

Law and Righteousness

SCRIPTURE speaks much about law and righteousness, and yet it seems that few really have clear thoughts about them. This is all the more surprising, as they are matters of vital moment to us. In Israel few appear to have grasped their significance, and beneath that fact lies the cause of Israel's failure to appreciate the Lord Jesus, either during His personal ministry to them or subsequent to their having crucified Him, when the meaning of His resurrection was declared by God through the apostle Paul.

We will attempt to distinguish several aspects of law, and also seek to gain an insight into righteousness, especially as to what lies beneath righteousness and makes it a possibility in the case of humans. First we will set out four major aspects of law and discuss them briefly, and then turn to the questioning of righteousness to find its vital spring. As an aid to examining law we will define our headings thus: (1) Law in relation to Israel; (2) Law in relation to the just; (3) Law in relation to the sinner; (4) Law as an enactment of God.

Before proceeding, it is desirable that we clarify our terms, so as to be able to think accurately. The Scriptures employ a number of words, and these again have several usages.

thure is the word for law; it belongs to a family having the general idea of AIM. The form *thure* will be recognized in the better-known spelling *torah*. It is the more general term, but is used specifically, as when it indicates the law of the burnt offering, etc.

Dbr belongs to the family SPEAK, and one of its usages is covered by our term *word*. It is the expression employed of the ten *commandments*. They are the ten *speakings* of God, and form an initial summary of the whole of the law.

To these are related the DELINEATINGS or *statutes*, *chqe*, and the INSTRUCTINGS, *tzue*. These latter are the more specific terms, though they are used in the plural in a very wide sense.

We may perhaps better realize the significance of these terms from a few sentences where two of them occur together: Deut. 6:6 these *words* which I instruct (A.V. command)

8:1 all the *instructions* which I instruct (A.V. commandments which I command)

Num. 19:2 this is the *statute* (A.V. ordinance) of the *law*.

Another term used a few times is NOTE, *phrd*, which is covered by our word *precept*. The Greek Scriptures use the term precept much more frequently than do the Hebrew ones. The latter have it only in the Psalms.

The term *oduth*, FURTHER, is *testimony*, and one of its usages is a general name for the ten words, especially in regard to their being on the two tablets of stone. *Testimony* views the law as being Jehovah's witness to Israel, and it sums up all God's requirements.

Yet a further word is JUDGING, *mshpht*, which, in its primary usage, seems to indicate the decisions which Jehovah makes. It is also used of the sacrifices and the passover, translated by the Authorized Version as *manner* and *ordinance* (Lev. 5:10, 9:16, Num. 9:3,4, 15:16, 24). Its use in connection with the sacrifice may be because the judgment of God was shown in the sacrifice.

One verse in the Psalms (19:7) gathers together all these terms, and a translation which distinguishes them would be somewhat as follows:

The *law* of Jehovah is flawless, restoring the soul.

The *testimony* of Jehovah is faithful, making wise the simple.

The *precepts* of Jehovah are upright, rejoicing the heart.

The *instructions* of Jehovah are pure, lighting up the eyes.

The *fear* of Jehovah is clean, standing for the future.

The *judgments* of Jehovah are truth: . . . righteous altogether.

The major point for us to realize is the close relation which exists in the use of these terms, and how, in fulfilling a statute or instruction, the law is being kept, observed, or done.

It is notable that the word *ritual*, prevalently used in theology, is not found in the Authorized Version. There is, in the Greek Scriptures, the word *thréskeia*, and this should be rendered *ritual*. It occurs four times, and a study will reveal that what we term ritual is much akin to religion. The interesting point is that Israel construed a religion from the law of Jehovah, and they overlooked the essence that the law was a transcript of the righteousness, the just relations, which God required to exist amongst His people. If Israel had penetrated into matters, they would have understood that the law was comprised within two great precepts, love of God and love of associates (Deut. 6:5, Lev. 19:18, Mat. 22:37-39). Love is the complement of law (Rom. 13:10), and such love would have ensured fidelity to the law. To Israel, and to humanity as a whole, comes the condemnation that they are incapable of the love which would display God's righteous law.

LAW IN RELATION TO ISRAEL

The law does not provide life, but it assumes life in its subjects, and that they desire life's continuance in righteousness. For this reason law urges attention to its details with a view to the lengthening of life. Its office is to point the way of righteousness, to encourage righteous living, and to condemn all unjust conduct. Any who are obedient to the law's instructions stand uncondemned. This is the position in which Israel was placed at the giving of the law.

The institution of the law came with the prospect of Israel's entry into the land. To them it was said: See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil (Deut. 30: 15, A.V.). They were enjoined to walk in God's ways and saying and statutes: therefore choose life that both thou and thy seed may live (Deut. 10:19, A.V.). They were instructed by Jehovah with the object of His preserving them alive as at this day (Deut. 6:24). In their love and obedience to Jehovah they were to find Him to be their life and length of days (Deut. 30:20). Attention to God's instructions would have proved to Israel that man does not live by bread alone, but by the words proceeding from Jehovah's mouth (Deut. 8:3). The words of the law were not an empty thing, but were Israel's life, and through them their days would be lengthened (Deut. 32:47).

Entry into the land was to enable Israel to keep the law and to live the law. So long as they adhered to the law's precepts, life's continuance was a prospect for them (Deut. 4:26, 40, 5:16, 6:2, 11:9, 17:20, 25:15, 30:18, 32:47). Yet they were, through their entire life, in fear of death and so lived in slavery (Heb. 2:15); death hung over them because of their failure to maintain the righteousness which law required.

Even in the prophets, when deportation and captivity was a threat, the call was to seek Jehovah and live (Amos 5:4,6, Ezek. 19:23,33:11). The departure from law was a departure from life, but God's mercy still held out that a return to law would be a return to life.

That the law was to give a lengthening of days is quite evident: those who do law would live as long as they do it. So long as law be fulfilled, so long would life be lengthened. It is not in point that law does not promise eonian life, for law does not promise - what is outside its capacity. Law cannot vivify, but the evangel can, since it is God's power. Nor is it in point that none succeeded in keeping the law, for that is another part of the subject of law, which will come before us later. The precepts were to life, but all around was the spectacle of death, and this the law was impotent to alter. Those under the law did not give the heed necessary to fulfill the law, and so did not continue to live.

Israel undertook to abide by Jehovah's instructions, and they have painfully proved that the precepts to life were in reality a ministration of death, But Israel's future will see the law written in their hearts, and from this there will be a continuance of life to enjoy the allotment given them by God. Then will they recognize and serve Him with delight.

THE LAW IN RELATION TO THE JUST

The law is not laid down for the just (1 Tim. 1:9), for, in its first analysis, the law expressed the righteousness which humans would display were they really righteous. If humans were righteous they would live righteously without a law to prescribe the character of their conduct. The law, in particular the ten words, summarizes and corresponds to the actual righteousness which would ensue from persons who were inherently righteous.

We may see the position of righteous beings by noting what is said of the fruit of the spirit, which is but the just requirement of law; against such things there is no law (Gal. 5:23), In a word, no law is needed by persons

who are capable of living fully as there described. Do we not also see this in the case of those of the nations, who, having no law, may be doing by instinct what the law demands? Righteous deeds are forthcoming without law, for they are a law to themselves, that is, they require no law, for instinct is the law to them, Thus just persons will live justly without law; to such law is without utility, and would be redundant.

The thought we are seeking to express can be confirmed by considering the ultimate to which God, in Christ Jesus, is moving. At the consummation the son gives up the kingdom to God. With this all sovereignty, authority and power will be abrogated, and for the very plain reason that all subjects will then be righteous. With them just conduct will be innate, being the only possibility.

It is thus obvious that, though the just characteristics of law would find coincidence with just persons, yet it would be purposeless to ordain laws in their case. Moreover, to appoint law carries the initial implication that conduct may not be just, and the fuller import suggests an unbalanced tendency needing the control of law. This could not be so with those who are righteous.

THE LAW IN RELATION TO THE SINNER

For sinners, and in particular for Israel, the law was educative: by its office sin was recognized. In this way it became an escort to Christ, and the several laws of sacrifice amplified the perception of the need for Him. The prime intention behind law is to show that humans are unable to fulfil its just demands. This explains why no one succeeds in complying with law. Law requires us to be righteous in order to fulfil its behests.

The placing of Israel under law ought to have indicated to them their lack of inherent righteousness, for, if law be necessary, it carries with it the implication of wrongs which the law will regulate and control. Keeping the law would have shown Israel's righteousness, but the highest actual outcome was that of becoming unblameable in regard to the statutes and judgments of the law. These provided the way for God to pass over their failings in view of the future rectification which God made in Christ.

The law certainly speaks of righteousness; it is a righteousness shown by what is done. This much is clear from a comparison of Leviticus 18:5 with Romans 10:5. It is there indicated that to do law is to live righteously, and one who so lived would not be condemned by law. But it is a most onerous position, for the least transgression cannot be allowed, but must reveal the law's severity. The question must not be considered from the human standpoint, for we are dealing with a matter which is vital in relation to God. A person is either righteous or he is not. There can be no middle position before God. The escape by way of repentance and sacrifice, though desired by God, really proves unrighteousness. We are unable to discover human righteousness by the keeping of God's law.

Israel did not learn their own lack. They did not realize they were without righteousness. They pursued the law of righteousness, not understanding that the law was escorting them to Christ for perfection; that it was not perfecting them. They had no perception that the law put them under a curse, and that they required to be reclaimed from law.

Nor did they appreciate that the law in certain respects was accommodated to their heart (Mat. 19:8), and was weighted by fleshly precepts (Heb. 7:16), burdened with infirm and poor elements (Gal. 4:9), and in some ways was characterized by unprofitableness and weakness (Heb. 7:18).

The sincere saint in Israel was the one who, under law's tuition, came to recognize sin and saw the meaning of the sacrifice which pointed to Christ. From such arose the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart and spirit, and these Jehovah accepted.

The fearers of God, without God's revelation, are those who follow the wisdom of the nature bestowed on God's creation. They, in measure, understand their need of God and obligation to Him, and render to Him the reverence instinct suggests.

To the mass of humanity, who, unlike Israel, were not placed under law, the position is that the law convinces of sin. Sincere attempts to fulfil the law's demands result in the cry of wretchedness. To such cases there comes the light of God's grace in the evangel. In that they find the solution of their problems before God, and come to learn of God's own righteousness provided for them apart from law.

LAW AS AN ENACTMENT OF GOD

Law is God's method of government; therefore law is the expression of authority. God is the Authority behind law, and He is its Source. As the Authority God is the Enforcer of law, for, since the law is the rule of action prescribing obligations and duties such as displayed righteousness and justice, it must be that God enforces law by penalty. The law must be upheld in regard to the majesty and righteousness of God, as well as because delinquencies from law require that penalty be suffered by those who break it.

The requirements of law must be maintained, otherwise the law not only falls into dishonor, but, seeing that God is the Authority, and that the law expresses His righteousness, the passing over would seem to question these. God made such provisions in the law that His mercy could be extended to His subjects. The sacrifices, whilst serving to uphold the law, must find a counterpart in which actual efficacy resides. This Christ provides, Who came under law that He should be reclaiming those under law.

Christ's relation to law must be the same as God's and so He must require the law's penalty. The incarnation made Christ the Man with dominion, and the penalty required by law must be asserted by Him. When dying under law He assumed the remitted penalty, and in this way upholds the leniency extended through the law's sacrifices, thus providing the vital value, in which they were deficient.

With God as the Authority behind the law, it cannot be merely a code, but must be regarded as a matter the reality of which we find in Him; it is His righteous nature transferred to words indicating that He requires righteousness and justice amongst His moral creation, both toward each other and toward Himself. The law is therefore a matter to be obeyed and fulfilled, for it corresponds to the actuality which is righteous, being the ideal statement of the just relation to which God's righteousness must hold those to whom the law is given.

As an ideal, law cannot offer rewards. It is proper to do right, to be just, apart from any other consideration or issue. There is no question of expediency in regard to that which is supremely excellent, and so the sincere person regards law as the perfect matter to be attended to because it is perfect. Rewards are outside the regard of such persons.

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Righteousness cannot radically differ, whether in God or in man, and the same is true of love and holiness. These three qualities must exist in the nature of God, and from that nature arise all the actions of righteousness, love and holiness. To God the demands of law, or the instructions of precepts, would be an affront.

To require law to govern conduct is to indicate the lack of righteousness as a characteristic; the very giving of law suggests the absence of a uniform disposition and the possibility of conduct which is not in accord with justice. The question then becomes a matter as to which will prevail, the good or the bad conduct. Law may be a factor toward directing conduct, but it cannot effectively control since it gives no power to execute the demands it makes, for, as a matter of fact, man has not the ability to do what he knows to be right.

Inherent sin prevents humanity from living righteously, and law is unable to subject the flesh; it cannot alter the disposition, for sin finds its strength in law. Even in the case of the saint, law is unable to govern conduct; law is definitely important, and the saint has died to law. The place of law is filled by the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus. The law could not give righteousness because it could not vivify, but now the believer has the spirit which is life because of righteousness.

Righteousness must then be the power to live righteously. God has such power; He alone is able always to act righteously. The evangel shows that He can justify from sin, and also bestow upon the believer the ability for righteousness. He gives us, in Christ Jesus, His own righteousness. This is, even now, the spirit of life which contacts with our spirit and makes it righteous, so that the just requirement of law may be fulfilled in us. Consequently we have power to do righteousness apart from the law's demands; in fact, the spirit of life is the law to us, since it corresponds to the just requirements of law.

In our first approach to the evangel of God, we learn that we have righteousness by faith in Christ Jesus. Deeper acquaintance teaches us of our death with Christ and for this reason we are *not* to live in sin. Still

further insight shows us that we have the spirit of life in Christ Jesus. Thus we proceed from faith in a righteousness provided by God, to negative righteousness seeing that we died with Christ, and so are *not* under sin, and then to the positive righteousness coming to our spirit because we have the same spirit of life which resides in Christ Jesus; that is, in our spirit we are now constituted righteous, and ultimately we shall receive the full value of our first faith righteousness. This will inhere our whole being and bless us to the full with God's own righteousness, which will be satisfying to Him and a delight to ourselves. The spring of righteousness then is God, in and through our Lord Jesus Christ.

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