**THE ELLIPSIS**

I recently received an excellent question from a friend about one of my recent articles (“You Cannot Separate Law and Grace”). In that article, I had said that Romans 6:14 was an “ellipsis.” His question basically revolved around the meaning of “ellipsis,” why one would use an ellipsis, and how to identify an ellipsis. Since others may have the same question (and because I am always looking for article ideas) I will turn my attention to that in this article.

An “ellipsis” is “The omission of one or more words that are obviously understood but that must be supplied to make a construction grammatically complete” (Merriam Webster). It is a very common form of communication, used more often than you might think. The reason that it is used is “economy of expression” – using less words to say the same thing. Here is an example of an ellipsis: “Begin when ready.” Fully stated, it would be, “Begin when ***you are*** ready.” Here’s another example: “The streets were deserted; the doors bolted.” Fully stated, it would be “The streets were deserted; ***and*** the doors ***were*** bolted.” Now let’s apply this to the text in question:

“For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (Rm.6:14). When one looks at this statement in light of the rest of the Bible, it is clear that it cannot be properly understood “as is” without some clarification. To take, “you are not under law,” as an absolute is absurd! Why do I say this? Because the same writer (Paul) said he was ***“under law toward Christ”*** (1Cor.9:21), and encourages us to ***“fulfill the law of Christ”*** (Ga.6:2). James said we ***“will be judged by the law of liberty”*** (Jm.2:12). And John said ***“sin is lawlessness”*** (i.e. disobedience to law, 1Jn.3:4). It is very clear that we ARE under law! As noted in my original article, if there is no law, then there is no sin; and if there is no sin, then we do not need grace. Therefore, the only conclusion one can draw in light of the rest of the Bible is that Paul is using an ellipsis. He means, “you are not ***merely*** under law, but ***also*** under grace.” This is precisely the reason that “sin (law-breaking) shall not have dominion over you.”

With that explanation given, I would like to use the rest of this article to show that this type of ellipsis is very common in Scripture. So, without further ado, I cite these examples:

“I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Mt.12:7). This is clearly an ellipsis because we know that God DID desire sacrifice (see Lv.4). But “mercy” is what Jesus called a “weightier matter” (Mt.23:23). Hence what Matthew 12:7 means is: “I ***also*** desire mercy and not ***merely*** sacrifice.”

“Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for that food which endures to everlasting life” (Jn.6:27). This is clearly an ellipsis because we ARE to labor for our food (2Th.3:10). Hence what John 6:27 means is “Do not ***merely*** labor for the food which perishes, but ***also*** for the food which endures to everlasting life.”

“Then Jesus cried out and said, ‘He who believes in Me, believes not in Me but in Him who sent Me’” (Jn.12:44). This is clearly an ellipsis because it makes no literal sense to say, “He who believes in Me, believes not in Me.” What Jesus means is “He who believes in Me, believes not ***merely*** in Me but ***also*** in Him who sent Me.”

“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1Cor.1:17). This is clearly an ellipsis because Paul WAS sent to baptize (v.14-16; cf. Mt.28:19). Hence, what Paul means is “Christ did not ***merely*** send me to baptize, but ***also*** to preach the gospel.” In context, his point is simply that he did not have to be the one who DOES the actual baptizing (because such is irrelevant); but it DID matter that he preach the gospel (cf. 1Cor.9:16).

“Do not let your adornment be outward – arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on apparel – but let it be the hidden person of the heart” (1Pt.3:3-4). This is clearly an ellipsis, or it would be teaching that it is wrong to comb your hair, wear a wedding ring, or even wear clothing! What Peter means is, “Do not let your adornment be ***merely*** outward… but let it ***also*** be the hidden person of the heart.” In other words, don’t just focus on the outside!

As you can see, the ellipsis is a common form of communication in the Bible. Indeed, without an understanding of this method of communication, the Bible would become nonsensical. Hope this article helps!

--Lanny Smith