

On the Law and the Gospel

by J.C. Philpot

The law is not the believer's rule of life, but rather the gospel is the guiding rule for believers, bringing life and freedom through the internal rule of the Spirit of God and the precepts of the gospel.

Scripture: John 8:32, Romans 7:4, Romans 8:2, Romans 13:10, Hebrews 13:21

Topics: "Law And Gospel", "Christian Obedience"

Description

J.C. Philpot addresses the believer's rule of life, explaining why the law is not the believer's rule but rather the gospel, which is written on the heart by the Spirit and in the Word of truth. He emphasizes that the law, being a covenant of works, cannot be the believer's guide as it lacks mercy, grace, and the communication of the Spirit. Philpot argues that the believer's rule of life is the gospel, both internally written by the Spirit and externally revealed in the Word, providing a complete code of Christian obedience and holy conduct.

Transcript

(A letter by J. C. Philpot)

My dear Sir,

In one of your letters you express the wish that I should give my views upon this point- "Why, in my judgment, the law is not the believer's rule of life." In doing so I shall take the occasion to offer my thoughts on these three distinct points-

1. Why the law is not the believer's rule of life.
2. What is the rule.
3. Disprove the objection cast upon us that our views lead to doctrinal or practical antinomianism.

By a believer, I understand one who by faith in Christ is delivered from the curse and bondage of the law, and who knows something experimentally of the life, light, liberty and love of the glorious gospel of the grace of God. By the law I understand chiefly, though not exclusively, the law of Moses. And by the rule of life I understand an outward and inward guide, by following which a believer directs his walk and conversion before God, the Church and the world.

It is very necessary to bear strictly in mind that we are speaking wholly and solely a believer. What has the law to do with a believer in Christ Jesus? Is he required by the revealed will of God to take the law as a guiding rule in his life? I answer, No; and for several reasons.

1. Why the law is not the believer's rule of life.

God does not leave us at liberty to take at will one part of the law and leave the other. It must be taken as a whole or left as a whole, for God has so revealed it. I cannot find in any part of God's Word any mitigation of its terms, or any halving of it, so that, according to the views of many divines who have written on the subject, we may be dead to it as a covenant, yet alive to it as a rule. The essential and distinguishing characteristic of the law is that it is a covenant of works, requiring full and perfect obedience, attaching a tremendous curse to the least infringement of its commands. If then I, as a believer, take the law as my rule of life, I take it with its curse; I put myself under its yoke, for in receiving it as my guide, (and if I don't do this it is not my rule,) I take it with all its conditions and subject to all its penalties....The indispensable connection between a covenant and its rules is clearly shown in Ga 5:1-6 where the apostle testifies to "every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to the whole law". It is idle to talk of taking the law for a rule of life, and not for a covenant; for the two things are essentially inseparable; and as he who keeps the whole law and yet offends in one point, is guilty of all Jas 2:10 so he who takes but one precept of the law for his rule, (as the Galatians took that of circumcision,) by taking that one, virtually adopts the whole, and by adopting the whole puts himself under the curse which attaches to their infringement.

People speak very fluently about the law being a rule of life who think little of the resulting consequences; for among them is this, that its written precepts and not its mere spirit, must be the rule. Now, these precepts belong to it only as a covenant, for they were never disjoined by the Authority who gave them, and what God has joined together let no man put asunder. To show this connection between the precepts and the covenant is the chief drift of the Epistle to the Galatians, who were looking to the law and not the gospel, and having begun in the Spirit, were attempting to be made perfect by the flesh. Read with enlightened eyes, this blessed Epistle would at once decide in favor of "the gospel" as our guiding rule of Christian conduct and conversation. Observe how Paul chides those who would so act--he calls them "foolish Galatians", and asks who has bewitched those who they should not obey the truth (that is, the gospel), "before whose eyes Jesus Christ has been evidently set forth, crucified among them." He appeals to their own experience and asks them--"have you received the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" He draws a line of distinction here between those works which are done in obedience to the law as a guiding rule, and that power of God felt in the heart which attends a preached gospel when heard in faith, and asks them under which of the two they had received the teaching and testimony of the blessed Spirit.

But observe, further, how he bids them "walk in the Spirit" Ga 5:16 Now to "walk" is to live and act, and the rule which he here gives for this living and acting is not the law but the Spirit, and he tells them of the blessedness of this divine leading and guiding--"If you be led by the Spirit, you are not under the law"--that is, neither as a covenant nor as a rule--that they were free from its curse as a condemning covenant, and from its commands as a galling yoke which neither they nor their fathers could bear Ac 15:10 But to show them that deliverance from the law did not set them free from a higher and more perfect rule of obedience, he bids them "fulfill the law of Christ", which is love, a fruit of the Spirit and not produced by the law which works wrath and genders to bondage Ro 4:15 Ga 4:24

If we are willing to abide by the inspired Word of Truth we need to go no further than this very Epistle to decide the whole question. For in it we have laid down the rule according to which believers should walk, which is a "new creature" (or a new creation)--"For in Christ neither circumcision avails anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be upon them, and on the Israel of God" Ga 6:15-16 Is the law or the Spirit's work upon the heart held out here as the rule of a believers walk?

The law is strictly a covenant of works; it knows nothing of mercy, reveals nothing of grace, and does not communicate the blessed Spirit. Why, then, if I am a believer in Christ and have received his grace and truth into my heart, am I to adopt for the rule of life that which does not testify of Jesus either in the Word or in my conscience? If I am to walk as a believer, it must be by a life of faith in the Son of God Ga 2:20 Is the law my rule here? If it is, where are those rules to be found? "The law is not of faith". How, then, can it lay down rules for the life of faith? If I wish to walk as becomes a believer with the Church, what help will the law give me there? To walk as such must be by the law of love as revealed in Christ and made known in my heart by the power of God. If I am to walk in the ordinances of God's house, are these to be found revealed in the law?

We give the law its due honor. It had a glory, as the Apostle argues 2Co 3 as the ministration of death and condemnation, but this glory is done away, and why are we to look to it now as our guiding rule? The ministration of the Spirit, of life, and of righteousness "does much more exceed in glory", and why are we to be condemned if we prefer the Spirit to the letter, life to death, and righteousness to condemnation?

A rule must influence as well as guide, or else it be a dead rule. If you chose to be guided by the killing letter which can only minister condemnation and death, and we chose for our rule that which ministers the Spirit, righteousness, and life, which has the better rule? It is much to be feared that those who thus walk and talk have still the veil over their heart, and know nothing of what the Apostle means when he says--"Now the Lord is that Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty. But we all with open face beholding, as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as the Spirit of the Lord" 2Co 3:17-18

But not only have we these deductions to influence the mind in rejecting the law as a rule for a believers walk, but we have the express testimony of God as a warrant for so doing. We read, for instance, that "I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God" Ro 7:4 As a believer in Christ, the law is dead to me, and I am to it. The Apostle has clearly and beautifully opened up this subject. He assumes that a believer in Christ is like a woman is remarried after the death of her first husband; and he declares that "she is bound by the law of her husband as long as he lives, but if the husband be dead she is loosed from the law of her husband" Ro 7:2 Of course the first husband is the law, and the second husband is Christ. Now adopting the figure of Paul's, may we not justly ask--Which is to be the rule of the wife's conduct when remarried, the regulations of the first or the second husband?

2. What, then, is the believer's rule of life?

Is he without rule? Is he a lawless wretch because he abandons the law of Moses for his rule has no guide to direct his steps? God forbid! for I subscribe heart and soul to the words of the Apostle--"Being not without law to God, but under law to Christ" 1Co 9:21 (footnote--not under THE law, as our version; there being no article expressed or implied in the original). The believer then has a guiding rule which we may briefly call--"the gospel".

This rule we may divide into 2 branches. The gospel as written by the divine finger upon the heart, and the gospel as written by the blessed Spirit in the Word of truth. These do not form two distinct rules, but the one is the counterpart of the other; and they are mutually helpful to and corroborative of each other. One of the promises of the New Covenant Jer 31:21-34 Heb 8:8-12 (compared), was--"I will write My law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts." This writing of the law of God in their heart, I need not tell you, is that which distinguishes it from the law of Moses which was written on tables of stone--and becomes an internal rule whereas the law of Moses was but an external rule.

This internal rule seems to be pointed out in Ro 8:2 where we find these words--"For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death." By "the law of the Spirit of life", I understand that guiding rule (for a rule in Scripture is frequently called a law; the word law in Hebrew signifying literally "instruction") which the Spirit of God, as communicating life, is in a believers heart. It is, therefore, the liberating, sanctifying, guiding influence of the Spirit of God, in his soul which, as a law or a rule, delivers him from "the law of sin and death"; by which I understand not so much the law of Moses, as the power and prevalency of his corrupt nature. If this then be a correct exposition of the text, we have a guiding internal rule distinct from the law of Moses, and a living rule in the heart--which the law of Moses never was nor could be; for it did not communicate the Spirit Ga 3:2-5

But this internal rule as being "the law of the Spirit of life", has power to lead all the children of God; for in the same chapter Ro 8:14 the Apostle declares that "as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." This leading which is peculiar to the children of God and is an evidence of their sonship, delivers them from the law; for if we are led by Spirit we are not under the law Ga 5:8 either as a covenant or as a rule, for we have a better covenant and a better rule Heb 8:6 What is the main use of a rule but to lead? But who can lead like a living Guide? How can a dead law lead a living soul? The very proof that we are the children of God is that we are led by the Spirit; and this inward leading becomes our guiding rule.

And is it not a disparaging of the guidance of the blessed Spirit to set up in opposition to His guiding rule, the dead law of Moses, and to call those Antinomians who prefer a living guide to a dead letter? This living guide is that holy, and blessed Spirit who "guides into all truth" John 16:13

Here is the main blessedness of the work and grace upon the heart--that the leading and guiding of the blessed Spirit form a living rule every step of the way; for He not only quickens the soul into spiritual life, but maintains the life which He gave, and performs (or finishes--margin) it until the day of Jesus Christ Php 1:6. This life is eternal, as the blessed Lord at the well of Samaria declared, that the water that he should give the believer should be in a well of water springing up into everlasting life John 4:14. It is then this springing well in a believer's soul which is the guiding rule, for, as producing and maintaining the fear of God, it is "a fountain of life to depart from the snares of death" Pr 14:27.

But lest this 'guiding internal rule' be abused, which it might be by 'enthusiasm', and that they might not be left to substitute delusive fancies for the teaching of the Holy Spirit, the God of all grace has given to His people an 'external rule' in precepts of the gospel as declared by the mouth of the Lord and His apostles, but more particularly as gathered up in the epistles as a standing code of instruction for the living family of God. Nor do these at all clash with the rule of which I have just spoken, but on the contrary harmonize entirely and thoroughly with it; for, in fact, it is one and the same rule; the only difference between them being that the blessed Spirit had revealed the one in the WRITTEN Word, and by the application of that Word to the soul makes the other to be a LIVING rule of heart.

Now there is not a single part or particle of our walk and conduct before God or man which is not revealed and inculcated in the precepts of the gospel; for, though we have not minute directions, we have what far excels all such unnecessary minutiae--most blessed PRINCIPLES enforced by every gracious and holy motive, and forming, when rightly seen and believed, a most perfect code of inward and outward conformity to the revealed will of God, and of all holy walk and conduct in our families in the church and in the world.

I would say that a believer has a rule to walk by which is sufficient to guide him in every step of the way; for if he has the eternal quickenings, teachings and leadings of the Spirit to make his conscience tender in the fear of God, and has a law of love written upon the heart by the finger of God; and besides this has the precepts of the gospel as a full and complete code of Christian obedience, what more can he want to make him perfect in every good word and work? Heb 13:21 Can the law do any of these things for him? Can it give him life, in the first instance, when it is a killing letter? Can it maintain life, if it is not in its power to bestow it?

3. Disprove the objection cast upon us that our views lead to doctrinal or practical antinomianism.

But it may be asked--Do you then set aside the two great commandments of the law--"You shall love the Lord your God" etc.. and "your neighbor as yourself?" No, on the contrary, the gospel as an external and internal rule fulfills them both, for "love is the fulfilling of the law." Ro 13:10 So this blessed rule of the gospel not only does not set aside the law as regards its fulfillment, but so to speak absorbs into itself and glorifies and harmonizes its two great commandments, by yielding to them in obedience of heart, (which the law could not give); for the believers serves in the newness of the Spirit, not in the oldness of the letter Ro 7:6 as Christ's freeman John 8:32 and not as Moses's bondsman. This is willing obedience not a legal task. This will explain the meaning of the Apostle--"For I delight in the law of God after the inward man"--for the new man of grace, under the powerful influence of the Holy Spirit, delights in the law of God, not only for its holiness, but as inculcating that to do which fills the renewed heart and the inward delight--love to God and His people.....

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