

# The Law of Moses

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It's been almost ten years since I graduated from law school. In that ten years, most of what I learned in law school has vanished from my brain, to be replaced by important information about things like warfare in sixteenth-century Italy and University of Missouri athletics. However, there are some things I still remember, and one of those things is that in law, jurisdiction is very important. Usually, a court case is decided on the basis of the law of the area where the cause of action arose. Thus, if two identical cases appear before two courts, one in Illinois and one in Oklahoma, the two cases could have dramatically different outcomes, because the laws of those two states are different.

The same thing is true of our dealings with God's law. However, in this area, the most important detail is not where a given action occurred. It is when. Things that are explicitly commanded in one location in the Bible are condemned with equal explicitness elsewhere in it. This doesn't mean that the Bible contradicts itself. Instead, it occurs because God's word contains two legal codes, not one. Let's consider this today with respect to the Law of Moses.

## Christ and the Law

Before we go any further, we first must gain an appreciation for the interaction between Jesus Christ and the Law. This will also serve to prepare our minds for the Lord's Supper. Any analysis of the subject would be incomplete if it did not note that Jesus was **BORN UNDER THE LAW**. Paul makes a point of this in Galatians 4:4-5. In fact, Jesus was born, lived, and even died under the Law. He was a religiously observant first-century Jew, and unless we include that truth in our understanding of Jesus, that understanding will always be flawed. Let me give you an example. A couple of weeks ago, I was reading an article that quoted Gene Robinson, who is a denominational bishop who is a homosexual. Robinson stated that he "could not imagine" that Jesus, if He were on earth today, would be opposed to gay marriage. There are two problems with that assertion. First of all, Jesus did plainly say, as recorded in Matthew 19, that in marriage, a man left his father and mother and was joined to his wife, which doesn't leave a lot of room for husbands joining husbands or wives joining wives. Second, though, Jesus could not have taken a stand in favor of homosexual marriage without rejecting everything the Law of Moses said about homosexuality, which He never would have done. Once we remove Jesus from His historical and legal setting, we inevitably lose touch with who He really was. We reconstruct Him according to our own desires, which is idolatry. Instead, we must consider Jesus with the Law in mind.

By Jesus' own admission, the Law was extremely important to Him. He said, in fact, that He **CAME TO FULFILL THE LAW**. We read this in Matthew 5:17-18. This is a text that is often misinterpreted. I've been in religious discussions with people before who wanted to justify their actions using the Law, and who cited this passage to prove that the Law was still in full force today. However, that isn't actually what the passage says. Jesus doesn't say that the Law won't pass away until heaven and earth do. Instead, He says that the Law will only pass away when all has been fulfilled. Immediately before that, He states that fulfilling the Law was the very reason why He came. The Law, which would otherwise be indestructible, was only to remain binding until Jesus fulfilled it.

In this statement of intention, Jesus means "fulfill" in two different senses. First, it was His goal to keep the Law perfectly, fulfilling every single commandment that God handed down through Moses, never sinning once. Second, Jesus meant to fulfill the Law by fulfilling all the prophecies about Him that the Law contained. In both of these ways, then, Jesus intended to be the embodiment of all the Law had been striving toward for 1500 years, after which it would pass.

Indeed, Jesus succeeded in this aim. He **KEPT THE LAW PERFECTLY**. This truth and its implications are presented in Hebrews 10:5, 7. The Hebrews writer here is quoting from Psalm 40, one of the many psalms that describes some aspect of the life of Jesus. However, this statement wasn't something that Jesus said once. Instead, it was a statement that He lived every day of his life. Even at the very end of His life, in the Garden of Gethsemane, He said to His Father, "Yet not My will, but Yours, be done," and to back it up, surrendered His own body to be killed.

This frighteningly perfect lifelong walk with God was something that Jesus had to do, and it was something He had to do for us. As this Scripture says, God took no pleasure in all of the animal sacrifices of the Law of Moses. They weren't enough to truly pay the price for the sin of His people. Instead, they, and we today, had to be cleansed with a better sacrifice, not with the sacrifice of an unblemished bull or goat, but with the blood of the unblemished Son of God.

As this statement implies, the Law of Moses was an imperfect law, attached to an imperfect covenant. As a result, Christ took this flawed Law and **NAILED IT TO THE CROSS**. Paul says this in Colossians 2:13-14. Obviously, this text does not describe a literal event. Jesus didn't say to the Roman guard, "Could you hold off a little bit, guys, and give Me the chance to hang this up first?" Instead, what Paul means for us to learn from this is that while the Romans were putting Christ to death, He was putting the Law to death. When He cried out, "It is finished!", one of the things that was finished was the authority of the Law of Moses. Because Jesus had perfectly fulfilled its every particular, it no longer had a purpose, and it was abolished, along with its inadequate provision for forgiveness of sins. The Law was not altered when Jesus died. It was not split into two parts, one of which survived. It was entirely destroyed.

Because this left a void in the relationship between man and God, Christ also **REPLACED THE LAW**. Let's consider Paul's take on the matter in 1 Corinthians 9:20-21. There are two important lessons we need to take from this. First, it reveals that Paul, despite being a Jew, no longer considered himself to be under the Law of Moses. When Paul did appear to follow some part of the Law of Moses, as when he underwent a purification ritual in the temple in Acts 21, he did so not because he felt that law was still binding, but because he wished to avoid giving offense to other Jews.

However, when Paul went to the Gentiles, he didn't bring the trappings of the Law with him, because those things would pose an unnecessary stumbling block. However, that didn't mean that he was free from obligation toward God. Instead, as he himself tells it, he invariably conducted himself according to the law of Christ. The words of Jesus and His apostles that we have recorded for us in the New Testament are not some incoherent blob of wise sayings. Instead, they form the system of law that governs us today, the laws that replaced the Law of Moses.

As we prepare ourselves for the Lord's Supper, then, all of this should turn our reflections in two main directions. First, it reminds us again how much we owe Jesus. He kept the Law that we could not keep, the Law that condemned us, paid the debt that we owed it because of our sin, and demolished it so that it no longer has any power over us. However, this does not mean that we are free to do as we please. Instead, we are responsible for obeying the Law of Christ, and we will have to give an account of how well we do so. Let's consider that responsibility as we partake.

### **Christians and the Law**

Now that we know how Christ and the Law of Moses interacted, we can turn our attention to the practical question of how we should interact with it. When it comes to the Law of Moses, the most important thing we can remember is that we are **NOT UNDER IT**. Paul says this pretty plainly in Romans 6:14. This cannot mean that we are outside any law whatsoever. As we saw a moment ago, we are very much under the law of Christ. However, because the Law of Moses was crucified with Christ, its statutes have no force to govern our conduct.

This has two main implications. First, it means that we will not be held accountable by God for the way that we keep the Law. There are all kinds of rules and regulations in the Pentateuch, about everything from what kind of food the Israelites could eat to what kind of cloth they could weave. We can safely ignore every last one of those rules. Second, though, if I am not bound by the Law, it logically follows that I can't use the Law to justify myself either. If the Law doesn't apply to me, it doesn't apply to me, and I don't get to cherry-pick the parts of the Law I like and claim that I'm obeying God when I follow those parts. Here's what that would be like: It would be like if a cop caught me driving down the left side of the street, and as he's writing me a ticket, I defend my conduct by claiming that I was only obeying the law of Great Britain, where everybody drives on the left side of the street. In reality, if I'm not in the territory of Great Britain, the law of Great Britain is meaningless. Likewise, if I'm not in the time of the Law of Moses, the Law is too.

What's worse, if I ignore this teaching and insist on following some part of the Law of Moses anyway, my conduct **LEADS TO A CURSE**. Once again, this is something that Paul teaches us, in Galatians 3:10. This isn't some kind of vague, nebulous curse, either. Instead, it is a natural consequence of picking and choosing. Basically, there are two ways we can be justified before God. The first is that we can be justified by our faith in Jesus, who will perfect us even though we are imperfect. The second is through perfect law-keeping. What Paul wants us to understand from this is that the Law of Moses is a package deal. We can't pick one Mosaic commandment and stop. Instead, once we pick that one Mosaic commandment, we are suddenly responsible for perfectly keeping the entire Law of Moses, which we wouldn't be able to do even if it were possible. As a result, the death-curse of the Law would come down on us. The point is, friends, that even for Christians, messing around with the Law of Moses can have dire consequences.

The most severe of these is **FALLING FROM GRACE**. Paul lays out this danger in Galatians 5:3-4. Let's begin our analysis of this passage by noting its specific application. Paul here is addressing the Judaizing practice of circumcising Gentile converts, on the basis that they had to be faithful to the Law if they wanted to please God. Note that the Judaizing teachers were not arguing that Gentiles or anybody else had to keep the Law perfectly. Instead, these teachers said that Gentiles had to be faithful to the Law of Moses as we must be faithful to the law of Christ today.

However, as we saw a moment ago, Paul wanted the Galatians to understand that seeking to be justified by any part of the Law led to disaster. Not only did that activate the curse of the Law, but it also severed the Galatians from the only One who could justify them. After all, the grace of Christ and the Law of Moses have nothing to do with one another. Once we seek, wittingly or not, to be justified by the Law, we inevitably fall from grace. This logic holds true not only for circumcision, but for any part of the Law of Moses. Relying on it leads to our spiritual doom.

We're going to examine the application of this principle in two main areas. The first concerns **DRINKING**. Look, for example, at Proverbs 23:31-32. This passage, along with several others in Proverbs, constitutes a clear warning against the consumption of alcohol. We need to pay attention to these passages. We need to acknowledge that drinking often leads to unforeseen trouble, and that the consumption of alcohol is often foolish. However, what we cannot do is import Proverbs 23 into the New Testament and use it to teach that drinking is sinful. That's not something we're permitted to use the Law of Moses for, and if we do, we will surely fall under the condemnation Paul utters in Galatians.

The second example we're going to consider this morning is **SPIRITUAL DANCING**. We see an instance of this practice in Exodus 15:20. There are many other examples I could have chosen. Dancing before the Lord was clearly a common part of the religious observances of the Israelites. Indeed, spiritual dancers are quite common in self-described Christian church services today. However, before we let Brother Fred get up here and dance before the Lord with his pink feather boa, we need to ask ourselves if that would be lawful. It is true that there are many things we do that the Law of Moses commanded. We sing. We pray. We give of our means. However, we do all of those things because they are commanded in the New Testament, not the Old. In one form or another, they were carried over to the new covenant. Dancing as worship, be it ever so sincere, was not. The only passages we could turn to for support of dancing in our assemblies are part of the Law of Moses, and as soon as we seek to be justified by law, we will be severed from Christ. There are all kinds of arguments that people make in favor of the instrument and tithing and what have you, but about the worst Biblical argument that we can make is that we should do something because the Israelites did it. The arguments against those things are not silence-of-the-Scriptures arguments. Instead, we have been explicitly warned that if we try to bring Moses into Christ, Moses will destroy us and Christ will not save us. We must take that warning to heart.

### **The Law Today**

If then, we imperil our souls by treating the Law of Moses as an authority for our religious practice, what use is the Law for us today at all? Actually, the Scripture reveals several things that we can use the Law for. First, it **GIVES US HOPE**. Paul emphasizes this in Romans 15:4. Sure, the Law doesn't bind us today, but that doesn't make it any less true. The Bible tells us over and over again that God is faithful, that God doesn't change, so we can be certain that He is the same God today that He was 3000 years ago. Likewise, if things look rough for God's people today, we must remember that they looked equally rough for God's people 3000 years ago. It's the thing about the eternal conflict between God and the devil: the devil always looks like he's winning, but he never does. When we read about the way that men and women of faith in Bible times overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to claim victory with God's help, that reminds us that if we are men and women of faith today, God will give us what we need to find victory too. We might not have giants to fight or invasions to defeat, but those stories from the word teach us to hope confidently in God.

The flip side of the coin is that the Old Testament also **WARNS US** of the dangers of disobedience. This idea appears in 1 Corinthians 10:6. When we see all the obstacles in our way and all of the apparent pleasures of sin, those things tempt us to abandon God, in the belief that we will live easier and better lives without Him. This is not a new temptation. The children of Israel faced the same pressures to fall away, and all too often, they gave into the devil and forsook the Lord. At this time, this looked like the smart play, like following God looked like the dumb play, but every time God's people turned away from Him, they paid the price. God is faithful in kindness to those who obey Him, but He is equally faithful in wrath to those who disobey. God hasn't changed since He struck down the unbelieving in the wilderness, or sent foreign nations to carry His unfaithful people into slavery. If we give into the pressure and forsake Him, those stories teach us that we will certainly be punished too. We don't serve a wimpy God who allows evil to continue unchecked. Instead, the Old Testament teaches us that He is just to repay the wicked according to their deeds.

Third, the Law **LEADS US TO CHRIST**. Paul makes this point in Galatians 3:24. In context, Paul is talking about the way that God's people were guided and instructed by the Law for the 1500 years before Christ came, but even today, the Law carries out a similar function for us. What does it mean, for instance, that Jesus has been seated on the throne of David? What does it mean that Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins? Why did the Jews get so outraged when Jesus predicted that the temple in Jerusalem was going to be destroyed? Why do Jesus and the Pharisees spend years fighting about Jesus healing the sick on the Sabbath? These are only a few examples. I could probably spend the next half hour listing example after example of some story or teaching in the New Testament that makes no sense unless we refer back to the Old Testament. Likewise, there are all kinds of things in the Old Testament that look forward to the New Testament, beginning with the dozens of prophecies about the Christ that the Old Testament contains and going from there. When we consider all of these things together, they lead us to conclude that the story of the gospel would be nearly incomprehensible without the guidance of the Old Testament. The Law and the Prophets help us to understand what Jesus was doing and why, and they help us build our faith in Him.

The Old Testament helps us understand in any number of ways, but it is perhaps most useful to us when it **ILLUSTRATES HEAVENLY THINGS**. The Hebrews writer indicates this function of the Law in Hebrews 8:4-5. Here's what we need to learn from this description. When God told Moses to construct the tabernacle with certain dimensions, certain rooms, and certain furnishings, He didn't do that because He thought the result would be aesthetically pleasing. Instead, the tabernacle, and after it the temple, were constructed as a model, an earthly representation of the heavenly reality. For instance, the veil between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place wasn't merely a decorative curtain. It was a representation of the barrier of sin that stood between man and God. Likewise, the religious rituals that the Law instructed the priests to carry out were representations of acts with genuine spiritual significance. For instance, the sacrifice that the priests offered once a year on the Day of Atonement for the sins of the people committed in

ignorance foreshadowed and explained the sacrifice that Jesus would offer of His own flesh and blood. For that matter, even many of the stories of the Old Testament aren't the story of some event that happened as the result of human will. Instead, God often arranged events so that they would teach us about some spiritually important concept today. For example, when God told Abraham to take and sacrifice his son Isaac, that was more than a test of Abraham's faith. Instead, it was a type of the time when the Father would sacrifice His only begotten Son Jesus for us. The more we study the Old Testament, the more these patterns emerge, and the more we learn about our spiritual reality.

Finally, the Law **TELLS US OF GOD**. We see an example of this quoted in Hebrews 12:26. I think just about all of us would acknowledge, if we thought about it for a second, that the New Testament has a near monopoly on first-person utterances of Jesus. There are a couple of times when He's talking in the Old Testament, but 99 percent of the statements made by our Lord are in the Gospels and the book of Revelation. However, the opposite is true with respect to God the Father. There are a couple of times in the New Testament when we see the Father speaking, such as at the baptism of Jesus, but other than those few instances, all the words of the Father Himself are in the Law of Moses.

This means that if we want to come to know the Father directly, we are driven to the Old Testament. In that time, God's prophets recorded page after page of Him speaking. Those words reveal His love for His people, His expectation of obedience, His wrath against the unrighteous, and His mercy for the repentant. Without that information, our conception of the Father would be much less well informed and likely much less accurate. That is a big deal. After all, as Christians our goal is to serve God here so that we can live forever with Him in heaven. We can't know whether that goal is worthy unless we first know God, and we can't know God without knowing what the Law says of Him.