

# The Mosaic Law: Its Function and Purpose in the New Testament

## Introduction

A great cause of confusion today concerns the place of the Mosaic law in the New Testament believer's life. While this short study cannot begin to cover all the issues involved, it is my hope that it will shed some light and remove some of the confusion.

One of the profound emphases of the New Testament, especially the epistles of Paul, is that Christians are no longer under the rule of the Mosaic law. This truth is stated in no uncertain terms and in various ways (see Rom. 6:14; 7:1-14; Gal. 3:10-13, 24-25; 4:21; 5:1, 13; 2 Cor. 3:7-18), but in spite of this, there have always been those who insist that the Mosaic Law, at least the Ten Commandments, are still in force for the Christian. In regard to the relation of Christian ethics to the Mosaic Law, Luck writes:

There are Christian teachers of repute who consider the Mosaic law to be the present-day rule of life for the Christian.<sup>1</sup> A view not infrequently found among earnest, orthodox believers is that although we are not saved by the law, once we have been justified by faith, then the Mosaic law becomes our rule of life. Those holding such a view generally make a sharp division of the Mosaic law into two parts, which they distinguish as the moral and the ceremonial. The ceremonial portion they consider as having found its fulfillment in Christ at His first advent, and thus as having now passed away. But the moral portion of the Mosaic law, say they, is still in force as the believer's rule of life. The treatment given to Christian ethics by some highly respected authors is indeed but little more than an exposition of the Decalogue.

It seems exceedingly strange that Bible-believing Christians should advocate such a view, when the New Testament makes it abundantly clear that the believer in Christ is not any longer under the Mosaic law in its entirety... Indeed after having been delivered from the law, to deliberately place ourselves once again under its [control] is said to be "falling from grace."

But let it be immediately understood that this does not mean to say that we should necessarily behave in a manner just opposite to what the Mosaic law commands—that we should kill, steal, bear false witness, etc. Long before the law was given through Moses, it was utterly wrong to do such evil things.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, the age in which we live, the church age, has often and rightly been called the age of grace. This is not because God's grace has not been manifested in other ages, but because in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ we have the ultimate manifestation of God's grace.

**Titus 2:11-12.** For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,

Grace becomes an absolutely inseparable part of the believer's life in Christ. In the coming of Christ and His death on the cross, the Mosaic Law as a rule of life was terminated. The believer is now to live in the liberty and power of God's grace by the Spirit, not the rule of law. This new liberty must never be used as an occasion to indulge the flesh or sinful appetites (Gal. 5:13) nor does it mean the Christian has no moral law or imperatives on his life, but simply that he or she is to live righteously by a new source of life as asserted in Romans 8.

**Romans 8:2-4.** For the law of the life-giving Spirit in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. 3 For God achieved what the law could not do because it was weakened through the flesh. By

sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and concerning sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the righteous requirement of the law may be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

But a great deal of confusion exists over the issues of law and grace and the place of the Mosaic law in the New Testament believer's life. However, the basic principle is that the "fusion" of law and grace brings a "confusion" which results in sterile legalism. Because of man's natural bent toward either legalism or license, the place and function of the Law has been an issue in the Christian community since the very early days of the church. There have always been those who have sought to put the Christian back under the Law or make the Law necessary for both salvation and sanctification. As a result large sections of the New Testament are written directly to this issue (see Acts 15 and the council at Jerusalem; Romans 5:10; 6:14; 7:1f; 2 Cor. 3:6-18; and the entire book of Galatians). These passages were written against a legalistic use of the Law, one which promotes works to gain points with either God or people; works of self-effort rather than a life lived by the power and personal leading of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, other parts of the New Testament are written against license and the misuse of liberty (Gal. 5:13ff. Rom. 6:1ff; 8:4ff; Tit. 2:11-14). But the answer is never to put the Christian back under the Law, but rather a proper understanding and appreciation of God's grace to us in Christ. Christian liberty is not the right to do as one pleases, but the power, desire, and will to do as one ought in and by the power of God and a regenerated life.

This is ultimately the focus of Titus 2:11-14. The glorious manifestation of God's grace in Christ instructs and trains believers in how to live.<sup>3</sup> This grace provides the incentive, the motive, and the means. Regarding Titus 2:11-14 Ryrie writes:

The verb *teaching* encompasses the whole concept of growth—discipline, maturing, obedience, progress, and the like. This involves denial of improper things and direction into proper channels. These five terms—godliness, worldly lusts, soberly, righteously, godly—do not describe the content of grace teaching so much as they indicate the object and purposeful goal of that teaching. And this intent is, according to this passage, the ultimate purpose of the Incarnation of Christ. He came to display the grace of God in the changed lives of his people. The final cause of the revelation of the grace of God in Christ is not creed but character.<sup>4</sup>

In Romans 6:14, Paul gives us a fundamental principle as it relates to the Christian's understanding and the place of the Law in a believer's life. "For sin will have no mastery over you, because you are not **under law** but **under grace**." (emphasis mine). Romans 6 deals with the believer's walk or sanctification. In this regard, *under grace* is never to be taken as an excuse to sin as one pleases since he is under grace (6:1-2) and it is placed in strong contrast<sup>5</sup> with *under law*.

Two things are prominent here: (1) these two (*law* and *grace*) are set forth as complete opposites, and (2) the text also makes it clear that the only way the believer is going to experience true sanctification (victory over sin plus the production of positive righteousness) is by grace (the work of God in Christ) and never by law. The reasons, which will be set forth below, are bound up in two issues, the weakness of man's flesh and the nature of the Law and its inability because of man's weakness to produce a truly holy life. This is not to say that the Mosaic Law is not good and holy and does not have a function, but this too will be set forth below. So just what is the meaning, nature, and place or function of the law in the New Testament?

## The Meaning of the Term “Law”

In the Old Testament, the word “law” is used to translated the Hebrew word torah, “instruction.” The Hebrew word for “law” probably comes from the causative form of the verb *yarah*, “to throw,” “to shoot (arrows).” In the hiphil stem, the verb *horah* means “to point, guide, instruct, teach.” Hence, the law is that which provides authoritative guidance. In the New Testament, the Greek word used for law is *nomos*. *Nomos* means “that which is assigned,” hence, “usage, custom,” and then “law,” or “a rule governing one’s actions.”

Thus God’s law is His system of rules by which He shows and instructs in His will and administers the affairs of the world. Obviously the definition allows for and even implies that there might be differing systems of rules at various times, depending on what particular aspects or how much of His will God wishes to show at a given time....A system of rules may be tailored for different times, peoples, or purposes. . .<sup>6</sup>

As a result, in the progress of God’s revelation to man, we can see a number of different systems of law in the Scripture. These are:

### The Law of Nature (Natural or Inherent)

This is the law Paul mentions in Romans 2:14, “For whenever the Gentiles, who do not have the law, do **by nature** the things required by the law, **these** who do not have the law **are a law to themselves.**” (emphasis mine) The law of nature is one which contains natural revelation of God’s eternal power and divine nature (Rom. 1:20) and is sufficient to condemn those who reject this revelation, but not sufficient to save. Those who do not receive this natural revelation through nature demonstrate they are unable to receive the additional light (special revelation of Scripture) needed for salvation. “If a man rejects the revelation of God in the law of nature, he fails to qualify for the further revelation which will lead him to Christ.”<sup>2</sup> This natural law perhaps also falls under the category of the eternal law of God for the moral principles of the Mosaic Law (the Ten Commandments) did not begin with Sinai, but are as eternal and immutable as the very holy character of God Himself (see 1 Pet. 1:16).

### The Law of Eden

While the term “law” is never specifically used of Adam and Eve’s relationship with God in the Garden, by the definition of “law,” a system of principles or rules that instructs man as to God’s will and direction, there was a law given to Adam. He was instructed to “dress and keep” the garden, and to eat freely of all the trees except the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

### The Law of the Patriarchs

Again, because there was very specific revelation and instruction given to the patriarchs, there was a law given to these Old Testament believers. Though very little detail of this is given, God’s instructions to them still represent His law, the system of principles and rules designed to direct their lives. This is illustrated in Genesis 26:5 which says, “Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.”

## **The Law of Moses Given to Israel**

The Mosaic Law is what we are most concerned about in relation to the New Testament believer. This consisted of 365 negative commands and 248 positive for a total of 613 commands. These may also be divided into three parts or sections (see below)—the **moral**, the **social**, and the **ceremonial**. As such, it covered every possible area of the life of Israel. It should be stressed that the moral principles embodied in the Mosaic Law given at Sinai were merely the codified expression of the eternal moral law of God as it was given to Israel to govern her life as a nation in order to experience God's blessing under the Abrahamic covenant. For more on this aspect, see below.

## **Human Law as Prescribed by Man**

There are obviously various forms of human laws, those prescribed by man through human government or custom (see Luke 20:22; Acts 19:38). While human government is an institution ordained by God's will or law, some of the laws of man are direct expressions of the will of God, but still constitute laws by which men are often bound by the governmental system in which they live. Of course, where such laws conflict with God's laws, then we are obligated to obey God instead (Acts 4:19-20).

## **The Law of Christ, the Law of the Spirit of Life**

The fact that the Mosaic law has been terminated does not mean that there is no law in this age of grace even though the nature of this law is quite different from the standpoint of incentive, motivation, and means. In fact, the epistles speak of "the perfect law of liberty (Jam. 1:25), "the royal law" (Jam. 2:8), the Law of Christ (Gal. 6:2), and the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:2). This consists of the many imperatives found throughout the epistles which comprise this law. These too cover all areas of the believer's life to direct him in the will of God in today's world.

The moral principles embodied in the law of Moses Paul calls "the righteousness of the law" (Rom 8:4), and shows that such principles are the goal of the Spirit-directed life in the same context in which he teaches the believer is not under the Mosaic law (Rom 6-8).<sup>8</sup>

## **The Law of the Kingdom**

The New Testament clearly speaks of and anticipates the reign of Christ on earth when He will rule in perfect righteousness and justice (Isa. 11:4-5). This will naturally mean many laws that will govern the life of citizens of the Kingdom. One only needs to consider Isaiah 2:3 which reads,

**2:3** many peoples will come and say, "Come, let's go up to the LORD's mountain, to the temple of the God of Jacob, so he can teach us his requirements, and we can follow his standards." For Zion will be the center for moral instruction,<sup>9</sup> the LORD will issue edicts from Jerusalem. (NET Bible)

## **The Significance of these Various Laws**

We can see from this that God is the administrator of the world. In the progress of His revelation and the development of His plan, there have been various economies (dispensations) administered by God with different regulations or laws giving precise instruction for each administration. The way God has

run each economy or dispensation has varied, however, in each case, different people were addressed with the commands differing in quantity and character, but always with specific instruction.

### **The Use of the Term “Law” in the New Testament**

A great deal of flexibility is found in the use of the term “law” in the New Testament. A few of the uses are as follows.

1. This term is used of the entire Old Testament (John 10:34; 12:34; 1 Cor. 14:21). John 10:34 is a quotation from Psalm 82:6, and 1 Corinthians 14:21f is a quote from Isaiah 28:11-12. Technically neither the Psalms nor Isaiah are a part of the Old Testament “law,” but sometimes the term “law” was applied to the entire Old Testament because it constituted God’s special revelation of instruction for Israel and ultimately for man.
2. It is used with such terms as the prophets, and writings, again as a title for the entire Old Testament Scripture, but in this way it looks at them in their division (Luke 24:27, 44).
3. It is especially used of the first five books of the Old Testament or the Mosaic Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). (Compare Luke 2:23; John 8:5; 1 Cor. 9:9; Gal. 3:10).
4. The term is used of the entire specific Mosaic code given to the nation Israel to govern and guide their moral, religious and secular life, and covers parts of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy (Deut. 4:8, 44-45).
5. The term is used of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3-17).
6. Law is used of a principle, force or influence that impels one to action or behavior (Rom. 7:21, 23a, 25).
7. It is used of law in general (Rom 3:27 and possibly Rom. 5:13b).

### **The Origin and Source of the Mosaic Law**

Though part of the Law was mediated by angels, God is the origin and source of the Mosaic Law, which stems from the eternal and holy character of God. This is true even of the natural law written in the heart or conscience of man (Exodus 31:1b; Acts 7:53; Rom. 2:14-16; Heb. 2:1-2).

### **The Nature and Content of the Mosaic Law**

It is common to divide the Mosaic Law into three parts as illustrated below, but though this is helpful for analysis and the study of the Mosaic Law and the way it functions, such a division is never stated as such in Scripture. Rather it is seen as a unit (The Law is a “system” that included sacrifices, priests, and laws. Either one is under the entire system or not. If you believe you are under the Law then you would need to follow the commands it gives about sacrifices, festivals, Sabbaths, dress, food, and priests). Arguments for this will be given below.

- **Part 1: The Moral Law or the Ten Commandments.** This part of the Law governed the moral life giving guidance to Israel in principles of right and wrong in relation to God and man (Exodus 20:1-17).
- **Part 2: The Judgments, or the Social Law.** This part of the Law governed Israel in her secular, social, political, and economic life (Exodus 21:1–23:13).
- **Part 3: The Ordinances or the Ceremonial Law.** This was the religious portion of Law which guided and provided for Israel in her worship and spiritual relationship and fellowship with God. It included the priesthood, tabernacle and sacrifices (Exodus 25:-31: Leviticus).

### **The Recipients of the Mosaic Law**

The Mosaic Law was a bilateral covenant made specifically for Israel alone to govern her life in the promised land. From the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen.12) we see Israel was a chosen nation, an instrument of God to become a channel of blessing to all nations. Yahweh was her Theocratic King who was to rule and guide the nation in her destiny that she might not become polluted or contaminated by other nations and could thus fulfill her purpose. For this the Mosaic Law was instituted to direct Israel as a nation in all spheres of her life—morally, socially, politically, economically and religiously.

By its very nature, the Mosaic Law was not to be, and could not be, obeyed to the letter by any other people in any other place as a rule of life. However, in the spirit of the Law it did set forth moral principles which were applicable and would bring blessing to all people anywhere and at any time when applied and used as a standard of right and wrong.

There were certain economic provisions in the Law to govern and protect the economic life of Israel in their promised land. For example there was the right of property ownership, free enterprise, protection of the poor which guarded against the evils of great concentrations of wealth in the hands of a few with the consequent impoverishment of others. But the poor were provided for in such a way as to avoid the loss of free enterprise and the individual's initiative by high taxation as well as to avoid making leeches out of men who refused to work.

However, the strict application of these laws to our world is impossible since the original conditions in which God directly intervened cannot be reproduced, at least not until the millennium. Yet, economists could study and learn much from these laws and principles.

### **The Characteristics of the Mosaic Law**

**(1) The foundation and basis of the Mosaic Law is the covenant God made with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.** In several places in Exodus and Deuteronomy, there are references to the Abrahamic Covenant which establish the fact that the giving of the Law at Sinai was based on the covenant with Abraham and God's continuing plan for the nation of Israel as a priesthood nation (cf. Ex. 19:4-6; Deut. 4:4-8 with Ex. 2:24-25; Deut. 4:36-38; 29:31; 1 Chron. 16:15-19). God had promised to bless the descendants of Abraham and through them, the world. This was a promise reiterated and expanded to Abraham and to Isaac and Jacob. God would bless Israel and through them, bring blessing to the world (Gen. 12:1f; 15; 17:1ff; 26:24f; 28:13f). The Abrahamic covenant is a **unilateral covenant**. Its ultimate fulfillment is dependent on God's sovereign and steadfast faithfulness to His promises to Abraham regardless of Israel's continued disobedience (cf. Ezek. 20:1-44).

The Mosaic Covenant, however, was a **bilateral covenant**. Though its ultimate fulfillment is dependent on God, for any generation to experience the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant, there had to be faithfulness to God. Thus, enters the Law, a bilateral covenant given to Moses for the nation of Israel after their redemption out of the land of Egypt. It was through obedience to the Mosaic Covenant (the Law) that Israel would be able to experience the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant in the promised land. For obedience there would be blessings; for disobedience, cursing (cf. Deut. 28-30).

**(2) The Mosaic Law is holy, good, and spiritual (Rom. 7:12, 14).** It was, however, only temporary as the book of Hebrews so clearly teaches. As such, the Mosaic Law was designed to maintain a proper relationship between God and His people Israel (blessing versus cursing), but only until the coming of Messiah and the establishment of a New Covenant. The Law was never designed to be a permanent rule of life. It was merely a tutor or guardian to guide Israel in all areas of her life until Christ (2 Cor. 3:7, 11; Gal. 3:23-24; Rom. 10:4).

**(3) The Mosaic Law is weak because it is dependent on man's ability.** It is especially weak when adopted as a system of merit (Rom. 8:3).

**(4) The Mosaic Law was an indivisible unit, and is that which was terminated by the Lord Jesus.** Though the Law is usually divided into three parts, as described above, it is important to see that it was an indivisible unit. Thus, when Paul stated that we are not under the Law, this included all three parts, including the Ten Commandments. Some will agree that parts of the Old Testament Law have been done away, but assert the Ten Commandments are supposedly still in force today. But all three parts of the Law were designed to function as a unit to guide Israel in all of its life. The Ten Commandments cannot be separated from the rest. Further, even though most recognize this three-fold division, the Jews so numbered all the commands that they approached the Law as a unit. Ryrie notes that,

“...the Jewish people either did not acknowledge it (*the three-fold division*) or at least did not insist on it. Rather they divided the 613 commandments of the Law into twelve families of commandments which were then subdivided into twelve additional families of positive and twelve additional families of negative commands.”<sup>10</sup>

Further, that it is a unit is evident by the fact that the recognition of any of its features, i.e., as a meritorious system of righteousness with God, obligates the person to fulfill the entire Law, as we are taught by both Paul and James (cf. Gal. 3:10, 12; 5:3; Jam. 2:8-11).

Further evidence that the Law is a unit is the penalty of death for disobedience is attached to all three parts of the Law. (Commandments – moral, civil – ceremonial, ordinance – ceremonial)

Noticing the penalties attached to certain commands further emphasizes the unitized character of the Law. When the command to keep the Sabbath (one of the “commandments”) was violated by a man who gathered sticks on that day, the penalty was death by stoning (Num. 15:32-36). When the people of Israel violated the command concerning the Sabbatical Year for the land (one of the “judgments”), God sent them into captivity where many died (Jer. 25:11). When Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire before the Lord (one of the “ordinances”), they immediately died (Lev. 10:1-7). Clearly these commands from various parts of the Law were equally binding and the punishment equally severe. The Law was a unit.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, three times in 2 Corinthians 3:6-13 Paul declares that the Mosaic system is done away or abolished (vss. 7, 11, 13). In commenting on 2 Corinthians 3:7-13, Chafer wrote:

It is the law as crystallized in the ten commandments which is in view; for that law alone was 'written and engraven in stones.' In the midst of the strongest possible contrast between the reign of the teachings of the law and the teachings of grace, it is declared that these commandments were 'done away' and 'abolished.' It should be recognized that the old was abolished to make place for the new, which far excels in glory. The passing of the law is not, therefore, a loss; it is rather an inestimable gain."<sup>12</sup>

**(5) The Mosaic Law stands in contrast to the grace of God as now manifested in the coming of Christ** (Rom. 6:14; 7:6; 8:3; Gal. 3:12).

## **The Purpose and Function of the Mosaic Law**

### **The Purpose and Function Explained**

What then is the purpose of the Law? Though given to Israel to govern her life in the promise land for blessing instead of cursing, there was an attendant purpose in the giving of the Mosaic Law to Israel—a purpose that still stands today. Simply put, its proper use is to show man his total helpless and hopeless condition before a righteous and just God.

**1 Timothy 1:8-10** But we know that the law is good if someone uses it legitimately, **1:9** realizing that law is not intended for a righteous person, but for lawless and rebellious people, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, **1:10** sexually immoral, sodomites, kidnappers, liars, perjurers—in fact, for any who live contrary to sound teaching.

In the study of the Bible, there are three specific purposes that surface in the proper use of the Mosaic Law.

**(1) In a general sense, it was given to provide a standard of righteousness** (Deut. 4:8; Psalm 19:7-9). In the process, the Mosaic Law revealed the righteousness, holiness, and goodness of God (Deut. 4:8; Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7; Rom. 7:12-14). The Law at Sinai was given to Israel to reveal who God is and to shed light on the reality of an infinite gulf that separates God from man.

**Romans 3:19** Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

**Romans 3: 23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

**(2) The Law was given to identify sin and reveal man's sin and bankrupt condition as guilty before God** (Rom. 3:19f; 7:7-8; 5:20; Gal. 3:19). God's holy Law reveals to man just who and what he is—sinful and separated from God by an infinite gulf that he is unable to bridge in his own human strength.

**Romans 3:19-20** Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. **3:20** For no

one is declared righteous before him by the works of the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

**(3) The Law was given to shut man up to faith, i.e., to exclude the works of the Law (or any system of works) as a system of merit for either salvation or sanctification and thereby lead him to Christ as the only means of righteousness** (Gal. 3:19-20, 20-24; 1 Tim. 1:8-9; Rom. 3:21-24). The ceremonial portion of the Law did this by pointing to the coming of a suffering Savior, “for without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22).

**Romans 3:21-24** But now apart from the law the righteousness of God, which is attested by the law and the prophets, has been disclosed— **3:22** namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, **3:23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**3:24** But they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

**Galatians 3:24-26** Thus the law had become our guardian<sup>13</sup> until Christ, so that we could be declared righteous by faith. **3:25** But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. **3:26** For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith.

### **Summary: Keeping the Law in the True Sense**

By keeping the Law, we are speaking about the true sense as God intended it, not as Israel and man tend to take it. The Ten Commandments showed the Jew his sin (and so all mankind) and that he was shut up under that sin. The Ten Commandments were designed to guide him, indeed to drive him to the Ceremonial Law (the tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrifices) for forgiveness through faith in the sacrifices which pointed to Christ. Then, the Social Law, regulated his life by showing him how to live socially, not to give him merit before God, but to enable him to experience the blessings of the covenant rather than the cursing as God warned in Deuteronomy.

### **The Limitations of the Mosaic Law**

When approached as a meritorious system, the Law cannot justify (Gal. 2:16), give life (Gal. 3:21), give the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:2, 14), sanctify (Gal. 3:21; 5:5; Rom. 8:3), make perfect, or permanently deal with sin (Heb. 7:19). It was designed to be a **temporary** guardian until the coming of Christ, the Suffering Messiah Savior.

### **The Effects of the Mosaic Law**

The reasons for the effects listed below lie in the wrong reaction of Israel and people today, i.e., approaching the Law as a system of merit, shifting from a faith basis to a works basis (Exodus 19:8; Rom. 10:3). People often try to use the Law as a means of establishing their own standing before God. But Scripture emphatically teaches us that the Law brings a curse (Gal. 3:10-12), brings death, it is a killer (2 Cor. 3:6-7; Rom. 7:9-10), brings condemnation (2 Cor. 3:9), makes offenses abound (Rom. 5:10; 7:7-13), declares all men guilty (Rom. 3:19), and holds men in bondage to sin and death (Gal. 4:3-5, 9, 24; Rom. 7:10-14). This is because man in his sinful state can never fulfill the righteousness of the Law, especially in the spirit of the Law. He always falls short as Romans 3:23 tells us, and becomes condemned or guilty before a Holy God (Rom. 3:19).

## The End of the Mosaic Law as a Rule of Life for Christians

### The Fact Established

Several passages of Scripture clearly establish that the coming of Christ has brought an end to the Mosaic Law. Paul specifically states that “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4). This instituted a new law or principle of life, i.e., the law of the Spirit, the one of liberty and grace (Rom. 8:2, 13). This fact was also clearly settled by the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. A council was convened in the church at Jerusalem to look into the issue of the Law and its place in the life of believers because some were saying “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved,” and because even certain of the Pharisees who had believed were also saying “It is necessary to circumcise the Gentiles and to order them to observe the law of Moses.” The conclusion of the council, consisting of apostles and elders, was to reject the concept of placing New Testament believers under the yoke of the Law (15:6-11). The only thing the Jerusalem Council asked was that Gentile believers control their liberty in matters that might be offensive to Jewish believers, but they did not seek to place the believers under the yoke of the Law for they realized the Law had come to an end. Some argue this is about being justified by the Law. But the response of the Apostles was to believers who were already saved. The concept of being saved in many passages takes into account justification and sanctification. Peter’s conclusion was regarding justification *and* how to live as a believer:

**Acts 15:10-11** “Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”

The conclusion (vv. 28-29):

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”

There is no command to place believers under the Law. On the contrary, the Gentiles are told to not follow the Law or listen to the Judaizers that wanted to place Christians under the Law. Christians do not wear tassels, they do not keep the festivals, they do not look for a Levitical priest, they do not cease planting crops on the 7<sup>th</sup> year, nor execute homosexuals because the Law was specifically for Israel, a theocracy, and is not binding upon believers under the New Covenant. The Church is not a theocracy. We are told to submit to the government (Rom. 13). But for Israel’s theocracy, the Law was the guiding rule. The Law however, cannot be for the church since it is not a theocracy and since Christ has fulfilled the Law. Once it was fulfilled, it was removed in order for the New Covenant to replace it. One cannot be under the Old and the New Covenant as Jesus (new wine in old wineskins) the author of Hebrews make abundantly clear. In a section on sanctification, Paul succinctly states: **But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. (Gal. 5:18).**

Why Christians would want to place themselves under a “ministry of death” since they’ve already died to the Law in order to be united with Christ (Rom. 7) is unthinkable. Paul contrasts the Law and the Spirit in Gal. 5 and in 2 Cor. 3 to show that the Spirit sanctifies Christians, not the Law. The Law is applicable to Christians in principle, but not as a binding covenant or way of life. Those who propose Christians must be under the Law need to hear the conclusion of the Jerusalem Council again.

Finally, the book of Hebrews demonstrates that the old covenant of the Mosaic Law was only **temporary** and has been **replaced** by the coming of Christ whose ministry is based on (1) a better priesthood, one after the order of Melchizedek which is superior to Aaron's, and (2) a better covenant with better promises (see Heb. 7-10). The old covenant was only a shadow of heavenly things, and if it had been able to make men perfect before God there would have been no occasion for a second or new covenant (see Heb. 7:11-12; 8:1-13). This change in the priesthood also necessitates a change in the Law. Such a change shows the Law has been terminated or done away.

When He said, "A new covenant," **He has made the first obsolete**. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear (Heb. 8:13). The only reason the author says "is becoming obsolete" after already saying it is obsolete is because he knew there were Jews still practicing Judaism and Christians who wanted to go back to the Law. The entire book of Hebrews encourages Christians to not go back under the Law for salvation or sanctification. It is only the Law as Christ interprets and fulfills it, the principles of the Law that are applicable for Christians today.

We must not also forget that Paul did not see himself as under the Law, regardless of his Jewish background. He forsake the Law in order to be saved (Phil. 3). And, he did not consider himself as a Christian to be "under the Law."

**To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law (1 Cor. 9:20).** This verse is crucial. Paul only applied the Law in order to reach those under the Law. He would occasionally abide by Jewish principles in order to be effective in evangelism. Besides that, he saw no reason to be "under the Law" because Christ is the end of the Law for the believer as a system or covenant. The Law cannot be separated from the Levitical priesthood and sacrifices. If one wants to be under the Law, as Hebrews 7:11-12 states, they must also be under those former and lesser systems.

### **The Problem of Mosaic Laws as Commands for New Testament Believers**

A careful reading of the New Testament shows us that nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated as obligations for believers. The one exception is the command to keep the Sabbath. If the Mosaic Law has been done away, then why are these commandments repeated in the New Testament? Further, some commandments outside the Ten Commandments are even repeated in the New Testament. For instance, as a motivation for loving others, Paul referred to four of the Ten Commandments because they demonstrate this principle, but then, to summarize, he mentioned one from Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." So in what sense has the Law been done away?

### **The Solution**

Part of the purpose of the Law was to point men to the coming Savior through its shadows and types. Through the moral law, man could see God's holy character as well as his own sinfulness and the infinite gulf that separates God and man. Through the ceremonial part of the Law (the priesthood, sacrifices, and tabernacle), man could find the solution to his sin by faith in what this part of the Law represented, a suffering Savior, one who would die as the Lamb of God. But even though no one could perfectly keep the Law, it was also designed for Israel's immediate blessing by setting forth righteous principles that would show them how to love God and their fellow man. This would produce a stable and secure society as well as a testimony to the nations (Deut. 4:6-8).

Thus, in 613 commands the Mosaic Law represented an ethical code given by God to Israel to govern the nation until the coming of Messiah, but at their heart, they represented the moral law of God—righteous principles vital to humanity. Today, we are not under this code, but many of its righteous principles, the eternal laws of God, have been carried over and are part of the law of the Spirit of life in Christ (Rom. 8:2) or the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). In this, some of the former commands are carried over (Rom. 13:9), some new commands and guidelines are added (Eph. 4:11f; 1 Tim. 3:1f; 4:4), and some have been revised, as in the case of capital punishment which is to be exercised by human government (Rom. 13:4).

It needs to be emphasized that the end of the Mosaic law, including the Ten Commandments, does not cancel or detract one iota from the eternal moral law of God. The moral principles of the ten laws did not begin with Sinai but are as eternal and immutable as the character of God. To understand this should dispel the fears of those who think the abolition of the Mosaic law leaves only a state of lawlessness.

The moral principles embodied in the law of Moses Paul calls “the righteousness of the law” (Rom 8:4), and shows that such principles are the goal of the Spirit-directed life in the same context in which he teaches the believer is not under the Mosaic law (Rom 6—8).

This should be no more difficult to understand than the fact that a citizen of the United States is not under the laws of Canada, even though the moral principles underlying the laws of the two countries are the same. When a citizen of the United States becomes a citizen of Canada he does not remain under ten of the best laws of the United States. Nor does the fact that some of the laws of the United States are quite similar to some of the laws of Canada confuse or compromise his new exclusive responsibility to Canada. So the believing Jew of the first century moved entirely from the Mosaic economy of law into the new economy of grace instituted by Jesus Christ (John 1:17).<sup>14</sup>

### **The Lawful Use of the Mosaic Law**

The Law is still good from the standpoint of its main function and purpose as seen above in The Purpose and Function of the Law (1 Tim. 1:8-10; James 2:1-10; Gal. 5:1-3; 6:1). This is how James uses the Law, to reveal sin (James 2:9), to get believers out of self-righteous legalism, and move them into a walk by faith in a living Savior.

### **The Relationship of New Testament Believers to the Mosaic Law**

1. He is never saved by keeping the Law (Gal. 2:21).
2. He is not under the Law as a rule of life, i.e., sacrifice, Sabbath keeping, tithing (Rev. 6:14; Acts 15:5, 24).
3. Thus, he does not walk by the Law but by the Spirit, which is the new law for the New Testament saint (Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:5). This is law of liberty through faith in the power of God.
4. He is dead to the Law (Rom. 7:1-6; Gal. 2:19) by virtue of his union with Jesus Christ who fulfilled the Law.

5. He is to fulfill the righteousness of the Law, i.e., the spirit of the law as seen in Christ's words in Matthew 22:37-40 love for God, and love for one's neighbor (James 2:9). But this can only be fulfilled through a knowledge of Bible truth and the filling of the Holy Spirit, which furnishes the power or ability needed to live the Christian life according to the eternal moral law of God. So we are under God's new law, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:2-4).

### **Christ, the Fulfillment of the Mosaic Law**

Christ fulfilled the Ten Commandments by living a perfect and sinless life. Thus, when man trusts in Christ, Christ's righteousness is imputed to that individual so we have justification. We have Christ's righteousness so the Law can't condemn us (Rom. 8:1; 7:1-6; Rom. 5:1; 4:4-8).

Christ fulfilled the ceremonial ordinances, the shadows and types of His person and work, by dying on the cross for us and in our place. This showed that God was also perfect justice and sin must be judged, but God provided His Son, the precious Lamb of God. The penalty which the Law exercised was paid. Again there is no condemnation because the believer is "in Christ" (Col. 2:14; Rom. 3:24-25).

Christ also fulfilled the Social Law, but now He replaces it with a new way of life fitting to our new salvation. He gives provision for the inner man—the indwelling Holy Spirit—who enables us to experience true sanctification so that we may experience also the righteousness of the Law (Rom. 8:2-4).

### **Summary**

1. Christ is the end of the Law and believers are not under the Mosaic Law. New Testament believers are not under Law but under grace (Rom. 6:14).
2. Since the Lord Jesus Christ fulfills the Law by His person and work, believers are under a new law; the obligation to walk by the Spirit of Life through faith (Rom. 8:2-4). If we are led by the Spirit, then we are not under the Law (Gal. 5:18).
3. Against such, i.e., the fruit of the Spirit, there is no law because the believer is then operating under the highest law, the standards are met as we walk by the Holy Spirit and grow in the Word (Gal. 5:22).

### **Warning Against Entanglements with the Law as Believers Today**

After salvation by grace there has always been the grave danger of reverting to Law or legalism by taboos and tactics of coercion, or some form of human manipulation (Gal. 3:1-3). To go back to the Law as a way of life puts one under the control of the flesh, it nullifies true spirituality by faith in the Holy Spirit, and defeats the believer. It results in human good and domination by the sin nature or the flesh (Gal. 5:1-5; Col. 2:14f). The fact that the Christian is not under the Mosaic Law does not mean, of course, that there is lawlessness or no proper sense of morality or ethics in the Christian life. Quite the contrary is true. But in dealing with the subject of morality or ethics, it must be understood that the clear teaching of the New Testament is that the moral life the Christian is responsible for is that (1) no one can be saved by virtue of his own works (Tit. 3:5; Eph. 2:8-9), and (2) that the morality of the Christian life is to be the result of the Christ exchanged life by faith and submission to the ministry and power of a Spirit-controlled life.

For more on this topic see:

*Five Views on Law and Gospel* by Stanley N. Gundry (Series Editor), Greg L. Bahnsen, Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Douglas J. Moo, Wayne G. Strickland, Willem A. VanGemeren .

*Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* by Frank Thielman

*Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* by John S. Feinberg (Author, Epilogue, Preface, Contributor), John A. Sproule (Afterword), Sam Storms (Afterword), Rodney Petersen (Contributor), Willem VanGemeren (Contributor), O. Palmer Robertson (Contributor), Paul D. Feinberg (Contributor), Fred H. Klooster (Contributor), Alan P. Ross (Contributor), Knox Chamblin (Contributor), Douglas J. Moo (Contributor), Marten H. Woudstra (Contributor), Robert L. Saucy (Contributor), Bruce K. Waltke (Contributor), Walter C., Jr. Kaiser (Contributor)

*Law and Its Fulfillment, The: A Pauline Theology of Law* by Thomas R. Schreiner

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1 For further information on this subject see the article by Roy L Aldrich, "Causes for Confusion of Law and Grace," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 116:463:221-29, July, 1959.

2 G. Coleman Luck, "Christian Ethics," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 118:471—July, 1961, Theological Electronic Library, Galaxie Software.

3 The verb "train" or "instruct" is *paideuo*, "to bring up, instruct, educate, train" then, "correct, practice, discipline, give guidance."

4 Charles C. Ryrie, *The Grace of God*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1963, pp. 51-52.

5 In this clause, "but" is *alla*, a conjunction that expresses strong contrast.

6 Ryrie, p. 53.

7 Ryrie, p. 53.

8 Roy L. Aldrich, "Has the Mosaic Law Been Abolished?," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 116:464, October, 1959, Theological Journal Electronic Library, Galaxie Software.

9 Literally, the Hebrew reads, "for out of Zion will go instruction." Though the NASB has, "for the Law of the Lord will go forth," which might be taken as the Mosaic Law because of the article, "the," used in the translation, but the original Hebrew is better rendered by the NET Bible for the Hebrew word for "law," *torah*, lacks the article.

10 Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1987, electronic media.

11 Ryrie, electronic media.

12 Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, IV, 242.

13 Or “disciplinarian,” “custodian,” or “guide.” According to BAGD 603 s.v. paidagwov, “the man, usu. a slave...whose duty it was to conduct the boy or youth...to and from school and to superintend his conduct gener.; he was not a ‘teacher’ (despite the present mng. of the derivative ‘pedagogue’...When the young man became of age the p. was no longer needed.” LN 36.5 gives “guardian, leader, guide” here. (Taken from the NET Bible translators notes)

14 Aldrich, Theological Electronic Library.

15 This and all the material that follows is taken from the article by G. Coleman Luck, “Christian Ethics,” Bibliotheca Sacra, 118:471, July, 1961, Theological Electronic Library.

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