

Notes on the Law of God from a New Covenant Perspective

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During the Last Supper Jesus inaugurated the new covenant promised through Jeremiah ceremonially, and then actually in his death and resurrection (Jer 31:31-34, Heb 8:8-12, Lk 22:14-20; cf., Matt, Mk). This inauguration culminates, and the fullness of the new covenant begins, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. What should not be missed as we study the new covenant, and live as new covenant believers is this: the law written on our hearts is not a new law. It is the same law that God gave on tablets of stone on the day he took Israel out of Egypt. As many commentators have stressed, the newness of the new covenant is primarily covenant renewal; so it must be likewise stressed that the law of the new covenant is not new in a novel sense, but a renewal of the law, published now on human hearts and minds. What once had its prominence externally, carved in stone, deposited in the sacred ark and holy of holies within the tabernacle, now finds its place in the new tabernacle of the Spirit in the souls of God's redeemed.

The implications are important for how we understand the law and its role in the new covenant lives of believers. But our study cannot begin with Jeremiah or even with the vital interpretation we find in the book of Hebrews, but with Jesus himself, who is the originator of the New Testament understanding of law and the new covenant. And then beyond what we find Jesus saying, we must look at the apostolic teaching, and see in it a coordinate and explanatory understanding of what Jesus taught.

Jesus and the Law

There are three key instances in the gospel accounts which assist us in seeing how Jesus interpreted the law: 1) what he says in the sermon on the mount; 2) what he says in those contexts where he was challenged by the Jewish legal authorities and by those asking about eternal life; and 3) what he says in presenting the two great commandments. We bring to these instances two questions: What did Jesus and his Jewish audience mean by the law, and how did Jesus himself in his Messianic identity relate to this law.

In the sermon on the mount Jesus declares, "*Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished*" (Mt 5:17-18). Jesus denies his intention to abolish "the Law or the Prophets," apparently meaning by this phrase the standard Jewish understanding of God's scriptural revelation, the whole Old Testament. He also asserts his intention to fulfill the Scriptures. In addition he speaks of the abiding nature of the law until all is accomplished, which seems clearly to refer to his own mission as the Messiah. The law continues to have validity, then, in conjunction with the ministry and mission of Jesus. If the law should ever pass away, it will do so in a manner that Jesus brings about, yet only on the condition that all fulfillment by Jesus has been accomplished. What Jesus says, then, raises the question: how does Jesus fulfill the law or what does Jesus accomplish that fulfills the law?

The common heritage of believing Christians on this matter has given us three aspects to the fulfillment of the law by Jesus. My own study has led me to no different conclusion: Jesus fulfilled the law in its moral, civil and ceremonial functioning. In reverse order, the ceremonial aspect of the Old Testament law is centered in the earthly tabernacle-temple. All of Israel's worship was conditioned by God's holiness and man's sin. The worship requirements were stated in strict regulations and ceremonies concerning the Aaronic and Levitical priests, the tabernacle's structure and furniture, the various sacrifices and Israel's Sabbath and holy days. Historically this administration of divine worship came to a crashing end during the great tribulation of the Jewish nation in AD 67-70, when sacrifice ceased forever and the temple was destroyed. Spiritually it ended when the temple curtain was rent when Jesus died on the cross. As the lamb of God representative of all sacrifices, bloody and otherwise, as the high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, as the temple of God (his human body), Jesus fulfilled all the ceremonial requirements of the law. He fulfilled their purpose, accomplishing in himself the very things these requirements represented symbolically. On this

basis Jewish Christians ceased their old covenant worship, and Gentile converts to Christianity were not required to come under this aspect of the law.

Jesus also fulfilled the civil aspect of the law. During the Mosaic period of revelation God gave extensive laws regulating the national identity and lifestyle of the 12 tribes of Israel. He set them apart from all other nations, not only through Israel's identity as a worshipping community, but through specific regulations of social and judicial practice. The dietary laws, crimes and punishments, marriage stipulations, debt repayment, indentured servitude, treatment of foreigners and foreign born slaves, payment of wages and treatment of hired laborers, public safety, lost property, the welfare of a neighbor's stock are all regulated by divine decree. Nothing is left for human legislatures to issue binding laws on Israel. Judges may and must interpret the law, and decide cases according to divinely given rules of testimony and evidence, but the civil regulations are given by God. In these laws we find the national identity of Israel, which was not a secular identity, but one which fully integrated the spiritual calling to be God's holy people. This was their purpose. In their holy identity Israel was to be a priestly nation, mediating God's word and ways to all the nations (Ex 19:4-6). In Isaiah 5 God describes Israel as his vine, his planted vineyard, while he protests against their failure to live up to their calling. However, in his messianic calling, Jesus claimed to be God's true vine (John 15), and his followers the true branches. Jesus claimed to be the New Israel and that in his identity and purpose as the Messiah he fulfilled all that God purposed Israel to be. Thus in Matthew's Gospel we find the history of the Messiah as a recapitulation of the history of Israel, a common rabbinic mode of interpreting messianic prophecy. As with the ceremonial aspect of the law, Israel's civil identity and civil laws came to their end with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, the temple and the dispersion of the Jews. Yet in Jesus, and all united to Jesus, that New Israel continues.

Lastly, Jesus fulfilled the moral aspect of the law, which is the primary purpose of the giving of the law. Here we naturally focus on the Ten Commandments, but it is evident that many of Israel's laws, beyond what is stated specifically in the Ten Commandments, had their primary function as regulating the moral relationship between man and man, and man and God. As one of many examples, consider Deuteronomy 13. In this

treatment of false prophets and those who would seek to seduce Israel to go after other gods or worship idols, we have the moral responsibility of the whole community to reject such people, listen to God only, and to bring about capital punishment, even to a whole city, if an investigation showed its inhabitants had been spiritually compromised. In this chapter the first three of the Ten Commandments are clearly the moral underpinning of what is required, while the 9th commandment governs how an investigation of judicial process must proceed. And throughout all the Mosaic legislation, it is possible to see, in all of the precepts we would designate as essentially moral, a direct link to one or more of the Ten Commandments. These "ten words" stand at the head of all morality, and summarize the whole moral obligation of man to God and men to each other. It was, then, necessary that Jesus as the Second Adam, as the Servant of YHWH, as the Lamb of Atonement, obey God perfectly. There could be no moral spot or blemish in him; he must have no personal sin himself, in order to be able to present himself as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of God's people. In this way Jesus fulfilled all righteousness, and possessed that perfect righteousness needed in order to be the covenantal representative of his people. What he did, he accomplished for us, that it might be imputed to us, so that all the law's righteous requirements might be fulfilled in us.

Now what we must understand in this analysis of the law's functions as moral, civil and ceremonial is that the 613 particular laws of the Mosaic revelation are directed towards these separate but related purposes. It is sometimes mistakenly thought that these categories can neatly organize the Mosaic revelation of law into those which are uniquely moral, and those uniquely civil and those uniquely ceremonial. This is not the case. Rather, these aspects speak to their functions, which quite often overlap. It is quite obvious from the New Testament revelation that dietary regulations have no intrinsic or abiding moral character. Jesus made this clear (Mk 7:14-23). He said pointedly that "whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach and is eliminated" (thus He declared all foods clean). Yet, there was a moral aspect to the people of Israel in these dietary laws. God had imposed them on the Jews until the time of the Messiah, and to disobey these laws was sin – not because the regulation itself expressed anything moral, but because the God who imposed them must be obeyed. And from this same

passage in Mark, as we examine what Jesus was stressing, it is evident that the civil identity of the Jews as a people of God, separated from others by dietary (and other) restrictions, was expiring, but not their moral identity at all. Those laws and commandments which are intrinsically moral do not lapse. Fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness all continue to be evil. The people of God are still morally bound to be morally holy. The Mosaic civil holiness was not continuing, the Mosaic ceremonial holiness was not continuing, but the moral holiness of the Ten Commandments remained the calling of new covenant believers.

In some of these remarks it has been necessary to anticipate the conclusions of this whole study, because in some measure the essential elements of understanding Jesus and the law, as well as the law and believers, have been stated. What continues in this study strengthens our understanding of the primary functioning of the law as moral and the subordinate functioning of the law as civil and ceremonial, inasmuch as the civil and ceremonial functions ceased, having served their purpose, while the moral function continues, with a purpose that does not cease at all. We turn now to consider how Jesus presented the law in those contexts where Jesus was challenged by the Jewish legal authorities and by those asking about eternal life.

It is again helpful to present my summary conclusion and then trust that the following comments on several passages will support what I am saying. In his controversies with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus pointedly cited the moral function as the primary purpose of the law, and further, as having the moral precedence over the civil or ceremonial functions. And when Jesus was asked about eternal life, he always answered referencing the moral function of the law, but never the ceremonial or civil. What this shows is that Jesus himself distinguished the moral function above the other functions of the law, and for the most part, so did his audience, whether hostile or friendly.

The lightning rod controversy in Jesus' earthly teaching was the Sabbath issue. Jesus acted on the Sabbath in ways the Pharisees believed violated the fourth commandment. In Matt 12:1-14 Jesus defends the actions of his disciples gleaning on the Sabbath by citing a ceremonial law violation by David. He also points out that every Sabbath the

priests "in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent." His argument was simple, "it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Jesus was asserting to the Pharisees that when a moral duty or requirement conflicts with a ceremonial function of the law, God expects the conflict to be resolved by obedience to what God morally requires. Jesus enunciated this idea to the Pharisees this way, "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire compassion, not a sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent" (vs 7). Another contentious issue between Jesus and the Pharisees concerned the "traditions of the elders." In Matt 15:1-9 Jesus posed the question, "why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your traditions?" It is important to see that by "commandment of God" Jesus meant the moral function of the law. It is surely significant that Jesus did not engage the Pharisees in order to dispute and correct interpretations of what were essentially ceremonial or civil functions of the law, which were also liable to be distorted by the "traditions of men."

Turning to questions of eternal life, Jesus was approached on one occasion by a rich young ruler, wanting Jesus' answer to the question "what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17-22). Mark records Jesus quoting five of the Ten Commandments. It is certainly justified in seeing Jesus as quoting a part of the Ten Commandments in order to represent the whole. It is surely not justified in thinking that these particular ones are the key to salvation. The point I am making is simply this: Jesus connects this man's question of eternal destiny to the moral function of the law, and especially to the chief moral precepts of that function, and not to any civil or ceremonial functions, not to dietary or ceremonial practices. On another occasion (Lk 10:25-28) a lawyer sought to test Jesus about the same issue. This time Jesus asked the inquisitor what he himself understood was "written in the Law." The lawyer responded by what Jesus himself would later describe as the two great commandments, namely, to love God supremely and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matt 22:34-37). These two commandments are the core of the moral function of the law, the epitome of what true morality is all about. Jesus says to the lawyer "you have answered correctly; do this and you will live." Jesus is saying, never any more clearly than here, that the substance of the law, what is written in the law, is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus is affirming the lawyer's understanding that this is the ultimate purpose and function of the law that God gave at Sinai to Moses, to tell us and show us, how to love God and one another. And that ultimate purpose and function is moral.

Finally, Jesus himself captures the essence of what is written in the law when challenged by a Pharisee to declare "which is the greatest commandment in the law" (Matt 22:34-40). It is certainly important to note that Jesus accepts the question as legitimate. Even though all the commandments come from God, they are not all equally great! In fact, it clarifies our understanding further to recognize Jesus' own assertion that there are greater and lesser commandments in God's law, for he says, "Whoever, then, annuls one of the least of these commandments . . ." meaning there are commandments which are greater than these in the law (Mt 5:19). If, then, there are greater and lesser commandments, then there are greater and lesser duties, and greater and lesser violations. Or to put this another way, it is clearly not in accord with Jesus' teaching about the law to make every commandment of the law, or every violation of the law (sin), morally equivalent. As there are greater and lesser commandments, there are greater and lesser sins.

In Jesus' response he quotes two passages from the Mosaic law, and gives a three-fold answer. The great and foremost command is to love God with all one's being, above all else (Deut 6:5). This answers the lawyer's question. But then Jesus gives an additional response. He says that to love one's neighbor as oneself is a second commandment like the first (Lev 19:18). The likeness is found in that both commandments focus on the moral activity of love. Thus, Jesus teaches that the ultimate purpose and function of the law is centered in love, in a supreme love for God and in a lesser love for others, a love that matches our own self-love. Further, these commandments are united in likeness in the third part of Jesus' reply. He says that the whole law and the prophets depend on these two. By these words Jesus teaches how the law of God ought to be viewed and correctly interpreted, namely, as precepts and ordinances implementing the true meaning and actions of love towards God and our neighbor. And if this is so comprehensively of the law given at Sinai, it is preeminently so of the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments of the Decalogue express the cardinal commandments which declare what it means to love God supremely;

likewise the remaining six declare the chief duties and moral obligations that embody what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves. In each of the Ten the right interpretation discovers the attitude and actions which are consonant with biblical love.

With this being so, it seems a clear and unavoidable conclusion that so long as the moral obligations exist to love God supremely and our neighbor as ourselves, that the moral obligations of the Ten Commandments also abide. What is fulfilled in the law at Sinai, which then expired, not being essentially moral in nature, were the civil and ceremonial functions. But all that is moral continues. What was written on tablets of stone at Sinai was the moral ultimate of God's revealed will. What is written on tablets of the human heart is the same.

The Apostolic Teaching

To undertake a complete survey of each NT writer's full statements on the law is beyond the scope of this study. I have chosen statements that seem normative for how the apostles understood the law under the new covenant, and those statements seem supportive of the main thesis that the abiding function of the law is moral and it is found in the Decalogue. We will consider James, Peter, John and Paul.

The moral tone of the epistle of James is one of its more obvious character traits. It is as ethically didactic as Paul's writings are theological. His principle reference to the law is in chapter 2:8-13. There he refers to the responsibility of his readers to fulfill the "royal law" of Lev 19:18. He then mentions the law functioning to convict those who sin as transgressors. And what he means by the law is clear when he next enumerates two of the commandments, "do not murder" and "do not commit adultery" as representative of the law as a whole. Whatever else James is saying in this passage, it is clear that he views the moral function of the Ten Commandments as valid for his readers. And his use of the "royal law" indicates he has an understanding of the law faithful to the teachings of Jesus. For James, to speak of the law is to speak of God's moral requirements over his people.

The one direct reference Peter makes to the law is found in 1 Peter 1:14-16. There he calls Christians to stay morally removed from their former evil lives, and in contrast to practice a moral imitation of God the Father. The authority Peter cites for this exhortation is from the law, "because it is written,

‘You shall be holy for I am holy’” quoting words repeated several times in Leviticus (11:44,46 19:2, 20:7). Peter’s citation of the law indicates his position, that the law’s moral function and force remains normative for new covenant believers.

John’s first epistle, by virtue of its greater length, contains many more references to God’s moral requirements for new covenant believers, than either the second or third. But nothing he says in his second or third letter varies from the prevailing theme of 1 John. In this epistle John presents the necessity of the believer’s possessing a righteous moral character as evidence of his true knowledge of God (a new covenant reality). This is expressed several ways: walking in fellowship with God, walking in the light, not sinning, keeping his commandments, walking as Jesus walked, not loving the world, purifying oneself, abiding in Christ and not sinning, practicing righteousness, and several more, all being characteristics that demonstrate one’s spiritual parentage. The “law” so named is not named by John, except that in 2:7 John mentions “an old commandment which you have had from the beginning.” It is important to note that John defines the practice of sin as the practice of lawlessness, an apparent reference to the law as that which displays and defines God’s moral standard (3:4). But that which seems to place John’s position clearly in accord with the previously mentioned apostles is his understanding of love and obedience to God’s commands. John writes; “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome” (5:2-3). Though John’s terminology and manner of expression differ from his fellow apostles, John’s position reflects the imprint of Jesus’ teachings no less than theirs.

The NT material Paul presents for us on the law is considerable and Paul’s varied use of the term “law” makes a comprehensive study challenging. Nevertheless, there are clear instances where Paul’s usage matches the meaning we have already seen in the other apostles. A very clear example is Rom 13:8-10. First Paul calls Christians to the duty of love as a never ending duty. Then Paul mentions that he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. He then quotes several of the Ten Commandments from the second half of the law and says they are summed up in this saying, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Obviously Paul sees the

moral function of God’s law, particularly in the Ten Commandments, as having continuing force, and as a faithful disciple of Jesus’ teachings, he teaches the same connection between the commandments and love. That Paul has a fully developed theology of the law as a functioning pedagogue, as a custodian leading to Christ (Gal 3-4), in no ways conflicts with the moral function of the law. It is, in fact, the moral relevance of all the functions of the law that come together in the law functioning as a tutor. No one could keep all this law, because no one always obeyed God. Rather than this law providing a path to the establishing of one’s righteousness, this law condemned (Gal 3:10). Under this law transgression increased (Rom 5:20). This law, though showing the moral requirements of God as perfect obedience, did nothing to bring about that obedience. Rather, “through the law comes the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). And what the law could not do, “weak as it was though the flesh, God did: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom 8:3). The outcome is that the “requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (4). So for Paul, as in the new covenant promise of Jeremiah, the law is fulfilled in us.

The issue which began this study concerned the role of the law in the lives of new covenant believers. The conclusion reached is hardly startling. Yet it is made so by some in the Christian community who persistently see grace and gospel as antithetical to law, and who do not see in what sense we are liberated from the law. Were we first century converts to Christ from Judaism, we would be free from the law’s pedagogical function. We would be freed as well from the misuse of the law as an attempt to establish works righteousness. Further, we would no longer have civil and ceremonial functions identifying us, binding us, and governing us with their heavy burden. But we would always have the law of love expressed first and foremost towards God supremely, and secondarily towards our neighbor as towards ourselves, as our highest moral requirements; and concordantly their preeminent moral expression in the Decalogue. As Gentile converts directly to Christ from paganism those Jewish categories of law governance, ceremonial and civil, simply did not apply. Yet God has still reckoned us sinners, because of the moral conscience imprinted on us from creation. It was true of Gentiles then, as of all people now, that “*although they know the ordinance of God, that*

those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them” (Rom 1:32). Consequently, in the gospel what is given to us, as promised by Jeremiah, is a heart that has the law of God engraved on it, namely the two great commandments as the moral center and their

Decalogical principles as that which they morally entail. Or to put it bluntly, in the new covenant reality of grace, the Ten Commandments still reign as God’s moral standard over our lives, yet governing us from our regenerated hearts outward into the lives we live.

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