

## The Freedom of Grace or the Yoke of Law?

Last week Richard gave us a really good message in which he summarised some of the main issues which led to the Protestant reformation some 500 years ago. Richard talked about the specialisation & the professionalisation of the Priesthood in the days prior to the reformation, which had the effect of turning most churchgoers into spectators rather than participants. As Richard pointed out, the Church had never risen to a more powerful position - politically, or in terms of size & influence - than it had become in the European middle ages; and yet at the same time it was probably never further from the teachings of Jesus than it had fallen at that time. And this seems to be a common theme of history - that whenever Jesus' church has power & status, it gets there by letting go of the teachings of Jesus. And that's because we are not called to be a great & powerful institution - but to be a servant community, & a missionary community, & strangers & aliens in this world. Yet, something in us keeps longing for power, doesn't it?

And when the reformers overthrew the yoke of an institutionalised church which had become so extremely legalistic & hierarchal, they started out with huge idealism. But the problem is **we are all by nature legalists, & we are all so easily corrupted by power.** And it wasn't long before parts of the reformation were doing things that were just as bad as the Roman church they had replaced. For example John **Calvin** attempted to set up the city of God in Geneva, with the vision was that it would be a place where every person would know & love God, & follow his word. But how did it turn out? Well here's one report:

*attendance at church and sermons was compulsory, and Calvin himself preached at great length three or four times a week. Refusal to take the Eucharist was a crime.*

*The ruling body, the Consistory, could summon anyone for questioning, investigate any charge of backsliding, and entered homes periodically to be sure no one was doing anything immoral or irreligious. Legislation specified the number of dishes to be served at each meal and the colour of garments citizens were to wear. What one was permitted to wear depended upon who*

*one was, for despite the original vision, Geneva quickly became a class-ridden society, with the professional clergy ruling over the laity. And on & on it went.*

So how **easily churches & denominations & each of us, slide into legalism**, as if somehow laws & rules could bring us closer to God, closer to each other & closer to our our own true selves.

I'm convinced that one of the reasons for this is that most of us start of from a place of feeling really **disempowered**, & when we feel disempowered on the inside, we all try & make up for that in other ways. Legalism is one of those ways.

I was watching a documentary earlier this week, & it had in it an interview with a guy who was a part of a gang, & who had been in & out of prison for violent assaults, but he was really up front, & he said the only moments in his life that he ever felt like a powerful person was when he was being violent. But most of the time he felt powerless & like his life counted for nothing. Now that's an extreme example, but for most of us this holds true - the greater the sense of internal power we have, the more secure we feel, the less likely we are to hurt ourselves or others. But, conversely, the less the internal sense of power we posses - the more likely we are to do things that will hurt ourselves or others. People who have been crushed either stay crushed or they try to crush others. **Hurt people hurt people.**

But for those of us who follow Jesus - an inner power has been promised to us.

And today I want to talk about how we can live in the power of grace - that power that Jesus was referring to when he told his followers, ***you must wait in the city until you are clothed with power form on high.***

I am convinced that living in God's grace, & living in God's power, are intricately related. And I believe there's a way we can find & take hold of

both, so that God's Spirit fills us & flows out of us and touches the lives of the people around us.

Even though the story of the New Testament is one of grace from start to finish, we still seem to carry the burden of religious legalisms around with us far too often.

And in so many churches & Christian books & sermons, you still hear the message that we just need to try harder so that we can do better & be more successful, as if that were the gospel of Christ. But it's not.

Last week at a house group, when someone summed up the religious messages they had grown up with was basically : ***“you're a sinner and you need to try harder”*** - which actually is a tragic reversal of what Jesus came to say & to do.

In fact as we read the gospels, a couple of things are clear. The people that Jesus had the greatest trouble with, & confronted & clashed with over & over, weren't the so called **“sinners”**; it was with the religious professionals & the so-called experts in God's laws. And these were the people who were going around labelling others as “sinners”.

**OK, lets do a quick Biblical story overview:** In the beginning - men & women, as represented by Adam & Eve - us, we are created for fellowship with God & with each other. In the book of Genesis we read that Adam & Eve walk with God, talk with God, & there is an immediacy and an intimacy that they have with both God & with each other. And then comes the fall: the refusal to hear & heed God's voice. The result is alienation, a sense of loss & distance not just with God, but with each other & with our own inner true selves. When we read Genesis 3 we see that the very first casualty of the fall is our own sense of wholeness & being loved - a sense of shame falls on the man and the woman & the first thing they want to do is hide from each other with fig-leaves, hide from God, because they are ashamed of who they are. Things get worse. Within one more chapter of Scripture we have the first murder. Within 14 chapters we have the first war. No good thing comes from

shame. And yet religion has so often dealt in shame, & made it a tool for keeping people in their place, instead of helping people find freedom from that shame.

By the time we've got to the book of **Exodus**, things have got so bad that God has no choice but to give humanity a set of **laws**, what we know as the 10 commandments & all the other subsidiary laws associated with them. Human behaviour had become so appalling that laws are needed to stop us killing each other, stealing from each other, lying to each other & so on.

But the problem with running a society or a community entirely by laws is that you have to keep coming up with new rules & new laws to cover every contingency and new situation - and we see that happening through the book of Deuteronomy & Leviticus and so on.

But at the same time, running through the Old Testament, there is this poignant & mysterious promise that something greater & more powerful than the law, would one day be given to us. There are lot's of glimpses of that promise, like when Habakkuk & Isaiah both tell us that the day is coming when *'the whole earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea'* (Habakkuk 2:13-14).

And then we come to the dramatic prophesy given by the prophet **Jeremiah**, written around 600 BC, where he tells us that God isn't just going to tinker with the religious system or add a few more laws to bring them up to date or improve them - but that the days are coming **when God will do something so revolutionarily new**, it will be regarded as making a **whole new Covenant with his people**. This word Covenant means sacred agreement or bond. And over time, the covenant's God made with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David were woven together & referred to collectively as the 'old covenant'. In Paul's writings in New Testament, he is especially thinking of the covenant with Moses & the law, when he talks about the Old Covenant.

Anyway, let's read Jeremiah's prophesy again (thanks George), and look at the promises it contains:

**v 29**, each person will be responsible for their own behaviour & sin; we'll be coming into a time when spirituality & blessing & curse won't be something you inherit from your forefathers, but that we receive directly from God. *God has no grandchildren*, as the saying goes.

**v 33-** *I will put my law in their minds, & write my law on their hearts; I will be their God & they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, "Know the Lord, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. 'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'* So the day is coming, according to Jeremiah, when the law of God will move from being an external code imposed from outside, to an internal code that's based on intimacy with God. Not only that, any kind of clergy - laity division will become irrelevant, because everyone will know me, from the least educated or wealthy person through to the greatest. And whereas God's law will be written indelibly on our hearts, God will not be remembering our sins - they will be irrevocably forgiven by him.

Now this is not the only place in the NT that this radical new covenant or sacred bond & relationship is promised. The prophet **Joel**, writing even further back, probably in the 8th Century BC, uttered these most famous words, that are re-quoted in the book of Acts, on the day of Pentecost:

*'And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy (in other words, gender won't make any difference, the Spirit will be given to females just as much as to males), your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions (in other words, age won't make any difference, God will speak to & through the young & the old).*

*Even on my servants (in other words, social status & profession won't make any difference, God's Spirit & gifts will be given to the poor as much as the rich), on both men and women (gender equality again) I will pour out my Spirit in those days.*

Now this prophecy is of course literally & initially fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. That marks the day that God's law & God's presence & God's companionship moved from being an external thing to being something burning in our hearts & minds. This event was so incredible & revolutionary, it was marked on the day of Pentecost with the sound of a violent rushing wind and the sight of fire falling from heaven. And Joel picks up on those signs with even more spectacularly poetic language, when he says *I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. Joel is signalling that a revolution is occurring.*

But this day marked the birthday of the church, and the birthday of open access to an equal opportunities, saving, healing, loving God - for the quotation finishes in the book of Acts with:

*And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved;"*

And so we arrive at this 'wow' moment when we realise that the New Covenant, the new relationship, the new deal that Jesus made with us through his death & resurrection, through the tearing open of the religious veil in the temple, through the outpouring of his Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, & on each one of since then,

we come to realise what an incredible thing this is that this Jesus, the one in whom dwell all the riches of wisdom & knowledge contained in the whole Universe - NOW DWELLS IN US. If that doesn't make our heads spin & our hearts leap, then I don't know what will.

Now that the Holy Spirit has come, now that grace has come - where does God's law fit in to the scheme of things? This is a question that the Apostle Paul wrestles with all the way through the NT. Paul of course had been a Pharisee himself, an expert in God's law. This is what he says about himself in Philipians 3:4-6

*“ I was circumcised on the eighth day, belonging to the people of Israel, belonging to the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; & in regard to the law, a Pharisee; & in regard to righteousness based on the law, faultless; & in regard to zealotry, well I persecuted the church.”*

But here's the thing - Paul was crushed by the weight of the law & by his own inability to keep it. He was a frustrated and angry man - because what he had was a great set of laws & but no power to live it out. And when he came across a bunch of people who said they had something greater than those laws, it drove him crazy & he wanted to kill them. Paul was a violent man & a religious terrorist - until he found true power, and love, and grace. Amazing grace, that saved a wretch like me

So what then was the point of the law? Well when we're spiritual infants, we do need laws & rules to stop us from hurting ourselves & each other. We need rules to stop us committing murder and adultery & lying & stealing. But here's the thing - rules can protect us, but they can never empower us. They can never speak to the deepest needs we have as people. For that we need **an internal locus of control** - & for that we need laws that are written on our hearts & minds. And as we've seen with Calvin in Geneva, once you start trying to control behaviour through laws & rules, immediately you have to start drafting even more laws to cover new situations, & contingencies & loop holes & exceptions, which is exactly what happened with the Pharisees: they had laws about keeping the laws, & then laws about keeping those laws. By the time of Jesus they had developed some 613 laws they were trying to live by & which they insisted every other person in Israel should live by too. And their label for anyone who wouldn't or couldn't live up to all those laws was "A sinner".

So in Matthew 22, when one of the experts in the law come & ask Jesus which is the greatest commandment in all the law, he had 613 options he could have chosen from. And what does he choose?

**Matthew 22:35-40**

35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:  
36 “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”  
37 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

And for Paul , the law-keeper who found Jesus, who for so long had been burdened by trying to keep those 613 laws to try & please God, it must have felt so good to be out from under that. And this is why he talks so much in his letters about the freedom Jesus has won for us.

In **Galatians 5**, he says *“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”* He is exhorting the Galatians - don’t be dragged back into the slavery of trying to keep a bunch of laws. Stay free. Laws about how often you have to go to church or read your bible or what clothes you should wear for example.

Paul in this passage talks about a yoke of slavery. But Jesus talks about a different kind of yoke, a yoke of freedom. In **Matthew 11:28-30**

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

I think we all know what a yoke is, don’t we?

I know there are some people here who don’t like The Message version (& others here who love it) - but it really does bring out something special with its rendition of this passage:

*“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of*

*grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."*

Jesus promises us rest, to teach us, gentleness & humility. He asks for a partnership, that we walk with him. He asks us to watch how he does things & learn from him. **Let's try & do this one thing this week** - spend some time in quiet reading about how Jesus deals with someone in the gospels, someone who is burdened & struggling - & then lets go & do likewise.

**What does it mean to live under grace?** I don't think we can ever grasp God's grace till we have fully grasped how unfathomable, unending, & unbounded God's unearned & unconditional love for each of us. I know this is a cliché, but this saying is true, is completely true:

*There is nothing you can ever do that that could cause God to love you more than he does right now, and conversely, there is nothing that you can ever do that could make God love you less than he does right now.*

I want to finish now with the prayer that the Apostle Paul prayed for people of Ephesus - & by extension, for us

Ephesians 3:16-19

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.  
Amen