

The Purpose of the Law

**(Part One of a Four Part Series on
The Relationship Between Law and Grace)**

-Sam A. Smith

Salvation is by grace; it cannot be obtained through means of the Law. The reason is simple: God requires perfection, and no one—outside of Christ—has ever, or could ever meet that standard. If you're reading this and you have doubts about whether or not you're perfect (in your own right), you're reading the wrong thing—you need to be reading your own life's story, in the light of God's Word. Anyone who does that will see clearly that if he, or she stands in the merits of their own works, they stand condemned before God. The fact is, every man, or woman (other than Christ) is a sinner (Rom 3:23) and therefore, in his natural (unredeemed) condition, condemned before a holy God (Rom.6:23). The question is, "What part, if any, does the Law play in salvation, and subsequently in the Christian life?"

God gave the Law at Mt. Sinai. He never intended for it to be used as a means of producing righteousness, but rather that it should show man his sinfulness and bring him to repentance and faith in the Savior announced in prophecy. "Religion" tends to turn God's truth upside down, and that's precisely what happened with the Law. Men took what God intended as a means of driving them to seek His mercy and grace, and repackaged it as a goal to be obtained by works. Of course, in order to sustain such a notion that man can in any way keep the Law, it's necessary to either elevate man's capacity to produce righteousness, or to diminish the absolute holiness represented in the Law—in essence either raising man to God's level, or lowering the bar of God's holiness to a level attainable by fallen men. If one buys into this incorrect view of the Law, the result is "legalism"—the notion that man can produce his own righteousness acceptable to God. Legalism is dangerous. In its most radical form, it can keep one from exercising faith in Christ—which is essential for salvation—and in the case of Christians who fall into this error, it's only one step removed from the notion that our salvation depends not so much on God as on ourselves, and is thus subject to loss (Arminianism). God never intended that the promises He made (including salvation) to be obtained by any means other than by faith alone. Obviously, if the promise can only be obtained by faith, it cannot be "maintained" by any other principle.

Let's begin with a look at Jeremiah 31:31-33.

³¹"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ³²not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. ³³"But this is the covenant which I

will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” [NASB]

In this passage, God declared that the covenant made at Sinai (the Law) would be replaced by a better covenant. In so saying, He acknowledged that the Mosaic Covenant of the Law was both inadequate and temporary. The writer of Hebrews develops this theme in Hebrews 8:13 by pointing out, “*When He said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.*” The covenant of promise that God made to Abraham is the foundation of all the kingdom promises of the Bible; it is the covenant of promise made with Abraham that the New Testament writers refer to as the basis for understanding the work of God in history (both past and future); its promises relate both to personal redemption (Gal. 3:6-9) and to the visible kingdom of God to come in the future (Rom. 4:13; 11:25-32). The covenant of promise is the central covenant of the Bible; everything else in the Bible must be seen in light of this covenant in order to be fully appreciated. The Law that came 430 years later did not, indeed could not supercede the promises made to Abraham (Rom. 4:1-25; Gal. 3:15-19); nor was the Mosaic covenant given as a means of fulfilling the promises made to Abraham. The Law, as a covenant, was only temporary. It was a “stop-gap” measure until the new covenant, which implements (and enables) the promises made under the Abrahamic covenant, could be brought into force by Christ’s atoning work on the Cross. The Law was, in essence, a spiritual “band-aid,” not a cure. It was like a crutch to a cripple—Christ on the other hand is the cure. Once the cure has been applied the crutch is no longer needed, indeed it becomes an impediment. Some argue the point that since the Law embodies the moral precepts of God and since morality does not change, the Law must be eternal. This is logically flawed thinking. The Law is not the moral precepts. The moral precepts were simply conveyed to man through means of the Law—along with specific civil penalties and the certainty that the transgression of any of these expectations—not sufficiently atoned for (ultimately in God’s perfect sacrifice)—would bring condemnation. But the Law was merely a vehicle for communicating the moral precepts. When Christ died, He completely satisfied the righteous demands of the Law (*i.e.*, the penalty for the abrogation of the requirement of perfect moral holiness), such that those who believe in Him now fully meet God’s demand for perfect holiness and are no longer even capable of breaking the Law—since Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness for everyone who has faith in Him (Rom 10:4). The true believer in Christ is incapable of breaking the Law because the Law no longer has jurisdiction over him (Rom. 7:1-25; 8:1-11). To use an illustration, I live in the state of North Carolina, USA; if I do something that is not illegal in North Carolina, but is illegal in Turkey, I cannot be charged with breaking Turkish law. Why? Because I’m not under the jurisdiction of Turkish law. In the same way, if I break one of the moral precepts of the Mosaic Law, I cannot be condemned because I’m not under the Law, but in Christ wherein all of the Law has been fulfilled by Christ on my behalf. Does this excuse my sin of doing what is contrary to God’s holy nature? Of course not, my sin is still sin. It can ruin my testimony and incur many other unpleasant consequences, so it’s foolish and

wrong to do those things—most especially because they displease God and may incur His discipline if not properly dealt with, *cf.* 1 Jn. 1:9—but the one thing my sin cannot do is result in my condemnation, because I am no longer under the Law’s jurisdiction.

So, the Law has no covenantal force for the believer in Christ. But the question remains: “Do the moral precepts contained within the Law have applicability to the Christian life?” And the answer is “Yes,” but only as moral precepts, not as covenant law—having the power to bring condemnation. (Remember, laws carry penalties—which are not the same as natural consequences.) It is often observed that most of the moral components of the Mosaic Law are repeated in the New Testament, and this is often taken as evidence that the Law is still applicable to the believer. However, it must be understood that the Mosaic Laws were never repeated in the New Testament as “laws”—having condemnatory power to the one in Christ. The moral precepts are repeated so that believers can live free from the natural consequences of evil which can still ruin our lives and rob us of our time, talent, testimony and effectiveness for Christ (all of which can have indirect negative consequences for our eternal rewards), but there is no divinely imposed penalty for their violation, only natural consequences—which can be considerable.

The Law is neither the means, nor the measure of holiness. As we will see in the discussions to follow, the Law is powerless to produce righteousness. Not only that, the Law isn’t even a good indicator of personal sanctification, if it were we would have to conclude that most of the Pharisees who rejected Christ were sanctified, for externally (and that’s all the Law deals with) their lives conformed to the Law. Conversely, we might conclude that a person exhibiting outward conformity to the Law to be progressing in sanctification, but if he harbored sin inwardly we would be wrong. It is always amazing to see how selective people can be in determining which Laws they will measure themselves by. Most of us can do a pretty good job (at least outwardly) of keeping commandments like “Don’t steal,” “Don’t make idols,” “Don’t commit murder,” but there are few legalists claiming to keep the two most important commands (which both Jesus and Paul state are the keys to all the rest): to love the LORD with all one’s heart, soul and mind, and to love one’s neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-38 *cf.*, Deut. 6:5). In light of such a standard, who among us is showing much progress as compared to the Law? Paul certainly didn’t feel happy with how he stacked up against the standard of the Law (Romans 7:1-25). Herein is the problem with externalism: It focuses one’s attention on the external behavior, which is really a poor indicator of spiritual development, instead of promoting the work of the Holy Spirit within. In so doing, it either depresses us—if we are honest about our true nature—or, if we are not, we develop a distorted, unrealistic, and self-righteous view of ourselves, thinking that we are succeeding when we are really failing—the delusion of “perfectionism.”

In the next three parts in this series we’ll look at some of the New Testament teaching regarding the superiority of faith to the Law, and we’ll focus on Hebrews 7-9, Galatians 2:11-5:26, and Romans 3:21-10:15.

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