

Intro:

Last week we took a bit of a digression from our progressive exposition of Romans to consider the work of Christ as opposed to the works of man in a message we called “The Works of Salvation”. We were keying in on a few words in Rm 4.14.

This week I want to take another digression, though we won’t stray quite so far from our text. I want to look carefully at some details in Rm 4.15 and consider the topic:

The Function of Law

Let’s read our text in isolation from its context for a moment:

Read Rm 4.15

This verse explains to us why “the merit-folks”¹ have only dust and ashes in their expectation of benefit and blessing from the law – if their expectation were true, faith is empty and the promise is ‘put out of work’ because...

The law brings about wrath (Rm 4.15a, NAU)

Our verse goes on to explain why the law is nevertheless necessary...

but where there is no law, there also is no violation (Rm 4.15b, NAU – ‘transgression’ – KJV)

Both of these statements relate to the function of law in general and the function of the OT law in particular.

We cannot conceive what it would be like to live in a world without law or without sin.

1. Suppose Adam and Eve had passed the test in the Garden – what would the world have been like? (No more need of law, man would be righteous by nature)
2. Suppose God sent Adam and Eve out of the Garden and into the world as sinners, but gave no further instructions (laws) by which men were to operate? What would such a world have been like?
 - a. We can barely conceive of this ... perhaps the pre-flood world was something like this;
 - b. Perhaps the nations outside of God’s covenant with Abraham were something like this ... not much input from God – Noahic covenant, vaguely and barely remembered and passed on from generation to generation

¹ William R. Newell, *Romans: verse by verse*, p. 143.

Nevertheless, in both pre and post flood peoples, there was a sense of law whether God specifically revealed it or not:

1. Cain feared other men killing him for killing Abel – he had an innate sense of law.
2. The legal codes of the nations (such as the Code of Hammurabi or the laws of Greece and Rome) reflect an innate sense of right and wrong, albeit with minimal direct revelation from God (Noahic Covenant)

So we cannot conceive of a world without law.

When God specifically gave to one nation a code of Law (Mosaic Law and Covenant), it is little wonder that it was viewed as superior to the laws of other nations and of a privileged national position of men in relation to God (unlike all other men – those ‘dogs’ of the Gentiles).

The Law was thus revered.

And since the Law came from God, it is holy. Paul will tell us in Rm 7.12 that “the law *is* holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.”

That is the Divinely inspired view of the Law.

Our text, however, puts the law in a very negative light, as do several other passages of Paul’s writings, even Rm 7 where the Law is said to be good.

1. The law works wrath
2. The law increases transgression

If this is so, then why did God give the Law? It can’t save and it produces exceedingly negative consequences.

Various answers could be given. I have done a little additional reading and find that *many* answers have been given. I learned some new very long words in the process (I will refrain from sharing them with you on the grounds I can’t pronounce them!).

Some writers list three basic purposes to the law. A fine Bible scholar named J. Dwight Pentecost offered an article on “The Purpose of the Law” to give us ten purposes or functions of the Law.²

There is some overlap in all these lists, but what I want to do is survey our passage and related passages and give you as carefully as I can the Bible reasons for the Law as we consider *The Function of Law*.

² J. Dwight Pentecost, “The Purpose of the Law”, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1971; 2002), 128:227-233.

Proposition: The Law brings the individual to the crisis of conviction from which there is no way of escape except the grace of God.

I. The working of wrath

A. The bald statement of our passage

1. The principle of law

- a. Passage begins with this emphatic statement: ‘For not through law [no article] is the promise...’ (13)
- b. First reason: ‘For if the ones out of law [no article] are heirs...’ (14)
- c. Second reason: ‘For the law wrath is working...’
 - 1) Article indicates it is a particular law
 - 2) Could be Mosaic Law or
 - 3) The law that the ‘merit-folk’ of v. 14 are depending on (whichever law it might be)

Same effect, whether it is Mosaic law or any other law that a man thinks merits God’s approval.

2. The work of law

- a. To be ‘of the law’ (14) is to be one who works the works of the law
- b. But the work of the law on us is the opposite of what the law-worker hopes for
 - 1) He hopes for God’s approval and God’s final blessing
 - 2) He gets instead God’s wrath: antagonism, condemnation and destruction

“After the analogy of the usage in this epistle, therefore, we should regard the wrath which the law works as the wrath of God.”³ [Murray works this out in detail in his commentary.]

³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 143.

“The first clause of this verse substantiates the conclusion drawn in v. 14 by showing what the law *does* — ‘produces wrath’ — as opposed to what it *cannot do* — secure the inheritance.”⁴

B. The description given in 2 Cor 3.7, 9

1. The ministration ‘deaconing’ of death (7)
2. The ministration ‘deaconing’ of condemnation (9)

Condemnation = sentence and execution
This ‘ordinary household service’ of the Law is:

- Glorious – because it is revealed by the glory of God and is the mind of the glorious God
- Ordinary – because it is what the Law is intended to do

C. The curse expressed in Gal 3.10 (and Dt 27.26)

1. Similar construction to Rm 4.14: lit., ‘as many as *are* out of law ...’ [no article]; compare ‘if the ones out of law *are* heirs...’
2. The ‘merit-folks’ are under a curse
 - a. The curse of The Law (Dt 27.26)
 - b. The curse that falls on anyone who attempts righteousness by the law but fails to keep *ALL* the Law *ALL* the time

“Any promise based on the law would have ended up in wrath with no one to inherit the promise.”⁵

The law works wrath... it cannot work the promise...

But the law has another function – a necessary function...

II. The inclusion of transgressors

A. Stated negatively in our passage: ‘if no law, no transgression’

1. Second clause seems a little out of place – could be taken to suggest ‘if only there had been no law, there would have been no transgression – *and thus no condemnation*’

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 276.

⁵ Herman A. Hoyt, *The First Christian Theology*, p. 67.

2. We have a similar verse in Rm 5.13
 - a. Here, ‘sin is not imputed when there is no law’
 - b. In our passage, ‘where there is no law, there is no transgression’
3. Go on to Rm 5.14 – ‘Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses...’

Everyone still died.

The absence of law would not remove the sting of death, it would not remove condemnation.

The absence of law would make the reason for condemnation invisible – there would be no transgression.

B. Law makes the guilt of the transgressor plain and includes every transgressor in its condemnation

1. Consider Luke 10.26-28

“At first, it might appear that the Lord was teaching salvation by law-keeping. Such was not the case. God never intended that anyone should ever be saved by keeping the law. The Ten Commandments were given to people who were already sinners. The purpose of the law is not to save from sin, but to produce the knowledge of sin. The function of the law is to show man what a guilty sinner he is.”⁶

2. Consider 1 Tim 1.8-11

On 1 Tim 8-11: “The main function of the law is to condemn *lawbreakers* (9–11). The negative side of the law is most prominent. The various types of offenders mentioned are all those against whom the law can operate, as they have committed specific offences. Paul singles out extreme examples, but at least no-one could deny the point he makes—that all these offences are *contrary to ... sound doctrine*.”⁷

⁶ William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad, *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments*, electronic ed., Lk 10:26 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995).

⁷ D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. ed. of: *The new Bible*

3. Consider Gal 3.19

On Gal 3.19: “The subordinate character of the law’s function is brought out in a variety of ways in v 19. First, it was *added*, *i.e.* it was not the original covenant. Secondly, it was given *because of transgressions*, which may mean that the law was intended to restrain sin or, more probably, to bring transgressions to light (Rom. 3:19–20; 4:13–15; 5:13) and even to augment them (in the sense of Rom. 5:20; 7:7–11).”⁸

4. Rm 3.19-20

- a. The Law shuts the mouth of all objectors
- b. The Law brings the knowledge of sin

C. Every law has the same effect: law of God, law of man, law of church, law of home – all laws make transgressors

1. Suppose we make laws in our church about how a Christian should live (and we do)
2. Suppose one of you were to think that if I keep this good Christian law, God will be pleased with me and I will inherit the promise
3. Suppose we make a law concerning music, for example (and we do)
 - a. It may very well be to your spiritual benefit to keep that law in this life
 - b. But ultimately, it will only produce wrath – because who can keep the law perfectly? (You hear music in malls, in ads, in cars, wherever... that breaks our law.)
 - c. And living by one law means living by all laws – even if you can keep one law perfectly, do you keep all laws perfectly?
4. The solution is not ‘let’s do away with laws’ – because laws exist in nature
 - a. If we had no written laws of any kind in this country, it would still be possible to be a transgressor
 - b. Natural law would militate against driving your car as fast as you wanted to without regard for the life or property of anyone else

commentary. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed., 1 Ti 1:3 (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

⁸ D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary* : Ga 3:15.

You kill someone speeding and everyone would know you had transgressed – you had done something wrong.

5. But what about the ‘law-abiding citizen’?
 - a. The whole law makes transgressions apparent
 - b. The visibility of transgressions makes transgressors

The law-keeper says, “I’ve never killed anybody.” Jesus says, “Have you hated?”

The law-keeper says, “I’ve never committed adultery.” Jesus says, “Have you thought it?”

So...

What the law does is make it plain that you are a transgressor.

What the law does is work *God’s wrath* in you.

The law is inescapable, but it does show us what is really necessary...

III. The conclusion of grace (16a)

“Therefore *it is* of faith, that *it might be* by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed”

Menno Simons: “This is the real function and end of law: to reveal unto us the will of God, to discover sin unto us, to threaten with the wrath and the punishment of the Lord, to announce death and to point us from it to Christ, so that we, crushed in Spirit, may before the eyes of God die unto sin, and seek and find the only and eternal medicine and remedy for our souls, Jesus Christ.”⁹

Conclusion:

Proposition: The Law brings the individual to the crisis of conviction from which there is no way of escape except the grace of God.

⁹ Menno Simons, *Reply to Gellius Faber*, in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons: c. 1496–1561*, ed. John Christian Wenger (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1956) 718, quoted in W. R. Estep, “Law and Gospel in the Anabaptist/Baptist Tradition”, *Grace Theological Journal*, (Grace Seminary, 1991; 2002), 12:199.