

GRACE I: THE OLD WAY OF THE WRITTEN CODE

When I first came to faith I thought that following Jesus was all about holiness and mission. I saw grace as a cop out for those who couldn't handle holiness and mission. I couldn't have been more wrong. Grace is not a way that the spiritual life works better. Grace is the gospel. In Acts 20v24 Paul sums up his message in two words. "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me, the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." If you want the gospel in two words from a man who knew something about it, there it is. The first word is God. The second word is grace.

In Romans 7v6, Paul contrasts the old way of the written code with the new way of the Spirit. In this article we'll consider the old way of the written Code, the Law, the tyranny of the 'shoulds'. In the next article we'll think about the new way of the Spirit, Grace, or how God transforms our desires.

CONVERSION

Everything in our Christian life starts with our conversion. We come to see our radical selfishness, we're the centre of our world. Even our best moments are often simply our desire to prove to ourselves and others how "good" and "loving" we really are. We see something of God's amazing love. When we hated him as a rival to the throne of our lives, he became a man, allowed us to torture him to death and tasted hell in our place. In light of that we turn away from our old life, we repent. We rest the weight of our life on the goodness and trustworthiness of God, we trust. God comes and plants his life in us by his Spirit, the new birth. Becoming a Christian is not just a fresh start. It's a totally new life.

This is described by a fantastic little parable in Matthew 13v44: The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

John Piper illustrates it like this: "Once we had no delight in God, and Christ was just a vague historical figure. What we enjoyed was food and friendships and productivity and investments and vacations and hobbies and games and reading and shopping and sex and sport and art and TV and travel ... but not God. He was an idea - even a good one - and a topic for discussion; but he was not a treasure of delight.

Then something miraculous happened. It was like the opening of the eyes of the blind during the golden dawn. First the stunned silence before the unspeakable beauty of holiness. Then a shock and a terror that we had actually loved the darkness. Then the settling stillness of joy that is at the soul's end. The quest is over. We would give anything if we might be granted to live in the presence of this glory forever and ever." (Desiring God)

To some this comes as a dramatic crisis point. This was my experience. God showed up in my room one night and everything changed. For others this is a much more gradual, gentle process. Either way we come to the same point: God becomes the most important thing to us. God is the thing that makes sense of everything else.

Can you relate to this? Do you know God in this way? If not, may not yet be a follower of Jesus. This is not something to beat yourself up about, but it is serious. You are not yet experiencing the forgiveness and love of God. You do not yet have new life and if nothing changes, when Jesus returns to judge the world it will not go well with you.

+ The good news is that God loves us more than we dare to dream. If we will turn to him and open our heart to him, he will meet us, forgive us and give us new life. Right now. Following Jesus is not about knowing theology or going to church or being good. It's about knowing, loving and obeying God. It's about receiving new life from him which changes everything. +

So we're converted. God is amazing and we love him to bits. We're bursting with joy and life and we're going to blow a fuse if we can't tell everyone about it. Then we begin to look at others that follow Jesus around us and we recognise we need to make some changes.

We start to notice our Jesus-following friends read the Bible. It's difficult to understand and sometimes it seems boring but we think surely we can manage a chapter a day. Then we realise that some of our lifestyle doesn't seem to fit too well with the Jesus-following friends around us. We realise it will cost us dearly to change but we grit our teeth and get on with it. Then someone challenges us to pray for 15 minutes a day. Frankly 2 minutes seems an epic feat of concentration. And then there's giving. Why can't the church pay for their pastors, or the tax payer, or someone else?! Then there's all the new meetings we're expected to attend. What have we let ourselves in for?

I began to follow Jesus as a university student. My course had a small Christian Group, the Civil Engineering Christian Union, which I joined. Most of us in the group really loved Jesus, but we didn't have too much Bible knowledge. As good Protestants we headed straight to Paul's letters. The first half of the letters were really difficult to understand so we headed for the second half which were full of simple moral instruction. We read about patience and gentleness and love and long-suffering. We went round the group and each of us sheepishly admitted that they weren't doing that well on any of them. We committed to try harder and report back the following week. Week after week we confessed our failure to show significant improvement. We just couldn't make it work.

In our conversion, we start off well. But as we try to move on and become more of the people Jesus calls us to be, we find ourselves crushed by expectations we can't live up to. The joy, love and spontaneity leaks away and is replaced by frustration, guilt and futility. 'Why did I get in to this in the first place?' we wonder, 'It just doesn't seem to work'.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

We started well. What happened? Romans 7 gives us some answers, v14-24:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Can you relate to this? You know the right thing to do. On one level, you want to do the right thing. And yet somehow you end up doing the opposite. The more you try, the worse it gets. You end up utterly frustrated with the standards, but even more frustrated with yourself. What's wrong with me? I'm wretched. I'm beginning to think I may be wicked.

Some people think that Paul's describing his normal experience of following Jesus. "Well," they say, "if this is how Paul struggled then how can I do any better?" Heaven help us if the best we can ever hope for is defeat, frustration and despair. Paul isn't describing the normal experience of someone who follows Jesus. He's describing the experience of the Jews trying to keep God's laws in the Old Testament. However, this will be the experience of any of us if we try to sort our life out by trying hard to keep rules. In other words if we try to live by the law. If you can relate to Paul's description, then chances are you are tangled up in the law. +

WHAT IS THE LAW?

We started well. What happened? We got tangled up in the law. Technically the law of Moses is the first five books of Old Testament. By Jesus' time it came to be understood as all the moral instruction, rituals and regulations in the Old Testament plus a whole lot more the rabbis had added to be on the safe side. But Romans 2v14-15 expand on this:

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.

We can make any awareness that we have of God's standards through the Bible, through our conscience or through others into a law. In other words, the law is what we should do. The law is the 'should's'. We can show the life that Paul describes as a simple diagram:



Trying hard by my own efforts to keep the rules will not work as a way to become holy. Understanding why it wont work will help us see how to make the Christian life fly.

THE ROLE OF THE LAW

We started well but then we got tangled up in trying to keep the rules. So what's the problem? And if the law doesn't help, why is it there? What's the role of the law? Romans 3v19-20 give some answers: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

The law tells us at least two things. Firstly, it makes it clear how God would have us live. No one will arrive at judgement and say "I never knew that murder was wrong so you can't judge me for that". God will point out that we knew through his word, through our conscience and through our culture. There will be no excuses. The law takes away our excuses. It also makes us conscious of our sin. We become aware of sin through the law. So through the law we see what it means for God to be holy and for us to be sinful.

But there's more. And this one is shocking: Romans 5v20:
"The law was added so that the trespass might increase..."

If that verse doesn't seem shocking to you, I would encourage you to read it again until you can see why it might be. The law actually stirs up the sin in us so we sin more. The more we focus on trying to keep the law, the more we end up breaking it. A few examples:

If you paint some railings and you want to keep them free from marks do nothing. If you want to get them covered in fingerprints put a notice up saying 'wet paint, don't touch.' Suddenly everyone who passes will be compelled to test it and see if it's still wet. If you leave a book on a table in a busy room no-one will give it a second look. If you mention on your way out of the room "That book contains some very personal things, please don't read it" suddenly everyone is overwhelmed with curiosity. Final example: Don't think about elephants. Don't think about their big grey floppy ears or their great white tusks or their long trunks or their huge tree-like legs. Suddenly a great herd of elephants is wandering through your imagination. "The law was added so that the trespass might increase..."

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This is incredible as most people who genuinely want to follow Jesus are trying to become like him by frantically trying to keep the rules. The thing we're trying to use to become holy is the very thing designed to prove to us how sinful we are. The more we try to become holy by our own efforts, the more we prove our sinfulness.

Trying to become righteous by our own efforts is what we call self-righteousness. The reason self-righteous people are so annoying is that the only way to succeed is to fake it. Self-righteous people aren't real. So is the law a bad thing? Romans 7:7-13: What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

The law is not a bad thing, it shows us what sin is. It's the sin in our nature that it exposes that's the problem. Sin isn't just the stuff we do wrong. It's a power that enslaves us. And our human nature is infected with sin because we're descended from Adam and Eve. This is original sin, that our nature is descended from corrupted people and therefore our nature is corrupted. Left to our own devices we have a natural bent to sin. This isn't a popular idea but it isn't hard to see. Ask a parent whether they have to train their child to be good or bad. We have to train children to be good. Being rebellious and naughty comes naturally.

If there's nothing to rebel against, then we're fine and the sin in our nature isn't shown up. However, as soon as the law appears and we try to change, the rebellious sin in our nature is provoked and we find ourselves going against what God wants. Sin gets leverage in our life through the law. Watchman Nee uses the illustration of a clumsy butler. The butler may be handsome and polite and look like the model butler. It isn't until you ask him to do something that his clumsiness is exposed. Likewise with us, we may be very nice and have the perfect Christian smile. It isn't until God asks us to do something that our sinfulness and rebelliousness is exposed.

So the law demands that we change, but as soon as we try and do what it says, we find ourselves going in the opposite direction. The sin in our nature is exposed and provoked. Our own efforts are doomed because they are infected by sin.

After a year of civ eng cu a new guy came and started to lead the group. He knew his Bible a bit better than the rest of us and so we began to tackle the beginning of Paul's letters. What an eye opener! I remember the first time Colossians 2:20-23 really hit me. I remember the room I was in, the sun streaming through the window and the chair I was sitting in. I read:

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

I don't know if anyone else in the room had any idea what was happening to me as these verses hit me. I felt like all the tent pegs of my faith had been pulled up. Everything was sliding. I knew full well that the only way I held my Christian life together was trying to keep all the rules. If this way of living was just as worldly as the things I was trying to avoid, I realised I had absolutely no idea how the Christian life worked. I Timothy 1:8-11 puts it simply. The law does not help us to become righteous. It confronts people who are rejecting God and rebelling against him: We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers, and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

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FREEDOM

So we started out well but then we realised we needed to change. But as soon as we tried to do what the law said we found it provoked the sin in us. The harder we tried, the worse the problem got. We need help. "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" cries Paul. We know what he means. So what's the solution? Incredibly, the very counter-intuitive answer to the problem of sin is that God sets us free from the law. If you don't believe me turn to Romans 7v1-3: Do you not know, brothers, for I am speaking to men who know the law, that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.

Paul's metaphor is marriage. If you read from chapter 5 of Romans you see that we're the women and through the law we're married to Adam (meaning our old, sinful nature). The only way out of this marriage is death so we're stuck. Unless... Romans 7v4: So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God.

So the way out is death. Initially this doesn't sound so good. But we don't die ourselves, Jesus dies our death for us and gives us new life. Jesus was crucified, died and was raised to new life. He died to the law and so was released from its authority. When we're born again, the new life we get is Christ's life. As Christ has already died to the law, we died in him. So our new life is no longer under the law. Sin pushes around by provoking our old nature, (Adam) to rebel against the law. But if the law is taken away then sin has nothing to push against and so can't control us any more. If you want to know freedom from the power of sin, you must embrace freedom from the law, the "shoulds", the guilt, demands and threats.

Think of punting on the river. It's a beautiful day and the sun is sparkling on the river, until you lose your pole. Then you're scuppered. You have nothing to push with. You either have to be rescued, or jump in to recover your pole, or simply drift wherever the river takes you. Sin is like the punter in our boat and the pole it uses to push us around with is the law. If we're free from the law, then sin cannot push us around any more. We're free! The only way sin can get leverage in our life is to get us to act as if we were still under the law, striving in our own efforts to keep the rules. We're free from the law. That's why Romans 8v1 says: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"

There are two reasons why this is true. Firstly, Jesus has already paid for all the sins we will ever commit, past, present and future (1 Peter 3v18). We're totally forgiven. But the second reason is that we're not under the law. It was the law that condemned us, but we're not under the law any more.

RADICAL FREEDOM

We started off fine. Then through the law we realised we had to change. But we found that as we tried to do what the law said, we simply proved our own sinfulness. The good news of the gospel of grace is that we are no longer under all the rules. Let me spell this out. We're totally forgiven. All the rules, the things we "should" do or else, no longer threaten us. We're free. Does this sound radical to you? Dr Martin Lloyd Jones used to say that if the gospel of grace doesn't sound very dangerous, we haven't preached it.

How radical is this freedom? Paul was faced with a tricky little situation in the church he'd planted in Corinth. Some of the church were having sex with prostitutes. How does Paul respond? Does he lay down the law? Does he say "Come on guys, this isn't on for followers of Jesus"? 1 Corinthians 6v12: "Everything is permissible for me", but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is permissible for me", but I will not be mastered by anything.

He starts by reminding them that they're free, so committed is Paul to not putting them back under the law. He goes on to give them a good reason for not sleeping with prostitutes. That's radical freedom. Let me say it again. You're absolutely free from the law.

I asked a couple of friends of mine, James and Phil, about their experience of their spiritual life before they grasped grace:

James: During my second year at university I heard a series of talks on Ephesians. They were great and I thought I'd got to grips with grace but I hadn't really. I was walking around not knowing what was going on, I was so ridden with guilt. I couldn't even come to church. I came a few times and people asked me to stay for lunch but I felt I just had to go. I couldn't look people in the eye. I was ridden with guilt and my relationship with God was impersonal. I put him in a box. It was a nice ideal but it wasn't a relationship, it wasn't anything.

Phil: When you focus on the law, which is something I've done a lot, you focus on yourself. You try and do good and you act as you should. There are two outcomes: Either you achieve the good in which case it's not really that great. You just achieve the satisfactory standard and you get quite full of yourself and think "look at me, I'm so great". You get quite a lot of pride. Or you slip up, which also happens a lot, and you get very guilty. You end up with a lot of pride and a lot of guilt which are two things that really block you off from an actual personal relationship with God.

Then I asked James and Phil to share what impact grasping grace had on their lives:

James: When you grasp grace you get one of those ridiculously large smiles on your face. I actually have a relationship with God now. Before it was just a box, it was idealistic. Now it's a relationship for which I'm so thankful.

Phil: My experience of getting to grips with grace has been a gradual process but last term, me and James and Duncan were talking about grace a lot. I had slipped up quite a lot recently and I was feeling down and frustrated with all this trying and really questioning why it doesn't work. Gradually coming to terms with the grace we were talking about, something started to hit my heart inside. I don't know how to describe it because I couldn't come to grips with how much God loved me, how much he was giving me. In the end I just burst into tears uncontrollably with relief that I wasn't attaining my righteousness and it was all given to me. I was completely blameless in front of God because of Jesus. It's such a massive burden lifted off your shoulders. You're free from everything. You're free to live.

VITAL FREEDOM

This freedom from the law is not optional. Sometimes it feels safer or more humble to hang on to a few rules. But Paul insists this isn't an option. Galatians 5v1-2: It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.

This is a big deal. Circumcision is the Old Testament sign of being under the law. Is Paul saying that if we put ourselves back under the law then the Christian life won't work so well? No. If we put ourselves back under the rules Christ will be of no value to us at all! Strong stuff. He goes on to say that living under the law alienates us from Christ and represents a falling away from grace. We must radically throw off the law if we're ever to change. The law only stirs the sin in our old nature making us sin more and alienating us from Christ. Resentful obligation, burdening duty, guilty striving only lead us to sin. If we place ourselves back under the law, the "shoulds", the demands, we give sin power in our life.

Can you see problems here? The notion of being free from the law is deeply frightening. For one, if we've always tried to live by keeping the rules, we don't know an alternative. Could another way work or would I fall apart morally? Secondly, if we're free from the law we're responsible. We have to rule our freedom and ourselves. We come to realise that the ultimate reason we sin is that we choose to sin. But as I sat there in Civ Eng CU with the sun streaming through the windows and Colossians 2 burning a hole in my heart, those weren't the two things worrying me. I was thinking of what John White refers to as "The Beast in the Basement", those deep, dark, depraved desires that run around our inner world.

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“If I let go of the rules,” I thought, “What is there to stop me doing whatever I want?” The logic raced through my mind: “And if I do whatever I want, I could be locked away for a very long time!” In other words, how can I let go of the law if it’s the law that keeps the beast in the basement? I asked a group of around 60 believers recently if anyone knew what I meant when I referred to the beast in the basement. I was reassured to find that nearly all of them put their hand up! Many, many followers of Jesus miss grace because they’re afraid of freedom, and they’re afraid of freedom because they’re afraid of themselves.

There is another way. Radical freedom doesn’t have to lead to sin. Romans 7v4-6: So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

The old way of the written code, the law, trying hard to keep the rules and do the right thing will not keep us from sin. But if God can so transform our wants that we passionately desire the things that he wants, then the law will be irrelevant. That’s the new way of the Spirit and we’ll look at how he does that in the second article.