

# Law & Grace

## Intro

- This morning's sermon continues with the theme from the last couple weeks about getting the most out of reading and studying the Bible.
  - o Two weeks ago we looked at the practice of daily reading and meditation.
  - o Last week we saw that dedication to the apostles' teaching (preserved for us in Scripture) was one of the highest priorities of the early church.
  - o This week we are going to look at how we should understand the Old Testament Law, especially as it relates to us as New Testament era believers.
    - This is going to be one of those sermons that is a bit more like a Bible college freshman class than a traditional sermon.
    - That doesn't mean this is a purely academic topic – it has important implications for how we live righteously and handle God's Word accurately.
  
- Christians' relationship to the Old Testament Law is a frequent topic of debate and misunderstanding for both Christians and non-Christians.
  - o Non-Christians frequently point to us as hypocrites for claiming the Bible as our standard of morality but “cherry picking” which commands to follow.
    - E.g. few Christians think that it is morally wrong to eat non-fish seafood like shrimp (Leviticus 11:9-12) or wear clothing of mixed fabrics (Leviticus 19:19).
    - The argument is that we make a big deal of commandments that support our preferences & prejudices while ignoring ones that are inconvenient.
  - o Many (most?) Christians do appeal to commands in the OT Law to support what they believe is a biblical standard of morality.
    - E.g. homosexuality as an abomination (Leviticus 18:22), tattoos forbidden (Leviticus 19:28), the Sabbath as a day of rest (Leviticus 23:3).
    - Arguing this way does seem to be the very hypocrisy that opponents claim (after all the supposed tattoo prohibition is just 9 verses down from the mixed-fabric prohibition).
  
- How should we as Christians relate to the OT Law? Can we appeal to it for morality? Are any of its commands binding on us?
  - o On one extreme are people who think that the OT is essentially worthless.
    - E.g. Marcion the heretic & Gnosticism in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.
    - Clearly this must be rejected if we believe all Scripture to be God's Word.
  - o On the other extreme, you have Christians who think that people are bound to keep pretty much all the OT Laws (with the probable exception of the sacrificial system).
    - E.g. the Christian Pharisees in Acts 15 and Judaizers in Galatians
    - The apostolic response to these people shows this approach to be in error, as we will see in a little bit.

- A more middle-of-the-road approach is to claim that *moral* laws are for today, but laws about ritual, ceremony, criminal justice, and civic government are not.
  - This is getting closer to a biblical approach, but it still begs the question of which laws are moral.
  - *Moral, ceremonial, and civic* can be helpful categories for the sake of theological discussion, but it's not as if each law comes pre-labeled.
- Examining what the OT Law is, what its purpose was, and what the New Testament says about it gives us a much more objective standard for godly living.

## What is the Law?

- We are talking about the commandments given to Israel in Exodus-Deuteronomy.
  - Best known are the ten commandments given on Mount Sinai.
  - Jewish rabbis usually give the total number of commandments as 613 (365 negative and 248 positive) in 34 categories.
  - They governed both moral vs. immoral (righteous vs. sinful) as well as ritually clean vs. unclean in public & private life.
    - To be ritually unclean was not necessarily sinful.
    - It meant that you were unable to participate in public worship until you were again ritually clean.
- It stated the conditions of the Mosaic Covenant between God and Israel made at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 20ff) and renewed before Israel entered the promised Land (Deuteronomy).
  - This covenant is crucial to understanding the rest of Israel's history in the OT.
  - It is most clearly spelled out in Deuteronomy 28-30 when the covenant is renewed.
    - 28:1ff – If Israel follow's God's Law they will be blessed with incredible national prosperity in health, family life, agricultural wealth and plenty, military victory, etc. so that everyone will look at them and know the greatness of the LORD.
    - 28:15ff – If Israel breaks God's Law, they will suffer God's curses of disease, famine, fear, poverty, military defeat, etc. and ultimately be removed from their land & scattered by their enemies and everyone will look at them and know the holiness of the LORD.
    - 30:1-3ff – When Israel repents and returns to obedience, God will once again gather them to the land and restore them as a nation and everyone will see the faithfulness and mercy of the LORD.
  - The history of Israel in the OT is largely this covenant playing out.
  - We must understand that this was a covenant made specifically with the nation of Israel, and we cannot try to apply it directly to ourselves.
    - It is not about Christians or the church (contra the "prosperity gospel").
    - It is not about the USA (contra some versions of Chrsitian nationalism).

- There are principles we can learn from it, but the promises themselves are to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- This was about how the nation of Israel could live prosperously in the land God was giving to them.

## What purpose(s) did the Law have?

- The general purpose of the Law as a whole:
  - Leviticus 20:26 – Obeying these 613 laws would set Israel apart as belonging to God.
    - God is completely set apart from sin (i.e. He is holy).
    - Israel was meant to be set apart from sin and from the pagan nations.
  - Romans 3:19-24 – Ultimately, the Law demonstrates that no one can measure up to God’s standard of perfection, and everyone needs a Savior.
  
- Within this overarching purpose of setting Israel apart and showing man’s need for a Savior, various laws had different effects.
  - To define what is morally right and wrong (what reflects the character & will of God).
  - To set up object lessons/types to be fulfilled by the coming Savior (e.g. many details of the tabernacle, feasts, & sacrificial system).
  - To protect people from each other
  - To encourage health (e.g. incest laws, skin disease laws)
  - To run the nation’s government (criminal justice, economy, etc.) since Israel was a theocracy rather than a republic in which church & state had distinct functions.
  - To make the Israelites stand out as different (e.g. blue tassels, circumcision), which helped preserve ethnic identity even when scattered.
  - To make sure they did not worship God the way pagans worshipped the false gods (e.g. sexual relations made you ritually unclean, which makes it impossible to worship like Canaanites if you are following the Law).
  
- Practically every aspect of an Israelite’s individual, civic, and religious life was regulated by very specific rules.

## What does the New Testament say about the Law?

- Matthew 5:17 – Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of the Law.
  - In many of his teachings, he emphasized the moral intent behind many of the individual commandments (see rest of Matthew 5).
  - He perfectly fulfilled all its demands in his life (perfectly keeping it), death (suffering its curse), and resurrection (showing God’s approval of the ultimate sacrifice).
  - When the early church began working through the implications of this, there was strong debate (especially about whether Gentiles needed to keep the Law).

- Acts 15 – The Holy Spirit led them to the conclusion that Gentiles (non-Jews) are saved without having to keep the Law, and it should not be imposed on them after they are saved.
  - o See Peter’s speech in verses 7-11 – i.e. It is wrong to impose the Law upon people as a necessary condition of being a faithful Christian.
  - o The council agrees & simply warn the Gentiles against sexual immorality & requests they avoid eating things the Jews find especially disgusting (which Paul later elaborates on as an issue of conscience & love – 1 Corinthians 10 / Romans 14).
  - o Colossians 3:16-17 – Anyone who tries to impose on you OT Laws about dietary restrictions, festivals, and Sabbaths as if they were a Christian duty has missed the point as all those things pointed forward to Christ, their fulfillment.
  - o This same issue crops up in the (mostly Gentile) church in Galatia where some teachers are trying to add elements of the Law as Christian responsibilities.
  
- Galatians 3:10-14 – We are no longer accountable to keep the 613 commands of the Law.
  - o Righteousness does not come through a checklist of rules that brings a curse when it is not kept perfectly.
  - o Jesus Christ took the curse of the Law for us, fulfilling it on our behalf.
  - o Which also brings the fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham, that all the world would be blessed through his descendant (Genesis 12:1-3).
    - We get to share in the same kind of righteousness that Abraham had: where faith is counted by God as righteousness.
    - We get the indwelling Holy Spirit who produces true righteousness in us.
  
- Galatians 5:1-4 – If you place yourself under obligation to keep one part of the Law (e.g. circumcision), you are under obligation to keep all of it.
  - o If you place yourself under that obligation, you are not living by God’s grace or in proper fellowship with Christ.
  - o i.e. It is hypocritical (and spiritually unhealthy) to pick and choose certain OT Laws as the basis of morality.
  
- Summary so far: the Law existed for a specific time (from Mt. Sinai until the cross) for specific people (national Israel).
  - o Galatians 3:23-25 – It was the primary means God used at that time for restraining evil and training in righteousness, but that time has passed.
  - o This does *not* mean that we live however we please (not “free from the Law, o happy condition / now I can sin with Jesus’ permission...”)

## How do we live holy lives?

- Many of the commands & principles found in the OT Law *are* repeated for believers in the NT, and we should follow those NT principles & commands in the power of the Holy Spirit.

- These are principles that go beyond Israel’s covenant relationship, national identity, or Messianic prediction and reflect the holy character of God.
- There are clear hints of this even in the Law itself where violations of certain commands are said to be the reason God is punishing the Canaanites.
  - E.g. Deuteronomy 18:9-12 – various forms of pagan worship & fortunetelling
  - E.g. Leviticus 18 on sexual immorality (incest, homosexuality, adultery, etc.)
  - Passages like these point to the same unchanging moral principles that flow from God’s character and underly commands in the NT.
- So what does it look like for us NT believers to reflect God’s holy character?
  - Matthew 22:36-40 – Jesus summarizes the moral intent of the Law in two commandments: Love God with all that you are & love your neighbor as yourself.
    - Cf. Romans 13:8-10 where Paul makes the same summary.
    - Most of the specific instructions given in the NT flesh out what it looks like for a Christian to love God and love their neighbor.
  - Romans 12:1-2 – We are supposed to live differently from the world by dedicating our whole life to the kind of living that is pleasing to God.
    - For us, that doesn’t mean having a specific dress code, weird dietary restrictions, a system of being ritually clean/unclean, etc.
    - Rather, our very thoughts and actions are shaped by God the Holy Spirit producing fruit in our lives, helping us to put into practice all that Jesus taught and commanded (Galatians 5:22-25).
  - If we truly do this:
    - It *will* frequently make us seem weird in areas like dress, speech, sexuality, honesty, non-retaliation, self-discipline, compassion, etc.
    - Our good works will make us stand out and draw others to God (Matthew 5:16).

## What is the use of the OT Law today?

- As it always has, it reveals God’s character (Malachi 3:6, Hebrews 13:8).
  - God’s character remains the same even though we are under different “administrative systems” (dispensations).
  - The Law can show us the kinds of things God values.
  - E.g., while our government is not (nor should it be) a theocracy like Israel’s, looking at Israel’s civil and criminal justice laws can show us some areas and practices that were of concern to God as they come up repeatedly.
    - Care for the poor (alms, opportunities to work, debt forgiveness, etc.).
    - Equal legal rights, protection, & responsibilities regardless of wealth, poverty, or national origin.
    - Fair and proportional punishment and restitution for wrongs committed.

- Overall, the principle of God’s holiness and hatred for sin alongside his love and willingness to forgive (through the death of a pure substitute).
- As it always has, it reveals human sinfulness & need of a savior:
  - Through Israel’s recorded history in which they never wholeheartedly followed it.
  - Through our own inability to measure up to the moral principles from it repeated in the New Testament (see Matthew 5:21-48 from the Sermon on the Mount):
    - (21-26) Hatred/Insults = Murder
    - (27-32) Lust/Fantasizing/Divorce & remarriage = Adultery
    - (33-37) All speech (not just promises & oaths) must be sincere and not deceptive.
    - (38-48) Love of neighbor includes non-retaliation when wronged & love of enemies.
  - This should drive us to Jesus for salvation & praise God for his love, mercy, & grace.
    - After all, the Sermon on the Mount starts “blessed [happy because of God’s favor] are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” (Matthew 5:3).
    - Song recommendation: *Blessed Are the Ones* by Rend Collective

## Applications

- Trust Jesus to forgive your sins and transform your life.
  - We all fall short of God’s perfection.
  - Throw yourself on God’s infinite mercy and receive true life on the basis of Jesus’ death and resurrection.
- Handle God’s Word responsibly
  - Learn about God’s character and values from the OT Law...
  - ...but don’t treat its commands as binding upon church-age believers.
    - To try to live by the Law is to place yourself under a curse.
    - To try to live by the Law is to ignore the way of Christ and teaching of his Spirit-inspired apostles.
    - To try to impose on others a command of the OT Law that is not repeated in the NT is to mishandle God’s Word & it damages your credibility.
- Keep in step with the Holy Spirit
  - As he helps you understand and apply the commands & teachings of Jesus that flow from the loving, holy character of God.
  - As he works with your new nature to produce character traits, attitudes, and motivations that are pleasing to our great God and Savior.
  - Assignment: read Galatians 5.