

### Under the Law and In Christ

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 22, 1986. Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 19:9-14; Psalm 43; Galatians 3:23-28; Luke 9:18-24.

Text: "Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. Galatians 3:23.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some of you here this morning may be recent graduates. I don't suppose you ever got spanked in school. I got spanked once. I was in seventh grade. I sailed a paper plane across a class room and got sent to the office and the principle turned me over his knee and spanked me. I never sailed another paper plane in school.

In the ancient world, school discipline was far more harsh than anything today. ~~Discipline was usually exercised by men called in the RSV~~ "custodians". The Greek word is *paidagogus* and means, literally, a *tutor, i.e., a guide and guardian of boys*. The tutor or custodian was responsible for taking the child to school and bringing him home. If the child got out of line the custodian would beat the child severely. "He was often harsh to the point of cruelty, and is usually depicted in ancient drawings with a rod or cane in his hand" (J.R.W. Stott). The child was under the harsh discipline of the custodian until he came of age. Hopefully by that time the child would've acquired some self-discipline. St Paul tells us that the law of God is our custodian to lead us to Christ. When that faith in Christ comes we're no longer under a custodian.

Paul was talking, first of all, to Jews. God gave his law to the Jews. The law was a tough custodian; a harsh disciplinarian. It made the Jews observe all kinds of rituals, sacrifices, ceremonies, and holy days. There was no area of life where the Jew didn't see the law as a custodian

standing over them with a rod ready to beat them if they disobeyed. The law even told them what kinds of food they could eat. When they got out of line the law disciplined them severely and threatened them with death and all sorts of terrible punishments.

But the law was only meant to be a temporary thing. When Israel was a child it needed a strict disciplinarian. A child needs firm discipline, concrete rules, and consistent nurturing to bring it to responsible adulthood. When a child grows up the custodian isn't needed any longer. God gave the law to Israel as a custodian in order to prepare his people for a mature faith in Christ.

When Christ came men and women didn't need the law to tell them what to do and what not to do. When Christ came he called men and women to follow him. ~~There was a winsome attractiveness about Jesus that~~ appealed to men and women and drew to him all sorts and kinds of people. People followed him because they wanted to. ~~Matthew left his job without giving notice.~~ No law told Zacchaeus to give away his ill-gotten gains. For the joy of knowing Christ he freely gave it away. No law forced Peter, James and John to leave their fishing and come worship Christ. When Christ walked by the shores of Galilee and called them they dropped their nets and for the sheer joy of it became the disciples of Jesus. Men and women who'd never attended worship services at the synagogue, who weren't at all interested in religion, ~~took delight~~ took delight in Jesus. They enjoyed being with him. Mary Magdalene, Martha, and the woman of Samaria all came to love, worship and obey Christ. He filled their hearts with joy and gave them a sense of freedom, a liberation that was unheard of for a woman in the ancient world. No custodian, no law made them worship Christ and follow him. Their whole understanding of religion changed.

Their religion stopped being a religion of laws and obligations. Their religion became a religion of grace, beauty, and joy. It didn't weigh them down any longer. It lifted them up. Religion stopped being a ritual, it became personal. Religion for them was Christ. "For me to live is Christ", Paul wrote.

But, secondly, what Paul says is true of all of us. God's also given us laws. They tell us what ~~to~~ to do and not to do. The law threatens us with severe punishment if we disobey it even in the slightest matters. It warns us about reaping what we've sown. It warns us about death, hell, and judgment if we don't obey. The law stands over us with a big ugly stick and makes us do things we don't enjoy and keeps us from doing things that we do enjoy. And as we try to obey the law and constantly find ourselves disobeying and being threatened with punishment we sometimes actually come to hate religion. We rebel. We try to escape this harsh taskmaster, the law.

We may do a lot of things the law tells us to do just like the ancient school-boy would obey his custodian. We may go to church dutifully. We may contribute to the church. We may not cheat or commit adultery. But the law's always there, like an unwelcome guest, never giving us any privacy, always standing in the shadows watching us with the cane raised ready to strike us. The law keeps us in line. It compels us to be good, at least outwardly. Sometimes we manage to get away from the custodian for a time. But even then there's the fear of being discovered, caught and punished. The law always catches up with us and warns us of the consequences of our actions. So we never get too bad. But that kind of religion is a religion of rules and regulations. It's something that weighs us down. It oppresses us. We long to be free of its restraints. So many

young people stop attending worship and Sunday school after they graduate from high school and go off to college or the service or jobs. They stop giving. They're glad to get away from the law, that harsh custodian.

Think of what Paul says about the law in terms of your childhood. When you were a child your parents made you do certain things. "Clean up your room! Pick up your toys! Eat your breakfast! Brush your teeth! Don't forget to wash behind your ears! You can't watch t.v. until you've done your homework. Don't you dare go near that place! Stay away from those people! Be back here by midnight!" They made you say "please" and "thank you". They made you say, "I'm sorry" even when you weren't. They made you go to Sunday school. They threatened you with all sorts of punishments if you didn't obey. It was rough being a child. "You never let us do anything!" they're constantly saying. That's the way the law is.

Now every parent longs for the day when the child will start doing some of these things on their own, without threats. Hopefully when you're children are 30 or 40 they'll brush their teeth without being told. It's a sorry thing when a fifty year old daughter has to be told by her 80 year old mother to pick up her toys. It's a pathetic thing for a full grown adult to be nagged by mother to go to Sunday school and church. It's a day of joy when the parent walks into a child's room and finds it clean, with the beds made. It's a proud day to see how your son and daughter have grown up and become mature, responsible adults.

The tragic thing is, though, that we can grow up in every other way but in our relationship to God. We can grow up and graduate from high-school or college. We make it through the rigors of the army, marines or air-force. We get married, have children, find a good job and handle all those responsibilities fairly well. We brush our teeth without being told.

We get up and go to work. We do all these things without having anyone threaten us. But when it comes to religion so many people remain immature and childish. They pray, read the Bible, go to public worship or contribute their tithes and offerings only when the law threatens them or makes them feel guilty; for many it's not something they enjoy doing. The custodian drags them to worship and they grudgingly give their time, money and talents. Their religion is a burden to them. They'd rather be fishing.

Don't be satisfied with religion as a custodian. God doesn't want religion to be a burden but a joy. The law of God may keep you from becoming too bad but it'll never make you really good or enable you to win God's favor. In fact, as long as you remain under the law you'll only become more and more unhappy with God for all the restraints he places on your life. You may even begin to hate God and wish that there weren't any God. Like a child you may shake your fists in the face of God and cry out, "You never let me do anything!"

The law can't get you on the right side of God but it can lead you to a mature faith in Christ. The other day I was talking to a parent. One of her children had been brought up in the church but after he'd left home, and got ~~ten~~ out from under the law, he'd fallen away and lost interest in the church. Recently, however, he's come back to the church. He avidly studies the Bible and he's even thinking about going to seminary. He's doing all this on his own, not because mother and father are standing over him anymore. The law, as exercised by his parents when he was a child, has done it's purpose. The law, as a custodian, has brought him to Christ. Now he's enjoying an adult and responsible faith.

I've heard so many stories like that. We can have confidence as parents

that the loving discipline, the rules and regulations, we firmly lay down to guide our children will lead them eventually to a mature and responsible Christian faith. And we can also be confident that as we continue to do our duty, and try to follow God's will and law, even when it seems harsh and burdensome, that law will lead us eventually to a new, deeper, and more mature faith in God through Jesus Christ.

But I hope that none of us will ever be satisfied with a religion of law where we're constantly looking for preacher or church to tell us exactly what to do in every area of our lives; what kind of clothes to wear, what not to eat and drink, how long to wear your hair. God longs for us to grow up and to become his responsible, adult, sons and daughter. He wants to enter into fellowship and partnership with us, like a father who longs for the day his son or daughter will become his junior partner in the family business. That's what God hopes and longs for. He longs for the law, our custodian, to lead us to a mature, adult faith in Christ. He wants to see us follow Christ freely, like those men and women long ago who worshipped and serve him for the sheer joy of it.

Amen

Let us pray: Almighty God, thank you for your law. May it lead us all to a mature faith in Jesus Christ. Deliver us all from a religion of oughts and shoulds. Deliver us from a religion that weighs us down. Give us faith to assuredly believe that our lives are justified and that we are accepted by you through Christ. And thank you for wanting us to be your partners in the building and strengthening of your kingdom in the world. Hear our prayers which we offer to you through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever. Amen.