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What do the Scriptures mean by the Law?

A brief study

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Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2)

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. (Romans 10:4)

The title of this brief study asks a very simple, yet very important question: what do the Scriptures mean by the Law? An understanding of the essence and purpose of the Law will enable us to appreciate and value its place within the purpose of God. In this study I will confine myself to defining what the Bible means by the Law, discussing the essence of the Law, and demonstrating the place of the Law in the light of the Person of Christ.

The word and its usage

The word *law* occurs hundreds of times in the Bible. The Hebrew word is *torah*; the Greek is *nomos*. The term 'law' is used in several different, though closely related, contexts.

Its first use occurs in the following passage, where God says of Abraham:

Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws. (Genesis 26:5)

Here we see that the Law of God precedes what most would readily define as the Law: the Law of Moses. The Law of God is, therefore, broader than what was delivered at Sinai.

Nevertheless, *law* occurs most often in the Old Testament to describe the Law of Moses or the Mosaic Law, also known as the Book of the Law:

The LORD said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for their instruction'. (Exodus 24:12)

Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God. There it will remain as a witness against you. (Deuteronomy 31:26)

The term *Law* eventually developed to describe the whole of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. Today they are also collectively called the Torah. It is this meaning of the Law as the Mosaic Law that we will most concentrate on in this study, since it is often referred to by the New Testament writers when contrasting it with the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

In the Psalms, the term *law* includes the Law of Moses, but also sometimes has a wider meaning to embrace the Law as the will and ways of God, intimately related to his nature as God:

All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal. (Psalm 119:160)

The Law of God is thus an expression of his nature, as we shall observe further in a moment.

In John's Gospel the term is used to describe the Old Testament scriptures themselves. Jesus said:

But this is to fulfil what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason.' (John 15:25)

The Hebrew Old Testament is divided into three sections: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. Jesus quotes from Psalm 35:19, which is the first book of the Writings section. Therefore the Law of God can be said to encapsulate the whole of the Old Testament. Since the Old Testament is the revelation of God, the Law itself can also be said to be a revelation of God, of his nature and his will. Furthermore, since Christ is the ultimate Word of God, the Law also reveals him, albeit not in a complete way. It was only when the Word became flesh that the Law found its completion and fulfilment. Once the reality comes, the shadow passes away.

Paul says a similar thing in 1Corinthians 14:21:

In the Law it is written: 'Through men of strange tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me'.

Here Paul quotes from Isaiah 28:11-12, which, of course, is not in the Law section of the Old Testament, but in the Prophets. We see, then, that the whole of the Old Testament is also the Law of God.

Finally, on this point, a distinction is drawn between the law of sin and death and the law of the Spirit of life, contrasting those in Adam (under the curse of the Law) and those in Christ, who live by the Law of the Spirit of life:

*Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.
(Romans 8:1)*

Love: the essence of the Law

There is an important principle that we must hold to. Everything God creates or institutes reveals something of his nature and purpose: the creation, mankind, marriage, baptism, or head uncovering and covering, for example. Theology and doctrine should always start and end with God. This same principle necessarily holds true for the Law of Moses. It is not detached from God or something outside of him. The Law came from him; therefore it reflects him. We saw earlier that God's righteous laws are eternal: they reveal his righteousness and his eternal nature (Psalm 119:160). Jesus said:

It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke a pen to drop out of the Law. (Luke 16:17)

It is not the aim of this study to examine in detail the minutiae of the Law. Since it reveals God's nature and purpose we can answer the demands of this study by drawing out why God instituted the Law, thus discovering its meaning. It appears that the 'wider' Law – the will and ways of God – is contained within, but not totally confined to, the Law of Moses. It is when we arrive at the New Testament, however, that we find the true essence of the Law explained to us.

The essence of the Law is love. Jesus himself, the author of the Law, was often questioned about its meaning and application. On one occasion:

*An expert in the law tested Jesus with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. **All the Law and the prophets hang on these two commandments**'. (Matthew 22:35-40)*

Here is what the Law of Moses, the will and ways of God, in fact what the whole of the Old Testament is all about: it is about love, and in particular, love for God, love of oneself and love of one's neighbour. Jesus' questioner on this occasion was concerned about doing the right thing, about keeping commandments. Like many others, he thought that doing right things

made one right with God. Jesus, however, was more concerned about being right, about who we are. To demonstrate this he went to the essential nature of the Law. Thus he took the whole of the Law of Moses, and indeed the whole of the Old Testament, and brought it down to two statements. The first is taken from Deuteronomy 6:5. Let us put it in its context of the two surrounding verses between which it sits:

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

Verse 4 is the fundamental revelation of God: he is one (in the use of the different Hebrew names of God used here, YHWH and Elohim, we also see that he is one in three and three in one). That is the basis of the Ten Commandments, the kernel of the Law: 'you will have no other gods besides me'. Our relationship to this one God was and is eternally destined to be one of love. As EW Kenyon observed, Christianity is not a religion, it is a family: the Father and his children. Verse 6 tells us that God's intention for his Law is that it will be written upon or in our hearts. It will be internalised within us in a love relationship with God. It was never destined to remain an external set of regulations, set on tablets of stone. It was given to be written on the tablet of the heart.

The second verse that Jesus quoted is from Leviticus 19:18:

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.

This little verse, tucked away in all the various religious, moral, medical, social and ethical laws contained in Leviticus is the one that, along with Deuteronomy 6:5, was taken up by its Author, Jesus Christ, to signify the real meaning of all the other laws. Without these two, none of the others makes sense. On another occasion Jesus said:

In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

Paul agreed:

Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law. (Romans 13:10)

He also affirmed this in Galatians 5:14:

The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.

And James called it the royal law:

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' you are doing right. (James 2:8)

The heart of the matter

The Law was always a matter of the heart. As we have just observed in Deuteronomy 6, the commandments of God were eternally designed to be upon or in the hearts of God's people. Adam forfeited a heart relationship with God when he fell. God has always desired a people after his heart: David was such a man (1Samuel 13:14). The prophets constantly urged the people to turn in their hearts to God ('rend your hearts, not your garments', Joel 2:13). The Wisdom literature of Proverbs constantly exhorts the wise to be careful about their hearts:

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. (Proverbs 4:23)

The Old Testament closes with the promise of future fathers who will turn their hearts to their children (Malachi 4). It was Jeremiah who described above all the purpose of God for his Law:

*"The time is coming," declares the LORD,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.*

*It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,"
declares the LORD.*

*"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel
after that time," declares the LORD.
"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.*

*No longer will a man teach his neighbour,
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,"*

declares the LORD.

"For I will forgive their wickedness

and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

The writer to the Hebrews twice takes up this passage, in Hebrews 8 and 10, to demonstrate that in Christ a new and better covenant has been established. Christ is the High Priest of the New Covenant, superior in every way to the shadow ministry of the Mosaic High Priest in the shadowy Tabernacle. Christ is also the once for all perfect sacrifice, who has 'made perfect for ever those who are being made holy' (Hebrews 10:14). The sacrifices demanded by the Law are no longer necessary, because:

'Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.' And where these have been forgiven there is no longer any sacrifice for sin. (Hebrews 10:17-18)

In that great revelation of the New Covenant People of God in Christ, Isaiah prophesied that:

In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. (Isaiah 2:2-3)

Zion, the city of God, the church of Jesus Christ, is the place from which God's word, his law, goes out to bless the world and bring it to him. God's law that goes out from Zion is the good news of Jesus Christ; it is not a set of regulations or legalistic requirements: 'do this, don't so that'. God's law is life in all its fullness; it is the promise of a new heart. God's new covenant 'law' transforms sinners into saints and orphans into sons. God's life is lived under the law of the Spirit of life, the Holy Spirit who brings righteousness, peace and joy. The Law of Moses could not do that. It was not designed to.

God's Law

Since the Law comes from God it has God 'in it', so to speak:

The Law is righteous:

It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Romans 2:13)

The Scripture holds out the promise of righteousness by obeying the law. Then it reveals that the righteous law actually exposes our unrighteousness status before the righteous God:

No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. (Romans 3:20)

The Law actually helps us become righteous by pointing out our state of unrighteousness before God. Paul tells us that:

Law was not made for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious... (1Timothy 1:9)

The Law is holy and good:

The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. (Romans 7:12)

If I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. (Romans 7:16)

The holiness and goodness of God are moral attributes of God. God is good and does only what is good. He is holy: his whole moral being is unimaginably different from ours. His holiness marks him off as God. God's holiness reveals to us how pure and clean he is in his character. This purity inevitably runs through all his attributes; they all have this holy quality in them. God's omnipotence, for example, is a holy omnipotence. He exercises his holy power only for what is pure and good. He is infinitely pure. We know nothing like God's holiness; he is absolutely perfect in his holiness. We cannot compare it with anything. Since he is infinite, he is infinitely holy. God's holiness is unique, incomprehensible, unapproachable and unattainable. God alone is holy: it is what separates him from everything and everyone else:

There is no one holy like the LORD; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. (1Samuel 2:2)

Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? (Exodus 15:11)

The Bible constantly reminds us that God is absolutely, utterly holy and pure:

God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. (1John 1:5)

He dwells in unapproachable light. (1Timothy 6:16)

Our terrible plight, which the Law constantly reminds us, is that we are born as sinners who need redemption and atonement.

The Law is spiritual:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. (Romans 7:14)

The Law is spiritual by nature, since God is spirit (John 4:24). The unspiritual person is the one without the Spirit: the one without Christ. Interestingly, in the New Covenant it is often those without the Spirit who try hardest at living by the Law. The essence of legalism is that it is devoid of the Spirit of God. Those who try to keep the Law are hallmarked by sin consciousness and a lack of revelation of Christ. Living under the Law brings a burden to perform. It is the ministry of death. The Holy Spirit takes us beyond the Law. Since he is the one who reveals Christ to us and lives in us as the Spirit of Christ, his concern is to form Christ fully in us. He knows the spiritual value of the Law, but now that Christ has come it has done its job. Paul criticised the Galatians over this:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing—if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (Galatians 3:1-5)

The Purpose of the Law

This brings us to the matter of the purpose of the Law. Why did God institute it? Happily, the Scriptures tell us loud and clear.

Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet.' (Romans 7:7)

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. (1Corinthians 15:56)

What, then is the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. (Galatians 3:19)

The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:24, KJV)

The Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:24, NASB)

No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. (Romans 3:20)

The Law holds out to us the possibility of righteousness. Its spirituality, holiness and righteousness demand a perfect righteousness to which we as sinners cannot possibly attain. The Law, then, reveals to us that we are sinners in the eyes of God. The Law shows us that it is impossible for us who are lawbreakers to be righteous by keeping God's Law. If we break just one part of it, no matter how small, we have broken all of it. It highlights and exposes our utter sinfulness and at the same time points us to the One who kept the Law in all its regards: Jesus Christ, the Holy and Righteous One (Acts 3:14). The purpose of the Law is only *until* (Galatians 3:19). Now that the 'until' has come, what place does the Law have for us now? The Law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming, not the realities themselves (Hebrews 10:1). Christ is the reality!

Christ and the Law

Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish [destroy/overthrow] them but to fulfil them. (Matthew 5:17)

Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. (Luke 24:44)

Philip found Nathanael and told him, 'We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph'. (John 1:45)

My brothers, you died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear the fruit of God. (Romans 7:4)

Through Christ, the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:2)

Christ is the end of the law so that there might be righteousness for everyone who believes. (Romans 10:4)

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (Galatians 3:13)

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing [rendering inoperative] in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace. (Ephesians 2:14-15)

New life and the Law

Through him [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the Law of Moses. (Acts 13:39)

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. (Romans 3:21)

Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. (Romans 6:14)

By dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. (Romans 7:6)

The righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:4)

A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2:16)

Now that faith has come we are no longer under the supervision of the law. (Galatians 3:25)

If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. (Galatians 5:18)

In Christ, the Law of God is 'internalised' within us by the Holy Spirit. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus took the Law and gave it its original, eternal meaning. Far from merely reiterating what was written, he took the Law and, in effect said, 'This is the true meaning of what I told Moses on the sacred mountain'. For example, he said in Matthew 5:21-22:

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment."

Jesus took the Commandment and gave it its true and original meaning and application to the person with the Spirit, the one recreated in the image of God. Jesus was not contradicting the Scriptures or the Law: he was reaching into the heart matter of the Law: loving God, yourself and your neighbour. Only the new creation in Christ can live like that. Only those who have been created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness live and love in such a manner. God knew that one day the Law would be written on the hearts of his children.

Do Christians have to keep the Law?

We are law keepers by our very nature in Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, who lives his life as God within us (Romans 8:11), we live the essence of the Law: we love God, we love ourselves; and we love one another. In that sense we keep the Law, since love is the very essence of the Law. The order of love is also very important: it is God, self, then others. We love our neighbour only to the degree we love ourselves. And we can only love and accept ourselves when the love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts. That is why it is vital to know who we are in Christ: that we are as righteous and holy as he is (Ephesians 4:24). We are as he is in this world (1John 4:17). If we see ourselves in such a manner, then we will have the same revelation of our brothers and sisters. We will know them after the Spirit and not after the flesh (2Corinthians 5:16). Of course, this will overflow to all mankind, since we will see and treat all people as God sees and treats them. As he is, so are we in this world. Love is not legalism; it is the heartbeat of God.

But what about aspects of the Law such as Sabbath days, Passover meals, circumcision, sacrifices for sin, feasts and festivals? Must we still observe and practise such things? No. Absolutely not. They are all mere shadows of the reality, who is Christ:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17)

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. (Galatians 5:2-4)

The New Testament is adamant: such things have no value at all. In fact, to still practise such things is a denial of the efficacy of Christ and is actually a falling from grace (Galatians 5:4). Furthermore, rather than having no value, they have a detrimental effect, since they deny the reality of Christ. They are anti-Christ, as is anything that detracts from or adds to the supremacy, sufficiency and centrality of Jesus Christ. Anti-Christ is anything that is against or replaces the Spirit of the Anointed One, the Christ. Everything to do with the Law, in fact everything of the Old Testament must, therefore, go through what is often called the Christ filter, or Christological grid. What does not pass through is no longer necessary. What does pass through will have a new covenant application to it. I do not intend to give a list of what does and does not pass through; I will leave that for discussion. Since Christ is the end of the Law and the one who has fulfilled it and rendered it inoperative, we must put everything through the

filter of his Person and Work. We live by the grace of God and not by the Law. And that is the subject of another study.

Conclusion

I am grateful to God for the Law. I am glad it has done its job of tutoring me to lead me to Christ. It was a valuable shadow and an expression of the nature and purpose of God. Now, by faith in Jesus Christ and by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, the righteous demands of the Law are fulfilled in me. I am loved by God and love him. I love myself, for I am as he is in this world. I have the same righteous and holy status as Christ. I share his position in the heavenly realms. I love my neighbour in the same way as I love God and myself. The Law is fulfilled in me. There is no need for Sabbath days, sacrifices, or circumcision. My old life was 'cut away' by faith in Christ and in the waters of baptism (Colossians 2:9-12). I live a Sabbath life, at rest in Christ (Hebrews 4:9-10). Christ lives his life as God in me through the Holy Spirit. I am what I am by the grace of God (1Corinthians 15:10); why try to live by a way of life that has been rendered inoperative?

From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:16-17)