

AGAPE

THE FRAGRANCE OF GOD

A Study on the Law, Grace, and the Holy Spirit

Lars Micael Larsson

Introduction

Once there was a group of people who struggled to understand God's commandments. They knew that they should follow God's will, but there was confusion about what it truly meant to obey Him. For many, God's law felt like a set of harsh rules - something to worry about and perhaps even fear. They wondered: How can we live in a way that pleases God? And above all, what does it really mean to follow God's commandments?

In one of his letters, Paul gives us a simple and powerful answer to this question. In Ephesians 5:1-2: "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Paul begins by explaining that our calling is not merely about following a law or adhering to rules. No, it is about becoming like God, reflecting His character - and above all, living in love. It is the love Christ showed us when He gave Himself for us. Jesus became the ultimate offering for us. It was His love for us that moved Him to give His life for our sake. In the same way, Paul calls us to live in love - a love that gives, a love that forgives, and a love that seeks what is best for others.

But why is this so important? What does it actually mean to follow God's example? And what kind of love is Paul speaking about? To understand this, we must first look at how God's commandments and His law function in our lives.

In Exodus 20 we find the well-known commandments of God, which many people see as a list of strict rules and demands. But when we look more closely, we see that these commandments are rooted in Agape love - God's infinite, self-giving love for us. They are not merely rules to be followed mechanically; they are about protecting us and our fellow human beings.

God's commandments are not intended to be heavy burdens, but rather a way of living in fellowship with God and with one another. When we follow

these commandments, we create a community that is safe, where justice and goodness can flourish.

But there is also a warning in Galatians 3:10: "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; as it is written: Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."

This reveals an important aspect of God's law: if we try to follow it in our own way, without understanding its purpose and heart, it can become a burden. If we see the law merely as a way of earning God's approval through our actions, we risk falling into a trap. Then the law becomes not a blessing but a curse. We will never be able to live up to the perfection the law requires. That is why we need Jesus.

Jesus did not come to tear down God's law but to fulfill it. Through His life, death, and resurrection, we are now given the possibility of living out God's law in the way it was intended - through His love and through His grace.

When we become His followers and live in love, as Paul urges us to do in Ephesians, it is no longer simply a matter of following rules. It is about allowing God's love to be lived out through us in the world.

And as we seek to reflect Christ, we discover true freedom - not the freedom to do whatever we want, but the freedom to live as we were created to live.

So when we speak about God's commandments and His law, it is not about following a set of strict rules in order to earn God's love. It is about understanding the love Jesus showed us and passing that love on to others. When we do this, God's law finds its proper place in our lives - not as a burden, but as a fragrant offering to God. An offering given in gratitude and obedience for His infinite love toward us.

The Battle Over Motive - The Law, the Curse, and the Great Lie

There was never anything wrong with the law. When God gave humanity His commandments, He did not give them as a prison, but as protection. The law was good - a mirror of God's own righteousness, an expression of His love. It protected our relationship with God, with one another, and with life itself.

But something happened. Deep within humanity, another voice began to speak: "If you do enough... then you deserve it. Then you are worthy." And at that moment, the law changed - not in its nature, but in the way we looked at it.

We began to use it as a ladder. A way to reach God, to climb into heaven by our own strength. But that ladder was fragile, built from our own pride, our own insecurity, and our own struggle for control. This is where the curse enters.

It is not the law that curses - it is we ourselves who go astray when we try to use it for something it was never intended to do. When we try to prove our worth before God through works, the result is bondage, despair... death. No human being can carry the law as a road to salvation - it only shows us that we need a Savior.

Where does this mistaken way of thinking come from? Why do we believe we must earn God's love? Because the lie is ancient. It did not even begin on earth. It began in heaven, in another being - one who was once full of light.

His name was Lucifer - the light-bearer, foremost among the angels. But he wanted something more. It was not enough to reflect God. He wanted to become God.

But creation can never become the Creator. In his pride he turned against God and became Satan - the adversary. And the same lie he believed, he still

plants in human hearts today: "You are not loved as you are. You must earn it." But God says something entirely different.

He says: "You are My child. You already belong to Me. Not because of anything you have done - but because I created you and loved you from the beginning." Just as a child does not need to earn his or her parents, we do not need to earn God. We belong to Him by nature.

Satan wants to pull us away from this truth and make us live in performance, guilt, and fear. But Christ came to set us free from that. Not from the law - but from the curse that arises when the law is misused. He fulfilled it, so that in Him we may live by grace, in freedom, and in truth.

The Lie in the Garden - A Truth Distorted

It began with a whisper in Eden. The serpent was more cunning than all the other creatures the Lord God had made. He did not question God's existence. He questioned God's intentions. When he spoke to the woman, he did not say, "God does not exist," but rather, "God does not want what is best for you."

In Genesis 3:1-5 the serpent challenges God's warning: "You will not certainly die... your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

God's instruction had been clear. But the lie slipped in and severed trust. The words were spoken with cunning, with a hidden purpose - to awaken suspicion toward the Creator Himself. And so the lie took root.

Satan, defeated yet still active, whispers the same thing today - not always directly, but through feelings, ideas, and voices in our world. He even uses God's own words to distort the truth. He takes what is holy - the law - and turns it into an instrument of pride, self-righteousness, or condemnation.

He deprogrammed humanity's trust in God. It may sound like a technical expression, but it describes the situation well: we are no longer aligned with our origin. The law that was meant to help us love became something we use to prove ourselves, compare ourselves, and control others.

In this way the lie gained power - not because it was true, but because we believed it. When we lost trust in God, we began to rely on ourselves. With that came pride, comparison, and finally accusation.

This lie - that we can use the law as a measure of our own righteousness - lies at the root of much of our separation from God. It draws us away from our harmonious origin: walking with God, by grace, in fellowship.

And here we must be careful. Keeping the commandments - such as the Sabbath commandment - is good. It is an expression of trust and love

toward God. But we do not enter the kingdom of heaven because we keep commandments. Not the Sabbath. Not anything else. We enter through Christ.

We must not turn the law into a measuring stick for judging others - or ourselves. It is not our task to use a commandment to search for faults, weigh shortcomings, or build a sense of spiritual status.

Nor should we allow one commandment to become greater than God's own voice. All the commandments matter, but there is one that carries the others - one that cannot be missing. We will come to that shortly.

Let the One Who Is Without Sin...

They stood there in silent expectation. The stones weighed heavily in their hands - not only literally, but in their hearts. A woman had been caught in adultery. Her guilt seemed obvious, the judgment already prepared. It was not merely punishment that awaited her - she was to become an example.

But in the midst of the commotion, Someone bent down. Jesus wrote on the ground. At first He said nothing. And when He finally spoke, it was as though time stopped: "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

The silence became heavy. One by one, they dropped their stones and walked away. Only the woman remained - and Grace Himself.

In John 8:7-10, Jesus asks the woman where her accusers have gone and whether anyone has condemned her. When she answers no, He says: "Neither do I condemn you. Go now, and leave your life of sin."

Jesus' response did not mean that sin did not matter. Instead, He pointed to a deeper problem: the human heart. Human judgment.

Matthew 7:1 says: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." With the judgment we use, we ourselves will be judged, and with the measure we use, it will be measured to us.

This is not about denying God's judgment. It is about the human tendency to measure, weigh, and pronounce verdicts in God's name without understanding His heart.

The Pharisees were a clear example. They were zealous for the law and passionate about the commandments, but something was missing. They did not understand the purpose. They used God's law like a hammer, not like a light. They believed obedience itself was what pleased God, but they missed the very center of the message.

They became judgmental and self-righteous. That is precisely why they could not understand what Jesus did with the woman - or why He did not throw the stone.

We need to stop here for a moment. What was it they lacked? Take a moment to reflect, because it is crucial to how we ourselves approach God's law.

What we believe to be devotion may in fact be pride if we lose contact with the heart of God's will. Therefore, we must not use the law to rank people, ourselves, or even the commandments themselves.

We must not allow one commandment to become greater than God's own voice. All commandments are important, but there is one that carries the others - one that cannot be absent. That is where we are going next.

The Love That Was Missing - and False Piety

The Pharisees kept the law. They did so meticulously, with outward precision. But something was missing, and what they lacked made them blind. Jesus summarized what the entire law rested upon - what gives the commandments their purpose and power.

In Matthew 22:37-39 He says: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Agape. Self-giving, unselfish love. This is where the Pharisees failed. They loved the law - but not God. They obeyed rules - but not in love. The law became a way of proving their piety rather than a way of loving. The result? Self-righteousness.

The outward appearance can be convincing. But it is not clothing, language, or actions themselves that decide the matter - it is the motive and the relationship with God.

Jesus develops this in Matthew 7:21-23. He warns that not everyone who says to Him, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven. Some will point to prophecies, deliverance, and mighty works done in His name, yet He will say: "I never knew you."

These words are serious - and at the same time clarifying. It is not about outward actions. It is about relationship with Jesus. John 6:40 makes God's will clear: everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life.

It is faith in the Son that leads to eternal life. Yes, our faith in Jesus gives birth to action - but action can also exist without faith. That is precisely where the danger lies. It is possible to do good, perform great deeds, and speak in God's name without having one's heart anchored in Him.

Jesus warns us not merely about the world, but about those who appear as sheep while carrying something else within: predatory hearts, hidden desire for power, faith without love, religion without relationship.

What is enough for God? I have friends who say, "It is enough to be good. To do good." I understand where they are coming from; it is a human, moral line of reasoning. But we must dare to say this in love: goodness by itself is not enough.

What counts is faith in Jesus. It is He who justifies us - not our own works, however good they may appear. But it is not our task to judge these people's hearts. We leave that to God. We can and should point to the truth. But judgment belongs not to us, but to Him who sees the heart.

Pride creates distance from those who do not measure up. Therefore, every act of obedience and every attempt to follow God's commandments should begin with a simple question: Is my heart filled with God's love - Agape?

Now that we have answered what the Pharisees lacked, we are led to another important point in our journey - a warning from Jesus Himself. Matthew 7:15 warns us about false prophets who come in sheep's clothing while inwardly being ravenous wolves.

What Is God's Will - and Why Is It So Crucial?

We stand before some of the most challenging and serious words Jesus ever spoke. These words are not addressed to those who openly deny Him or to people who make no profession of faith. They are addressed to those who confess Him - those who say, "Lord, Lord," and yet remain outside.

Matthew 7:21-23 describes people who have performed spiritual works - prophecy, deliverance, miracles - and yet Jesus says, "I never knew you." Why?

Jesus answers indirectly but clearly: it is not only about what you do, but about whom you do it in and for. Relationship with Him is decisive. And this relationship is God's will.

John 6:40 gives us the key: the Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life. This is what God wants: that we see the Son - and believe. Faith opens the door to life. Not works. Not piety. Not religiosity.

Actions without relationship: Jesus does not say that the actions themselves were evil. But they were not rooted in faith. They lacked roots in fellowship with Christ. Just as ravenous wolves in sheep's clothing can imitate the behavior of sheep, actions can also look genuine without being genuine.

Matthew 7:15 again warns about false prophets in sheep's clothing. We do not always recognize them by outward appearance, but by the fruit - by the spirit, the tone, the love, or the absence of love.

I have friends who say, "I believe it is enough to be a good person. If I do good, I will go to heaven." Humanly speaking, it sounds reasonable.

But it is not what Jesus teaches. God looks at the heart - and at whether it is anchored in the Son. It is not our good deeds that justify us. It is grace. Faith. Fellowship with Christ.

I do not want to judge these people's hearts. I entrust their destiny to God - but I dare to speak the truth. Jesus spoke clearly: many will believe they were with Him when in reality they followed only their own righteousness.

A Fragrance God Does Not Find Pleasing

Jesus calls them "workers of lawlessness" in verse 23. Those are strong words. But why so sharp?

Because the doctrine of self-righteousness - the teaching that we can earn salvation - prevents people from coming to God in humility. That teaching closes the door to grace.

It is a rotten fragrance before God, because it carries the same seed as the ancient serpent's lie: "You will be like God."

But God's grace... At the same time, we must see the balance. Jesus does not want to frighten us away from God - He wants to draw us closer.

Even when we fail to fulfill the law, even when our obedience falters and our love fails, we are still God's children.

Our security does not rest in the law - but in God's grace. This is precisely what makes the gospel so liberating: We are not children because we are obedient - we are obedient because we are children.

Jesus Raises the Standard - Not to Condemn, but to Show the Way to Grace

In the Sermon on the Mount - which in my conviction is one of the most important sermons Jesus gave - we receive a deeper understanding of how we should relate to God's commandments.

Here He goes straight to the heart of our humanity, to our deepest motives and drives.

And now we come to a decisive point in my teaching. Listen carefully, because this concerns all of us:

Pride and arrogance make us blind. Blind to what?

Blind to our own sin. Blind to our true identity - that we are created by God and belong to Him regardless of our achievements. We belong to God not because we deserve it, but because He loves us. Always.

But in order to receive this love fully, we must see the truth about ourselves. The truth about sin in our lives. That is why God gave us the commandments - not to condemn us, but to illuminate our nature and guide us toward something greater.

Jesus Raises the Bar - to Show Us Our Need for Grace

In Jesus' day - and still today - there was a teaching that said a person must attain salvation through his or her own works of the law, as though we could climb into heaven with our own hands. But Jesus shows us another way.

He exposes the illusion of human pride by raising the bar. He does not make the law easier. On the contrary - He makes it impossible to attain in our own strength.

"Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

With these words Jesus explains that sin is not only about outward actions. It begins in the heart, in our thoughts, in our inner desires. And this applies not only to desire for another person's spouse. It applies to all the thoughts and drives that distance us from God - selfishness, anger, contempt, envy.

The point is clear: none of us can stand righteous before God in our own strength.

But where sin exists - grace also flows. We do not need to fear this. We do not need to hide.

For God knows our struggle. He knows our weaknesses, our falls, our temptations. And He does not meet us in rage - He meets us with grace. His grace is greater than our sin. His forgiveness is continually at work. His love is unchanging.

That is why we need grace every day - not as an emergency solution, but as our spiritual oxygen. It carries us through temptation, through struggle, through every fall.

We are called to live in the light, to see the truth - not to be condemned by it, but to be set free through it. For the truth makes us free, and in Christ we

have found the truth.

Grace, Law, and Agape - God's Perfect Weaving

Jesus meets the woman caught in adultery. She stands before Him exposed and condemned by men, but not by God. He says: "Neither do I condemn you." And this, even though He was the only One who truly had the right to judge her.

Now I want to ask a trick question: What appears here - love or law? The answer is: both. In Jesus we encounter the holiness of the law and the fullness of love, woven together in God's grace.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows us how to relate to God's commandments. There He exposes Satan's lie: that we could reach heaven through our own achievements - through works of the law.

But this is a false gospel. Ephesians 2:8-9 says: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast."

We are saved by grace, not because of our works - not because we deserve it, but because God loves us.

We are God's possession, chosen from the beginning to live in fellowship with Him. The love He shows us is Agape - unconditional, self-giving, faithful love. The love that loves not because we are good, but because He is good.

We see the same love in Jesus' life and work. He did not merely carry God's commandments - He carried God's fragrance, the fragrance of love, the fragrance of Agape.

God's law is not meant to bind us. It is meant to smell of Agape. That is the fragrance Jesus wants us to carry with us.

When we live in Agape love, then we fulfill God's law, not under compulsion, but in the freedom of the heart.

The commandments and Agape are joined together - not as opposites, but as a unity in God's nature. Figuratively speaking, they are God's DNA. And this DNA is meant to be reflected in us - in our lives, our words, and our deeds.

Grace, Not Judgment - the Fragrant Evidence of Love

I want to share something personal. I myself received salvation through a message of love. Not through accusation. Not through fear. But through fragrant evidence of love from Jesus - even though I did not deserve it.

Could I have received God's salvation through someone accusing me? Hardly.

But through admonition and teaching that rests on love - yes. For that is how the Spirit works. He works in hearts, gently yet powerfully. Let us trust that God's Spirit does His work - in us and in others.

Let me show another perspective, an incorrect one, which Jesus Himself exposes in Luke 18:9-14. He tells of two men who went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee thanked God that he was not like other people and listed his religious achievements. But the tax collector stood at a distance, would not even look up to heaven, and prayed: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Jesus says that it was the tax collector who went home justified rather than the Pharisee. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Here Jesus shows us whom God counts as righteous. Not the one who praises himself, but the one who humbly seeks grace. Not the one who raises himself above others, but the one who acknowledges his guilt and seeks God's heart.

The righteous person is not the flawless person - but the humble one. The one who examines himself day by day. The one who understands that God's love is greater than works of the law, and that His grace cannot be limited by our human measuring sticks.

We must not make our own convictions or doctrines the measure for other people. We are neither judges nor prosecutors.

For if God does not condemn in the way we do, why should we? Would we place ourselves above God by issuing verdicts? No. The best we can do is leave judgment to Him - He who judges in love and grace. He who forgives even scarlet sins with His fragrance of Agape.

Love Is the Fulfillment of the Law

Romans 13:10 says: "Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

Here we return to Agape - self-giving love. Agape makes God's law complete. It is through this love that we fulfill the law.

Jesus says: "Love as I have loved you." It is not about feelings. Agape is not a feeling - it is a command.

God does not ask whether you feel like loving your enemy. He says: "Love your enemies." And: "Turn the other cheek."

You may say: "I have no love for that person. I feel nothing for him or her."

It does not matter. You do not need to feel - you need to decide.

You can say: "I want to do good, whether it concerns an enemy or a friend."

I know it is difficult to be complete in Agape love. To love as Jesus loved requires something that does not exist naturally within us. But do you know what helps us? Humility.

The humble person says: "Lord, I cannot fulfill Your commandments. But I want to. Help me to spread Your Agape love. Help me to live Your gospel."

And that is when we receive power. For God has not left us alone. He has given us His Holy Spirit. It is in the power of the Holy Spirit that we can live out the love through which the law is fulfilled.

Agape and the Law - A Fragrance from God

Agape love is not boastful. It is not proud. It never seeks its own advantage. It helps without demanding anything in return. It gives - always - both to friends and enemies. It turns the other cheek. It is not dependent on feelings - it acts according to God's will.

If we look back at the Pharisees, the problem was clear: they had the law - but not Agape. They applied God's commandments without love. They judged - not in truth, but in pride. They used God's word to exalt themselves.

Therefore they missed the fragrance of the law - because it is fragrant only where Agape is present.

But let us look at another perspective: sin also receives its opportunity from the law. Romans 7:7-8 explains that it was through the law that Paul came to know sin, and that sin seized the opportunity afforded by the commandment.

"Apart from the law, sin was dead."

One might wonder: why not simply remove the law, and then sin would disappear? But it is not that simple. If the law disappeared, we too would cease to exist. For the law is not merely rules - the law is part of God's nature. God's law is holy. God's law is good. God is the law - and God is Agape.

The Parable of the Lily of the Valley

Think of the lily of the valley. So many people love it - it is beautiful, and it has a lovely fragrance. But it is also poisonous if consumed in the wrong way. If it is misused, it can become a curse.

Incorrect handling of something good can cause harm. So it is with God's law. The law carries the fragrance of Agape. But if one consumes it without understanding, without love, without humility - then it becomes judgment.

The fragrance is not the lily of the valley - but the fragrance bears witness to the flower. So it is with God's law.

The fragrance itself is not God, but the fragrance bears witness to Him. God is the One who carries the fragrance of Agape. He is the source of love. He is the very essence of all that is holy and good.

It is God who is Love, not love that is God.

1 John 4:16 says: "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them."

The Law That Cleanses - A Parable About Sin and Grace

There is another purpose of God's law, and I want to illustrate it with a personal story.

When I was about nine or ten years old, I developed a wart at the bridge of my nose. Sadly, it looked like a piece of mucus, and for a time I was given an unpleasant nickname because of it. The solution? A corrosive acid - salicylic acid.

Every day the wart was treated, and it stung. It hurt. But after a few weeks of treatment, the wart was gone - and I was whole and clean again.

In this picture, the wart is sin. And the corrosive substance is the law. The law reveals sin. The law attacks sin. The law causes pain - but only in order to cleanse.

When we stand before God's holiness, we react. When we encounter total, pure love, our sin becomes especially clear. It is not because God wants to harm us.

It is because we are contaminated - and God's holiness reveals it. Just as the salicylic acid burned away what did not belong, God's law works in our lives to cleanse us - not to condemn us. And yes - it can hurt.

We may feel something like anguish or conviction of sin. But it is not rejection - it is an invitation to sanctification. It is not punishment. It is not condemnation. It is a reminder that something in us needs to make room for God's love.

So the next time you feel the sharpness of the law, remember the wart. Remember how something ugly and painful was removed. Not out of hatred. But out of love. God's law is pure. God's law is good. And God's grace is greater.

The Purpose of the Law - and Christ's Victory

The purpose of the law is to make us aware of sin - not to punish the sinner. No, God's law does not punish the human being - it punishes sin and death. Human laws judge the offender. But God's law seeks the root of evil - and wants to restore the human being.

It is not our ability to keep the law that determines whether we belong to God. It is God's grace and Jesus' atonement that open the way to heaven.

Galatians 3:10-14 tells us that all who rely on works of the law are under a curse, and that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

Notice the words: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law."

Jesus - He who Himself embodied the law in its fullness - took the curse, sin, and death upon Himself. And through Him there is salvation for all people. All sins - even those we in our human thinking call the worst - are covered through the blood of the cross. No judge, no prosecutor, no power in the world can finally condemn us to death. Jesus has broken Satan's power.

But the question for you now is: Do you believe this? Do you believe that Jesus truly carried your sin? Your shame? Your death?

Perhaps it seems too great. Too wonderful. Too incredible. But it is true. My own faith was only like a mustard seed in the beginning.

But it grew - through God's Spirit, who led me step by step, deeper into the understanding of God's word. So I want to give you some advice now: write down this passage of Scripture. Read it again when you get home. Examine yourself. Cry out to God. Let the Holy Spirit speak to your heart. And understand - in the depth of your being - that you are loved, cleansed, and reconciled through Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:1-10 tells us that we were dead in our transgressions and sins, following the ways of this world. But God, who is rich in mercy, loved us with such great love that even when we were dead in transgressions, He made us alive with Christ - it is by grace that we have been saved.

God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order to show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. It does not depend on works, so that no one can boast. We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

The very last Scripture passage in this teaching that I want you to carry with you is Romans 13:10: "Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

After Jesus' atonement, this is what prevails. Through faith we have received a Helper - the Holy Spirit - who shapes us, guides us, and enables us to carry the same fragrance as God.

We are not to become God - but we can carry His fragrance. Remember the lily of the valley: the fragrance is not the flower. But the fragrance bears witness to the flower.

So it is with God's love in us: the deed itself does not save - but the deed bears witness to whom we belong.

Let us carry the fragrance of God. Let our lives be filled with Agape - unconditional love.

Encourage one another toward good deeds, not for your own sake - but for the good of your neighbor. Wake each morning and love your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Write His commandments on your heart and mind. Embrace and welcome Agape in your service to God. Love your neighbor - and spread God's fragrance. Amen.