

A really simple look at law

What is Biblical law?

In the simplest terms, the law is the expression of the will of God for ethical behaviour. This standard covers all life forms, angels and men.

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Jos 1:8

And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes. Deut 17:19

The law of his God *is* in his heart; none of his steps shall slide. Ps 37:31

And I gave them My statutes and showed them My judgments, 'which, if a man does, he shall live by them.' Ezek 20:11

Bless the LORD, you His angels, who excel in strength, who do His word, heeding the voice of His word. Ps 103:20

Where does this law operate perfectly?

Currently, it operates in heaven controlling all heavenly creatures: angels, seraphim and cherubim. All these do the will of God without question or delay.

Everyone prays that this situation will prevail upon earth in accordance with the Lord's Prayer, which every single believer (of all theological persuasions) submits to. This means that there is a Biblical desire that God's will, God's law, should prevail upon earth as it does in heaven.

This means that those antinomians who claim that there is no law for believers are hypocrites since they pray daily that God's will should be done on earth.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as *it is* in heaven. Matt 6:10

Wrong views on law?

- *Legalism*: mechanically performing formal statutes with no inner motivation.¹ It also refers to the establishment of human laws and traditions that may not be in line with God's ordinances.²
- *Antinomianism*: the denial that there is any law at all. The claim the Christians have been delivered from all forms of law. This is common in Charismatic churches and Higher Life and American Holiness teaching, plus some Baptist groups.
- *Neonomianism*: the modern idea that Christians submit to a new form of law found in the NT which is substantially different from that found in the OT. [Historically it affirmed that works of obedience formed part of conversion, being part of saving faith; e.g. when Arminian people preach that faith is 'man's part'.]³

¹ It can also refer to works righteousness in salvation (Pelagianism) and also to faith plus works (Arminianism).

² Thus the tradition that Christians cannot watch a movie is an extra-Biblical law.

³ Thus it was applied to Richard Baxter's Amyraldian followers, whose view of justification was fundamentally Arminian, in order to avoid Reformed antinomianism. It was essentially faith plus works in salvation.

Expression of the law in the Bible

- *Heaven*: The eternal moral law of God found in heaven that rules heavenly beings.
- *Patriarchal times* (Creation to Exodus): the moral law of God passed on by oral teaching from Adam onwards. Thus ancient man had an understanding of right ethical behaviour and the need for worship, followed by the principle of a bloody sacrifice to atone for sins, or the idea of the Sabbath.
- *Mosaic Law*: the moral law is enshrined (chiefly in the Ten Commandments) within the Mosaic Covenant along with civil laws for the Israelite nation and ceremonial laws for Israelite worship. These three forms (civil, moral, ceremonial) are intertwined and cannot be extricated from one another in the Mosaic Law, which is called the Old Covenant in apostolic times (see Hebrews).
- *The Law of Christ*: this is a heightened form of the moral law that governs inner dispositions, as well as external actions, which is integral to the New Covenant. It is empowered by the Holy Spirit in the believer and its standard is the perfect life of Christ. This is the form of law for NT believers.

What was the point of the Mosaic Law?

The Mosaic Law was brought in to magnify sin and to demonstrate that no man can achieve holiness without divine help. Thus it pointed to the urgent need for the Christ (Messiah) to come and bring release from the law that could only condemn man and not save him. Without a divine redeemer, the law ensured that all men would die and receive God's condemnation.

Moreover the law entered that the offence might abound. Rm 5:20

By the law *is* the knowledge of sin. Rm 3:20

The law brings about wrath. Rm 4:15

For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. Rm 7:5

The ministry of death, written *and* engraved on stones. 2 Cor 3:7

So what has passed away?

The Mosaic Law was always temporary, being in force until the Messiah came:

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

Moral law was in existence before the Mosaic Law appeared and continued after the Mosaic Law ended; just as the Gospel existed before the Mosaic Law and the promise of eternal life and divine blessing originated with the covenant to Abraham more than 400 years before Moses. Christ inherits these promises and ends the Mosaic Law, perfectly fulfilling it.

Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness. Rm 10:4

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil.
Matt 5:17

Believers are said to be dead to the law and the law (or Old Covenant) is said to be cancelled.

You also have become dead to the law. Rm 7:4

There is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness.
Heb 7:18

For if that first *covenant* had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.
... 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 8:7, 13

This does not mean that all forms of law are finished but that the Mosaic Covenant is ended, having fulfilled its purpose of preparing the way for Christ. Christians, whom Paul says are dead to the law, are also said by Paul to be 'under law'. They are dead to the Mosaic legal framework but are in the Law in Christ.

To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those *who are* under the law, as under the law, that I might win those *who are* under the law; to those *who are* without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ)⁴, that I might win those *who are* without law. 1 Cor 9:20-21

Those who teach that Christians are not under any form of law at all are lying and are antinomian.

The Biblical view of God's law for modern believers

There is one eternal form of God's law, namely the moral law. This has been variously exhibited throughout history. It was chiefly oral in the time of the patriarchs. It was subsumed within the Mosaic Law, but with many additional ceremonial and civil sections added to it which were not eternal. It was spiritualised in the Law of Christ, or the New Covenant, after the resurrection and ascension of Christ. For the first time it was empowered and internalised by the Holy Spirit within those admitted to the New Covenant by spiritual life (being a new creation in Christ). The standard now is not a summary of ethical behaviour (such as the Ten Commandments, which is but a guide) but the life of Christ himself.

If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Gal 5:18

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **looking unto Jesus**, the author and finisher of *our* faith. Heb 12:1-2

What about the Sabbath?

The essence of the Sabbath principle is enjoying the rest of God, ceasing from works. In the Mosaic period this was materialised formally in a day of the week, as many duties were externally objectified;⁵ but it pointed forward to enjoying God's rest spiritually. Angels are not so restricted, and neither are New Covenant believers. The material Sabbath is only for those in the flesh. The material duty of Sabbath keeping was removed after the cross; thus there is no mention of Christians having to meet on a Sabbath. Sunday is not a Christian Sabbath; it is the 'Lord's Day'; a new thing.

⁴ Literally translated 'in-law of Christ' or 'subject to the law of Christ'.

⁵ For example, the temple was a material building; it is now God's spiritual people. The possession of God's people was the physical land of Israel; it is now the whole universe (to be fulfilled after the Last Day). God's people were only those of Israel; now the elect are from every nation. The enemies of God's people were various nations; now the enemy is demons, not material people. Circumcision was of the flesh, now it is of the heart.

Keeping the Sabbath is now entering God's rest in Christ – living as a new creation by faith, not in the flesh.

Since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us. Heb 4:1-2

For we who have believed do enter that rest. Heb 1:3

For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God *did* from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest. Heb 4:10-11

If you are living, by faith, in the rest of God in Christ, you have no need of submitting to a material symbol that pointed to its future fulfilment in Christ (the Sabbath). In the same way; if you have atonement by faith in Christ's blood, you have no need to sacrifice bulls and goats.

Law keeping

Thus Christians keep the law, not by submitting to fleshly principles as in Israel, but by living in Christ; in the new man. They have crucified the flesh, the fleshly passions that needed an external law.

If you are in Christ you are a new creature; you are not human. The Mosaic Law applied to men, but Christians are not mere men, they are new creatures in Christ; the old covenant law does not apply to them.

However, being in Christ involves a law – the Law of Christ (Gal 6:2). That is living to the standard of Christ and this is only possible by walking in the Spirit.

Thus when a believer keeps the law of Christ he is said to be exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit. The test of whether a believer is living right is – is he manifesting the fruit of the Spirit? Against such there is no formal, external law.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those *who are* Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Gal 5:22-25

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