

Cheap Grace or Cheap Law?

By Shawn Lazar

In any debate, the language being used is critical in shaping opinions. Control the language, and you can often control the debate itself. On that score, opponents of Free Grace theology may have the upper hand. They routinely describe our position as *antinomian*, *easy believism* and *cheap grace*. Every Evangelical has heard of these terms, and everyone knows they are bad.

By contrast, few people know the term “Lordship Salvation.” I’d like to turn the tables a bit and introduce a new term to describe opponents of Free Grace. Specifically, I would like to suggest why Lordship theology supports *cheap law*.

What is *cheap law*, and why should we be wary of it?

The term is inspired by the work of Gerhard Forde (1927-2005, pronounced *Fur-dee*), a Lutheran theologian who wrote extensively about the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Although he did not specifically use the term *cheap law*, he effectively described the phenomenon and strongly opposed it.

Forde helped to show that *cheap grace* and *costly grace* preaching, instead of being opposites, are actually synonymous, and both should be understood as preaching a *cheap law* that has nothing to do with God's authentic grace in Christ.

THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

Let us begin by understanding the purpose of the law. Forde derived his understanding of the law from the Lutheran reading of Romans and Galatians. Law includes more than the Mosaic law. It includes any and all commandments. If something makes a demand or an accusation, that is law. This includes the Sermon on the Mount, the command to love, the command to repent, or the moral standard written on our hearts and conscience—all of it is law.

With that in mind, Forde pointed out how the law demanded holiness (Lev 11:45) and blamelessness (Deut 18:13). If you broke even one commandment, you were guilty of breaking them all (James 2:10). Paul emphasized that no one could be justified before God by works of the law (Gal 2:16). Such a course of action was hopeless because it was not the law's purpose. Paul made clear that the law could never give a person life or make them righteous (Gal 3:21). On the contrary, the law was a ministry of death (2 Cor 3:7). It does not save us from sin, but it gives us knowledge of it (Rom 3:20). Without a law to tell us the difference between right and wrong, sins like coveting would go unnoticed (Rom 7:7). Hence, Paul says that the law was actually given to *increase* sin (Rom 5:20). This was done precisely so that God's wrath would come (Rom 4:15). In other words, the law was not meant to relieve man of sin's burden, but to make the burden unbearable, so as to leave the sinner completely condemned before God. As Forde explained,

The law did not stop sin but only made sin worse. In so doing the law showed sin to be exceedingly sinful. The law exposed the depth of sin by showing it to be ineradicable by human power. Indeed, the law increased sin so as to bring it into confrontation with its sole remedy: that where sin abounded grace might much more abound (Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, p. 78).

Hence, the law is not an invitation of cooperation between God and man, but an implicit denial that any such cooperation is possible. So far from acting as a *condition* for receiving God's grace (as cheap law preachers hold), the law is meant to dispel every thought of self-

fulfillment, self-aggrandizement, self-progression, and self-deification. The law proclaims the absolute futility of all schemes of salvation by works righteousness. The law slams the door shut on salvation by works, and says, “Go another way.”

This other way to eternal salvation is nothing other than grace. It is a grace that does not complete or supplement man’s works, but excludes them entirely. As Paul said, “And if grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work” (Rom 11:6).

THE NATURE OF CHEAP LAW PREACHING

So what is cheap law preaching and why is it bad?

Cheap law preaching *seems* pious. It rightly demands obedience to Christ. What could be wrong with that? The problem occurs when obedience to Christ is made into a requirement for eternal salvation. Cheap law preaching ignores the Biblical purpose of the law. Cheap law preachers unwittingly commit the error of thinking the law’s purpose is to save people from sin. Says Forde, “We think that the law is the remedy for sin. If we could just get our act together we could break the slavery and be free at last” (Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, p. 88). But that is something the law cannot do.

Certainly, the law can do many good things, “It can preserve society. It can restrain evil. It can even help us to reach out to give aid beyond our normal reach. It may preserve, restrain, prevent, and so forth.” But cure sin? That it can never do. The law “is not a remedy for sin. As a matter of fact, it just makes sin worse” (Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, p. 88).

Ultimately, Forde says there are three problems with cheap law preaching.

CHEAP LAW PREACHING DENIES CHRIST

First, Forde says that cheap law preaching commits a Christological error. Properly understood, the law demands perfection. But no one has ever met that demand, except for Jesus. But that was the ultimate purpose of the law all along. The law was a tutor to bring us to faith in Christ (Gal 3:24). He is the end of the law for all who believe (Rom 10:4). Jesus is “the realization and fulfillment of that to which law can only point” (Forde, *A More Radical Gospel*, p. 60).

But cheap law preaching implicitly denies this Christological end. When grace is made to depend on some performance by the sinner (such as repentance, commitment, or good works), there is an assumption that sinners can meet the law’s demand. But that is only possible if the law is made to demand something less than Jesus’ perfect righteousness, effectively severing Christ from being the end and purpose of the law.

CHEAP LAW PREACHING IS ANTINOMIAN

Second, Forde claims that cheap law preaching is a covert form of antinomianism. Antinomianism means being against (*anti*) the law (*nomos*). How can cheap law preaching be *against* the law, if it openly preaches it?

Forde distinguishes between two kinds of antinomianism: overt and covert.

Overt antinomianism tries to do away with the law entirely. It denies that the law is necessary, even to lead a person to Christ. Clearly, cheap law preachers don’t qualify as overt antinomians.

But covert antinomianism is a different animal. It doesn’t explicitly deny the law. But it changes it. It softens the law’s demand in order to better suit the sinner. This is antinomianism in its truest form:

What is antinomianism, after all? In essence, it is a theological attempt to bring the law to heel short of death by some kind of manipulation, overt and covert. If one can’t end the law, one seeks to tone it down, to alter it, to apply it casuistically... One disarms the law and makes it into a gentle guide which we use in our quest for virtue. Thus domesticated as the “house pet” of the pious, the law indeed remains but it has lost its teeth. (Forde, *Justification by Faith*, pp. 47-48).

WHY CHEAP GRACE IS TOO EXPENSIVE

Third, by preaching a cheap law, one must also preach cheap grace. After all, in order for grace to be *cheap*, it must *cost* something. But that itself is the problem.

God does not sell his grace. It cannot be had for any price! Rather, He gives it away freely, as a gift, through faith in His Son.

The problem with cheap grace is not that it costs too little, but that it costs anything at all. Says Forde (echoing Hodges):

Is it not “cheap grace”? No! It’s not cheap, it’s *free*! “Cheap grace,” you see, is not improved by making it inexpensive, a “bargain basement” special. It’s *free* (Forde, *Justification*, p. 34).

God’s grace is free to us. We receive it through faith in Christ’s promise, apart from all works.

LORDSHIP SALVATION PREACHES CHEAP LAW

Lordship Salvation (whether Arminian, Calvinist, or Catholic) is a form of cheap law preaching. It denies Christ by claiming His work must be supplemented by our own efforts if we hope to be saved. It is antinomian, because it demands something less than Christ’s perfect righteousness. And it preaches cheap grace, because it offers grace on the condition of imperfect human works.

By contrast, Free Grace theology unashamedly proclaims a perfect law that could only be fulfilled by Christ, and grace that is *freely* given without demand, to all who believe in Jesus’ promise of everlasting life. Free Grace, not costly grace or cheap law, is the true foundation of Christian living.

Shawn Lazar is Director of Publications at GES. This is a condensed version of a talk he gave at the 2013 Conference. MP3s available.