

THE HARMONY OF THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL BY RON HARVEY

Text: Romans 3:19-24

From our text we see first the bad news in verses 19-20.

Every mouth is stopped. There is no room for boasting under the law. If you ask the question, “Does anyone here claim to be righteous according to the requirements of God’s law? There would be dead silence. Every mouth would be stopped.

All the world is guilty according to the law. That means every kind of person, Jew or Gentile. And, that means every human being period. Guilty under the law. That is bad news.

There is no justification by the law. The law makes no provision for justifying sinners. The whole world is guilty. And, there is no hope under the law.

But, then we see good news in verses 21-24.

But. Thank God for this simple conjunction. There was no hope by the law. But. And perhaps there is hope after all because Paul says, but.

There is a righteousness that can be gained apart from the law. It is called righteousness by faith. (v.22)

So you see, this is a bad news/good news situation.

Example:

The Doctor told his patient, “I have some bad news and some good news.” Of course this is always the hard decision – Do you want the good news first or the bad news.

The patient said, “OK Doc, give me the good news first.”

So the doctor said, “The tests showed that you have only 24 hours to live.”

Of course the patient was stunned and worried because if that was the good news, what was the bad news?

So he asked the doctor, if the good news is that I only have 24 hours to live, what in the world is the bad news?

And the doctor said, “I forgot to call you yesterday!”

Now if someone has bad news and good news, you hope the good news overshadows the bad news, don't you? You hope the good news is really good, and the bad news isn't so bad.

The Lawyer had a criminal client who was charged with a brutal murder. And the lawyer got the blood tests back from the lab. And he told his client, “I have some bad news and some good news.”

And the client nervously asked, “What is the bad news?”

The lawyer said, “Well, they did the blood test and your DNA was found all over the crime scene.”

“Oh no,” the client said. “I'm ruined. What's the good news?”

And the lawyer said, “Your cholesterol is down to 130.

You see that blood test had some bad news and some good news, but the bad news completely overshadowed the good news.

In the Scriptures there is some bad news and there is some good news. And this news is found everywhere in the Bible. It is found in the Old Testament and it is found in the New Testament. It is found in Genesis and it is found in Revelation. And this bad news/good news theme runs parallel throughout the Scripture. They are woven together like a brilliantly written novel. And since the Bible deals with eternal things, you just hope the bad news isn't so bad, and the good news is really good.

Now let me say right off the bat that the bad news of the Bible is really, really bad. Sinners will not want to hear this bad news. It is the worst news possible. It is news that you dread to hear. It is the kind of news that you get when

the phone rings at three in the morning and a family member is crying on the other end of the phone and says, "I've got some bad news."

The chill bumps go up your spine and you just know the news is very, very bad.

And the Bible has some very bad news for sinners. And that telephone has rung at a very odd hour and the sinner has picked it up and on the other end of the line is someone with very bad news. And the caller on the other end of the line is the law of God.

And the law of God on the other end of the line gives the sinner that awful news. And he says, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die."

Now that is very bad news for sinners. That is condemnation. Utter loss and ruin. And that is the universal message of the law of God.

And the thing about the law of God is that it does not come to the rescue of sinners. It comes to condemn them. Listen to what the Bible says.

Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight.

Romans 3:19, 20

You see, when the law speaks, it speaks to those who are under the law, and it is bad news. The law says, "Sinner, you're guilty and I cannot justify you."

There is no good news for the sinner in the law, only bad, bad news.

Now we are going to take a look at the law of God this morning. And I know that the law of God brings bad news to sinners, but that is the fault of sinners not the fault of the law.

And so, we consider first,

What is the law?

Sometimes we think of “the law” as being the first five books of the Bible - The books of Moses. These books contain the many rules and regulations that were given to Moses for the nation of Israel. They also contain the ten commandments which has always been and remains to this day the simplest and most complete expression of God’s moral requirements for mankind.

The Bible itself refers to these five books as “the law.” (See John 1:45)

Jesus referred to these five books as “the law of Moses.” (See Luke 24:44)

So, there is no question that Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are considered to be part of the law of God.

But the Scriptures also seem to indicate that the entire Old Testament is the law of God.

Jesus quotes Ps. 82:6 and calls it the law in John 10:34.

Jesus quotes Ps. 35:19 and calls it the law in John 15:25.

Sometimes we think of the entire Old Testament period as being characterized by the harsh realities of the law as opposed to the free flow of grace in the New Testament. And so, we consider briefly the law as it was given to Israel in the Old Testament.

First, there was that portion of the law that we call the **ceremonial law**. These were the rules and rituals which concerned the religious worship of the Jews. They concerned such things as the work of the priests, sacrifices, feasts, fastings, washings, clean and unclean animals, circumcision and many other ceremonial laws.

Now these laws would have meant nothing to other nations. They would have seemed completely arbitrary, not useful perhaps, certainly burdensome, a cumbersome yoke around their neck on a daily basis. But these ceremonies meant something in the law of God. They prefigured the coming Savior. They were types and shadows. And even the people of Israel must have strained to understand their meaning. But meaning they had. They were very rich in meaning and significance in that they foretold of salvation which was coming in Christ.

And then there were **judicial laws**. These laws concerned the civil government of the nation of Israel. And God gave them statutes and rules and the Judges in Israel determined the outcome of legal matters according to the laws of government which God had given. People were to be stoned for certain serious offenses. There were rules for injuries done to their persons and to their property. There were rules of debt relief. We might call it bankruptcy in our day. And there were many other civil rules. And all of these rules were given by God to the people of Israel. And Israel was a theocracy. They were a government directly under God. Israel did not make their own laws, but they were governed under the law of God. Moses never enacted any of his own legislation. Rather, God spoke to Moses and Moses passed the law down to the people. The laws of Israel were made by a committee of three – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And God passed these laws on to the people through Moses.

So, there were ceremonial laws and there were judicial laws. And we find that there were also **moral laws**.

The simplest expression of the moral law of God is found in the Ten Commandments. And these Ten Commandments were so important and so basic that God wrote them himself on tablets of stone and gave them to Moses.

Now the ceremonial law and the judicial law was obviously specific to the nation of Israel although there is much in them that is instructive and which other nations might emulate if they were wise.

But the moral part of the law is an expression of what God demands of all of his servants. It is binding on every man and is unchanging. It is the eternal, moral law of God. It is an expression of who God is.

God does not lie. Therefore, he says, “Thou shalt not lie.” God does not commit infidelities, and therefore he says, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”

The holy attributes of God are manifest in his moral law. We see who God is by studying the moral law that he has given to us.

Be ye holy, for I am holy.
(Lev.11:44)

Now all of this that we have been talking about is the law of God. But, the law of God goes even beyond all of this.

When Jesus was enduring his temptation in the wilderness, and when he was very hungry, Satan tempted Jesus by challenging him to turn stones into bread. And Jesus answered him and said,

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.

Matthew 4:4

And this illustrates that “the law” is not limited to those statutes and rules and regulations and ceremonies that we find in the law of Moses. The moral law is not confined to those two tablets of stone. But every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God is the law. We are bound by one supreme duty and that is to obey every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God.

If God has spoken in the book of Genesis, then it is a law unto us. If he has spoken in the book of Revelation then it is a law unto us. And every word that he has spoken from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21 is the law of God. His word from beginning to end is our rule of law.

And the Bible says, “Sin is the transgression of the law.”

Sin is a falling short of the standard of God’s law. Not just his law in Exodus. Not just his law in the Old Testament, but his law as revealed by every word that proceeds from his mouth.

Now this is an incredibly high standard. It is the standard of God’s righteousness and his absolute holiness. And sin is anything that comes short of that standard.

Now we understand something about his holiness from the law that is written in the Scriptures. But that is not the only place the law is written. The Scriptures also say that God’s law is written in the hearts of men?

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness . . .
Romans 1:14, 15

Even the heathen who have never read the Bible, know that stealing is wrong. They know that lying and cheating is wrong. They know that adultery and murder is wrong. And how do they know? The law of God is written in their hearts and in their consciences so that there is no excuse.

And when the law of God calls at that odd hour, it brings the sinner bad news. “Thou art condemned,” it says. “Thou art wretched and thou shalt surely die.” And the law has no mercy on sinners. It has no good news, no cure for sin, no hope. And the law of God stands as the enemy of sinners.

Sinners often think of the law of God as a hateful and a hurtful thing as though there is some evil in the law. But the fault is not to be found in the law. The law is that holy thing. It is a perfect thing. It is a just thing. The fault is to be found in the sinner himself.

Sinners cringe under the law of God. The law of God is a burdensome thing and a heavy load upon the backs of sinners. It requires them to be holy when they are most unholy. It demands righteousness when they are most unrighteous. The law of God demands perfection when sinners are most imperfect. When sinners are found in compromising positions, the law is most uncompromising.

And sinners place the fault not in themselves but in the law of God. Sinners curse the law because the law will not allow for their sins. Sinners curse the law because it will not grade on the curve. Sinners despise the law of God because it demands that sinners give up their evil ways. Sinners despise the law because the law brings on them certain condemnation. Sinners despise the law because the law reveals the holiness of God and sinners hate God.

And so, the law of God calls out to sinners with bad news, “Thou shalt surely die.”

Now I hope that every sinner feels the utter despair of that pronouncement. Because it is that very despair that will lead him to search for good news. He has heard the bad news. Now, is there any good news that will undo the condemnation that has befallen the sinner by the just requirements of the law of God?

The sinner is standing on the precipice of hell. And he says, “Please, tell me there is some good news that overshadows this awful penalty of sin.”

And with his eternal destiny hanging in the balance, the sinner waits for good news.

And it is now three-thirty in the morning and the phone rings. And the sinner, shaking with nervous anticipation, answers the telephone.

“Who is it,” he asks.

“It is the gospel,” says the voice on the other end.

“Oh,” says the sinner, “I just had a call from the law a few minutes ago and it was such bad news.” I do hope you have some good news.”

“Oh, yes,” says the gospel. “I have very good news. That call you just got from the law was certainly very bad news. But that call was designed to prepare you for my call. Do you now understand your condition under the law?”

“Oh yes,” says the sinner. “I understand that I am condemned and that I will surely die. For I have offended the law of God. But hurry, tell me what is the good news.”

And the gospel tells the sinner. “There is hope after all. Not from the law, for it is impossible to be justified by the law. There is only one hope, but it is a blessed hope. And I think you will be interested.”

“Go on,” says the sinner. “I can barely stand the suspense. I stand condemned to die and I am on death row according to the law. What is this hope? What is this good news?”

“Why, it is that someone has paid the penalty on your behalf.”

“What,” asks the sinner? “Who has paid my penalty for me?”

And the gospel answers, “Why, God himself has done it. The one whose law you offended has come and borne the offense. It is Jesus. He came and died in your place.”

“Why, this is very good news,” says the sinner. “What must I do?”

And the gospel says, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.”

You see, there is bad news for sinners in the Bible. But there is good news that swallows up the bad news altogether. It overwhelms it and nullifies it. This good news makes the law of none effect upon the sinner. It takes him out from under the law and places him under grace. And this is good news indeed. In fact, it changes the sinner’s whole attitude toward the law.

Remember how the sinner hates the law of God. Not so God’s saints. To those who have gladly received the good news of the gospel, the law of God is not a hurtful thing at all, but a loving and most helpful thing.

Sinners cringe in the face of the law and under the penalty of it, but saints, who are out from under its penalty, glory in it. You see, the penalty has been paid for believers and they are out from under the curse of the law.

The law of God is not burdensome to Christians. It is a delight. Jesus said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Sinners hate the law of God because it is holy and they are not. Saints love the law of God because it is holy. And a most holy law is consistent with the new nature of the saints.

David said, “Thy law is my delight.” (Psalm 119:77)

And again, David said, “O how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day.” (Psalm 119:97)

“How sweet are thy words unto my taste! Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way. Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. (Psalm 119:103-105)

So, you see how the law of God is bitter to the sinner, but exceedingly sweet to the saint because the penalty of the law has been swallowed up by the good news of the gospel.

Example: Now if someone came up to you and said, “I have bad news and good news.” You would hold your breath. And if he said, “Your house has burned down,” that would be bad news. But then if he said, “Your insurance company has agreed to pay you twice what your house was worth,” that would overwhelm and nullify the bad news.

And that’s what the gospel does to the bad news of the law. You see, the sting of the law is the penalty. But the gospel takes the penalty away and there is no sting left to the law. The law places sinners under a curse. But the gospel takes the curse away.

And when the curse of the law is lifted, the law can be seen in all its beauty and majesty.

Example: When I was a boy, we lived in California. And California was a very beautiful place with palm trees and mountains in the distance and greenery everywhere. But it was not unusual to wake up in the morning and look outside only to find a thick, murky fog everywhere. And you couldn’t see any of the beauty for the thick fog. And the fog was like a curse and it hung there like a thick darkness. But when the fog was lifted, you remembered where you were and you remembered the beauty of the place.

And this is the way it is with God’s law. The law is a very beautiful thing. It is pure and just and wise. But the curse of the law hangs like a fog and hides its beauty. And for sinners all they can see is the fog of the curse.

But when the gospel comes and the good news is believed, the curse of the law is lifted and lo and behold, the law is revealed in all its beauty. The very glory of God is seen in it when the curse vanishes into thin air.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL

1. The law does not work against the gospel and the gospel does not work against the law. They sing together in harmony. The law prepares the sinner for the gospel. Listen to what Paul says about the law.

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

Galatians 3:24

You see, the gospel can save, but the law can't. But the great thing is that, the law is not jealous of the gospel. The law prepares sinners by showing them their need, and then it sends them on to the gospel for salvation. Both the law and the gospel have work to do and they work together to bring men to Christ.

2. The law and the gospel hold hands in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. They are co-workers in the kingdom of God. And they work side by side in **all** ages. Now we sometimes picture the Old Testament as being the principal time of the law and the New Testament as being the principal time of the gospel as though the gospel never knew the law in olden days and the law never knew the gospel in the latter days. But this is a poor image. The law has always led sinners to the gospel in all ages. Now the floodgates of grace were shut up to some extent in the Old Testament and the law worked condemnation on unbelievers to a large extent in the Old. And, it seems the law sent fewer prospects to the gospel during the Old Testament. And so, we view the Old Testament as a darker time and the harsher aspects of the law seem more prevalent in those days. But don't tell this to Noah who found grace in the eyes of the Lord. And don't tell this to David who was led to the mercy of the gospel by the harsh demands of the law. And don't tell this to the multitudes that were led to the gospel by the law of God even in the Old Testament. And when the fullness of time was come, and salvation appeared on the earth in the person of Jesus, the law sent thousands of weary and desperate prospects to the gospel and the gospel saved all who were sent. And so, the law and the gospel should not be seen as competing forces and they should not be seen as working separately or differently in Old and New Testament times.

3. The weakness of the law to save sinners is a function of its design. The law was never intended to be the saving arm in the plan of God. That is the work of the gospel. But the law was intended to be the condemning arm. The purpose of the law in salvation was to bring men to nothing by showing them their utter

helplessness and their extensive guilt before God. And this served as a necessary preparation for the gospel.

4. The curse of the law is its penalty. And the penalty is severe. If you violate the law in one point, you must suffer spiritual and eternal death. The law is unbending in this requirement. It does not make allowances. It does not compromise with the sinner at all. Sinners are under the law. They are under the law in the sense that they are required to obey the law in every point and they are subject to its harsh penalty. The fog of the curse, prevents sinners from seeing the absolute beauty of the law.

Example: You know, a hangman might be a very handsome man, but to the condemned man, he is a terrifying figure.

And the law might be very beautiful, but to the condemned, it is a terrifying executioner.

5. The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ which delivers from the penalty of the law. It is a very simple matter. *Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.* That is, thou shalt be justified. You shall be declared forgiven. And that simple legal declaration removes the sinner from under the law. And when the sinner is taken out from under the law, there is joy indeed, because the bad news of the law has been undone.

6. The gospel is the good news. And it is good news indeed. The sinner is mercifully moved from under the condemnation of the law to the shelter of God's grace. What good news this is! The law sent me fleeing desperately to the gospel and the gospel saved me.

7. Since the law and the gospel are co-workers, they serve one another. First, the law sends the sinner to the gospel for salvation by faith. The gospel says, "Thank you very much for sending me sinners ripe for salvation." Then, in gratitude, the gospel sends new creations back to the law ready and willing to obey the law and honor the law with a pure heart.