

*Under Law vs. Under Grace: Romans 6:14-15*

Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church

Sunday, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013

This morning we're going to look at a very specific question that arises from verses 14-15. In both of these verses Paul uses the phrases "under law" and "under grace." And the question is, What do those phrases refer to? What does it mean to be under law? And what does it mean to be under grace?

It's important for us to understand this, because in verse 14 the fact that we, believers, are not under law but under grace is given as the ground for why sin has no dominion over us. This is crucial to our understanding of the Christian life. It's crucial to our understanding of sanctification. It's crucial to our fight against sin. We need to know what this means, because it will help us think about ourselves rightly, and thus be a further motivated to become who we are in Christ.

Additionally, as verse 15 addresses, it's important for us to understand these categories lest we turn the Gospel into a license to sin. The fact that we are not under law but under grace does not mean that we continue in sin that grace may abound (to use the wording of Romans 6:1).

So these are critical concepts for us to grasp. On the one hand, as a positive motivator in the process of sanctification. And on the other hand, as a warning to protect us from falling into the mindset that a person can be a Christian and continue on living a life given over to sin.

Now, to bring us up to speed this morning, let's just remember a couple things from earlier in this passage. The chapter began with an objection. Paul cites this question that was surely being asked of him when he preached this Good News of justification by faith alone. "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" That's the question that inevitably comes when people begin to realize how radical this message is. Are you really saying that you don't have to do anything to be saved? Really, you're saying you don't have to keep any rules in order to earn God's favor? Well, then you're giving people license to continue living in wickedness.

Paul combats that reasoning with great vehemence. "By no means!" And he goes on to explain that those who are united to Christ have died to sin and have been raised to walk in newness of life. He spends some time explaining those glorious realities in

verses 2-10. Then he gives the very first command in this letter. In verse 11 he tells us, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” You have to know this to be true, and then you need to exert yourself in the fight to live in light of that reality. Because even though we are dead to sin (that is an objective reality), our subjective experience in this life is that those sinful desires continue to tempt us.

And then come the commands in verses 12-13, which are basically a plea to become who you are. Live as the new person you are in Christ, not as the old person who has been put to death. “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.”

The Christian life is a battle. I hope you feel that. You need to feel that. We need to wage war against the sinful inclinations that rise up with us, and, sadly, will continue to rise up within us until the day we see Jesus. We have to be relentless in our efforts to slay those wicked desires, those deceitful desires. These commands clearly show our responsibility in this fight. We have to be active in this.

We talk a lot about God’s sovereignty in this church. We love the truth of God’s sovereignty over all things. But don’t ever use that as an excuse to be passive. Especially don’t use God’s sovereignty as an excuse for being lazy in fighting sin. I can just hear some people saying, “Well, it must not be God’s will for me to be sanctified. He just keeps letting me fall into sin.” That’s Satan talking, and you know it. You can’t theologize your way out of things God is clearly telling you to do. God’s sovereignty does not cancel out our responsibility. We must wage war against sinful passions. We must not present our members to sin. We must, rather, present ourselves to God. We must resist unrighteousness, and pursue righteousness. Don’t make any excuses. And don’t try any fancy theological ways of getting yourself off the hook.

Instead, the way we’re helped in this, is to recognize how these commands flow from and are integrally connected with promises. We are responsible to obey these commands. But the good news is we’re not left to ourselves to wage this war in our own strength. I noted last week how these commands in verses 11-13 are sandwiched between promises. Verses 2-10 expounded the great truths of our union to Christ, and therefore our death to sin and resurrection to new life. That is Gospel reality. And now in verse 14 there’s another great promise, on the other side of these

commands. Verse 14 says, “For sin will have no dominion over you . . .” That’s a promise. You are not under the dominion of sin. Sin is not your slave master—that’s the metaphor Paul will use through the latter part of this chapter.

So here’s another great promise for us, as believers. Sin will have no dominion over us. And this promise supports the commands that come right before it. Notice the word “for” at the beginning of verse 14. This is the “become what you are” logic. Verse 12: don’t let sin reign over you. Verse 14: because sin won’t reign over you.

And why doesn’t sin reign over us? Paul takes another step in explaining this. He writes in the second half of verse 14, “since you are not under law but under grace.” And this brings us to our questions for this morning. What is it to be under law, and what is it to be under grace?

### **Under Law**

Paul uses this phrase 11 times (once in v. 14, once in v. 15, 4 times in 1 Corinthians 9:20, and 5 times in Galatians). I’ll walk us briefly through these other verses to give us a sense for what Paul has in mind when he uses this phrase.

“To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.” (1 Corinthians 9:20)

Here Paul is talking about how he adapts himself to various situations in his desire to be a servant to all in the hope of winning more to Christ. He himself, as a believer, is not under the law, meaning he is not under the obligations of the Mosaic law.<sup>1</sup> But in his desire to win Jews to Christ, Paul would not flaunt his liberty, but rather conform to the demands of the law. He wouldn’t show up at the pot-luck at the synagogue with a big pork roast. He would bring something kosher. He didn’t want to unnecessarily offend, so he conformed himself in certain ways to his audience. Not in ways that compromised the Gospel in any way. But in trivial matters, he didn’t have any problem with some contextualization. So the point from that verse is that “under the law” refers to the obligations of the Mosaic law.

“Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the

---

<sup>1</sup> See the helpful essay by Doug Moo in *Five Views on Law and Gospel*. He discusses “under law” on pg. 361ff

law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian,” (Galatians 3:23–25)

Here Paul describes the condition of Jews before the coming of Christ in contrast to the present condition now that Christ has come. He describes the law as a guardian until Christ came. There is a strong temporal aspect to this. The Mosaic law had a certain role in the past, but the situation is different now. The Old Testament law was a guardian for God’s people to lead them to Christ. But now that law is obsolete in the sense of direct guidance for God’s people. We’re not to look to the law for hope or salvation or sanctification, but we are to look to Christ. The law is supposed to point us to Christ. Therefore, if we remain fixed on the law, we’re missing the point. And especially now that Christ has come, and we’re in this new era of salvation-history, it is absurd to go back and want to be under that old guardian.

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” (Galatians 4:4–5)

Jesus, during His life on this earth, was under the obligations of the Mosaic law. When He was born, that old era was still in effect when the law was functioning as a guardian for God’s people. And He fulfilled the law. He perfectly obeyed the law, and thus accomplished redemption for sinners who cannot keep the law. This reminds us that there is nothing inherently evil about the law, itself, or even about being under the law. Jesus was born under the law, and yet was sinless. The law is holy and righteous and good (Romans 7:12), and the Mosaic covenant had its place. But when sinners look to the law, especially now that Christ has come and fulfilled the law, that is self-destruction.

“Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?” (Galatians 4:21)

Paul rebukes those who want to continue enforcing all the commands of the Mosaic law. He is exasperated that they want to remain under an old arrangement now that the fulfillment has come. To remain under the law is to remain in bondage. And to remain under the law is to scorn Jesus Christ, because it ignores what He has done to fulfill the law and redeem us from it.

“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” (Galatians 5:18)

That statement is made right before the lists of the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. This connects with our passage in Romans 6, because it's saying something very similar. If you are led by the Spirit, which is something that is true of those who are united to Christ, dead to sin, and walking in newness of life, then you are not under the law. You are not under that old system. A new day has dawned. There is now power, by the Spirit, to obey God.

This was also the case for a remnant of true believers in the old covenant, but for the most part the Israelites were rebellious.<sup>2</sup> They were imprisoned under the law. They should have repented, but they mainly rebelled. And that whole history is instructive to us, and should make us realize our need to repent and look to the one Person who fulfilled the law, Jesus Christ. We don't look to the law for righteousness, but we look to the one who fulfilled the law.

This is what it means that we are not under law. We are not under that guardian. We are not under that system of obligations. And we must not look to any list of rules as a means of gaining righteousness before God. That is absolutely futile and prideful and foolish.

### **The Law and Sin**

Let's look at one more verse in Galatians before turning back to Romans 6.

“For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”” (Galatians 3:10)

This answers the question, “Why does being under the law mean that sin has dominion over you?” That question is raised by Romans 6:14. “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” It's implied in that statement that if you are under the law, then sin has dominion over you. Sin dominates those who are under the law. Sin has mastery over those under the law. Why is that the case? Galatians 3:10: because if you're relying on works of the law, if you're looking to law-keeping as a way to be righteous, then you are under a curse. And why is that? Because if you're looking to law-keeping, then you are obligated to keep the whole law. You can't pick and choose. If you're under the law, you're not going to be graded on a curve. You can't have the mindset, “Well, I obeyed some of the

---

<sup>2</sup> See Schreiner, *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law*, pg. 73-76.

law, that must count for something.” No, it doesn’t count for anything, unless it’s total obedience.

So those who are looking to the law are under a curse. They are under the dominion of sin. Apart from Christ, there is no power to obey. And this is the irony of the objection to which Paul is responding. The objection assumes that dethroning the law will give sin free reign. But Paul says it’s just the opposite. If you put law on the throne, you put sin on the throne. If you really want to escape the mastery of sin, don’t look to law. You don’t have the power to keep the law. Who do you think you are? If you think you can keep the law, you are delusional. You’re blind. You’re living in a fantasy world. Being under the law will not help you. It will hurt you. What you need is grace.

### **Under Grace**

You are not under law but under grace. What is it about being under grace that assures us that sin will have no dominion over us (in the wording of verse 14)? Or, in terms of the objections in verses 1 and 15, what is it about being under grace that assures us that we will not continue in sin?

Well, one component of this phrase “under grace” is the salvation-historical shift from old covenant to new covenant. We saw this in the various places Paul speaks of being “under law.” That was the old era. The new era is characterized as “under grace.” John 1:17 speaks in this way: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:17) We now live in this new day in which grace reigns through Jesus Christ.

The end of Romans 5 speaks in a similar way. “Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 5:20–21) From what we learned in Romans 5 about the imputation of Adam’s sin and imputation of Christ’s righteousness, we understand this grace to be the unmerited favor of having Christ’s righteousness counted as ours by faith.

This gets at another critical dimension of the law-grace contrast. To be under the law means you’re looking to your own obedience as the ground of your righteousness before God. That is bad news resulting in condemnation. But to be under grace means you’re looking to Christ’s perfect obedience as the ground of your

righteousness before God. This is Good News resulting in salvation unto eternal life.

We also see in this context the power of grace. Don't think of grace as merely forgiveness of sin. It is that, but it's so much more. Grace is powerful. Grace not only forgives sin, but empowers us to fight temptations. Grace, indeed, is given here as the reason why sin will have no dominion over us. It's the reason why we will, by no means, continue living in sin. The poignant imagery of this chapter brings this out. In the first part of the chapter, it's the imagery of death and resurrection. In the latter part of the chapter, it's the imagery of slavery. We are no longer slaves to sin, but are now slaves to God. The transfer from being "under law" to "under grace" is yet another angle on this. We have been taken out of the domain of law, sin, the old self, slavery, into the new domain of grace, righteousness, newness of life, freedom.

Knowing this ought to be a powerful motivation in our pursuit of holiness. If we take this teaching and turn it into a license to sin, we don't understand the Gospel. I heard a sad story recently of a pastor who had an affair and was leaving his wife and children to go be with this other woman. He said to his family, "I know this is wrong. But I'm going to do it anyway, and I know God will forgive me. That's what He does." That is a wicked thought. That man doesn't understand the Gospel. And if he doesn't repent of his sin, he will burn in hell for his sin. That is a satanic perversion of the Gospel, and it's just the kind of thinking Paul attacks in this passage. To assume that grace means I can run headlong into sin and God is somehow obligated to forgive me, that is not the Gospel. That is presuming upon grace and ignoring the fact that real grace, if it is present in your life, will empower you to fight sin.

On the other hand, if we ignore the precious gift of Christ's righteousness and instead try to earn a righteousness of our own by law-keeping, we don't understand the Gospel. Again, this message is meant to keep us from two opposite errors. On the one side, from continuing in sin. On the other side, from turning to legalism. Both of those paths contradict the Gospel. Don't think that having more rules will solve your problems. That's just putting yourself under the law. What you need is more of Christ. You need to see more of Christ. You need to behold Him in all His glory and beauty, in the Word and in prayer and in fellowship with other believers and in the Lord's Supper and in sacrifice and suffering.

I love the promise in our fighter verse for this week, from James 4:8. "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you."

Make that your meditation this week. Make that your prayer and your passion. God, I want to be near You! Please, draw near to me. That's where the power is, my friends. There's no power in lists of rules. There's no power in man-made programs. What you need is the Triune God invading your life to the depth of your being. Crying out to the Father to be near you. Being united to Jesus Christ by faith, in His death to sin and resurrection to new life. Being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, led by the Spirit, so that you walk according the Spirit and set your mind on the things of the Spirit, rather than the flesh (Romans 8).

Turn from sin. Turn from law. Turn from religion. Rest in Christ. For all those who are in Christ are not under law, and the dominion of sin that goes along with that, but under the life-changing power of grace.