

“I Fought the LAW and the LAW...!”
by Rom A. Pegram (2/5/17)

If you want to know when you’re encountering the LAW, do a quick inventory of your fears. What are you afraid of? I mean ... *really* afraid of...

In a survey of the general public, people were asked about the same thing. *Death* came in at Number 6. Number 1, by a long shot, was ... *public speaking*. And I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that fear of public speaking is really about a much deeper fear—that of judgment ... being vulnerable in a room full of people, all evaluating what you’re saying and how you look. They may like you ... and they may reject you. And this seems a good example of what’s maybe the deepest of *all* our fears—*fear we won’t measure up*. And that fear, folks, always leads to stress and depression and exhaustion! One young mother recently put it as honest as anyone can:

Deep down, I know I should be perfect and I’m not. I feel it when someone comes into my house unannounced and there’s a mess in every corner. I know it when my children misbehave in public and I just want to hide. I can tell it when that empty feeling rises after I’ve spoken in haste, said too much, or raised my voice. There’s the feeling in my stomach that I just can’t shake when I know I’ve missed the mark of perfection.

And this kind of judgment—from others—is but a hint of a judgment that lies underneath the surface. We know if we don’t measure up, *the Judge will punish us*. When we feel this weight of judgment, we all tend to slip into what I’ll call ‘self-salvation’—*whatever we need to do to survive*. And we come up with things like this:

- If I can just stay out of trouble and get good grades, maybe my mom and dad will finally approve of me...
- If I can just get thin, maybe my husband will finally think I’m beautiful...
- If I can make a name for myself and be successful, maybe I’ll get the respect I deserve ... and so forth...

Those are some reactions to the judgment of the LAW, but don’t ever think for a moment that we totally dislike the LAW! The LAW, in one sense, assures us we can determine our own destiny! Give me 5 steps (laws) to get better grades; give me 5 steps (laws) to losing weight; give me 5 steps (laws) to succeed in my business! Don’t we love that? We love the LAW in some ways, because it helps us control our destiny. And *people who are addicted to control ... are really addicted to LAW as a means of control*. On the flip side of the coin, we don’t *always* like the law...

In another sense, *the LAW tells us what to do*—and most of us don’t like being told what to do. But, it’s ironic that—at times—GRACE offends us even more, because it tells us *there is nothing we can do*—everything’s already been done. And if there’s something we hate more than *being told what to do* ... it’s being told *there’s nothing we can do*—we can’t earn anything, we’re helpless, weak, and needy. However much we hate the

LAW, we're sometimes more afraid of GRACE. We're DIY people, aren't we? We want to DO IT OURSELVES, but the truth is ... *there's no DIY with God!*

We'll get to more of GRACE later on in this series, but for today, let's consider the LAW. What good is it? What purpose could there possibly be for the LAW? Are you interested? Let's begin here: As we continue to learn more about GRACE, we also need to know these things about GRACE's partner...

The LAW may have the power to instruct and expose, but it does not have the power to inspire or create. The truth is ... most of us fall prey to the illusion that real change will take place when we 'lay down the law', demand good performance, or offer 'constructive criticism', but is that right? We wonder why husbands become more and more withdrawn over the years, why our children don't call as much as they used to, why our colleagues don't confide in us, and so forth. It may be our lips moving, but what they're hearing is the voice of the LAW. And, again, ***the LAW may have the power to instruct and expose, but it does not have the power to inspire or create!***

When confronted with LAW in our lives, most of us fall into forms of 'self-salvation'—*whatever it takes to survive*; our strategies are usually one of three: *We may...*

- ***Fight***... The judge isn't leaving anytime soon, but neither are you, so you put up your dukes. But, the LAW is bigger than you are, folks, and it'll win every time; that's simply its nature! *Or we may choose...*
- ***Flight***... You run from whoever's accusing you. You leave home ... or don't answer their phone calls. Whatever form it takes, the idea is: the judge isn't going away, so I will—*adios! Or we may choose to...*
- ***Appease***... This is the most popular path. The judge has found us wanting in some way, so we beg and plead and show him how hard we're trying. We tell him we're sorry, promising to do better next time—whether the demands are reasonable or not. We believe the lie that says ... *we're capable of reasoning with the voice of demand!*

The problem with fight, flight, or appeasement, however, is not so much that these strategies are *unwise*, but ... *they don't work!* They just don't work in the long run. And when we finally figure that out, we generally walk away in despair—full of sorrow...

Maybe you're familiar with Jesus' interaction with the rich young ruler. It's an incredible case study in the nature of the LAW and our response to it. It goes like this (Mark 10:17-22, NLT):

As Jesus was starting out on his way to Jerusalem, a man came running up to him, knelt down, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ "Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked. "Only God is truly good." ¹⁹ But to answer your question, you know the commandments: 'You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. You must not cheat anyone. Honor your father and mother.'" ²⁰ "Teacher," the man replied, "I've obeyed all these commandments since I was young." ²¹ Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for

him. “There is still one thing you haven’t done,” he told him. “Go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”²² At this the man’s face fell, and he went away very sad, for he had many possessions.

The rich young ruler approached Jesus with quite a question, didn’t he? “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Sounds a bit lofty ... but don’t we ask similar questions every single day? What’s the right way to live? What *should* I do if I want to be a good person/parent/Christian? Jesus naturally brings in the LAW of God—*divine standards of righteousness*. And the young man shoots back an answer that would put most of us to shame. He claims he’s kept all these commandments since his youth!

BUT, Jesus then says the one thing that’ll make the young man realize the gap between *who* he actually is ... and *who* he *should* be. He goes for the jugular—the young man’s wallet, the sum total of his worldly achievements, something he’s very proud of! Jesus knows his money is his ‘self-salvation’ strategy, so he swings the hammer of the LAW! *You must sell all you have and give it to the poor...*

Then notice how the young man responds. Is he immediately inspired to take the plunge and give it all away (like Zacchaeus)? No! He becomes sorrowful ... and leaves (*flight*). The LAW exposed him as the sinner he is, *a man unwilling to give up control over his life!* So, the information Jesus gave him didn’t result in a positive action; it only made him want to distance himself from the Lawgiver...

So, folks, if the LAW can’t produce its intended effect, what good is it—really? Well, if the LAW has a purpose, it may just be *this paradoxical outcome...*

The Fruit of the LAW: Resentment, Rebellion, and Exhaustion. BUT *it helps to bring us ... to the end of ourselves* (if you remember what I said last week) ... and that’s where GRACE begins!

One of the things technological advances like email have done for us is this: *Have you ever sent an email off to someone you were upset with (because it’s so easy and quick to do), only to wish later that you’d never sent it?* That happened to a retired Royal Navy officer by the name of Nick Crews. He sent an email to his son and two daughters, listing in remarkably colorful language all the misery they’d caused (i.e. divorces, etc.) their mother and father through the years. Here’s what it said:

I can now tell you that I for one, and I sense Mum feels the same, have had enough of being forced to live through the never-ending bad dream of our children’s underachievement and domestic ineptitudes. I want to hear no more from any of you until, if you feel inclined, you have a success or an achievement or a REALISTIC plan for the support and happiness of your children to tell me about. I don’t want to see your mother burdened anymore with your miserable woes—it’s not as if any of the advice she strives to give you has ever been listened to with good grace—far less acted upon. So I ask you to spare her further unhappiness. If you think I have been unfair in what I

have said, by all means try to persuade me to change my mind. But you won't do it by simply whining and saying you don't like it. You'll have to come up with meaty reasons to demolish my points and build a case for yourself. If that isn't possible, or you simply can't be bothered, then I rest my case. I am bitterly, bitterly disappointed. DAD

Wow! Any parent can relate to Mr. Crews' frustration, can't they? But would we send such an email? Like the LAW itself, the content of his message may be well-founded, and their standards may be perfectly reasonable. But *expectations are, many times, planned resentments*. We expect people not to be self-centered, but when they turn out to be just that ... we get angry and blame them!

Folks, what the LAW cannot do ... is change a heart from self-seeking to self-sacrificing. That's what Paul meant when he said (Rom. 5:20a, MSG): "All that passing laws against sin did was produce more lawbreakers..." The truth is, moralism doesn't produce morality. It's no coincidence, folks, that the straight-laced *Leave It to Beaver* generation preceded the free-love movement of the 60s. Or the state most known for its wholesomeness (Utah) also leads the country in rates of pornography consumption and antidepressant scripts...

We make a big mistake when we conclude that the LAW is the answer to bad behavior; in fact, the LAW generally stirs up such behavior. The LAW reveals sin but is powerless to remove it; it points to righteousness but can't produce it. So, you may be wondering...

So, Why Then the LAW? Am I saying the LAW is BAD? NO! The answer, folks, comes in Jesus' words to his disciples right after the rich young ruler walked away in sorrow. Mark 10:23-27 (NLT) tells us:

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!" ²⁴ This amazed them. But Jesus said again, "Dear children, it is very hard to enter the Kingdom of God. ²⁵ In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!" ²⁶ The disciples were astounded. "Then who in the world can be saved?" they asked. ²⁷ Jesus looked at them intently and said, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God."

Can you see what Jesus was up to here? Before the young man could look outside himself for help, he needed to be dissatisfied about who he was! And that's what the LAW would lead him to. We need the LAW to freshly reveal to us that ... we're worse off than we think! We need to be reminded there's something to be pardoned even in our best works or proudest achievements...

BUT ... once we've felt the weight of the LAW once again, we need to be reminded of God's unbelievable GRACE. We need to be reminded ... 'there is a fountain fill'd with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath the flood lose all their guilty stains' (W. Cowper). We need to be reminded that ... the sins we cannot seem to forget, *God cannot remember*. And we need to be told over and over again ... there is

no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, nothing can separate us from God's love, and Christians live under a banner that reads ... 'It is finished'! Folks, Christ's death has disarmed the LAW, and where there was once guilt, all that remains is gratitude on our part. Christianity alone affirms that the God who makes the demands ... also met those demands for us in the person of Jesus. Is there any greater love than that?

Contrary to what many Christians believe, the biggest problem facing the church today is not 'cheap grace' but 'cheap LAW'—the idea that *God accepts anything less than the perfect righteousness of Jesus*. So, let's make sure our view of the LAW is a *high view*—one that admits we cannot save ourselves; being saved *from* ourselves can only happen through God's GRACE. The LAW points us to our need; GRACE is our salvation. And we'll pick up here next time...