

“The Law of God in the Life of the Christian”
Exodus 19-20
September 18, 2005
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Read Exodus 19:1-6; 20:1-17

Which of the following laws of God do you feel obligated to obey?

- Exodus 22:31 “Do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts.”
- Exodus 23:15 “Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you.
- Exodus 20:15 “You shall not steal.

I’m quite obviously addressing my remarks to those who believe in God and believe that he has expressed his will in the Bible about how we are to live.

- Have you ever wondered, when reading your Bible, what commands are for you and which ones you can safely assume were for others of another time?
- Have you ever been bothered by your own apparent inconsistency of dismissing some laws as irrelevant and yet holding to others as important?
- Have you ever been unable to answer someone who says, “You simply pick and choose what to believe in the Bible so on what basis should I believe anything?”
- Have you ever felt that if you accept the laws of the Bible as binding on you or others you are a legalist and you are denying grace?

How are we who trust in God and believe the Bible is from him to understand the laws of God?

I raise these questions because we have come in our study of Exodus to the giving of the law in chapters 19 and following.

And because in modern American evangelicalism we have tended to depreciate or even dismiss the role of the law in the life of a Christian.

And so I continue to ask:

- “Have we left ourselves confused about the place of the law of God in our lives?”
- Have we emphasized grace, love and freedom to the point that we have set up a false dichotomy between law and grace?
- Have we created the impression that to obey the law is to reject grace and that to accept grace we must reject the law?
- Have we made of the law some kind of cold, impersonal, arbitrary list of dos and don'ts and detached it from the warm, personal desires of the Father for his children?

The way I ask those questions and probably the very tone of my voice certainly convey to you that I think we have a very unbiblical and thus harmful view of the law of God.

I say “harmful” view of the law of God because I believe some evangelical teaching has left Christians with no guidance in what it means to be a Christ-follower.

- Years of disregarding the commands of God have left people with little understanding of what it means to live Christianly.
- Years and years of saying we are not under law but under grace have left people thinking the laws of God are largely irrelevant.

I think it can be reasonably said that this low view of the law of God and even more importantly low view of God are partly responsible for the decay of godly living among evangelicals.

- Why is our divorce rate as high (some say higher) than the general population?
- Why is abortion nearly as common among believers as unbelievers?
- Sexual promiscuity among young and old, living together outside of marriage, lawsuits, gambling, dishonesty, revenge, greed and the like are seen as equally common among those who call themselves Christians as those who don't.

Romans 2:24 "God's name is blasphemed (held in low or no regard) among the (unbelievers) because of you."

Where are the people of God shining as light in the darkness?

Pastor Trevor Lee this past week told, us on staff, of a man who recently wrote in response to a presentation of the gospel, that he understood the message, he even found it appealing, his problem was that he didn't want to be LIKE the man who was presenting the message to him.

Our lifestyles lay the lie to what we claim!

Having made such an indictment, do I think that the re-imposition of a code of conduct, with sufficiently severe penalties, will correct the situation? Absolutely not!

But as I said last week on another matter, in our effort to keep out of one ditch on the road of life we have driven right into the other.

I know there are those who say that the corrective is not to refer people to the law but to love.

As one famous man reportedly said, "Love God and do as you please."

There is great truth in that statement but misunderstood it disregards too much of the Bible.

And so again, what are we to make of the laws of God?

What is the relationship of the law to the believer?

When the Apostle Paul said in Romans 6:14 (and 6:15) "You are not under law, but under grace" what did he mean?

There is a popular misconception that before Christ came people were saved on the basis of keeping the law and that because so few were able to keep the law, Jesus came and changed the basis of salvation to grace.

The Scofield Reference Bible was for many years a purveyor of this error.

In his comment on John 1:17 for example Scofield wrote that under the Mosaic covenant, "legal obedience (is) the condition of salvation." (F.B. Meyer suggests the same in [Studies in Exodus 220](#))

I want you to see again this morning that salvation has never been by works or law-keeping but has always been by grace through faith – both in the New Testament and in the Old Testament.

For one example, both the Old and New Testaments make it clear that Abraham (going back to Genesis 15) “believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:9 among other places)

Someone might say, “Well that was before Moses and before people were put under the law.”

Okay, let’s look at the people of Israel “under the law.”

Please look at Exodus 6.

Here early in the story of God’s rescue of Israel from Egypt, God says:

Exodus 6:6-7

“Therefore, say to the Israelites: `I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and **I will redeem you** with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. ⁷ **I will take you as my own people**, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.

- Please notice that no law has yet been given as will later happen on Mt. Sinai.
- Notice that God does **not** say if you will keep all of my laws then I will redeem you, save you.
- It is all of grace – he declares his salvation of them.

After they were set free from Egypt by God and had crossed the Red Sea on dry ground this is what Moses and the people sang:

Exodus 15:13 “In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.”

Then when they came to the mountain of God in Sinai we read in Exodus 19:3-4 “Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the

house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴ ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and **brought you to myself.**”

I ask you, “By that time, are the people of Israel ‘redeemed,’ ‘saved,’ already?” Yes!

On what basis are they saved?

On the basis of law-keeping? No!

They were saved as Abraham was and as we are - by grace through faith.

To be sure, there were people in Moses’ day, in Jesus’ day and in our day who think God says we become acceptable to him by keeping the law.

But that has never been what God has said.

Now if we understand that the law was never intended to save anyone, it leads us to ask what is the law for?

- We can no longer dismiss the law as merely “legalism” for another time.
- We must find another explanation, a biblical explanation for it.

Do you remember when I began the sermon I asked, “Which of the following laws of God do you feel obligated to obey?”

- Exodus 22:31 “Do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts.”
- Exodus 23:15 “Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread; for seven days eat bread made without yeast, as I commanded you.
- Exodus 20:15 “You shall not steal.

I intentionally selected three laws that illustrate the distinctions in the law that have been classically observed.

They are three:

The **Moral law** expressed most succinctly in the 10 Commandments and in the Great Command of Jesus in Matthew 22 and also in the narratives of the Bible where we see God in action.

The **Civil law** expressed in the elaborate codes of conduct.

The **Ceremonial law** expressed in the sacrifices and temple worship.

To be sure, these are intertwined in the Scriptures, as they should be.

Let's look first at **The Moral Law containing those unchanging moral imperatives or requirements** that reflect the character of God and our relationship with him and each other.

That moral law is found long before Exodus 20, all the way back in Genesis, they are reiterated throughout OT and reconfirmed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 and by the writers of the NT.

Prior to Exodus 20 this moral law is what Paul is talking about in Romans 2:14-15 "Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law,¹⁵ since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.

Some have called this "natural law," meaning what all reasonable people concur about the rules by which life should be lived – for example that murder is wrong.

Some would say this natural or moral law is simply common sense, we just know it intuitively.

Others, us included, would say that's true **but it has its ultimate source** not simply in human reason but **in God** who created us to understand and operate by these rules.

The Scripture is very clear about the source of moral law.

It is repeatedly affirmed that when God came down on Mt. Sinai he wanted the people to hear for themselves that **these words came from God.**

Just one OT example of this is in Exodus 19:9

"The LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you

(See also Deuteronomy 4:10-13, 35-36; 5:22)

And the New Testament Apostles Peter and Paul wrote,
 2 Peter 1:21 The Bible “never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke **from God** as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.
 2 Timothy 3:16 “**All Scripture is God-breathed** and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness

I will come back to the moral law of God a little later.

But remember the moral law reflects the very person and character of God and his image in us.

In addition to the moral law there is also the Changing Civil laws or structures.

These civil laws were given to help the people know how to live out their relationship with God and each other in their situation.

It’s very important to remember that the Israelites had been living in slavery for nearly 500 years and under the powerful influence of a pagan culture.

In the civil laws that God lays down, he shows them how to live as a new people with their own culture.

Two-million-plus people were uprooted from a culture antithetical to God and led across a desert to a new land.

There was nothing they didn’t need.

They needed instructions on making a living, settling disputes, about property, food, health, and moral treatment of each other – the “stuff” of a culture.

These civil laws supported the moral imperatives.

They were specific applications for that time.

More about that too, in a minute.

Not only were there unchanging moral laws and changing civil laws but there was also a temporary SACRIFICIAL LAW or system.

The elaborate sacrifices that we find in the Mosaic law, the detailed system of worship, the intricacies of the tabernacle and temple were all to prefigure the ultimate sacrifice of the Son of God.

The writer of Hebrews speaking of the people during Moses day wrote, Hebrews 4:2 “We also have had the gospel preached to us, **just as they did.**”

OT believers trusted in God that he would in the future deal with their sins in ways that bloody animal sacrifices never could.

The way whereby God’s people could be justified and made righteous was, as I said earlier, by grace through faith.

As to these laws of sacrifice and the elaborate temple requirements and rituals, the NT book of Hebrews speaks extensively of how the coming and death of Jesus fulfilled and hence superceded the entire OT sacrificial system.

We don’t sacrifice sheep on an altar any longer because the “Lamb of God” has been sacrificed once for all of his people.

Also, Jesus said that worship is no longer relegated to the temple in Jerusalem (John 4:21-23).

The coming and death of Jesus fulfilled all that the OT sacrificial and ceremonial law **looked forward to.**

Not only did the sacrificial system and laws become obsolete by a new and living way through Christ (Hebrews 10:20) but **the civil laws were also no longer applicable in the same way** as before.

You can see changes in the civil laws even within the period of the Old Testament as when the people finally entered the Promised Land and also when they took a human king to be over them.

But the most significant change took place when the Messiah came.

For example Jesus did not recommend that the woman caught in adultery be stoned.

How could he abrogate/nullify the “Civil Law” that said one caught in adultery **was** to be stoned?

Of course he was not saying adultery (an unchanging moral imperative) was okay?

But he was saying that the administration (the civil structures) of that law against adultery had changed with his coming.

Under the new administration of Christ both the sacrificial laws as well as the civil laws are fulfilled or changed.

Animal sacrifices (Hebrews 9-10), holy days (Galatians 4:10), penalties (John 8), temple worship (John 4:21), instructions on food (Colossians 2:16) and the like reflect the change in the way the covenant of grace is carried out.

When the Messiah came he spoke of a new culture, a new people, God will build – the church.

Using the very same language God used to describe the people of Israel in Exodus 19, God now describes the church:

1 Peter 2:9 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God...”

And then just as the **Israelites** were given commands to help **them** develop into the people, the culture, the community God wanted for his glory and their good, **so we are given many commands** to understand how to build a new culture – to become in practice what we are by grace – the people of God.

Again, no one is suggesting that obeying these commands **saves us** but we grow and we reflect our relationship with God by obeying his commands.

Again, we are saved by grace through faith.

Obedience doesn't earn the grace but it does reflect it.

Neither Jesus nor Paul had any difficulty using the word “command” from the Lord.

John 14:15 “If you love me you will obey what I command.”

2 Thessalonians 3:6 “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers

1 Corinthians 7:10-11 “To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband. ¹¹ But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

¹ Thessalonians 4:1 “Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God

Ephesians 4:1 “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely

humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

But over and over again in many of his letters to the churches Paul before Paul gives the commands he first lays out the truth that our relationship is established by grace through faith (Romans 1-8; Eph 1-3; Colossians).

So again, the obedience doesn't produce grace but it does reflect it.

But I want to come back to the first use of the word law that I discussed earlier – The Moral Law of God.

Following many others, most importantly Jesus and Paul, I contend that the moral law of God is a reflection of the very character of God and, as we bear his image, what it means to live in relationship with him and each other.

As such moral law is eternal, unchanging and yes, binding on all God's people of all ages.

The 10 Commandments are treated throughout scripture as a summary of the moral law of God.

As I suggested earlier, the 10 Commandments given at Mt Sinai were simply the written expression of what had existed from before the beginning.

Stealing didn't become wrong at Sinai.

It was already wrong and known to be wrong by all; conscience dictated it.

Conscience itself is a reflection of the moral law of the universe built into people by God at creation.

Here is a very important point - **the moral law of God is an expression of the person of God.**

The law is about God first of all – showing us who he is and who we are to be as his children.

Obedience is response to a person not merely response to a principle or a law.

We are not to simply know or obey the law in some abstract way, detached from the lawgiver.

We wish to know God; to know him is in largest part through his word, his law.

Please remember that the law, called the “torah” is not just the list of dos and don’ts of the Bible but is also the narratives of God’s actions toward his people. (See the larger discussion of the law as “torah” set in narrative – the actions of God)

The entire OT gives us insight into the person of God.

Faith and obedience are the primary ways of responding to that God.

Listen to what one man says obedience is about:

“Life in relationship with God means that certain words and acts do justice to that relationship in a way that other acts and words do not.” (Fretheim, Romans, 207)

Following Christ means something and the Bible, including the law, tells us what it means.

Obedience to the Law is one way of bearing witness to the reality and beauty of God.

We don’t only sing songs but we obey God.

Matthew 5:16 “let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Yes that includes specific deeds (not lying, stealing, etc) but it is so much more than mere compliance – it is a lifestyle reflecting our Lord to the world around us.

Thoughtless children and legalists think only of complying with the letter of the law.

One who loves God thinks of the spirit of the law as well.

The Bible is not a “morality manual with an index we flip through to find answers.” (Enns, Romans, 383).

God always meant for the people to love and obey **HIM** not just laws.

And he always meant for it to be from our hearts:

Deuteronomy 5:29 “Oh, that their **hearts** would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!

Deuteronomy 6:6 “These commandments I give you today are to be upon your hearts.”

Psalm 40:8 “I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”

So what is my relationship to the moral law of God?

That law expressed in the 10 Commandments and expressed in the commands of the NT gives me insight into the very heart of my Savior.

Each command reveals the character of my God and my privilege to bear his image in my life?

My response is **to the One who gives the law** not to the law in and of itself – I must never detach my obedience from my relationship to Jesus; I am following HIM.

And that means I want to know what he thinks, how he acts and what he loves, that I may think, act and love like him.

As we look at each moral imperative, each written reflection of the character of God given in the 10 Commandments and seen perfectly in the person of Jesus, I want to know him that I may be more like him.

We are not legalists we are lovers – lovers of God.

Is the moral law of God binding on me?

Yes, because I am bound to Jesus.

I am saved by his grace and desire to reflect his image.

Psalm 119:97

“Oh, how I love your law!

I meditate on it all day long.

Other notes:

Natural law:

“Law stands above and apart from the activities of human law-makers; it constitutes an objective set of principles that can be seen true by natural light or reason, and (in religious versions of the theory) that express God’s will for creation.” (Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy p256)

Is it legitimate to distinguish between moral and ceremonial law or even civil and moral law?

The Scriptures themselves do so:

1 Samuel 15:22-23

Isaiah 1:11-17

Jeremiah 7:21-23

Micah 6:8

Psalms 51:16-17

The moral law takes precedence over the civil and ceremonial laws because it expressed the character of God wherein the civil and ceremonial laws were expressions of or illustrations of the moral law.

Some would argue that if someone had kept the whole law perfectly they could have been saved.

Paul says no. Galatians 3:21 “if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.

The so-called legalistic “if” of Exodus 19:5 “Now **if** you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.

Is no more legalism than John 14:15 “If you love me, you will obey what I command”

Or John 15:10 “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love,
Or Matthew 19:17 “If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.”

These are not conditions for salvation but conditions related to the quality of life lived in the promise...

“If Christ really is the standard, the Christian will obey the law of love and in so doing will also obey the Decalogue...The Christ of scriptures invites his followers to listen in stereo. When we consider the words of the Gospels, we hear the words of the Jesus who invites us to listen carefully to what the Father revealed through Moses.”
(VanGemeren, In Strickland, 203)

Romans 6:14-15 “Not under law but under grace.”

In what respect are we not under law?

Some would say we are out from under the authority of the law altogether and now live under the authority of the Spirit.

Douglas Moo following Luther and subsequent Lutheran formulations means the Torah as rightly understood in the OT, not just the improper interpretation by Judaizers. I humbly disagree.

Others would say we are not under law, as it was popularly understood by Paul’s adversaries – as a system of works righteousness. I agree.

“In view of the place Paul’s Jewish contemporaries ascribed to the law we must be clear that the apostle saw it as in opposition to the way of grace and thus an impossible way of salvation for the Christian.” Morris Romans 259

“Paul’s point then is that in the new epoch ushered in by the death and resurrection of Christ the terms of grace are different from what *they had come to be in practice* (emphasis mine) within his own (pre-Christian) Judaism.”
(Dunn Romans 340)

The great commandments as a summary of the moral law of God didn’t change from the OT to the NT:

Deuteronomy 6:4-6 “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ **Love the LORD your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.

Leviticus 19:18 “**Love your neighbor** as yourself. I am the LORD.

Matthew 22:37-40 “Jesus replied: ” **Love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.³⁹ And the second is like it: **Love your neighbor as yourself.**’⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Exodus 19:5-6 “if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine,⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’

The NASB says simply “for all the earth is mine.” The NIV word “although” sets up an adversative that is not in the original. The meaning is **not** that in spite of the fact that the whole earth is mine, I am especially choosing you but that **because the whole earth is mine, I am choosing you to carry out my purposes in the whole earth.** This is similar to God’s words to Abraham: “Through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” The emphasis here is on the purpose of God’s choice of them.

“Treasured possession” – they are royal property, they have a special calling.

One on whom the owner has set his special affection, he doesn’t share this one with anyone else nor does he trust the care of it to another.

God could have called anyone, but he chose (by grace alone) to call Israel – after all the whole earth is his and he could have called anyone. (“Elect” Eph 1:5 “he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will

Priests – servants in a mediatory role – Israel was not special for its own glory and gain but as a means God would use to bless all. Here again the “priestly” function indicated how special was their relationship.

Holy – set apart for special use, a display-people, a showcase of what a relationship with God is about.

I Peter 2:9-10 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

“If” – “Then” language must be dealt with.

It cannot mean that “if” they obey they will be saved because they have already been saved.

It must mean that “if” they obey they will be effective in the mission God has given them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to reach the world.

God’s salvation of them is not conditioned by their obedience.

It is their usefulness as God’s missionaries to the world, God’s means to change the world, that is at stake.

They won’t be able to be God’s means to His greater ends if they aren’t obedient. They will be ineffective, useless.

They are to obey the law not for their sake only but the sake of the world.

The issue is why do we obey.

Is it only personal or is it also to an end?

Clearly to an end; for a specific purpose:

Genesis 12:3 is repeated many times.

Isaiah 49:6 ““It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

Acts 1:8 “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Christ is the fulfillment of God's intention for Israel – he is the treasured possession, the priest for the world “a light for revelation to the Gentiles. (Luke 2:32).

In Christ, Israel finally is what God intended.

But the church (the body of Christ; us in union with Christ) is the means God uses to fulfill his mission to the world.

Paul speaking himself and us who believe:

Acts 13:47-48 “For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

“ I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.' ”

^{AC 13:48} When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Francis Shaeffer called our love the greatest apologetic.

Romans 10:4-10

“Christ is **the end of the law** so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

^{RO 10:5} Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: "The man who does these things will live by them." ⁶ But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' " (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ "or 'Who will descend into the deep?' " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: ⁹ That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

The word “end” can be understood in two ways:

Either as the termination of or as the fulfillment of.

We can say “The policeman brought their car race to an end.”

We can also say, “To what end were they racing?” meaning for what purpose or goal.

John Piper writes, “in Romans 10:4 he (Paul) says, “Christ is the end [goal] of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” (Aug 7, 2005 sermon).

The following is from Kaiser in (The Law, The Gospel, and the Modern Christian edited by Wayne G. Strickland)

VV5-6 “For” – “But” gar – de Contrasting or coordinating?

Romans 7:8-9 for apart from the Law sin *is* dead. ⁹ And I was once alive apart from the Law;

Romans 10:10 “for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

The conjunction of v6 should be “AND” not “but”

In what way is Christ the “teleos” of the law?

Perfected/Completed – purposeful conclusion

OR

Termination (NO!)

The law moves the believer toward the Messiah.

Just as in the OT the word was very near (v8) so now the word is very near.

Both Moses and Paul wanted Israel to believe unto righteousness (Romans 10:10 (for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness NASB) and

Deuteronomy 30:14 But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it. NASB

Paul is not arguing for a NT way of salvation contrary to an OT way.

He is arguing that the way has always been the same by grace in God’s provision of a Messiah. The OT believer looked forward to it and we look backward to it.