

Not Under Law but Grace

Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. When you were slaves of sin, you were freed in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6.12-end

Right at the heart of the Apostle Paul's understanding of our life as the people of Christ is his strong sense that we are guided and inspired not by the 'Law' of God, but by God's 'Grace' – God's *kindness and mercy*, rather than God's *judgement and 'wrath'*. As an observant Jew who had 'seen the light' and put his faith instead in *Jesus Christ* (cf Acts 9.3-5), Paul knew that adherence to the Law on its own could never satisfy the judgement of God: the more we *try* to abide by the commandments, the more we *fail*; and in consequence a religious observance which is defined by the Law can never achieve anything except to *remind us constantly of our failure*.

For Paul, it was faith in Jesus Christ – trust in the reconciling mercy which he embodies – that addressed this problem, and did so *definitively*. Coming from God the Father, rescuing us from our failings, and returning

with us to God the Father, Jesus Christ is the one in whom our failings are *put right*. This is what Paul came to recognise and understand. And just as Abraham's *trust in God* 'was reckoned to him as righteousness' (cf Genesis 15.6), so Paul believed that our *faith in Christ* will be reckoned by God to us as righteousness. That is, in the absence of any other way for us to fulfil the requirements of the Law, God is willing to reckon our trust in Christ as 'righteousness'. Genuine trust becomes the most important component of faith, not least because it includes a complete recognition of our *weakness* before God, as well as our *hopefulness* before God.

For the Apostle Paul, this was the most important perception at the heart



of Christianity. But that does not mean that there are not also other perceptions which matter very deeply. In particular, in today's text, he is drawn back to the existence of the *Law of God* – the 'Torah' – and its *continuing importance*, even though it is not, Paul thinks, *definitive*. We could put this in very simple terms. *Of course* – Paul says this very clearly – the fact of God's mercy working through our faith and trust does not negate the

Law of God or subvert the integrity of God's commandments. It remains important for us to live godly, holy, and moral lives according to the values of God's kingdom. But our efforts to do what is right and good are not the means by which we are 'saved': that remains solely the work of God himself. But as for doing what is right and good: that should be even more of a priority for us in *response* to the grace of God which has saved us. Paul thinks that although our own efforts to be right and good will never meet the absolute standards of God, they remain the apt and just response to the mercy we receive from God by faith. The *Law* still matters, but *legalism* and *judgementalism* are completely overturned. Instead, it is within the culture of *grace* that we live and behave and encourage each other – the culture of kindness and openness of heart, of hopefulness and gift, made complete in the gift of God which makes good what we are unable to achieve on our own. May we respond to this gift with renewed commitment to truth and goodness and holiness of life, sharing the vision of light in which we are all made new.