

June 20 *Are we subject to the Old Testament Laws*

Last Sunday I talked about justification by grace through faith. God accepts and forgives us, even though our conduct does not deserve a favorable verdict. Our hope for deliverance rests not on our goodness, but solely on God's mercy, as Paul wrote:

We know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.

No one will ever be saved by obeying the law... Galatians 2:16

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If we are made right with God by faith, what role should the Old Testament law play in the life of Christians?

Paul raises that question:

Why then the Law? It was added because of transgression... Galatians 3:19

Paul says God provided the law "because of transgressions"- to show people their sins. God's law was given in the 2nd book of the Bible, so the first book in the Bible, Genesis, tells the story of the people of God before they received the law. Genesis is a bloody book – and even the heroes generally are not admirable people. Without the law, it's chaos. Then in the 2nd book, they receive God's law – His commandments – to instruct and guide, rebuke and punish - in order to protect God's people from themselves. God provided the law "because of transgressions" that would have destroyed the people had it not been for the restraining role of the Law of Moses.

We were kept in protective custody under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian - our guardian and teacher- until Christ came... 3:23,24

So Paul compares the law to a guardian, or even a school master. It exposes unconscious wrong doing as willful disobedience. It defines human failures and follies as transgression, and curbs self-righteousness and pride.

But the law cannot enable God's people to do what it requires. It is demand but not power. The law shows us the need for salvation.

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"So the law was our custodian until Christ came. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 3:25,26

Paul says as Christians we are no longer under the burden of the Mosaic Law, the more than 600 commandments of the Old Testament. Rather we are now under the Lordship of Jesus and thus subject to the law of Christ, the law of love.

Bear one another's burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ. 6:2

Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law, and his life is the example that shows us how we are to fulfill the new law. Thus Paul writes:

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 5:14

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In other words, the laws of the Old Testament are not thrown out, but rather summed up by the command to love and interpreted in the light of Christ's teaching and example.

Often that makes a big difference.

For example, one of the practices that defined Jews was the strict observance of the Sabbath commandment – rules about what you couldn't do, and what you should do, on the Lord's day. But Jesus and his disciples were criticized for not observing the Sabbath – for even breaking the Sabbath rules as they were going to worship. In response, Jesus quoted an example from the Old Testament and then said *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*. The Sabbath day of rest is to be a blessing, not a burden.

Second example: last week I mentioned those kosher laws about forbidden foods – no pork, no shell fish. Jesus dismissed them saying *It is not what goes into a person that defiles them – makes them unclean – but rather what comes out of them... For from the heart comes evil thoughts...* Mark 7:20

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The strict observance of the Sabbath and the kosher laws distinguished the religious Jew from the less observant (whom they called sinners). It also set apart the Jews from their gentile neighbors. But now that Christ has come, the law cannot be used as a wedge to divide people between those who zealously observed it – and felt morally superior – and those were indifferent – and labeled sinners. Nor can it be used to separate Jews from non Jews.

That's why as a church we don't have a long list of rules – do's and don'ts for church members. Because it's not about keeping man-made rules, but about faith.

The Law can no longer be used as a threat. Its custodial role is over, for Christ has come. That means we can't take proof texts from the law and use them in judgment on those whose conduct is less than perfect. To pass judgment on another is a violation of Christ's teaching.

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But while Jesus minimized some of the Old Testament laws, he intensified others. *You have heard, "Thou shalt not commit murder", but I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother or sister shall be subject to judgment.* Matthew 5:21

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, three chapters in your bible, includes many more examples of Christ explaining the true meaning of the law – usually deepening its demands and making them more thorough-going.

Christ-like love does not replace the law of the Old Testament, but rather applies and interprets it. That word "love" can be subjective. By itself it may not tell one exactly how to respond in many of the ambiguous situations we face daily. But the commandments interpreted by Christ's teaching can reveal how love should respond. When read in the light of Christ, the commandments give positive definition to the loving will of God.

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As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. Galatians 3:27

Then and now, much of a person's public appearance is the clothes he or she wears. Back then, clothing could announce your country of origin, your occupation, your social class or economic status. It could tell you what you had in common or how you were different.

But as Christian, we are to "*put on Christ*". All the differences that might have separated us have now disappeared because everyone looks like Christ. So Paul concludes:

There is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for all of you are one in Christ. 3:28

It's a surprising statement for an orthodox Jew who once prayed: "Lord I thank you that I am not a gentile, a slave, or a woman." To say that Jews and Gentiles are equal members of God's family was a radical move. But even more radical, was announcing that men and women were equal – that there was no distinction in God's eyes.

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Paul concludes Jews and Gentiles are equal members of God's family. In today's strange gospel, we see Jesus, a Jew, in a gentile area where he encounters a sad gentile. The gospel says he's possessed by a demon. We might say he is very ill – so deranged he lives apart from everyone else.

In dramatic fashion Jesus delivers him from his affliction. The demons are cast into a herd of swine that rush over a cliff and fall into the sea.

The wild scene ends with the man clothed, sitting at Jesus feet, listening to him teach.

This man is Jesus first gentile student.

Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." Luke 8:39

The poor man had suffered for many years. And what does Jesus tell him to do during the first minutes of his health and wholeness? Jesus gives him a job. He calls him to tell everyone what God has done for him. This man without any education or training is told to go back to town and tell others.

So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him. 39

He becomes the first gentile witness to Jesus, telling others that in this Jesus, God is active and God is healing love.

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Some of you here today embody this story. Jesus has touched you and healed you – or maybe is delivering you from addiction. And that's a great blessing.

But don't just sit back and enjoy the blessing. You have been commissioned and called to work for Christ – to witness to the one who has blessed you.

Jesus Christ not only loves us and cares for us, he also calls us. Those he touches, he commissions. Those he saves, he sends. He gives each of us a job to do, a story to tell, and a part in His mission.

As we respond to His call – obey His command – we share in Christ's glory and the coming of His kingdom.