

Rightly Proclaiming the Gospel and Rightly Dividing the Laws for the Assurance of Salvation

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Rightly Proclaiming the Gospel

Scripture's Unified Sense of Gospel

The New Testament Scriptures summarily use the term “gospel” (“good news”) to refer to the preaching of **the kingdom of God** in Jesus Christ our Lord.

There are many passages that explicitly describe the term “gospel” in this way. For example:

- ✦ “Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the **gospel of the kingdom**, and healing every kind of disease . . . among the people.” (Mt 4:23)
- ✦ “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the **gospel of the kingdom of God** has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.” (Lk 16:16)
- ✦ “But when they believed Philip preaching the **good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ**, they were being baptized, men and women alike.” (Acts 8:15)

Scripture uses a variety of terms to describe the gospel, such as “the gospel of peace” or “the gospel of God’s grace”, particularly in Acts. This variety adds depth to the import of the good news and does not need to restrict or pluralize its definition. Often the different descriptions are shown to be referring to the same thing:

- ✦ “But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the **gospel of the grace of God**. And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about **preaching the kingdom**, will no longer see my face.” (Acts 20:24-25)

In this example, when considering similar language used both within Acts and throughout the New Testament, the “gospel of the grace of God” and “preaching the kingdom” clearly refer to the same message.¹

This is consistent with a contemporary Roman use of the term in which secular authorities use “gospel” to refer to Roman political victory and to the peace (*Pax Romana*) brought about by Caesar Augustus.² In that context, the “gospel” for the Roman world of the kingdom established by Caesar Augustus implicitly served as a type or image via which the New Testament preachers communicated the grace and goodness of Christ’s kingdom.

The term “gospel” in the Scriptures is never used in a way that exclusively refers to the gift of salvation we have through Christ’s death and resurrection apart from this context of the good news of the kingdom of God.³ Rather, one can examine each use of “gospel” in the New Testament and see its connection to the broader message of the kingdom of Christ.

¹ Another good example is 1 Cor 15, often cited to define the gospel, which requires reading the whole chapter to see Paul’s emphasis with that definition on our resurrection into the kingdom of God. Specifically, see vv 1-8, 12, 20, 50-57.

² Evans, Craig A. (2000). “[Mark’s Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel](#)”. *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism*. 1: 67–81

³ See (Stearns, B. (2025). “[Gospel](#)” / “[Good News](#)” in the NT. Word Studies. https://unnaturalphilosophy.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/WordTopic_Gospel.pdf) for an exhaustive examination of every use of the word “gospel” in the New Testament. The word “evangelize” (a single Greek word often translated as “to preach the gospel”) sometimes means simply “to tell good news”, and not to specifically preach *the* good news of God’s kingdom. 1 Thes 3:6 is the main example of this. (“Timothy has come to us from you and has ‘brought us good news’ [evangelized us] of your faith and love...”) Other instances of “evangelize” in the New Testament largely refer to the same good news as the normal noun “gospel” described above.

The New Testament describes the “gospel” variously as good news:

- Of the fulfillment of God’s promise to the Jewish fathers (Acts 13:32)
 - The promise of the Messiah/Christ/Anointed One is the chief promise and focus throughout the Old Testament Scriptures: That the Davidic King will crush the serpent’s head and restore peace between God and man and whose kingdom will have no end.
- Of the name/person of Jesus the Christ (Acts 5:42, 8:12; Phil 1:12-17)
 - Naming Jesus as the Christ (“Anointed”) identifies Him as the King and Son of God who fulfills the Old Testament promises and who is the true Lord of all.
- Of the grace of God (Acts 20:24) and of salvation (Rom 1:16, Eph 1:13)
 - Membership in God’s kingdom and peace with God is made possible by Jesus’ death and resurrection as our incarnate Lord. By this He purchases (redeems) us. He pays our debt that we cannot repay. (Thus His death on the cross is the center of the good news for us.)
- Of peace (Acts 10:36, Eph 2:17)
 - Jesus restores our union with God that was severed by humanity’s fall into sin. Christ as our King and Head means peace for all who are in Him: peace with God and with fellow members of the kingdom. (See Eph 2 ff.) His kingship and His promised triumphant return further means peace from our warfare against the devil, the world, and our sinful nature.
- That the law is not for the righteous but for the rebellious (1 Tm 1:8-11)
 - Our membership with Christ in His kingdom means we are freed from slavery to the demands of the letter of the law and free to live maturely in accord with the Father’s will. (See 2 Cor 3:5-6 ff.)
- Of judgment through Jesus Christ (Rom 2:16, Rv 14:6-7)
 - Jesus destroys the works of the devil and overthrows his dominion by freeing us from bondage to sin and the letter of the law, by countering the corruption of sin, and ultimately by destroying the devil and his servants on the final day of judgment. (See Jn 12:31, 16:11; 1 Jn 3:4-10.)
- Of our hope laid up in heaven (Col 1:5, 1 Cor 15:1-57)
 - All of this means we have an inheritance of God’s eternal dwelling and kingdom, the new heavens and the new earth, where the devil and his works are completely removed and our warfare will be ended. We will rise from death as Christ did, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. This hope is what makes the good news truly good for us.

A concise union of these various aspects of the good news is found in Zechariah’s prophecy of the Christ:

- ✦ “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem; and the bow of war will be cut off. And He will speak peace to the nations; and His dominion will be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. As for you also, because of the blood of My covenant with you, I have set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to the stronghold, O prisoners who have the hope; this very day I am declaring that I will restore double to you. For I will bend Judah as My bow, I will fill the bow with Ephraim. and I will stir up your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece; and I will make you like a warrior’s sword. Then the LORD will appear over them, and His arrow will go forth like lightning; and the Lord GOD will blow the trumpet, and will march in the storm winds of the south. The LORD of hosts will defend them. And they will devour and trample on the sling stones; and they will drink and be boisterous as with wine; and they will be filled like a sacrificial basin, drenched like the corners of the altar. And the LORD their God will save them in that day as the flock of His people; for they are as the stones of a crown, sparkling in His land. For what comeliness and beauty will be theirs! Grain will make the young men flourish, and new wine the virgins.” (Zec 9:9-17)

The Gospel Story

Thus, the gospel is the story of two kingdoms:

- **The Domain of Darkness:** The domain of the devil, the prince of this world, and all those who follow him in rebellion. Members of this domain will burn eternally under God's judgment.
- **The Kingdom of God:** The kingdom of Jesus Christ our Lord, who has redeemed us, that is, paid our debts and purchased us to be His own. Citizens of His kingdom are fellow heirs with Christ of God's eternal goodness and life. Christ's kingdom is not of this world, but will be manifest at His return.

As it is written:

- ✦ "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Col 1:13-14)
- ✦ "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ . . ." (Rom 8:16-17)
- ✦ "Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.'" (Jn 18:36)
- ✦ "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself." (Phil 3:20-21)

Jesus' most common titles reflect the emphasis on His kingship, particularly, "Christ", "Lord", "Son of Man", "Son of David", "King of the Jews."⁴ The title "Son of David" clearly refers to His inheritance of the throne of David, which God promised would have no end (1 Chr 17:11-14). "Christ/Messiah/Anointed One" is a reference to this same promise. "Son of Man" refers to Daniel's prophecies of the king from God who would supplant the world's kings, whose kingdom would have no end (Dn 7).

We benefit from God's kingdom by being raised on the last day (1 Cor 15), but also by God's presence with us now (Lk 17:21, Rom 14:17), and life with Him immediately when we die (Lk 23:43, 2 Cor 5:8, Phil 1:21). This is the reason Christ's death and resurrection is good news for us. We now inherit God's eternal grace and kingdom rather than judgment, and under Christ all evil will be purged (Mt 13:40-43, 1 Cor 15:24-26).

- ✦ "And I saw another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal **gospel** to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people; and he said with a loud voice, '*Fear God, and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come; worship Him who made the heaven and the earth and sea and springs of waters.*'" (Rv 14:6-7)

Thus, the preaching of Christ is, "Repent and believe the gospel!" (Mk 1:15) For the king is coming with His winnowing fork in His hand. We are called to repent so that we may receive life in His kingdom and not burn with the rebels in unquenchable fire (Mt 3:12). Peter concludes his Pentecost sermon with the same call:

- ✦ "'Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.' And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation!'" (Acts 2:38-40)

⁴ "Lamb of God" is an important title that does not inherently connote kingship, at least not by the world's idea of kingship.

The Faith

If we are saved by believing the gospel, what does it mean to believe? To believe means to have faith. That is, the Greek word translated as “believe” is the verb form of the noun translated as “faith”: *pistis*.⁵

Does “faith” mean simply mental assent that something is true, such that “faith in God” means “acknowledging that God exists”? The verb “believe” can sometimes be understood that way:

- ✦ “Jesus said to them, ‘Do you **believe** that I am able to do this?’” (Mt 9:28)
- ✦ “You **believe** that God is one. You do well; the demons also **believe**, and shudder.” (Jas 2:19)

But clearly the Christian faith means much more than this (as the quoted chapter from James demonstrates).

Does “faith” mean simply “trust”? While “trust” comes closer in modern English, it still misses multiple key elements of the Biblical word. A better definition in modern English would be “hopeful and loyal clinging”.

First consider what is said about faith by the author of Hebrews, who quotes Habakkuk 2:4:

- ✦ “‘But My righteous one shall live by **faith**; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have **faith** to the preserving of the soul. Now **faith** is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. . . . And without **faith** it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.” (Heb 10:38-11:1,6)

Here “faith” is simultaneously the opposite of shrinking back and that which comes to God with the assurance of reward. (The ensuing chapter then exemplifies faith through the famous Old Testament figures who followed and hoped in God despite the forces of the world that offered alternate hopes.) This bold assurance is the same image that Jesus uses to explain the Lord’s Prayer:

- ✦ “Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and from inside he answers and says, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his [shamelessness / unembarrassed boldness]⁶ he will get up and give him as much as he needs.” (Lk 11:5-8)

In addition to this “hopeful assurance”, *pistis* could also be described as “loyalty”. Consider how the word is used in the Septuagint⁷ to translate the Hebrew words *’ēmûn* and *’ēmûnâ*⁸ that mean “faithfulness”, “steadfastness”, “truth” (fidelity), or “office”.⁹ For example:

- ✦ “Their relatives in their villages were to come in every seven days from time to time to be with them; for the four chief gatekeepers who were Levites, were **in an office of trust** [in faith], and were over the chambers and over the treasuries in the house of God. They spent the night around the house of God,

⁵ For more about the use of this word, see (Schmidt, A. J. (2022). *Faith Misused*. Concordia Publishing House.).

⁶ Greek word *anaideia*, sometimes translated as “persistence” or “impudence”.

⁷ The Common Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, translated by the Jews in the mid-200s B.C.

⁸ The word “amen” meaning “may it be” comes from the same root.

⁹ Though not every use of these Hebrew words is translated with *pistis*, which shows they are not fully interchangeable. For instance, “his hands were **steady**” (Ex 17:12), a physical steadiness, is translated with *stērizō* (“stabilized”).

because the watch was committed to them; and they were in charge of opening it morning by morning.” (1 Chr 9:25-27)

- ✦ “The men did the work **faithfully** with foremen over them to supervise . . .” (2 Chr 34:12)
- ✦ “And He will be the **stability** of your times, A wealth of salvation, wisdom and knowledge” (Is 33:6)

Note the lack of the distinction that in English separates “faith” and “faithfulness.” *Pistis* is used to describe devoting or attaching oneself to serve and support something else, such as to an externally-defined role (staying at one’s post) or to selflessly support another within a covenantal relationship (God providing salvation and wisdom to His people). In the context of the Roman Empire of Jesus’ day, *pistis* could be used to refer to how a conquered people could unconditionally give themselves over in loyalty to Caesar in order to obtain benevolent treatment rather than punishment or destruction, as well as to the protection offered by Caesar to his subjects (cf. Eph 4:8).¹⁰ More generally it could be used for household or community loyalty or trustworthiness within the bonds or covenants that bound people together (cf. Gal 5:22).¹¹ One might perhaps describe *pistis* as a word for the way one organ in the body is interconnected with another to not only serve it but to even be defined by that interconnection. Or, in keeping with Christ’s teaching, *pistis* is a word for the default bond between an infant and his parents: the parents are devoted to serving the child, and the child conforms to that devotion by learning from their image, trusting them, seeking to please them, and looking to them as his source for good.

- ✦ “Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like [little children / infants], you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this [little child / infant], he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 18:3-4)

These pictures of “hopeful assurance” and “loyalty” come together in the examples of faith in the Bible to give the united meaning of **“a heart that shamelessly clings to and loyally presses toward its object, to conform to its service.”**¹² Abraham is the chief Biblical example of this faith (Rom 4:1-22, Gal 3:5-9, Heb 11:8-10, 17-19; Jas 2:21-23). He was faithful even to the point of being willing to sacrifice his son Isaac: he conformed to God’s command with the hope and trust that God would even restore his son. Jesus praises the example of faith in the centurion who shamelessly sought Jesus’ help while confessing His authority over creation (Mt 8:8-10), as well as the Canaanite woman’s shameless request with trust with submission (Mt 15:22-28), and the shameless love of the forgiven sinful woman who washed His feet under the gaze of the Jews (Lk 7:36-50) and of the unclean woman with the hemorrhage who trusted that a touch was sufficient for healing and professed her deed before a crowd (Lk 8:43-48). All these examples show a shameless hope in Jesus as a rewarder of those who seek Him and follow Him that dominates any motive to shrink back.

The Christian Faith then is the heart that gives its loyalty to and presses toward Christ and the hope of life with Him. As Paul describes:

- ✦ “Not that I have already obtained [the resurrection] or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward

¹⁰ Zerbe, Gordon M. (2013) [Believers as Loyalists: The Anatomy of Paul's Language of Pistis](#). *Citizenship: Paul on Peace and Politics*, CMU Press. pp. 26-46.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² From this core definition, a related use of *pistis* is to refer to an external means that secures *pistis* in the recipient, often translated as “proof” (e.g. Acts 17:31), such as an oath or physical evidence that supports an argument. See (Hay, D. (1989). *Pistis* as “Ground for Faith” in Hellenized Judaism and Paul. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 108(3), 461-476. [doi:10.2307/3267114](https://doi.org/10.2307/3267114)) for non-Biblical examples.

to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3:12-14)

The difference with “trust” is that trust generally describes a passive acceptance of the fidelity of someone else. By contrast, “faith” is “a living, busy, active, mighty thing”,¹³ the state of being that clings in fidelity to another.

Summary

The good news is a message of peace, not the *Pax Romana* enjoyed by Roman Empire in Jesus’ day, but the peace enjoyed by the kingdom of God through the triumph of Jesus Christ over the domain of darkness.

- ✦ “Now judgment is upon this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.” (Jn 12:31-32)
- ✦ “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can anyone enter the strong man’s house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.” (Mt 12:28-30)

By the faith that follows and clings to Christ Jesus, we are brought out of the domain of darkness and made members of His kingdom, and we shall not perish but have eternal life (Jn 3:16). The good news is that Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil (1 Jn 3:8), has triumphed, and His kingdom is now ours by adoption into His family (Gal 4:4-7). He is the true prince of peace (Is 9:6-7). We confess that He is the Christ, the Anointed One, our Lord and God, the one with the highest authority over all things (Jn 11:27, Eph 1:19-23). And this good news truly does reflect the fact that the fundamental confession of the faith expressed in the New Testament is not “Jesus died for my sins”, but rather “Jesus is Lord”:

- ✦ “The righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: . . . ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for ‘Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” (Rom 10:6-13)¹⁴

The gospel includes Christ’s death, His resurrection, the coming of His kingdom among us since Pentecost, and especially His imminent return on the Last Day, when He will raise us from sleep and bring us to our inheritance with Him in the Father’s house that Christ is now preparing for us. This truly is good news for us.

- ✦ “Now I make known to you, brethren, the **gospel** which I preached to you, . . . that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to [many]. . . . Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. . . . Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the **kingdom of God**; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, . . . and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’” (1 Cor 15:1,3-5,20,50-51,54)

¹³ See (Luther, M. (1960). Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans. In E. T. Bachmann (Ed.), *Luther’s works: Vol. 35. Word and sacrament I* (pp. 365–380). Fortress Press.) at pp. 370-371.

¹⁴ See also Jn 20:28-21, Phil 2:11, 1 Tm 6:12-16, and Rv 19:16.

Rightly Dividing the Laws

Scripture's Unified Sense of Law

The New Testament Scriptures use the term “law” in a broader way than is expected by modern English speakers. (This is why Pauline phrases such as “law of faith” tend to cause confusion, though “law of Moses” still makes sense.) Modern English “law” is typically constrained to specific, written legal requirements.¹⁵ The New Testament uses the word “law” at different times to refer to different objects, such as to the words God gave through Moses (e.g. “the law and prophets” in Mt 7:12; Jn 1:45), the assignment of responsible freedom (e.g. “the law of liberty” in Jas 2:12), the influence of the desires of the flesh (e.g. “the law of sin in my members” in Rom 7:23), or to the entire collection of the Old Testament (e.g. the reference to the Psalms in Jn 10:34). These uses refer to different objects, but the same term “law” is used for each.

The Greek word for “law” (*nomos*) derives from the root for “that which is parceled out / assigned”, as when a shepherd assigns food or grazing to sheep. It is used in the Septuagint for the Hebrew word (*torah*), which means “direction, instruction, or law”, which comes from the root “to shoot” (as in, “to shoot forth instruction”). Though scholars debate the meaning of *nomos* and its use for *torah* in light of other Greek uses, the assumption that Scripture speaks consistently and rightly leads to a simple definition that reconciles the different applications: **an assigned bond or instruction by which a head leads its body**. A “law” in this sense is not merely an external force or written demand, but it is the system through which a mind directs reasoning and actions. A government uses political law to direct corporate life, a community uses the law of local custom to order local life, and a man’s mind uses inner law to define his understanding and direct his own life. This is consistent with Aristotle’s use of *nomos* as “mind (*nous*) apart from appetites/desires (*orexeôis*)”, and as “reason (*logos*) which arises from a sort of practical wisdom and mind”, even in a political context.¹⁶

At first glance, the use of “Law” as a common shorthand for the books of Moses (the Pentateuch) or for the Old Testament seems like a special case due to how specific the object is. However, this also represents an application of the definition given in bold above. To God’s people after Moses and before the Christ, the Pentateuch was *the* bond and instruction by which God led His people. So, for a people with God as their head, it was simply “*the* law”. In a context where “the law” is, by default, the law of Moses, additional words are needed when one needs to refer to a law given by a different head (the law of sin) or to the new way in which the same God leads after the advent of Jesus as the redeeming King (the law of Christ).

The Three Laws

There is one law that rebels against God’s law:

- **The Law of Sin:** The bond of our selfish, sinful, rebellious nature, following the will of the devil. This law drives a person to pursue pleasure, pride, independence, and self-destruction.
 - This label is taken from Rom 7:23: “but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the **law of sin** which is in my members.”
 - It is also referred to as the “**law of sin and death**.” (Rom 8:2)

¹⁵ Though the English sense of “law” does not technically have to be so constrained.

¹⁶ See (Lockwood, Thornton C., “[Physis and Nomos in Aristotle's Ethics](#)” (2005). *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 327.) for these and other relevant Aristotle quotes regarding *nomos*.

However, with respect to laws from God that are to rule His people, Christ's apostles make an overall distinction between two particular "laws".¹⁷ Both reflect God's will and nature, but each presents a different assignment by which it leads mankind:

- ✦ **The Law of Ordinances:** The bond of God's demands and teachings for mankind's behavior of body and mind prior to Christ. This law reflects God's will but also condemns a person to death for transgressing its external demands.
 - This label is taken from Eph 2:15: "But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. . . . by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the **Law of commandments contained in ordinances**" (Eph 2:13,15).
 - This law is also referred to as the "**decrees against us**" (Col 2:14).
 - It is often also referred to with "**law of Moses**", as in 1 Cor 9:9, "For it is written in the Law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.'"
 - The Law of Ordinances condemned Adam and his descendents to death before Moses, but the Law of Moses subsumed and increased this same law (Rom 5:12-14,20).
- ✦ **The Law of the Spirit:** The bond of free responsibility under Christ in faith to Him to pursue His will of love by His Spirit as adopted sons and as stewards of His house. This law does not condemn a person for individual failures in perfectly executing love, but it does condemn anyone who abandons faith, that is, anyone who intentionally rebels, shirks his duty, or otherwise refuses to be ruled by the Spirit.
 - This label is taken from Rom 8:2: "For the **law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus** has set you free from the law of sin and of death", in combination with the passages that command those in Christ to be ruled by the Spirit (such as Gal 5:16-25).
 - This Law is also referred to as the "**law of Christ**", as in Gal 6:2: "Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ."
 - It is also referred to as the "**law of my mind**",¹⁸ as in Rom 7:23, "but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind . . ."
 - It is also referred to as the "**law of liberty**", as in Jas 2:12: "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty." (See also 2 Cor 3:17.)
 - It is also referred to as the "**law of faith**", as in Rom 3:27: "By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith."
 - The Law of the Spirit is often not explicitly called a law when the term "law" is reserved to refer to the Law of Ordinances. Nevertheless, the rule of the Spirit is still called a law as noted above.

This is not a distinction of different uses of the same law, but rather it is a distinction of different laws.¹⁹ Both the **Law of Ordinances** and the **Law of the Spirit** reflect the nature of God in that God gave them both and He does not change (Jas 1:17). But Scripture is clear that they are different laws with respect to their bondage and judgments of man as well as the freedoms they offer.

In brief: The **Law of Ordinances** rules from outside of its subjects, as a tutor over children who do not understand the spirit of the law (Gal 3:23-29), particularly those who are inwardly ruled by the **Law of Sin** (1 Tm 1:9). But for those who are made alive in Christ, the **Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus** replaces both the **Law of Sin** in inward rule (Rom 7:4-6, Rom 8:2-4, Col 3:5-8) and the **Law of Ordinances** in outward rule (Col 2:14, 2 Cor 3, Jas 2:12, Mt 24:45-51).²⁰

¹⁷ The distinction that follows corresponds to definitions 2 and 3 of [Thayer's Greek Lexicon](#) for the Greek for law (*nomos*).

¹⁸ More specifically, the law of Paul's mind is that by which he rules his self, which is defined by the Spirit of Christ in him.

¹⁹ This section will use the red/orange/blue color scheme to distinguish portions of text that relate to these different laws.

²⁰ One might argue that the Law of the Spirit could be further divided into two laws, the external command from Christ to love one another and the inward rule of the Spirit. However, it is crucial to note that these are not divided bonds or wills,

As it is written:

- ✦ “But before faith came, we were kept in custody **under the law**, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore **the Law** has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by **faith**. But now that **faith** has come, we are no longer under a **tutor**.” (Gal 3:23-25)
- ✦ “After saying above, ‘**Sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin** You have not desired, nor have You taken pleasure in them’ (which are offered according to **the Law**), then He said, ‘Behold, **I have come to do Your will**.’ He takes away **the first** in order to establish **the second**.” (Heb 10:8-9)
- ✦ “But we know that the **Law** is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that **law** is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are **lawless and rebellious** . . .” (1 Tm 1:8-9)
- ✦ “But if **the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones**, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how will the **ministry of the Spirit** fail to be even more with glory? . . . But to this day whenever **Moses** is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and **where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty**. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.” (2 Cor 3:7-8,15-18)

But this is not a distinction purely of “letter of the law” vs “spirit of the law.” The **Law of Ordinances** permits a man to transgress the letter of the law when following the letter would violate the spirit of the law, such as when David and his men ate the temple bread (Lk 6:2-4). Though the **Law of Ordinances** is an external bond, and it requires external obedience (Mt 23:23-26), its foremost commands are matters of the heart that produces works (Ex 20:17, Mt 22:36-40, Rom 2:25-29). God demanded obedience in both heart and works to the spirit of the **Law of Ordinances**. Nevertheless, the **Law of Ordinances** is not of faith, but of works (Gal 3:11-12).

As it is written:

- ✦ “But some of the Pharisees said, ‘Why do you do what is not **lawful** on the Sabbath?’ And Jesus answering them said, ‘Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not **lawful** for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?’” (Lk 6:2-4)
- ✦ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the **law**: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. . . . you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.” (Mt 23:23-26)
- ✦ “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” (Ex 20:17)
- ✦ “‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the **Law**?’ And He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” On these two commandments depend the whole **Law** and the Prophets.” (Mt 22:36-40)
- ✦ “For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the **Law**; but if you are a transgressor of the **Law**, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of

just as the will of the Son is not different from that of the Father, and by the Spirit we are to be one with Him as the Son is with the Father (Jn 14:16-24,17:11). Thus, this law is a “law of liberty” (Jas 2:12), not of external compulsion.

the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.” (Rom 2:25-29)

- ✦ “Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, ‘The righteous man shall live by faith.’ However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, ‘He who practices them shall live by them.’” (Gal 3:11-12)

Paul explains in greater detail in Romans that we are born under the authority of the Law of Ordinances, that we are guilty of death by that law of God because we all instead obey the Law of Sin in our flesh as slaves to sin, but that through baptism into Christ we die to the external authority of the Law of Ordinances and to slavery to sin so that we might instead be slaves of righteousness in loyalty to Christ our Lord:

- ✦ “Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. . . so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. . . . By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.” (Rom 3:19-24,26,27-28,31)
- “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. . . . Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.” (Rom 6:3-5,16-18)
- “But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man. Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.” (Rom 6:22-7:6)

“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.” (Rom 8:2)

The transfer from slavery under the Law of Sin and the Law of Ordinances to be free under the Law of the Spirit in Christ directly corresponds with the gospel transfer of a person from slavery under the Domain of Darkness to citizenship in the Kingdom of God through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Salvation Apart from Works

Paul in Rom 3, quoted above, makes it clear that we are saved apart from works of the law. He states further:

- ✦ “‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.’” (Rom 4:4-8)
- ✦ “Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” (Gal 3:21-22)
- ✦ “[God] has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity” (2 Tm 1:9)
- ✦ “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Eph 2:8-9)

And David says in the Psalms:

- ✦ “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit! . . . I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD; and You forgave the guilt of my sin. . . . Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but he who trusts in the LORD, lovingkindness shall surround him. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous ones; and shout for joy, all you who are upright in heart.” (Ps 32:1-2,5,10-11)
- ✦ “Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise. For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise. By Your favor do good to Zion; build the walls of Jerusalem. Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices, in burnt offering and whole burnt offering; then young bulls will be offered on Your altar.” (Ps 51:14-19)

What does it mean to be saved? It is to be delivered from the death sentence that we earn by breaking the Law of Ordinances and to be reborn to eternal life in the kingdom of God as fellow heirs with Christ. This is the gospel, as described earlier. We are saved when made children of God now (1 Pt 3:21) and again when we finally reach our hoped-for rest with God (Rom 13:11).

As Paul writes in Gal 3, quoted above, righteousness before God cannot be earned by works of any externally given law. Even earthly laws do not impart life; they only create constraints for the sake of order and they

establish punishments for people who transgress that order. Even if we were to perfectly keep the **Law of Ordinances** from today onward, we would not earn anything, but we would only be doing our duty, that which we should have been doing in the first place.

- ✦ “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” (Eph 2:10)
- ✦ “Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come immediately and sit down to eat’? But will he not say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink’? He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.’” (Lk 17:7-10)

We incur the debt of sin when we fail to do what we ought to do. Thus, doing what we ought to cannot make our debts go away; it only avoids additional debt. We cannot pay our debts to God, for “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). And we all have earned this debt, for “If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us” (1 Jn 1:10).

But Jesus has freed us from our debts under the **Law of Ordinances** by grace as a gift, as it is written:

- ✦ “When **you were dead in your transgressions** and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the **certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us**, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” (Col 2:13-14)
- ✦ “For He Himself is our peace, who made both [Gentiles and Israel] into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the **Law of commandments contained in ordinances**, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace.” (Eph 2:14-15)
- ✦ “. . . so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the **Law**, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.” (Phil 3:8-11)
- ✦ “[Our Savior Christ Jesus] abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tm 1:10)
- ✦ “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’ And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. . . .” (Mt 18:23-27)

After God transfers us freely into His kingdom through faith in Christ, no amount of our works can then do anything to earn that transfer. The transfer is already made. We walk in love according to the **Law of the Spirit** because of this transfer, not to earn it. This is exemplified by Paul’s use of “therefore” in Col 3 (following the passage from Col 2 quoted earlier):

- ✦ "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, [keep seeking the things above](#), where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on [the things above](#), not on [the things that are on earth](#). For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. Therefore [consider the members of your earthly body as dead](#) to [immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed](#), which amounts to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of [disobedience](#), and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, [put them all aside](#)" (Col 3:1-8)

Once the transfer is made, we pursue works of love because we are sons of God in [Spirit and truth](#). We do not perform these works out of obligation to any [Law of Ordinances](#). We "owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the [law](#)" (Rom 13:8). We are free as sons of God.

- ✦ "'From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?' When Peter said, 'From strangers,' Jesus said to him, 'Then the sons are exempt.'" (Mt 17:25-26)

Rewards in the Kingdom

We do not merit the **Kingdom of God** for our works. But doing well with the liberty given to us as members of the kingdom is rewarded. This reward is not the gift of our salvation; it is a reward within the gifted kingdom:

- ✦ ". . . each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire." (1 Cor 3:13-15)
- ✦ "The first appeared, saying, 'Master, your mina has made ten minas more.' And he said to him, 'Well done, good slave, because you have been faithful in a very little thing, you are to be in authority over ten cities.' The second came, saying, 'Your mina, master, has made five minas.' And he said to him also, 'And you are to be over five cities.'" (Lk 19:16-19) (See also Mt 25:20-23,28-29.)
- ✦ ". . . at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt. Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever." (Dn 12:1-3)
- ✦ "Then Peter said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?" And Jesus said to them, 'Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last; and the last, first.'" (Mt 19:27-30)²¹

Two Paths of Judgment

To reject the assignment, the law, from God is to break one's bond with God—to be severed from God. There are two ways by which a person can be condemned and left outside the Christ's inheritance:

²¹ See also [Against Heresies 5.36.1-2](#) for Irenaeus' account of what he says the disciples of the apostles passed along to him regarding the different honors given in the resurrection.

1. Remaining under the **Domain of Darkness**. This judgment is for those who refuse the call of Jesus Christ or who never hear it. These remain in slavery and condemnation under the **Law of Ordinances**.
2. After being called into the **Kingdom of God**, refusing to be ruled by the **Law of the Spirit**. This judgment is for those who have been baptized into the name of Christ Jesus but then willfully obey the **Law of Sin** despite a knowledge of the truth of God's will. These rebel against God in intentional, unrepentant sin, whether by willful sins of commission or by willfully shirking duty with sins of omission.

Paul in 1 Corinthians notes the chief illustration of this reality that God gave us through Israel's history: they were redeemed from the slavery of Egypt; they were, by grace, made heirs of the promised land through baptism into a kingdom of God's people in communion with Christ; and yet many still died for their rebellion, not reaching that promised land:

- ✦ “Our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not **crave evil things** as they also craved. . . . Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.” (1 Cor 10:1-6,12)

That is, there was judgment for the people of Egypt, and there was also judgment for the people whom God called out of Egypt but who then rebelled in the wilderness.

Other passages say the same thing more explicitly:

- ✦ “For if we go on **sinning willfully** after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the **Law of Moses** dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted **the Spirit of grace**?” (Heb 10:26-29)
- ✦ “For this you know with certainty, that no **immoral or impure person or covetous man**, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly **darkness**, but now you are **Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light**” (Eph 5:5-8)
- ✦ “. . . But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.” (Mt 18:28-35)

Christ our Lord likewise addresses the parable of servants waiting for their master to return from the wedding feast to people inside the church. The master will reward the faithful steward, but will come to the wicked servant and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers:

- ✦ “Be dressed in readiness, and **keep your lamps lit**. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. . . . You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect.’ Peter said, ‘Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?’ And the Lord said, ‘Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds **so doing** when he comes. Truly I say to you that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But if that slave says in his heart, ‘My master will be a long time in coming,’ and begins to **beat the slaves**, both men and women, **and to eat and drink and get drunk**; the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and assign him a place with the unbelievers. And that slave who knew his master’s will and **did not get ready or act in accord with his will**, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.” (Lk 12:35-37,40-48)

Christ’s parables of the talents and minas together also illustrate this same image of both judgments in one picture. The parable of the minas (Lk 19:12-27) includes an emphasis on the judgment of the enemies of the kingdom, while the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30) emphasizes the judgment of the wicked servant. The parable of the wedding banquet (Mt 22:1-14) also especially illustrates the two paths of judgment: Those who refuse the call to the feast are destroyed and burned. Those who refuse the master’s garments after following the call are cast into the outer darkness.²²

Both paths of judgment are the fruit of obeying the **Law of Sin**.

So while we cannot earn our transfer into the kingdom of God, we do earn any judgment that casts us out of it. We are dependent on receiving life from Christ the Vine, and when severed we must be reattached by His grace and Spirit alone. Severed rebels have no authority to command God’s Spirit into their hearts. But those who are alive are capable of choosing to cut themselves off from that Vine and His Spirit.²³

Two Obediences

Paul writes:

- ✦ “. . . you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of **sin** resulting in death, or of **obedience** resulting in righteousness” (Rom 6:16)

He then distinguishes between the obedience of the flesh and the obedience of the mind:

²² Cf. Rv 19:8: “It was given to her [the bride] to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.” See also Zec 3:1-7.

²³ This is also the case with earthly life. We cannot choose to be conceived, but we can choose to kill ourselves.

- ✦ “But now we have been released from the **Law**, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we **serve in newness of the Spirit** and not **in oldness of the letter**. . . . For we know that the Law **is spiritual**, but I am of flesh, sold into **bondage to sin**. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the **law**, confessing that the law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but **sin which dwells in me**. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the **willing is present in me**, but the doing of the good is not. For the **good that I want**, I do not do, but I **practice the very evil** that **I do not want**. But if I am doing the very thing **I do not want**, I am no longer the one doing it, but **sin which dwells in me**. I find then the principle that **evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good**. For **I joyfully concur with the law of God** in the inner man, but I see a different **law in the members of my body**, waging war against the **law of my mind** and making me a prisoner of the **law of sin** which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the **body of this death**? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand **I myself with my mind am serving the law of God**, but on the other, **with my flesh the law of sin**.” (Rom 7:6,14-25)

Paul thus makes the distinction between the service carried out by the flesh and by the mind. Our flesh is and will always be a slave of **sinful passions** until Christ returns and resurrects us. Then we will be changed to have perfected, heavenly bodies, for our “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” (See 1 Cor 15:42-57.)

Unlike in modern English, the Greek word for “obey” (*hupakouó*—literally “under-hear”) is a word closer in meaning to faith than to outward works. It is the act of listening submissively in the mind so that the mind produces works as a fruit. That is, the mind believes the word and therefore acts consistently with that word.²⁴

You are slaves of the one you obey. Thus, there are two options for obedience by your mind:

1. Submit to and serve the **Law of Sin** and death from your flesh,
2. Submit to and serve the **Law of the Spirit** of life in Christ our Lord.²⁵

This is not “Law” in the sense of external obligation. It is a question of whom one serves in the “obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5, 16:26) in the law of one’s mind. You cannot serve two masters (Mt 6:24).

Our flesh serves the **Law of Sin**, and we cannot change that. But obedience to Christ with our minds means that we do wrestle against the desires of the flesh and do not let them rule over us.

- ✦ “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey **its lusts**.” (Rom 6:12)
- ✦ “Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is **for you**, but **you must master it**.’” (Gen 4:6-7)

So there remains condemnation for those who willfully obey the **Law of Sin**—who do not submit to the “**Law of God** in the inner man” (Rom 7:21), but no condemnation for those who are in Jesus, as Paul continues:

- ✦ “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the **law of the Spirit of life** in Christ Jesus has set you free from the **law of sin and of death**. For what the **Law** could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the **Law** might be fulfilled in

²⁴ Hebrew does not even have a distinct word for “obey”. Its corresponding word (*shama*) is simply the word for “hear”.

²⁵ Compare with early church writings on the “Two Ways” such as in the *Didache* (1st century A.D.)

us, who do not walk according to the **flesh** but according to the **Spirit**.

For those who are according to the **flesh** set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the **Spirit**, the things of the Spirit. For the **mind set on the flesh** is death, but the **mind set on the Spirit** is life and peace, because the **mind set on the flesh** is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the **flesh** cannot please God. However, you are not in the **flesh** but in the **Spirit**, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If Christ is in you, though the **body is dead because of sin**, yet the **spirit is alive because of righteousness**. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” (Rom 8:1-11)

This does not mean that God’s standards of perfection have diminished. Any disobedience to God, whether under the **Law of Ordinances** or under the **Law of the Spirit of life in Christ**, deserves wrath and death. Under the **Law of Ordinances**, though an Israelite pursued God in faith, God still required propitiation for non-willful sins in the form of animal sacrifices, and mediators in the form of priests, though these were but shadows of things to come (Heb 10:1). Under the reign of Christ, we do not receive God’s wrath for non-willful sins because Christ’s propitiating death applies once and for all time, and He is still our mediator before the Father as our great high priest. Thus, the **Law of the Spirit** does not condemn us to death for individual transgressions or failures in our conduct as we war to rule over the desires of our flesh. As it is written:

- ✦ “The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing, but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.” (Heb 7:23-25)
“. . . the high priest enters once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance. . . . how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? . . . For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.” (Heb 9:7,14,24)
- ✦ “Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” (Heb 10:11-14)
- ✦ “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” (1 Jn 2:1)
- ✦ “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom 8:31-35)

If you choose to reject the headship of Christ and to obey sin even while having a full knowledge of the truth of what you do and that by doing so you oppose God’s will, then you obey the **Law of Sin** in your mind and rebel against the **Law of the Spirit**. For this there is no atoning sacrifice (Heb 10:26). But if you can say, with Paul, that the sin you do is what you do not want, then with him you can also say that it is not you who does it but the sin dwelling in your flesh. Take heart; you have an Advocate with the Father. He will deliver you from this body of death. Come, Lord Jesus!

The Assurance of Salvation

How is a person who has heard the gospel message to be confident that he is saved? Can a Christian on his deathbed, if asked, “Will you be raised to life everlasting and not to eternal death?” answer with a confident, “Absolutely!” and not with an uncertain, “I hope so”? And if so, what is the source of such confidence?

Obviously, as noted in the previous sections, God will condemn the hard-hearted who only claim to follow Him but still rebel against Him in practice, such as the Pharisees or the apostate portions of Old Testament Israel, regardless of their confidence. But what about the genuine Christians?

Scriptural Examples of Confidence

Do Christ’s followers speak of the resurrection as a matter of uncertainty? Christ and Martha speak as follows:

- ✦ “Martha then said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said to Him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.’” (Jn 11:21-27)

We know that the unrighteous will also be raised for the lake of fire (“the second death”) whether they believe in Christ or not (Jn 5:28-29, Rv 20:11-15). Clearly Jesus is not merely talking about that kind of resurrection, since He is talking about the rewards of faith in Him, and He specifies “will never die”. His question to Martha is an appeal for her certainty.

The same certainty is seen in the Old Testament as well. For example:

- ✦ “As for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God; whom I myself shall behold, and whom my eyes will see and not another.” (*Job*, Job 19:25-27)
- ✦ “If there is an angel as mediator for him, one out of a thousand, to remind a man what is right for him, then let him be gracious to him, and say, ‘Deliver him from going down to the pit, I have found a ransom’; let his flesh become fresher than in youth, let him return to the days of his youthful vigor; then he will pray to God, and He will accept him, that he may see His face with joy, and He may restore His righteousness to man. He will sing to men and say, ‘I have sinned and perverted what is right, and it is not proper for me. He has redeemed my soul from going to the pit, and my life shall see the light.’” (*Elihu*, Job 33:23-28)
- ✦ “If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared. I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait, and in His word do I hope. . . . O Israel, hope in the LORD; For with the LORD there is lovingkindness, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” (*A Song of Ascents*, Ps 130:3-5,7-8)

And we know that Old Testament Israel’s trust in God was not founded upon something they earned through keeping God’s Law, but upon God’s covenant with Abraham and his offspring. Paul references this covenant trust when he argues against trust in descent according to the flesh:

- ✦ “I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh. . . But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: ‘through Isaac your descendants will be named.’ That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.” (Rom 9:3,6-8)

And, more explicitly, he says to the Galatians regarding God’s promise to Abraham:

- ✦ “. . . the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions . . .” (Gal 3:17-19)

Christians share in this promise to Abraham by sharing his faith (Gal 3:6-9).

The Certainty of Hope

If a Christian cannot know for certain that he is saved, how are we to share our hope to the unbelieving world, as Peter says?

- ✦ “‘And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled,’ but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you. . .” (1 Pt 3:14-15)

Biblical hope (Greek: elpis) does not mean a wish, as when in English one says, “I hope it doesn’t rain tomorrow.” This Greek word for Christian hope means confident expectation.

If we cannot say with confidence on our deathbed, “I know that where Christ is, there I will be also”, then, by the Biblical definition, we have no hope.

But Peter says:

- ✦ “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials. . .” (1 Pt 1:3-6)

And Paul says:

- ✦ “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.” (Rom 8:20-25)

And again Peter says:

- ✦ “[God] raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.” (1 Pt 1:21)

If a Christian on his deathbed were to doubt his inheritance because of his past sins or because he doubts that he has done enough to be worthy of that inheritance, then his trust is not in God but in himself. But Peter exhorts the church to fix our hope completely on God’s grace, and then at the same time, because we are made children of God, to strive to live in the holiness that should result from pressing toward God:

- ✦ “Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (1 Pt 1:13-16)

But can a genuine Christian still doubt his ultimate inheritance because, even if he is presently faithful, he does not know whether he might fall away in the future? Only in the sense that he must not stop running the race.

- ✦ “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified. . . . Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.” (1 Cor 9:24-27, 10:12-14)

Proper humility demands that one acknowledge one’s capacity to fall to temptation. Yet, as stated, Christian hope is confident expectation in our Lord. For someone to let his own weakness shake his confidence in Christ is for him to place his hope at least partially in himself rather than on Christ, just as Peter doubted as he walked toward Jesus on the sea. Peter’s doubt was not because he completely forgot about Christ, but because he focused on whether the storm was stronger than his own weakness (it was), rather than on whether it was stronger than Jesus, his “way of escape” from its power (it was not). Present doubt in one’s future of faith is still doubt, and thus it conflicts with true hope and faith in Christ.

Our success does not flow from ourselves, but from God through faith. Thus, while we should acknowledge our own weakness and need for endurance, the solution is to cling all the more closely to Christ and His will and Word, not to put faith in our own strength, and not to fear the temptations that seek to draw our attention away from Christ. To fear them due to our own weakness would be a self-fulfilling fear. But they are not stronger than our Lord, and so in Him we need not fear any opposing power.

- ✦ “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Mt 10:28)
- ✦ “I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” (Jn 10:28-29)
- ✦ “He is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.” (Ps 18:30)

“No one is able to snatch them out of My hand” means that no storm can overpower Christ’s protection. It does not mean that we are incapable of stepping away from His protection through doubt. We benefit from His protection by taking refuge in Him through faith. This faith hopes in Him and not in ourselves.

The author of Hebrews argues that confidence in our promised inheritance as God’s children is our motivation now to endure any present hardships that would tempt us to shrink back. He argues this precisely by pointing to the example of God’s faithful people in Old Testament times, who lived by this confidence:

- ✦ “Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet in a very little while, he who is coming will come, and will not delay. ‘But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul. . . . Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Heb 10:29-39,12:1-2)

So we are called to lay aside sin out of faith and faithfulness to Christ, our Lord, with the same expectation that Christ Himself had while enduring the cross. Christ knew with confidence that God would raise Him from the dead, as He often stated (e.g. Mt 16:21). If we did not share that confidence, despite our shortcomings, then we could not run the race with the same assurance of joy set before us.

The Endurance of Faith

If faith is the assurance of things hoped for, then is faith something that a person either completely has or completely loses? If he wavers at all in faithfulness by falling into transgression or even by only wavering in his heart, then has he completely lost his faith, and thereby lost his grounds for confidence? John does say,

- ✦ “No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” (1 Jn 3:9)

But Peter shows that there is more to consider. After Peter looked away from Jesus while walking on the water, Jesus called him a “little-faith”²⁶ (Mt 14:30-31), notably not a “no-faith”. Later, Jesus stated:

- ✦ “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers. . . . I say to you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me.” (Lk 22:31-32,34)

Jesus is declaring that His prayer is granted, and that Peter’s faith would not fail throughout the ordeal of denying Him. (Otherwise Jesus could not speak of the time following the ordeal once Peter has turned again.) This statement shows that Peter was able to deny Jesus without having his faith “fail”.

Consider how Paul says that faith is measured out as a gift of the Holy Spirit differently to different Christians:

²⁶ “You of little faith” is the typical English translation, but what Jesus literally says is simply, “You little-faith”.

- ✦ “For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith . . .” (Rom 12:3-6)
- ✦ “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit . . .” (1 Cor 12:7-9)
- ✦ “. . . if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” (1 Cor 13:2)

Implicitly, having “all faith” that moves mountains is not mixed with doubt, and does not look away from its object in the manner that Peter looked away from Christ while walking on the sea. A faith that does look away when confronted by a distraction is a little-faith, and it vies for dominance against fears and distractions. But this is distinct from a faith that completely dies (“fails”).

Doubting can lead to losing the immediate object of one’s hope. (By doubting, Peter began sinking and failed to reach his object on his own two feet; see also Jas 1:6-8.) Yet little faith can still be saving faith. Though Peter forgot his assurance in Christ in the moment that he was tempted by the fear of the storm and again by the fear of Christ’s accusers when he denied Him three times, his faith did not totally fail and die, as Christ said it would not. How do we know this? Because when each moment passed and Peter came to himself, he still pressed toward Christ as his hope:

- ✦ “. . . beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him . . .” (Mt 14:30-31)
- ✦ “So when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put his outer garment on (for he was stripped for work), and threw himself into the sea.” (Jn 21:7, in which Peter swims toward resurrected Jesus)

Faith does not exist because of its performance, but through the clinging of the heart to its object, which thereby strives for faithful performance. Living faith is that which, upon realizing that one has strayed, shamelessly returns again in contrite submission and renewed hope. Faith dies when repentance dies.

Then what of John’s statement that “no one who is born of God practices sin” (1 Jn 3:9)? John is speaking in the context of lawlessness, or the intentional refusal with one’s mind to be ruled by and receive the Spirit from God, as he establishes earlier:

- ✦ “Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.” (1 Jn 3:4-6)

First, note that if sin is lawlessness, as John declares, then for a man to know whether he sins he must know what law he is under. If a man is under the Law of Ordinances, then lawlessness is that which transgresses those ordinances. If a man is under the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ, the “law of faith” (Rom 3:27), then lawlessness is that which is not of that life in Christ.

Second, it is important to distinguish the “sin” that is willful lawlessness of the mind and “sin” that is committed unwillfully (in ignorance). God’s atoning sacrifices are for sins “committed in ignorance” (Heb 9:6-7, 11-14; cf. Lv 4:2, 22, 27; 5:14, 18). Under the Law of Ordinances, one could sin in ignorance by unintentionally transgressing the letter of the law. Under the Law of the Spirit, “all things are lawful” (1 Cor 6:12) with respect to works, but

“whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). So under the Law of the Spirit, one can sin in ignorance by unintentionally lapsing in faith, but one cannot choose wilful, unrepentant sin and still bear the Spirit. Clearly when Peter stumbled in faith on the sea and when denying Jesus, his lapse in faith was unintentional in that he did not wilfully reject faith in God. So his faith did not die, and his sin was covered.

Thus, if referring to wilful, intentional sin against the Law of the Spirit, since the Law of the Spirit mutually exclusive with a wilfully lawless spirit, a Christian can echo 1 John 3:9 to say that he does not sin.

- ✦ “For if we go on sinning wilfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. . .” (Heb 10:26)

But of sins that do not so refuse the Spirit after one has been transferred into God’s kingdom, John wrote:

- ✦ “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. . .” (1 Jn 1:8-2:1)

We know from Scripture that none of us can avoid stumbling, for “we all stumble in many ways” (Jas 3:2), and “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt 26:41). With respect to unintentional sins, we are all guilty. We all still war against the Law of Sin in our flesh, and we all stumble and fail at times in acting from faith during that war, and we all have thereby sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Therefore we all need Christ as our great High Priest to make atonement for us. We are able to approach God without shame because Christ is our Redeemer and Advocate (see Heb 9), and through Him we do continually press forward to maturity and holiness in the image of Christ (Eph 4:11-16). The testing of our faith makes it stronger and produces endurance against such opposing temptations (Jas 1:2-3, Rom 5:3-5).

So saving faith is not a faithfulness that never stumbles. It is a faithfulness that always repents and returns to God when it does stumble. The only sin that fully kills faith and severs us from Christ is that which wilfully refuses rule by the Spirit. We must cling to Christ and the full assurance of our inheritance in Him. Christ Himself atoned for our sins by His blood so that we can repent and approach God with confidence despite our shortcomings and stumblings. Our faith is the picture of looking with confidence to the Son of Man lifted up as the serpent in the wilderness, even while we are presently being justly bitten by serpents, and saying, “Lord, save me! Come, Lord Jesus!”

The Test of Love

Are works of love a source of confidence for the Christian? There are certainly several passages in Scripture that highlight works in relation to our hope:

- ✦ “Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.” (Jn 5:28-29)
- ✦ “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing

good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.” (Rom 2:4-8)

Further, much of John's first epistle is focused on the topic of confidence related to works, and he says:

- ✦ “By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked. Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. . . . No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother. . . . Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. . . . God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because He first loved us. . . . These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.” (1 Jn 2:5-7, 3:9-10,18-23; 4:16-19, 5:13)

This does not contradict the many statements of Scripture that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works, nor does it mean that we lose salvation if we stumble in our striving for faithful behavior. It means that faith strives to imitate its object and also that a guilty conscience must shrink back before the Almighty God.

- ✦ “‘And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.” (Heb 10:38)

As John says, God's command is to believe in Jesus and to love one another. This is the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ. So by the Spirit, we do believe in Jesus and love one another. Faith in Jesus must love, for “God is love”. We are “begotten again” (Jn 3:3) of the “seed” of the Father, “by the Spirit whom He has given us” (1 Jn 3:24), and thus we share in His nature of love. Since we know that we should love, if we knowingly refuse to do so, then we must have a guilty conscience. It does not mean that we earn life by our love. It means that willful refusal to walk according to the Spirit is incompatible with the faith that is born of God. The heart of true faith loyally pursues faithfulness in word and deed, even while it fights against the Law of Sin in the flesh.

In other words, because God is love, and because faith in God by definition clings to and conforms to Him and does not willfully and unrepentantly sin against Him, a faithful child of God is obvious by his fruits of love. A man who only says the words, “Lord, Lord” but does not submit to Christ as his Lord in spirit and truth does not have this faith. He is a hypocrite who still obeys unrighteousness and the Law of Sin with his mind, and he will be assigned a place with the hypocrites (see Mt 24:48-51).

- ✦ “A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in

Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’” (Mt 7:18-23)

- ✦ “They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed.” (Ti 1:16)

But love is also something that is taught and learned through faith:

- ✦ “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us” (Eph 5:1-2)
- ✦ “Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is opened wide. You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. Now in a like exchange—I speak as to children—open wide to us also.” (2 Cor 6:11-13)
- ✦ “Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, kind, being subject to their own husbands, so that the word of God will not be dishonored. Likewise urge the young men to be sensible; in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, . . .” (Ti 2:3-7)

And so some Christians will bear more fruit than others due to having matured further from little children in the faith into the full image of Christ. So John writes of “perfect love”, that is, love that has matured to its goal. Those who have matured in love are those who “know” the Father. Those who have not are still children:

- ✦ “If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. . . . By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. . . . I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name’s sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning.” (1 Jn 1:10-2:1,3,12-13)

If John’s hearers already had perfect love, John would not need to write to them. But they did have faith. So, as “little children”, John teaches them to love, in the image of Christ and according to the Spirit. The fruits of mature love are objective and obvious and thus give his hearers confidence before God that they are His children. But a child cannot know his father’s will unless he is taught. A faithful child will strive to conform to the image of his father’s instruction. A child who clings to lawlessness will shrink back from his parent’s gaze.

Thus, John’s epistle presents the same exhortation as what Paul and as the author of Hebrews wrote:

- ✦ “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. . . . So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, . . . So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart . . . Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of

Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.” (Eph 2:8-10, 19, 4:17-18, 5:1-10)

- ✦ “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. . . . You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord’ . . . God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. . . . Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.” (Heb 12:1-2, 4-5, 7-8, 12-14)

If a man has faith in God but also serves the lusts of his flesh not out of overt rebellion but out of ignorance to what God’s Way is, he is like an infant or like a sheep without a shepherd. The mature Christians, out of love for serving their Lord and out of love for the man, that he may not earn punishment in his ignorance (see Lk 12:47-48), are to go and show him what God demands from His Word. If he has faith in Jesus as his Lord then the law of his mind will conform to the law of God, and he will then strive to conform his willful behavior accordingly, though that must involve battling against sin in his flesh. This process of maturing in love is our sanctification. Only after a person is confronted with his sin in private, and before witnesses, and before the church, and then still willfully rejects Christ’s authority, should Christians treat him as someone who is outside of Christ’s body and outside of His certain hope of resurrection (see Mt 18:15-20).

If a man finds that he has failed in any way to love God or his neighbor as he ought and as he strives to, that does not mean that he has chosen to wilfully cast off the Law of the Spirit in rebellion against God. The striving shows that he is in fact fighting the Law of Sin with his mind, according to the Law of the Spirit of Christ. Of those who pursue God’s will but still continually fail and repeatedly repent in the same ways, Christ says:

- ✦ “If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.” (Lk 17:3-4)

We know from human experience that our thoughts follow habits, often multiple and inconsistent habits, and these can be hard to rule over through the Spirit. We pray to be forgiven as we ourselves forgive (Mt 6:12-15).

Scripture says that, despite our continual sins and need for forgiveness, a Christian can be reassured of his life in Christ through the objective test of his fruits of love. This is the same as reassuring a man that his body is alive through the objective sight that he is breathing. “For just as the body without the [spirit/breath] is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (Jas 2:26). There is no confidence before God for a man who knows that he is choosing to disregard God’s will. There is confidence for any child of God, no matter how young or untaught, who toddles toward Him in faith. As he pursues Christ, he will increase in maturity, in love, and in knowledge in His Way and will bear more fruit. Since God continues to teach us, we maintain this confidence by continuing to listen to Him in faith. Even if our heart condemns us, we “will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him”, “for God is greater than our heart and knows all things.” (1 Jn 3:19-20)

A man cannot be reassured that he has God's Spirit by being reminded that Christ died for the sins of the world. A man burdened by his sins cannot be reassured that he has not blasphemed the Spirit and cast God off by being reminded that he was previously given the Spirit. Rather, a man who is burdened by knowledge of his sinfulness and who stills pursues God should be reminded of the distinction between faith that stumbles and faith that fails, and that he can see objectively that he does pursue God's will as he struggles against his sinful flesh. He should especially be reminded that "if we are faithless, He remains faithful" (2 Tm 2:13).

But if any man looks to his own fruits, not as a measure of whether he is faithfully listening to his Lord but as a measure of whether he has merited enough through his fruits to earn or sustain life from God, he poisons faith in God with faith in himself and seeks to be justified by law, which severs him from Christ (Gal 5:4). He must then either doubt his future, for he will never be able to meet God's standard of perfection in his works, or fall into blind conceit and the judgment of the devil (Jn 9:41, 1 Tm 3:6). And if any man regards his fruits without recognizing his guilt and need for continual intercession, the truth is not in him (1 Jn 1:8) and his guilt remains.

- ✦ "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Lk 18:11-14)

Legitimacy Doubts

Paul summarizes "the word of faith" as follows:

- ✦ "... if you confess [submissively pledge] with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, 'Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.' ... For 'Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" (Rom 10:8-11,13)

There are then two ways that a person can legitimately doubt that he will be saved. Only if either of these is true for a man can he conclude that he has rejected his Lord and will not be saved:

1. He does not confess Jesus as his Lord (he rejects the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ),
2. He does not believe in his heart that God raised Jesus from the dead (he rejects the Gospel).

Regarding the first, it is obvious when one does not truly submit to Jesus as Lord, for even if he claims on the surface to follow Him, such a person openly chooses to reject His Word once he acknowledges that it says something he disagrees with.²⁷ He instead confesses allegiance of his mind and spirit to the Law of Sin. As it is written, those who say "Lord, Lord" in word only and in practice submit to lawlessness will not be acknowledged by Christ (Mt 7:18-23). This lack of loyalty to Christ is incompatible with the Christian faith.

Regarding the second, it is also obvious when one rejects that God raised Jesus and will raise His church from the dead. These are typically those who outwardly identify as belonging to other religions or as atheists, though there have been those who openly reject the real resurrection while calling themselves Christians. This refusal to recognize the living reign and rewards of Christ is incompatible with the faith that clings in hope to Christ.

²⁷ Though when people disagree about what God's Word says, such people can disagree out of zeal for following God.

Summary: The Assurance of the Gospel and the Law

- ✚ “Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.” (1 Jn 2:28)

There are two paths of judgment: one for those who do not receive the gospel, and thus are not transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of God, and one for those who are not willing to receive the law, and thus, though they have been transferred, they then rebel against God in our present wilderness.

Thus, for true confidence before God that does not shrink away from Him at His coming, a man must have:

1. Confidence that he has been transferred into the kingdom of God,
2. Confidence that he is not rebellious and that God still receives him.

A person's confidence according to the gospel is that he has been transferred into the kingdom of God, and this must be solely in the gift and love of God, and not in his own works. If a person wrestles with doubt as to whether God's mercy is for him, due to how undeserving he is, then that person should be reminded that his transfer depended not on his own merits but on God's mercy, to God's glory.

A person's confidence according to the law of the Spirit, that God still receives him throughout life after his transfer, depends on both God's forgiveness and on his objective life in the Spirit that God gives. A tree is known by its fruits. If he doubts whether he has forsaken Christ, pointing him back to confidence in his initial transfer will not address his uncertainty. He must be reminded of the meaning of faith and law, and that he is in the Spirit when the law of his mind pursues God's law even as it fights sin. Faith leads him to continually mourn his sin and repent and pursue maturity in God's image. Confidence that God still welcomes him must be rooted in the assurance that Christ still intercedes for him and cleanses him from his sins even after his adoption.

In common with both assurances is the remembrance of God's steadfast love for us that both creates and sustains our forgiven life in Him. He is “the author and perfecter of faith” (Heb 12:2). To Him be all glory, amen.

If a Christian can say, with Paul, that Jesus is his Lord, according to the law of his mind, and believes, with Paul, that God raised Jesus up from the dead, he too will be saved and raised to be with Him in paradise.

The good news is that God's Anointed, Jesus our Lord, has come, has died to pay our debts, has been raised to eternal life to bring into His eternal kingdom with Him all those who are united to Him through faith, has defeated the prince of this world, and will on the last day cast out all evil. He has freed us from the penalties of God's ordinances so that in this faith and grace in which we stand we may freely and confidently bear fruit for Him in love.

- ✚ “Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” (2 Cor 3:4-6)

This confidence, faith with hope with love, is the object and goal of the proclamation of the gospel and the dividing of the laws.

- ✚ “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Rom 15:13)