

The Law of God, Pt. 1: The Law and Love

Matthew 5:17 ESV (Pg. 473) “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. **18** For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. **19** Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. **20** For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

- I. It is impossible to understand the message of the Bible without seriously considering the Law of God. In many ways, the Bible is a book that is all about the law of God, and the relationship that humanity is to have with it.
 - A. This can be a shocking statement to modern Christians, many of whom have been taught to view God’s law as a pesky annoyance, like some buzzing “moral mosquito” sent to afflict our consciences. Consequently, we have understood the gospel to be a message that says that Jesus removed the burden of the law for us so that we wouldn’t have to give its demands a second thought.
 1. Because of this, it can be a bit jarring for us to hear Christ say things like, “**I have not come to abolish the law**” and “until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law”. An “iota” is the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet, while a “dot” signifies a tiny pen stroke used to differentiate between Hebrew letters.
 2. He reinforces this position with a couple of stern warnings: “whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven” and “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”. Jesus obviously had a high regard for the law!
 - B. But the water can get a little muddy when we see the things written in the later books of the New Testament that seem to push us away from the law, such as:
 1. **Galatians 3:13a ESV** Christ redeemed us **from** the curse of the law...
 2. **Romans 3:23b ESV** the righteousness of God has been manifested **apart from** the law...
 - C. These verses would seem to indicate that the Law has been removed, supplanted or weakened by an act of Jesus Christ. But if that is true, what do we do with verses like we read at the first that say that the law isn’t going anywhere, uttered by no less of a spiritual authority than Jesus Christ. When people try to resolve this, their solutions can result in one of two kinds of error:
 1. The first possibility is **Legalism**. This happens when we place too much emphasis on the law, and make doing right things the basis of our acceptance with God. This equates to righteousness through perfectionism.
 2. The second possibility is called “**Licentiousness**” which I would define as giving ourselves a “license to sin”, believing that because of something faith does in us, that we need to have very little, or no regard, for God’s law. We sing “Jesus paid it all” and feel free to keep running up the bill! License is to think that we have no real responsibility as believers to grow in holiness.

- D. So how do we navigate this apparent contradiction? Many people assign an arbitrary sliding scale to violations of the law to make sense of it. For example, occasionally telling a “white lie” every now and then, or talking back to your mama, are generally regarded as acceptable; while murder or adultery are major league sins, and are rarely or never OK in the eyes of most Christians.
1. But does God have any regard for our sliding scale? All four of the sins I just mentioned are strictly prohibited by God in the 10 commandments.
 2. And what are we to do with all of the dietary laws in the Bible? What about circumcision? Are we required to observe all the festivals and bloody sacrifices that are spelled out for us in the book of Leviticus?
- II. In order to discover the answers to some of these questions, let’s go back to the beginning and take a look at how and why the Law of God came to humanity. You’ll recall that after Joseph died in the end of the book of Genesis, Exodus finds the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. But God, through 10 plagues sent upon their captors, and the dividing of the Red Sea, miraculously brings his people out of their slavery.
- A. Once they are freed, they begin to travel through the desert until God brings them to the foot of a mountain in the Arabian desert called Sinai. Through Moses, their leader, the Lord tells the Israelites what his intention is with them.
1. **Exodus 19:4 ESV** ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. **5** Now therefore, *if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples*, for all the earth is mine; **6a** and you shall be to me a *kingdom of priests* and a *holy nation*.’
 2. God’s intention was to have a people, set apart for himself (a “treasured possession”), that would be unique among all other peoples on the earth in two ways; first, because of their relationship to him (a kingdom of priests), and secondly, because of their distinct way of living (a holy nation).
- B. Beginning in chapter 20 of Exodus, and throughout the rest of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, God lays out what their relationship to him, and their uniqueness among the other nations, would look like.
1. They were given a strict moral code (the 10 Commandments). It included 4 commandments instructing them as to how they are to revere and honor God, and 6 dealing with how they were to live together as the people of God.
 2. They were given blueprints for a place to worship (the Tabernacle), and were forbidden to make other “holy places” on their own. They were also given a priesthood and a sacrificial system, so that they might know how to approach God in the orderly way of which he approved.
 3. They were given certain dietary, health, and hygiene laws which would keep them pure, and radically distinguish them from all other nations on the earth. Central to this was the covenant of circumcision, which was required for every Jewish male, marking them as a true Israelite; one of God’s people.
- C. After being given these laws, the Hebrews unanimously declared their resolve to observe them fully, but within days they were building idols and declaring them to be their Gods. Later they fell into immorality and unbelief, with increased idolatry. So God declared that none of the people freed from Egypt (with the

- exception of two) would enter the land that had been promised to them. After wandering in the desert for a full 40 years, that entire generation finally died off.
1. So their children entered the promised land in their place, renewing the covenant, and promising allegiance to God's way. But they too failed miserably after just a generation or two, and depraved chaos ensued.
 2. Later, when the Israelites had Kings, there would be some who would call the people back to holiness and the law, only to be succeeded by a king who was wicked, leading the people into idolatry. Wash. Rinse, Repeat.
- D. But then, the prophets began to speak of something that God was doing that would change all that. A new King would come to sit on David's throne, who would reign in righteousness forever, and the Spirit of God would be poured out. A well known example of this "forward-looking" prophecy is found in Jeremiah.
1. **Jeremiah 31:33 ESV** For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will **put my law within them**, and I will **write it on their hearts**. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
 2. Notice that in this vision of the future (and there are many more in the Old Testament just like this one), there is no talk of the law being **removed**, just **relocated**. What was once written on stone, will now be written on hearts.
- E. But when the fulfillment comes in the person of Jesus Christ, he actually "ups the ante"; not lightening the law's burden, but adding significant weight to it.
1. He tells the people that even though the law had forbidden adultery, he says that **now** we are prohibited from lusting after others in the fantasy world of our hearts! Though the law said not to murder others, Jesus says that we must slam on the brakes before we even get angry with others!
 2. He is telling them that the **action** of outward observance of a moral creed matters little if it only springs from a corrupt and polluted heart.
- F. But these statements of Jesus primarily concern the moral laws. In a **seeming** contradiction, Jesus takes an entirely different approach to the ceremonial laws.
1. In Mark 9, The Pharisees are in a tizzy because the disciples did not ceremonially wash their hands before eating, according to the tradition of the Jewish fathers. Jesus calls them hypocrites and makes a statement that, "There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him".
 2. Later the disciples confess that they don't know what Jesus meant by this. **Mark 7:18 ESV** And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, **19** since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) **20** And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. **21** For from within, **out of the heart of man**, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, **22** coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. **23** All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."
- G. Once again Jesus makes the heart the issue, and not observance. While he reaffirmed and reinforced the moral law, in this passage, he knocks down the

traditional take on what one must do to be holy, as well as dismissing the dietary laws entirely (“he declared all foods clean”).

- III. This is of vital importance to us as believers today, because we live in a time when it is not uncommon for people to excuse their violations of the moral law (which is a flagrant disregard for God’s holiness), while they insist upon observance of some version of the ceremonial laws (ranging from Saturday sabbaths, to dietary restrictions, to a code for acceptable music styles and clothing choices). This constitutes a replacement of God’s holy standard with a man-made counterfeit.
 - A. So how do we know which laws are to be kept and which ones no longer apply?
 1. Love is the key to understanding. If keeping a law is an expression of greater love toward God, like the first 4 commandments, obedience to it is vitally important. If a law is an expression of greater love toward others, like the last 6 commandments, obedience to it is vitally important.
 - a) No one mistakes my worship of other Gods, my bowing before idols, and my profaning of the name of God for evidence of love for him.
 - b) Similarly, I would be really deluded if I think I show you genuine love by lying to you, cheating you, or stealing from you.
 2. **Galatians 5:6 ESV** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only **faith working through love**.
 - a) Once Jesus was asked a question by a man who was an expert in Old Testament law. Having heard and been impressed by his answer to other legal questions, he asked, “What is the greatest commandment of all?”
 - b) **Matthew 22:37 ESV** And he said to him, “You shall **love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. **38** This is the great and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: You shall **love your neighbor as yourself**. **40** **On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.**”
 3. Do you understand what an amazing statement Jesus is making? In the Torah there are 613 laws! But Jesus distills every single one of them down to just two. Love God, and love everyone else as much as you love yourself. Jesus is saying that if you and I would set ourselves constantly about the business of loving God and others, we would be **morally perfect!**
 - B. But what about the ceremonial laws? Does “faith working through love” apply in the case of this set of laws as well?
 1. In short, if I insist on observing a law regarding food, or holy days, or circumcision, etc, because I think doing so contributes to my justification, or shows me to be more mature than others, I am woefully deceived, completely misunderstanding the power of the cross of Christ!
 2. I have disregarded the love that Christ has had for me, thinking that I have to do something to earn a place in the home where I have been freely adopted. I am like the prodigal son, crawling back home, hat in hand, to be a slave in a place where God has given me an honored place as a son.
 - C. The Jews had the ceremonial law to signify that they were distinct, belonging to God. The equivalent for us is not a statute; but rather faith, repentance, baptism

and membership in the Body of Christ. These are the indicators of our distinction as New Covenant believers.

- IV. But the rub is found in the fact that I, like the Jews who originally received the law, am completely inept when it comes to obeying God's law! I can't keep 613 laws. I can't keep 10 Commandments. I can't even keep the 2 most important ones!
- A. Most of us believe in a God that will forgive us for our failure to keep his laws; but would you be surprised if I told you that's not enough?
1. God's requirements **must** be fully kept, or the offender **must** be destroyed. You may not like it. It may strike you as unfair, but God's holiness demands it. If God merely winks at sin, not demanding obedience, then by doing so, he becomes less holy, and that is an impossibility. So what are we to do?
 - a) Paul wrote about this conundrum in Romans 7. He talked about how he was incapable of doing what he knew he should, and that he always seemed to wind up doing the things he shouldn't. Anyone here relate?
 - b) At the end of the chapter he cries out in desperation **Romans 7:24 ESV Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?**
 2. I can't tell you how often, and even how regularly I feel this same disgust for my frail faith and sinful tendencies! But it is Paul's answer to this rhetorical question that is the answer to the whole problem of the law. **Romans 7:25 ESV Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!**
- B. God's righteous requirement in the law must be kept, and thank God it has been! I am only forgiven today because someone better than me both fulfilled the law perfectly for me, and took the punishment I deserved as a law-breaker! Thanks be to God, through our Lord, Jesus Christ!
1. Now, because he has done this for me, the law is no longer a "got to" issue for me, it's a "get to" issue! His law has now been written on my heart, and in joy, I am growing in my ability to obey.
 2. But this is not because I fear punishment for my misdeeds, but because I love the one who has redeemed me from the curse, so for the first time I want to obey and be pleasing to him. It grieves me when I fail to, not because of judgement, but because of my love for him in response to his for me.
- C. **1 John 4:17 ESV** By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. **18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. 19 We love because he first loved us.**
1. Jesus said that the law would never pass away "until all is accomplished". In Christ, all is accomplished! So I am freed from the curse of the law, and able, by the Spirit's power, to joyfully lovingly obey!
 2. Jesus said that my righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees in order to enter the kingdom. That's a tall order. Those guys were religious rock stars! But I stand before you confident that I have a much better righteousness. How is that possible? It is only because I have been freely given the righteousness of Jesus Christ to wear eternally as my own.

