

Completed By The Spirit: New Covenant Sanctification in Paul

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For the apostle Paul, the Mosaic law – or any external commands not grounded in the indicative of the Spirit of God given to dwell in the believer – is antithetical to our growth in holiness; rather it is the Holy Spirit who is transforming the believer from “one degree of glory to another,” (2 Cor 3:18)¹. Paul’s teaching on the uselessness of the law to combat sin in the life of the Christian has been distorted through the lens of confessional Covenant Theology, resulting in a focus on law that continues to enslave believers in sin.² Perhaps Paul’s exasperated exclamation and rhetorical questions to the “foolish” Galatians is summary enough of Paul’s view of the law:

[2] Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? [3] Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? [4] Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? [5] Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— [6] just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? (Gal 3:2-6)

“Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” That antithesis – the Spirit and the flesh – draws the battle lines for Paul between those who would have believers continuing as slaves to sin instead of living as slaves to Christ and

¹ Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001).

² This is a reference to the “third use of the law,” the belief that the “Moral Law” or the Decalogue remains a “perfect rule of righteousness” for the believer, such as is stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith and its later derivative, the 2nd London Baptist Confession of Faith.

reaping the fruit of the Spirit. It is, as Paul tells the Thessalonians, the will of God that they – that we – be sanctified, “because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth” (2 Thess 13). God did not choose believers to be sanctified by the law; God did not choose believers to be sanctified by their own actions, behavior modification or self-help techniques; God chose believers to be sanctified by the Spirit of Christ via the gospel of Christ.

For the believer, there is an initial positional sanctification: we have been set apart as holy by God at our regeneration. There is also a final sanctification, or glorification: we will be holy and blameless and spotless. “And I am sure of this,” Paul writes, “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6). But what comes between? Thomas Schreiner describes the tension between these two states and the believer’s existence between these two states:

Believers are already in the realm of the holy, but on the last day, they will be transformed so that they are without sin. Paul does not explain how this transformation will occur; though it seems that it will take place when Christ returns. ... A tension emerges in Paul’s thought. On the one hand, it seems that the eschatological completion of holiness cannot be sundered from progress in holiness in this life; on the other hand, Paul recognizes that the work of holiness will not be accomplished in this life. He uses a future tense to assure them that God will sanctify them completely. ... The already–not yet dimension of Paul’s eschatology provides the most satisfactory solution. Believers are in the process of sanctification now,

but they are not yet perfect. They long for the day when God’s promise of perfecting them in holiness will be consummated.³

Martyn Lloyd-Jones describes that “process of sanctification now” in this way:

So then, I suggest to you that this will do as a good definition of sanctification: it is ‘that gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit by which He delivers the justified sinner from the pollution of sin, renews his whole nature in the image of God and enables him to perform good works.’ Let me make that clear: ‘It is that gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit by which He delivers the justified sinner’—the one who is already justified—‘from the pollution of sin’—not from the guilt any longer, that has happened. Justification has taken care of that. He is declared just and righteous, the guilt has been dealt with. Now we are concerned more about the power and the pollution of sin—‘renews his whole nature in the image of God and enables him to perform good works.’⁴

Thus for the purposes of this paper, we shall use the term “sanctification” in the sense of a growth in holiness: what has traditionally been called “progressive sanctification.”⁵ However, because of the use of and the association with the term

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 374-5.

⁴ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossways Books, 1997). 195.

⁵ For example, Robert L. Reymond in *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith (Second Edition)* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1998) defines progressive sanctification as one “understood negatively in terms of putting to death the deeds of the flesh which still remain in him and positively in terms of growth in all saving graces.” (p. 768-769). Reymond then goes on for 12 more pages defending the use of the Decalogue as the as “the moral law of God, which Christians are to obey.” Similarly, the Westminster Confession of Faith quite sweetly posits that “They who are effectually called and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and

“progressive sanctification” with those who would also advocate the “third use of the law” as part of that growth, we will not use that term here, but instead will use “sanctification” – and its Greek *ἁγιασμός* (*hagiasmos*) – as interchangeable with a “growth in holiness,” recognizing that this is the most common use of the term in the New Testament.⁶

With that eschatological trajectory in mind – our final complete holiness – we will focus on the sanctification – the growth in holiness – that should be the life story of all Christians, a life story that requires a fervent belief in the gospel and a trust in the Spirit for that sanctification. It is God who justifies and God who glorifies (Romans 8:30) and most assuredly, it is God who sanctifies by His Spirit (2 Thess 2:13).

To show how Paul views this growth in holiness – this ongoing work of sanctification before that final glorification – we will look at five propositions of Paul’s theology. First, is that the law cannot cope with sin. Second, the love that is intrinsic to God and which flows only from God – the love brought by the indwelling Holy Spirit – fulfills the law. Third, that it is the Spirit that produces fruit in the believer while the law in our remaining sinful flesh can produce only that which it has power to produce: sin. Fourth, that sanctification results from our union with Christ, exhorted by what it means to be Christ-like. Fifth, that while Paul gives us imperatives, commands and exhortations,

personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them; the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified, and they more and more quickened and strengthened, in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (XIII/i). Yet that same confession describes asserts that the law “doth forever bind all” (XIX/v), the words of Paul in Scripture notwithstanding.

⁶ William D. Mounce says of *ἁγιασμός* (*hagiasmos*) that the word, “is generally used in the NT the moral sense, referring to the process (or the final result of that process) of making pure or holy. It is like a growing fruit that results in eternal life.” *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). 338.

they are not themselves laws and are not given as laws or in the category of law, because they are imperatives that are only achieved by the indicative of our reliance upon Christ and our position in Christ.

The battle for our sanctification is between the Spirit and the use of the law or anything external to change us. It is not – and cannot – be the law battling against our sinful flesh. Using the law to combat sin pours gasoline upon the sinful passions of the flesh, a flesh we will inhabit until the day we meet Christ face to face and be raised like Him. “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom 6:5).

A Resurrection Like His

Before we address the five propositions outlined above, we should take a moment to consider the eschatology of our sanctification. We will indeed be glorified, Paul promises (Rom 8:30). What is important about that final and complete sanctification, though, is what that state reveals about us – what that “not yet” tells us about our “already.”

Certainly the apostle John gives us the most poignant view of what we will be: “We know that when he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). But Paul also comprehends and explains to us that we indeed shall be like our Savior. In his benediction at the end of 1 Thessalonians, Paul writes, “[23] Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. [24] He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thess 5:23-24). We will be sanctified completely. Will we accomplish it through our own effort or through performance-driven navel-

gazing? Will a reliance on the law do it? No, Paul tells us, “the God of peace himself” will do it.

Paul tells the Thessalonians that the one who is sanctifying them will complete that sanctification when Christ returns: “Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, [12] and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, [13] so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” (1 Thess 3:11-13).

And Paul even exhorts himself to remain faithful and focused on the goal he knows he will reach, when he writes to the Philippians:

[12] Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. [13] Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [14] I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. [15] Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. [16] Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

[17] Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. [18] For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. [19] Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

[20] But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, [21] who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Phil 3:12-21)

Paul has his eyes fixed on what lies ahead, a time when he will be rid of what remains of his “body of death.” He strives to live according to the Spirit as one whose mind is set on the things of the Spirit. He knows he will be like Christ; not as someone who follows the letter of the law, but one whose transformed spirit gives him the perfect selfless love of Christ that intrinsically and ontologically fulfills the law.

With this eschatological reality in mind, a sanctification begun at regeneration, increased in the now and consummated in the not yet, let’s look at the five propositions outlined above and consider how Paul uses the antithesis of law and Spirit to exhort believers to be more and more in the here and now what they will one day become in full.

The Law Cannot Cope With Sin

The law cannot cope with sin. The law cannot prevent sin; the law can’t curb sin; the law is powerless against sin. In fact, Paul tells us, the law provokes sin. Although what the law commands is holy, it was given to stiff-necked Israel to increase transgressions until the Messiah, the single seed of Abraham, was to come:

[19] Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary. [20] Now an intermediary implies more than one, but God is one.

[21] Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. [22] But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

[23] Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. [24] So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:19-27)⁷

In his analysis of this passage, Jason C. Meyer references Thomas Schreiner's argument that, "although the phrase 'because of transgressions' could refer to defining or increasing transgression, the latter option is preferable."⁸ Schreiner gives three reasons for that interpretation: first, that the context of the passage is that salvation cannot be attained by the law; second, that the relationship of "under law and under sin" reveals the law's role in arousing sin; and third, that there is a parallel with Romans 5:20: "Now the law came in to increase the trespass. ..."⁹

Meyer expands upon Schreiner's argument with five observations:

⁷ Verse 27 is translated variously as "to lead us to Christ" instead of "until Christ came" in editions such as the New American Standard Bible. Could the preference of the NASB in law-preaching circles be a theological decision? Furthermore, the choice of "schoolmaster" or "tutor" instead of "guardian" (or perhaps better yet "nanny" or "babysitter" as a word for the slave or servant who supervised the conduct of a child) for παιδαγωγός gives the sense that the law teaches and leads the individual to Christ rather than being a covenantal law to guide the covenant people until the time of the Messiah. The latter understanding seems to fit Paul's theology more consistently while the former more neatly tailors itself to the theology and confessions of third-use proponents.

⁸ Jason C. Meyer, *The End of the Law: Mosaic Covenant in Pauline Theology* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 168.

⁹ *Ibid.*

First, the view that stresses the restraining function of the law does not make sense contextually. Paul could not persuade the Galatians to forsake circumcision and the Mosaic law by telling them of the law's power to restrain sin. Second, while the open-ended phrase "because of transgressions" could refer to either the defining or increasing function of the law, context favors the latter view.

Third, there are compelling reasons to think that the law's purpose of increasing transgressions actually provides a coherent argument in the context. The downward spiral introduced by the advent of the law reveals that the law did not save Israel then and will not save anyone now.

Humankind needs a Savior, not more stipulations. Paul accentuates the downward spiral precisely so that the upward spiral introduced by the coming of Christ would be all the more evident. Fourth, Rom 5:20 provides an instructional parallel for this discussion of the law's function. The parallel provides a Pauline precedent for this type of logic, though it does not prove that Paul is saying the same thing in Gal 3:19. Fifth, the view that the law increases transgression receives further support from places in Paul like Rom 7:7-11. Therefore, Gal 3:19b reveals the impotent nature of law in that the law cannot restrain sin (ontological problem); it only increases it (because of the anthropological problem.)¹⁰

In using the terms *ontological* and *anthropological*, Meyer makes reference to a previous discussion on Paul's reference to Leviticus 18:5, "You shall therefore keep my

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 168-70.

statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD,” in Paul’s antithesis between law and Spirit in Galatians 3:11-12: “[11] Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’ [12] But the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them.’” Meyer explains: “The offer of life conditioned on human obedience never becomes a reality because ‘the one who does these things’ cannot obey them (anthropological), and the law (‘these things’) cannot provide (ontological problem) the power to overcome the anthropological problem.”¹¹ (Meyer also notes a third problem – chronological – because Israel had not received the Spirit.)

Even though believers are indwelt by the Spirit, sin remains in the old man, in the flesh. That’s an anthropological problem for which the law cannot provide an answer; in fact, the law *by design* causes that which it seems given to prevent.

Meyer references Romans 7 as a parallel passage to support Paul’s assertion that the law increases transgression. Indeed, the apostle also makes it quite clear in his discourse in Romans chapters 6 through 8 that the law is ineffective against sin and, what’s even worse, arouses sinful passions in man. In Romans 6, Paul shows us that living under law is to live under the power of sin:

[8] Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. [9] We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. [10] For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. [11] So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ

¹¹ Ibid., 161.

Jesus. [12] Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. [13] Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. [14] For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Advocates of the “third use of the law” will attempt to draw a distinction between being “under the law” and *following* the law. Somewhat ironically (as we shall see), Joel R. Beeke advocates using the law to expose sin for our sanctification, despite Paul’s warnings that the law arouses sin. Beeke writes:

This convicting use of the law is also critical for the believer’s sanctification, for it serves to prevent the resurrection of self-righteousness — that ungodly self-righteousness which is always prone to reassert itself even in the holiest of saints. The believer continues to live under the law as a lifelong penitent.

This chastening work of the law does not imply that the believer’s justification is ever diminished or annulled. From the moment of regeneration, his state before God is fixed and irrevocable. He is a new creation in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17). He can never revert to a state of condemnation nor lose his sonship. Nevertheless, the law exposes the ongoing poverty of his sanctification on a daily basis. He learns that there is a law in his members such that when he would do good, evil is present with him (Rom. 7:21). He must repeatedly condemn himself, deplore his

wretchedness, and cry daily for fresh applications of the blood of Jesus Christ that cleanses from all sin (Rom. 7:24; 1 John 1:7, 9).¹²

What a dismal, rotten and pitiful existence Beeke describes! What a horrid depiction of a Christian life! Indeed, Beeke's description does reflect a law that "doth bind the believer"¹³ (as the Westminster Confession of Faith states) and not a freedom in which believers have been set free (Gal 5:1).¹⁴ And he (perhaps unwittingly) makes an excellent argument for the man of Romans 7 being an unbeliever by advocating that Christians should be miserable about their sin as they perform their daily Protestant penance. Furthermore, a heavy dose of moralistic preaching from the pulpit at the expense of the gospel can lead to a young generation of unevangelized Pharisees.

Willem VanGemenen not only advocates for third use, but also denies that the Spirit replaces the law in the New Covenant:

The law is not replaced by the Spirit in the eschatological age. The Spirit opens people up to the law and transforms them to live by a higher ethics [sic]. We may even speak of eschatological ethics as an application of the moral law, by which believers live in the present age with their eyes focused on the coming of the kingdom. While all people belong to the present age and are made responsible for keeping its mores, Christians live by the higher ethics of the kingdom. Paul speaks of this tension in his ministry: "To those not having the law I became like one not having the

¹² Joel R. Beeke, "The Place of the Third Use of the Law in Reformed Theology" (Concordia Theological Seminary, 2005), 5-6.

¹³ Westminster Confession of Faith, XIX/v.

¹⁴ Beeke concludes his paper with the argument that binding users under the law actually produces freedom. Perhaps an analogy would be that keeping training wheels on bicycles actually produces Lance Armstrong.

law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law [*ennomos Christou*]), so as to win those not having the law" (1 Cor. 9:21). The law is God's instrument in transforming the Christian into a servant of the kingdom of God. ...¹⁵

Paul, however, could not be more direct that the law is no longer binding on the Christian. The apostle begins this in chapter 7 of Romans:

[7:1] Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives?

[2] For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage.

[3] Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

[4] Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. [5] For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. [6] But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code (*or "of the letter" – ESV footnote*). (Romans 7:1-6)

¹⁵ Willem A. VanGemenen, "The Law Is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective" *Five Views on Law and gospel* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1996), 58.

While proponents of “third use of the law” (like Beeke) will divide the law into three component parts, nowhere do we see Paul draw distinctions among moral, ceremonial and civil aspects of the Mosaic law. Paul does not say that we’ve died to Jewish cultic rituals and Jewish civil law as some might argue – although many of the ethical norms expressed by Paul do contain the same or similar content as the Decalogue. Stephen Westerholm explains why there is a difference between the Ten Commandments and what are similar ethical exhortations from Paul:

The ethic determined by God’s Holy Spirit cannot, for Paul, be capricious. Paul points out areas of possible human behavior which are incompatible with the leading of the Holy Spirit of God and other moral characteristics which the Spirit inevitably produces. In fact, of course, Paul’s understanding of the moral behavior which the Spirit induces corresponds nicely with the moral demands of the Mosaic law. But this ... does not mean that Paul derives Christian duty from the law. The ethical instruction of the epistles would have looked very different had Paul continued to find the will of God in the way he did as a Pharisee, by interpreting and applying the relevant statutes from Torah.¹⁶

Paul’s antithesis is between written code – the code of the Old Covenant – and the Spirit. *We have* died to that which aroused sin in us.

Nor does Paul specify justification only as the basis for not trusting the law. He clearly speaks of the law in its present tense for the believer. He speaks against using the

¹⁶ Stephen Westerholm, *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 214.

law for our walk, for our sanctification. In verse 6, he writes “we serve” (δουλεύειν ἡμᾶς) *in the present tense*. We serve in the Spirit because we are released from the law.

The law bears fruit for death, arouses sinful passions and holds men captive. Is that what we should follow, is that what we should use, is that what we should turn to grow in holiness?

Furthermore, Paul does more than tell those who would look to the law that they are wrong; he calls them adulteresses. In his analogy, he says that a woman who lives with another man while he is alive commits adultery. We have died to the law; to live as under the law is to commit adultery against Christ, to whom the church is betrothed, and to whom He gave His Spirit as a guarantee until the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9).

Paul continues in chapter 7 in a pericope of which the subject is widely debated:

[7] What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” [8] But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. [9] I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. [10] The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. [11] For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. [12] So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

[13] Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. [14] For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. [15] For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. [16] Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. [17] So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

[18] For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. [20] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

[21] So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. [22] For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, [23] but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. [24] Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? [25] Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Rom 7:7-25)

Douglas Moo identifies three different ways in which this passage may be interpreted:

1. Paul describes his experience as an unconverted Jew under the law.
2. Paul describes his experience, perhaps shortly after his conversion, as he sought sanctification through the law.
3. Paul describes his experience as a mature Christian.¹⁷

Moo advocates for the first position:

As Paul has taught at some length in Romans 6, every believer, united with Christ in death and resurrection, has been “set free from sin” (see 6:6, 14, 18, 22). And Romans 8:2 makes it clear that the Spirit sets every believer free from the law of sin and death. For me, then, the decisive point is simply put: the assertions made in verses 14–25 cannot be true of a believer, and thus cannot be referring to Paul. That is why I think that Paul is describing what it was like to live as an unregenerate Jew under the law.¹⁸

Systematic theologian Robert L. Reymond, though a third-use advocate, concurs with Moo:

It is both this last point – the “utter sinfulness” of his sinful nature – and the impotency of the law in the struggle against sin – that Paul develops in 7:14-25, arguing that even when as the convicted Pharisee he wanted to do the good and obey God, his sinful nature would not let him and the law did not help him; to the contrary, the sinful nature “waged war against the law of his mind [the desire to do good] and made him a prisoner of the law of

¹⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans: A Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002). Moo provides further depth in his Romans commentary.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

sin at work within his members.” His conclusion: his unregenerate state had been a “wretched” existence, so wretched, in fact, that he cried for deliverance from it! Not knowing where to turn (for he still did not believe Jesus was the Messiah or that Jesus could help him), however, he continued in his impotency to struggle against sin’s potency until his Damascus road conversion finally brought him deliverance from his slavery to sin (8:1-4)!¹⁹

Sinclair Ferguson advocates for the third view, a post-regenerate Paul (or generic regenerate man) in Romans 7, and sees the apostle as using this pericope to join chapter 6 with chapter 8 and to describe the struggle that the believer has between his remaining corrupt flesh and his new nature:

[T]hese statements simply underline Paul’s sense of the inherent contradiction of being one in whom sin continues to dwell when he or she is not under the dominion of the flesh but in the Spirit. For the one who has realized that the synchronous indwelling of the Spirit of Christ and of sin presents an appalling contradiction – not merely a paradox – is bound to express it in terms that verge on, and perhaps *are*, contradictory.²⁰

Westerholm also makes an argument for the third position, and in doing so gives us a warning about the danger of using the law as an agent of sanctification:

To seek to define whether he has in mind the Christian or the pre-Christian struggle with sin is probably to ask a question he did not intend to answer; indeed, his account seems to mix elements from both. Most of what he

¹⁹ Reymond, 1132.

²⁰ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: 1996), 160.

says clearly reflects his Christian perception of life lived under the law, but modern scholarship has perhaps too quickly banished *every* suggestion of Christian experience from the passage. 7:24-25, if reflective of *any* experience, would seem to reflect his continuing awareness of the struggle between a mind devoted to God's service and a "flesh" drawn toward sin.²¹

Moo explains the second, mediating view in his analysis of all three:

The main argument for the second, "immature Christian," view is, of course, that the arguments for the first and third views both carry weight, and so the only way to reconcile all the data is with a mediating view. Paul is a Christian (explaining the data in the third-view argument), but a Christian who finds himself frustrated because he is trying to live by the law (explaining the data in the first-view argument). But the problem with this mediating view, and the reason I finally think that the passage describes an unregenerate person, is that the data in the argument for the first view involve an objective state, not a subjective feeling. Paul does not say that he feels as if he were a slave of sin or that he feels as if he were a prisoner of the law of sin; rather, he states such as the reality of his situation.²²

Whichever of the three views one might hold, two of the same conclusions can be drawn from this passage. First: the law cannot save us *or* sanctify us; second: the

²¹ Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 397.

²² Moo, 125-6.

regenerate man is not, and must not live as, a slave to the law. Given those two propositions, how can it follow that the regenerate man should use what enslaved him and what caused him to sin as something to sanctify him? As Lloyd-Jones writes:

The Apostle is not describing his own experience here; but, as I have continued to repeat, he is concerned to tell us a number of things about the Law, and to show us that the Law cannot save in any respect; it cannot justify, it cannot sanctify. That is his one object in the whole of the passage. His interest is in the Law. In verse 5 he says that the Law makes us sin more than ever; in verse 13 he says “the law kills me.” He knew he would be criticized and misunderstood over this, so he answers the objections. That is all he is doing; and he puts it in this dramatic form.²³

Paul does not speak of the law as something that produces holiness; that function is reserved for the Holy Spirit. Instead, Paul shows us that while the Spirit of Christ may indwell us, sin still lurks in our members. To use the law to sanctify the regenerate man, that same law that fostered sin in his unregenerate state, is to be foolish.

Schreiner writes:

Paul contrasts living under the law, where the flesh uses the law to produce sin, with life under the Spirit, where believers are freed from slavery. The Spirit works in their hearts to give them a desire to do the will of God. Life under the law leads to death because sin has free reign. Those who have died to the law through the death of Christ have been freed by the Spirit so that they will do the will of God because they are united with

²³ Lloyd-Jones, “The Law: Its Function and Limits,” <http://www.gospeltruth.net/ljrom7.htm>, accessed July 19, 2010.

Christ. Returning to the law, then is to rebuild what has been torn down with the coming of Christ (Gal. 2:18). Hence, reversion to the law can only mean the return of sin and transgression. Believers died to the law by dying with Christ (Gal. 2:19-20). They live new lives by trusting in Jesus as God's Son, and to return to the law would be a denial of God's grace in Jesus Christ (Gal. 2:21).²⁴

In Romans 8, as Paul provides the solution to the wretched state of the chapter 7 man, he joyfully proclaims, “[1] There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. [2] For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” (Rom 8:1-2). But that does not mean that the law is now harmless to the regenerate man who nevertheless still has remaining sin – and as we noted above – will continue to have remaining sin in his flesh until glory. Paul issues this stern warning:

[5] For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. [6] For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. [7] For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. [8] Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Romans 8:5-8)

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians, Paul reminds us, “[56] The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. [57] But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:56-57).

²⁴ Schreiner, 649.

To focus on the law in our regenerate state is to set our minds on the very thing that provokes sin in the flesh and to set our minds on the very thing that gives sin its power over our flesh. While the Romans 7 man by chapter 8 now no longer faces condemnation for sin, the Romans 8 man still has not been glorified, and thus he remains susceptible to the *effects* of sin. To set his mind on the external law of letters and not the internal law of the Spirit of Christ is to condemn him in a temporal sense to a walk beset by sin.

But, says Paul:

[9] You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. [10] But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. [11] 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.

The same warning was given by Paul to the Galatians. Despite those who would characterize Galatians as warning to unbelievers that they cannot be justified by the law, or who characterize it as a warning to the Galatians not to return to the ceremonial practices of Judaism – practices Paul finds indifferent in Romans 14 – Paul is writing to the church and Paul is making no tripartite distinction within the law. Thus, Paul’s warning is about the whole law and his warning is to those who are believers. “You were running well,” he exclaims. These are not people who are not yet justified; these are

people trying to walk the Christian walk, though some individuals would deny the Galatians freedom and return them to a yoke of slavery.

[7] You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?

[8] This persuasion is not from him who calls you. [9] A little leaven leavens the whole lump. [10] I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. [11] But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. [12] I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves! (Gal 3:7-12)

We will visit one more passage in which Paul speaks against the law for sanctification, and that is 2 Corinthians 3, perhaps the most specific comparison between a law of letters and of the Spirit – the *γράμμα/πνεῦμα* antithesis.

[1] Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? [2] You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. [3] And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

[4] Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. [5] Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, [6] who has made us

competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor 3:1-6)

Verse 6, the comparison between the letter and the Spirit, is often used to contrast the ineffectiveness of the Mosaic law against the power of the indwelling Spirit of Christ. And indeed, the context of the following verses in which the “ministry of death, carved in letters on stone,” clearly referring to the tablets given at Sinai as opposed to the ministry of the Spirit, suggests a comparison between the Decalogue and the Holy Spirit given to believers. But the letter/Spirit antithesis actually goes further. It is not only the Decalogue – the law which is indeed “holy and righteous and good” (Rom 7:12) according to Paul – which is ineffective. It is any external code, any external effort whatsoever that does not rely upon the Spirit of God for transformation. T. J. Deidun advances that proposition in his discussion of 2 Corinthians 3:

Now we may safely presuppose that Paul did not arrive at the conclusion that the γράμμα ‘kills’ by way of anthropological reflection on the effect that law has on man. It is the [C]hristian experience of the life-giving Spirit as eschatological newness that enables Paul to see that *only* the Spirit brings life and hence *only* the ‘new creation’ effected by the Spirit can bring man from death to life and from sin to [justification]. The primary datum of [C]hristian experience is not that the γράμμα ‘kills’ (that is a subsequent inference) but that the Spirit (and only the Spirit) [gives life].²⁵

²⁵ T. J. Deidun, *New Covenant Morality in Paul* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1981, 2006), 206. English is substituted in the brackets the author’s Greek for clarity.

It is important to note that neither Deidun, nor this paper, are advocating for a morality that is devoid of any external imperatives. We shall see that those imperatives – grounded in the indicative of the believer’s position in Christ and as a temple for His Spirit – are indeed necessary on this side of glory while we remain imperfect. Indeed, Deidun remarks, “*even in the [C]hristian economy external imperatives are to be seen chiefly as a sign of imperfect liberation. ...*”²⁶

We shall see how Paul uses imperatives, commands and exhortations in cooperation with the Spirit to encourage our growth in holiness. But those imperatives are not the external code of a former covenant that failed to produce righteousness. It is that external code of death that produced sin in the flesh of the unregenerate Paul. It is that external code of death that was given to increase transgression until Christ came. It is that external code of death that the Judaizers wanted to impose upon the Galatians who had been running well and now were stumbling. And it is that external code of death that is the antithesis of a life in the Spirit.

Love is the Fulfilling of the Law

If an external code is the antithesis of a life in the Spirit, what is the *expression* of a life in the Spirit? Love. “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Romans 5:5).

That love, that love from God via the Holy Spirit given to dwell in us is, as Paul tells us, the fulfilling of the law:

[8] Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. [9] For the commandments, “You shall not

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 209.

commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” [10] Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

There are those, especially from the camp that Graeme Goldsworthy characterizes as “evangelical Judaism,”²⁷ who will turn verse 10 on its head and say that Paul is telling us that the way we achieve love is through obedience to the law. For example, Vincent Cheung writes, “The real biblical definition of love, that is, the love that the Bible commands us to have, is defined by obedience to the law in all of our relationships (Romans 13:9-10) – and this includes the commands that it makes to both the mind and the body.”²⁸ Furthermore, Cheung makes the audacious statement that God’s love is demonstrated by “practical benevolence” and that the love of the Christian should be one of “accurate obedience.”²⁹ “In other words,” Cheung oddly asserts, “you walk in love by obeying all these commandments.”³⁰ That sort of legalism, Goldsworthy tells us, has at its base “an assertion of our control over our relationship with God. It is a soft-pedaling of the greatness of God’s grace to sinners. On the surface it may appear to be an exalting of the law, however the law is understood. Yet when we understand the nature of legalism, we find that the opposite is true.”³¹

²⁷ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 171.

²⁸ Vincent Cheung, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Boston: self-published, 2004), 159. In an over-the-top style, Cheung also criticizes D. A. Carson in this section, writing that Carson’s statement that love requires more than actions (cf. 1 Cor 13:3) is “a surprisingly amateurish inference. . . .”

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 160-1. Cheung also advocates hating non-believers as God hated Esau.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 90. Cheung makes the statement: “Immediately after my conversion, I stopped lying altogether.” This contradiction of 1 John 1:10ff necessarily brings the author’s veracity into question.

³¹ Goldsworthy, 171.

If we are to be like Christ – if we indeed are to have the love poured out by Him, and if as Paul promises we will be rid of sin – then to suggest that love is obtained by following an external code, rather than it being something intrinsic to our ontological state, is absurd.

Love is a repeated theme for Paul. So, while we have seen that love fulfills the law and that God’s love is poured into us by the Holy Spirit, let’s look at how Paul describes that love. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul writes:

[1] If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. [2] And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. [3] If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

First, let’s note that in accordance with love being something poured into us by the Holy Spirit, that love is not something that would be described by Paul as “practical benevolence. In fact, he cautions, “If I give away all I have ... but have not love, I gain nothing.” Love is not the *result* of our actions; rather it is a God-given, Spirit-provided quality that impels actions in the believer.

It is that same Spirit-provided love that forms the outworking of the New Covenant ethic. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, “[9] Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another. ...” (1 Thess 4:9) He thanks God for the Colossians’ “faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, [5] because of the hope laid up for

you in heaven” (Colossians 1:4-5), echoing the faith ... hope ... love pattern of 1 Corinthians 13, Romans 5, Galatians 5, Ephesians 4, and 1 Thessalonians 1 and 5. In his beautiful discourse on the ministry of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5, Paul tells us in verse 11 that “the love of Christ controls us.”

And in his prayer for spiritual strength in Ephesians 3, it cannot be more plain that that a living faith draws its basis from love:

[14] For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, [15] from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, [16] that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, [17] so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, [18] may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, [19] and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. [20] Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, [21] to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph 3:14-21)

Love is not the result of our obedience to the law. Love is not produced by works of the law. Our love of Christ – whether that phrase means to have the love He has, or to have love for Him, or both – is what fulfills the law eschatologically, and therefore that love is essential to the not yet that we seek in the now as we strive to be holy in our lives.

Indeed it is that dual love of God and love of neighbor that comes from a circumcised heart that finds the roots of the New Covenant in the scrolls of the Decalogue.

We'll end our section on love with a rather long quotation from D. A. Carson, in which he summarizes Paul's view on love as it relates to those two loves – God and neighbor – which have their exposition in the two tables of the Old Covenant:

Similarly, Paul insists that what is fulfilled in one word, viz. Leviticus 19:18, the command to love one's neighbor as oneself, is the entire second table of the Decalogue: love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:8- 10). Despite arguments to the contrary, the double command to love is not some sort of deep principle from which all the other commandments of Scripture can be deduced; nor is it a hermeneutical grid to weed out the laws of the old covenant that no longer have to be obeyed while blessing those that are still operative; nor is it offered as a kind of reductionistic substitute for all the Old Testament laws. In some ways, the twin laws of love, love for God and love for neighbor, integrate all the other laws. They establish the proper motives for all the other imperatives, viz. loving God and loving one's neighbor.

But the "fulfillment" language suggests something more. All the laws of the old revelation, indeed all the old covenant Scriptures, conspire to anticipate something more, to point to something beyond themselves. They point to the coming of the kingdom, the gospel of the kingdom; they point to a time when life properly lived in God's universe can be summed up by obedience to the commandment to love God with heart and soul and

mind and strength and by the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.³²

Carson goes on to describe the prophetic and predictive elements in ceremonial laws – the types and shadows, the pictures and promises fulfilled in Christ – that most Christians will recognize in the Savior: the Passover lamb, the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate high priest. But Carson also reminds us of the predictive nature of all of the Old Testament:

The argument here is that something similar can be said, in general terms, of all the law and the prophets. For example, in the consummated kingdom we will no longer need a command to prohibit murder. This is not because murder will be tolerated, but because murder will be unthinkable (quite apart from the challenge of murdering someone with a resurrection body!); hate will be unthinkable; instead, we will love one another. Thus it is not as if the consummated kingdom abolishes the command to murder; rather, it fulfills it. The kingdom brings to pass the true direction in which the prohibition of murder points.³³

This is a key point, and one we will return to. The fully-glorified believer – the one in whom sanctification is complete – will, like our God, not require laws, rules and statutes to externally determine his ethic. We will be like Christ: intrinsically, ontologically and eternally made spotless. Our new nature, still clothed in the old body, has that now. It is the cultivation of our new nature that Paul seeks in his exhortations to

³² D. A. Carson, *Love in Hard Places* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 28-29.

³³ *Ibid.*, 29.

the churches and to us, as we will see. As noted above, and by Carson, there is an already/not yet tension in the interim:

Moreover, although the consummated kingdom has not yet arrived, there is a sense in which the kingdom is already inaugurated; it has already begun; it is already partly realized. That leaves us with some terrible tensions, of course. The kingdom has come, but it is still coming; we have been transformed by the new birth, but we do not yet have resurrection bodies; we have been regenerated, but we have not yet experienced that perfect transformation that means we no longer sin; we hear the kingdom imperatives, but we recognize that this is still a cruel and broken world where the conflict between good and evil staggers on. That is the very stuff of New Testament eschatology, of New Testament ethics.³⁴

It is indeed “the very stuff” also of Paul’s eschatology and ethics. We have been given the love of Christ by His Spirit, but we are not yet what we shall be as we strain toward the goal of glory.

Producing Fruit

While we have seen that the law is ineffectual against sin, and (as Paul argues) that the law promotes sin in sinful flesh, and while we have just seen that it is love that fulfills the two tables of the law, we then must ask, “What, according to Paul, produces growth in holiness?” And that brings us to the great antithesis between the Spirit and the flesh that Paul expounds in Galatians 5. Let’s emphasize once again that Paul is writing to the church. He is not writing a treatise solely on justification by faith. He reminds the

³⁴ *Ibid*, 29-30.

Galatians, as we noted above, “You were running well!” These are believers that Paul is cautioning against turning from the Spirit.

[16] But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. [17] For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (Gal 5:16-17)

While the struggling man of Romans 7 may or may not be a representative of the unregenerate man facing despair in trying to obey the law, the man addressed by Paul *is* one who fights the Christian fight, the war between the flesh and the Spirit.

[18] But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. [19] Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, [20] idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, [21] envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:18-21)

There is a connection between living under the influence of the law and living in the flesh. Paul has already explained to us that the law promotes sin in man’s flesh, and Schreiner explains Paul’s argument:

Those who “are led by the Spirit ... are not under the law.” (Gal 5:18).

Those who yield to the Spirit are free from the law. For Paul, being under law is the equivalent to being under the power of sin (cf. Rom. 6:14-15).

His point is not that those who live in the Spirit are free from all moral norms or moral constraints, as if those who live in the Spirit enjoy

unbridled freedom. Instead, those who yield to the Spirit conquer sin and live in love. Those who are still subject to the law end up producing the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21). Those who are led by and walk by the Spirit produce the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).³⁵

And what is the fruit of the Spirit? Fruit of the Spirit is not that which “third use” advocate Beeke describes in that perpetually penitent believer who repeatedly condemns himself, deplores his wretchedness and despairs over his lack of sanctification – in other words the one in whom the works of the flesh is evident. It is the one who relies on the Spirit who obtains the joy that Paul describes; not the one in bondage to self-condemnation.

[22] But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23] gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. [24] And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

[25] If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Gal 5:22-25)

That walk by the Spirit finds its prototype in Jesus Himself declares Sinclair Ferguson, who writes:

The fact that Jesus was the Man of the Spirit is, therefore, not merely a theological categorization; it was flesh-and-blood reality. What was produced in him was fully realized human holiness. He was the

³⁵ Schreiner, 484.

incarnation of the blessed life of the covenant and of the kingdom-beatitudes which are its fruit.³⁶

Meyer makes a connection between the call in Romans 7 to “serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code,” and the fruit of the Spirit:

Bearing fruit for God means serving in the newness of the Spirit. That is, the Spirit gives birth to newness and fuels “new life” further. . . . The comparison between “fruit” and “newness” is enlightening for the whole discussion. Fruit grows on a tree because of the root system that causes its growth. The root system accounts for the origin of the fruit (i.e., gives birth to the fruit) and acts as the catalyst that causes further growth (i.e., providing the water and nutrients that are necessary for growth). In the same way, the Spirit accounts for the origin of new life (Spirit creates new life) and acts as the catalyst for future life (Spirit produces new life). . . . “In newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter” of Rom 7:6 is comparable to the phrase “ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit” in 2 Cor 3:6.³⁷

The Holy Spirit working in the God-Man Jesus Christ produced the prototype for our glorified selves. That which we will one day be in glory has been given to us now in the Spirit within us. We strive to be that which we already are by walking in the Spirit until the time when Christ “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21). We do not do it by becoming slaves to sin, we do not do it by becoming adulterers now that the King has come for His betrothed, and we do not do it through

³⁶ Ferguson, 52.

³⁷ Meyer, 47-8.

anguished, externally-driven, dismal self-righteousness produced by the dangerous doctrine of third use.

Exhorted in our Union With Christ

The Holy Spirit is “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” as Paul wrote in Colossians 1:27. It is, posits Abraham Kuyper, a “mystical union with Immanuel.”³⁸ Our sanctification is achieved by God through our union with Christ. As we saw above, “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thess 5:23-24).

The great existence-altering event that happens in our salvation is our union with Christ through His Spirit. Paul writes in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” To the Romans, he writes: “[3] Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? [4] We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. [5] For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom 6:3-5).

Union with Christ through His Spirit is the only way to combat sin in the flesh – to completely defeat it in the eternal and to battle it in the temporal. Ferguson writes:

[T]hose who have been baptized into Christ are united to him in such a way that they share in his death, burial, resurrection, ascension and ultimate glorification. This new identity in union with Christ is the

³⁸ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (London: Funk and Wagnall’s, 1900), 333.

groundwork that the Spirit lays for adequately dealing with the continuing presence of sin. On the basis of it, believers are to put off the characteristics of the old man and but on the characteristics of the new, since they have already put on the new man who is being renewed in knowledge in the image of the Creator.”³⁹

That union will result in our glorification on the last day. However, we’re still stuck in the tension of the now and not yet. We have been given the Holy Spirit and we are now positionally sanctified and set apart by God as His chosen redeemed. Yet the holiness we are promised often can be elusive in the Christian walk. What is Paul’s answer to this? Paul encourages us in two things: first, to remember the gospel of Jesus Christ and second, to rely on the Holy Spirit – to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph 4:1). Paul roots his exhortations to believers in the indicative, our position in Christ. Paul’s imperative, which can flow only from that indicative, is to walk as those called by Christ. The indicative and the imperative are treated as inseparable by Paul: because of Christ, *this* is who you now are and *this* is how you walk as one called. Paul uses exhortation, encouragement, and parenthesis – Paul implores us to be who we now are because of the Spirit of Christ who dwells in us.

Paul’s continued explanations of the gospel and doxologies of Christ are not given because these people don’t have Christ, or don’t know Him, but because they do now him. Paul writes to the Romans words that echo those of 1 Thess 4:9:

[14] I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one

³⁹ Ferguson, 152.

another. [15] But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God [16] to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (Rom 15:14-16)

Paul is bringing the words and truth of Christ to remembrance, because it is the gospel of Christ that brings about all aspects of salvation: justification, sanctification and glorification. But it's not new information to these saints. The gospel does, however, continue to ground them in what is transforming them. Their knowledge of Christ brings them closer to Him, increasing the love of Christ in them. For indeed, we all, "with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:18). By beholding Him then, we will be transformed in an instant. By beholding more of Him now, we are transformed bit by bit.

As Jerry Bridges writes:

Our specific responsibility in the pursuit of holiness as seen in 2 Corinthians 3:18, then, is to behold the glory of the Lord as it is displayed in the gospel. The gospel is the "mirror" through which we now behold His beauty. One day we shall see Christ, not as in a mirror, but face to face. Then, "we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Until then, we behold Him in the gospel. Therefore, we must "preach the gospel to ourselves every day."⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006) 111-2.

Why then, if sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in us, do believers, who have received the Spirit, still need instruction and exhortation? First, it is important to remember that believers are still imperfect this side of glory. As we saw above, the incarnate Christ as God-Man was the prototype of the believer given the Holy Spirit. But unlike us, the incarnate Jesus' communication with the Holy Spirit was perfect. In Christ, the Spirit's communication was complete. Kuyper explains this relationship:

There are three differences between this communication of the Holy Spirit to the human nature of Jesus and that in us:

First, the Holy Spirit always meets with the resistance of evil in our hearts. Jesus's heart was without sin and unrighteousness. Hence in His human nature the Holy Spirit met no resistance.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit's operation, influence, support, and guidance in our human nature is always individual, i.e., in part, imperfect; in the human nature of Jesus it was central, perfect, leaving no void.

Thirdly, in our nature the Holy Spirit meets with an ego which in union with that nature opposes God; while the Person which He met in the human nature of Christ, partaking of the divine nature, was absolutely holy. For the Son having adopted the human nature in union with His Person, was cooperating with the Holy Spirit.⁴¹

We as believers fail to cooperate fully with the Holy Spirit. Immature believers, or those with certain weaknesses or besetting sins, need further instruction in ethics to aid their cooperation with the Spirit of Christ.

⁴¹ Kuyper, 101.

Paul tells the church at Corinth that its members are immature. “[1] But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. [2] I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, [3] for you are still of the flesh” (1 Cor 3:1-3). Paul tells the Romans that some of their brothers are weak: “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions” (Rom 14:1). Indeed Paul explains that he has been sent as an apostle to bring encouragement: “For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down” (2 Cor 13:10). Westerholm writes: “As long as believers remain ‘in the flesh,’ the risk of succumbing to temptation remains.⁴² And as we noted from Deidun, those external imperatives are to be seen chiefly as a sign of “imperfect liberation.”⁴³

Schreiner doesn't root the need to provide exhortation or explanation of an ethic of love solely in the imperfection or immaturity of believers, but he does assert the need for it:

For Paul, love does not float free of ethical norms but rather is expressed by such norms. In some ways Paul's ethic is rather general, for he does not give specific guidance for each situation. He realizes that in many situations wisdom is needed to determine the prudent and godly course of action (Eph. 5:10; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-11). Paul does not have a casuistic ethic that prescribes the course of action for every conceivable situation, but neither does he simply appeal to the Spirit and freedom without

⁴² Westerholm 1988, 214.

⁴³ Deidun, 209.

describing how life in the Spirit expresses itself. The notion that Paul appeals to the Spirit for ethics without any ethical norms is contradicted by his parenthesis. Nor should the Pauline theme of obedience be identified as legalism, for the new obedience is the work of the Spirit in those who are the new creation work of Christ. Nor does it diminish the work of the cross, for the cross is the basis and foundation for the transforming work of the Spirit in believers.⁴⁴

Our sanctification is achieved by a union with Christ through His Spirit. Paul's exhortations and exposition serve to encourage the cooperation of with the Holy Spirit in the believer. Paul exhorts not by showing the believer's shortcomings through a comparison to the law – an external code that engenders sin, and thus resistance to the Spirit – but by encouraging those a reliance on the Spirit that brings the fruit of the Spirit of Galatians 5:22-23.

Imperatives Rooted in the Indicative

It is important to understand that Paul's imperatives are not in the form of laws, but are imperatives that are dependent upon the indicative of the gospel. Schreiner explains:

Paul's exhortations do not fall prey to legalism, for they are rooted in his gospel and the promises of God. Another way of saying this is that the imperative (God's command) is rooted in the indicative (what God has done for believers in Christ). Believers are saved, redeemed, reconciled, and justified even now, and yet we have seen that each of these blessings

⁴⁴ Schreiner, 656.

is fundamentally eschatological. Believers are already redeemed, and yet they await final redemption. Justification belongs to believers by faith, and yet they await the hope of righteousness on the last day (Gal. 5:5).

Believers would not need any ethical exhortations if they were already perfected. But in the interval between the “already” and the “not yet,” ethical exhortation is needed. If the priority of the indicative is lost, then the grace of the Pauline gospel is undermined. The imperative must always flow from the indicative. On the other hand, the indicative must not swallow up the imperative so that the latter disappears. The imperatives do not compromise Paul’s gospel. They should not be construed as law opposed to gospel. The imperatives are part and parcel of the gospel as long as they are woven into the story line of the Pauline gospel and flow from the indicative of what God has accomplished for us in Christ.⁴⁵

Schreiner gives two examples of imperatives rooted in the indicative of the gospel. He points first to 1 Corinthians 5 in which a man has been caught in sexual immorality with his father’s wife. Beginning in verse 6:

[6] Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? [7] Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. [8] Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old

⁴⁵ Schreiner, 656.

leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Corinthians 5:6-8)

Schreiner notes that there is a coordination between the indicative and the imperative. Paul commands the Corinthians to remove the man from the church because toleration of sin corrupts the entire church. He exhorts the church to “clean out the old leaven,” but grounds it in the words, “as you are really unleavened.” The indicative of the church as believers being free from evil demands the action to make it a reality in the here and now.⁴⁶

Schreiner’s second example is Philippians 2:12-13: “[12] Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, [13] for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” A quick read of verse 12 would suggest that we are to save ourselves, but Schreiner explains that while the passage reveals that obedience is necessary for salvation on the last day, “The imperative is grounded in the indicative. . . . All human obedience testifies to God’s power and grace in the lives of his people.”⁴⁷

We can also look to Paul’s letters to the Ephesians and Colossians for imperatives grounded in the indicative. Ephesians 4:1-3: [1] I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk,” (*imperative*), “in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, [2] with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, [3] eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” (*indicative*).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 656-7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 657.

Similarly, Ephesians 5, which follows Paul's indicative description of God's forgiveness of us through Christ:

[1] Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. [2] And walk in love, (*imperatives*) as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (*indicative*).

[3] But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, (*imperative*) as is proper among saints (*indicative*). [4] Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving (*imperative*). [5] For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God (*indicative*). [6] Let no one deceive you with empty words (*imperative*), for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience (*indicative*). [7] Therefore do not become partners with them (*imperative*); [8] for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord (*indicative*).

(Ephesians 5:1-8)

In Colossians 2:8-15, Paul's doxology establishes the indicative of Christ, while verses 16-23 (beginning with "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath,") express the imperatives that flow from that. Then, chapter 3 begins with another indicative-driven imperative:

[1] If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. [2] Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. [3] For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. [4] When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4)

Paul's pattern of indicative-empowered imperatives – which really means Spirit of Christ-empowered imperatives – continues throughout his epistles. Lee Irons writes:

The real substantive difference in the ethic of the new covenant lies not in the area of the content of this ethic, but in the antithetical contrast between the Law as a covenant of works and the dynamic of grace, with its indicative-grounded imperatives. The Law says, “Do this and live! Sinner, be something you are not!” Grace says, “You have been made alive, therefore be what you are!” The imperatives of the NT are laced with indicatives. ... There are no imperatives in the NT that come to us apart from the indicative of our union with Christ, apart from the reality of what we have first become by grace. In the NT we find no sheer commands direct out of heaven from the throne of God, much less the naked ten commandments as an eternally static “moral law” binding on all men. To the extent that the ten commandments contain a just requirement founded on the holiness of God, we find those commands coming to us not from the hands of Moses, but from the hands of Christ who first kept those

commands in our place and who calls us to see ourselves as having kept them in him, and to express that vision concretely in our lives.⁴⁸

Application

So, then, how do we apply what is shown to us about sanctification in Scripture? How do we grow in holiness or counsel those who are combating sin by relying on the Holy Spirit and following imperatives grounded in the indicative of the gospel and the gift of the Spirit of Christ to dwell in us? Our study has provided us two answers: one positive and one negative. We do focus on the gospel; we do not focus on the law.

When we set our eyes on Christ and look at His person and work, we behold more and more what it is that our union with Him has granted to us.

Elyse M. Fitzpatrick and Dennis E. Johnson write of the importance of more fully comprehending our union with Christ through His Spirit:

The gospel tells us that Jesus' life has been given for us and to us. His holy desires have been planted in our hearts. We're one with him through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Meditating on these truths will energize our pursuit of godliness because our belief that we are in union with Christ "is key to overcoming sin in our lives. ... When any of us lose sight of our privileged position as a result of our union with Christ, we lose our ability to resist sin."⁴⁹

Our union with Christ should refresh our hearts with joy and strengthen our faith to enable us to fight for holiness. Realizing that he has

⁴⁸ Lee Irons, "Not Under The Law But Under Grace," (http://www.upper-register.com/papers/not_under_law.pdf, 2007), 11.

⁴⁹ Source quotes Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace: Delighting in the Joy That Is Our Strength* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 50-51.

loved us so much that he has made us one with himself should engender fervent love in our hearts, resulting in fervent obedience.⁵⁰

Fitzpatrick and Johnson *almost* get it. But they do stop short of recognizing the effects of the mystic union we have with Christ's Spirit and so they seem to frame it more as an intellectual or emotional response. It is more than that. The Puritan Thomas Watson once preached:

This union with Christ may well be called mystic. It is hard to describe the manner of it. It is hard to show how the soul is united to the body, and how Christ is united to the soul. But though this union is spiritual, it is real. Things in nature often work insensibly, yet really (Eccles. 11:5). We do not see the hand move on the dial, yet it moves. The sun exhales and draws up the vapours of the earth insensibly yet really. So the union between Christ and the soul, though it is imperceptible to the eye of reason, is still real (I Cor. 6:17).⁵¹

Jerry Bridges also acknowledges our union with the Spirit of Christ while expressing wonder at its nature:

The way the Spirit operates in our lives to sanctify us is shrouded in mystery. Paul said He works in us "to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13), but he never tells us just how the Holy Spirit interacts with, or works on, our human spirit. I like to know how things

⁵⁰ Elyse M. Fitzpatrick and Dennis E. Johnson, *Counsel From The Cross: Connecting Broken People to the Love of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 115.

⁵¹ Thomas Watson, "Mystic Union Between Christ and the Saints" (<http://www.puritansermons.com/watson/watson3.htm>), accessed July 25, 2010.

work, and I used to try to figure out how the Holy Spirit interacts with our spirit, but I finally realized it was a futile pursuit.⁵²

We need constantly to be reminded of our union with Christ and constantly to be reinforced in our identity in Him. Thirdly, we need to understand our freedom in Him. Ultimately, our nature will be like His; our actions will be holy because our nature will be holy. We will not need laws and rules because our glorified selves will be by nature without sin and our actions will reflect that holy nature. We will be free. “[W]here the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17). “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1).

But submission to a yoke of slavery – the slavery of sin – is exactly what those would have us use the law as the yardstick – or more accurately as a nightstick – for our sanctification. An emphasis on personal performance measured by and brow-beaten by the law brings on the despair of the man of Romans 7, or the hideous and cruel self-condemnation advocated by Beeke. That focus on the law produces what Fitzpatrick and Johnson call the “Sad Moralist:”

[T]he Sad Moralist really does see the law and says in response, “I can’t believe that God loves me like that; why would he?” He knows that God is transcendent, not to be trifled with. The Sad Moralist is a “serious” Christian. When he reads the commands in Matthew 22:37 and following⁵³ he doesn’t think for one moment he has fulfilled them. He

⁵² Bridges, 107-8.

⁵³ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. [38] This is the great and first commandment. [39] And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. [40] On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matt 23:37b-40a)

knows his sin. But ... he has a pride problem. He believes that he *ought* to do better, so he is harsh with himself, and he thrashes himself with condemnation, hoping that by so doing he will be able to obey and finally find rest.

He is trying to justify himself by his repentance. He is scrupulously religious and frequently outpaces other Christians around him. But sadly that is never enough to calm his conscience. He thinks that if he could just see his sin as it really is and be sorry enough for it, God would be pleased with him. When he reads about God's love for us in Christ, he isn't comforted or enthralled. He is terrified and condemned. He doesn't know the peace that Christ promises or the joy that should infect his heart.

He ... is trying to avoid the realities of the gospel. ... [H]e is trying to prove that he is worthy, thereby removing the "stumbling block" of the cross (1 Cor. 1:23).⁵⁴

Isn't that the response we would expect from binding people under the law? Isn't that how we would expect people to behave when we focus them on self-improvement instead of focusing them on what God has done for us in Christ? Isn't that what we would expect to see when we focus believers on the law instead of on what God has done in giving His Holy Spirit to us? Isn't that exactly what we should expect when we focus believers on external laws that are *derived* from love instead of focusing them on what God has done in us by giving us the ability to love Him and to love our neighbor?

⁵⁴ Fitzpatrick and Johnson, 79.

Paul's antitheses between Spirit and law show the ineffectiveness of the law; to expect our own selves – or those we might counsel – to show the fruit of the Spirit through the use of the sin-promoting yoke of the law is like the definition of insanity attributed to Albert Einstein: “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”⁵⁵

Paul has condemned the use of law both in our justification and in our sanctification. Paul does not advocate Torah in any of his epistles. To force external law upon believers because of doctrinal, confessional or systematic tradition is unbiblical and cruel. Paul tells us our walk should be one of freedom, joy and love. Self-loathing, penitence and despair have no place in Paul's theology, except as the sorry state of the pre-regenerate man. To advocate placing the binding yoke of the slavery that produces sin is nothing short of cruel spiritual abuse and egregious pastoral malfeasance.

Summary

The apostle Paul writes throughout his epistles that the law was given for a different covenant and that believers are not under its jurisdiction. He makes no qualifications in this: he does not separate the law into component parts – moral, civil and ceremonial – and he does not prescribe commands of the Torah for our Christian walk. Paul warns us of the power of the law to promote sin in the flesh and implores us not to submit to its yoke of slavery.

While John is often referred to as the apostle of love, love is a major focus of Paul's teaching. (A search for “love” in the Pauline epistles returns 115 results in the ESV.) It is love that fulfills the law in the Christian; it is a perfect love of God and of

⁵⁵ <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/alberteins133991.html>, accessed July 25, 2010.

neighbor that is a reflection of the relationship among the Trinity and it is a perfect love of God and of neighbor that is the outworking of our completed Christ-likeness in glory. Until then, an increasing reliance upon the love of Christ – given to us by His Spirit – molds us more and more into His image.

No law can produce the fruit of the Spirit. All that the law can do is produce sin, despair, self-condemnation and self-righteousness in our remaining imperfection. It is our union with Christ through His Spirit that results in our sanctification. “I have come to realize,” writes Jerry Bridges, “that the deep work of spiritual transformation of my soul has been what the Holy Spirit has done, not what I have done. I can to some degree change my conduct, but only He can change my heart.”⁵⁶ Thus, while Paul gives us imperatives in his exposition of what it means to be a follower of Christ in our hearts and in our conduct, those imperatives have their basis only in the indicative of what Christ has done in us.

“[1] There is therefore now no condemnation,” self or otherwise, “for those who are in Christ Jesus. [2] For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death” (Rom 8:1-2).

Postscript

This topic is one that cries out for more study. The importance of a proper understanding of sanctification is one of critical importance for pastoral ministry and Christian counseling. A longer study that would incorporate all of the NT – not just the

⁵⁶ Bridges, 106.

gospels but particularly the epistles of John, James and Peter – could encompass other rich material that was excluded because of this paper’s Pauline focus. A study that incorporates more scholarly material and more original language exegesis would probably require a book-length manuscript, but the topic is of vital import. This topic needs such studies from academic, pastoral, personal, counseling and systematic or biblical theology viewpoints.

Finally, the understanding of the Spirit’s role in sanctification and ethics expressed in this paper needs to be an integral part of future New Covenant Theology thought. A coherent NCT with a basis in Scripture, with a solid redemptive-historical understanding of the covenants, and with a full-orbed understanding of the OT promise of the Spirit cannot be one that substitutes one law of letters for another. Christ promised nothing short of a radical transformation of His followers. Paul expressed to the churches what such a radical transformation looks like in practice. It is time for us to recapture an understanding of that radical transformation, the radical transformation that birthed the church in the 1st century if we are to see a radical transformation in our midst.