

The Law and Progressive Sanctification

As we have seen, progressive sanctification, no less than justification, is an essential part of salvation. Without progressive sanctification there can be no salvation. Very well. That leads straight into the next question: What part does the Mosaic law play in the believer's progressive sanctification? As we have seen in Galatians, while Paul was explicit that justification is not by the works of the law but by faith in Christ alone, he is no less explicit that progressive sanctification is not by the law but by the Spirit. And it's not just in Galatians where he said this. He knew what the *pseudadelphoi* were teaching, what they were insisting on, and what their doctrine was leading to and, no doubt, would lead to. He could see the writing clearly on the wall. So much so, time and again Paul not only taught that justification was by faith alone in Christ alone, through grace alone, and not by our law works, he also knew that he had argue that neither does our observance of the law – or any part of it – contribute to progressive sanctification. If he had failed in either, the battle would have been lost, the war would have been lost, the *pseudadelphoi* would have won the day. Consequently, the old covenant would have been shoe-horned into the new covenant – and (to change the figure) it would have meant that the old covenant, camel-nose-like, would have taken over the new.¹ In short, the gospel would have been ruined, and Christ would have been sidelined.² That is how vital a conflict it was. The apostle had to win it. On all fronts.

¹ If Paul had lost, just as in the fable of the camel's nose, the *pseudadelphoi* would have been wormed the old covenant into the comfort of the warm, while the old covenant would have been left shivering in the cold outside the tent.

² Witness the history of Christendom.

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In many works, I have tried to set out his argument, drawn from all parts of the New Testament.³ When writing to the Galatians, in order to demolish the teaching of the *pseudadelphoi*, Paul set out not only that justification is not by the law, but that neither is progressive sanctification. And the latter is the subject of this chapter. Now this presents me with a problem: do I repeat those extracts already quoted in this book, and run the risk of completely turning you, the reader, off? Or do I, for sake of completeness, repeat the extracts and accept that risk? Well, I have opted for a compromise. I am going to repeat the extracts, cutting out my comments, and indicating where the repetition begins and where it ends. Reader, if you wish to skip, that is now your choice. I prefer this option to making you flip backwards and forwards trying to keep tabs on the extracts.

In what follows in these repeated extracts, notice how Paul argued that there is no progressive sanctification under the law of Moses or any part of it. Progressive sanctification is under the law of Christ by the power of the Spirit. This is the age of the new covenant, the age of the Spirit; the old covenant has been superseded and rendered obsolete. The supporting evidence of these extracts is overwhelming.

Repetition from Galatians begins

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you...?... Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now⁴ being made perfect by the flesh? (Gal. 3:1-5).

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us... so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:13-14).

Now that faith [that is, the faith, that is the gospel] has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are

³ See, above all, my *Christ*.

⁴ Note the 'now'. Having been justified, 'now'...

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all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were spiritually immersed⁵ into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:25-29).

Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying: 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God (Gal. 4:6-7).

Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God... Brothers... my little children... (Gal. 4:9,12,19).

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain...

Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They [that is, the false teachers, the Judaisers]⁶ make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them... My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you [that is, until you are completely transformed into Christ-likeness by progressive sanctification – see Romans 8:29]! I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our

⁵ See my *Infant*.

⁶ And (to coin a word) paganisers.

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mother... Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman’. So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... You were called to freedom, brothers (Gal. 4:8-11,16 – 5:13).

[We are talking about] two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother... Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise... [Gal. 4:24-28].

Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh... If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are... But the fruit of the Spirit is... Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh... If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in [or by] the Spirit... He who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life...

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God (Gal. 5:16-25; 6:8,12-16. See also Rom. 8:1-17; 13:14; Gal. 4:5-6).

Repetition from Galatians ends

So much for Galatians. Its teaching on progressive sanctification – that is it by the Spirit, under the law of Christ

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– is written large, for all to see. Paul’s cogent argument destroys the teaching of the *pseudadelphoi*. The believer is not under the Mosaic law – or any part of it – for progressive sanctification.

Now consider Romans 5:20 and Romans 6:1 – 7:6. As I have said repeatedly, those who are serious about reaching the biblical position on the law should read such passages – aloud – in other translations of the Bible as well as their own favoured version, and do so, as far as possible, unfettered by the pre-supposition of a Confession.

At this stage in his letter to the Romans, Paul has proved that justification is not by the law. It is by grace, through faith in Christ alone (Rom. 3:20 – 5:21). But once a person is justified... what then? Where is the law now? What part does it play in the ongoing life of the believer? Obedience to the law cannot justify a sinner. But can obedience to the law progressively sanctify a child of God? Indeed, is progressive sanctification only possible under the law? Those are the questions which have to be faced.

We have seen the unbreakable connection between justification and progressive sanctification. There can be no debate about this. In what he goes on to say in his letter to the believers in Rome following on from Romans 5:20, the apostle works out the necessity and inevitability of practical godliness and fruit-bearing for those who are justified; that is, progressive sanctification. He has to do this after speaking so unguardedly, so freely, about salvation being by grace, and not by the law: ‘Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more’ (Rom. 5:20). What a breathtaking statement! A licence to sin? Not a bit of it!

So, although justification is not by the law, is the law the way of progressive sanctification? Certainly not! As we have seen, Paul has proved that a sinner is justified by faith in Christ, and in Christ alone, and all on the basis of grace and by grace, starting with his tremendous opening statement in Romans 1:16-17, he developed his proof regarding justification (Rom.

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1:16 – 5:21), with a later reference to it (Rom. 8:1). Christ is all.

Contrary to what many believe, justification is not merely a detached declaration, a cold, dry, legal pronouncement.⁷ It is not something, as it were, merely objective, outside the believer.

Saving faith unites the sinner to Christ. And whatever that union is, it is not dry or cold or detached! In Joseph Hart's words, 'true religion' – 'true spirituality' – is 'something... known and felt'.⁸ Christ died, the believer has died with him. Christ was raised, the believer is raised with him (Rom. 6:1-11). Christ ascended and sits in glory; the saint is seated with him (Eph. 1:20; 2:6). In Christ, the believer is free of the slavery of sin (Rom. 6:6-7,11). He must not be stupid, go back to his former way of life and allow sin to dominate him again (Rom. 6:11-13; Eph. 4:17-24; 1 Pet. 1:14-15; 4:1-4). Imagine a liberated slave fixing the manacles back on his wrist! Imagine a believer submitting to his old bondage to sin! Indeed, he will not, he cannot, 'for sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace' (Rom. 6:14). Wow! What an amazing argument, how counter-intuitive! How much at odds with the law-men! Surely, they would say – they still do say – take away the law and – bingo! – sin must follow as night follows day. Antinomianism next stop! But no! Not for Paul! Quite the opposite! 'Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace'! Do not miss the 'for'. It is not a makeweight, a bit of padding. Far from it. Short it may be in the original – *gar* – but it punches with massive weight in the apostle's argument: 'Sin shall not have dominion over you, *for* you are not under law but under grace'! A knock-out blow if ever there was one! It is because the believer is not under the law that he can be progressively sanctified, and it is his justification by the grace of God that has brought this about. This is what Paul asserted,

⁷ See my *Four*.

⁸ Joseph Hart's hymn: 'Let us ask the important question'.

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and this is what he argued out by way of two illustrations. He began with slavery:

Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey...? (Rom. 6:14-16).

And then marriage:

Do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband... she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man. Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another – to him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God. For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now⁹ we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by,¹⁰ so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter (Rom. 7:1-6).

Under the marriage law upon which Paul based his argument, a woman is bound to her husband, she is bound to obey him. If the husband dies, however, she is no longer married to him, she is no longer under his rule. Moreover, she is free to marry another man. Thus speaks this law of marriage.

The thrust of the illustration is clear: the death of a spouse ends a marriage, and the survivor is free to marry again; death ends the legal obligations of marriage; indeed, it ends the marriage state. It is over. It is no more. Likewise, the relationship between the sinner and the law ends when the

⁹ Note the 'but now'.

¹⁰ Note the recurring description of the law as that which brings bondage (as in Acts 15:10; Gal. 2:4-5; 3:22-23; 4:22-26,30-31; 5:1, for instance).

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sinner comes to faith in Christ, since by faith the believer is united to Christ in his death, and has died in and with him. And Christ, by his death, was no longer under law – his death freed him from it: ‘The law has dominion over a man as long as he lives’ (Rom. 7:1). The believer, therefore, having died with and in Christ, is no longer under the law, married to the law. He is married to Christ. Whereas the unbeliever under the law must submit to the law – as a wife to her husband – the law has no rule, governance or jurisdiction over the believer. He is dead to it.¹¹ He is at liberty, free from the law, married to Christ, and under his rule, under his law. ‘We have been delivered from the law’, said Paul (Rom. 7:6). ‘Delivered’? The apostle used a strong word – ‘discharged’, ‘set at liberty’, ‘set free’. Believers are totally discharged or set free from the law. It has no authority over them any longer, it rules them no more. Just as a man, when he dies, is discharged from all obligations to the law,¹² so it is with the believer. He has complete freedom from all obligations to the Mosaic law as a rule of life. The Mosaic law has no governance over the believer.¹³

As Paul concluded:

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free [has freed you] from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of [for] sin: he condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of

¹¹ Many confuse the illustration and say the law has died. It has not. The believer has.

¹² Once again, it is the merest quibble to point out that an executor has to discharge the debts of the deceased. Paul is not dealing with the law of probate, but with the ongoing life of the believer.

¹³ This does not mean the believer is lawless. He is not under the Mosaic law, but he is most definitely under Christ’s law. Again, as I have already noted, of course, the new covenant uses the old covenant to illustrate the gospel, but only when scripturally nuanced.

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the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).

* * *

The issue is beyond doubt: both justification and progressive sanctification are essential; no justification by law; no progressive sanctification by law.¹⁴ That was Paul's teaching in Romans. As it was in Galatians. And everywhere else! Going back to the law for either justification or progressive sanctification is a disaster; it signals a mingling of the covenants old and new; and that spells slavery. No wonder then that he was so vehement in his opposition to the false brothers and their law-peddling; that is why the apostle used such passionate – even violent – language when speaking of them. The person of Christ, the purity of the gospel, and, speaking of later developments, the maintenance of the *ekklēsia*, and the salvation of sinners, were all at stake. Paul had to confront the *pseudadelphoi* and defeat them.

And he did!

¹⁴ I remind you that by 'law', I am referring, as the Judaisers did, to the law of Moses, in whole or in part. Of course the believer is under the law of Christ.