

The Old Testament: Discontinuity and Continuity

Having contrasted the kingdom of God to the pretenders to God's throne and kingdom, the principalities and powers among which the state is numbered, let us turn our attention to other matters, namely the ethical challenge of the Old Testament, the witness of the early church and Christian ethical dualism.

The goal of this chapter is to understand, from a New Testament perspective, how the Law and the Prophets inform Christian ethical behavior. This is an essential task for the Old Testament is used to justify much unchristian activity, especially the use of coercion and violence.

To be sure the Old Testament is a treasure trove, a gift from God, and there is much to inform us. It is after all God's Word to his people before the appearance of the Messiah. However, we must understand how Jesus and the apostles understood the place of the Law and the Prophets lest we seriously misapply them.

13.1 The Problem

The problem facing us is that the Old Testament, rather than the New Testament, informs much of our ethical and political

behavior, as well as our social and economic ordering and our relationship to power and its use. The problems are at least twofold.

First, politically, dual citizenship is permitted. Christians are mistakenly taught that they may fully participate in both Jesus' kingdom and the world's kingdom having loyalty to both. This is an impossibility if we take Jesus' commands seriously. In truth we can only serve one master, for we will hate one and love the other. Furthermore, participation in the world's kingdoms is cut off to the Christian for the means and ends of Jesus' kingdom and those of all others are in total opposition.

The second problem is how we view power and its use. Many believe that Christians are permitted to coerce, employ violence and kill enemies at the state's behest.

Both of the above assumptions are supported by an appeal to Israel's example in the Old Testament. However, these ideas have been imported into Christianity from the ministry of condemnation and death, that is, Moses' Law and the Prophets.¹ Since Jesus came, the Law and the Prophets cannot inform us on these matters.

The justification for the use of power and violence based on the Old Testament is frequently argued in the following way: (P1) God either permitted or commanded Israel to fight wars and kill innocents. (P2) Our nation is God's nation as Israel was God's nation, at least in some sense. (P3) God is changeless so what he commands or permits at one time cannot be forbidden at a later time. (C1) Thus, we may continue to fight wars, killing our enemies, even their noncombatants – women, children and aged.

Another closely-related argument proceeds in the following manner: (P1) What God commands we must obey. (P2) God has commanded us to obey our rulers in all matters, even when commanded to go to war and kill enemies. (C1) Thus, should our state command us to go to war we must fight, killing our enemies, even their noncombatants.

¹2 Cor 3:7–11

There are many problems with these lines of argument. In particular they make unjustified assumptions: 1) Our nation is God's nation, 2) there is no real difference between the Old and New Testament's ethical requirements, 3) and similarly, God does not change the ethical requirements placed on those who follow him. None of these assumptions are true for they certainly cannot be supported consistently from the Scripture.

In previous chapters we spent considerable time looking at the nations. It is simply preposterous to equate any state with God's kingdom. The witness of Scripture² and the witness of history are conclusive. It is also false to claim that God does not change his expectations for his people. Those living before Moses did not need to obey the law God gave Moses for there was no such law. Furthermore, God at one time permitted intermarriage and polygamy; later on he forbade them. At one time God's people stoned adulterers and disrespectful children, there were many dietary restrictions that had to be obeyed, the Sabbath day had to be kept upon pain of death, sacrifices had to be made continually, and so on. We no longer keep any of these and many others. We could list more, but this is enough to show that there is no such unbroken continuity in God's religious and ethical requirements.

That the Scriptures do not support the claim that there is no difference between the ethical requirements of the Old and New Testaments should be obvious. However, it is not so obvious to many. This chapter has been written to clarify this point and establish how Jesus and the New Testament writers understood the Law and the Prophets.

The truth of the matter is that since Jesus came, God's people operate under higher and very different ethical requirements. In fact, to obey some portions of the Mosaic Law, or behave as faithful Old Testament saints, one would necessarily become non-Christian. Could we be a faithful Christian and insist on the death penalty for a blasphemer, a son who cursed his parents, an adulterer or one who broke the Sabbath? Could we insist

²1 Sam 8:1–22; Is 40:14–17; For history see chapter 12 on the nature of the state and chapter 10 on the principalities and power.

that circumcision is necessary? Could we kill our enemies given Jesus' commands and example? To all and more we must answer no.³

Nor can we now pray many of the prayers found in the Psalms.⁴ Could we now ask God to destroy our enemies and have their children's brains dashed out upon rocks, when God the Son has commanded us to bless our enemies, to do good to our enemies, to love our enemies, just as our Lord showed us as he hung on the cross and asked for the forgiveness of those crucifying him?⁵

The Old Testament was a tutor and a guardian for mankind in his childhood, while God waited for the fullness of time to reveal his Son and execute his redemptive plan conceived of in eternity past. With the summing up of all in Christ,⁶ things are so new since he came that, in Christ, one might rightly say "new creation."⁷

That we Christians live in a new creation should be abundantly clear from previous chapters. It has been firmly established that God's present kingdom is radically different from the kingdoms of this world which are numbered among the rebellious principalities and powers. However, to develop this concept further we will consider the following topics. 1) Israel is a singularity, 2) The nations are not Israel – not God's people 3) Old/New Testament continuity and discontinuity 4) The Old Testament as seen from the New Testament.

13.2 Israel: A Singularity

Israel is a singularity and holds a unique place in history and no nation since has stood in the unique relationship to God that

³Ps 109; Lev 2:16; Deut 10:6–10; Lev 20:9; Lev 20:10; Num 15:32–36

⁴I am referring to the imprecatory Psalms. See Ps 109 for an example.

⁵Rom 5:10; Lk 23:24

⁶Eph 1:8–10

⁷2 Cor 5:17

it occupied. Despite the claims of the early Puritan leaders⁸ and many that followed them, the United States was not the new Israel, that is, the new land of promise for God's people while the Indians were Canaanites.

The nation of Israel was unique, established by God's covenant with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The governing document of this covenant establishing the requirements placed on Israel and the laws by which it operated were contained in the Law of Moses, a law given directly by God to Moses. Has any other nation had such a prophet who gave such a law to it? Certainly not.

Initially Israel was a theocracy that God governed through his prophets and judges. Later, God permitted Israel a king, however, God still effectively ruled the nation through his prophets and his Law. Even if the kings did not submit to God's commands as communicated through the prophets, the belief was that God still ruled and rebellion, even by the king, was punished by God.

Israel as a kingdom is unique in its relationship to God, that is, how it was established and how God exercised his rule over it. God has not made a covenant with any other nation, nor has he ever given prophets to any other nation who could speak "Thus saith the Lord God," in matters of state, or any other matters. With the death of the last apostle there are no longer prophets who can speak in that manner. As the writer of Hebrews says "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world."⁹ Jesus and his apostles have the last word, not the Law and the Prophets.

Some of the restrictions God placed on Israel are quite interesting, as well as unique in all history. These include economic restrictions that we have looked at in some depth and a number

⁸Ezra Stiles D.D., *The United States Elevated To Glory and Honor*, From a sermon delivered at Hartford, Connecticut, at the annual election of the governor, state representatives, and senators. American Antiquarian Society. Also found numerous places on the Internet such as <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/41/>.

⁹Heb 1:1,2

of restrictions on matters of state such as war-making. It is interesting how these restrictions are treated by those who claim Israel as a national example and justification for participation in the state and the use of violence.

For example, Israel's kings were forbidden to accumulate excessive wealth and horses. When obeyed, these severely restricted the king's options when fighting a war. For example, armies were paid for out of overstuffed treasuries and horses were needed to employ the chariot, an essential high-tech weapon of the time.

Additionally, God could, and did, through his prophets, command Israel to both fight and not fight depending on God's divine plan. The command to not fight might be given to let God deliver Israel by his miraculous power, or it might be given so that rebellious Israel might suffer defeat and be led into humiliating exile.¹⁰

Those who desire to use Israel as an example and justify Christian involvement in the state and employ coercion and violence, have never seriously considered these limitations on the state or the possibility that God would want them to surrender and suffer ill treatment at the hands of their enemies. Those who insist on this sort of continuity between the Old and New Testaments, however, are content to abandon God's Old Testament requirements regarding ceremonial cleansing, dietary law, temple sacrifice and the imposition of capital punishment for many crimes. However, they are loath to abandon the use of violence and would never consider abandoning participation in the state.

To be sure, most who claim to be Christians now believe the New Testament speaks clearly about the end of Law of Moses. On the other hand, they continue to hold to much of the obsolete dimensions of the Law and Prophets and deny that Jesus set aside the Law and Prophets establishing a new covenant with new law. These same people do not believe that Jesus has his own kingdom now operating in the world, and that those who follow him must have a singular allegiance to him. Nor do they

¹⁰2 Kings 19:14–37; 21:1–14

believe that those who follow Jesus must refuse the temptation to coerce and employ violence. This unbelief is held in the face of ubiquitous, powerful and clear evidence to the contrary. The evidence is everywhere and present in Jesus' teachings, life, the Acts, the Epistles, the Apocalypse, the uniform witness of the early church to the early-fourth century and a persistent witness since. Clearly there is an arbitrary picking-and-choosing going on and those who claim to be followers of Jesus must stop it and be faithful to all their Lord's commands.

13.3 The Nations: Neither Israel nor God's People

Conflating Israel with another nation is also a common mistake. This belief generally no longer equates a nation with Israel, but rather assumes that the nation is, in a real sense, God's nation as Israel was God's nation. In the West, this was conventional wisdom from Constantine forward, however, with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment this idea, at least in its most overt form, declined. Today it takes a somewhat diminished form, but it still persists in most Christian groups. In the United States it remains strong among most Protestants.

This error produces errors of its own. This error lies at the heart of the mistaken belief that the Old Testament provides an example for participation in the state and the use of state violence. The argument follows the common line of reasoning given above. "God's people in the past participated in their nation, Israel. Since we nationally are God's people we may likewise participate in our nation in a similar manner." From these errors follows the belief that we may participate in the state's violent means to achieve its relative, not absolute, ends.

What makes possible this mistaken equality between our nation and the "nation of God's people," is a completely uncritical view of the state and the naive belief that nations are not rebellious principalities and powers hell-bent on subverting God's redemptive plan, desiring to sit on God's throne,¹¹ and adopting means and ends at odds with our King's means and ends.

¹¹2 Thess 2:3,4

Equally important is the refusal to believe that we Christians have our own Sovereign, we belong to his kingdom, and live by his imperatives, imperatives at odds with all other nations.

A simple cursory examination of an important principle on which all nations operate reveals a tremendous conflict with Jesus' commands. It is axiomatic that nations act in national self-interest.¹² There is no other consideration: not moral, not religious. The writings of those who found nations, run nations and the actions of nations substantiate this claim. Not only is it considered conventional wisdom, it is also considered virtuous. Those who object only need a quick glance at history and read it without the colored glasses the state gives us to disabuse themselves of this error. Furthermore, states are neither self-sacrificing nor altruistic.¹³ Both these virtues, however, are commanded of Christians.

Jesus and the apostles make it clear that Christians must live the selfless life of a servant, living in mutual submission, sacrificially caring for others, going without to meet the needs of others, not seeking first their own good, but the good of others. In all this they also adopt Jesus' selfless and nonviolent means. Thus, for a true Christian, self-interest does not play a role in his moral deliberations, rather a firm commitment to obey his Lord in all matters and the needs of others inform him. Self-interest, beyond a healthy love for self evidenced by caring for the basic health of body and mind, is antithetical to true Christianity.

Thus, if it is sinful for a Christian to use self-interest as a guiding principle in his personal life then how, pray tell, can he participate in a corporate body whose guiding principle is self-interest? Isn't national self-interest simply personal self-interest writ large? How is self-interest at the personal level wrong but virtuous when practiced by millions? It is the same reasoning by which we condemn killing as murder when done

¹²National self-interest, as it is presently understood, is fairly new. Historically it was first introduced by Niccolò Machiavelli of Italy and Cardinal Richelieu of France. In its current form the state's ambitions (security, military, economic) come before religious or moral considerations.

¹³We have examined this in some detail in chapter 12.

by an individual, but praise killing when thousands do it in the name of the state. God help us.

That the nations are rebellious principalities and powers should not come as a surprise for “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.”¹⁴ This is not hyperbolic language; it rather expresses a fundamental truth. God has allowed Satan, within limits, to exercise real power over this earth, power that he exercises to such an extent that we live in an “evil age.” Even Jesus refers to Satan as “the ruler of this world.”¹⁵ Thus, when Satan offered the kingdoms of the world to Jesus if he would fall down and worship him, Satan was making an offer he could fulfill.¹⁶

The historical record and the Scriptures affirm the claims made here.¹⁷ The nations are not God’s people, nor do they stand for God, not even when those calling themselves Christians rule the nations.

13.4 Change and Continuity

Now let us turn our attention to an examination of the discontinuity and continuity between the Old and New Testaments.

That there is discontinuity as well as continuity between the Old and New Testaments should not come as a surprise. One only has to note that the requirements of the Law came several thousand years after the creation bringing great change to the ethical requirements God placed on his people. This did not mean that God changed, rather it simply meant that God was doing something different according to his plan. With this in mind consider some of the discontinuities between the Old and New Testaments.

¹⁴1 Jn 5:19

¹⁵Jn 12:31; 16:11

¹⁶Matt 4:8,9

¹⁷A short historical examination was conducted in chapter 12, however a much fuller examination will be conducted in volume 3 of this work, Lord permitting.

Discontinuity

To begin with, the most important change we find is that Israel's long-awaited eschatological king, the Messiah, has performed his redemptive work and sits enthroned at his Father's right hand, ruling visibly over his kingdom in the church and invisibly over the entire creation, which, of course, includes the nations. The Messiah has ended the exile having redeemed his people from slavery to sin and has given them the Spirit of God who is now transforming them into the Messiah's image. True obedience is now possible by the Spirit's power whereas in the past such obedience was not attainable.

Furthermore, the enemies of God's people have been disarmed and led away in humiliation.¹⁸ Those among the Gentiles who affirm the Messiah as their king have become the people of God, God having created a new man, uniting Jew and Gentile, taking out of the way the dividing wall which is the Law and commandments.¹⁹ The Law and the Prophets are no longer taught having fulfilled their purpose; now the gospel of the kingdom is preached.²⁰ We do not follow the Law and the Prophets, for God's people now obey Jesus' kingdom Law. *A new way of life has dawned for those in Christ.*²¹ *Old things have passed away; new things have come.*²²

Continuity

Not surprisingly, the discontinuity, seen in its proper light, is the basis for continuity. What has happened is what God had planned all along. The old was supposed to pass away and a new

¹⁸Col 2:15

¹⁹Eph 2:11–22

²⁰Lk 16:16

²¹Once again we must not read this hyperbolically. A new way of life has really dawned with the empowering gift of the Spirit. The way of life described in the Law and the Prophets was a description of life held in bondage. (Gal 4:21–5:1) It was a way of life that was to pass away making room for something far greater. Paul tells us that to return to the Law is to return to bondage, (Gal 2:4; 4:3,25; 5:1) and life under it to live under a curse. (Gal 3:10–14)

²²2 Cor 5:17

age established. Life was supposed to change; reconciliation to God without the Law and the restoration of obedience through the transforming power of the Spirit was the plan all along.

Those who follow King Jesus can now really obey, loving God with all their body, heart, soul and mind and their neighbor as themselves. They can love enemies and not return evil for evil, they can live in moral purity and sacrificially care for others. No longer is the internal struggle that Paul describes in Rom 7 normative of those who follow King Jesus.²³

Thus, we find that a great discontinuity was planned from eternity past. The discontinuity being planned is, hence, no problem at all. However, it is essential that we understand the full nature of this planned discontinuity lest we borrow from the past in improper ways. To help us in this we now turn to the New Testament to see how the Law and the Prophets were viewed by Christ and the writers of the gospels and epistles.

13.5 The Law in the New Testament

Now we turn to an examination of the New Testament view of the Law of Moses and the Prophets. To begin let us review the covenants found in the Old Testament.

13.5.1 The Covenants

There are five covenants God establishes in the Old Testament. The sixth and last covenant is mentioned in the Old testament and is established by Christ.

²³A careful reading of Rom 7 will reveal that the conflict Paul describes is the conflict that a person under the Law of Moses experiences. The person that Paul is speaking of in the first person is a slave to sin. (Rom 7:14) Since Paul has already made it abundantly clear in chapter six that those of us in Christ are no longer slaves to sin, (Rom 6:2,11–23) the passage in chapter seven cannot refer to a real Christian.

Adamic Covenant

The first covenant established with Adam is found in Gen 1:28; “God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”

Additionally, Adam is given one simple command; “The LORD GOD commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.’”²⁴ Tragically, Adam and his wife failed to obey and the world was cast into darkness and death clings to man and all his works.

Disobedience necessitates a change in covenant, thus, God tells Adam how he will now deal with mankind.²⁵ The consequences of Adam’s disobedience are shattering; women will suffer pain in childbirth, their desire will be for their husband, the ground is cursed and will yield its fruit only after tremendous labor, and all will die. All is not lost, however, for One of the seed of woman will come and defeat the Serpent.²⁶ It is the first unconditional promise of the Messiah.

The Noahic Covenant

God’s covenant with Noah is a great relaxing of the curses of Adamic covenant.²⁷ God once again commands mankind to be fruitful and fill the earth (1, 7), and God places the fear of man in every beast so that man need no longer fear all animals (2). No longer is the ground cursed as it was for Adam²⁸, and God unconditionally promises that he will not again destroy the earth with water.²⁹

²⁴Gen 2:16,17

²⁵Gen 3:14–19

²⁶Gen 3:15

²⁷Gen 9:1–17

²⁸Gen 8:21

²⁹Gen 8:21; 9:11–17

The Abrahamic Covenant

Prior to the formal establishment of the Abrahamic covenant God gives Abraham a foretaste of what is to come. He promises that of Abraham he will make a great nation, that his name will be great, that God will bless him and that in him all the families of the earth will be blessed.³⁰ Lastly, “The LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.”³¹ There is again a promise to give Abraham the land in Gen 13:14-17.

God’s establishment of the Abrahamic covenant is recorded in a beautiful passage in Gen 15. In it God promises that Abraham will have a son and the number of his descendants will be multitudinous, and that they will possess the land God had given him.

It is interesting that God’s promise of the land to Abraham provides considerable interpretive latitude. Most assume that God is referring to what we call the Land of Promise of the Mosaic covenant. However, it is not necessary to impose this restriction on the promise. In fact Paul says that Abraham inherited the whole world.³²

Several things are important to remember. First, God’s covenant with Abraham is unconditional, second, the promise of a continuous lineage prefigures all God’s people, Jew and Gentile alike.

Lastly, the Abrahamic covenant is the covenant that God fulfills when he sends his Son, the Son of God, and son of Abraham, who will bring a blessing to the whole world. This covenant is not part of the “Old Covenant” that will pass away. That covenant is the Mosaic covenant.

³⁰Gen 12:1–4

³¹Gen 12:7

³²Rom 4:13

The Mosaic Covenant

Moses was the mediator between God and his people at the establishment of what we call the Mosaic Covenant. This covenant was a conditional covenant governed by the law given by God to Moses. God's blessing or judgment was conditioned on Israel's faithfulness to this covenant Law. Specifically, if they faithfully kept the Law God would bless them materially, protect them from enemies, and keep them in their land. If they were disobedient they would suffer God's judgment, ultimately taking the form of death at the hands of their enemies, beasts or starvation, and for those remaining alive, exile from the land.

Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Ex 19:5,6

But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it.

Deut 3:17,18

The Law encompassed every dimension of life: temple sacrificial system and practices, ceremonial cleansing, civil law, criminal law, economic practices, sanitation and dietary law. Keeping the Law not only resulted in God's special blessings, but freedom from many diseases as a result of the sanitary and dietary requirements.

The Law of Moses was certainly a gift of God, a true blessing. However, it was also a ministry of death and condemnation that multiplied sin.³³ The Law's purpose was never to justify or enable obedience. Its task was to make sin utterly sinful,

³³Rom 3:20; 5:20; 7:7–13; 2 Cor 3:7–11

placing all under God's judgment so that it might lead us to faith in Christ.³⁴ When Jesus came, Moses' Law became obsolete and passed away, having completed the task set for it.

The Davidic Covenant

God's covenant with David is recorded in 2 Samuel.

The LORD also declares to you that the LORD will make a house for you. When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.

2 Sam 7:11–16

The Davidic covenant is God's unconditional promise to David that from his lineage One would come who would rule forever. In many ways it is an elaboration of the Abrahamic covenant. At this point in the story the ancients knew more about how God would bless the world through the line of Abraham.

The New Covenant

The New covenant is the last unconditional covenant. It is the fulfillment of all previous unconditional covenants, and it occupies a central place in the major and minor prophets as Israel and Judah are led into captivity. It is the ultimate and only hope of Israel and the world.

³⁴Gal 3:24

God's new covenant promises are marvelous and blessed beyond our comprehension; the Prophets strain at their words trying to communicate its glory and blessing. It is a time when the world and man himself are created anew. It is under this last great covenant that those who are in Christ now find themselves.

In this covenant we live in Jesus' kingdom under his Law. Having died with Jesus we died to the Old Covenant and its Law. Now faith in Christ justifies and marks out God's covenant people. Having been raised with him we live in newness of life and live unto God. Obedience is restored to mankind by the power of God's own Spirit,³⁵ and the principalities and powers have been disarmed. We are no longer slaves to sin and death, we are all servants and priests in God's kingdom, we are called to a higher ethical standard than those in the previous covenant, and in our communities we live in mutual submission to one another. We love all, forgive all, serve all, consider others more important than ourselves, do not resist the evil man and love our enemies, blessing them, praying for them and doing good to them.

In the New Covenant our world is made new.

13.5.2 The Jew and the Works of the Law

Obedience to the Law of Moses was what marked one out as a faithful Jew. However, it is mistaken to think of the Jew as a proto-Pelagian earning salvation by the works of the Law, that is, by keeping the Law.³⁶ The Jew did not believe that he became part of God's covenant people because he kept the Law thereby earning his covenant status. The Jew was one of God's covenant

³⁵Ezk 36:22–32

³⁶To assume that ancient Judaism was based on works-righteousness is to make a serious mistake. If assumed, much in the Old and New Testaments is misunderstood, especially the nature of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and what Paul is saying about works. Briefly, Paul speaks to the truth that the works of the Law cannot establish one's covenant status, only faith in Christ. However, our faith in Christ, if not accompanied by works of obedience to Jesus' law is not a saving faith at all (Jas 2:14–26). Paul, in different words, says the same thing in Rom 6–8. Paul also teaches that we have been created for good works (Eph 2:8–10).

people because of God's election. Thus, keeping the Law did not make a person one of God's people, rather obeying the Law maintained your covenant status. To repudiate the Law through disobedience was to repudiate your election and suffer God's judgment.

Hence the faithful Jew kept the Law *because he was one of God's people, not to become one of God's people*. The following expresses this well.

Judaism has never taught that individuals must earn God's favor by performing meritorious works; members of the covenant people are already embraced by God's gracious election and mercy. Obedience to the Law is not a condition to getting in, rather, it is a means of staying in the covenant community.³⁷

The Law, a gift beyond value, was unable, however, to maintain their covenant status, that is justify the Jew. The problem was that no one could keep the Law. This, however, was the very point God wanted to make with the Law.³⁸

13.5.3 Life Under the Law

To live obediently under the Law was to experience great blessing, but Israel was seldom faithful and ultimately became worse than those who occupied the land before her.³⁹ In reality the Law could bring neither blessing nor covenant righteousness.⁴⁰

Thus we find that to live under the Law was to live under a curse. "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law to perform them.'"⁴¹

³⁷New Interpreter's Bible, Commentary on Galatians, Vol. XI. pg. 239

³⁸Rom 3:20; 7:7-8:4; Gal 3:10

³⁹Ezk 16:44-52

⁴⁰Rom 3:20; Gal 3:10

⁴¹Gal 3:10-14

As if living under a curse was not enough, to live under the Law was to live in slavery.⁴²

Life under the Law was to live without pity, the Law permitting neither mercy nor pity. If you were found guilty of a capital offense the sentence was carried out without pity. “Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”⁴³

Furthermore, the Law aroused sinful passions⁴⁴ and brought wrath upon those under it⁴⁵ for the letter of the Law kills.⁴⁶ Paul describes the Law as a ministry of condemnation and death.⁴⁷

As to the Jew’s relationship to non-Jews, the Law brought enmity.⁴⁸ Lastly, and most importantly, the Law made it clear that mankind was horribly sinful. In Paul’s words, the Law made sin exceedingly sinful and “The Law has shut up all under sin.”⁴⁹

13.5.4 The Limitations of the Law

At this point the limitations of the law are obvious, but we will enumerate them. 1) The Law could not impute life,⁵⁰ 2) the works of the Law could not justify, that is, maintain covenant status,⁵¹ 3) The Law was faulty,⁵² and 4) the Law was weak because of the weakness of man’s flesh and hence it could not deliver from sin and death.⁵³

Clearly, God had another plan that he was waiting to execute. The Law was necessary, but temporary. In the fullness of time he

⁴²Gal 4:21–5:1

⁴³Deut 19:21; see also Deut 7:16; 13:8; 19:13; 25:12

⁴⁴Rom 7:5

⁴⁵Rom 4:13–15

⁴⁶2 Cor 3:6

⁴⁷2 Cor 3:7,1,10

⁴⁸Eph 2:14–16

⁴⁹Gal 3:12–22

⁵⁰Gal 3:21,22

⁵¹Gal 2:16

⁵²Heb 8:7,8

⁵³Rom 8:3

would send forth his Son and execute his plan of redemption.⁵⁴

13.5.5 The Goal of the Law

The Law of Moses was never meant to be an end in itself. God never intended it to be his final word to mankind. Rather the Law was a tutor and a guardian when mankind was immature.⁵⁵

That the Law was not God's final word is clear given his prediction to Moses at the reviewing of the Law before the Jews entered the Land.⁵⁶ As he spoke with Moses this last time he told him that Israel would be unfaithful and suffer judgment. Thus, God himself predicted the ultimate failure of the Law to justify.⁵⁷

The purpose and intent of the Law was to bring life, but not in keeping the Law, but rather in its fulfillment which is established in leading us to faith in Christ.⁵⁸ The Law and the Prophets did this in a powerful way. First, they taught that God would one day fully deal with sin and its consequences, second, the Law shut up all under sin,⁵⁹ and third, it showed sin to be utterly sinful.⁶⁰ By the time Christ came it was obvious to the person attempting to live a holy life according to the Law, that God himself had to do something to remake men and women if there was any hope for the reconciliation of man to God and the restoration of obedience.⁶¹

⁵⁴Gal 4:4

⁵⁵Gal 3:23,24; 4:1-7; This immaturity is in regard to mankind's point in the process that God used to prepare the human race for his Son.

⁵⁶Deut 31:14-29

⁵⁷Of course, the problem was not with the Law but with man, a problem that the Law fully demonstrated.

⁵⁸Gal 3:24

⁵⁹Gal 3:12-22

⁶⁰Rom 7:13

⁶¹Recall Peter's words at the Jerusalem council when he says "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are." (Acts 15:10,11)

Thus, when Christ comes the Law is fulfilled; it has accomplished its purpose. Hence we find that the law is no longer operative. As Paul puts it, the Law is operative “until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.”⁶² Now the Law is obsolete, growing old and ready to disappear.⁶³ In Corinthians Paul teaches that the Law is fading away and has no glory compared to the glory of the New Covenant.⁶⁴ And Jesus himself said that “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since then the gospel of the kingdom has been preached.”⁶⁵ And in Ephesians Paul teaches that the Law has been removed for Jesus “has broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, . . . , which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances.”⁶⁶

The Law is no longer operative because it has accomplished the purpose for which it was made; Jesus and the way of faith he enables are now present. Jesus himself says that he has fulfilled the Law for the Law achieves its final purpose in him.⁶⁷ And we establish the Law by faith when by faith we confess Jesus as Lord.⁶⁸ By our faith in Christ, the end to which the Law was directed, we affirm and establish the Law.

Paul puts it a little differently in Rom 8. Here he teaches that the requirement of the Law is now fulfilled in us.⁶⁹ To accomplish this sin had to be dealt with. To this end Jesus, by his obedience, has condemned sin in the flesh and set us free from the law of sin and death.⁷⁰

But what does it mean for Christ to condemn sin in the flesh? It means that in God’s court of law sin has lost its claim upon us. In Christ, we are set free from the law of sin to live not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit so we might be slaves to righteousness and thus become the obedient people God desired.

⁶²Gal 3:19

⁶³Heb 8:13

⁶⁴2 Cor 3:14–18

⁶⁵Lk 16:16–18

⁶⁶Eph 2:14–16

⁶⁷Matt 5:17–20

⁶⁸Rom 3:31

⁶⁹Rom 8:1–4

⁷⁰Rom 6; 8:3

We may understand the fulfillment of the requirement of the law in yet another way. First, by faith in Jesus as Lord, we are reconciled to God and justified, that is made part of God's covenant people, something men failed to secure through the Law; and, second, obedience to the true spirit of the Law — love of God and love for others — is restored by the empowering of the Spirit.

13.5.6 Man's New Relationship to the Law

From the discussion above it should be clear that since Christ God's people now have a different relationship to the Law. Specifically, the Law no longer has jurisdiction over us.⁷¹ Paul uses this law-court language extensively in Romans chapters six, seven and eight.

Consider Paul's argument in Romans seven. In this passage Paul begins his argument with the example of divorce and remarriage. A "married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning her husband. so then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the Law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man."⁷²

Paul's argument is simple; the death of one of the parties changes the relationship of the other with regard to the Law. In this same way you "were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God . . . But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter."⁷³

This death and resurrection in Christ is what Paul was talking about in Romans chapter six. It is in chapter six that he

⁷¹Rom 7:1-6

⁷²Rom 7:2,3

⁷³Rom 7:4,6

emphasizes our death to the law of sin and death. Here in chapter seven he talks about another dimension of our death in Christ; we are released from the Law of Moses so that we might serve God.

In verses seven through thirteen he continues his exposition on the Law, teaching that the knowledge of sin came through the Law (7) and that sin, taking an opportunity through the Law produced sin in the one following the Law. Thus, the Law which was to result in life proved to result in death. (10) Thus, it is not the holy, good and righteous Law that was at fault, but rather sin. Paul puts it this way in verse thirteen.

Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by affecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.

Rom 7:13

And as sin was shown to be utterly sinful we are led to understand that by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified, and from this we find that faith in Christ is our only hope. Thus, when Jesus opens up the way of faith, the law is fulfilled, accomplishing the task for which God had set for it.

Although not essential for our considerations here, it is nevertheless helpful to consider the rest of chapter seven along with a few verses from chapter eight.

Remember that Paul has been talking about life under the Law of Moses, and he maintains this thought in the rest of chapter seven for he begins his next observation regarding the Law with; "For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin."⁷⁴ This is a continuation and elaboration of his thought in verse thirteen.

However, is it possible that the 'I' Paul begins to use in verses fourteen to twenty five refers to Paul himself? Notice carefully

⁷⁴Rom 7:14

that the one Paul is referring to is “of the flesh, sold into bondage to sin.” that is, a slave to sin.

The ‘I’ used here cannot be Paul, or any true Christian for that matter, for Paul has already taught us in the previous chapter that “our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.”⁷⁵ And does not Paul also say; “But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”⁷⁶

Thus, it cannot be that Paul is speaking about a Christian who is freed from the law of sin by his death in Christ. Rather Paul uses a rhetorical device, not entirely uncommon today or in Paul’s day,⁷⁷ speaking in the first person, to describe what a Jew under the Law experienced. One can see a clear echo and working out of what Paul has already said of the Jew under the Law in verses 5, 7-13. Hence the Christian does not suffer from the inability to obey God’s commands⁷⁸ as is described here for this is a description of a faithful Jew living under the Law.

Nor does God’s redeemed cry out “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (24) The Christian in Christ is not in a wretched condition, because for the Christian established in Christ there is *now* no condemnation “for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus *has set you free* from the law of sin and of death.” Notice the verb tenses; they are either present tense or past tense describing a present reality. For those in Christ, freedom from the law of sin is a *present reality*. Jesus *condemned* sin in the flesh, and we *no longer* walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.⁷⁹

⁷⁵Rom 6:6,7

⁷⁶Rom 6:17,18

⁷⁷Witherington III, Ben, *New Testament Rhetoric*, pg. 139–142

⁷⁸The following Old Testament passages foretell of the restoration of obedience: Ezk 11:19,20; 36:22–32; 37:24–28; The following New Testament passages either command we obey or presume that we can obey: Matt 7:21–27; Lk 6:46–49; Jn 14:15,21–24; 15:9,10; Rom 6,7,8; 1 Jn 2:3–6; 5:1–4

⁷⁹Rom 8:1–4

Victory in Christ, evidenced by a life characterized by obedience, is the norm for those who have truthfully affirmed Jesus as their Lord and King and who walk by the power of the Spirit who is even now transforming them into the image of Christ⁸⁰

Therefore, let us stop using Rom 7:14–24 as an excuse for lives characterized by disobedience. Let us live in the freedom of obedience to Jesus' kingdom Law.

Now let us turn to other passages that shed further light on our new relationship to the Law of Moses.

The Witness of the Early Church

Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18)

With Peter and Cornelius, a Gentile of Caesarea, God begins to help the primitive church understand the new status of the Law of Moses. As the narrative opens we find an angel telling Cornelius that his prayers have been answered. To this end Cornelius is commanded to send some men to Joppa and have the man Peter come to him.

Before Cornelius' representatives arrive Peter is given a vision in which God speaks. In this vision a great sheet is lowered from heaven, containing all kinds of animals, both clean and unclean, as clean and unclean are understood from the context of the Law. God commands Peter to kill and eat (13). Peter, being a good Jew, responds as one might expect; "By no means Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean" (14). God, however, is teaching something new and replies, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy" (15). This sequence occurred three times and was followed by a communication from the Spirit to follow the three men who were coming for him.

Peter, not surprisingly, is perplexed. How is it that what God had forbidden in the past should now be permitted? It is more than likely that Peter is only thinking in terms of the Law's

⁸⁰Rom 8:29

dietary laws. God, on the other hand, has just given him a truth that extends far beyond the Law's dietary restrictions.

Shortly after Peter's vision, Cornelius' representatives come and tell Peter of Cornelius' vision and request that he come to Caesarea. Peter agrees to follow them as he has been commanded.

Upon reaching Caesarea Peter is greeted by Cornelius and many others. Peter's first words to the gathered crowd were an acknowledgement of his recent vision and how he now understood it in light of the unfolding events. Specifically, that it was normally unlawful for a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him,⁸¹ but God had shown him not to call any man unholy or unclean. What else could Peter have concluded given his vision and the grace God had already shown to Cornelius?

Peter continued and said that he understood that God showed no partiality and recounted Jesus' life and work. As Peter spoke, the Holy Spirit fell on them and they began to speak in tongues just like the first Jewish Christians at Pentecost when the Spirit was first given. Seeing that God had treated the Gentiles just as he had the Jews, Peter saw no reason not to baptize them.

Upon returning to Jerusalem, some Jewish Christians confronted Peter wanting him to explain why he visited and ate with the uncircumcised. To this Peter replies "Therefore, if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"⁸²

At this point it is clear that the Gentile who had not obeyed Moses' Law could, by faith in Christ, become one of God's covenant people.⁸³ What has yet to be worked out is the answer to the question, "Must the Gentile, upon coming to faith in Christ,

⁸¹The problem for the Jew was the dietary Law and the Law regarding ceremonial cleanliness. Associating with and eating with a Gentile almost always meant that some aspect of the Law was either compromised or broken.

⁸²Acts 11:17,18

⁸³Rom 2:28,29; Gal 3:6-9; 4:1-11; Eph 2:11-22

also keep the Law to maintain his covenant status?" This question is answered at the council at Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–29)

The Jerusalem council is both critical and decisive in stating the church's position on the Law of Moses. At the time of the council Peter had already communicated his encounter with Cornelius, and Paul had already begun his ministry to the Gentiles and fully understood that the Law, being fulfilled by Christ, was obsolete. However, the church as a body had not spoken decisively on this matter.

Things came to a head in Antioch, the city where Paul was residing, when some men from Judea began teaching that "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (2). A "great dissension and debate" ensued, and the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas should go to Jerusalem for the matter to be taken up by the apostles. Clearly, a definitive word from the body of Christ was needed to settle the matter.

Upon reaching Jerusalem the question at hand was debated. Some not only insisted that circumcision was necessary for salvation, but one also had to observe the Law of Moses (5). Thus, the matter involved the whole Law, not only circumcision.

After three days of debate, much of it most likely quite heated, Peter took to the floor and began to speak:

Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?⁸⁴ But we believe that we

⁸⁴We find here a resonance with Rom 7:14–25

are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.

Acts 15:7–11

James closed the matter with the following.

Brethren, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, “After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, so that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the LORD who makes these things know from long ago.” Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.

Acts 15:13–21

At the council’s conclusion they were in agreement and the apostles and the elders, along with the whole church, sent out a letter stating the church’s position.

For Peter, James and the entire church, the matter was settled. God had made it clear; keeping the Law of Moses was not necessary. Attempting to faithfully execute the works of the Law was not possible for the Jew, and God had made it clear that a new way, the way of faith, had dawned.

Jesus had summed up the Law in *love God with every fiber of your being and love your neighbor as yourself*.⁸⁵ This was what was required. Loving God means that you obey his commands

⁸⁵Matt 22:36–40

given through Jesus, and in loving others, even enemies, forgiving and sacrificially caring for others we fulfill the second command.

God's covenant people are no longer marked out by the works of the Law; now they are marked out by faith in Christ, a faith that is made alive by our works of faith,⁸⁶ resulting in a moral life superior to the saints in the Old Testament.

Paul's Arguments to Support the New Status

Before considering Jesus and his actions and teachings respecting the Law, let us briefly consider a few more passages from the Epistles.

From Romans

As we saw above, Paul found the Law condemning man rather than justifying man. He says specifically in Rom 2:17–29 that Jews were condemned by the Law.

In the great covenantal passage found in Rom 3:21–4:25, Paul teaches that God has fulfilled his covenant promise not through the covenant based on the Law, but on a new covenant based on faith established by Christ. In it is the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham who was justified by faith.

From 2 Corinthians

In 2 Cor 3:1–18 Paul maintains that the “the letter kills but the Spirit gives life,” (6) and remarkably describes the Decalogue as “the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones.”

As to the glory of the Law compared to the glory of the New Covenant, the Law “has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it.” (10)

These statements would be remarkable if a faithful Jew were to utter them, but for Paul, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee

⁸⁶ Jas 2:14–26

who was blameless as to the righteousness found in the Law, they are an earthquake.

From Hebrews 7 & 8

In Heb 7:11–22 we have another exposition on the Law within the context of Jesus’ priesthood, that is, a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. With the change of the priesthood from the tribe of Levi to Jesus, “of necessity there takes place a change of law also.” (12) We also find that the Old covenant is useless, “For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God” (18,19).

We have also seen the following passage from Hebrews chapter eight but it bears repeating. “We have a high priest who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man (1,2). But now he has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as he is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been established on better promises” (6).

And as to the status of the Old Covenant: “The first covenant is faulty for God promises another covenant.”⁸⁷ “When he said, A new covenant, he has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.”⁸⁸

13.5.7 Jesus and the Law

It is often claimed that Jesus flawlessly kept the Law of Moses. This claim cannot be substantiated nor would it be likely that it would be true for Jesus himself said “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since then the gospel of the kingdom

⁸⁷Heb 8:7

⁸⁸Heb 8:13

has been preached.”⁸⁹ With Jesus the New covenant is breaking out and with it a new law.⁹⁰

Please do not misunderstand this. I am not claiming the Jesus did not live a perfectly pure and holy life for he did. He certainly fulfilled the intent of the Law for he loved his Father with every fiber of his being and he sacrificially loved others completely subordinating his needs to theirs.⁹¹ However, he did not perform the works of the Law flawlessly. It was for this reason that he says in Matt 5:17 that he has not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. We should thank God that he did not keep the law in every detail, seeing that the church was going to need an example of what it really meant to walk as a true citizen of God’s kingdom in the New Covenant when the Old Covenant law no longer had a claim on God’s covenant people.⁹²

That Jesus did not follow the Law of Moses in all its detail consider the following.

- 1) Jesus and the apostles gleaning grain on the Sabbath set aside the Sabbath laws:⁹³ To the Pharisees’ challenge Jesus says that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath and that he is the Lord of the Sabbath, indicating that he may rework their understanding of the Sabbath law as he saw fit. Contrast this to the treatment of the man gathering sticks for a fire on the Sabbath in Num 15:32–36. Moses was reluctant to carry out the death penalty, but God insisted on it. Jesus, however, is the Messiah, the Lord of the Sabbath, and has the right and duty to implement the New Covenant and its New Law. Notice that we no longer keep the Sabbath like the faithful Jew.

⁸⁹Lk 16:16–18

⁹⁰Archie Penner, *Divine Covenants*, chapters 4, 5 and 6, 2nd. Ed., Servant Pub., Elkhorn Manitoba, 2003. This book provides an excellent and detailed discussion on the matters here and goes into much more depth than can be permitted in this book.

⁹¹Mk 10:45

⁹²For teachings found in the apostle’s writings there is always a precedent found in Jesus’ life and teaching.

⁹³Matt 12:1–8

- 2) Jesus reworked the dietary laws as he saw fit.⁹⁴ By his statements in Matthew he completely undoes Moses' dietary restrictions. On this matter he gives a final word to Peter in Acts 10:9–16.
- 3) Jesus, at the well in Samaria, met and spoke with a woman living in adultery and visited and ate with Samaritans. This would have been unthinkable for a faithful Jew who would have insisted on stoning the woman and refused to associate with the Samaritans. A good Jew would not have been able to stay with them for they certainly ate and performed unclean practices, the very things that defiled a Jew according to the Law. It is difficult to believe that Jesus and those traveling with him were able to remain undefiled after a stay of several days.⁹⁵
- 4) When Jesus is anointed by the repentant prostitute he does not insist that she be stoned or that she go and make a sacrifice at the temple. He rather senses her repentance from her previous way of life and forgives her.⁹⁶ The temple and the sacrificial law surrounding it are ignored. They are no longer important now that the Messiah has come.
- 5) When Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus defuses the situation to such a degree that her accusers leave, unwilling to carry out the death sentence demanded by the Law of Moses, a sentence that God had said must be carried out without pity. Jesus does not follow Moses' Law or insist that others follow it in this matter. Instead he chooses not to condemn her and commands her to go and sin no more. To a faithful Jew this is a flagrant violation of Moses' Law.⁹⁷
- 6) At Jesus' trial, beatings and crucifixion he does not call for the destruction of his persecutors who are also God's enemies. Instead of pronouncing an imprecation over them, he asks the Father to forgive them. Through the example of imprecatory prayer, the Old Testament actually taught that we may pray that ours and God's enemies be de-

⁹⁴Matt 15:1–11

⁹⁵Jn 4:1–42

⁹⁶Lk 7:36–50

⁹⁷Jn 8:1–11

stroyed.⁹⁸

- 7) In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus forbids some things previously permitted by the Law of Moses, as well as commands some things not contained in the Law, going far beyond the Law. Jesus is actually overturning the Law, changing it in significant ways, so much so that we cannot say that it is the same Law. A Jew who insisted that the Law be obeyed in its most minute detail would never do such a thing.

Jesus, for the reasons above, was not a good Jew as the faithful Jew of his day understood Jewish practice. However, Jesus was doing exactly what the Father wanted done. Jesus says, “but so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me.”⁹⁹ To this end Jesus was establishing his kingdom and a New Covenant that replaced the Old Covenant that was even then obsolete and passing away. To accomplish this task Jesus had to do new things, undoing some of the Law and in other ways going far beyond it.

In Jesus’ actions we see the beginnings of what God was going to do with the Law. That the church ultimately understood that the Law and Prophets must give way to Jesus Law¹⁰⁰ should come as no surprise, for as they looked back at Jesus’ life in light of the working of the Spirit among the Gentiles and the promises made in the Old Testament to the Gentile at the coming of the New Covenant they could only conclude that the Law had accomplished its work and having been fulfilled was now obsolete and ready to disappear.¹⁰¹

Matt 5:17–20

Before leaving this topic we must consider one more item found in Matt 5:17–20.

⁹⁸See Ps 109 for an example. Remember that the Law commanded that the penalty required by the Law be executed without pity – life for life, limb for limb, tooth for tooth, eye for eye. (Deut 7:16; 13:8; 19:13,21; 25:12)

⁹⁹Jn 14:31

¹⁰⁰Acts 15, the books of Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and Galatians

¹⁰¹Heb 8:7–13

Jesus makes it clear that he is not going to abolish the Law and the Prophets but fulfill them. In what sense is he going to fulfill them? By obeying the Law? No, of course not, for in the Sermon he will terminate some practices allowed by the Law. He will also teach things and do things that are contrary to the Law as we have seen above. However, Jesus insists that the Law will not fail until all is accomplished. If Jesus does not mean that he will flawlessly keep the Law, and yet the Law will be fulfilled, what then is the Law to accomplish? The Law is fulfilled when the Messiah comes and opens up the way of faith.¹⁰² Thus Jesus is fulfilling the Law by his coming and establishment of the New Covenant. Recall the discussion above how Paul taught that the Law was fulfilled.

Subsequent troublesome verses now yield to a more consistent understanding. Verse 19 begins with “Whoever then ignores and teaches others to ignore the least of these commands . . .”. What are the commands that Jesus is referring to? Is it the Law? Must they keep the Law in its minutest detail? How could this be, given that Jesus himself did not keep the Law in all its detail? Recall that Jesus said that the Law and the Prophets were taught until John, but now the gospel of the kingdom of God is taught.¹⁰³ Given this and the teachings to come and Jesus actions which, in some cases, are not consistent with the Law, it is exceedingly difficult to believe that this passage means that we must keep the Law. It is far better to understand Jesus referring to what he has just said in the Beatitudes and the commands that follow in the sermon. Jesus is saying that his commands must be obeyed.¹⁰⁴ This reading also harmonizes with the rest of the Sermon, Jesus’ later teachings and actions and the Acts and the Epistles.

On the other hand, if we assume that Jesus is saying that the Law must be obeyed during his life on earth, a conflict remains with Jesus’ teachings and actions, for they were not all consistent with the Law or Lk 16:16–18.¹⁰⁵ Thus, even in this

¹⁰²Rom 3:31; Gal 3:24

¹⁰³Lk 16:16–18

¹⁰⁴See also Jn 19:28–30

¹⁰⁵Acts 15

case, it seems more consistent and less troublesome to read 19 as respecting the commands to follow (chapters 5-7), some of which are greater than others. It also meshes better with verse 20.

Jesus, of course, needs to say these things because his ministry will appear to be a subversion of the Law at some level, both to true Law practice and the traditions added to the Law, and because he expects the church to set the Law of Moses aside.

But why must the Law be fulfilled and why must we go beyond the Law as Jesus says? Because our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees who kept the Law better than anyone else. The righteousness derived from the Law is insufficient. The Law could neither establish nor maintain covenant membership, for it was unable to address man's bent toward disobedience. The declaration of justified or righteous in God's court of law is not attained by the Law. This is in perfect harmony with Paul. "No flesh will be justified by the works of the Law." Jesus will continue (well beyond the Beatitudes) to explain what it means for our righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees by going far beyond the Law, teaching that some things permitted by the Law are now disallowed and that some things commanded by the Law no longer need be obeyed.¹⁰⁶

In many ways verses 17-20 are a preface to the rest of the Sermon. Jesus is saying that, going forward, things are going to be very different, not the least of which is the status of the Law.

The new status of the Law is necessitated by and a consequence of Jesus' fulfillment of the Law and the establishment of the New Covenant. The "accomplished" in verse 18 should be seen to refer to the "fulfill" in verse 17. Because of its fulfillment, the Law, being completed, will no longer be observed. The Old Covenant comes to an end and so the Law which governed it

¹⁰⁶For example, associating with non-Jews; the extended visit in Sychar, Samaria; not insisting on the death penalty in his interactions with the prostitute who anoints him, the woman caught in adultery and those who crucify him.

comes to an end.¹⁰⁷ Verses 17 and 18 speak to this. Verse 17 lays it out and verse 18 is a hyperbolic restatement. This was a common rhetorical device used by the ancients.

Thus Jesus expounds on the law of His kingdom, a law which we find later can be lived out only by the power of the Spirit whom Jesus is about to give to his people.

From verse twenty onwards Jesus explains more completely what it looks like to have a righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees,¹⁰⁸ a righteousness enabled by the gift of the Spirit.

13.6 The Early Christians and the Law

The arguments and conclusions are firmly rooted in Scripture and follow a simple and straightforward reading and application of the texts. However, some will still object, insisting that what has been stated here is new and off the beaten path. This, however, is not the case for we have the witness of the early church that affirms this understanding. Consider the following from the prominent Christian writers of the first three centuries.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, I do allow that one order did run its course in the old dispensation under the creator, and that another is on its way in the new one under Christ. I do not deny that there is a difference in the language of their documents, in their commandments of virtue, and in their teachings of the law. Yet all this diversity is consistent with one and the same God. *Tertullian*, 3.345, 346

¹⁰⁷Recall what Jesus said in Lk 16:14–18. Here Jesus brings together the truth that the Law and the Prophets were taught until John and that the Law will not fail to accomplish its purpose. It is as if he is saying that the reign of the Law is over, but it will not fail to achieve its goal – placing all under sin and thereby leading us to faith in Christ. To drive home the point that the Law’s reign is over he teaches that divorce and remarriage are adultery, a teaching contrary to the Law. That Jesus would say this to the Pharisees is significant for they were proud of their exemplary law-keeping.

¹⁰⁸See the discussion above in the chapter 4 section 4.3.3 that discusses the Sermon on the Mount for more details.

¹⁰⁹The quotes below are found in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers* and are compiled in *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, David Bercot, Editor in the sections *Covenants of God, Moses, Law*.

God thus shows that the ancient covenant is temporary only, when He indicates its change. Also, when he promises that it will be followed by an eternal one. *Tertullian*, 3.346

Still, we make this concession: that there is a separation [of the two covenants] by reformation, amplification, and progress. To illustrate, fruit is separated from the seed, although the fruit comes from the seed. Likewise, the Gospel is separated from the Law even though it is developed from the Law. It is a different thing from it, but not an alien one. It is distinct from it, but it is not inimical to it. *Tertullian*, 3.361

The epistle that we also allow to be the most decisive against Judaism, is that in which the apostle instructs the Galatians. For we fully admit the abolition of the ancient Law. We hold that it actually proceeds from the dispensation of the Creator. . . . Christ marks the period of the separation when He says, "The Law and the Prophets were until John." He thus made the Baptist the boundary between the two dispensations of the old things that were then terminating and the new things that were then beginning. *Tertullian*, 3.431; see also 3.157

If we still live according to the Jewish Law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace. *Ignatius*, 1.62

If anyone preaches the Jewish Law to you, do not listen to him. For it is better to listen to Christian doctrine from a man who has been circumcised than to listen to Judaism from one who is circumcised. *Ignatius*, 1.82

The Christians do not observe the same forms of divine worship as do the Jews. *Letter to Diognetus*, 1.26

Is there any other matter, my [Jewish] friends, in which we Christians are blamed, than this: that we do not live after the Law, and are not circumcised in the flesh as your forefathers were, and do not observe Sabbaths as you do? *Justin Martyr*, 1.199

We do not follow the Jews in their peculiarities in regard to food, nor in their sacred days, nor even in their well-known bodily sign. *Tertullian*, 3.34

The following two quotes from Tertullian are from his work against Marcion.

The same God, therefore, who prohibited meats also restored the use of them. For He had indeed originally allowed them. *Tertullian*, 3.471

We do not now deal with the Law any further than [to remark] that the apostle here teaches clearly how it has been abolished by passing from shadow to substance. That is, it has passed from figurative types to the reality, which is Christ. *Tertullian*, 3.471

From these things, it is plain that all those things [i.e., clean and unclean animals] are returned to their original blessedness now that the Law is finished. *Novatian*, 5.648

The former Law that had been given by Moses was about to cease. And a new law was to be given. Another dispensation and a new covenant were to be given. The old baptism was to cease and a new one was to begin. *Cyprian*, 5.508

The yoke of the Law was heavy, which is cast off by us. And the Lord's yoke is easy, which is taken up by us. . . . In the Gospel according to Matthew, it says: "Come unto me you who labor and are burdened and I will give you rest." . . . Also, in the Acts of the Apostles: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us, to impose upon you no other burden than those things that are of necessity: that you should abstain from idolatries, from shedding of blood, and from fornication." *Cyprian*, 5.556, 557

The [Jewish religious leaders] alleged other causes for their anger . . . namely, that Jesus destroyed the obligation of the Law given by Moses. That is, He did not rest on the Sabbath, but labored for the good of men. Furthermore, He abolished circumcision, and He took away the necessity of abstaining from the flesh of pigs . . . However, he did not do this by His own judgment, but according to the will of God. *Lactantius*, 7.118

When you read the Law, do not think yourself to be bound to observe the additional commandments . . . Read them only for the sake of history, in order to learn about them and to glorify

God that He has delivered you from such great and so numerous bonds. *Apostolic Constitutions*, 7.393

But what parts of the Law can I defend as good, with greater confidence than those which heresy has shown such a longing for? There is the statute of retaliation, requiring eye for eye, tooth for tooth, and stripe for stripe. Now there is not here any hint of permission to do mutual injury. Rather, on the whole, there is provision for restraining violence. To a people who are very obstinate and lacking in faith towards God, it might seem tedious, and even impossible, to wait on God for that vengeance that was subsequently to be declared by the prophet: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." Therefore, in the meanwhile, the commission of wrong was to be curtailed by the fear of an immediate retribution. *Tertullian*, 3.311

We affirm that this was the function of the Law, as preparatory to the Gospel. It was utilized to form faith, through gradual stages, of those who would learn the perfect light of the Christian discipline. *Tertullian*, 3.373

These quotes obviously agree with what has been affirmed in this chapter and what was written by the apostles. Thus, what is affirmed here is in no way innovative or new, but the recovery of something very old and in agreement with the Scriptures.

13.7 Conclusion

It was stated at the beginning of this chapter that the goal here is to understand, from a New Testament perspective, how the Law and the Prophets inform Christian ethical behavior. This is an essential task for the Old Testament is used to justify much unchristian activity, especially coercion, violence and participation in the state.

To be sure there is in one sense a perfect continuity between the Old and New Testaments, that is, God executing his plan of redemption conceived of in eternity past. However, there is a jarring discontinuity when God fully executes his plan sending

the Son of God, the one for whom and by whom all things were created.

The old ways of the Law of Moses are set aside, having been a tutor and guardian on the one hand, but a ministry of death and condemnation on the other hand, so that all might be held under sin so we might be responsible to God, to the ultimate end of leading us to faith in Christ.

Not only are we dead to the Law and hence no longer under it, having been set free from it, but we are held to a much higher ethical standard as Jesus articulates in the example of his life and his teachings. No longer may God's people divorce and remarry, to hate is to commit murder, and to lust in our heart is to effectively commit the act. Furthermore, God's people love their enemies, no longer require retribution, nor resist the evil man, nor execute vengeance even when deserved.

No longer needing the Law and the Prophets and the works of the Law which they teach, God's covenant people now walk by faith in Christ, a faith that is made alive by our works of faith,¹¹⁰ that is, faithfully walking in the works of obedience¹¹¹ that God has ordained for us.¹¹²

Since the King came and faithfully implemented God's redemptive plan, the lives of God's people are marked by a greater moral purity, mutual submission, sacrificial care for others, indiscriminate forgiveness and love, even love for enemies whom we bless, pray for and do good to. It is a way of life that God's people can now live since the empowering gift of the Spirit. It is the fulfillment of Ezk 11, 36 and Jer 31:

And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they

¹¹⁰Jas 2:14–26

¹¹¹Jesus tells us that obedience is the path to knowing him; if you keep his commandments he will disclose himself to you (Jn 14:21). If you would know Jesus keep his commands.

¹¹²Eph 2:8–10

will be My people, and I shall be their God. . . . Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. *And I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will be careful to observe my ordinances.*

Ezk 11:19,20; 36:26,27 [emphasis added]

And with this blessing, the restoration of obedience, we have been set free from the law of sin and death and the principalities and powers that informed our lives in the ways of death, for they were disarmed and led away in humiliation.

It is not too much to say that in Christ a new creation has dawned.

Recommended Reading

Penner, Archie, *The Divine Covenants: Conflict or Harmony*, Chapter 4, 2nd. Ed., Servant Pub., Elkhorn Manitoba, 2003

Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1–19, Ed.'s Alexander Roberts D.D, and James Donaldson, LL.D., Chronologically arranged, with brief notes and prefaces by A. Cleveland Coxe, D.D., Hendrickson Pub., Inc. 2004