

## “Law vs Grace...a Divine Balancing Act”

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**New Testament Lesson:** John 1:10-18

**Old Testament Lesson:** Isaiah 49:1-6

It's a malady that comes upon most of us every year about this time: the compulsion to change something about our lives. We call this compulsion our New Year's resolution.

Rarely does it work, at least not in any instantaneous way. There's nothing magic about taking down one wall-calendar and putting up another.

Real change – change that matters – takes time, often with us moving two steps forward and one step back. It requires the support of others. Still, that clean, unblemished wall calendar promises fresh opportunity and renewed hope, ready for that first new word on your brand new calendar leading into a brand new year.

When Jesus came to earth, “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” *The Word*: clean, pure, unblemished. *Living among us*: yes, even us. Human words are forgettable and fallible. Yet, the Word of God is like that first appointment or social event of the new year, written on a pristine calendar page. There it is, catching the eye. No doubt and uncertainty. Full of hope and promise.

It's no wonder Christians have struggled for centuries to understand the miracle of Jesus' Incarnation, in human terms. Our words are insufficient in capturing the height and depth and breadth of the Incarnation. “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”

None of us came into this world knowing God, at least not in terms that we can comprehend and fully express. So we spend our whole lives getting to know God better, and learning to express God's grace and truth to others. It's a lifelong job, for everyone.

As Christians, we know that our lifelong job – that our calling – comes to us through Jesus Christ, ***the Word of God made flesh***. We know this, but we also struggle with this. We struggle to accept Jesus' way over our own way, over the way of the world. It's a balance between the two. We live in the world – a world that God created, a world that God gave to us, and us to it, as stewards of creation and faithful children of the one and only true God.

To help us know and accept God's way, we have been given the Word of God, incarnate, over and against the way of the world. The Word comes to us and says help a stranger in need. And the world steps in and says, “But what if he's

abusing the system, what if she's not willing to try and just wants everything handed to her." The Word comes to us and says, in Christ, we have eternal life. And then the world steps in and says, "But you've just been diagnosed with a life-threatening disease," or "Your loved one has just died," or "The life you have is full of misery and who wants an eternity of that!?"

The Word comes to us and says, "Judge not lest ye be judged" (Matt. 7:1), "Do unto others as you would have them to do you" (Matt. 7:12), and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39), and then the world steps in and says, "An eye for an eye" (Deut. 9:21), "Love your neighbor and hate your enemies," (which is implied in Psalm 137.)

In fact, the Bible says lots of things that we can use, things like stoning to death people judged guilty, divorcing your spouse for fooling around, and staying clear of those judged unclean or foreign or different or offensive – you stay clear of them, keep them away from your home and your family, according to the Bible. The Bible can be used to justify just about any action or conviction or behavior that you want justified. We as human beings have justified all kinds of things by standing firm on the Bible, on scripture – things like the Roman Catholic Inquisitions, slavery in America, genocide in Nazi Germany, the burning of "witches" in Salem, and the terror attacks of ISIS.

All of these atrocities and more have been justified in the name of God, based on scripture – the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures found in the Bible. Each of these religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – traces its faith back to Abraham, based on the exact same scriptures that point to Abraham as the father of faith in all three religions. And when kept true to God's word, all three religions – Judaism, Christianity, and even Islam – can be peaceable, faithful, God-fearing practices. So how do we keep true to God's word in a world where people use God's word against us?

"The law indeed was given through Moses," says John, but "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Christ-like behaviors – that's what separates us from those who distort or abuse the faith.

You see, there is ***a divine balance to be struck*** between the law of Moses and the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. That's how we stay true to our faith – by seeking the grace and truth of Christ. How do we find that balance?

"No one has ever seen God," says John. "It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." If no one knows the will of God apart from Jesus, then it is only through Jesus that we as Christians can strike a proper and faithful balance between the law of Moses and grace of the Lord.

We turn to Christ, not to our own thoughts or beliefs, and not the thoughts and beliefs of the world around us, but to Christ, and Christ alone. In turning to Christ, in looking at how and what Jesus taught, we see that he preferred to lead and to teach by example rather than by the rule of law.

He never painted everyone with the same brush, never treated every situation the same. Jesus ministered to the person before him, regardless of race, gender, religion, or place of origin.

For instance, Harry Emerson Fosdick, writing in *The Man From Nazareth*, says: “Jesus had a way of putting things that time does not wear out. ... He personified neighborliness in the good Samaritan, making him stand out in vivid contrast with the unneighborly priest and Levite, so that not only did his contemporaries grasp his meaning, but we do also,” through the parables of Jesus.

Fosdick calls the parables of Jesus “personal incarnations,” meaning that Jesus took his lessons about faithfulness and living rightly before God and put a face on them. He, too, wanted us to encounter the Word of God made flesh, in person, in the people around him

In Luke 16, Jesus tells about the rich man trying to get into heaven after having neglected poor Lazarus. Fosdick calls the parable of the rich man and Lazarus a personal incarnation, a story with flesh on it, a story that shows us the Word of God over and against the way of the world, over and against the way of greed, and racial prejudice, and religious intolerance. “Such incarnations” says Fosdick, “walk the streets of New York and London as plainly as they walked the streets of Jerusalem.”

Or as the great missionary E. Stanley Jones once said, “The Christian faith is not a set of propositions to be accepted – it is a Person to be followed.” How are we doing at that? How well has humanity done at following the person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh? “... The world came into being through him,” says John, “yet the world did not know him.” Balance that with what John says just three verses later, where he says, “... The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory..., full of grace and truth.”

It’s a balance between “the world did not know him” and “we have seen his glory ..., full of grace and truth.” It is only through *the grace and truth of Jesus Christ* that we can rightly act in this world. Only by following the true teachings of Jesus, can we bring into this world the way of Christ, the Kingdom of God, the everlasting peace of the Lord.

Every situation, every person, every belief system must be encountered and interpreted through the grace and truth of Jesus. In the Incarnation, God gives us, not mere words, but *The Word*.

If each of us made it our New Year’s Resolution to better know and more faithfully follow the living Word that is Jesus Christ coming to us out of the most unexpected places, under the most difficult circumstances, why just imagine what this year would look like, what this world could become.

Why it would look like heaven on earth, with true and lasting peace in our homes and neighborhoods, in our country and throughout the world. And that, my friends, is something worth committing to this year. Amen.

## Pastoral Prayer

Holy God, you sent your Son to warm the darkness with light.

We pray for all those who cannot see the light because they are afraid or are in too much pain – physically, spiritually or emotionally.

We pray that the power of your light would shine through the cracks of our broken world so that all people might know the power of your grace and truth.

By your Spirit, empower us to be children of the light, radiant with the spirit of Christ shining through us.

And join us together in the name of your precious son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to raise our eyes to heaven and our voices in pray singing:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we  
forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever.  
Amen.**