

070204 Intense Conflict: A Characteristic of Grace 22/05 February 4, 2007GG Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Intense Conflict: A Characteristic of Grace

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead. For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me. Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful. ([Ro 7:7-13](#))

In our last chapter we examined the insidious character of legalism. Given the preponderant victory of grace, it is a logical point to ask why an heir of grace is so vulnerable to legalism. If we were so purified in regeneration that only the mere traces of our old nature (frequently referred to by Paul as our "old man") remain in us, legalism would be defeated before the battle begins.

What Paul describes in these verses is by no means a one-sided struggle. He rather describes a mortal conflict between two powerful though opposite moral forces within. As with so many Biblical truths, balance is essential to our discovery of truth in Scripture. In our study of the internal duel within a regenerate elect we should carefully avoid two unscriptural extreme ideas.

1. The errant idea that the two forces are exact equals. This error lends itself to the Eastern mystical idea of "yin-yang," of two eternal forces that are equal and opposite.
2. 3. The opposite error that in regeneration all of our old nature is eradicated except for a bare vestige or remnant. This error tends toward either the sinless perfection of Pentecostal Holiness ideas, or to the "lordship salvation" of quite recent origin. The first chapter of First John clearly refutes both errors, along with the seventh chapter of Romans, not to mention many other similar passages throughout the New Testament. Both of these errors inherently foster excessive pride, one by claiming sinless perfection attained by the believer, and the other by claiming near perfection with its inherent arrogant and condescending attitude toward anyone whom its advocates view as having fallen short of their near sinless perfection. The holiness view will somewhat gently make allowance for the struggling believer by asserting that he/she simply has not yet attained "sanctified" status. The lordship salvation error manifests a harsher legalism by questioning that the struggling believer is saved at all. Neither error allows any room in their errant view of a near perfect model family of God for either the struggles of this chapter or the failures of believers that appear throughout the New Testament. One advocate of lordship salvation flippantly rejects any pretense of the "carnal Christian" as being a preposterous and "antinomian" error. To be accurate, neither advocates of these two insidious errors, nor their opponents, seek to justify or glorify sin, nor to denigrate God's moral code. The question at issue is the balanced and correct teaching of Scripture regarding the nature of discipleship. As a matter of Biblical fact, Paul specifically charged the Corinthian church with being "carnal" ([1Co 3:1-5](#) where he associates "carnal" with their immature status as "babes in Christ" and as being excessively divisive in their schismatic attitude toward various preachers, not as unregenerates who were not born again. Paul further described these people ([1Co 1:2](#)) as "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours...."). I have never heard or read of a preacher or Biblical scholar glorifying the Corinthian church as the model of a faithful local church so

the “antinomian” accusation is a classical example of both the straw man and the red herring logical fallacies.

4. In our study passage Paul draws an informative contrast between a time when he only knew the subtle nuances of God’s moral code and character by the teachings of the Mosaic code and a subsequent time when the presence of divine grace (God’s law written in his heart as expressed in [Ro 2:14-15](#), as well as a major tenet of God’s promised “new covenant” in [Jer 31:27-34](#)) revealed and convicted him of “*all manner of concupiscence*,” evil or sinful desires.

Paul raises an interesting question. If God’s law written within exposes such embedded sin and the related intense sense of condemnation, is the law then evil? You see, the straw man-red herring accusations of antinomianism so common in our day are not new. *Paul’s critics were accusing him of being antinomian!* In the heart of his discussion of the intense struggle within the believer Paul defends the workings of God’s law as it exposes sin and convicts the quickened sinner as doing precisely what God intended it to do. God did not institute His law, either in the Old Testament form of the Ten Commandments or in the New Testament form of Scriptural affirmation and the co-testimony of that same law written in the heart of every regenerate elect, to promote arrogant legalism or to give prideful man a platform for boasting in self. He designed it to do exactly what Paul affirms that it did in his own personal experience in this chapter. By exposing sin within as exceedingly sinful, God intended—and uses—His law written in the heart to break self-righteous pride and human arrogance.

Many years ago a “relative-in-law” of mine who held to a distinctly Arminian view of salvation was telling me about an encounter he had with someone who, though quite devoted to his faith, did not agree with my relative’s view of salvation by works. After describing an extended session of “Bible verse ping-pong,” my relative boastfully described how he concluded the conversation with this person, “Well, there is only one difference between what you believe and what I believe. My sins are forgiven; yours are not.” The prideful arrogance of this self-aggrandizing comment surprised and disgusted me. Sadly many professing Christians who claim to hold to the doctrines of grace as taught in the New Testament, corrupted by one of the errors mentioned above, often display similar prideful arrogance as they proclaim anyone who fails to meet their definition of sanctification as being deceived and not saved at all.

I have been amused—and frustrated—over the years at the manner in which various respected commentaries attempt to explain away—rather than understand and truly explain—this chapter. They ask the question, “Whom was Paul discussing in this chapter?” Following the question they will either attempt to develop the idea that he was describing himself *prior* to his Damascus Road experience, or they will make their case that Paul was describing someone else. The passage clearly explains itself. *Notice the frequency of Paul’s use of the personal pronoun in this passage, not to mention also the use of present tense verbs. Paul was describing his present experience as a regenerate elect, living out the conflict between God’s law written within and his abiding carnal nature.*

What are we to learn from this lesson? I suggest at least two major themes for our consideration.

1. First the conflict that Paul described affirms that every regenerate elect will experience this conflict. It is an inherent characteristic of a regenerate elect person struggling with the conflicting moral appetites of two opposite natures.
2. 3. Secondly, Paul uses this conflict to help us avoid the unbearable weight of insidious legalism. The regenerate elect who does not understand this conflict, be he inclined toward the holiness view or the lordship salvation view, will struggle to harmonize his/her personal conflict with his/her errant view of salvation and of discipleship. In order to preserve their errant beliefs believers in these errors will increasingly develop harshly legalistic tendencies, or else they will redefine sin in such a way as to boost their false pride in their own inflated sense of personal holiness. In either case they miss the point

that Paul makes in this chapter.

4. Why did God create us “in Christ” through regeneration or the new birth so as to allow this conflict? Paul will end this chapter with a wholly Christ-centric view of himself, not with a self-righteous legalistic view of himself. May we follow his example and learn the truth of his teaching.

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