Flesh, Law, and Grace:

Romans and Galatians

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At the heart of the New Testament treatment of the nature of the “flesh” is its connection with sin and death. The Book of Romans teaches that to be “governed” by the flesh is death, but to be guided by the spirit (specifically, by the Holy Spirit in and through Jesus Christ) is to acquire “life and peace” (Romans 6:8, New King James Version). On the most rudimentary level, this implies that a life driven by carnal desires, whether these pertain to lust, greed, sloth, glutton or some other self-serving, preeminently pleasure-seeking mode of living, is antithetical to the Christian life. The carnal life perpetuates an estrangement from God, as the individual seeks to serve the flesh—its pleasures, wants, and needs—rather than to serve the spirit.

There are, however, deeper considerations even than these, as is evident in the tension explored in the Book of Galatians between law and grace. According to Old Testament doctrine, original sin was brought about through the imbrications of the flesh. Adam and Eve were tempted in the flesh and it was the inherently weak nature of the flesh that prompted them to break Divine Law. In breaking the Law, the activated a generational curse by which all their progeny, all mankind, would bear the mark of this original sin. Mankind, due to the lapse of the first parents, had fallen not only into sin and away from life but also into the flesh and away from spirit.

Redemption, under the Law, is only to be found in death, according to Romans 6:23, which reads, “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (*ibid*). This, then, speaks to the fundamental conflict explored in Galatians between law and grace. According to the Law, all human beings are sinners deserving of death and of eternal separation from God. The Law reads humanity as prisoners of the flesh, estranged from the Holy Spirit and corrupted in mind and body by the pollutions of this dead and accursed thing, the flesh that the original parents gave humanity over to.

The birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, however, is the fulfillment of the law; it is the “gift of God” spoken of in Romans 6:23 (*ibid*). When humanity, through the temptations of the flesh, fell into sin, the law was broken and a death (soul and spirit as well as body) was owed for each (inevitably fallen) life given. Before the birth of Christ, humanity since the Biblical Patriarchs had existed in a covenant relationship with God, in which the execution of the law would be forestalled until the Messiah came to redeem the debt of death owed according to the law.

As the Son of God, only Christ was capable of fulfilling the law and of redeeming humanity from its provisions. His crucifixion rebalanced the divine scales and restored the equilibrium of the law. In His divinity, purity, perfection, and sacrifice, Christ’s death paid the debt that all humans, by virtue of original sin, owed. Christ died, in other words, so that humanity may life. He died so that we do not have to die in spirit or soul as we do in body (the death of the body signifying the ultimate mortification of the flesh, the release into spirit and the ultimate reunification with God).

This, then, is what grace means: it is gift of Christ to pay the debt that humanity owes, to take the burden of sin, suffering, and death onto His own shoulders. The conflict arises when tenets of the law are applied at the expense of the acknowledgment of grace. To privilege law above grace is to adopt a punitive and condemning orientation to mankind, one which repudiates Christ’s sacrifice and ultimately leads to estrangement from Him. In Galatians 5:4, the Apostle Paul writes, “Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law, yet fallen from grace.” There is a double move at play here: first, this speaks to the idea that mankind can redeem itself through the strict adherence to covenant and/or Rabbinical law. This makes salvation as matter of works, not faith. Simultaneously, it continues to operate under the presumption that the Messiah/Redeemer has not yet come. Once the Redeemer comes and fulfills the Law through His sacrificial death, then humanity no longer labors under the punishing and condemning weight of the broken law. It now operates under grace, and the faith that redemption has come, the slate has been wiped clean, and no further debt is owed because Christ has paid it in full.

In regard to the application of this important question to the ministerial practice, acknowledging that humanity operates under grace, not law, is incredibly humbling. It equalizes humanity under a shared debt of sin, a shared carnal imperfection, from which we were redeemed through Christ. This recognition ensures that no one is deemed unfit for or unworthy of Christ. This suggests that all may be redeemed, all may enjoy eternal life, not because of who they are or what they do but because of what they believe, specifically, that they believe in Christ and His gift of eternal life for those who accept Him as Lord, Savior, and Redeemer.

References

New King James Version. (2016). *NKJV Bible.* Retrieved from <http://www.thenkjvbible.com/>