, *“Must I not at least begin to fulfil God’s Law before He will accept me, before He will declare me righteous?”* again the Gospel tells the sinner, “Listen! Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, and He has made a thorough job of it. You do not need to begin to fulfil one iota of the Law in order to be saved.

Listen! On that Cross hangs the Son of God. We read in Galatians 4:4-5, ⁴ *But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.*

On that Cross hangs Christ, who *is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.*¹² If you want righteousness, forget about the Law. Take the righteousness offered to you from the Cross. Let your Saviour clothe you with the robe of His perfect righteousness, and you will be sure that even the all-seeing eye of God will not detect the slightest spot or flaw.

And if the harassed sinner asks, “*Will I not remain a sinner? And will not my daily sin call down upon me the wrath and curse of the righteous God?*” then the Gospel once more points to the Cross and tells the sinner, “Forget about the curse. Christ Jesus has come into the world to save sinners. He has redeemed you from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for you! There is not a penalty that Christ has not paid, not a curse that He has not tasted, no height of sorrow that He has not experienced, no cup of divine wrath that He has not emptied to the dregs. Come to this Jesus, and there is no more curse, no more condemnation for you, but peace and joy in the Holy Spirit and the sure hope of everlasting life.

That is what the Apostle means when he wrote those remarkable words, that the Law is not made for a righteous man. A man that has received Jesus Christ as his Saviour need not fear the threat and the curse of the Law, nor need he fear that his sins will shut him out from the grace of God and God’s heaven.

The believing Christian knows that he has in Christ Jesus a Saviour from the transgressions of the Law, a Deliverer from the curse and condemnation of the Law, and a Saviour who helps His believing brothers and sisters to begin to lead that life of holiness, of love toward God and man, which is demanded by the Law. That is the third lesson the Apostle teaches in this remarkable passage.

3. Not The Law, But Only The Gospel Produces True Love Which Alone Is The Fulfilment Of The Law

The Apostle thanks Jesus Christ, his Lord, because Christ enabled him, who had been a blasphemer and persecutor, to become a faithful minister of Christ by implanting in him faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

This faith, and this undying love, the gift of grace, made of Paul an untiring worker in Christ's kingdom, a man who sacrificed himself in the service of his Saviour and his fellow men, who counted everything that once had been gain to him as worthless rubbish, who laboured more than any other Apostle, for whom to live was Christ, who at the end of his life could exclaim in 2 Timothy 4:7, ***7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*** Truly a marvellous example of the saving and sanctifying grace of Christ Jesus our Lord.

Again, Paul is only a pattern of the effective working of the Gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ. This grace is not merely the good will of a human being who cannot always transform his good will into actualities. It is the grace of the Lord, who has Himself procured for us all the gifts He bestows upon all who believe in His name.

This grace does not merely offer its gifts to us, nor does it merely invite and encourage us to come and take them. The Lord knows that we cannot by our own reason or power believe in Him or come to Him, and therefore He comes to us to give us together with His grace two choice gifts: faith and love.

Jesus Himself, the Author and Finisher of our faith, creates by His almighty grace that faith which believes in Him as our Lord and Saviour. With this faith He implants in our heart that love toward God and our fellow men and that sincere desire to serve both, which was demanded by the Law, but which the Law could never call forth.

And grace does that not by telling us, You must do this, you must do that, or you will be eternally damned, but by pointing to the Cross on which our Saviour died to free us from sin, from the curse of the Law, asking, *Shall He have died in vain for you?* And the heart of the believer responds,¹³

Lord, all my life I'll cleave to Thee,
Thy love for e'er beholding
Thee ever, as Thou ever me,
With loving arms enfolding.

...

Henceforth myself and all that's mine
I yield to Thee, my Lord, as Thine,

Who art my hope and glory.

So the Gospel of Christ crucified does that which the Law of God demands, but can never accomplish: It makes us willing doers of the holy will of God by creating in our hearts the faith in the atoning sacrifice of our Saviour, through whom we have forgiveness of all our sin, and by implanting in us as the fruit of faith, that love of God and our fellow men which makes us willing doers of God's holy will.

God's will is revealed in the Moral Law, the Ten Commandments. Therefore we will strive to keep them, not to merit salvation, but in thankful response for all that Christ has done for us. The Moral Law is still useful for all people as a curb, mirror, and rule, but it can in no way save us.

So let us not trust in our own righteousnesses. They are and remain what Isaiah calls them, *filthy rags*,¹⁴ which cannot cover our sins. Let us thank God for His unspeakable gift, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let Jesus and His blood be our glorious dress, and let us in His strength walk in the footsteps of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us, that there may now be no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit. ¹⁷ *Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever and ever.* Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Acts 15:1

² Deuteronomy 4:8

³ Galatians 3:19

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:5

⁵ Leviticus 19:18

⁶ Ezekiel 18:20

⁷ Galatians 3:10

⁸ John 1:29

⁹ 1 John 1:7

¹⁰ Jeremiah 31:34

¹¹ Hymn 170

¹² Romans 10:4

¹³ Hymn 57

¹⁴ Isaiah 64:6