

# The Law of God in the Life of a Christian

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In most ethical debates among Christians, the question causing debate is often not what the law means or how it should be applied, but rather what is the law that should be applied. Even among Christians, who all recognize Jesus Christ as the King of Kings, there is significant disagreement about which of the many words that he has spoken are applicable in any given situation and which are not. One doesn't have to listen to this debate very long before hearing the assertion, "We are not under law, but under grace." In fact, these words themselves are part of the law of God. ("*...for you are not under law, but under grace.*" Romans 6:14b) What do they mean? To answer that question, let's begin by defining the terms, particularly the terms *under* and *law*. In the Bible, *Law* is used in several different ways. It can refer to:

1. **A doctrine, system, or principle**

Romans 3:27 Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.

Romans 8:2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.

Romans 7:23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

2. **The commands and ceremonies associated with the OT Temple and Tabernacle Worship.**

Hebrews 8:4 For if he were on earth, he should not be a priest, seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the law; or

Hebrews 10:1 For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect.

Hebrews 10:8 Above when he said, Sacrifice and offering and burnt offerings and offering for sin you would not, neither had pleasure therein; which are offered according to the law;

Ephesians 2:15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace;

3. **The Moral Law** (or that which is summarized in the 10 commandments)

Matthew 12:5 Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?

Matthew 22:36 Master, which is the great commandment in the law?

## The Law of God in the Life of the Christian

### 4. The Pentateuch

Luke 24:44 And he said unto them, These are the words which I spoke unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.

John 1:45 Philip found Nathanael, and said unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

### 5. The Scriptures as a whole

John 10:34 Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? (Jesus quotes from Psalm 82:6 referring to the Psalms as the "law.")

Romans 7:22 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:

Matthew 23:23 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law: judgment, mercy, and faith. These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.

Psalms 19:7 The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.

There are many passages in the NT where law is used to explicitly refer to OT commandments and there are places where law is used without explicit reference to OT commandments. But nowhere does the NT ever limit "law" to just NT commands.

The word *under* is fairly straightforward meaning "obligated to obey" or in the case of a principle, that it is applicable to our situation. So with these definitions, I think most would agree that scripture teaches:

1. The law of faith and the law of the Spirit of life are doctrines that are applicable to us. But we are not under the law as a means of justification. We can't be saved by keeping the law. Grace is the principle undergirding our salvation. It is the means by which we are saved from the wrath of God (Ephesians 2:9). Neither are we under the curse of the law. Christ has borne the curse of the law, satisfying the wrath of God and paying the penalty for our breaking of God's law. Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangs on a tree: Galatians 3:13.
2. Neither are we under the law in the second sense of its use. Christ has offered of himself a sacrifice that is far superior to the blood of the bulls and goats. In fact any attempt to obey these laws using animal sacrifices is to deny Christ's great work on the cross.

But what about the law as defined in senses 3 through 5?

## The NT View of Transgressions of God's Law

The Bible defines sin as a transgression of God's law.

Whosoever commits sin transgresses also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law. 1 John 3:4

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. 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

## The Law of God in the Life of the Christian

In these passages law is being used in sense 3, 4, or 5.

The Bible says that we still sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:8-10)

Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. (James 5:16a)

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)

If sin is a transgression of the law and we still sin, even after conversion, then we must still have a duty to obey the law of God. If there was no obligation for us to obey the law of God, then it would be impossible for us to sin. Sin is only possible where there is a law. "For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law." (Romans 5:13)

Paul tells us that sin is not to have dominion over us and that we are not to use our members for sinful purposes. If we are not to use our members for sin then we are not to use our members to transgress the law of God. That is the same as saying that we have a moral duty to obey the law of God.

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.  
Romans 6:12-13

John is quite explicit that we if we abide in Christ we are not to sin any more.

You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. 1 John 3:5-6

If we are not to sin any more, that means we are not to transgress the law of God anymore. If we are not to transgress the law of God, then we are under obligation to obey the law of God. This is consistent with what Jesus said in Matthew 5 about not coming to abolish the law.

Jesus taught that the Old Testament law was still something we should obey and called those who broke even the least commandment, least in the kingdom of heaven.

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:17-19

And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail. Luke 16:17

## The Law of God in the Life of the Christian

Jesus also cited OT applications of the moral law as obligatory. For instance, when Jesus was tempted by Satan to cast himself off the temple, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:16 (Ye shall not tempt the LORD your God,) as the reason it would be wrong for him to cast himself off the temple. In Mark 10:19 he added the OT command "Do not defraud" to a recitation of the 10 commandments.<sup>1</sup>

This understanding of our relationship to the law is implicitly assumed or explicitly stated many places in scripture. Jesus said the golden rule is based upon the OT law (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, you shall love the Lord thy God with all your heart, and with all thy soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Matthew 22:37-40

Therefore all things whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. Matthew 7:12

Jesus appealed to the OT law regarding the necessity of a plurality of witnesses to establish facts in order to show that his testimony about himself was true. Jesus claimed his testimony was true because it was established by two witnesses – the Father and the Son – exactly as required in the law.

And yet if I judge, my judgment is true: for I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent me. It is also written in your law, that the testimony of two men is true. I am one that bears witness of myself, and the Father that sent me bears witness of me. John 8:16-18

Jesus recognized the Pharisee's tithing the increase of their spices was proper and good. But he also rebuked them for not obeying the weightier matters of the law. If the Pharisees were rebuked for forgetting the weightier matters of the law – judgment, mercy, and faith, how much more are we, who have the greater light of the NT, responsible to obey the weightier matters of the law of God?

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Matthew 23:23

Paul acknowledged that the law in Exodus 22:28 was something he should obey.

Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for you sit to judge me after the law, and command me to be smitten contrary to the law? And they that stood by said, Do you revile God's high priest? Then said Paul, I knew not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people. Acts 23:3-5

Consistent with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5, Paul applies obligations in the OT law to NT situations.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a quote from both Exodus 21:10 forbidding withholding conjugal rights from an unloved wife and from Malachi 3:5 forbidding the defrauding of an employee, a widow, or an orphan. The Septuagint uses ἀποστερέω (apostereō) in both passages which is the same verb Jesus uses in Mark 10:19.

## The Law of God in the Life of the Christian

Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine. For the scripture says, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treads out the corn. And, the laborer is worthy of his reward. (1Timothy 5:17-18)

For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treads out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Or says he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that plows should plow in hope; and that he that threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope. 1 Corinthians 9:9-10

Paul appeals to Deuteronomy 25:4 (Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treads out the corn.) as the basis for paying elders in the NT church. It should also be remembered that Paul goes so far as to say that he proclaimed nothing except what was written in Moses and the prophets. Far from being abolished, the law of God (i.e OT scripture) is the foundation on which the NT is built.

Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come. (Acts 26:22)

Paul also said that all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (2 Timothy 3:16-17) He doesn't say, "NT scripture is profitable." If we are going to be thoroughly furnished unto all good works, then we must pay attention to all scripture. We have to be instructed in both the OT and NT law.

### The Significance of Obeying God's Law

Jesus taught that keeping the law would bring eternal life, if anyone could do it. The problem, as Paul makes clear in Romans 2 is that absolutely no one, either Jew or Gentile, can keep the law.

And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, 'What is written in the law? How do you read it?' And he answering said, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.' And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. Luke 10:25-28

Paul repeats same principle in Romans – those who (actually and in fact) keep the law are justified.

For there is no respect of persons with God. For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law; For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. Romans 2:11-13

Paul goes on to leave no doubt that even though perfect obedience of the law of God would result in eternal life, no one can be saved that way because no one is able to keep the law. No one can even come close.

## The Law of God in the Life of the Christian

As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understand, there is none that seeks after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulcher; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes. ... Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight... (Romans 3:10-18, 20a)

### The Spiritual Nature and Inward Inscription of God's Law

But as Paul makes clear a little later, the fact that we are justified by grace does not make void the law of God.

Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. ... Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law. Romans 3:28, 31

Far from being made void, the law is not only established, but it is good and it is spiritual.

Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. ... For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Romans 7:12, 14, 16

I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: Romans 7:21-22

The NT teaches that God writes the law on our heart. Far from teaching that we are no longer obliged to obey the law of God, Hebrews says that God puts his law into our minds.

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Hebrews 8:10

The Apostle John describes Christians as those who keep the commandments of God.

Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. Revelation 14:12

Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea. Revelation 12:17

### Love Defined by Obedience to God's Law

The NT everywhere emphatically affirms the OT. But the obligation for NT Christians to follow the law of God can be shown from a completely different approach. We are commanded in numerous places to

## The Law of God in the Life of the Christian

love one another. What does it mean to love? Jesus said that to love him means that we keep his commandments. (If you love me, you will keep my commandments. John 14:15) Paul says the same thing in Romans: "love is fulfilling the law."

Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loves another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Love works no ill to his neighbor: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

The Apostle John says the same thing.

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. 1 John 5:2-3

And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. 2 John 1:6

John also said that keeping the commandments of Christ was necessary to abiding in his love. His commandment is that we love one another. As shown earlier, to love our neighbor means that we obey the law of God with respect to our neighbor – we promote his life, property, chastity, and reputation.

If you keep my commandments, you shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. John 15:10

This command to love is not a new command. It is an old command. From the beginning God's saints have been obligated to love him and keep his commandments. Our love for one another and the fact that we are children of God are both evidenced by our obedience of God's law.

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. 1 John 2:3-7

Since love is defined as obedience to the law of God, we do not love unless we are obeying God's law as revealed in the Old and New Testament. Since we are commanded to love, we are therefore obligated to keep the law of God. Thus we are under the law, not as a way of salvation, but as a pattern for our sanctification.