

A Comparison of “Law” and “Grace” in Scripture

Introduction

One of the concepts that is often mentioned in Christian churches is the “Law vs. Grace” doctrine. In essence, that doctrine makes several assertions about the “characteristics” of Law and Grace in Scripture. As a result, before describing that doctrine, it is first necessary to *define* the terms “Law” and “Grace”.

The word which is translated as “Law” in Scripture is the Hebrew word **Torah**. In the strictest sense, the Torah refers to the first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Also, in the majority of cases, when Scripture uses the term “Law”, it is referring to the commandments listed in those five books. As a result, for the purpose of this document, “Law” and “Torah” are treated as “synonyms”.

Grace refers to God’s willingness to forgive people of their sins – even though people are **not** worthy of forgiveness. In other words, it refers to God’s *mercy*. To put it another way, our sins have caused us to **deserve permanent destruction** – but God’s Grace allows Him to *forgive* us of our sins, if we truly repent. God extends this Grace to us through the perfect obedience of Jesus.

As mentioned, many churches espouse a very specific doctrine – a doctrine that places Law and Grace in **opposition** to each other. In essence, this “Law vs. Grace” doctrine consists of two primary beliefs:

Belief 1: When Jesus was crucified, he “abolished” the Law. That is, Jesus “cancelled” the Law – so that the Law is no longer in effect. Basically, Jesus completely “**eliminated**” the Law, when he inaugurated the New Covenant.

Belief 2: In the Old Covenant, people needed to *obey the Law* to be saved. In the New Covenant, however, people are saved by Grace – rather than by obeying the Law.

This document will explore the two “Law vs. Grace” beliefs described above.

The “Duration” of the Law

As mentioned above, one of the traditional church beliefs is that the Law has been “abolished” – i.e., that the Law’s commandments are no longer in effect. As a result, let’s examine Scripture, to see what is listed there about the “duration” of the Law’s commandments. After all, if the Law actually *has* been abolished, then there should be at least **some** indication in the Torah that its commandments are not “permanent”.

So, consider the following passages from the Torah – because those passages explicitly state the “duration” of the commandments in question:

The Sabbath Day – **Exodus 31:16-17** ¹⁶Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. ¹⁷It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.”

Passover – Exodus 12:13-14: ¹³ The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴ “This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast.

The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) – Leviticus 23:15,21: ¹⁵ “You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering. ²¹ And you shall make a proclamation on the same day. You shall hold a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. It is a statute forever in all your dwelling places throughout your generations.

Yom Kippur – Leviticus 23:26,31: ²⁶ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²⁷ “Now on the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be for you a time of holy convocation, and you shall afflict yourselves and present a food offering to the LORD. ³¹ You shall not do any work. It is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwelling places.

The Feast of Booths– Leviticus 23:41-42: ⁴¹ You shall celebrate it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. ⁴² You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths

The Priesthood through Aaron – Exodus 29:8-9: ⁸ Then you shall bring his sons and put coats on them, ⁹ and you shall gird Aaron and his sons with sashes and bind caps on them. And the priesthood shall be theirs by a statute forever. Thus you shall ordain Aaron and his sons.

Levites are Responsible for Tabernacle Service – Numbers 18:23: ²³ But the Levites shall do the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations, and among the people of Israel they shall have no inheritance.

As shown above, Scripture states that the Torah’s commandments will be in effect **forever** – that is, for **all** generations. As a result, there is no indication in the Torah that its commands will **ever** be abolished!

The New Covenant

The traditional church belief states that the New Covenant has “abolished” the Law (i.e., the Torah). There is **no** indication in the Law, itself, that its commands will **ever** be abolished, however. So, does Scripture *actually* state that the New Covenant will “eliminate” the Law? Consider the passage below – because that passage contains the very first reference to the New Covenant – *and* that passage describes the “status” of the Law in the New Covenant:

Jeremiah 31:31-33 (ESV):

³¹ “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

From the above, we can see that the New Covenant does not “eliminate” the Law *at all*. On the contrary – in the New Covenant, the Law is even **more** “relevant” to people – because it is “written on our hearts”! Basically, when the New Covenant is completely established, people will have “new hearts” – so that we will want to follow God’s Law!

The Ministry of Jesus

The next item to address is: What happened to the Law during Jesus’ ministry? Basically, many churches teach that when Jesus came, he “abolished” the Law – so that the Law is *no longer in effect*. So, consider the passage below from Jesus – because in it, Jesus *explicitly* states what he came to do regarding the Law. (Note that in the passage below, the “Law” refers to the Torah, and the “Prophets” refers to the remainder of the Old Testament):

Matthew 5:17-19 (ESV):

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

As shown above, Jesus explicitly stated that he did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets! In other words, Jesus did not “eliminate” the Law at all. What Jesus did come to do is to “fulfill” the Law. So, that raises *another* question: What is the difference between “abolish” and “fulfill”?

The word “abolish” is very straightforward – it means to “eliminate”, or to “end”, something. However, the word “fulfill” is more nuanced. The Greek word which is translated as “fulfill” is *plerosai*. It turns out that that word has multiple meanings. In **some** passages, that word means to “complete”, or to “end”, something. However, in this passage, the word *plerosai* definitely does not mean to “end” something – because the word “abolish” **also** means to “end” something! In other words, if “fulfill” actually means to “end” in Matthew 5:17, then the second half of that verse would read like this:

I have not come to end the Law or the Prophets but to end them.

Of course, that translation does not make any sense. So, in **this** case, it is clear that *plerosai* does not mean to “end”.

It turns out that *plerosai* has an additional meaning as well. In many passages, the meaning of that word is: to “**fill to the full**”. The *general* sense of that meaning is to “magnify”, or “exalt” something – i.e., to make something more important.

Not only that, but in some cases, “fill to the full” has a very *specific* meaning – the meaning of: “to fill **people with** something”. Consider this passage:

Romans 15:13 (ESV):

¹³ May the God of hope fill (*plerosai*) you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

In the above passage, *plerosai* refers to God **filling people** with joy and peace. In other words, *plerosai* refers to placing something within people.

So, it appears that in Matthew 5:17, *plerosai* has the meaning of: “to fill people with something”. Take a look at the second half of that verse, with **that** meaning:

I have not come to **end** the Law or the Prophets but to **fill people with** them.

With that meaning, Jesus did **not** come to eliminate the Law at all! On the contrary – he came to place the Law within us – i.e., to “write it on our hearts”, so to speak.

Now, take *another* look at what the New Covenant does, regarding the Law (from Jeremiah 31:33):

I will put my law **within them**, and I will write it on their hearts.

In other words, the New Covenant **places the Law within people** – and that is **exactly** what Jesus said that he came to do! This makes sense, because Jesus “inaugurated” the New Covenant at the Last Supper!

So, the ministry of Jesus *precisely matches* the prophecy about the New Covenant! Consider this:

- Jeremiah 31:33 prophesies that in the New Covenant, the Law will be **within** people;
- Jesus “inaugurated” the New Covenant at the Last Supper;
- In Matthew 5:17, Jesus stated that he came to place the Law **within** people – *exactly* as prophesied about the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:33!

The Writings of Paul

Some Christian churches acknowledge the fact that Jesus, himself, did not “abolish” the Law in any way. However, *almost all* Christian churches claim that the apostles – especially Paul – stated that the Law was abolished. Here is one particular verse from Paul’s writings, which is quoted *quite* frequently in Christian churches on this subject:

Romans 6:14 (ESV):

¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

From that verse, many Christians assume that the Law – that is, the Torah – has been “abolished”. Of course, as shown above, the idea that the Torah has been abolished is the exact **opposite** of what Jesus stated. So, how can this apparent contradiction be resolved?

First of all, as shown above, Jesus stated that he came to “fulfill” the Law – that is, to “write it on our hearts”. Interestingly, Paul also refers to the concept of “fulfilling” the Law. Consider this passage:

Romans 13:9-10 (ESV):

⁹ For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

The Greek word which is translated as “fulfilling” in that passage is *pleroma*. That word has the same root as the word *plerosai* mentioned above; and it refers to filling people “with” something – in this case, the Torah. As a result, Paul certainly does not appear to be saying the Torah is abolished – instead, he is saying that it is “written on our hearts” – just as Jesus did!

In addition, in the following passages, Paul refers to a “circumcision of the heart”, and a “circumcision made without hands”:

Romans 2:28-29 (ESV):

²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Colossians 2:11 (ESV):

¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ

The “circumcision of the heart” mentioned in those passages are references to the Old Testament – including references to the Torah, itself:

Deuteronomy 10:16 (ESV):

¹⁶ Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

Deuteronomy 30:6 (ESV):

⁶ And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

From the above passages, this “circumcision of the heart” refers to people having the Torah “written on their hearts” – so that they will want to follow God’s Law. In other words, it is another indication that Paul is not saying that the Torah is abolished.

Next, consider Romans chapter 3. In that chapter, Paul states that we are “justified by faith”, rather than being “justified by works of the law”. So, does that mean that Paul is claiming that the Law is “abolished”? Paul himself answers that *very* question, at the very end of that chapter:

Romans 3:31 (ESV):

³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

So, in Romans 3, Paul certainly appears to be saying that **true** faith will cause the Torah to become “written on our hearts” – and as a result, that true faith will lead us to uphold the Torah. So, once again, Paul is not saying that the Torah is “abolished”.

There is another very important item to bring up about Paul as well. In the following passage, elders in the early Church make a very *specific* request of Paul, regarding observance of the Torah:

Acts 21:20-24 (ESV):

And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law,²¹ and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.²² What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.²³ Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow;²⁴ take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.

As shown above, the elders asked Paul to assist four men in completing a Nazirite vow – and the reason for this is so that Paul can demonstrate that he actually **observes** the Law. In other words, if Paul agrees to the elders’ request, then he will be *explicitly* demonstrating that he does **NOT** believe that the Law has been abolished.

So, how did Paul react to this request? If Paul really believed that the Law had been abolished – such that it was not in effect, and should not be observed – then certainly he should have told the elders that, and refused their request to assist the men with the Nazirite vow. However, let’s see what Paul’s actual reaction was:

Acts 21:26 (ESV):

²⁶Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

As shown, Paul agreed to the elders’ request – and observed the Nazirite vow. As a result, Paul **demonstrated** that the Law is still in effect!

Of course, there is still one big question remaining about the writings of Paul. As listed above, in Romans 6:14, Paul states the following:

Romans 6:14 (ESV):

¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

So, what did Paul mean by that statement? Most Christian churches believe that that statement means that the Law has been abolished – such that it should not be observed at all any longer. However, as shown above, Paul did not believe that the Law was abolished. So, what is the meaning of that verse?

What Paul appears to be saying in that verse is that we are not under “**condemnation**” of the Law. Basically, if a person breaks any of the commandments in God’s Law – i.e., if that person sins – then that

person is guilty, and deserves punishment. Not only that, but any sin **separates** us from God – and as a result, anyone who has unforgiven sin will not be able to have everlasting life with God.

Of course, every one of us has broken God’s Law during our lives – and therefore, all of us have sinned. As a result, the Law finds us “guilty”, so to speak. So, from a strict “justice” perspective, none of us is worthy to be granted everlasting life.

However, God’s Grace – through Jesus’ sacrifice – allows us to be forgiven of our sins, if we truly repent. So, even though we are not worthy of everlasting life by our own merits, Grace allows us to be forgiven, and obtain salvation. This, I believe, is the idea that Paul is trying to convey – that we are not under “condemnation” of the Law (even though we broke it), because God’s Grace allows us to be forgiven. Paul makes this same type of statement in the following passage:

Galatians 4:4-5 (ESV):

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

In the above passage, Paul mentions that Jesus was sent to “redeem those under the Law”. This is the same idea as Romans 6:14 – that God’s Grace, through Jesus, allows us to be forgiven when we break the Law – i.e., when we sin. In other words, Jesus’ sacrifice allows us to be redeemed – so that we will not be “under condemnation of the Law” any longer.

In summary, when Paul stated that we are “not under the Law”, he certainly did **not** mean that the Law was abolished, or that we should stop following the commandments in the Law. On the contrary – Paul explicitly **observed** the Law, to demonstrate that the Law is not abolished. What Paul meant by “not under the Law” is that we will not be “automatically condemned to eternal death” after we commit a sin – because God’s Grace allows us to be forgiven of our sins.

Information about “Salvation”

Another traditional church belief deals with **salvation**. As mentioned above, the traditional church belief is that in the Old Covenant, people needed to obey the Law to be saved; but in the New Covenant, people are saved by Grace – rather than by obeying the Law.

In order to discuss that belief, it is first necessary to define “salvation”, itself. The general definition of salvation means being “**saved from something**”. Of course, that raises another question – what, exactly, are people being saved from?

It turns out that there are three different “types” of salvation listed in Scripture – and in each of those types, people are being saved from a different item. Here is a brief summary of the three salvation types:

Salvation Type 1: Salvation from Premature Death – This type of salvation is concerned with “premature” death – i.e., a person dying *prior to* the “normal” end of his life. In other words, this type of salvation involves being saved from dying by disease, by violence, by accidents, etc. So, if a person is saved from premature death, then he will live out his normal lifespan (usually 70 to 80 years), during this current age.

Salvation Type 2: Salvation from Foreign Countries – This type of salvation is concerned with foreign countries attacking Israel. Basically, this type of salvation determines whether the armies of Israel will be

victorious over the armies of enemy countries or not. So, if Israel is saved from foreign countries, then Israel will defeat the foreign countries' armies.

Salvation Type 3: Salvation from Everlasting Death – This type of salvation is concerned with “**everlasting**” death – i.e., a person being condemned to *permanent destruction*. As mentioned, our sins have caused us to *deserve* everlasting death. However, God's Grace allows us to be forgiven of our sins. That, in turn, allows us to be saved from everlasting death. So, if a person is saved from everlasting death, then he will be granted everlasting **life**, in the next age. In other words, a person who receives this type of salvation will *live forever*, with God and Jesus, in the Kingdom of God!

Generally speaking, when a Christian doctrine mentions “salvation”, it almost always refers to salvation type “3” – i.e., salvation from everlasting death. In other words, Christian doctrines rarely (if ever) have *anything to do* with salvation types “1” and “2”.

Salvation and the Covenants

Now that the three “types” of salvation have been discussed, the next item to cover is: the “relationship” between salvation and the Old and New Covenants.

The Old Covenant refers to the covenant that God made with Moses (and the Israelites) at Mt. Sinai. In that covenant, God stated that He wanted the Israelites to follow the commandments listed in the Torah. In addition, God explicitly mentioned the *benefits* that the Israelites would receive if they obeyed the Torah – as well as the *curse*s that would befall them if they did not obey the Torah.

In particular, within the Old Covenant, God *explicitly stated* that if the Israelites obeyed His Law, then they would be **saved** from premature death, and that they would be **saved** from foreign countries. That is, God stated that if the Israelites obeyed the Law, then they would receive salvation types “1” and “2”.

So, it is actually **true** that in the Old Covenant, it was necessary to obey the Law – in order to be saved from premature death, and from foreign countries.

However, the Old Covenant does not mention **anything** about being saved from everlasting death! In other words, the Old Covenant does **not** have *anything to do* with salvation type “3” – being granted everlasting life.

The reason why this is important is because some churches claim that in the Old Covenant, it was necessary to perfectly obey the Law, in order to be granted everlasting life. That belief is *not supported by Scripture* – because the Old Covenant does not make any mention of everlasting life at all!

The next item to address is: what about the New Covenant? In particular, does the New Covenant state that it is no longer necessary to obey the Law, to be saved from everlasting death?

First of all, as shown in the previous sections above, the Law is **still in effect** in the New Covenant. That is, God still wants people to follow the Law in the New Covenant – and in fact, in the New Covenant, God will “write the Law on our **hearts**”! So, there is absolutely no indication that the Law has been “abolished” in the New Covenant.

The other item to note is that the New Covenant does **not** mention *anything* about being saved from everlasting death – just like the Old Covenant does not mention that type of salvation. In other words, both the Old Covenant, and the New Covenant, do not have *anything to do* with everlasting life.

What Scripture *does* state is that **everyone** has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God – and therefore, the *only* way that **anyone** can be saved from everlasting death is by God’s Grace. That is, being saved from everlasting death **never** had *anything to do* with obeying the Law – instead, that type of salvation was always a function of Grace. This is true both in the Old Covenant and in the New Covenant.

So, here is a summary of the “relationship” between salvation and the covenants:

- In the Old Covenant, it **was** necessary to obey the Law, in order to be saved from premature death, and to be saved from foreign countries.
- However, both the Old Covenant and the New Covenant do **not** have *anything to do* with being saved from everlasting death.
- Salvation from everlasting death has always been a function of God’s Grace – **not** with the Law. That was true both in the Old Covenant, and in the New Covenant.

Conclusion

The purpose of this document is to explore the traditional Christian “Law vs. Grace” doctrine. From the information above, that doctrine does not appear to be supported by Scripture, for two main reasons:

- First, Scripture shows us that the Law is still in effect – even in the New Covenant. In other words, the New Covenant has **not** “abolished” the Law.
- Second, Scripture demonstrates that salvation from everlasting death was **always** a function of God’s Grace, not of perfectly obeying the Law – in the Old Covenant **and** in the New Covenant.

There is one final item to bring up. As mentioned, the Hebrew word **Torah** is usually translated as “Law”. The word “Law” has the connotation of a formal “list of regulations” which must be followed, or else you will be punished. However, it appears that a more *accurate* translation of Torah is “instruction”. In other words, the Torah is God’s “instructions for holy living”. To put it another way, the Torah contains God’s guidance, on how we can **conduct ourselves** as His people.

The translation of Torah as “instruction” makes it much more obvious that the Torah has not been “abolished”. After all, it does not make any sense for God to want us to **stop** living holy lives, right?

I hope that this article was a blessing to you!