

Biblical Theology of the Law of God

Fulfilling the Law of Christ

Introduction

- Universal moral rules include do not murder, steal, and commit adultery
- Humans have the Law written in their hearts—their “conscience” (Rom 1:15)
- The term “**law**” (*torah* and *nomos*) of God generally refers to a system of rules that regulates human behaviour
- However, this concept denotes different things in the broader contexts of the OT and NT
- Thus, it often makes better sense to translate *torah* as “**instruction**”
- Because God is the creator of everything, he alone determines what is morally right and wrong
- He alone reserves the right to hold people accountable when they disobey

God as Lawgiver and Judge

- Examples of disobeying the law of God include:
 - When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they rejected God as law-giver, seeking to set their own standards
 - When Cain kills Abel, going against God's standards and values
- Against this background, the overall biblical account of redemption centers on how people, as lawbreakers, can be made right with God
- In telling the story of **redemption**, the concept of law is expressed in various ways

God as Lawgiver and Judge

- Throughout the book of Genesis, people are held accountable for their immoral actions
- This implies that they have some sense of right and wrong, though the text of Genesis only occasionally alludes to the existence of God's law (Gen 9:3-6):
- ³ Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.
- ⁴ "But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. ⁵ And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being. ⁶ "Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind."

God as Lawgiver and Judge

- The first substantial recording of God's moral values comes in the context of the covenant God made at Mount Sinai (Ex 20)
- Importantly, this covenant comes after God graciously redeemed the people from slavery in Egypt and delivered the firstborn from death
- Thus, God's salvation precedes the giving of the "law," so that people do not earn salvation by keeping it
- However, having been redeemed by God, the Israelites were expected to live holy lives by keeping the covenant obligations

Obligations of the Sinai Covenant

- The Israelites willingly agreed to fulfil various obligations, including a set of broad principles called the **Ten Commandments** (Ex 20:1-17)
- Additionally, the people were given the “**Book of the Covenant**” (Ex 24:7), a document covering sample case laws designed to help people resolve disputes and to exact appropriate penalties (Ex 21:1-22:20) and other moral standards (22:21-23:9)
- Another section sets out instructions relating to periods of rest associated with the observance of the Sabbath and annual festivals (Ex 23:10-19)

Regulations for a Holy People

- The sealing of the covenant at Sinai prepares the way for God to come and dwell in the midst of the Israelite camp
- To make this happen, God instructed Moses to manufacture a special tent, the **Tabernacle**, that will function as God's temporary earthly dwelling place
- Additionally, God appointed and consecrated a priest to serve within the Tabernacle
- Since God's presence makes the tent exceptionally holy, he gave instructions to prevent people from defiling the Tabernacle—i.e., by making it ritually unclean
- These concerns are reflected in the instructions provided in Leviticus, including types of sacrifices, clean and unclean food, guidelines for moral behaviour, because God wants his people to be "**holy**" (Lev 11:44-45)

Covenant Renewal and the Law of Moses

- After a generation of people died in the wilderness, the Israelites renewed the covenant initiated at Sinai before they entered the promised land
- Moses set out the obligations that people must fulfil in what is called the *Torah*—The Law or instruction of Moses (Josh 8:31; 2 Kgs 14:6; Deut 28:61)
- It probably consists of material recorded in Deut 5:1-28:68 and is much more than a system of rule. The *Torah* is important in two ways:
- **One**, it is a source of joy for those who delight in its content (Ps 19:7-10):

Covenant Renewal and the Law of Moses

- “The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. ⁸The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. ⁹The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous. ¹⁰They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb” (Ps 19:7-10)
- In other words, God will bless those who meditate on it and live by its instruction (Josh 1:7-8)
- **Two**, the *Torah* becomes the standard by which God judges the actions of the people, particularly kings. Solomon is condemned for disregarding the instructions in Deut 17:16-17:

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- ¹⁶“The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, “You are not to go back that way again.” ¹⁷He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold” (Deut 17:16-17)
- Solomon was prohibited from amassing too much wealth, taking foreign wives, and buying horses from Egypt
- Eventually, the Assyrians and Babylonians decimated the kingdoms of Israel and Judah because they violated the obligations set out in the Book of the Law
- God punished them with exile because they failed to live according to the law

Jesus and the Law

- In the gospels, Jesus criticizes others for interpreting the law in ways that lessen its moral demands
- **Firstly**, Jesus does not interpret the OT law by simply draw a line between behaviour that is legal and illegal. Thus, he rejected a legalistic approach of interpreting the OT law (Matt 5:21-48)
- He seeks a righteousness from his followers that surpasses the Pharisees:
- ²⁰ “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20)

Jesus and the Law

- **Secondly**, Jesus criticizes those who adopt a hypocritical stance concerning the law
- He openly condemns the Pharisees for focusing on lesser aspects of the law while ignoring the most important aspects (Mk 7:1-23)
- Jesus is adamant that he did not come to dismiss the Law, but rather has come to fulfil OT expectations (Matt 5:17):
- **17** “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.”
- He anticipates that his death and resurrection will inaugurate new developments:
 - A “New Covenant” in place of the Sinai covenant
 - The inclusion of the Gentiles within the community of believers

Jesus and the Law

- The replacement of the Jerusalem temple with a different type of temple
- With the Gentiles becoming part of God's people, the distinction between clean and unclean foods, which was intended to remind the Israelites of their calling to be a holy people, would no longer be relevant (Acts 11:1-18)
- With the creation of the church as a new temple, the detailed regulations relating to the old temple become obsolete
- No longer would there be a need for the Levitical priesthood and the sacrificial system that was introduced when the Tabernacle was first introduced (Heb 7:18-19; 8:1-6)

Paul and the Law

- In his letters, Paul addresses the transition from an OT understanding of the people of God established through the covenant at Sinai to a NT faith based on Jesus' sacrificial death
- While Paul's Jewish opponents argue that Christians must observe the law, Paul insists that Gentile Christians are not obligated to keep all aspects of OT regulations
- While Paul no longer sees himself as being "under the law" (1 Cor 9:20), he does not see himself as being without any law, for he is "under Christ's law" (1 Cor 9:21):
- ²⁰ "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law" (1 Cor 9:20-21)

Conclusion and Implications

- God's law reveals that we are sinner and our inadequacy to fulfil it
- God's law also serve as a moral ballast for Christians to live within civil society
- The "**Golden Rule**" (Matt 7:12) is a prime example:
- ¹²"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."
- However, by providing the law, God also demand perfection from us as his royal priesthood (1 Pt 2:9)
- However, this can only be fulfilled by faith in Jesus, who fulfilled the demands of the law by his death and resurrection
- Believers enjoy the power of the Spirit to live a holy life, set freed from our enslavement to sin