

The Law and the Gospel

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God's law is very concise, yet all-encompassing. The Ten Commandments as found in Exodus 20 contain about 320 words, depending on the translation, whereas a law of the European Community dealing with the import of caramel products contains 26,911 words. The problem today is with people's attitude toward the law. There are two extremes: rejection of the law or seeking salvation through keeping the law. Neither do justice to Scripture.

Different Laws

If studied carefully, biblical statements about the law, such as those that describe the law as being abolished or those confirming the validity of the law, are not contradictory. The term "law" is used in various ways, even by the same author and within the same document. The immediate context determines which law is dealt with. Notice how Paul uses the term:

Rom 3:19	The entire Old Testament
Rom 3:21	The five books of Moses (the Pentateuch)
Rom 7:7	The Ten Commandments (the Decalogue)
Rom 7:23	A principle
1 Cor 9:8-9	Mosaic commandments
Gal 5:3	The law in its entirety

Even Moses distinguishes the uniqueness of the moral law of Ten Commandments from other laws, such as those for Israel as a nation, the ceremonial laws pointing to the life and work of the Messiah that found their fulfillment in Jesus, and various other laws. Although all of these laws ultimately came from God, they differ in scope and duration (see appendix on p. 3).

The Ten Commandments in the New Testament

The New Testament upholds the continuing validity of the Decalogue.

Matt 5:17-19 While Jesus upheld the Ten Commandments, explaining more fully what it means not to kill (5:21-26) or commit adultery (5:27-30), he modified the commandment on the transient bill of divorce (5:31-32—returning to Gen 1 and 2), as well as the common understanding of taking oaths (5:33-37), retaliation (5:38-42), and the unbiblical injunction to love one's neighbor and hate one's enemy (5:43-48).

Matt 22:37-40 The so-called Greatest Commandment does not abolish the Decalogue. God gave us the Ten Commandments because of our ignorance so that we might understand what it means to love. If we fail to love as God intended us to and transgress His will, the Ten Commandments make us aware of our sin (Rom 7:7).

Paul makes several indirect statements, all of which presuppose a law which is still valid: bringing about "the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles" (Rom 1:5; 15:18; 16:26); obedience toward God (e.g. Rom 6:16); the existence of sin (Rom 3:20; 7:7); and the necessity of exhorting believers to live a moral life (e.g. Rom 12:17, 19, 21; 13). Besides these, Paul also makes more direct statements maintaining that the Ten Commandments remain valid:

Rom 2:21-23 Although Jews emphasize the Decalogue, they have not kept it and therefore dishonor God.

- Rom 3:31 The law is not nullified but established. In the immediate context, this verse seems to refer to the moral law.
- Rom 7:7, 12 Quoting the Ten Commandments, Paul says it is this law that shows us what sin is and also that the law is holy, righteous, and good.
- Rom 13:8-10 Again quoting some of the Ten Commandments, all are summarized in the commandment to love.
- 1 Cor 7:19 Paul's distinction between circumcision, which had become unnecessary, and the necessity of keeping God's law points to the difference between the moral law and laws which were transitional.
- Rom 10:4 Several different interpretations of this verse have been proposed: (a) Christ is the termination of the law; (b) Christ is the goal (or aim) of the law; (c) Christ is the fulfillment of the law; or (d) Christ is the termination of the law as a means of salvation. In light of the immediately preceding verses (9:30-10:3), the last option is to be favored. Obviously Paul uses "law" in a general way (no definite article is being used) and affirms that justification is accepted by faith and not attained by keeping the law. Paul's statements do not contradict each other.
- Jas 2:10-13 The Ten Commandments are "the law of liberty" and the standard in the judgment process.

Importance and Functions of the Law

The Ten Commandments must have existed prior to Sinai. Cain would not have been guilty of murder without a law prohibiting the killing of another. Abraham knew God's law (Gen 26:5), as did Israel before God gave the tables of stone to Moses (Exod 16).

Christianity defends the validity of the moral law as prohibiting idolatry, murder, lying, adultery, etc. On the other hand, many Christians reject the fourth commandment and although keeping the other nine, when pressed, declare that the Ten Commandments or, at least, certain so-called "ceremonial" aspects of them, have been abolished. The major problem is the rejection of the fourth commandment, which leads to the rejection of the others. Some people regard the law as too inconvenient and idealistic. While some reject God's law outright, others attempt to be saved by keeping the law and thus go to the opposite extreme of overemphasizing its importance. However, Jesus had to die because the law could not be abolished (Matt 5:17; Phil 2:8).

The law has several distinct functions:

- 1. The nature of God's law is love.** Like the lights on airport runways which allow the pilots to touch down safely, it wants to guide us on the right and good path. It is "the law of liberty" (Jas 2:12), and we keep it because we love God.
- 2. The law shows us our sinfulness and condemns us.** Even this function has a positive effect, because we realize our need of salvation and that we need the help of Someone else.
- 3. The law leads us to Jesus who saves us.** As Peter Elderveld has said, "Mount Calvary is only for those who have been to Mount Sinai."¹
- 4. Jesus leads us to obey the law.** Whoever has been led to Jesus by the law will, by Jesus, also be led to obedience to the law. Such people will express their gratitude for salvation by keeping God's commandments (Ps 119:70; Jer 31:33; Heb 10:16-17). According to Matthew Simpson, "the law without Gospel is dark and hopeless; the Gospel without the law is inefficient and powerless." And, as John Mackay pointed out: "Apart from the Law, the Gospel cannot be understood or be more than mere sentimentalism. Apart from the Gospel the Law cannot escape becoming pure moralism."

Conclusion

Law and Gospel belong together. We need both. The problem is not God's law; rather, oftentimes, it is the attitude of rebellious human beings towards the law.

¹This quotation and the two which follow are taken from Don F. Neufeld,, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Student's Source Book*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1962), entries 981, 954, 955.

Appendix

Even the Reformers acknowledged that there are different laws and that some are still valid. For example, the distinction was already known to Melancthon, colleague of Martin Luther, and is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The Law of Ten Commandments

- Written by God – Exod 31:18; 32:16
- Written on stone – Exod 31:18
- Handed to Moses by God – Exod 31:18
- Placed inside the ark of the covenant – Deut 10:5
- Focuses on moral principles – Exod 20:1-17
- Reveals sin – Rom 7:7
- Is spiritual – Rom 7:14
- Established through faith – Rom 3:31
- Blessed by keeping this law of liberty Jas 1:25
- To be kept in its entirety – Jas 2:10
- To be judged by this law – Jas 2:12
- Violation of this law is sin – 1 John 3:4

The Mosaic Law

- Written by Moses – Exod 24:4; Deut 31:9
- Written in a book – Exod 24:4, 7
- Handed to the Levites by Moses – Deut 31:25-26
- Placed beside the ark of the covenant – Deut 31:26
- Focuses on ceremonial and ritual ordinances – e.g. Lev 8
- Describes sacrifices for sins – e.g. Lev 1-7
- Parts depend on physical descent – Heb 7:16
- Abolished by Christ – Eph 2:15
- Loss of freedom by keeping this law to be saved– Gal 5:1-2
- To keep this law now means nothing – 1 Cor 7:19
- Not to be judged by this law – Col 2:16
- Violation of this law is not sin as it is abolished – Eph 2:15

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