

A very simple essay on God's law

This essay aims to show the history of God's law being outworked on the earth.

The origin of the law of God

The law of God is heavenly and eternal. It is not something that begins and ends, or something that changes. It is eternal and immutable because it is part of God; the law of God is merely the will of God applied to morals. It is a part of God's goodness that describes righteousness.

God is perfectly righteous; everything he does is holy and right. The law of God is the description of this righteousness; it is the definition of acts of God as applied to moral behaviour.

The purpose of man

When God created the world, and especially man, it was to create a material expression of his divine character. The chief point of creation is for there to be a physical manifestation of the glories and virtues of God. Everything in the created universe is a testimony to the character of God and this is exemplified, regarding character, in man. Thus man is the crown of creation. While nature displays God's glory in terms of wisdom, power, order, and perfection, man was made to express the moral perfections of God. The behaviour of man was meant to be a display of the will of God for human beings.

The inner witness of the moral law

Thus when God made man he created an inner witness to the moral law of God. Knowledge of the will of God for moral behaviour was embedded in man's conscience. Thus all tribes in history have known to worship the creator, uphold justice, love one another, honour parents etc. But in addition to this inner knowledge of God's law, Adam learned a great deal about God's law in his conversations with God in the Garden. As a perfect man, and wanting to do God's will, he sought to understand God's law – what God wanted of him.

Despite the fall of Adam, the testimony of the law of God remained in his heart;¹ in addition he had the knowledge he had gained about God's will in his intellect, which he passed down to his descendants. Thus descendants of Adam before the time of Moses understood all the precepts of moral law found in the later Mosaic Law. The patriarchs demonstrated this over and over again, having revelation about blood sacrifice, worship, prayer, honour, the Sabbath and ethics. Everywhere they went they quickly built an altar to worship God.

Thus the moral law prevailed amongst men before the giving of the Mosaic Law as the expression of the will of God for human behaviour. This was not just among descendants of Abraham, but also amongst other nations; such as Job from Uz or Elihu from Buz (who were distantly related Semites) or Melchizedek, the King of Salem (and presumably not descended from Eber).

¹ Rm 2:14-15, 'for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness'.

The introduction of the Mosaic Law

430 years after the covenant promise to Abraham,² when God determined to make an example of the nation of Israel, he gave what is called the Mosaic Law to the Israelites alone.³ This wasn't Moses' law it was God's law applied to a theocracy, of which Moses was the leader and mediator with God. This was a special legal system to govern a theocratic nation.

The Mosaic Law enshrined all the principles of the Moral Law but also added a number of other precepts and statutes that were only applicable to Israel. These governed every area of life since Israel was then a theocracy. There were many laws set out regarding worship according to the needs of Israel at that time before the Messiah appeared.

This is the Old Covenant that Paul says much about in the NT. It was temporary⁴ and local (for Israel). The point of the Mosaic Law was to demonstrate the inability of man and the need for a divine saviour to deliver from sin; thus it magnified sin.⁵ It could not give eternal life or power for holiness – but it did point to Christ.⁶

The coming of Christ

Then Christ came; the culmination of all that was hoped for in the Mosaic Law and the prophecies of the patriarchs.

Christ fulfilled all the Mosaic Law. He was the living reality that the legal shadows represented⁷ and the perfection of holiness and righteousness as demanded by the moral precepts of the Mosaic Law. Thus Christ was the end of the law.⁸

Christ brought justification by faith and adoption, dealing with the problems of sin and alienation from God. What the law could not do, Christ enabled through grace, based upon his substitutionary sacrifice on the cross.⁹ The fruit of justification was righteousness in Christ; not the strivings of human righteousness, but the actual righteousness of Christ imputed to those who believe into him.¹⁰ In being united to Christ, the believer also has eternal life.¹¹

² Gal 3:16-17, 'Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. ... the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later'.

³ Deut 7:6, 'For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth'. Amos 3:2, 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth'.

⁴ Gal 3:19, 'What purpose then *does* the law *serve*? It was added because of transgressions, **till** [Gk. *achri*: 'until'] the Seed should come to whom the promise was made'.

⁵ Rm 3:20, 5:13, 20.

⁶ Gal 3:21-22, 'if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe'.

⁷ Such as the typology of offerings, tabernacle and feasts.

⁸ Rm 10:4, 'For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes'.

⁹ Jn 1:17, 'For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'. Rm 8:3, 'For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son'.

¹⁰ Rm 3:21, 'the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe'. Rm 5:17, 'those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ'. Rm 10:4, 'Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes'. 1 Cor 1:30, 'you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God -- and righteousness'.

¹¹ Rm 5:21, 'grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord'. Jn 3:15, 'whoever believes in [Gk. 'into'] Him should not perish but have eternal life'.

Thus Christ cancelled the Mosaic Law (the Old Covenant) since it no longer had any purpose. It was fulfilled in Christ and abrogated.¹² Those in Christ have no need for the legal statutes of the Mosaic Law because the Holy Spirit is the testimony of God's law in their hearts. Those in Christ need no more mediators; they can communicate with God in their spirit.¹³

The law of Christ – the New Covenant

This is the New Covenant foreseen by Jeremiah¹⁴ and Abraham. In fact the covenant promises to Abraham are fulfilled by Christ in the New Covenant.¹⁵

However, this does not mean that believers are without law. They are in law in Christ.¹⁶ By following the guiding of the Spirit they have inner knowledge of God's eternal moral law and the power to obey it. This is called 'the Law of Christ'.¹⁷ Thus believers are constantly told to obey Christ's commandments.¹⁸ They are not without law, not without commands, but they obey them by the power of the Spirit who indwells them. Thus we see the equivalent command to 'walk in the Spirit', to 'put on the new man' or 'to put on Christ'.

The new man

The new man is the life of Christ within the believer that forms the new nature the Christian is called to put on and walk in by the Spirit.¹⁹ This man has no external law because the standard of God's law has now been embodied in Christ. Jesus Christ is the standard of human behaviour, not the Mosaic Law.²⁰ The cross changed everything. We now follow Christ, by the Spirit, not statues and written laws.²¹

The old man - under Old Covenant law

The old nature, the old man, is the life we used to live before we were united with Christ. This is the realm of satanic temptation and it is also where Mosaic Law reigns for those

¹² Heb 8:13, 'In that He says, "A new covenant", He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away'. Heb 7:18-19, 'there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, there is the bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God'. Heb 9:9-10 'gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience - - concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed [under Mosaic Law] until the time of reformation'.

¹³ Heb 8:10-11, 'I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbour, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD', for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them'. 1 Tim 2:5, 'For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus'. Eph 5:19-20, 'making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

¹⁴ Jer 31:33-34, 'But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, "Know the LORD", for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more'.

¹⁵ Jn 8:56, 'Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad'.

¹⁶ 1 Cor 9:21, 'to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law [Gk. 'in-law'] toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law'.

¹⁷ Gal 6:2, 'fulfil the law of Christ'.

¹⁸ Jn 14:21, 15:10; Acts 1:2; 1 Cor 7:19, 14:37; 1 Thess 4:2; 1 Jn 2:3, 4, 3:22, 24, 5:2-3 etc.

¹⁹ Eph 4:22-24, 5:18.

²⁰ Eph 4:13, 'till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ'.

²¹ Eph 2:15, 'having abolished in His flesh the enmity, *that is*, the law of commandments contained in ordinances'. Col 2:14, 'having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross'.

who submit to it without faith.²² The old nature is earmarked for destruction,²³ grows in corruption and is never fixed;²⁴ believers have new life, eternal life. When Christ returns the sentence of death already on the old nature is carried out and it is finally destroyed. Believers then gain a new body in the likeness of Christ.²⁵

New Covenant life

New Covenant believers, walking in the Spirit, fulfil God's commandments and please him. They are motivated by the guidance and power of the Spirit, to live in holiness both externally and internally. The Mosaic Law could only deal with external actions; Jesus commands inward purity such as: love for enemies, eliminating hatred, avoiding lustful thoughts and so on. Indeed, in Christ every thought must be taken captive.²⁶

The focus

The fruit of the Gospel is the redemption we have in Christ and the liberty of being sons of God by our union with the Lord.²⁷ For this reason our continual focus is to look to Jesus, the origin of our faith and set our mind on him alone.²⁸ He is to be pre-eminent.²⁹ Looking anywhere else (including the Mosaic Law) is a mistake.

Mistakes made by Reformed (Covenant) theologians

- They make the moral principles in the Mosaic Law the standard for Christian behaviour. This is close to blasphemy as it dishonours Christ, who is the standard of ethical behaviour for man.
- To extract only the moral principles of the Mosaic Law; they make an unbiblical distinction between moral, ceremonial and civil laws; even splitting verses up into three pieces. They say that the civil and ceremonial parts are not cancelled but the moral parts remain in force, even though all three are found in one verse on occasion.
- They unite the Old Covenant (Mosaic Law) and the New Covenant in order to harmonise the OT with the NT. They say that the change to the NT is merely external and superficial and a change of administration. They say that there is no difference between saints under the Old Covenant and saints in the New Covenant. All of this contradicts clear Gospel and apostolic statements; such as: that all things are new, that there is a new life, a new man, a new and living way to God; that the Spirit was not given for indwelling until the ascension of Christ etc. It ignores the fact that Moses

²² 1 Tim 1:9-10, 'the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for man-slayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine'.

²³ Rom 6:6-8, 'knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, [Gk. 'to render idle'; 'destroyed' in the KJV is a bad translation; the old nature is sentenced to death but not destroyed yet] that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him'. Note: 'our old man was crucified with {him}, that the body of the sin may be made useless', Young's Literal Trans.

²⁴ Eph 4:22, 'put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt [a process of corruption] according to the deceitful lusts'.

²⁵ 1 Jn 3:2, 'Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is'.

²⁶ 2 Cor 10:5, 'bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ'.

²⁷ 2 Cor 3:1, 'Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty'. Gal 2:4, 'our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus'. Gal 5:1, 'Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage'.

²⁸ Heb 12:2, 'looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith'.

²⁹ Col 1:18, 'in all things He may have the pre-eminence'.

brought law but Christ brought grace. It ignores the purpose of the Mosaic Law – to highlight sin and human inability.

- Some Reformed theologians (Theonomists) seek to apply the Mosaic Law to modern society after the Gospel triumphs in the world (Postmillennialism). This is wrong; the Mosaic Law (Old Covenant) has been cancelled and replaced by Christ. To return to the law is to deny Christ (this is the message of the book of Hebrews).

Application

We can make simple points of application without further exposition.

- All Christians are under law, committed to obey God’s commandments, and are never without law, whether they accept this or not.
- Faithful believers, following the New Covenant, are in-lawed in Christ and obey God’s law by walking in the Spirit. In essence this is doing what Christ would do. The Holy Spirit is a living guide to living correctly.
- Those Christians who uphold the Mosaic Law as the standard for Christian behaviour are disobeying God and failing to grasp what God has given them in Christ. This leads to fleshly legalism, dead works and merely external purity.
- Those who deny that Christians are under any kind of law are antinomians and fail to please God. Antinomianism always leads to a diminishing of the threat of sin and licentiousness.
- Those antinomians who say that Christians are never guilty, ever, are false teachers. Every time a believer slips into his old nature and sins he is guilty and must confess his sins to God in shame (1 Jn 1:8-9). Genuine believers who fail to do this will be chastised by God their Father as erring sons. All Christians sin and this sin should be mourned, not denied.
- When Christians sin they are in their old nature, which is under legal condemnation. Christians that sin openly must be publicly condemned, as Peter was.³⁰ Church members that sin publicly and do not repent must be ejected from fellowship.³¹
- When Christians are in the new nature there is no condemnation.³²

³⁰ Gal 2:11, ‘Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed [Gk. ‘condemned’].’

³¹ Rm 16:17, ‘Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them’. 1 Cor 5:11, ‘have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner -- not even to eat with such a person’. 2 Thess 3:6, ‘we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us’.

³² Rm 8:1, ‘*There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit*’. You are not in Christ is you are in the old nature.

Objection

Paul says that we are not under law but under grace

Indeed, Paul says this in Rm 6:14-15, 'For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!'. The key is Gal 5:18, 'But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law'.

The old nature is under the Old Covenant, under law, under a system of rules and regulations to try to restrain the flesh. The new nature is of Christ and is not under external law. When you are in the new nature, walking by the Spirit, you are not under an external law to determine what to do; the Spirit guides you into all truth internally.

When you are under law, under an external legalistic system like the Mosaic Law (which many Christians follow – even though it was designed for Israel) sin easily has dominion over you because you are acting in the strength of the flesh alone, instead of considering it dead.

Those in grace are those in the new nature, walking by the Spirit. This is the normal expected life for believers. Falling into the old nature and sinning is abnormal behaviour; such folk are also under law and condemnation; their sin is judged by the law.

Identification is the doctrine that we have died with Christ and were raised with Christ (see Rm 6). Sanctification is based upon believing that by doctrine faith. Thus the old nature must be considered as 'dead'.³³ When you consider it as dead, when you deny yourself and take up your cross and strive against temptation, you will put on the new nature and do good. The new nature is not under Old Covenant law because it is dead to sin; thus it is dead to external law.³⁴

The common error is to consider that every single believer is under grace, walking in the Spirit, all the time; this is the essence of antinomianism. They are not. Conversion is not perfectionism. Conversion did not place you into a continual state of victory. There is assurance of final victory for true believers.³⁵ There is grace to help in time of need.³⁶ There is restoration for those who sin,³⁷ but you can still err, sin and be deceived; hence the multiple warnings in the NT against being deceived or committing sin.

Those that have experienced regeneration and grace can still sin (even as Christ's apostles did),³⁸ but not finally sin and be lost; God will preserve them to the end. Yet those who are children of God can still sin and displease him; they will be chastised so as not to sin again.³⁹

³³ Rm 6:11, 'Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord'.

³⁴ Rm 7:1-4, 'the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives ... you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another -- to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God'.

³⁵ 1 Cor 15:57; Rev 15:2.

³⁶ Heb 4:16, 'Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need'.

³⁷ 1 Jn 1:9, 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'.

³⁸ Jm 3:2, 'For we all stumble [Gk. 'to fall, to err, to make a mistake, to sin'] in many things'.

³⁹ Heb 12:5-7, 'And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives." If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?'.

There is a daily battle to determine what nature you live in and that is the basis of progressive sanctification. Over time you learn not to put on the old man in this and that area. Each victory is a step forward.

So, when you are in the new man, you are not under Old Covenant law, you are not judged by the law because you are avoiding sin. But you are in-lawed to Christ and obey his commandments by the Spirit indwelling you. All creatures are under God's law in some form because they are created life-forms that must abide by his will as determined by his creative purposes.

Conclusion

It is crucial for the believer to understand this doctrine; yet so many get this wrong. Following the Old Covenant leads to legalism, frustration and dead works done in the flesh. Living in the New Covenant leads to liberty and bearing spiritual fruit.

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