

Liberty in God's Law

I. Law or Love?

A Question For Jesus

People often wonder what they would ask Jesus if given the opportunity. What would you ask Him? Would it be about UFO's or why is there suffering in the world? Perhaps you would ask Him why there is so much bickering among Christians or theologians or why evil people prosper. The thing about questions like those, however, is that they don't really make a difference in your actual life.

One day a religious lawyer approached Jesus and asked Him a question. The question this man asked makes all the difference in the world when it comes to your actual life. I would say that this particular question would have to rank pretty high on anyone's list. He asked, **"Master, which is the great commandment in the law"** (Matthew 22:36). In other words, "According to God, what is the most important thing that a person should actually do?"

To this Jesus gave the well-known answer,

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

The Love Criteria

So the most important thing a person can do is love God and love his neighbor. Some might argue that the most important thing a person can do is believe in Jesus. To this I would respond that the idea of loving God while rejecting Jesus is a contradictory notion. So assuming we all agree that the most important thing any of us can actually do is love God and love our neighbor allow me to ask another question. What is the criteria by which we determine whether or not we are indeed loving God and our neighbor? How do I know if what I have done, or will do, is an act of love?

Adorned with Law

There is a portion of Jesus' quotation that is often neglected. We see it in verse 40. Jesus says that on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. The way a door hangs on its hinges or articles hang on a nail, the law of God is somehow hanging on the command to love God and love our neighbor. It's as if the love of God is the Christmas tree and the laws of God are the ornaments. Or the love of God is the body and the law is the clothing with

which we adorn ourselves. As the fable indicates, I certainly cannot say I am well-dressed if I am not wearing any clothes, nor can I say that the tree is trimmed if there are no ornaments. I therefore should not say that I am loving God or my neighbor without adorning my behavior with the law of God.

As we embark upon our study and devotions regarding the law of God, a good way to look at this is to view these laws as the behaviors which constitute love. The first four commandments are how we are to love God and the next six are how we are to love each other.

Law—Burden or Blessing?

Viewing the law of God as the criterion for love may help diffuse our natural difficulty with the entire subject before us. For many the word ‘law’ (or more specifically ‘the law of God’) evokes a very negative response. The law of God and its role in the life of the Christian is very misunderstood. The law has become something that many Christians feel burdened by, even though we are told by John that the law of God is not burdensome (1 John 5:3).

Read the words of James. He gives us some insight on the way Christians should view the law of God.

“But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does” (James. 1:25).

The law of God liberates and blesses. It is my goal that the following pages will yield in readers the same disposition toward the law that David had when he penned,

“The law of Your mouth is better to me Than thousands of coins of gold and silver” (Psalm 119:72).

Is this our attitude toward the law of God? I pray that by the end of our devotions in *The Law of Liberty* we will share David’s sentiment.

II. Liberated From What?

James calls the law of God the “perfect law of liberty”. This brings up the question, ‘from what does the law liberate us?’ Liberty means freedom. If we have been liberated we have been set free. In what respect does the law accomplish this? Ultimately we must acknowledge that, as we have learned, it frees us from improper views on how to love. Along with this, however, the law of God frees us from a great many things. You can add to the list, but among the things the law of God frees us from are...

Legalism and Manipulation

The law of God frees Christians from legalism and manipulation. Christians know they should behave differently from the world. When the Holy Spirit enters a person they will seek to walk in the statutes of God (Ezekiel. 36:27). In other words, we will seek to love God and our neighbors. Apart from God's law, however, we do not know specifically¹ of what our behavior should consist. This opens up many Christians to guilt-trips and manipulation through legalism² (man-made miss-interpretations of God's law). Paul writes Timothy,

“For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:6,7).

This is not a principle merely applied to women but anyone who wants to obey God while finding himself ignorant of God's law. Instead of being led by God's truth, we're led by various impulses. Some will actually interpret these impulses as the Spirit of God. Some very common forms of legalism are revealed when Christians receive criticism from other Christians for activities like going to the movies or dancing or drinking wine—things that are not necessarily unbiblical. It could go, as with one gentleman I know, to the point where the pastor has you mowing his lawn in the name of the Lord.

I remember, as a young Christian, a conversation I had with a man who was very influential in leading me to the Lord. He told me in no uncertain terms that it was God's will for me to go to a popular youth conference. I didn't go and felt very guilty about it. My impulses told me to go to the conference. My mentor told me to go to the conference. Looking back on it now, and what I know about this particular conference, I'm glad I didn't go. Do you want to know God's will for your life? It's in His law.

Knowing the law of God frees Christians from the guilt manipulators and legalists. If you know the law of God you know what is righteous in His sight. If you don't know the law of God you are fodder for any high energy individual who calls himself a Christian, especially a Christian leader, who wants something from you. Or even a well-meaning friend who might give poor, or ungodly counsel.

¹ I use the term 'specifically' because some people, at this point, will refer to the law of God written upon our hearts (Romans 2:15). But we must keep in mind that the law of God written upon our hearts will in no way be inconsistent with His written law. And since we have a sin nature, it is only the written law that we can know to be the flawless word of God.

² The term 'legalism' may not be completely accurate. In its classic sense, legalism is a teaching that involves salvation by works. In this sense I am using it (as is common these days) as a sort of man-made code of ethics apart from, but perhaps similar to, the teachings of Scriptures.

Consequences

Knowing and seeking to keep God's law frees us from consequences. One of the great misunderstandings of grace is that there are no consequences for the violation of God's law. Fortunately when Christians stand before God on judgment day we will not be judged according to our works³ because of Christ's atoning work on the cross. But this doesn't mean that in this life there are no consequences for sin⁴. There are consequences for sin and we all know it. No genuine Christian thinks that he can lie, cheat, steal or be unfaithful to his wife without it somehow affecting his life. We know that doing these things will result in terrible damage in our lives. Conversely, if we obey the law of God it will result in blessings. Remember again what James writes,

“But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:25).

Knowing and seeking to obey the law of God liberates us from the reality that our sin will find us out (Numbers 32:23). The idea that there are no consequences for sin is a popular, yet tragic, miss-perception for today's Christian who doesn't completely understand the nature of God's grace. David had his sins washed away, but there were still some very real consequences for his adulterous and murderess affair with Bathsheba. Read of the judgment on David from 2 Samuel.

“Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in His sight? You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword; you have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the people of Ammon.

Then he lists the consequences.

‘Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ “Thus says the LORD: ‘Behold, I will raise up adversity against you from your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. ‘For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun.’ So David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.”

³ Our works will be judged, but we won't (1 Corinthians 3:14).

⁴ 'Sin' is defined by John as disobeying God's law (1 John. 3:4). Some suggest that sin is merely unbelief. This is incorrect. Unbelief is sin but sin is not unbelief. We know, for example, that God is love but love is certainly not God.

And Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. “However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die.” Then Nathan departed to his house” (2 Samuel 12:9-15).

Although we cannot assume that God always works exactly the way he did with David⁵, we do see here an example of God judging⁶ a man under grace⁷ who had violated His law.

Bondage

“Hear, O earth! Behold, I will certainly bring calamity on this people—The fruit of their thoughts, Because they have not heeded My words, Nor My law, but rejected it” (Jeremiah 6:19).

The law of God liberates from bondage. The United States is at a very interesting place in history. We can actually see what happens to a people who at one time had respect for God’s law but no longer do. The calamity that we see in our nation is a calamity that God promises to those who reject His law. At times the offenses and the judgments are the same thing.

Within the borders of the United States we are witnessing a blatant lack of respect for human life; whether it be abortion, euthanasia, gang violence, children killing parents, parents killing children, etc. Sexual promiscuity is ruining households and burgeoning diseases for which there is no cure. We have a national debt of over five trillion dollars and the church of Christ, instead of being viewed as light, salt and a place of beauty, wisdom and substance, is becoming an impotent laughing stock. All of these sins and judgments are warned of in Scripture.

A cursory reading of Deuteronomy 28 reveals what happens to a people who reject the law of God. Although we haven’t reached that level of calamity, the fire is clearly at our feet. The prophets in the Old Testament would be crying for God’s people to repent. Repenting involves both trusting in Christ and obeying His law. Repenting involves loving God and loving our neighbor.

⁵ For example, Job went through horrible trials and yet was considered blameless and upright, fearing God and shunning evil (Job 1:1).

⁶ Not eternal judgment.

⁷ Some think that David was under law and not grace. This comes from a misunderstanding of the old covenant which was a covenant of grace, not works. Read Psalm 51 and see if you don’t come to the conclusion that David was a man under grace?

Pride

“What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet” (Romans 7:7).

The law liberates us from pride, or an undue love of self. It was the law of God that humbled Paul and made him realize that he was a sinner. At one point Paul thought he was a law-keeper (Philippians 3:6). A truthful and intense study of God’s law will relieve any honest person of that sort of self-delusion. We are all clearly law-breakers.

If we seek to remove the law of God from the equation of Christian living, we will not so acutely perceive our need for Christ. Seeking to obey God’s law keeps us desperate for Christ. If we somehow water down God’s law in the name of new covenant theology, we can become self-confident. We might even think that we’re walking the victorious Christian walk⁸. In this case our need for Christ will not appear as desperate as it truly is. The law must be ever before us and we must continually seek to walk in it. In doing so we will be kept humble and desperate for Christ.

The law must also be brought before the unbeliever (as with Paul) that they might see their need for a Savior. In this respect the law works in conjunction with the gospel to bring salvation (or liberation from damnation). As the Psalmist writes,

“The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul” (Psalm 19:7).

III. The Law and the Gospel

The law and gospel are very common biblical terms. In short, the law is what God demands and the gospel is what God provides. There aren’t too many things more important than knowing what God demands and what God provides. Contrary to popular teaching, the law and the gospel are not enemies with each other, nor are they mutually exclusive in their use.

Moses Versus Jesus?

John makes the statement in his gospel

“For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

⁸ I say this ‘tongue-in-cheek.’ The true victorious Christian is one who is ever dependent upon Christ over and above keeping the law--any law.

Some read this to mean that Moses and Jesus were at odds with each other, as if there were two different plans. They believe that Moses taught that God's standard is the keeping of the law and that Jesus taught that God's standard is not the keeping of the law. Is John saying that the immutable (unchanging) God has changed His standards? Moses and Jesus were not at odds with each other. This is clearly stated in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

“By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward” (Hebrews 11:24-26).

This passage seems to be teaching us that Moses was a Christian. Look at verse twenty-six. Moses was not looking to the law for his redemption but to Christ. Hopefully this will begin to unlock for you one of the great misunderstandings in the church today -- the relationship of the law to the gospel. Moses brought the law⁹, but neither Moses nor today's Christians are saved by keeping it.

Three Purposes of the Law

The law has always had a specific purpose, actually three purposes: It reveals the righteousness of God; it reveals the standard for righteous living; it reveals to us our need for a Savior. It did that for Moses and it should do the same for Christians today. When man looks at the law of God he sees: an extension of God's character and nature; the perfect standard for human life and ethics and his own fallen state. The law of God should make us yearn for Christ. How efficiently and powerfully it sweeps us to His nail-punctured hands and pierced side!

A Standard Met, Not Changed

Here is a trick question -- Is obedience to the law of God a necessary condition for salvation? The answer is an unequivocal 'yes'. God has not changed His standard. He fulfilled His standard through His Son and freely and graciously gives us the gift of righteousness. Paul does not tell us that God's standard has changed, he tells us that God's standard was met by Christ and imputed¹⁰ unto us. Read one of the greatest 'one verse' summaries of the gospel:

⁹ It is interesting to note here that although the Old Testament has grace, it gives the full expression of the law. The New Testament has law but gives the full expression of grace. Most people who use this verse to downplay law are getting their law from the New Testament which does not appear to be the purpose of the New Testament at all.

¹⁰ 'Imputed' means to credit to one's account. It is as if someone graciously decided to put a large sum of money in your bank account. Having done nothing to earn it, you've become rich. Praise the Lord!

“For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Nothing New

Jesus was accused by the Pharisees of being an iconoclast, a revolutionary, someone who was bringing a ‘new’ teaching into the kingdom of God. Jesus made it very clear that His mission was in no way inconsistent with that which came through the Old Testament (here referred to as the Law or the Prophets). Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill the law.

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. “For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. “Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17-19).

Abolished or Fulfilled?

To suggest that the law has been abolished and that keeping the law is no longer a requirement for salvation is to say that Jesus merely talked the Father into having a pleasurable disposition toward fallen man by changing the rules. To understand that the law has not been abolished is to understand that Jesus lived a righteous life for us, died for us, rose for us and didn’t change the plan but fulfilled the requirements of the law and gave the free gift to us.

The removal of the law as God’s standard diminishes how apparent our need for Christ truly is. The standard is perfect adherence to the law. When I understand that, I realize how much I need Christ. What I am seeking to promote -- what the law most assuredly promotes is a life-long dependence upon Christ. We don’t want a church full of people who think that standards have changed. We want a church full of people who need the one who met the standard, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What would you ask Jesus if given the opportunity? Why?
2. What is your criteria by which you determine what love is?
3. What does it mean that the law “hangs” on loving God and others?
4. Is the law a burden or a blessing? Explain your answer.
5. From what does the law liberate us?
6. How does the law help us avoid being manipulated by false guilt?
7. Are there consequences for disobedience to the law? Explain.
8. Jeremiah 6:19 says God brings calamity upon those who heed not His words. How do we see this happening today?
9. In Romans 7:7 Paul indicates a role the law played in his life. Examine and discuss this role.
10. What is the difference between the law and the gospel?
11. Was Moses a Christian?
12. Discuss the three purposes of the law.
13. Did Jesus abolish or fulfill the law? What is the difference?