

Should Christians Observe the Law?

by Wesley White
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Who would deny that we are living in LAWLESS times? In virtually every public opinion poll taken over the last ten years, crime has been one of the top five concerns to the American public.

Criminal violence has reshaped the way we live. Many Americans feel that they are no longer safe on the streets or in the privacy of their own homes. We are uneasy with the fact that our nation's drug problem is completely out of control. Yes, we are living in LAWLESS times.

Why is there such disregard for the law? Why has our society degenerated to the point where law means so little? **Could it be that the teachings of the churches of this world are somehow related to this serious problem?**

Many claim that the United States is a Christian nation. They say America's legal system based on the laws of the Bible. They point out that many of our forefathers recognized the inherent value of God's laws and made attempts to found a nation on those precepts.

Yet many churches teach that the Law found in the Bible has been done away! Many ministers say that the Law has been replaced by GRACE.

Is this viewpoint correct? Did the writers of the New Testament come up with a new system in which the Law was somehow eliminated? Was God's Law "nailed to the cross" because it did not truly reflect a continuation of His divine will?

Or, put another way, should Christians observe the Law mentioned in the Bible?

The answer to this last question is fourfold:

- 1) Yes
- 2) Yes
- 3) Yes
- 4) No

"Now what kind of an answer is `yes, yes, yes, and no?'" you may be asking at this time. Perhaps you are thinking that this seems like a flippant response to a very weighty spiritual question.

Four Types of Law

It is important to understand that there are four types of Law mentioned in the New Testament. It is essential to understand the differences among the four if you are to answer the question posed above.

Type #1--The Ten Commandments

The first type of Law is described in Romans 13:8-10. Here the apostle Paul writes:

"Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.

"For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet: and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

"Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

The word *law* in this instance was translated from the Greek word *nomos*.

When Paul writes about refraining from committing adultery, stealing, bearing false witness, and coveting, what Law is he referring to? He is obviously speaking of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20.

Our first type of Law is the Ten Commandments or Decalogue.

Type #2--The Torah

The second type of Law is discussed in the Gospel of Luke. Here Jesus says, "...These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me" (Luke 24:44).

Again, in this instance, the word *law* was translated from the Greek word *nomos*.

In this passage, Jesus is putting his stamp of approval on the Sacred Scriptures of the Jews--the same Old Testament we find in our Bibles. The Old Testament was topically divided into three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms or Writings.

The Law that Jesus referred to in Luke 24:44 encompasses the first five books of the Bible, which are also known as the Torah (Hebrew) or the Pentateuch (Greek).

Our second type of Law, then, is the Torah or the books of the Old Testament known as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy written by Moses.

Type #3--Old Testament Revelation in General

The apostle John writes about the third type of Law in his Gospel. "Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods?" (John 10:34).

Once again, the word *law* was translated from the Greek word *nomos*.

What Law was Jesus speaking of in this passage? It cannot be the two types we have already discussed. Neither the Ten Commandments nor the first five books of the Bible make the statement, "Ye are gods." This statement is found in Psalms 82:6, which brings us to our third

type of Law: Old Testament revelation in general.

These Laws Are In Harmony

When reading either the Old Testament or the New Testament, we find that the above types of Law are never in contradiction with each other. Rather, they complement each other.

The Ten Commandments do not conflict with the Torah. The Torah does not conflict with Old Testament revelation in general. Instead, they are contained within each other.

The Ten Commandments are found within the Torah. The Torah is found within the Old Testament. The above types of Law can be called sets and subsets.

Type #4--Tradition of the Elders

But then we find a fourth type of laws. These laws are not inspired of God. They were made by men. These "laws" were actually a set of regulations that the scribes and Pharisees considered as binding as God's revealed will. Included among them were **interpretations** of biblical principles.

In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus has just established the validity of the Old Testament (Matthew 5:17-19). He then goes on to correct the interpretations of rabbinic tradition relating to divorce, murder, hatred of one's enemies, oaths, and other principles (Matthew 5:21-43). When a biblical law is listed, Jesus in no way opposes it; rather He requires a stricter code of conduct. Hatred of one's enemies was not commanded in the Law, but it was a belief in certain Jewish sects, and Jesus sets the record straight by hearkening back to the original intent of Leviticus 19:18.

"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus later in His ministry. "Is it lawful to pluck grain on the Sabbath for food? Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar?"

Jesus spoke AGAINST these "laws," which are also called the traditions of the elders. Notice this:

"Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying,

"Why do thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.

"But he (Jesus) answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?

"For God commanded, saying, Honour thy father and mother: and, He that curseth father or mother, let him die the death.

"But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me;

"And honor not his father or his mother, he shall be free. Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition" (Matthew 15:1-6).

Notice that the scribes and Pharisees condemned Jesus' disciples for not washing their hands before eating. Where did the scribes and Pharisees find this hand-washing requirement?

The Ten Commandments, the Torah, and the Old Testament do not include such a rule! Rather, this ordinance was found in their own man-made laws which had been added to what God had given in the Old Testament.

A good example of the conflict between Jesus and these self-righteous Jews occurred when He healed a crippled man. This is described in John 5. In verses 8 and 9 Jesus told the

man to take up his bed and walk. This miracle took place on the Sabbath day. What was the response of the religious teachers who were steeped in the traditions of the elders?

"The Jews therefore said unto him that was cured, It is the sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed" (verse 10).

In this Scripture, was the word *lawful* translated from the Greek word *nomos* or a variant of *nomos*? No. An entirely different word is used. The original Greek word was *exetazo*, referring to an entirely different type of "law": one that is a customary practice, rather than of divine origin.

An extremely important question needs to be asked at this point: "Whose law?" What law forbade this man from carrying his bed after he had been miraculously healed by Jesus? Was it the Ten Commandments? Was it the first five books of the Bible? Was it in the Old Testament?

No! No! No! A thousand times NO!! The "law" which prohibited this man from carrying his bed was the tradition of the elders! These "laws" were ADDED to the Ten Commandments. These "laws" were created by men--not by God.

The Reason For the Added "Laws"

In order to understand the problem that Jesus faced regarding this fourth set of laws--the added laws--we need to understand the history of the Jews. The Jews during the time of Jesus' earthly ministry knew their ancestors had gone into captivity because they had broken God's Laws contained in the Old Testament.

When the Jews returned to Palestine after their captivity (several hundred years before the birth of Jesus), they rebuilt their temple and made a sincere attempt to ensure that they would never break the divine Laws again. They looked at the Sabbath as a beautiful garden which was not to be trampled. They vowed as a nation to do everything possible to please God when it came to Commandment keeping.

In their zeal, they actually went too far. They decided to add further restrictions to the Commandments to ensure that they were kept properly. They not only built a fence around this beautiful garden, they added another fence and then another and then another. By the time of Jesus, these rules--the oral traditions of the elders as opposed to the written laws of the Old Testament--had become so detailed that they were a burden on the people.

These traditional laws formed the basis of a series of writings known as the Talmud, compiled from 200-500 AD. Here are some examples of the rules that the Jews added to God's law.

The children of Israel had been given instructions on how to observe the Sabbath. On one occasion, they were told, "See, for that the Lord hath given you the sabbath, therefore he giveth you on the sixth day the bread of two days: abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day" (Exodus 16:29).

After returning from captivity in Babylon, the Jews decided that "place" in this Scripture actually meant "city." They correctly understood that they were not to be doing extensive travelling on the Sabbath--they were to rest instead. They reasoned that each city averaged about 3/5 of a mile in diameter. In their understanding, God did not want a person to travel farther than a certain distance on the Sabbath. They therefore estimated that the maximum allowable distance was about 3/5 of a mile.

This became known to the Jews as a Sabbath day's journey.

We find reference to this commonly accepted idea in Acts 1:12, where Luke writes that the Mount of Olives was about a Sabbath day's journey from Jerusalem.

Did the Old Testament actually forbid God's people from travelling further than 3/5 of a mile on the Sabbath? No. The idea of an arbitrary distance was added to the Law. It became a tradition of the elders.

Another example of these man-made traditions is found in the area of dietary laws. Again, after their departure from Egypt, the children of Israel were given laws about what to eat and what not to eat. In Leviticus 11 they were told which animals are clean and which animals are unclean.

They were also restricted in their preparation of animals for consumption. For example, "...Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk" (Exodus 23:19). We are not told WHY we are not to seethe (boil) the meat of a kid goat in his mother's milk. Perhaps it is for health reasons. We just don't know. The fact remains that it is forbidden.

In their sincere efforts to make sure that no one broke this law, the Jews added to it by prohibiting all meat products cooked with milk products.

Today, many Jews have three sets of dishes: Dishes for meat products, dishes for milk products, and dishes for Passover meals. Because of what their forefathers added to the Old Testament, devout Jews are now restricted from eating things such as creamed chipped beef and cheeseburgers. These dishes combine milk with meat.

When Jesus' disciples went about their business, they sometimes ignored these man-made laws. The self-righteous Jews condemned them for not following their special rules. And this is one of the main reasons that Jesus was in constant conflict with the Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees.

At no time did Jesus ever disagree with or do away with the Law found in the Ten Commandments, the Torah, or the Old Testament in general! His conflict with the Jews was over their ADDITIONS to the divine Law. If at any time Jesus had suggested that the Law was to be repealed or abolished, He surely would have been stoned by the religious leaders of His time. Doing away with the Law was not open for discussion, but heightening the Law was. Thus we find areas of contention in first-century Judaism relating to Sabbath practices, such as defending oneself on the Sabbath, preparing food, or traveling. But there never were debates on the validity of the Law of Moses.

The New Testament and the Law

Perhaps you don't believe that Jesus obeyed the Law. Perhaps you believe what many churches teach--that He did away with the Law. Read His own words for yourself: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). He also taught: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (verse 19).

Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law--not the destroyer of the Law. Notice what He said when people came to Him and asked what they should do if they were to become His disciples. He had a very clear answer for them:

"And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?"

"And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:16-17). If asked that question, most ministers in churches of the world would NOT include the answer Jesus gave!

And, in case there was any doubt about which commandments He meant, Jesus listed them:

"...Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness,

"Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (verses 18-19).

Where do we find these Commandments? Why, in Exodus 20! Jesus is quoting the Ten Commandments that were given to the children of Israel! Jesus did not say, "Just love your neighbor and accept me." No. He said that those who would follow Him should OBEY GOD'S LAW!

When Jesus said, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," He was quoting from the Torah! He was not inventing a new, consolidated law that eradicated all other laws. He expanded them to such a degree that adultery could be committed merely by lusting!

The Apostles Taught Obedience to the Law

After Jesus was resurrected, His Church began preaching the Gospel to the world. And those very apostles taught that the Law was not done away! The apostles did not teach that the Law was a CURSE. They taught that the Law was given to lead men to Christ: "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). People still need the law to bring them to Christ!

What then does Paul mean by saying, "But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster" (Galatians 3:25)? The same thing he meant when he wrote to the Church of God in Rome:

"But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.

"What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law; for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet" (Romans 7:6-7).

Paul is following Jesus' example by teaching the Law and quoting from one of the Ten Commandments. He goes on to say: "Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good..."

"For we know that the law is spiritual..." (verses 12, 14).

Paul tells us that the Law is for us in our everyday lives as Christians. He delighted in the law of God and served it, although he knew he was also capable of sin (verses 22-25).

In Romans 2:13, Paul wrote: "For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified."

Is Paul alone in his teaching that the Law is binding on Christians? No, the apostle John also tells us: "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous" (I John 5:3).

How about the apostle Peter? What does he say about this vital subject? He actually prophesied that there would be men who taught that the Law is done away. Peter warned that a person should not accept Christ and then turn away from keeping the Commandments:

"For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning.

"For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them" (2 Peter 2:20-22).

This is quite a statement! Peter tells us that we are not to forsake the "holy commandment" which we have been given once our eyes are opened to the truth. He finishes his thought by saying:

"But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again: and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire" (verse 22).

Once we have accepted Christ and His teachings, we cannot reject His Commandments and live a life of lawlessness.

What About Grace?

"But what about GRACE? Doesn't grace free us from having to keep the Law?" This is probably one of the most commonly asked questions in Christianity.

We must never lose sight of the fact that the Law cannot and does not save us! Ephesians 2:8 says, "For by grace are ye saved through faith: and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God."

All the possible observances of the Law cannot save a single person. If you were to keep the Law perfectly every day of your life, you would still not be saved. Salvation can come only when we accept the blood of Jesus as a free gift.

When Peter preached salvation, he said we must repent of our sins (Acts 2:38). Now we come to a pivotal point of understanding--the area that most churches simply do not comprehend!

When Peter tells us to repent of sin, we must answer the question, "What is sin?" Can you agree that, if you do not know what sin is, you cannot repent? The concepts of sin and repentance are BASIC to Christianity.

We find a very clear definition of sin in 1 John 3:4: "Sin is transgression of the law."

How could it be clearer? If we are to accept Jesus, we must repent of transgressing the Law! Does this mean that after conversion we can expect to keep the Law perfectly? Of course not. Jesus Christ was the only man who lived a perfect, sinless life. But the Christian is still bound to do his best to love God with all his heart and to love his neighbor as himself (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37-40). The way he shows his love to God and man is through obedience to the 10 Commandments (1 John 5:3).

Was the Law Only For Ancient Israel?

Still, many people believe that the Law was only for the nation of Israel. They think that the Law was not in force before the covenant at Mount Sinai. They also believe that the Law was not obeyed after the Crucifixion.

We have already shown that the apostles taught the Law to the New Testament Church. But notice also that the Law was being observed long before the children of Israel left Egypt. The Sabbath was observed from Creation (Genesis 2:2-3).

It was wrong to murder in the second generation after Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:10).

Adultery was forbidden during the time of Joseph (Genesis 39:7).

Idolatry was a sin before Abraham was born (Joshua 24:2).

The Law is for the Christian!

"And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12 NRSV). That's about where we've arrived. The direct connection between loss of love and lawlessness escapes those who forsake the commandments as guides for Christians, who forget that John wrote: "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments; and his commandments are not grievous" (I John 5:2-3).

Yes, we live in a lawless and loveless age, and the churches are helping to make it so by declaring the law of God abolished.. The god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4) would have you believe that the Law is not a blessing for God's people.

Many churches would have you believe that you do not need the Law, even though the Bible shows us that the Law was given for our good.

Think of how much better off the world would be if everyone followed the the royal law of love (James 2:8-10). No, not the traditions of the elders which Jesus condemned, but the Law found in the Ten Commandments, the Torah, and the Old Testament.

Reflect on these things the next time you have to confront the effects of lawlessness in our society. And ask yourself if you and your religious denomination have contributed to the problem by rejecting the Ten Commandments as your guide for Christian living.

For more information, check us out on the web at: DynamicChristianMinistries.org.

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