The Long Reach of Law and Grace

Luke 2:22-40 T Christmas 1

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Life is full of obligations and demands. Every aspect of our lives have some demands waiting for us to fulfill them, and accomplishing it in an efficient way. Whether it’s our jobs, our lives at home, or even work in the church. Accomplishing our tasks may be overwhelming, especially if we aren’t particularly organized. And so there’s a whole business surrounding how to make you more effective in accomplishing your tasks, obligations, and demands. You can buy calendars where you can plan down to the hour what your plan is for each day. You can find self-help books to make you more efficient at managing your time. You can buy software for your computer to block certain distracting websites like social media, so that you can focus on your work for the day.

 But even though these products may help with time-management and organization, the demands, tasks, and obligations are still there. These things can’t help escape the extending arm of life’s demands reaching toward us.

 It’s sort of like God’s Law – His demands seem to extend to and reach out to us. Is there any escape from the long arm of the Law?

 The long arm of the Law seems inescapable. It reaches out and takes hold of us in many ways. First there are the commands of God to be obedient to the state, who has their own set of laws! The list of demands often seems difficult to keep up with! There’re obligations to vote. There’s the demand to pay taxes. There’s the demand to get your property registered with the state. Then, there’s the general everyday stuff – wear your seatbelt, don’t go over the speed limit, can’t use your cell phone while driving, no jaywalking on the streets, etc. The long arm of God’s Law from the state is inescapable.

 Second, there’s the God given demands that come through our vocations. Not just our jobs, of course, but also obligations to our families and friends. There’s cooking for kids or your spouse, cleaning the house, and all the chores associated with that. Then, there’s the godly obligations of loving your spouse and kids, and other family members with true Christ-like love. Children are to obey their parents and love and cherish them as if they were God’s representatives on earth, as Luther puts it in the Large Catechism. Then, we’re called to love each other within God’s church with an extraordinary love that goes beyond above and beyond what’s normal. These duties and expectations of the law are inescapable.

 Lastly, the long reach of the law comes in the form of the commandments of God – which seem to us the most spiritual of the three. Sure, we know of the ten commandments and their impossibility to keep. We’ve been well catechized in our inability to keep God’s Law. But imagine in the Old Testament, with all the purity laws, sacrificial laws, dietary laws, ceremonial laws, the law reaches far out! How could anyone possibly keep up with the demands of all these laws? The long arm of the Law reaches out in many ways – and we can sense it. Is there any relief, or escape?

 Even though the long arm of the law reaches out for us in many different ways, the longer arm of God’s grace reached even further out into the world. The longer arm of grace extends to us this Christmas season with the baby Jesus! Galatians 4:4 shows that Jesus was born **“under the law.”** Meaning, God made flesh couldn’t escape His own laws, demands, and obligations. We see Jesus fulfill the Law in the Gospel lesson, when Jesus was circumcised according to the Old Testament Law and custom, 8 days after he was born. Jesus willingly underwent the demands of the law. He put himself in reach of the law’s long arm, fulfilling every demand the law could thrust on him. That’s why Simeon rejoiced in the temple! Because as Romans 8:3-4 says, **“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”**

The longer arm of grace handled the law in the place of sinners. Jesus’ arm of grace handled all the law’s demands and obligations, and Jesus extends to us His life of righteousness. His arm of grace extends out to console our void and darkened hearts. His grace brings true peace and joy.

We see that peace and joy shown in two characters from the Gospel – Simeon and Anna. Through the Holy Spirit, Simeon rejoiced seeing this longer arm of grace placed in his own arms! He held the grace of God, the Messiah, who was promised to come to the world! And now that Simeon held Him, he had peace with His death. He wasn’t scared of death, because God’s longer arm of grace had reached out to him and filled him with heavenly joy! Anna, a prophetess in the temple, also saw God’s longer arm of grace and rejoiced! She worshipped unceasingly in the temple! She fasted and prayed night and day, giving thanks to God for extending His grace to a poor sinner like her, and to all of Israel. God’s grace consoles consciences, giving peace and joy, as a result of God handling the obligations of the law for us.

 God’s longer arm of grace also redeems us from the reach of God’s law. God’s Law was meant to point to the coming Christ, who extended the longer arm of God’s grace which has come in Jesus. At the end of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus said, **“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”** Christ came that He would fulfill the obligations, demands, and commands of God’s law in the place of sinners. He gave redemption by suffering on the cross, and on the third day rising from the dead. He took the punishment of the Law to the grave with Him, and left it there, rising victorious from the grave. His grace redeems us and He invites us all to share in the redemption He won from the cross by repenting of our sins and receiving forgiveness that’s for all nations.

 This longer arm of God’s grace extends to you still today. Like Simeon and Anna, we stand in the presence of God to hear of God’s grace which consoles our burdened consciences, and provides eternal redemption for our souls. Through our baptisms, God’s grace comes to us and allows us to take hold of Him by faith. God’s grace comes to us to soothe our hearts and consciences who feel the burden and inescapability of God’s Law. He comes to soothe us with the words of the Gospel spoken through the pastor, “I forgive you all your sins.” Finally, His long reaching arm of grace comes to strengthen us with His own body and blood, which covers and washes us clean of our transgressions against God’s Law. We are forgiven, washed clean, and we are presented to the Lord for service to him – just like Jesus in the Gospel lesson today. We don’t use our freedom from the Law and our redemption from the Law as an excuse to indulge in the sinful nature. Rather, God’s long arm of grace places us as instruments of the Lord’s love and grace that extends to other people – people at our jobs, or our employees or bosses, or our family at home, or our family at church. God’s longer arm of grace propels us into a life of grace, love, and patience with one another.

 So, is there any escape from the long arm of the law? Yes, in Christ Jesus our Lord, and in Him alone. Wherever and whenever we’ve been pushed by the Law’s demands, causing any sort of fear and uncertainty, the longer arm of grace comes to us in Jesus, and reaches in to console, redeem, and heal us, so that we may live lives of grace and mercy to all.

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