

Law or Grace?

By Ronald L. Dart

It had been a hard three days. David and the handful of young men with him had left in a hurry and had taken no food. By the time they got to a place called Nob, they were in a bad way. They needed food and there was only one place David thought they might get something to eat. The Tabernacle at Nob.

When David arrived there, the priest Ahimelech was unnerved. David was the most powerful man in the Kingdom after Saul. "Why are you here?" he asked, "And why alone?" He knew that David normally traveled with a formal retinue. David replied, "The king charged me with a certain matter and said to me, 'No one is to know anything about your mission and your instructions.' As for my men, I have told them to meet me at a certain place."

This was an outright lie. David was fleeing for his life from Saul. And if it were not enough that he lied, he goes on to compound his lawbreaking. "What do you have to eat here?" he demanded. "Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find."

"I don't have any ordinary bread on hand," the priest replied, "however, there is some consecrated bread here - provided the men have kept themselves from women."

"Indeed," said David, "women have been kept from us about these three days, since I came out, and the vessels of the young men are holy, and the bread is in a manner common, yea, though it were sanctified this day in the vessel." So the priest gave David the hallowed bread (1 Samuel 21:5).

David and the priest engaged in a classic example of rationalization, of reasoning one's way around the law. It was an infraction of the law. This is beyond dispute. Only the priests were allowed to eat the holy bread. Even Jesus said that what David did was not lawful.

Jesus took occasion to remark on David's conduct when His disciples were criticized for plucking ears of grain on the Sabbath day. In the eyes of the Pharisees, this was harvesting and therefore it was working on the Sabbath. "Look!" exclaimed the Pharisees, "your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

Jesus replied, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread - which was *not lawful* for them to do, but only for the priests" (Matthew 12:1-4). Now even though Jesus confirms that what David did was wrong, Jesus seems ready to let David off the hook for this infraction. But why? And on what basis?

When it comes to matters of the law, there are those who say, "Give the people an inch and they will take a mile." The Pharisees were a good example of this. "We have to spell these things out," they said. "We must build a fence around the law lest one of us accidentally steps over the line." There is a strange fear in religious leaders that if we begin to let the barriers down people will take liberties and abuse the law - as though it were our fault that other people break the law.

It is clear that Jesus and the Pharisees were on opposite sides of this fence. A Pharisee might well have objected to Jesus by quoting the law which made it clear that David had done wrong. "When the law is so plain," he would want to know, "how can you justify what David did?"

I am going to answer that question, and in the process, I am going to explain one of the most important things you will ever learn about God and His law. If you can grasp what I am going to explain, it may revolutionize the way you read the Bible, the way you relate to God, and the way you relate to one another. If that sounds a little presumptuous to you, please wait and judge when I have finished.

First, let's get a few things straight:

1. All rationalizations aside, David did break the law. Jesus said he ate the bread which it was not lawful for him to eat.
2. The law of the showbread was not superseded or set aside by any actions of David. He did not have that kind of authority. His making an exception to the law in no way diminished the law.
3. The law of the showbread was not unimportant. It was just as important as any other law of God. It was the law then, and it will be the law when there is a tabernacle once again.

In the case I am about to make here, I am not against the law. I am a radical believer in the law of God. I take Jesus at His word when He says that not one jot or tittle shall pass from the law till everything has come to pass (Matthew 5:17-18).

Why, then, does Jesus use this example in reply to the accusation that His disciples were breaking the Sabbath? How can He justify David? And how can He justify David when there is not a hint of repentance on David's part, nor anything done to make up for his error?

The answer comes in one word, a familiar word, one that has been used so much, that no one seems to be sure what it means anymore. The word is *Grace*. And along with this word comes a truth of profound importance:

Grace is an Old Testament Doctrine.

David was justified, not because what he did was right, but because God is *gracious*. Now we all know that God is gracious, but I can't help wondering what some of us think that means. What does it mean to say that God is gracious? Let me see if I can explain.

There is a beautiful example of the graciousness of God right in the beginning of His relationship with man. You know it well. First, God created man in His own image, male and female. Then God placed them in a beautiful garden and told them to dress it and keep it. It is safe to consider that this man and this woman were perfect physical specimens and very attractive. They were stark naked. And God told them to be fruitful and multiply. Can I leave the rest to your imagination?

Now is God the sort of person who would hide in the bushes and watch Adam and Eve become intimate? Or is He the sort of person who would leave them entirely alone? There are two kinds of people reading this. On the one hand, there are those who believe that God is all seeing, that He knows everything that is happening, and that nothing is hidden from Him. On the other hand

there are those who believe that while God *can* know everything, there are some things He chooses not to know.

The Genesis account is totally charming, because God did what a *gracious* man would do. He created these two perfect physical specimens, put them in a gorgeous outdoor garden totally naked, and then granted them total privacy. God did not hide in the bushes and watch. Why not? Because He is *gracious*, that's why. Graciousness is that character trait that responds to awkward situations with grace. Does it limit God to say that He didn't watch? Of course not. It limits God to say that He had to watch. God is not a voyeur. He is gracious.

Then there are those who seem to believe that God is like a computer. If you press the delete button, things disappear. Automatically. Remorselessly. They believe that God enforces the law like a computer. You break the law, the law breaks you. But, you see, that is not what happened to David. God is not a computer, He is a person. Not only is He a person, He is a kind person, a gentle person, a compassionate person, a forgiving person, and above all, God is a *gracious* person.

Now it is true that God can be very strict at times and it is this strictness that men find terrifying. We know that God is gracious and merciful (mercy is an act of grace), but we also know that God is just. What we may not understand is that without justice, we have only caprice, and there is a great difference between a God who is gracious, and one who is capricious. Because there was justice, Adam and Eve were eventually shut out of the Garden and denied access to the Tree of Life. But that was because of a choice they had made.

Time passes and two sons are born, Cain and Abel. And in a fit of anger, Cain kills his brother. Later, Cain lied to God. Justice would have called for the death of Cain as well. Why did God not kill Cain? Why did He merely exile him and even set a mark on him to protect him? It is obvious, isn't it? Cain was allowed to live because God is gracious.

More time passes, and things really deteriorate on planet Earth. The earth was filled with violence, and things got so bad, that God was sorry He ever started the project. I realize this runs counter to the idea that God knows everything in advance, but what can I say? It seems better to me that, if I want to know God, I take Him as He is, not as I want Him to be. Remember, God is not a computer.

Here is what the Bible says about this time: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it *repented* the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and *it grieved him at his heart*. And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for *it repenteth me that I have made them*" (Genesis 6:5-7). (Somehow, it seems foolish to go around apologizing for God and trying to find explanations that sound good to the modern mind. I am sorry if it is upsetting to learn that God does not control everything. By His own choice, He does not)

So God decided to end the whole earth project, to just wipe it out. And except for one thing, He would have. What do you suppose that one thing was? "But Noah found *grace* in the eyes of the LORD.

Mind you, Noah was a good man. He was righteous in his generations. But if you think that is the reason he and his family survived the flood, you have it all wrong. Noah was a good man, but he was not that good. He survived because God was *gracious* to him.

More time passes, and God strikes up a friendship with a man named Abraham. This friendship is remarkably personal. But remember, God is not a computer, He is a person. God wants Abraham to have a son by Sarah and tells him so. Abraham laughs. He not only laughs, he falls on the ground laughing. And he is not laughing for joy, he is laughing because the idea of he and Sarah having a baby was laughable.

Now what does that tell us about the relationship between God and Abraham? Most of us would not be able to laugh in the presence of God, no matter what He said. And God did not smite Abraham for laughing as an *ungracious* God might do. He just said, "You'll see." I think He took a certain amount of pleasure in doing all this the hard way. God, it seems, also has a sense of humor, which is also a characteristic of gracious people.

More time passes, and God comes to call on Abraham on his way to Sodom and Gomorrah. If you had been hiding nearby and watching this encounter, what you would have seen would have been very commonplace. You would have seen three men come walking down the road. You would have seen Abraham run out to them and greet them in the customary fashion. You would have seen him have water brought so the men could wash their feet. You would have seen them wash their feet. You would have seen food brought and you would have watched them eat.

All very ordinary, right? Except that two of these three men were "angels" and the third was God Himself. Now does it seem out of the ordinary that they washed their feet and ate a meal? Do spirit beings get dirty feet? Do they get hungry? Apparently, when they appear in the flesh, they do. And since God created food to be enjoyed, He may simply have come by Abraham's place to enjoy a good meal.

But as He left Abraham to go on to Sodom, God paused. He said, as though He were speaking to Himself, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation . . . For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (Genesis 18:17 ff.).

And then, God told Abraham what He was about to do. "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."

Then follows a classic example of a man reasoning with God, an example of intercessory prayer rendered face to face. "It is not like you to destroy the righteous with the wicked," Abraham pleaded. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Abraham's boldness is staggering. Before an ungracious god, he would have been inviting a stern rebuke.

But God listened and allowed Abraham to talk Him down from destroying the city into not destroying the city if he found ten righteous people there. Why did God let Abraham talk Him down like this? Because God is gracious. God does not like the idea of executing judgement. He is merciful by *nature*. He doesn't like killing people even when they have it coming and He is willing to accept almost any excuse for not doing so. This is God's *character*.

There are so many examples of this in the Old Testament, that it would be exhausting to review them all. But let me give you the definitive illustration of what I am driving at.

Still more time passes and a prophet named Jonah was sent to Nineveh with a message. The message was simple, direct and unconditional: "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). No ifs, no ands, no buts, Nineveh is through. So Jonah started his march through the town proclaiming the message. But something truly astonishing happened. The people of Nineveh believed God. The king proclaimed a fast and all of them from the least to the greatest covered themselves with sackcloth and sat in ashes, totally humbling themselves. Even the poor animals had to fast.

This is such a rarity in human events. And God, because He is gracious, saw their repentance and decided to let them off. Jonah, singularly lacking in grace, was furious. And he prayed, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

God was not the person Jonah wanted Him to be. God was gracious, compassionate, abounding in love and one who relents from sending calamity. Jonah is the archetype of the man who wants his religion by the numbers. Exceptions to rules drive him nuts. Life is not worth living if sinners can get off so easily.

But if God had been the kind of God Jonah said he wanted, He would have taken a giant fly swatter and turned Jonah into so much road kill. But He didn't. Why didn't He? Well, Jonah's story doesn't end here. God asked him, "Have you any right to be angry?" Jonah was so angry he didn't even answer. He went up and sat on a hillside to watch and see if maybe God would kill them all anyway.

So God decided to approach Jonah from another angle. He caused a shady plant to grow up and keep the sun off of him. Then, when Jonah had grown rather fond of the plant, God sent a worm to kill it. Then He saw to it that it got blistering hot to the degree that Jonah wanted to die. Then God begins a short dialogue to make His point.

"Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" God asked.

"I do," replied Jonah, "I am angry enough to die."

"You have been concerned about this vine," God said, "though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

God makes His point. He felt sorry for Nineveh. There were so many people in the city who didn't know anything, who didn't understand. God let them off because He is gracious. He even let Jonah off because He was gracious and Jonah didn't even appreciate it.

Perhaps by now it is becoming clear why I say that *Grace* is an Old Testament doctrine. But does it strike you as odd that I talk about *Grace* as a "doctrine"? Or does it strike you as odd that we have so much to say about doctrine and so little to say about *Grace*?

There is a funny thing about grace in the New Testament. In all four Gospels, there is not a single instance where Jesus used the word “grace.” Grace was not a *doctrine* that He preached. Rather, Jesus was the very *personification* of grace. Even as a child, Luke tells us that he “grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the *grace* of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40).

I take that to mean that the basic characteristic of the Father, that He was gracious, was also a characteristic of the Son. John makes the same point in different words: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, *full of grace* and truth.”

As I studied the Gospels in preparation for the *Born to Win* radio series, “The Words of Jesus,” I was struck by the gentle, kind, gracious man who was described there. And I also felt a sameness with the God I meet in the Old Testament. It is the same character, the same grace. John went on to say of Jesus: “John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me. And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:14 ff.).

Where, when and how do we find this *Grace* in Jesus? Nearly everywhere. For example, what motivated Jesus when He fed the 5,000? What character trait led to that great miracle? It was the graciousness of a hospitable man who couldn’t bear to send His guests away hungry.

When John tried to get Jesus to stop a man who was successfully casting out demons in Jesus name, for no other reason than that the man was not in their group, what character trait led Jesus to tell John to let the man alone? It was grace.

When His disciples wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan town that refused to accept Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, what character trait led Jesus to correct them for that spirit? It was grace.

When Jesus healed the Syro-Phoenician woman’s daughter, when He refused to condemn the woman who washed His feet with her tears, when He refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery, why did Jesus respond that way? Because He was gracious.

After Pentecost, the disciples of Jesus were very different men. Something important had happened to them, something we seem rarely to notice. Luke records it: “And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and *great grace* was upon them all” (Acts 4:33). They were no longer the “sons of thunder” ready to call down fire from heaven. One of the gifts bestowed upon them was the gift of grace. “Great Grace” was upon them all. These are not mere spiritual words. A real change in character had taken place. These men were now reflecting the character of Jesus Christ. They had become gracious.

And now, if you really want to know what is wrong with the Church nowadays, the answer is simple enough: “Great Grace” is not upon us. When we are unforgiving, when we take offense easily, when we make a brother an offender for a word, when we make ourselves, our organization, our church, better than others, this is not grace. When we envy others, when we are suspicious, negative, looking for flaws, failures and weaknesses, this is not grace. And if, as you read this ungracious list, you are thinking of all the people you know who display these characteristics, this is not grace either.

One of the most touching occasions in Jesus' ministry came on the day when He was reclining at meal in a Pharisees house. A woman came to Jesus and began to wash His feet with her tears, to wipe them with her long hair, to kiss His feet and to anoint them with ointment. The Pharisee's response was ungracious. He said to himself: "This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth him: for she is a sinner." Jesus response was gracious. He told the Pharisee a parable and then observed, "He who has been forgiven much, loves much."

It is another way of saying that he who has received much grace, has much grace to give. The truth is that we may not have received in ourselves enough of God's grace that we can share it freely with others. It may be that we are so caught up in being right that we cannot be gracious to those who have been wrong.

There was a book a few years ago that asked the question, "What Would Jesus Do?" It has spawned a generation of bracelets and posters that ask, WWJD? It is a good question to ask and a right example to follow. But I sometimes wonder if we know what moved Jesus to do the things that He did, if we have a vision of the *character* of Jesus. Because it is a true saying: If we have the *grace* of Jesus, if we are gracious as He is gracious, then the question, "What would Jesus do?" is answered before it is asked.

Take a new look at this old Scripture, and notice what we must do to serve God acceptably: "Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, *whereby* we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Hebrews 12:28).

Not to put too fine a point on it, but the way some people approach God, you would think that Scripture should read: "Let us keep the *law*, whereby we may serve God acceptably." On the other hand there are those for whom it should read, "God's grace has freed us from the law." But this passage is not merely about God's grace, it is about *our* grace. It is about God's grace, in us, *applied*. It is about the way we treat people. It is about the way we relate to God.

This passage is a call for each of us to live *graciously*, to apply the law of God graciously in our own lives and in our judgement of others. Take another look at Grace in the Bible. Grace is not just another doctrine. *Grace* is a way to live.