

The Kingdom of Heaven. Law and Grace

F. B. Hole.

(Extracted from Scripture Truth Vol. 12, 1920, page 160.)

To the Editor of SCRIPTURE TRUTH.

DEAR BROTHER IN CHRIST, — Having recently received through the post a series of controversial publications by an American author, dealing with such subjects as "The Kingdom of Heaven," "The Sermon on the Mount," "Law and Grace," it occurs to me that others of your readers may also have received them, and that therefore a few remarks on these subjects may not be out of place in your columns.

First, then, I would like to point out that where the word "law" occurs in our Authorised Version of the New Testament we have to draw a twofold distinction.

To begin with we must distinguish between "the law" and "law" without the definite article in the original Greek. If we possess the "New Translation" of the late Mr. Darby we can pretty easily do this, even though we are unable to handle the Greek text. "The law" is specific, and indicates the law of Moses whereas "law" is characteristic, and sets before us rather that principle or feature which characterized the law of Moses, viz., God formulating and codifying His righteous demands upon man, and then basing His attitude towards man upon man's attitude towards Him as revealed by his response thereto.

Then we have also to distinguish between both the above meanings and the use of the word in such a passage as Romans 8: 2. Here it bears the same sense as it does when we speak of the laws of the universe, or more specifically of the law of gravitation, and indicates some controlling force which operates with uniformity of action upon all under its power.

Bearing these things in mind, let us proceed to a few distinctions of a practical nature.

Adam was set in responsibility under law, though *the* law was not instituted until 2500 years later. In his case there was but one prohibition, but his attitude towards that one prohibition regulated God's attitude towards him. For so long as he kept it he lived, when he broke it he died.

Consequent upon his fall, Adam and his posterity became subject to the dreadful tyranny of "the law of sin and death" of which Romans 8: 2 speaks. Yet for many centuries no further laws were given by God, and hence what characterized mankind was not lawbreaking, but rather lawlessness. This was the great feature of the antediluvian age.

With the call of Israel out of Egypt the law was given through Moses to them. Henceforward there was a people possessing *the* law and, of course, "under law" as to the principle of their relations with God. The law of Moses only proved how thoroughly they were dominated by "the law of sin and death."

Meanwhile the Gentiles remained, up to Christ, openly dominated by the law of sin and death, though quite lawless as to their relations with God.

Now Christ having come, redemption having been accomplished, and the Spirit having been given, believers are not under *the* law, nor are they even "under law," as to the principle of their relationship with God. They are rather "under grace" (Rom. 6: 14), and "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" sets them free from "the law of sin and death." Thus they are kept "under law to Christ"

or "legitimately subject to Christ" (1 Cor. 9: 21), and enabled to fulfil all the righteous requirements of the law (Rom. 8. 4) — not as thereby attaining or maintaining a position before God, but rather as the fruit of the grace that has set them already in the position of richest favour.

If these things are clearly grasped we shall have no great difficulty in settling various points which have been raised as to "the sermon on the mount" (Matt. 5-7).

Is the sermon on the mount law? This is one question which is much agitated. What is the answer?

Clearly it is not the law of Moses, and yet in those chapters we hear the voice of the original Law-giver, setting before us, as has well been said, "not a new code but a new edition of the old one," "clearing up His own intentions and disallowing the perversions of men." This is particularly marked in Matt. 5: 17 to 48. He announces Himself as the One come not to destroy the law, but to fulfil, or give the fulness of it. Hence the repeated words, "Ye have heard that it was said . . . But I say unto you . . ." Note Matt. 5: 20, 22, 26, 28, 82, 84, 89, 44, and Matt. 6: 2, 5, 16, 25, and 29.

But if these chapters are not "*the* law," are they "law"? In other words, did our Lord base His teaching in them on grace previously known and received which had established His disciples in their relationships with God-; or did He lay down these further and more spiritual instructions as being themselves, if kept, the basis of such a relationship? Were they based — in a word — upon the principle of "do and live" which is law, or "live and do," which is grace?

Other Scriptures will help us here. Your readers will remember that wonderful statement in John 1: 17. "The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." This prepares us for what we find in Matt. 5: 7. A definite strain of grace runs through those chapters. Under the Lord's teaching, thus early in His ministry, God appears to the disciples in a new light as "your Father which is in heaven." Pretty clearly there is nothing legal about such a conception as that.

And yet we have equally to remember Gal. 4: 4, 5, which tells us that "God sent forth His Son . . . made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." Here the striking fact meets us that though our Lord Jesus came into the world "full of grace," yet He came "under the law," though indeed His object in so coming was to accomplish redemption from law and bring His saints into a position where they might be able to rejoice in the grace He brought.

Allow me to propound a question! When did our blessed Lord Himself cease to be under the law? He came into this world under it; did He, for instance, cease to be under it when He left the seclusion of Nazareth and launched forth in public ministry? Or when? The answer is, He ceased to be under it when He redeemed His people from under it by DYING on the cross under its curse (Gal. 3: 13). Hence the ground on which Paul was "dead to the law" was simply this, "I am crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2: 19, 20).

Your readers must also bear in mind the drift of the great argument of Heb. 9 and 10. Let them particularly consider Heb. 9: 11-14, and Heb. 10: 1, 2, 9-17. Nothing can be plainer than that such a great fundamental blessing of grace as a conscience purged "from dead works to serve the living God" or, "no more conscience of sins," consequent upon being "once purged," could only be known and enjoyed AFTER the death and resurrection of Christ.

The sermon on the mount is Matthew's record of the early teachings of the Son of God come full of grace and truth, and yet come under the law. As yet redemption is not accomplished, the blood that purges the conscience and sets the soul in the liberty of grace is not shed. There IS no proper release

from law and its claims until He DIES, and the whole ministry of our Lord was transitional and progressive up to that point. The sermon on the mount then is *law*, but in it the clouds of Sinai are wearing thin and we discern the glow of the sun of grace behind them. With His death and resurrection the clouds rolled away and the sun shone forth in its strength.

Another much-discussed question is the following: *To whom is the sermon on the mount addressed?* or to use the words of another, "Are the commandments found in the sermon on the mount the law which God has given to His own children in this dispensation, or are they the law of a yet future kingdom?"

Taking the question in its latter form and giving a matter-of-fact answer, we have to reply, "They are neither one nor the other," for, answering the question, as first stated, we can only reply — It was addressed to *the disciples* (see Matt. 5: 1, 2). Subsequently some of these disciples became apostles, and later still, when the Lord had died, risen, and ascended, these disciples became the nucleus of the church of which Matthew 16: 18 speaks, and they were definitely incorporated as such by the baptism of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. But at the time when the Lord addressed to them the sermon on the mount they were not in the Church position, nor had the Lord even announced His intention of building His Church. The first intimation of this was as recorded in Matt. 16.

A contrast has been drawn between Matthew 5-7 and John 14-16, and very justly so. The former gives us a set discourse of the Lord to His disciples in the early days of His ministry, the latter a set discourse to the same just at the close of it. The contrast is most marked. The former discourse in all its parts dwells on what the disciples were to be for God, the latter on what the whole Godhead — Father, Son, and Spirit — would be for them; and the obedience to the Lord's commands and the keeping of His words that is enjoined, is clearly based upon the revelation then made of the disciples' new position before the Father and their relation to Christ as branches sharing the life and nature of the vine.

Your readers will indeed do well to carefully and prayerfully ponder these two passages, as an appreciation of the true character of the sermon in the upper chamber and afterwards will greatly help in a correct appreciation of the character of the sermon on the mount. It will not be difficult to see that *law* is the prevailing feature of the one in the light of the *grace* which is the chief feature of the other — always remembering that law sets before us what we should be for God and grace what God is for us.

In pondering the sermon of the upper chamber, let John 13 and 17 be read. The one gives the preface and sets the scenes for the discourse, the other gives its grand conclusion in the great "High-priestly" prayer of our Lord. It is in these two chapters that we find the standpoint from which the Lord spoke. The cross was actually a few hours ahead of Him, but He spoke as one in spirit beyond it, treating it as something already accomplished (see John 13: 3, 31, 32; John 17: 1, 4, 11). It is this that accounts for the wonderful nature of the discourse, and for the fact that He now spoke of things of which He had *not* spoken at the beginning of His ministry (see John 16: 4).

To sum up: The sermon on the mount was addressed to the disciples in their then character as a godly "remnant" or "seed" in the midst of Israel. They were, in the parabolic language of John 10, "His own sheep," who recognized the Shepherd when at last He entered the Jewish fold. The Shepherd did indeed purpose to die out of the Jewish fold and thereby make a way of exit for them, but that great event was not yet.

I hasten to conclude, but before doing so I would again beg your readers to carefully weigh the closing part of John 16: 4, because the question which underlies all these discussions is simply this: *Have the synoptic Gospels a transitional character?* John's gospel is quite distinct, as they know, and starts with Christ's rejection at the very outset (John 1: 5, 10, 11); but it supplies us with this important

word of our Lord in which He claims a progressive character as stamping His ministry. To this verse we may add John 14: 25 and 26, and John 16: 12 and 13, wherein He promised His disciples further teaching beyond anything we have in the Gospels. These promises were fulfilled in the Spirit's teaching in the Epistles, when the disciples had reached the full and proper Christian state. How striking the contrast between the "*these things*" of the Lord's earthly teachings and the "*all things*" of the Comforter's teaching - then future. Each of the other three Gospels has a clearly-marked transitional character, and the transition from a dispensational standpoint is most distinct in Matthew. In Matt. 12 recounts His definite rejection by the leaders; and their blasphemy against the Holy Ghost — the unpardonable sin. It also recounts the fact that He commenced to recall the testimony to Himself as the Christ in the midst of Israel. He made this more definite in Matt. 16: 20. He denounced the unbelieving mass of the people, and symbolically, at the end of the chapter, broke all the old links with them.

In Matthew 13 He commenced His parable teaching and indicated the new form under which the kingdom of heaven should be established during the period of His rejection. Enough had been said in the Old Testament to show that the kingdom so long promised should have its centre of authority and direction in the heavens; but these "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (verse 11) which are unfolded in the parables are things which had been "kept secret from the foundation of the world" (verse 35). Indeed in keeping with these *new* revelations is this *new* meaning connected with the kingdom (verse 11); a *new* method of divine working, viz., not seeking fruit from the existing vineyard but sowing seed to produce fruit (verses 3-8); and a *new* method of teaching, viz., by parables (verse 10). Hence the scribe instructed unto the kingdom of heaven, brings forth out of his treasure "things new and old" (verse 52).

The first parable of the chapter, then, sets forth that Christ's rejection as Messiah involved a change of dispensation, and the introduction of a period in which man's probation being over God would Himself work to produce the fruit He desired. The remaining six parables, which are similitudes of the kingdom, give us first what the kingdom is like viewed in its external system as seen by men (verses 24-43), and then what it is like in its internal condition as known only to faith (verses 44-50). Thus the kingdom of heaven is set before us in two ways, one in which it embraces all profession of Christ, the other in which it only embraces what is really and vitally the fruit of God's work.

Later chapters of the Gospel give us further similitudes of the kingdom of heaven as well as the first intimation of the building of that which the Lord calls "my Church" in Matthew 16. The transitional period covered by the gospels being over, that Church is seen formally inaugurated in Acts 2, and the truth concerning it fully developed in the epistles.

This is a very brief survey of these important matters, but it may serve to awaken interest, and increase among your readers the number of those "scribes" who are "instructed unto the kingdom of heaven."

Affectionately your brother in Christ,

F. B. Hole.