

## Chapter V

### THE PERFECT LAW OF LIBERTY

It is commonly believed, both inside and outside of the canopy of Christianity, that the law was given by God to establish an ideal moral code around which man should base his life. The law of Moses has indeed established perfect ideals; but it should be evident that it has always been impossible for any man, saved or unsaved, to perform the law perfectly. This is especially true because of our Lord's interpretation of the law. He showed, in His sermon on the mount, the law could be violated by thoughts as well as by deeds. This was not teaching for the kingdom age as some theologians have suggested, but it is the *lawful* use of the law: to magnify transgressions so that the law could act as a *schoolmaster* to bring the Jews unto Christ, that they might be justified by faith, for:

... by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his [God's] sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:20)

The reason for this is, *there is not a just man upon the earth that doeth good and sinneth not* (Ecclesiastes 7:20). When Adam sinned, he immediately died spiritually, and he began to die

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physically. This legacy of spiritual and physical death has been passed on to every member of Adam's race, because God deemed Adam, as the head of the race, to have acted for the entire race when he sinned. Thus every child born into this world has been born *dead in trespasses and in sin*.

This means every child born into this world has been born with a sin nature. This nature is evident even in the new-born. The Scripture says *they are liars from their mother's womb*. Additionally, every child born into this world is subject to a corrupted sense of morality. This morality was not from God, as has been supposed, but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Solomon described this morality as *a way which seemeth right unto a man*. Consequently the natural man's disposition is to think he can be justified before God by the works of his own hands. So Paul wrote to Timothy about the *lawful* use of the law: *it was not made for a righteous [saved man], but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners...*

In dealing with the Jews, both personally and in His sermons, the Lord did not interpret the law as the Rabbis did, but He intensified the law to condemn all who thought they were justified by its performance. The Jews' covenant relationship with God demanded that they perform the law, but the Rabbis' interpretations of the law had removed the convicting power of the law. So when the rich young ruler inquired of the Lord how to enter the kingdom, the Lord used the law *lawfully* to produce conviction and condemnation. Then He said, *Take up your cross [the sign of a curse, because Cursed is every one who continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them] and follow me*. This was an invitation to salvation by grace through faith, which prior to the cross was manifested in offering a sacrifice for sin by faith,

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trusting that God would provide the promised Redeemer in the fulness of time.

It should be noted, the Jews' desire to be justified by the deeds of the law was clearly an act of provocation and unbelief according to the book of Hebrews, chapters three and four. The Jews committed this act of unbelief and provocation just sixty days after they had been redeemed out of Egypt by the blood of the Passover Lamb, which was clearly a portrayal of salvation by God's grace through faith. There was, obviously, no merit expressed in the Jews' deliverance from Egypt. God said, *When I see the blood, I will pass over you.* On the night of the passover judgment, all God looked for was the application of the blood, placed by faith on the door posts and lintels of the houses in which the Jews resided. If the blood was there, they were delivered by the grace of God through faith in the blood of the Passover lamb, which represented the blood of Christ. It is the blood of Christ which cleanses the believer from all sin. Therefore a desire on the part of a believer to express his own righteousness, rather than resting in the righteousness of Christ, is clearly a self-willed act of unbelief.

In the book of Romans, Paul stated that the Jews were ignorant of the righteousness of God. The Righteousness of God is more than an attribute of God; it is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Since the Jews corrupted the law to the point that it no longer convinced them of sin, they saw no need of a Savior in Jesus Christ. The Jews in their ignorance went about trying to establish their own righteousness by their self-efforts at law-keeping. To counter the Jews' erroneous ideas of law-keeping, James said:

... be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth

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therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. (James 1:22-25, emphasis mine)

When the Jews spoke of keeping the law, it was not the law as delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai, it was the law as traditionalized by the Rabbis. As we have already seen, the Rabbis had reduced the law to a worthless system of traditions, which produced a sense of self-righteousness in those who observed them. Consequently their traditions made the Word of God of none effect, so that our Lord said: *Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men* (Mark 7:7). And again, He said: *Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition* (Mark 7:9). And again, after our Lord described how the Rabbis explained the requirements of the law away, He said: *And ye suffer him no more to do aught for his father or his mother; making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye* (Mark 7:12-13).

Apparently when the Jews read the law or heard the law, many of them experienced conviction until they arrested their convictions with the traditions of the elders. This allowed their sense of conviction to give way to a false sense of well-being. James wished to change their minds. He wished to bring those who were *forgetful hearers of the word* to the place where they were *doers of the work*. The *doers of the work* was not another ethical system. The Jews certainly did not need that. It was salvation in Jesus Christ, and the *doers of the work* were believers in Jesus Christ. Our Lord said, *This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent* (John 6:29). Thus belief in the Lord Jesus Christ is expressed in James's statement:

... whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. (James 1:25)

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Our Lord said, *Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.* The law could not free a man; it could only enslave him. Consequently the law of Moses could never be called the *perfect law of liberty*. The law of Moses was a law of condemnation and death. This is seen in Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians:

Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart. And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away: How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious? For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory. (II Corinthians 3:2-9, emphasis mine)

The book of James could not have been written to Jewish Christians as so many have supposed. If it were, James used the law unlawfully and was a preacher of *another gospel*; but this was not the case. The only fault with James's letter is not in the letter, but in those who have presumed it was written to Christians, rather than to *the twelve tribes scattered abroad*.

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul argued for justification by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Then, in the seventh chapter, he described an incident in his life when, after his salvation, he put himself again under the law and the law immediately condemned him:

For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, [the] sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life [as a schoolmaster], I found to be unto death. For [the] sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me. Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But [the] sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that [the] sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.

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For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under [the] sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but [the] sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but [the] sin that dwelleth in me.

I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of [the] sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin. (Romans 7:9-25, emphasis mine)

After Paul cried, *O wretched man that I am!* He knew the answer, *I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.* All of Paul's sins were forgiven because of the one sacrifice for sin that had been made by the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's experience in the seventh chapter of Romans is common to everyone who has been saved -- who thinks now that he is saved, he can perform the law. This inclination is in believers because of the sin of Adam, which is identified in Scripture as the flesh. It is also identified by Solomon as *a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.* Further it is identified in the Romans text by sin in the singular, preceded in the Greek text by the definite article. After Paul realized his condemnation had been borne by the Lord, he said, *So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.*

The source of Paul's condemnation in chapter seven of Romans is addressed at the beginning of chapter eight. There is no condemnation from the Lord for those who are in Christ, who walk by faith, in dependence upon the Spirit, but there most certainly is self-condemnation from a failed performance of the law, instigated by the flesh. Consequently Romans eight, verses

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one and two, supply the answer to Paul's experience in Romans chapter seven:

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh [the law], but after the Spirit [the faith]. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of [the] sin and death. (Romans 8:1-2)

Please note: I have inserted in brackets *the law* after the word flesh and *the faith* after the word Spirit in my quotation of Romans 8:1-2. The reason for this comes from Galatians chapter three, where Paul equated the works of the law, in verse two, with the flesh, in verse three: *This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?* (Galatians 3:2-3) When we couple this truth with a statement of the apostle Paul, also found in Galatians chapter three, we have the whole picture: *The just shall live by faith, and the law is not of faith.*

Thus looking into the perfect law of liberty is looking into the saving grace of Jesus Christ as found in the gospel. It becomes evident then, there was a law of condemnation and there is a law of liberty. With respect to the latter, the apostle Paul wrote the Galatians: *Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage [i.e, the law]* (Galatians 5:1).

James did not tell Christians to be diligent in their observance of the law. James told the Jews, who had looked into the law of Moses and beheld what manner of persons they were, to appropriate the grace of God by faith in Jesus Christ. If a Jew looked into the law of Moses and saw what manner of man he was, how tragic it would have been for him to continue in the traditional observances of the law. If he continued in the traditions of the elders, he could only

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be described as *a forgetful hearer* and not a *doer of the work*.

Now that we have considered the arguments of James and Paul, it should be evident that the gospel of the saving grace of Jesus Christ is *the perfect law of liberty*. In the law of liberty the Lord Jesus Christ has fulfilled every jot and tittle of the law in behalf of the believer. Consequently, by judicial reckoning, he is not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work. Thus, according to the book of Hebrews, he has entered into God's rest:

There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us [be eager] therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. (Hebrews 4:9-11)

Peter described the Jews in their relationship to the law in the council at Jerusalem and pleaded that the law should not be imposed upon the Gentiles: *Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they* (Acts 15:10-11, emphasis mine). Thus the *law of liberty*, as used by James, is equivalent to the grace of God, as used by Peter and Paul. Thus Paul wrote: *But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; that being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life* (Titus 3:4-7).

Thus, with James, we make an appeal to those who are religious, but lost, like the Jews of the twelve tribes scattered abroad: Look into the law of Moses and let it reveal to you what manner of person, before God, you really are. Remember, in His sermon on the mount, the Lord

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told the Jews the requirement to be justified by the law: *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.* Then allow the law of Moses to be a schoolmaster (an attendant slave who educated children) to bring you into the perfect law of liberty by faith, which is the saving grace of God, through the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ in your behalf as a sinner, believing that *Christ died for your sins according to the Scriptures and was buried and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures*, thus to be deemed *a faithful doer of the work.*