

The Old Testament Law and the New Testament Christian
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Most dramatic event in the Old Testament to me, that stands out above all the others, is what takes place at Mount Sinai—when the people of Israel have been led out of slavery in Egypt, they've been brought out into the wilderness, and now they're gathered at the base of this mountain. A million strong, every man, woman, child, grandfather, grandson, grandmother, granddaughter...everybody is there. They're gathered around the mountain, they're prepared for it. They've gone through all sorts of preparations for this. And they awake on the day and suddenly there is a cloud, there was smoke, there is thunder; the ground trembles. And then there is the voice of God. Picture the flats out here filled with every person in the state of Alaska, and every tourist that comes up in the summer, so there's about a million. And they're all gathered at the base of Pioneer Peak. And suddenly there's thunder and lightning, and the earth shakes, and you have that voice—the voice of God. Unlike any other time in history, God speaking to a people...loud, clear, in their language.

And He gives them an amazing...an amazing opportunity. He puts before them the choice. He tells them that He will be their God, and they may be His people if they will keep this law. And He begins to announce His commands, His law, the requirements that He lays down for them to be His people and Him to be their God. The voice comes with such thunder, with such shock and awe, that after hearing the ten Great Commands the people, totally terrified, turn to Moses and they say, 'We've heard enough. No more! You go up and get the rest.'

And so Moses does. He goes forward and approaches God, and he spends time with God, and he eventually has the six hundred and three other commands that go with the ten Great Commands. That dramatic event brings into Israel's history what becomes one of the most dominant elements in the rest of the story of the Old Testament—the law of God. And as you go through the rest of the Old Testament it seems like Israel's fortunes go up and down according to how they respond to God's law. When they're keeping God's law things go well, but when they drift from God's law things go poorly.

When you finish the Old Testament story with that dramatic event, and then the way it dominates the rest of the story, that law, you're left with a question, a question that perplexes us at times. And the question is this: if we're gonna be God's people and He's gonna be our God, do we need to keep those same laws? If we're gonna be God's people and He's gonna be our God, do we need to keep those same laws, thundered from heaven and shaping that nation's history. That's a question that gets a lot of debate. In fact, the first great debate in church history was over that precise question. It almost split the church in two as it was just beginning. The most volatile conflict and confrontation between the two great apostles, Peter and Paul, in public, was over that question. And it still, to this day, is confusing in many people's minds. And today what we wanna do is try to address that. And we're not gonna address it in complete detail. In fact, I'm gonna have to go very straightforward and quickly with this today. And my goal is to simply provide you a framework to think through that question and come away with at least a clear idea, a clear answer to it...the question...and a way to think about it. And even being that brief, I'm gonna take us overtime a bit today. I found that out first hour. Ok? So I'm warning you second hour.

We're just gonna walk through three basic issues on when this question comes up. Number one is what is the law? Number two is gonna be Jesus and the law, His relationship to the law. And then third and finally coming out of that is what's the Christian's relationship to the law? And those are the three things we're gonna go through today, and we're not gonna have time to spend a lot of ... take the opportunity to be able to do much exegetical analysis of verses of scripture. But in the middle of this today, as we work through these issues, there's gonna be one verse of scripture that is central to the whole question. In fact, it is the verse that needs to come to mind every time the question of the law comes up, and I'll mark that verse, I'll note it. You'll be aware of it when we come to it, because it's the one you need to hang onto with respect to this question. So let's jump in; let's begin to work through.

What is the law? And we're using a fairly narrow definition of it here today. We're gonna focus on it. We could say, and often it can be said that the whole five of the books of Moses—Genesis all the way through Deuteronomy—was the law. And that's a correct statement. But we're using a fairly narrow focus here in terms of the commands and the directives given by God through Moses to govern and lead His people. We can speak of it this way—six hundred and thirteen commandments given by God to Israel to provide rules for the relationship with God as His people. In those commands there was two hundred and forty-eight of 'em that were positive...'Thou shalt do this...'

There were three hundred and sixty-five that were negative... 'Thou shalt *not* do that...' And that's according to rabbis that studied that, and the numbers will vary according to which rabbi you talk to, how they combine some of the commands, and how they isolate some others. But basically the idea is there's a little over six hundred of 'em. Most of them are negatives...do not do this; and many of 'em, however, still are positives...do that.

They cover everything. They relate to every aspect of life...your dress and your diet; it talks about your schedule and sanitation. It will deal with questions and applications about your marriage and your family. It will touch upon your relationships in the community and your relationship to God. These commands seem to cover everything. Some of them are given with explanation as to why we should do this and what are the outcomes if we don't. There are commands...many of those commands...and the Hebrews actually had a name for these commands that have absolutely no explanation at all. They're just there, and you're expected to do 'em not knowing why or what the outcome will be.

Theologians and rabbis of the past and scholars of the present look at it, and they classify 'em in various ways. They speak of laws that were ceremonial. These were laws that dealt with the temple, and with worship, and with sacrifice and offerings, and priests and stuff like that. And then they saw laws that they identify as moral or ethical, laws dealing with your behavior, especially in interpersonal relationships. And then they deal with laws that are judicial, that lay out the instructions for how the nation was to be run, and how communities were to operate, and all those sorts of things. They cover everything, they touch upon every aspect of life.

They do so, one, God gave it to these people to provide some order. You gotta remember that the Israelites had been in slavery for over four hundred years, living under the heavy hand of the Egyptians. They were, as they came out of Egypt, a lawless people. They had no law to guide them. They had no set of rules. They had nothing. And God provided the law to give them order—give them order in their relationships to one another, both in terms of that very personal, private level, and also on the public level in dealing with each other in the community, and even in the national level as a nation. And then He gave them rules that would guide their relationship to Him, and how to approach Him; rules again, that at times dealt with the very private, quiet moments between you and God, and also rules and directions that related to the public times of worship, and how the congregation was to gather, and how the nation was to honor God. A nation without any laws—God gave them these to give them some order.

But it goes beyond order. He gave them for instruction. In fact the Hebrew term, their title that's applied to the first five books of the Bible, is the Torah. It means 'the instruction'. It was meant to teach them things. For example, it was meant to teach them the difference between right and wrong, and with that the reality of consequences. It was also meant to teach them things that they would not have been able to learn on their own, things that they would not have fully understood, except for the law helped them learn these things. For example, the idea of holiness. As they practiced these laws and as they lived them out they began to understand that concept, which is so vague to so many people. They began to understand what holiness is. They began to understand what sin is. They began to understand sin really well...not simply as an action, but that inner resistance that's within us to the rule of God. And as they interacted with the law they began to discover that you know what? There's resistance within me. In fact, if God says, "Thou shalt not covet," suddenly I find out I'm coveting. And so they began to learn what sin is.

They learned about sacrifice, that there are certain things when you've done wrong you can offer in sacrifice that would cover that wrong done, if it was offered in the right way and it was the right thing at the proper time. They also began to discover, linked to that, the idea of what was later called substitutionary atonement; in other words, a relationship that had been broken, brought into reconciliation where there was an atonement in the relationship, was restored because of a sacrifice given. They didn't know that; they didn't understand that until they had lived under the law and been through that. Redemption...they discovered what that meant as they went through and practiced these laws. It was a training manual to help 'em learn these concepts.

There was unseen realities that none of 'em had ever seen, none of us had seen, but the law gave 'em an idea of that. And this was especially when you get into the ceremonial law, and it has instructions for the temple and how it was to be constructed, and the priests and what they were to wear and how they would approach in times of worship, and what the people were to do in worship. And as this was developed and they didn't realize what was happening, was God was giving them a shadow, a picture, of the heavenly realm. And so when they looked at their tabernacle with the Holy of Holies, they eventually learned that in heaven there is a Holy of Holies, there is a place of God's presence, and you can't enter there except on His terms.

These are all things they learned. Most of all what they learned is something that the Apostle Paul mentions in the New Testament. Speaking of the law he says it was our tutor, our teacher, to lead us to Christ, to make Christ understandable in such a way that when He appeared people would respond to Him. One of the best ways for me

to picture this is there's a time early in the gospels where Jesus is walking along the river Jordan and John the Baptist sees Him and he identifies Him. And Jesus is just now going public. He's just now being recognized, and John the Baptist is the one who's been called to point Him out. And John the Baptist sees Jesus and he says this. The words out of his mouth is

"There is the Lamb of God."

Now if you had not lived for fourteen hundred years under the law, that statement would not make any sense to you. What does that mean? Is He gonna bleat soon or what? But if you'd lived for fourteen hundred years under the Old Testament sacrificial system, where every time there was a sin there had to be an offering of a lamb...when John the Baptist said *"There is the Lamb of God"* you knew that was a sacrifice God was giving for our sins. The law prepared a people to understand Jesus; when He talked about our redemption...when He talked about atonement...when He talked about the heavens...they could understand and respond, because the law had taught them.

Now one thing the law could not do was save anybody. It couldn't save a soul. Another statement the Apostle Paul makes when he's talking to Timothy, a young man who'd grown up reading the Old Testament scriptures, and Paul encourages him about that, encourages him to stay in those scriptures, those sacred writings; and then he makes a statement about 'em...

...which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.
--2 Timothy 3:15

What Paul's sayin' there is 'You know what? These sacred writings don't save you. But they'll give you the understanding, the insight, the wisdom to recognize and respond to Jesus with faith. That's where the salvation is.'

Those who read the law correctly, who understood its purposes, who approached it for order and for instruction, grew to love it. David writes in Psalm 19... It's a beautiful psalm where he starts out talkin' about the wonder of creation and how he sees God in creation. And then he begins to talk about the scriptures, the law of God. And his statement is *'The law is perfect. It restores my soul. It refreshes me in the inside. It gives wisdom to my mind. It gives light to my path.'* And then he'll go on and say, *'It gives joy to my heart. When I'm done with the law [he says] I have a clean fear. I know what to revere and what not to.'* And he goes on and says, *It gives me right judgment. I know what's good and what's bad.'* And he says, *'You know, this law is more precious than gold.'* He says, *'Reading it is like sweeter than honey in the honeycomb. This is precious.'*

Others went to the law and not understanding and not appreciating what it was about, and they came away expecting other things from it, and looking for it and using it for the wrong purposes. And they came to see the law as a burden, as a very heavy burden, as a yoke. And so by the time we come to Jesus' time, if you wanted to really become a devout person of God, you really wanted to be among His people the way you should be, and you had decided that you were gonna keep the law...all 613 commandments, you were said to be 'taking on the yoke', the burden, and you gritted your teeth and you set out to keep all 248 of the commands and avoid all 365 of the prohibitions. And you knew this was gonna be hard.

So by the time Jesus comes on the scene, this teacher who hasn't been taught by the rabbis, he hasn't been going through the centuries of books that analyzed, defined, and worked through those 613 commands and tried to work out their exact definition of every term and how they applied in every situation, no matter how cultures changed...when Jesus came along and they looked to Him and said, 'What's He gonna do with the law?' He made, I believe, the most important statement ever with respect to it. You find it in Matthew 5:17. Jesus has...it's His first sermon. He's got a huge crowd gathered around listening to Him, and He is speaking to His disciples...the ones who are committed to following Him. There's others listening on, but His primary message here is to disciples. And we're on a mount, only this isn't Mount Sinai with the thundering voice. It's Jesus talking to His disciples. And as He talks to 'em He comes to the subject of the law, those 613 commandments. And He makes this statement with respect to the law. He says

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets..."

...and we'll talk about that element another week. He says, *'Don't think I've come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. Don't think I've come here to rip up that parchment and throw it away.'* He says, *'I've not come to abolish it, but I have come to fulfill them.'* That is, *'I have come to complete them. I have come to bring them to their ultimate end.'*

He'll go on from there and explain that this law is not gonna be thrown away. He explains that until heaven and earth pass away this law is gonna continue, until every 'i' is dotted and every 't' is crossed this law is gonna be completed in detail...so much so that He warns teachers not to relax the law at all. Don't relax it, don't accommodate it to people, don't make it easier. He adds the next statement because, as He finishes this paragraph, he'll say because our righteousness, our right-doing is going to have to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees who devoted their lives to keeping these 613 commands in detail. He says we are gonna have to do better than them if we're gonna enter the kingdom of heaven. That's Jesus' statement with respect to the law. What we need to recognize is that set the course of His life, and that's exactly what He did, is He went forward and He fulfills the law.

He does it first of all in His teaching. He takes those laws of God and He brings 'em to their fullest interpretation and their authoritative application. He does that, for example, in the verses that follow when He talks about adultery and He talks about retaliation, and He talks about taking oaths and not taking oaths. And He goes through a whole list. He uses six different examples where He walks through and says, 'You know, this is what people say the law is about. This is how they interpret it. This is how they apply it.' But He says, 'No, *this* is how I interpret it, and *this* is how I apply it.' And He doesn't relax it at all. His teaching became the authoritative interpretation and application of the law.

Secondly, not only did He bring it to its fullest meaning, its fullest interpretation, its fullest application, He fulfilled it in His life. He did everything the law demanded...not the way people were defining it, not the way they thought it should be, but the way He understood it in its fullest application and its fullest intent. He lived it.

And then lastly, and this third, and this is just mystery—He fulfilled the law in His death. The law demanded that where there was sin a penalty had to be paid. Now if it was unintentional sin, it wasn't willful, it wasn't rebellious, you just forgot something, you got busy and harried and you missed this little assignment, or whatever, there was sacrifices that could cover that. But if it was willful, if it was intentional, if you knew God wanted this done and you said, 'Nah, I'm not', or if God said, 'You will not do this,' and you said, 'I think I will', there was no sacrifice for that. That required death, and separation forever from God's people. This is mystery. But because of who He is, and the perfection of His life, when Jesus went to the cross as the Lamb of God He paid the penalty due our sins. He covered it. He covered it. He met the law's demands for every sin willfully, rebelliously, intentionally done. He fulfilled the law.

And then He fulfills the law in His people. He enters into their lives and He begins to bring about in their lives a change such that they keep the law in its final, authoritative interpretation and application. And they come to do what the law demands.

So, given that, what's the Christian's relationship to the law? And we're just gonna echo the things we just went through. Number one...we rely on His teaching with respect to the law. I mean, when we put on our study glasses and we decide we're gonna become experts in Old Testament law, we're gonna go back there and we're gonna figure it out, ok...New Testament instruction is 'No.' You wanna interpret the law and know its applications, you go to Jesus, and you trust His teaching; that when you've dealt with His teachings and you're following what He directs, you are living out and you are following the authoritative interpretation and applications of God's law.

Second, we follow His pattern. We look to Him and say 'What does the law look like lived out? If I'm really gonna live it, does it mean I have a beard that hasn't been cut at the corners? Does it mean I have four tassels on the garment I wear, which are required? Is that what the law looks like, lived out?' And the answer is if you want to see what the law looks like lived out, you look at Jesus. By the way, you won't have a description of His beard, and you won't have a description of any tassels on His garment. What you'll have is a description of someone who loved the LORD His God with all His heart, with all His soul, with all His mind, and loved us as He loves Himself, proven at the cross.

Third, we trust in His sacrifice. You trust that every willful, intentional, deliberate wrong you have done has been taken care of. It's been covered, it's been paid for. All the wrongs you've done in the past, may be guilty of at the present, and yet lie in your future have been paid for. As far as the law is concerned you are dead. You are dead, and the penalty is paid. But, and this is interesting 'cause this'll just happen, is you'll begin to believe in His renewal, that He's actually in you, producing what God wants, making you desire it and want it and live it, even though you don't have to.

There's an interesting statement early in the book of Romans where the Apostle Paul says,

"We have all sinned, we have all fallen short of the glory of God."

In other words, God has a standard of excellence, and none of us meet it. We may meet our own standards, we may meet the standards of people around us, we may meet our community standards, but guess what? We don't meet God's standards. We don't measure up to the law. We really don't. And then Paul spends the rest of Romans providing a very, very intricately woven argument to say, 'Alright, this is how God handles that.' What I love, in the book of Colossians, in less than a sentence he gives an answer, much shorter because he didn't have as much time to write. And what he says in the book of Colossians...facing that problem is very simply this,

...a great and amazing mystery, which is Christ in you the hope of glory...

...of excellence. I love that! It's Christ in you working, and it provides for us a hope. It doesn't mean we're there yet, doesn't mean we're accomplished yet, but there's a future expectation of excellence, that we will meet the standard God has! He does that in His people.

Question: if we're gonna be God's people and He is gonna be our God, must we keep those 613 commands? To answer, I'm gonna draw one line down the page. On one side of the page I'll put this. If you decide that you wish to keep God's commands, and thereby be among His people, then you must keep all 613 commands. You must keep 'em; not just 'Thou shalt not murder,' but you better be wearin' a garment with four tassels on it, and your beard better not be trimmed at the corners. Now what'll usually happen if we decide that's what we're gonna do is we kinda cut back on the number of commands. Can't do that. Don't say, 'I'll do the Big Ten.' You have to do them all. And don't relax any of 'em. Our human nature will be to cut back on the number we have to keep, and try to relax 'em and adjust 'em so they would be workable in our culture.

Just reading this past week about an individual who was trying to keep the law and realized that this community was supposed to stone adulterers. And he was struggling with 'Well how am I supposed to do that? They're not gonna let me do that.' So what he began to do was carry little pebbles in his pocket. And he would come up behind people that he knew were participating in adultery, and he started flicking little pebbles at 'em when he knew they weren't looking. Ok? No. You get out a rock and you throw it.

I know what'll happen. You'll try to cut back the number, you'll try to relax it, and in the end you will not keep the law, even the law as you adjust it. And you will not be among God's people. And He will not be your God.

The other half of the page I would simply put this: Jesus. Trust Him. You trust that if you concentrate on His teachings and do what He does, you will be dealing with the best interpretation, the authoritative application of the law of God. If you follow His example you'll be living out the way it should be lived out. But most importantly, every failure, every time you resist it and react to it, you will know it is covered and it is paid for, and you do not need to fear condemnation. And you'll know the amazing wonder of Him working through you, to change you, with the expectation of ultimate excellence.

The first is by rules. The second is a faith relationship. The first seems easier. Give me a list, I'll check it off. The second seems more difficult because we're talking about a relationship with someone who our eyes cannot see, our ears cannot hear, and our hands cannot touch. Relationships are tough enough! Now we're trying to keep up a relationship with someone we cannot see except with our heart. It is so much easier to teach the rules. I could give you a list of things today and say go out and work on 'em. But I can't. What I have to do is to call you into a relationship of faith.

But with it is a promise. You call Him LORD, you acknowledge Him, confess Him as LORD and all that it means, believe in your heart that He is alive, that God raised Him from the dead, and He will save you. He will save you.

The first is called law, the second is called grace. The Bible speaks of the first as works, the other as faith. It speaks of the first one as slavery, the other one the freedom and the wonder of knowing Jesus working in you and through you.

Gonna wrap up with three quick action steps. Gonna walk this through very fast. I need you to stay with me and track very closely. Number one—some of you need to make a commitment. You really do. A commitment between are you gonna follow commands and rules and try to be God's person that way? Or are you going to commit and trust in a relationship with Jesus? You need to make that kind of commandment, because it's one way or the other. You're either on the left side of the page or the right side of the page. You either turn towards Jesus or you go back to the rules. You have to make a choice. Trouble is, we muddle around on that. Some people

spend their whole lives on that. 'Well, I'll try some of this. Well, maybe Jesus will help...' You make the decision and you commit to it.

I encourage people at this point to do what the Bible speaks of, is to be baptized, because it is such a powerful way to mark that commitment. It's a heart commitment, but it's one of those things that it's like a skier planting a pole before he turns. It's a way of saying, 'Yes, right now I am goin' this direction.' Some of you need to do that. You're tryin' to live Christianity without the relationship, and it doesn't work.

Others need to do a check on yourself. You've been a Christian for years. You made that commitment long ago. But one of the things that happens among Christians, and it happens so quickly sometimes that it's just astounding... In fact, when the Apostle Paul saw it happening in the church of Galatia, he sits there and says, 'I'm amazed! I'm astounded! How did this happen so quickly?' What happens is people begin to slide away from relationship and begin to dwell on rules. They've entered into faith with Jesus, they're followin' Him, but pretty soon, just like we do with many of our relationships, we begin to boil it down to a list of routines. Let's check off these rules. You know what the Apostle Paul says about that? When we drift away from our relationship to Jesus, our faith relationship, and we turn our relationship into simply a list of rules to keep? The Apostle Paul says when you have done that this is really serious...you have fallen from grace! I mean, we hear that phrase and we think of some horrendous sin that can never be forgiven. No. What Paul's talkin' about is a person who has gotten too busy for the relationship, and said 'What are the rules I've gotta keep?' He says if that's gonna be your relationship, here's the 613 rules, and you are no longer walking in grace. 'But I only wanted ten...' No. You got all 613, and you are not in grace. Check yourself.

The way I monitor, and this is just a simple thing I do with myself regularly to try to make sure I'm keeping my relationship with Jesus personal, I keep periodically asking myself a simple question—what am I hearing from Him, what am I seeing of Him? What am I hearing from Him, what am I seeing of Him in my life? It's just my simple way...call it sightings and soundings...we have journals that we use to do that in some of our classes...it's just my simple way of continually bringing me back to the fact that this is about a relationship; it's not rules.

And then lastly, and this is why I'm pushing you long today, I wanna get to this one too, is we gotta communicate. Oh, do we have to communicate as a Christian, and as a Christian community. We need to be people who communicate the wonder, the mystery, and the glory of Jesus, this One who fulfilled the law, who authoritatively interprets it and shows its application, and demonstrates it, and meets its demands, and finally begins to work it in our lives. We need to talk of the wonder and the mystery of Jesus. Unfortunately, in the community and the culture we live in, what Christians are known for is their understanding of the law. Our community can tell us very well what we think they're doing wrong. I'm not so sure they could tell us what we think Jesus has done so very right. Think about your conversations over the past month, and how many times you've been in varied settings; and you, with those around you, have reviewed what is all wrong with the world, who's not meeting standard and how, and what needs to be done about it. And I ask you, in any of those conversations, in any of those conversations did you talk about what Jesus has done so very well? If you're talking rules you are sending people to hell. If you are talking Jesus you're pointing them towards heaven.

That's why it's so important we close with this prayer. Let's stand.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in that truth and extend that grace in Jesus' name.