

"Be Stiff-Necked No Longer"

Law and gospel. These are two very important categories in Scripture. In a real way, every passage in Scripture contains either law or gospel. Sometimes a passage is very clearly law. Sometimes it's very clearly gospel. Other times both concepts are present and very closely interwoven together. But it's very important to make a distinction between these two categories as you study Scripture. That you understand each of these categories and how they apply to you as a Christian. If you don't make a distinction, or you don't understand one properly, then it can result in some major problems. When you don't properly divide between law and gospel, you can end up with either moralism on the one hand or lawlessness on the other.

Moralism of course is that idea that you have to earn your way into a right standing with God. Moralism makes your relationship with God dependent on your personal righteousness. This often expresses itself in concern for your outward actions, things people can see. That's how the Pharisees acted in the Bible, for example. Lawlessness, on the other hand, is the opposite. In theological terms, the lawlessness I have in mind here is called "Antinomianism," which literally means "against the law." It says that because of the gospel, you have no need for God's law anymore. It's irrelevant, since you are saved by grace. Both moralism and antinomianism are trying to understand how the law applies to us. But they both fail because they misunderstand the gospel.

You see, the law should drive us to the gospel, and then gospel should in turn drive us to the law, but from a different perspective. We need to see that God's law demands perfect personal righteousness. But we need to recognize that we can't accomplish this on our own. Instead that should point us to the gospel. The gospel then says that we find forgiveness by God through Christ. But then the gospel points us back to the law. It says that as forgiven people, we should then look to follow God's laws. That the law should be our rule and guide for how we live our life.

Now if we stop here, I can see how someone could end up as an antinomian. You could say, okay, yes, I understand all this. But come on, won't God forgive me if I fail in keeping the law? Isn't that the practical outworking of the gospel in our life? Well there's a certain bit of truth in that statement. Certainly God will forgive all our sins and shortcomings in the gospel. But I think it still misunderstands how the gospel then changes our perspective on the law.

And so I'd like to look at this passage today and use it to help us think about a right relationship of the law and the gospel to us. Ultimately we're going to be thinking about our sanctification. But we're going to do it by thinking of these categories of law and gospel. First, we'll look briefly at how law and gospel are presented to Israel in this passage. We'll see the tension that's present in the old covenant. But then we'll see how this tension is resolved in the new covenant. This will ultimately cause us to think about our sanctification as Christians.

So let's dig in. Let's get a sense of the relationship of law and gospel here for Israel. Now when we look at this passage, we can see lots of law.

But we can also see some gospel here. Now at this point I'm going to be using that term a bit loosely. Gospel generally means good news. But more specifically the gospel is about what Christ has done for us to save us. Certainly the full fledged gospel of Christ's work is not described in this passage in any detail. But there is some good news for Israel in this passage. There are expressions of God's grace to them. These elements of grace look forward to the fully revealed gospel of salvation through Christ which we find in the New Testament.

So just look at some of the "good news" described in this passage. The context for this passage is really coming from chapter 9 and the first half of chapter 10. That's where we see how after Israel broke the covenant with the golden calf, that God restored them. The first part of chapter 10 records how God heard Moses' intercessory prayer for Israel. God answered Moses' request that God forgive the people. God forgave them and then he renewed the covenant with them. Last week we saw God had Moses recreate the Ten Commandments on the two stone tablets and place them in the Ark. God then had sent the people out toward the Promised Land to take hold of it. And in verse 22 of our passage today we see that God was already blessing them by multiplying them in terms of their population. That was one of God's covenant promises way back to Abraham, that his descendants would be multiplied like the stars of heaven.

All of this was God's grace to Israel. God forgave them of their idolatry and restored them in covenant relationship. He was multiplying them as promised. And then he promised to still give them the Promised Land. None of this was because of their righteousness. No, chapter 9, verse 6, said otherwise. It said that they were a stiff-necked people. And yet in spite of Israel being a stiff-necked people, God had graciously forgiven them and would bring them into the Promised Land. That is grace. It's a bit of gospel, in the "good news" sense, in the Old Testament. It makes us realize from a New Testament perspective that God's inheritance for us as Christians is one that requires God to forgive us of our sins in order to receive it. And so the good news here for Israel foreshadows the greater good news we'd learn about in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And so it is in light of this context of grace that God then calls Israel to obedience. Verse 12. What does God require of you? To fear the Lord, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve him with all your heart and soul, to keep his commandments. This is the chief commandment for them. They are to chiefly love God with their everything. Then verses 17-18 talk about God's love for others, especially for the lowly in society. And so then in verse 19, God commands Israel to love the strangers. And so this passage has the same summary Jesus gave of the law. Love God with your everything, and love your neighbor as yourself. The fact that God had acted so graciously meant that they should obey him. And that obedience could be summarized in their love for God and their neighbor.

And all of this should result in what's described in verse 21. It says about God to Israel, "He is your praise, and he is your God who has done for you these great and awesome things." And so everything God's done for them should result in praise. That helps us to understand the call to obedience in this passage. The people should look now to keep God's laws an expression of gratitude and praise. They should thank God for everything he has done for them, by looking to obey him. Of course, as Christians this is true for us. We should look to keep God's laws out of a deep sense of gratitude as

well. Our praise for God should look to express itself in heartfelt obedience.

And yet don't miss the tension in this passage between law and gospel. Yes, they did fall short of the law. Yes, there is good news here that God forgave them graciously. Yes, that does provide a reason of gratitude for them to keep the law. But the law-keeping that God asks for in this passage is more than just a call of gratitude. Verse 12. What does God "require" of you? This putting law-keeping more than just in "gratitude" category. It's putting it in the "obligation" category.

The idea is, that God has done all these great things for them. They are then obligated to obey God. Just think about this in light of verse 16. This is such a key verse in this passage. It says, "Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer. Israel had been stiff-necked. God forgave them, even of their idolatry. Now in light of that, God tells them to no longer be stiff-necked. Instead they should circumcise their hearts. That's an illustration they should know. The covenant required that all male members be outwardly circumcised as a sign of being in the covenant. And yet here God tells them instead to no longer be stiff-necked but to instead circumcise their hearts.

I hope you realize how that makes the point of this passage even harder for Israel. This passage had already obligated them to obey God's laws. But we all know that it's one thing to obey God's laws outwardly. It's another to obey them inwardly. You see, when God tells them to circumcise the hearts and stop being stiff-necked, he's calling for inward change. Outward conformity to the laws wouldn't be enough. They needed to change who they were in the core. They had been stiff-necked, stubborn, wicked, rebellious people. Now, they must change. That must be their old self. Their new self must have softened hearts. Their obedience to God's laws must spring from a changed inner self. It's hard enough to change our outward actions. But who can really change who they are at their core? Who can throw off the weighty desires for sin that we have, by our own strength?

Surely there's an implied threat here as well. God had forgiven their stiff-neckedness up to this point. But who's to say that he'd keep doing that? God just remade the two stone tables containing the Ten Commandments. Would he keep redoing that every time Israel broke the covenant? Well this passage doesn't say. But it does say that now that God had graciously restored them in the covenant, they were being called to change. They needed to change who they were and start keeping the covenant. If they didn't, the covenant was subject to be broken yet again. Of course Israel did end up breaking the covenant again. Their idolatry was again the chief cause. They end up in exile under divine curse.

But thankfully the story didn't end there. The tension that's here with Israel is a tension that is revisited several times in the Old Testament. This tension shows a need that we humans have. We know that we fall short of keeping God's laws. But the gospel tells us that we're forgiven. That's true for Israel, and that's true for each of us as Christians. This keeps us from moralism; that our failure to keep the law is met with the gospel that declares forgiveness. But antinomianism is not an acceptable solution after that. God didn't forgive us to just have us disregard his laws. That was true in the old covenant. And it's true in the new covenant. And so this passage presents a problem here. We don't just need forgiveness. We need new hearts. You see, God's calling the people to be sanctified here. He's

telling them to change fundamentally who they are. But they don't have the power to do that on their own. Israel really was stiff-necked. They didn't have the power to change that. No matter how many times God would forgive them and restore them, that alone wouldn't change who they were. That is why Israel kept breaking the covenant.

But when we see this problem in the old covenant, we see the solution promised at different points as well. You see, what we have in verse 16 falls into the category of law. "Circumcise your hearts," is a command. "Be stiff-necked no longer," is a command. "Respond to forgiveness with praise and gratitude," is a command. They all fall under the category of law. But the Old Testament has some other passages that deal with this same issue, but hold out the promise of grace; of gospel.

Like at the end of the book. Deuteronomy 30:6 "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." That's the promise of gospel. That's good news. What Israel is commanded to do right here in verse 16 is something they can't do on their own. And so in chapter 30, when God predicts that they'll one day break the covenant again, he then promises that he'll solve this problem as well. They can't circumcise their own hearts, so he will. He'll circumcise their hearts for them.

We see the same tension in other places in the Old Testament as well. Like in the book of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 18:31, God commands his people to make themselves a new heart and a new spirit. How do you do that? But in Ezekiel 11:19 and 36:26 God instead promises that he will give them a new heart and a new spirit. We see something similar in the book of Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 4:4, God commands his people to circumcise their hearts and stop their evil deeds. Again, how do you do that? But then in Jeremiah 31:33 God promises that a new covenant would one day come where he himself would write his law on their hearts.

Do you see the point? The Old Testament has this tension in it between law and gospel concerning our sanctification. The law is that we have to change our hearts. We have to become new people. We have to become people who genuinely love God from our inner self. That's the law. But it's one Israel kept failing in. It's one we'd fail in too. That's because Scripture says that we've all been infected with sin. That's true for Israel, and it's true for us. We need a spiritual heart transplant, but can't do it ourselves. But the gospel that's promised in the Old Testament is that one day God would solve this problem. One day God would come and change his people's hearts. He'd make them into something new. Circumcised hearts. Stiff-necked no longer. New spirits. New hearts. People who now have God's laws written on their hearts and minds. And so realize what this is saying. He's saying that people will be like this on the inside. This means that they'll be like this on the outside as well. That once God completes this work on the inside, that means that person won't sin anymore. They won't live wickedly, because they won't be wicked. They'll instead live righteously, because they'll be righteous, righteous on the inside. This is the gospel promised in the old covenant. It's what we, you and me, have begun to realize in the new covenant. It's what we call "sanctification," and ultimately, "glorification."

Brothers and sisters, this is what Christ does for us. Christ sanctifies us. Christ changes who we are on the inside. We were stiff-necked people like

Israel. Apart from Christ, we were rebellious, sinful and wicked. We had hearts of stone. In theological terms, we were totally depraved. Stephen in Acts 7:51 said to the Jewish council who had rejected Jesus, "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you." That's a description for all of us who have not believed in Christ.

But when we turn in faith to Christ, the gospel gives us some amazing news. Not only are we forgiven. But we are sanctified. In one sense this happens all at once. We are seen by God as his sanctified people. God now calls us a new creation. But in terms of how we actually live in this life, this becomes a gradual work of Christ's Spirit in our hearts. That's the process of sanctification. We are growing more and more to be like Christ. And we know Christ is not stiff-necked. Dean Davis pointed out a great passage that shows that Christ is not stiff-necked. He pointed out Isaiah 53:7, that describes how Jesus, "Was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; he was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth." That's the opposite of being stiff-necked. Being stiff-necked fights against God's will for your life. The opposite freely follows God's path for your life. Jesus was led as a lamb to the slaughter. He did not resist, but entrusted himself to his heavenly Father's good plan. A plan that would result in our salvation. A plan that would mean gospel to us; good news!

And so brothers and sisters, don't sell this gospel short. We often think that the gospel is about our being forgiven. Well, yes, that's true. But that's only part of the good news. Don't stop there. The gospel goes on to tell us more good news. There's more than just forgiveness. There's also transformation. There's sanctification. What God commands Israel here to do in verse 16. That's law. But the gospel says that he is doing that to us! And of course he does that through Jesus. Jesus, the one who is not stiff-necked. The one who's heart is completely circumcised unto the Lord. He's the one who's working these things inside us. Christ, by his Spirit, sanctifies us. This is part of the benefits of the gospel.

Let me give you two New Testament passages that confirm this. Colossians 2:11, "In him [Christ] also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ." When our passage from Deuteronomy tells us to circumcise our hearts, this passage from Colossians tells us that this it's Christ who circumcises us inwardly. Here's another one. Philippians 3:3, "For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh." In other words, the Bible can say in one sense that in Christ, we've already completed what this passage asks for. We are those who are inwardly circumcised who worship God. But it's not our own doing. It's by the Spirit of God and to the glory of Christ.

You see, the gospel does *not* say we get in by grace but stay in by works. That's maybe what many of the Jews thought after hearing the words from this passage today. Certainly it's part of the tension presented in the old covenant. But the tension has been solved with the coming of Jesus. We get in by grace and stay in by grace. Let me put it in theological terms. It's not like we are justified by faith and then sanctified by works. No, our sanctification is also something that happens by grace through faith. That's what Jesus told Paul at his conversion. That people are sanctified by faith in Jesus, Acts 26:18.

We don't think about this enough. It's too often that we want to make our sanctification about our own works. This is an obvious temptation, because if Christ is working this in our lives, it will involve us actually performing godly works. That might make us think that we worked our sanctification by our works. What might also make us think that is when we see all the commandments in the New Testament to live godly lives. That might again make us think that it's our own works that bring about sanctification. That would be easy for us to understand. It'd be easy to say, okay, I'm justified by grace through faith. But now I must work my hardest to be sanctified. You might say, well the good news is that if I screw up, I'm still forgiven. But I must nonetheless work as hard as I can to sanctify myself.

Now this sort of thinking is close to the gospel truth. It's probably an attitude we find ourselves in a lot. It's really hard to get our minds wrapped around this. That God calls us as Christians to follow the law of Christ. He calls us to live godly. That's to be both a response of gratitude and an obligation for us. That's basically what he told Israel here. But the gospel goes on to tell us that God does this for us as well. And so if we are to be sanctified, it boils down chiefly to faith. We're justified by faith in Christ. We're sanctified by faith in Christ. We grow in godliness because by faith in Christ, we're been made into a new man and are beginning to live like that more and more each day. Some people might not like a message like this. They might think it doesn't have enough practical application; people often want to leave church with some new thing to do. They might say this truth could become an excuse for sin. It might become an excuse to not strive for godliness as God calls us to. Well, if someone were to use that excuse in their life as a reason to live ungodly, I'd wonder if they really had real faith. James says that that sort of faith is a dead faith; a counterfeit one. Real faith will strive to live their life for Christ. Real faith will have real works. But it's the faith in Christ that produces that, not the other way around. Faith in Christ produces Christian works in our life, because it's Christ who works those in us. It's a mystery. It's hard to grasp. But this is the good news of the gospel. That even our sanctification is a gift from God. It's one we need to believe in. To trust in. To live our life by.

And so as we start out this new year, let's realize that we are a new man. Under the old covenant, you might have saw the covenant renewal in this passage like how so many start out the new year today- with New Year's resolutions, trying to turn over a new leaf. New Year's resolutions that people then go on to break. But with the light of the new covenant, let's really approach the New Year with a fresh perspective of God's saving grace working in us. That yes, we should press on in our sanctification. But we ultimately should see that it's something God-worked. That doesn't mean we shouldn't strive against sin. No we should. But certainly it might color our approach - like do you pray about your "resolutions?" One of the best ways to struggle through our sanctification, is to be praying to God for growth and power to overcome. It's a great way to express to God that we recognize that our sanctification is part of the gospel. It's God's gift to us. It's an expression of faith and trust that he is at work in our life.

And may this result in the highest praise to God. This is what verse 21 does. It calls Israel to break forth in praise. Well, how can we not break forth in praise? How can we not declare, that Christ is our praise! He is our God! He has done for us these great things before our very eyes. And this includes our sanctification. How can we not praise Christ all the more

when we realize that even our sanctification involves gospel! The good news that our hearts are circumcised into new life by Jesus Christ. Amen.

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