



Lesson Eight

Bible Basics –

God's Laws and the Sabbath

The Covenant of Law

In ancient times, people wondered how to communicate with the gods. In a poem written around 1640 BCE in ancient Sumer, a man laments the suffering of mankind, and wonders what they have done to displease the gods. This poem, titled “A Dialogue Between a Man and His God” discusses in depth how challenging it is to understand what the gods wanted. If anything, this poem proves that man has

always struggled to understand what God’s expectations for us were.

Yahweh God – the one true living God – has proven to be different from the other gods of history, not just through the actions He has taken to provide for His people, but also in the way that He speaks with us. Unlike other historical gods, Yahweh has always communicated directly with His people in many

ways. This includes laying out His expectations for us through clear, divine edicts called "laws".

Since the beginning of human incarnation, God has laid a foundation of laws for mankind to follow. Why? The bible tells us that these laws are "for our own benefit" (Deuteronomy 10:13). Think of a parent with a small child. Sometimes, the rules parents put in place in their household do not make sense to the children. Yet the parents set these rules in place to protect their kids from various harms. As our heavenly Father, Yahweh God gives us rules to obey that protect us and keep us safe.

Discussion: What were the divine laws?

God has been using laws to communicate His expectations from the very beginning. When Cain and Abel came of age, they each made a sacrifice in God's name. The bible indicates that Abel's sacrifice was done correctly, while Cain's was not. This shows us that there was a set standard for sacrifices, meaning that God had already established some laws that weren't recorded by later bible authors. When Noah was boarding the Ark, he was instructed to bring aboard 2 of every 'unclean' animal and 7 of every 'clean' animal (Genesis 7:2). This implies that Noah already knew which animals were considered clean vs unclean, again a law that wasn't written. However, the most notable early example of God's laws came in the form of the Law of Moses.

Some people think of the Law as a series of hard rules that one must follow to earn God's approval; however, the bible clearly demonstrates that this is not the case. In ancient times, laws were considered a 'governance of wisdom', meaning that these were edicts one could use to affect how they thought and thus how they behaved. This can be seen repeatedly throughout bible history. Yahweh lamented how His people disobeyed the spirit of the law in favor of the letter of the law. During his time on earth, Jesus repeated this lamentation and even went as far as to claim obedience to the letter of the law was not enough for the people of Israel.

God wants us to use His laws to train our conscience. Let's look at an example. In ancient Israel, the part of the house we would call the

'roof' was part of the living space. Stairs would lead up onto the roof where people could sit, cook, or even sleep on particularly hot days. In the Torah, Yahweh commanded His people put a parapet – or small wall – around the roof. This was the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law was the reason why God put this edict in place. It was to protect people, and to preserve safety. You can see by this example that the law here dictates how one ought to *think* rather than simply how one should *behave*.



Finished Roof exterior, image by Nazareth Village Trust

These laws were not just rules, however. This was a covenant. This was known as the Covenant of Law, and was defined in many ways by the Law of Moses. As an obligatory covenant, both parties made promises to the other. In this case, Yahweh promised the Israelites His divine authority and protection, that He would clear their enemies and lead them into the promised land, where they could live in peace so long as they maintained their part of the covenant. In return, the Israelites promised to be Yahweh's people, and to obey His commands and authority. This meant, in part, that the Israelites promised to uphold the Law of Moses.

When the Israelites began to worship false idols, they broke the covenant they made with Yahweh God. Did that mean that the Law of

Moses was done away with, since the covenant they were attached to were gone?

Many today will say that it was. Let's look at what the bible says.

Not One Dot



The New Covenant, which we are under to this day, defines a relationship with Yahweh based on grace and love. Yet there is law here, also. Yahweh is a God of justice (Isaiah 30:18). There is no relationship with Him that does not include a judiciary component. The New Covenant is no exception.

Many think of the New Covenant as its own, standalone concept. This simply is not the case. The New Covenant isn't separate from previous covenants; *it fulfills them* (Galatians 3:17-18). The Old Covenant is a shadow of the New, which in itself is a reflection of the Old. These covenants are two sides of the same coin – which is to build a lasting

relationship between God and mankind.

When we compare the Old and New Covenants, we begin to see similarities in their efforts. The Old Covenant included sacrifices for grace, just as the New does. In ancient times, people could sacrifice animals at the tabernacle (and later at the Temple) for the repentance of sin. The New Covenant does not need those sacrifices, as the sacrifice of Christ covers all sin (1 John 2:2). In the Old Covenant, they obeyed the Law of Moses. Under the New Covenant, to this day, we are to obey **the Law of Christ** (Galatians 6:2).

Some will say that Jesus did away with the Law in its entirety. Yet Jesus himself disputed this argument. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

(Matthew 5:17-18). Jesus had said that not one dot of the law would pass away until 'all is accomplished'. This means that Jesus was promoting obedience to God's Law, even under his own sacrifice!

What about the apostles? Did they obey the law? Yes. Long after Jesus' death, the apostles continued to obey God's laws. There was a great debate at the time, in which some followers were saying that we no longer

needed the law. This is where context becomes important. Remember that the Law of Moses was both a command and a covenant. In some cases, it is clear that the apostles are saying we no longer need the law, but which law? In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul writes, "the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith" (Galatians 3:24-26). When we examine this text, and truly throughout all of Galatians, we can tell that Paul is clearly referring to the Law *covenant*, not the Law commands.

The Old Covenant is a shadow of the New, meaning that it was a placeholder in

which those chosen by God had a chance to form a true and lasting relationship with Him. However, even at the time, God acknowledged that this covenant was not a permanent one (Isaiah 49:8). Paul tells in his letter to the Galatians that this covenant was a placeholder, something to maintain a good relationship with God in the time until Jesus' arrival. But now that Jesus has come, no longer are we under the Covenant of Law, but instead the Covenant of Grace.

So, what about the law of commands? Paul, who had written Galatians, also wrote "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law." (Romans 3:31). This shows us that while we are under a covenant of grace through faith, we are still bound by

God's commands in the Law. Galatians 6:2 tells us to "obey the Law of Christ". In 1 Corinthians 9:21, Paul further clarified that we are to obey God's Commands in the law of Christ even if we are not bound by the Law of Moses anymore.

The Apostles James also wrote on the matter. He firmly established that though we are justified by faith, our faith is manifested through our works of the Law (James 2:18). This only serves to confirm what Paul said and to unite the major themes in scripture: If we have faith in God's good-will and believe in His right to rule, we will submit ourselves to His sovereignty through obedience to His commands. Even to this day, that holds true.

Discussion: Which law was abolished? Which was kept?

The Greatest Commandments



If we're still under the Law, what does that mean for us today? It means that we are obedient to the commands of God through three main sources: First, we are under the command of God through the Holy Spirit. Upon our baptism, we gain the holy spirit as a helper, to guide us on our spiritual journey (James 14:26). When we pray to God, He can use the holy spirit to incline our hearts towards His will. To us, this may read as a particularly strong feeling or intuition. However, we must be careful to differentiate holy spirit from our own personal feelings, which can often be manipulated and misleading (**Read: Proverbs 3:5-6**).

The second way God commands us is through the bible. When we read the bible in its entirety, we get to know God. There is nothing He withholds from us in scripture. Here we can begin to understand the spirit of the Law, which is where our obedience is most important. For example, let's revisit the Old Law of roofs. God commanded Israel to put a parapet around the roof to protect the sanctity of life. He wants us to practice safety. Today, we no longer use rooftops as living spaces. We don't need a parapet on our roofs. Instead, through the Law of Christ and love for our neighbors, we can apply this law by putting a railing on a balcony, or through other safe practices in high places.

Which brings us to the heart of God's laws: love. Unlike the Law of Moses, which was quite literally chiseled in stone, the Law of Christ has very few written laws. The point of the Law of Christ is to read the bible and come to an understanding of what God expects through sources He provides. We can follow Jesus' examples of how we ought to behave regarding the Law. But it was perhaps his words to the Pharisees that most concisely summarized the Law of Christ:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40)

These are referred to as the two greatest commandments. Jesus is telling us, plainly, that we obey the Law by seeking to first please God in all we say and do (Colossians 3:17). Through our actions, we must hold an upright character that praises God's holy name. Second, we are to love our neighbor above ourselves, which covers the whole of the Law. The apostle Paul said that "love does a neighbor no wrong" and that through our loving actions, our love fulfills the Law. This can be taking actions through our understanding of Scripture that show our neighbor genuine, Christian love. Ultimately, it doesn't look one specific way, but is fulfilled in many, small ways.

We get to know God through our bible studies and come to feel strongly inclined

towards them through holy spirit. Yet the third and most prevalent factor in how we can show obedience to God's Laws is through God's holy assembly. The assembly is God's earthly representation. Run by imperfect people, you may have doubts about the assembly and its ability to honestly represent God's interests. Yet God doesn't call us to be perfect; He does, however, command us to come together in worship (Hebrews 10:25). In the assembly, Yahweh God uses the holy spirit to appoint delegates of His word. These are Presbyters, or those who teach others about God's word. From those who serve on a personal basis to full-time ministers, God uses presbyters to enact His will on earth through the assembly.



God uses three main ways to convey His will to us: Holy spirit, the bible, and the assembly

The Sabbath



Christians are bound by the Law of Christ in our covenant agreement, but we are bound by more than just that. There are laws so fundamental to God's teachings that they exist outside covenantal ties. These are the laws of cleanliness and, perhaps most prevalent of them all, **the Sabbath**.

Some people get confused about the Sabbath. Many say that the Sabbath has been done away with as the Law of Moses. While it is true that Yahweh chose the Sabbath to be the symbol of covenant with Israel, that does not make the Sabbath strictly a part of the Old Law. God included the Sabbath in the Law of Moses, but as a

standard, the Sabbath pre-existed the law.

The bible tells us that the Sabbath was introduced in Genesis, when Yahweh created the world (Genesis 2:3). This was long before Abraham or his children were conceptualized. At that time, Yahweh commanded that all sentient beings rested on the seventh day. Never in the bible did He countermand this directive. Yet still many today are confused by the Sabbath command and deny it. Let's look at some arguments that people propose against the Sabbath, and compare it to what the bible says.

Jesus Abolished the Sabbath

Many well-meaning or confused Christians say that Jesus abolished the Sabbath during his time on earth. At face value, Jesus' actions seem to support this: he and his followers prepared food on the Sabbath, a practice that was strictly forbidden in Israeli society at that time. Further, when the religious leaders of that day called out Jesus' actions, he admonished them strictly. Yet when we more carefully examine these biblical accounts, we get a clearer picture of Jesus' true stance on the Sabbath.

The Pharisees were notoriously legalistic. Many times during his three-year ministry, Jesus called out the Pharisees hypocritical, manmade laws that contradicted the spirit of God's laws. This included their Sabbath observance.

Jesus confronted them by asking, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" (Luke 14:5). Later, when Jesus was healing on the Sabbath, he asked them "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?"

When the Pharisees struggled to answer him, Jesus declared that, as the Son of Man, he was Lord of the Sabbath. What did that mean? Jesus explained himself: The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). The Sabbath is a day of rest, for our own benefit, not a day to adhere to the strict principles of man. The Laws that the Pharisees had created were not from God. Since Jesus was from God, his way of keeping the Sabbath was the appropriate way! Jesus

maintained Sabbath adherence through preaching, healing, and resting. We ought to do the same.

The Apostles Worshiped on Sunday

Many will argue that the apostles did not keep the Sabbath after Jesus died. This is simply not the case. It is true that the apostles gathered on Sundays – actually, the apostles gathered almost every day of the week. They'd eat meals together and debate bible topics. They were establishing the early assembly, and it required full-time attention. But they still maintained the Sabbath as sacred.

While the topic of the Sabbath wasn't a focus of the New Testament, it still makes

it plain that the Sabbath was a holy day of rest for the Israelites. Luke 23:56 says, "On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment." This clearly shows that the Israelites still valued the Sabbath as separate from the Law. It also says that Paul would regularly preach on the Sabbath, even after his conversion (Luke 4:16)

When directly asked, the apostles told the growing Christian community to "let no one judge you in... sabbath keeping..." (among other things) (Colossians 4:16). In other words, not only are we to maintain the Sabbath, but we are to keep it with pride and dignity, not allowing other's ridicule to manifest in our hearts.

Keeping the Sabbath is a Personal Decision

Indeed, whether to keep the Sabbath or not is a personal decision, however that does not mean it isn't also a command. Most people get this confused because of one particular scripture, often misinterpreted: Romans, 14:5, which reads "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind."

Most people see this verse out of context. When we read the chapter, we begin to understand that this verse doesn't refer to the Sabbath at all. In this chapter, the apostle Paul is referring to the act of fasting, or the withholding of food in honor of Yahweh. Some people believed that we should abstain from all food or drink, while others were only able

to withhold from specific foods, like meats. Paul was admonishing the early assembly not to think of those who couldn't observe an entire fast day as spiritually weak, but to honor their efforts no matter how small it seems to us.

The biggest arguments to keep the Sabbath are, overall, stronger than any evidence one might provide against it. The apostles kept the Sabbath after Jesus. Jesus kept the Sabbath. Yahweh God *Himself* kept the Sabbath and commanded all of us to do the same. There is no better argument than that for us, today, to hold the Sabbath as holy.

God's Laws are an important part of the Christian faith. They allow us to openly praise God's name in our actions. The Laws are

designed to help us draw closer to Him. While perfect obedience is neither possible nor expected, when we strive to adhere to God's laws, we ultimately demonstrate to Him that we love Him, and believe in His divine sovereignty.