

# *The Pilgrim's Progress down the King's Highway*

by Dr. David G. Barker, 2015

## Introduction Question #3



Before getting into our study of the Moral Law, we have been examining three common questions often considered regarding the relationship of the Christian to the Moral Law. The first was: "Aren't we free from the law now that we are under grace?" The second was: "Isn't the Moral Law just irrelevant to modern-day life?" Now, we address the third question: "Doesn't spiritual conversion inspire and deliver us to a holy life that is far superior to mere obedience to law?"

To answer that, we look to Paul's words in Rom. 7:7-25.

*For I do not understand my own actions.*

*For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (Rom. 7:15, ESV)*

These verses, written by the Apostle Paul, have been the subject of a great debate among Christians. Here is the question: "Is Paul speaking of the experience of struggling with sin before he was a believer or after his conversion to Christianity?"

## **The Great Debate**

The one side insists that this can only be a pre-conversion experience. "The reason for this is clear" they say. 'Paul speaks of struggling with sin. He wants to be free from it but cannot in his own strength. He needs Christ to lift this burden from him. The Christian, on the other hand, is free from sin. He has the power of the Holy Spirit. He is joyful and liberated. He's not struggling any longer.'

The other side insists that Paul is describing not the life of the unbeliever but the true, Christian experience in this life. 'The unbelieving man is enslaved to sin and death and does not struggle against that sin but craves and enjoys it. That is because he is not only enslaved outwardly, he is enslaved inwardly. His sinful mind and heart affect his reasoning, his will and his emotions. The Christian, on the other hand, is the one who truly grapples with his temptation and sin now because he sees these things as his mortal enemy - an enemy he must battle with every day, and for which God has given him the armor of Ephesians 6. The Christian is the one who rejoices in knowing the Moral Law for it guides his steps; but it also helps him realize that Christ has paid for all his sins and he now lives not under the judgment of the law but in the forgiveness of God.'

So which one is correct? The one says he is tired of fighting with sin and wants Christ to release him from it, and when he becomes a Christian he is led by the power of the Holy Spirit and needs nothing else. The other says that it is only with the Holy Spirit giving him a love for God and hatred of himself by which he even desires to fight the battle against sin at all! So, which view should we take? Is Romans 7 speaking of the struggle of the unbeliever or the believer?

## Is the Gospel Merely an Appeal to Reason?

In the Second Great Awakening during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the gospel call was made by appealing to one's reason. 'Look at how evil your sins are and how they have ruined your life and the lives of those you love. Don't you want to be done with them? Come to Jesus and he will heal you!' Romans 7 was employed by these preachers to depict this desire. 'See how Paul remembers that very struggle himself before he was a Christian? He knows how you want to be done with your sin and yet you cannot. You need the help of Christ!' Often, very public (and often staged) depictions of physical healings were brought into parallel with being spiritually liberated from temptation and sin and habit, and the successful deliverance from them. This demonstrated, the audience was told, the transformation of the gospel in one's life. To have "victory over sin" was the true promise of the Christian life.



As a result, the person being persuaded by such a call - and who had surrendered his life to Christ - was often filled with an immediate and euphoric joy as well as a temporary will, strength and resolve against his old battles. He would sense the strength of the Holy Spirit and be told that living by that Spirit had freed him from the fear of merely trying to 'obey certain laws and earn God's righteousness by them as the Pharisees did'. According to this new transformation, the new believer had no use for the Moral Law. That was a mere written code that judged you. Now, he was not only free in Christ but led by the Spirit of God.

The problem was that the old temptations and sins would not stay away. They would regularly creep back into that man's life and become a problem once again. But how could that happen? 'If Christ has healed me, if the Holy Spirit has changed me, what does this return of the old struggle mean?' Such failings would be diagnosed in many ways. Giving in to sin was something you did 'in the flesh' or 'backsliding' or when you were 'not living for the Lord'. The solution was often simply to 'rededicate your life to Christ', to 'get back into church' or the like, which was done in an effort to regain that former resolve and spiritual strength. The Christian life became a perpetual 'stoking up' of such emotional and spiritual strength, or else the Christian would find himself hiding his true and continuing struggles with sin behind a mask of hypocrisy.

## What Use is the Law to the Christian?

While it cannot be denied that some people were truly brought to the Lord in a saving way through that kind of gospel presentation, we would hold that to appeal to the unbeliever's reason only amounts to a gospel of self-help, followed by a need to be loyal to the sales-pitch to which you agreed. According to such an understanding, the Moral Law of God remains an enemy, something that cannot save but only still condemns. Coming to Christ 'should mean freedom from that law' and that means the Christian has no obligation to keep it.

But this is squarely answered in the Scriptures with the gospel of grace. The believer is saved in spite of his failures, even his continuing ones. The duty to follow the Moral Law of God is not to impress God or anyone else, for that matter. It is the path of life for those who believe. It is the way, in specific, practical direction, how to be Christ-like. And it is there to correct, rebuke and encourage the believer all along the way.

There are actually three proper uses for the Moral Law of God.

1. *The first is, indeed, to declare aloud the bad news.* No sinner can be saved (or save himself, for that matter) by obeying the Moral Law. He already has failed before God, even before he tries to be obedient, and, once he begins to try, he cannot obey the Moral Law in thought, word and deed every minute of every day for the rest of his life. The first use of the Moral Law, then, is to clearly teach us of this hopeless dilemma.

*[A]ll have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23)*

*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God (Rom. 3:10b-11, ESV).*

The Moral Law condemns us as the sinners we are.

2. *However, there is a second use of the Moral Law, and that is entirely good news.* There is one man who did live perfectly and sinlessly before God's law. That man is Jesus Christ. But how do we know that? The Scriptures tell us that.

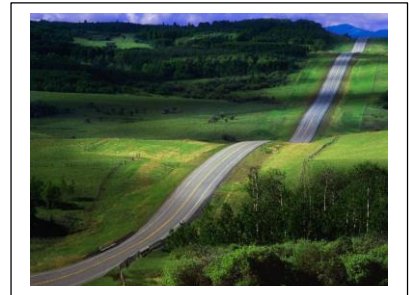
*[W]hen the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. (Gal. 4:4-5, ESV)*

How is sin actually to be defined? Sin is defined as breaking the Moral Law of God. So when the Scriptures teach that Jesus was without sin, it means that he obeyed the Moral Law perfectly during the entire years of his mortal life. We know Jesus is God and is the Savior of his people because he obeyed the Moral Law. The Moral Law points us to Christ.

3. *The third use of the law provides us with the right path for living our Christian lives.* How does a new believer learn how to live a Christian life? How is he to be disciplined? How does he learn to be Christ-like in all his ways? The answer is more than just to be led by God's Spirit. Why? Because God's Holy Spirit leads the Christian to the Scriptures (cf. Jn. 16:13), not away from them. And the Scriptures teach that the way of Christ is the Moral Law. The Moral Law teaches the Christian how to live.

### **The Struggling Christian Life**

In another of Paul's expressions, we see the same thing. In 1 Timothy 1:15, he says: *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.* Is he talking of himself in the past or in the present? before or after conversion? What Paul says of himself is not in his reflecting back upon his previous, Pharisaical life, but of his life even at the end of a long pilgrimage of Christian service which is about to come to an end by martyrdom. If anyone had the right to declare he was done with sin, it was Paul. But his own understanding of himself is not of perfection or of earned righteousness or of being above and beyond the law of God which would point to him his continuing sinfulness, rather, the more he studies the law of God, the more he realizes his need for salvation, and the more appreciative he is of it.



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