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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 35

The Law Established Through Faith: Discourse One

"Do we then make void the law through faith God forbid: Yea, we establish the law." Romans 3:31.

1. St. Paul, having the beginning of this Epistle laid down his general proposition, namely, that "the gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth;" -- the powerful means, whereby God makes every believer a partaker of present and eternal salvation; -- goes on to show, that there is no other way under heaven whereby men can be saved. He speaks particularly of salvation from the guilt of sin, which he commonly terms justification. And that all men stood in need of this, that none could plead their own innocence, he proves at large by various arguments, addressed to the Jews as well as the Heathens. Hence he infers, (in the 19th verse of this chapter,) "that every mouth," whether of Jew or Heathen, must be "stopped" from excusing or justifying himself, "and all the world become guilty before God." "Therefore," saith he, by his own obedience, "by the words of the law, shall no flesh be justified in his sight." "But now the righteousness of God without the law," -- without our previous obedience thereto, -- "is manifested;" "even the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ, unto all and upon all that believe:" "For there is no difference," -- as to their need of justification, or the manner wherein they attain it; -- "for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; -- "the glorious image of God wherein they were created: And all (who attain) "are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood; that he might be just, and yet the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus; -- "that without any impeachment to his justice, he might show him mercy for the sake of that propitiation. "Therefore we conclude," (which was the grand position he had undertaken to establish,) "that a man is justified by faith, without the works of the law." (Verses 20-28.)

2. It was easy to foresee an objection which might be made, and which has in fact been made in all ages; namely, that to say we are justified without the works of the law, is to abolish the law. The Apostle, without entering into a formal dispute, simply denies the charge. "Do we then," says he, "make void the law through faith God forbid! Yea, we establish the law."

3. The strange imagination of some, that St. Paul, when he says, "A man is justified without the works of the law," means only ceremonial law, is abundantly confuted by these very words. For did St. Paul establish the ceremonial law It is evident he did not. He did make void that law through faith, and openly avowed his doing so. It was the moral law only, of which he might truly say, We do not make void, but establish this through faith.

4. But all men are not herein of his mind. Many there are who will not agree to this. Many in all ages of the Church, even among those who bore the name of Christians, have contended, that "the faith once delivered to the saints" was designed to make void the whole law. They would no more spare the moral than the ceremonial law, but were for "hewing," as it were, "both in pieces before the Lord; "vehemently maintaining, "If you establish any law, Christ shall profit you nothing; Christ is become of no effect to you; ye are fallen from grace."

5. But is the zeal of these men according to knowledge Have they observed the connexion between the law and faith and that, considering the close connexion between them, to destroy one is indeed to destroy both -- that, to abolish the moral law, is, in truth, to abolish faith and the law together as leaving no proper means, either of bringing us to faith, or of stirring up that gift of God in our soul.

6. It therefore behoves all who desire either to come to Christ, or to walk in him whom they have received, to take heed how they "make void the law through faith;" to secure us effectually against which, let us inquire, First, Which are the most usual ways of making "void the law through faith" And, Secondly, how we may follow the Apostle, and by faith "establish the law."

1. Let us, First, inquire, Which are the most usual ways of making void the law through faith Now the way for a Preacher to make it all void at a stroke, is, not to preach it at all. This is just the same thing as to blot it out of the oracles of God. More especially, when it is done with design; when it is made a rule, not to preach the law; and the very phrase, "a Preacher of the law," is used as a term of reproach, as though it meant little less than an enemy of the gospel.

2. All this proceeds from the deepest ignorance of the nature, properties, and use of the law; and proves, that those who act thus, either know not Christ, -- are utter strangers to living faith, -- or, at least, that they are but babes in Christ, and, as such, "unskilled in the word of righteousness."

3. Their grand plea is this: That preaching the gospel, that is, according to their judgment, the speaking of nothing but the sufferings and merits of Christ, answers all the ends of the law. But this we utterly deny. It does not answer the very first end of the law, namely, the convincing men of sin; The awakening those who are still asleep on the brink of hell. There may have been here and there an exempt case. One in a thousand may have been awakened by the gospel: But this is no general rule: The ordinary method of God is, to convict sinners by the law, and that only. The gospel is not the means which God hath ordained, or which our Lord himself used, for this end. We have no authority in Scripture for applying it thus, nor any ground to think it will prove effectual. Nor have we any more ground to expect this, from the nature of the thing. "They that be whole," as our Lord himself observes, "need not a physician, but they that are sick." It is absurd, therefore, to offer a physician to them that are whole, or that at least imagine themselves so to be. You are first to convince them that they are sick; otherwise they will not thank you for your labour. It is equally absurd to offer Christ to them whose heart is whole, having never yet been broken. It is, in the proper sense, "casting pearls before swine." Doubtless "they will trample them under foot;" and it is no more than you have reason to expect, if they also "turn again and rend you."

4. "But although there is no command in Scripture, to offer Christ to the careless sinner, yet are there not scriptural precedents for it" I think not: I know not any. I believe you cannot produce one, either from the four Evangelists, or the Acts of the Apostles. Neither can you prove this to have been the practice of any of the Apostles, from any passage in all their writings.

5. "Nay, does not the Apostle Paul say, in his former Epistle to the Corinthians, 'We preach Christ crucified' (1:23,) and in his latter, 'We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord' (4:5.)"

We consent to rest the cause on this issue; to tread in his steps, to follow his example. Only preach you just as Paul preached, and the dispute is at an end.

For although we are certain he preached Christ in as perfect a manner as the very chief of the Apostle, yet who preached the law more than St. Paul Therefore he did not think the gospel answered the same end.

6. The very first sermon of St. Paul's which is recorded, concludes in these words: "By him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses. Beware

therefore, lest that come upon you which is spoken of in the Prophets; Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: For I work a work in your days, a work which you will in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you." (Acts 13:39, 40.) Now it is manifest, all this is preaching the law, in the sense wherein you understand the term; even although great part of, if not all, his hearers, were either Jews or religious proselytes, (verse 43.) and, therefore, probably many of them, in some degree at least, convicted of sin already. He first reminds them, that they could not be justified by the law of Moses, but only by faith in Christ; and then severely threatens them with the judgments of God, which is in the strongest sense, preaching the law.

7. In his next discourse, that to the Heathens at Lystra, (14:15ff.) we do not find so much as the name of Christ: The whole purport of it is, that they should "turn from those vain idols, unto the living God." Now confess the truth. Do not you think, if you had been there, you could have preached much better than he I should not wonder if you thought too, that his preaching so ill occasioned his being so ill treated; and that his being stoned was a just judgment upon him for not preaching Christ!

8. To the gaoler indeed, when "he sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved" he immediately said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ;" (Acts 16:29, 30;) and in the case of one so deeply convicted of sin, who would not have said the same. But to the men of Athens you find him speaking in a quite different manner; reproving their superstition, ignorance, and idolatry; and strongly moving them to repent, from the consideration of a future judgment, and of the resurrection from the dead. (17:24-31.) Likewise when Felix sent for Paul, on purpose that he might "hear him concerning the faith in Christ;" instead of preaching Christ in your sense, (which would probably have caused the Governor either to mock or to contradict and blaspheme,) "he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come," till Felix (hardened as he was) "trembled." (24:24, 25.) Go thou, and tread in his steps. Preach Christ to the careless sinner, by reasoning "of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come!"

9. If you say, "But he preached Christ in a different manner in his Epistles:" I answer, (1.) He did not there preach at all; not in that sense wherein we speak: For preaching, in our present question, means speaking before a congregation. But, waving this, I answer, (2.) His Epistles are directed, not to unbelievers, such as those we are now speaking of, but "to the saints of God," in Rome, Corinth, Philippi, and other places. Now, unquestionably, he would speak more of Christ to these than to those who were without God in the world. And yet, (3.) Every one of these is full of the law, even the Epistles to the Romans and the Galatians; in both of which he does what you term "preaching the law," and that to believers, as well as unbelievers.

10. From hence it is plain, you know not what it is to preach Christ, in the sense of the Apostle. For doubtless St. Paul judged himself to be preaching Christ, both to Felix, and at Antioch, Lystra, and Athens: From whose example every thinking man must infer, that not only the declaring the love of Christ to sinners, but also the declaring that he will come from heaven in flaming fire, is, in the Apostle's sense, preaching Christ; yea, in the full scriptural meaning of the word. To preach Christ, is to preach what he hath revealed, either in the Old or New Testament; so that you are really preaching Christ, when you are saying, "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the people that forget God," as when you are saying, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!"

11. Consider this well; -- that to preach Christ, is to preach all things that Christ hath spoken; all his promises; all his threatenings and commands; all that is written in his book; and then you will know how to preach Christ, without making void the law.

12. "But does not the greatest blessing attend those discourses wherein we peculiarly preach the merits and suffering of Christ"

Probably when we preach to a congregation of mourners, or of believers, these will be attended with the greatest blessing; because such discourses are peculiarly suited to their state. At least, these will usually convey the most comfort. But this is not always the greatest blessing. I may sometimes receive a far greater by a discourse that cuts me to the heart, and humbles me to the dust. Neither should I receive that comfort, if I were to preach or to hear no discourses but on the sufferings of Christ. These, by constant repetition, would lose their force, and grow more and more flat and dead, till at length they would become a dull round of words, without any spirit, or life, or virtue. So that thus to preach Christ must, in process of time, make void the gospel as well as the law.

II. 1. A Second way of making void the law through faith is, the teaching that faith supersedes the necessity of holiness. This divides itself into a thousand smaller paths, and many there are that walk therein. Indeed there are few that wholly escape it; few who are convinced, we are saved by faith, but are sooner or later, more or less, drawn aside into this by-way.

2. All those are drawn into this by-way who, if it be not settled judgment that faith in Christ entirely sets aside the necessity of keeping his law; yet suppose either sets aside the necessity of keeping his law; yet suppose either, (1.) That holiness is less necessary now than it was before Christ came; or, (2.) That a less degree of it is necessary; or, (3.) That it is less necessary to believers than to others. Yea, and so are all those who, although their judgment be right in the general, yet think they may take more liberty in particular cases than they could have done before they believed. Indeed, the using the term liberty, in such a manner, for liberty from obedience or holiness, shows at once, that their judgment is perverted, and that they are guilty of what they imagined to be far from them; namely, of making void the law through faith, by supposing faith to supersede holiness.

3. The first plea of those who teach this expressly is, that we are now under the covenant of grace, not works; and therefore we are no longer under the necessity of performing the works of the law.

And who ever was under the covenant of works None but Adam before the fall. He was fully and properly under that covenant which required perfect, universal obedience, as the one condition of acceptance; and left no place for pardon, upon the very least transgression. But no man else was ever under this, neither Jew nor Gentile; neither before Christ nor since. All his sons were and are under the covenant of grace. The manner of their acceptance is this: The free grace of God, through the merits of Christ, gives pardon to them that believe; that believe with such a faith as, working by love, produces all obedience and holiness.

4. The case is not, therefore, as you suppose, that men were once more obliged to obey God, or to work the works of his law, than they are now. This is a supposition you cannot make good. But we should have been obliged, if we had been under the covenant of works, to have done those works antecedent to our acceptance. Whereas now all good works, though as necessary as ever, are not antecedent to our acceptance, but consequent upon it. Therefore the nature of the covenant of grace gives you no ground, no encouragement at all, to set aside any insistence or degree of obedience; any part or measure of holiness.

5. "But are we not justified by faith, without the works of the law" Undoubtedly we are; without the

works either of the ceremonial or the moral law. And would to God all men were convicted of this! It would prevent innumerable evils; Antinomianism in particular: For generally speaking, they are the Pharisees who make the Antinomians. Running into an extreme so palpably contrary to Scripture, they occasion others to run into the opposite one. These, seeking to be justified by works, affright those from allowing any place for them.

6. But the truth lies between both. We are, doubtless, justified by faith. This is the corner-stone of the whole Christian building. We are justified without the works of the law, as any previous condition of justification; but they are an immediate fruit of that faith whereby we are justified. So that if good works do not follow our faith, even all inward and outward holiness, it is plain our faith is nothing worth; we are yet in our sins. Therefore, that we are justified by faith, even by our faith without works, is no ground for making void the law through faith; or for imagining that faith is a dispensation from any kind or degree of holiness.

7. "Nay, but does not St. Paul expressly say, 'Unto him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness' And does it not follow from hence, that faith is to a believer in the room, in the place, of righteousness But if faith is in the room of righteousness or holiness, what need is there of this too"

This, it must be acknowledged, comes home to the point, and is, indeed, the main pillar of Antinomianism. And yet it needs not a long or laboured answer. We allow, (1.) That God justifies the ungodly; him that, till that hour, is totally ungodly; -- full of all evil, void of all good: (2.) That he justifies the ungodly that worketh not; that, till that moment, worketh no good work; -- neither can he; for an evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit: (3.) That he justifies him by faith alone, without any goodness or righteousness preceding: And, (4.) That faith is then counted to him for righteousness; namely, for preceding righteousness; that is, God, through the merits of Christ, accepts him that believes, as if he had already fulfilled all righteousness. But what is all this to your point The Apostle does not say, either here or elsewhere, that this faith is counted to him for subsequent righteousness. He does teach that there is no righteousness before faith; but where does he teach that there is none after it He does assert, holiness cannot precede justification; but not, that it need not follow it. St. Paul, therefore, gives you no colour for making void the law, by teaching that faith supersedes the necessity of holiness.

III. 1. There is yet another way of making void the law through faith, which is more common than either of the former. And that is, the doing it practically; the making it void in fact, though not in principle; the living as if faith was designed to excuse us from holiness.

How earnestly does the Apostle guard us against this, in those well-known words: "What then Shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace God forbid:" (Rom. 6:15:) A caution which it is needful thoroughly to consider, because it is of the last importance.

2. The being "under the law," may here mean, (1.) The being obliged to observe the ceremonial law: (2.) The being obliged to conform to the whole Mosaic institution: (3.) The being obliged to keep the whole moral law, as the condition of our acceptance with God: And, (4.) The being under the wrath and curse of God; under sentence of eternal death; under a sense of guilt and condemnation, full of horror and slavish fear.

3. Now although a believer is "not without law to God, but under the law to Christ," yet from the

moment he believes, he is not "under the law," in any of the preceding senses. On the contrary, he is "under grace," under a more benign, gracious dispensation. As he is no longer under the ceremonial law, nor under the Mosaic institution; as he is not obliged to keep even the moral law, as the condition of his acceptance; so he is delivered from the wrath and the curse of God, from all sense of guilt and condemnation, and from all that horror and fear of death and hell whereby he was all his life before subject to bondage. And he now performs (which while "under the law" he could not do) a willing and universal obedience. He obeys not from the motive of slavish fear, but on a nobler principle; namely, the grace of God ruling in his heart, and causing all his works to be wrought in love.

4. What then Shall this evangelical principle of action be less powerful than the legal Shall we be less obedient to God from filial love than we were from servile fear

It is well if this is not a common case; if this practical Antinomianism, this unobserved way of making void the law through faith, has not infected thousands of believers.

Has it not infected you Examine yourself honestly and closely. Do you not do now what you durst not have done when you was "under the law," or (as we commonly call it) under conviction For instance: You durst not then indulge yourself in food: You took just what was needful, and that of the cheapest kind. Do you not allow yourself more latitude now Do you not indulge yourself a little more than you did O beware lest you "sin because you are not under the law, but under grace!"

5. When you was under conviction, you durst not indulge the lust of the eye in any degree. You would not do anything, great or small, merely to gratify your curiosity. You regarded only cleanliness and necessity, or at most very moderate convenience, either in furniture or apparel; superfluity and finery of whatever kind, as well as fashionable elegance, were both a terror and an abomination to you.

Are they so still Is your conscience as tender now in these things as it was then Do you still follow the same rule both in furniture and apparel, trampling all finer, all superfluity, every thing useless, every thing merely ornamental, however fashionable, underfoot Rather, have you not resumed what you had once laid aside, and what you could not then use without wounding you conscience And have you not learned to say, "O, I am not so scrupulous now" I would to God you were! Then you would not sin thus, "because you are not under the law, but under grace!"

6. You was once scrupulous too of commending any to their face; and still more, of suffering any to commend you. It was a stab to your heart; you could not bear it; you sought the honour that cometh of God only. You could not endure such conversation; nor any conversation which was not good to the use of edifying. All idle talk, all trifling discourse, you abhorred; you hated as well as feared it; being deeply sensible of the value of time, of every precious, fleeting moment. In like manner, you dreaded and abhorred idle expense; valuing your money only less than your time, and trembling lest you should be found an unfaithful steward even of the mammon of unrighteousness.

Do you now look upon praise as deadly poison, which you can neither give nor receive but at the peril of your soul Do you still dread and abhor all conversation which does not tend to the use of edifying; and labour to improve every moment, that it may not pass without leaving you better than it found you Are not you less careful as to the expense both of money and time Cannot you now lay out either, as you could not have done once Alas! how has that "which should have been for your health, proved to you an occasion of falling!" How have you "sinned because you was not under the law, but under grace!"

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