

The Christian and the Law

What is the Christian's response to the law of Moses? This is not simply a doctrinal issue for Bible college students to discuss; this issue touches the very heart of our understanding of becoming like Christ. It goes to our understanding of the Gospel itself – of how we are justified and sanctified.

Today, as before, there is much confusion over the New Testament believer's relationship to the Law. As with every controversial issue, you have two extremes. The one extreme is gaining popularity today. It insists that to be really spiritual, to be on really good ground with God – you ought to follow the Mosaic Law. You ought to circumcise your children, observe the dietary restrictions, observe the Sabbath, keep the feasts of Israel, basically – in short, you need to keep the Law.

Well, some in this camp insist that the believer must keep the Law for salvation. Others maintain they must keep it to be complete as a Christian – it's something to mature them or make them more spiritual. This kind of thinking was dealt with by Paul in his epistles to the Galatians, Colossians, Romans, Hebrews, 1 Timothy and 2 Corinthians. This teaching is the error of legalism.

Legalism is a word that has been abused and taken on all sorts of meanings today that it does not have. Legalism is the belief that the keeping of the Law imparts righteousness – either at salvation, or in sanctification. Legalism insists that you can create righteousness by adhering to rules, essentially trying to force righteousness inside, from the outside. It becomes external and formal – focusing on duties, rather than the heart. Legalism is wrong.

However, on the other side of the debate, you have people saying that the believer has no relationship to any Law whatsoever. They tell us that New Testament believers are all about liberty and freedom, and any attempt to mention rules or standards produces a negative reaction in them. They regard all rules, all standards, even explicit commands in the Bible as legalism.

Such people have misunderstood what liberty in Christ means, and think that believers have no law at all. They think the New Testament dispensation is a time where there really are no more rules, because, in their words, rules were for people under the Law. So, their Christian experience is a lot of subjective experience, no standards, and no pursuit of real holiness, for fear of supposedly becoming legalists.

All too often, these groups of people degenerate into immorality, licentiousness and ungodly living, for their hearts and flesh deceive them apart from an objective standard of the Word. They commit the error of libertarianism – the teaching that you can do what you want in Christ. Another name for such teaching is antinomianism – which simply means 'no law.' They believe and live as if the New Testament believer has no Law whatsoever.

But the New Testament epistles of James, 1 Corinthians, Romans and to a degree, 1 John, correct this error. Believers may not be under the Law, but they are certainly under authority.

Clearly, this is an issue that Scripture gives a lot of attention to, and so we have no excuse for being deceived or led astray on this point. It is also a crucial issue, because it touches the heart of the Gospel – how do I become righteous? It touches the very heart of our Christian experience – how do I become more like Christ?

To begin with, we must ask, what is the Law?

Law is used in different ways in Scripture, especially in the book of Romans, so we must define it carefully. For our purposes, the Law is the code of laws given to Moses and recorded in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This Law essentially had three parts:

1. **Firstly, it had a ceremonial aspect.** This includes all the laws on things clean and unclean, on the sacrifices, offerings, feasts and holidays prescribed by God.
2. **Secondly, it had a civil aspect.** This included all laws related to regulating civil life in Israel – down to the minutest detail.
3. **Thirdly, it had a moral aspect.** This was essentially all laws governing the moral conduct of every person, whether in relationship to God or to man.

Now we must understand why God gave Israel the Law. If we understand this, then we will go a long way to understanding how it relates to us today. God gave the Law to Israel for a number of reasons, but it was never meant to impart righteousness to them.

Let's say that again: the Law was given for many reasons – but keeping the Law could never make anyone righteous. It could never affect your standing or your state before God. It was neutral from that standpoint – unable to impart righteousness. So why did God give it?

1. God gave the Law to reveal what His righteousness is like.

Even today, when people speak of the holiness of God, they have a vague, fuzzy idea of what it means. The Law personified, put into everyday terms, is what God's righteousness looked like. The Israelites could see – even when dealing with what happens if their ox falls into a pit on their neighbour's land: this is God's righteousness in this specific situation.

So the Law showed a people who had been living in a pagan land for 400 years, and who would be surrounded by pagans for all their future, what God's righteousness was like. This is why, far from hating the Law, Paul exalts it in **Romans 7:12**: *"Wherefore the Law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good."* And in **1 Timothy 1:8** he says, *"But we know that the Law is good, if a man use it lawfully."*

Paul realised that the Law set up a hugely high standard of righteousness. But the key is – it could not *produce* that righteousness. Just like putting a measuring chart on the wall doesn't *make* you grow – it just explains the standard.

As Paul says in **Galatians 3:21**: *“For if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the Law.”* The Law was so good that, of all things, it should have been able to produce righteousness – but it was powerless to produce it.

2. The Law showed the sinfulness of humankind, and condemned us.

Once any person tried to keep the Law, they saw how high God’s standards were, and how miserably they fell short. When confronted with the brightness of God’s holiness, it is as if an ultra-violet beam highlights even the so-called ‘hidden sins.’ It shows us how miserably we fall short of God, and how worthy we are of punishment. This is Paul’s theme in Romans 7:

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 7:7

But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.

Romans 7:13

Anyone who tries to keep the Law without feeling hopelessly inadequate is deceiving themselves, like the self-righteous Pharisee who prayed proudly, as opposed to the repentant tax-collector.

3. The Law therefore drives us to God for salvation from sin.

The one who sees God’s righteousness sees their own sin, and the one who sees their sin and its judgement will either run from God or toward God. This is why Paul said in **Galatians 3:24**, *“Wherefore the Law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”*

A schoolmaster in Paul’s day was a slave who literally drove the children to school using whips and sticks. Paul says the heavy burden of the Law, its curse of death, was there to push people to God to cry out for grace. When you saw the utter impossibility of keeping it, and the certainty of the punishment, you ran to God for grace and forgiveness.

4. Logically then, the Law pointed to Messiah.

In the many offerings, types of sacrifices, ceremonies and the Tabernacle, a shadow or picture of the coming Messiah was there. The people knew that the continual offering of animals could only be a temporary solution to their sin problem. It provided for what we call the ‘covering of sin,’ not the final atonement of them.

Though a Jewish person may not have understood all the types, they certainly knew that Messiah was coming, and that salvation would be through Him. They had a foundation through pictures that salvation would be by substitutionary atonement.

5. On a practical level, the Law regulated Jewish life.

It made God central to everything they did, and therefore it separated them from the unbelieving nations. Many of the Laws were purely to teach separation: wearing a garment made of only one type of material, the ways to shave a beard and hair and so on.

So the Law was a very practical and useful thing. Paul calls it a glorious ministration in **2 Corinthians 3**. It displayed God's character and righteousness, revealed sin, drove people to God for grace, portrayed the Messiah, explained God's methods for salvation, and then regulated Jewish life so they would be a people separate unto God.

But, again, the Law could not impart righteousness. People were never saved by keeping the Law. This is Paul's whole point in **Galatians 2:21**: *"I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the Law, then Christ is dead in vain."* Paul says, if you could get saved by keeping the Law, then it was pointless for Jesus to die. We should all just keep the Law, and that's how we'd get saved.

No, Paul explains, the Law could never save you. It could point you to salvation, it could partially explain salvation, but it could never produce salvation. Salvation has always been by grace through faith. Consider how Abraham is described: *"And he believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness"* (**Genesis 15:6**). We also find David, who lived under the Law, saying to God:

For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, You will not despise.

Psalms 51:16-17

So David also understood that forgiveness was by grace through faith. The Old Testament saints were saved by looking forward in faith to God's grace in the Messiah, and today we look back in faith at God's grace in the Messiah.

So what do we mean then when we say, the Israelites were under the Law? By contrast, what does it mean when **Romans 6:14** says we are not under the Law? We mean that Israel, as a nation, had covenanted with God to keep all the commandments in the Law. They did this in **Exodus 19:8**: *"And all the people answered together, and said, 'All that the LORD hath spoken we will do.'"*

Here, the people entered into a conditional covenant with God where physical blessing would result from obedience to the Law, and cursing for disobedience. It does not mean they depended on the Law for their personal salvation. Rather, it means they were under the Law as a covenant: it was their responsibility, their duty, to uphold it in their relationship to God. As a people, they placed themselves under the authority or 'Lordship' of the Law to regulate their lives.

Now we come to our position as believers. **Romans 6:14** says we are not under the Law. **Romans 7:4** says, *"Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ."* So there is no question that the situation has changed when it comes to the New Testament believer and the Mosaic law.

If you deny this, let me ask you if you have recently presented a bull for your trespass offering. The reason you don't do that is because you understand that thanks to Christ, things are now different. And that is our most important point. You as a believer must understand your relationship to the Law is defined in Christ.

Those last two words are so important. As a believer, you are *in Christ* – His righteousness has been imputed to you, His life given to you, He died your death. Therefore, we will understand how to relate to the Law as New Testament believers when we understand how the risen Christ relates to the Law.

Hear Jesus as He spoke in **Matthew 5:17**: *"Think not that I am come to destroy the Law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil."* The Greek word for fulfil means to complete, to consummate or to realise. What does that mean? It means that Jesus would be the total embodiment of the righteousness of God expressed in the Law.

Jesus would fulfil the Law by keeping every command and fulfilling every type. The Law becomes a shadow; Jesus becomes the body. The moral Law was fulfilled by the perfect life of Jesus. The civil Law was fulfilled by Jesus' total adherence to the regulations. The ceremonial Law was fulfilled in Jesus, because every offering, every ceremony and every feast has its fulfilment in Jesus Christ.

Even the penalty of the Law – death – was fulfilled by Christ, by dying on the cross. So Jesus arrives, and essentially it is as if all that the book pointed to, required and commanded, is now physically here and has performed. Jesus did not abolish the Law, He completed it. He put the full stop at the end of it. It becomes inferior by contrast.

The person who receives Christ as Lord and Saviour has Christ's relationship to the Law imputed to them. They now have the capability to even rise above the Law by the indwelling Spirit. That is why Paul says:

For what the Law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

Romans 8:3-4

We must understand that Christ has fulfilled the Law, and therefore as believers in Him, so have we. Why don't you offer an ox or a lamb for your sins? Because Christ fulfilled God's requirement, and we received Him.

How is it then, that we accept Christ's fulfilment of the Law on that point, but reject it when it comes to Sabbath, circumcision, and diet? How is it that we believe we have the authority to pick and choose which parts of the Law we think we must still fulfil? *"For whosoever shall keep the whole Law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all"* (**James 2:10**).

Paul says that the person who places themselves under the Law as their means of righteousness becomes a debtor – they become obligated to keep the whole thing perfectly, because the Law requires perfect obedience. You cannot pick out some laws to obey and think they will make you righteous, and on other points depend on Christ to have fulfilled it. This is not a buffet – Christ is either of no effect to you, or of total effect.

The Law demanded that if you sin, you die. If you have received Christ, you have fulfilled this, since Christ died for you. Paul likens it to a woman whose husband dies, so she is free to re-marry. Paul says since you died with Christ, your life is now built in, around and on Christ:

Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to Him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God.

Romans 7:4

But here is where we make some clear distinctions. The believer has fulfilled the Mosaic Law, but that does not mean they have *no* Law. Paul himself, the champion of grace over law, says this in **1 Corinthians 9** as he speaks of his methods when dealing with different groups:

And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law.

1 Corinthians 9:20-21

Notice – not without law to God, but under the law to Christ. Just as there was grace under the period of the Law, so there is law under this period of grace. What law? Paul calls it the law of Christ. What is this law? Well, just as in the Old Testament the Jews came under the authority of the Law, they submitted themselves to it, so the law of Christ is a believer's continual submission to the Lordship of Christ.

James, in his epistle, wants us to know that no true conversion will be devoid of a holy life that follows it. A true believer will try to submit to the Lordship of Christ. You can sum up this law the way Jesus did – to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and to love your neighbour as yourself. That's the broadest, most general stating of the law of Christ – it obviously has multitudes of specific commands that work that out in daily life.

See, many believers think that the Christian life is one of no rules, no submission, no Lordship. Any time they see a command or even a rule in a church, they cry 'legalism!' That is completely false. The Christian life is a life of total discipleship under Christ.

Having strict rules does not constitute legalism. A church with standards is not necessarily legalistic. Legalism is the belief that standards and rules produce righteousness. You can have strict rules, and understand that the Spirit produces righteousness. Rules can simply aid and direct believers to walk in the Spirit for themselves.

So, for instance, am I under obligation to get circumcised? No, because Christ fulfilled the ceremonial Law, and I am in Him, therefore that Law is not binding on me. Paul even says of Christ, *“in Whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ”* (**Colossians 2:11**).

Am I under obligation to keep the command to not commit adultery? Yes. Why? Understand, *not* because it falls under the 10 commandments – because Christ even fulfilled them – but because it is definitely part of the law of Christ. You’ll find 9 of the 10 commandments are re-stated in the New Testament – the only one which isn’t is the Sabbath.

The moral Law is completed in Christ, but in daily life, we are expected to flesh it out. How do I know what laws are part of the law of Christ? You can very clearly see where New Testament apostles repeat Old Testament laws, and where they omit them. Paul clearly regarded circumcision as useless when it comes to our standing or position before God. But humility, kindness, purity of thought – these are clearly repeated.

Peter was told to rise, kill and eat, and not call any food unclean anymore. He was taught that the laws of defilement for being in the company of Gentiles were not in effect anymore. Why? Because these civil, ceremonial and dietary laws were completed in Christ, and to continue in them would be to focus on the shadow, when the true substance had already come. They have no moral value whatsoever. Hear Paul as he speaks to a church struggling with this:

Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.

Colossians 2:16-17

There are two errors that people make: firstly, they seek to make their standing before God righteous by the Law. Our standing we call justification. And Scripture is clear: *“Being justified freely by his grace”* (**Romans 3:24**). Secondly, people try to make their state before God holy by keeping the Law. This is sanctification. But sanctification is just like justification – it is God’s work, accomplished by faith in Him. That is why Paul says:

This only would I learn of you, received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?

Galatians 3:2-3

Paul is saying, if you didn’t receive your righteousness by your own hand, what makes you think you can perfect it by your own hand? We were saved by depending on God, and we are made holy by obeying God in dependence on Him. See, sanctification is also by faith.

The reason people go back to the Law is that the Law gives them a very measurable form of righteousness. You can tick off the rules you've kept, and keep a score of your righteousness. It removes all aspects of depending on God to produce His fruit within you, as you obey Him. It makes the whole thing very controllable – which is what our pride wants. We want to be able to grasp the whole thing, make our list, and claim righteousness when we have kept the list.

But to admit that righteousness is produced by the Holy Spirit as we obey the law of Christ, is a much more intangible thing. It keeps us in a place of humility, neediness and submission. It can even feel uncertain and foreign to us – beings who are not used to grace. You can really sum it up as 'rules righteousness' versus 'relationship righteousness.'

'Rules righteousness' seeks to internalise righteousness by keeping certain commands. It hopes to force righteousness in, from the outside. 'Relationship righteousness' depends on God to renew the heart. It responds to God as Lord and Saviour, and seeks to obey Him from the heart. It seeks to externalise the righteousness which God is creating on the inside. It admits God is the Author and Finisher, but maintains responsibility for obeying God wholeheartedly.

So the Law is a good thing. It is still useful for revealing sin, for explaining righteousness, for pointing to Christ. Some people observe the feasts because they help them see Christ – I think that's fine. But understand that Christ fulfilled the Mosaic Law entirely. The New Testament believer is not under Israel's obligation to keep it, for blessings or cursing.

The believer is in Christ, and therefore has the same relationship to the Law that the risen Christ has. It is fulfilled. As such, to go back to it as an obligation is actually to descend to an inferior standard – one given before the fullness was come; and to take upon yourself a covenant that God did not make with the church.

That said, believers are not lawless – we are under the law to Christ. We seek to obey Christ from the heart, trusting totally in Him for righteousness. We know the Spirit, and not our rules, is what produces righteousness, and we obey from the heart.

Moreover, the law of Christ is not lax – it is in many ways more precise, more demanding and more exacting than the Mosaic Law. The key is to understand that righteousness cannot be internalised by rule-keeping, it can only be externalised by Spirit-empowered obedience. You cannot make your heart righteous by keeping the Law; only a heart made righteous by the grace of God can keep the law of Christ.