

Christian Growth Week 6: God's Law

Introduction

As Christians, what is our relationship with God's law? The New Testament's answer to this question is somewhat confusing.

On the one hand, it states emphatically that Christians are no longer under the law.

Rom. 6:14 Sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

Rom. 7:1-6 Do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to men who know the law—that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? ² For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. ³ So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.

⁴ So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. ⁵ For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶ But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

Gal. 2:19 For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.

On the other hand, it states that Christians still have a relationship with God's law.

Rom. 13:8-10 ⁸ Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God's law. ⁹ For the commandments say, "You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet." These—and other such commandments—are summed up in this one commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God's law.

1 Cor. 7:19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts.

1 Cor. 9:21 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.

These two sets of verses are not contradictory. In order to sort this out, we need to understand the different purposes for which God gave his law, and how these purposes relate to us as Christians. Mistakes on this issue lead to horrible misrepresentations of Christianity, and to twisted views of Christian spirituality.

No longer under the Old Testament law

The Old Testament law (or the law of Moses) was given to the nation of Israel for three distinct purposes—civil, ceremonial, and moral. But they were not neatly separated into three volumes; they were all mixed together. Can you distinguish these three kinds of laws in this passage?

Lev. 19:23-34 ²³ When you enter the land and plant any kind of fruit tree, regard its fruit as forbidden. For three years you are to consider it forbidden; it must not be eaten. ²⁴ In the fourth year all its fruit will be holy, an offering of praise to the LORD.

²⁵ But in the fifth year you may eat its fruit. In this way your harvest will be increased. I am the LORD your God.

²⁶ Do not eat any meat with the blood still in it. Do not practice divination or sorcery.

²⁷ Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.

²⁸ Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD.

²⁹ Do not degrade your daughter by making her a prostitute, or the land will turn to prostitution and be filled with wickedness.

³⁰ Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the LORD.

³¹ Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God.

³² Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD.

³³ When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. ³⁴ The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

The Bible clearly teaches that the law of Moses was a temporary arrangement until the Messiah came.

Jer. 31:31-34 “The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. ³³ “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴ No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

Heb. 7:18,19 For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹ (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.

Now that Jesus has come, He has changed the way we relate to each aspect of the Law:

COMPONENT & PURPOSE	EXAMPLES	PRESENT STATUS FOR CHRISTIANS
<p>CIVIL: Pragmatic aspects of civil order for Israel. To preserve Israel as a nation until Messiah came.</p>	<p>“Normal” penal laws (murder, theft, etc.), “special” penal laws (witchcraft; idolatry), inheritance laws, sanitary codes.</p>	<p>Old Testament civil law has been replaced by national governments during the Church Age (Matt. 22:21; Rom. 13:1).</p>
<p>CEREMONIAL: Israel's prescribed rituals for approaching God. To teach the seriousness of sin & the necessity of atonement. To give Israel a distinct cultural identity.</p>	<p>Animal sacrifices, Sabbath & annual festivals, “cleanliness” laws, circumcision, some health and dietary laws.</p>	<p>Old Testament ritual law was fulfilled by Christ's work on the cross (Heb. 8; Col. 2:16,17). Ritualism is now set aside for a personal relationship with God (Gal. 4:1-11).</p>
<p>MORAL: A description of God's character and ethical will for humanity. It provides an absolute morality, & the moral basis for much of the Old Testament civil law (e.g., sexual laws; murder; theft; etc.). It exposed the Israelites' sin to convince them of their need for God's grace (see also “Present Status for Christians”).</p>	<p>The two “great commandments” to love God & neighbor (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). Nine of the Ten Commandments apply these two commandments.</p>	<p><i>Non-Christians are under God's moral law.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It shows them that they are under God's judgment because of their sin (Rom. 3:19,20). <p><i>Justified Christians are no longer under God's moral law.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are freed from the judgment decreed by it because of Christ's atoning sacrifice (Gal. 3:24,25). • It shows us that we cannot serve God without the power of the Spirit (Rom. 7:6). • It describes the life of loving God & others when we live by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:4; 13:8-10).

The *civil* laws (Lev. 19:23,25): Christians are not obligated to follow the Old Testament civil laws. These laws were for the nation of Israel, not the church. Jesus and Paul taught that Christians are to submit to whatever civil government they live under.

Matt. 22:21 “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.”

Rom. 13:1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

Church history is full of examples of what happens when the church institutes portions of Old Testament civil law (e.g., THE CRUSADES; THE INQUISITION; CROMWELL DESTROYING A CATHOLIC TOWN).

The *ceremonial* laws (Lev. 19:24,26a,27,28,30): The New Testament teaches very clearly that Christians are not obligated to keep Old Testament ritual laws. This is mainly because Jesus' death has fulfilled most of these rituals.

Col. 2:16,17 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

Heb. 8:4-6,13 If he (Jesus) were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. ⁵ They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." ⁶ But the ministry Jesus has received is superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises . . . ¹³ By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

This explains the unmistakable difference between Old Testament Judaism and New Testament Christianity over the role of rituals:

- The *hundreds* of Old Testament rituals have been replaced with only *two* New Testament rituals (baptism and communion).
- The *detailed regulations* for Old Testament rituals have been replaced by *very little instruction* for baptism and communion.
- Whereas the Old Testament rituals looked *forward* to a future Sacrifice, the New Testament rituals *commemorate* the salvation that Jesus has already purchased for us.

RELEVANCE: Churches that emphasize ritual tend toward formalism (ritual observance without the proper heart attitude) and/or works-righteousness (ritual observance earns merit with God). How many of you were raised in churches like this, and got the message that you didn't need to be reborn, that God accepted you as long as you observed the rituals?

The *moral* laws (Lev. 19:29,30-34) reflected the character of God and his moral will for humans, who are created in His image. As such, they are universally and eternally valid, and provide an absolute morality. What are God's purposes for His law regarding non-Christians and Christians? The New Testament gives us a multi-faceted answer to this question.

Non-Christians are under God's moral law

Grace is (literally) charity for all who admit that they deserve God's judgment and cast themselves on God's mercy through Christ. Every human needs God's grace—but many pridefully assume that they can earn His acceptance by their own good works, moral reformation, etc. What damns people, then, is not their sin, but their self-righteousness—their belief that they don't need grace. As long as they hold this belief, they cannot be saved.

Religions urge people to believe they can earn God's acceptance (EXAMPLES). Most Christian cults also teach works-righteousness (EXAMPLES).

How does God convince self-righteous people that they need His grace? By giving them His moral law. God puts all non-Christians “under” His moral law because *it shows them that they are under God's judgment because of their sin.*

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 held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

This is the conclusion of Paul's argument in the first three chapters of Romans.

- In chapter 1, he argues that all “pagans” under God's judgment because they have violated the law of God written on their consciences (see also Rom. 2:14,15).
- In chapter 2, he argues that all “moral” people are also under God's judgment because they have failed to perfectly keep God's law by which they judge “pagans.”
- In chapter 3(above), he summarizes that all people are condemned by God's moral law as guilty sinners who deserve His condemnation.

Gal. 3:24* The Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.

A “tutor” (*paidagogos*) was not a kindly instructor who helped their students become competent. They were “child-conductors,” or household slaves who were in charge of making their master's children go to school, do their chores, etc. Children under the authority of these “tutors” longed to reach adulthood so they could be free from them. In the same way, Paul says that the purpose of the law for non-Christians is to help them to see their need for the freedom of God's grace. It does this by revealing their moral guilt and their inability to gain God's favor by their own efforts.

When Jesus was dealing with people who knew they were guilty sinners, He told them about the gift of God's forgiveness that He to offered freely (cf. Jn. 3:16). But when he was dealing with self-righteous people, he pressed them with God's law.

See how He did this in the Sermon on the Mount, especially Matt. 5:20-48.

He told his self-righteous audience that unless they were more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees, they would never make it into God's kingdom.

This is like saying: “Unless you are more righteous than Billy Graham and Mother Theresa combined, you’ll never be accepted by God.

He told them that it isn’t enough to not murder people. If they had ever hated anyone, they were guilty enough to go to hell. Likewise, it isn’t enough to never commit adultery. If they ever sexually lusted for another person, they were guilty enough to go to hell.

Jesus’ purpose was to show his listeners that they fell short of God’s standards and needed to accept his forgiveness.

See how Jesus did this with the (self-righteous) rich young ruler in Matt. 19:16-22. This man believed he was good enough to earn eternal life; he just wanted to know which commandments he needed to keep. Jesus pressed him with God’s law. When the man insisted that he had kept the commandments, Jesus told him to give up his money—thus exposing the man’s selfishness and guilt.

When you share God’s grace to people (religious or non-religious) and it “bounces off,” it is often because they are so self-righteous that they don’t believe they need it.

When this is the case, you will need to use the law as per above. EXAMPLES:

Walk the person through Matt. 5, and acknowledge your own sins of hatred and lust. Then press them on whether they have ever hated or lusted for anyone. When they say “yes,” explain that God says this makes them deserving of hell, or ask, “What does this passage say to you?”

Walk the person through the greatest commandments (Matt. 22:37-39), and admit that you have fallen far short of this requirement. Then ask them if they have always loved God most and never used other people selfishly. When they say “no,” point out that these sins are punishable by death.

You may need to help them understand that God is not just a kindly deity who just wants us to be “pretty good.” He is morally perfect, and because He is this way, we must be perfect in order to earn His acceptance. God doesn’t “grade on the curve,” and that even one act of disobedience fails the test (Jas. 2:10).

Trust that God’s Spirit will convict their consciences as you declare this, as Jesus promised in Jn. 16:8.

The good news is that once we humble ourselves to ask God for forgiveness through Christ, our relationship with His moral law fundamentally changes . . .

Christians are no longer under God’s moral law

We are freed from the judgment decreed by it because of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Once we receive Christ, we never need to worry again about God’s condemnation for our sins (Rom. 8:1). Our acceptance by God is now based entirely on Christ’s finished work for us, and not at all on our imperfect work for God.

Gal. 3:25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

It shows us that we cannot serve God without the power of the Spirit. Once we receive Christ, His Spirit lives within us to motivate and empower us to serve God (Phil. 2:13). The problem, once again, is our pride—we tend to assume that we can serve God by our

own moral will-power: “Just focus on God’s moral law and try to keep it.” Paul calls this approach serving God in the “oldness of the letter.” (This is the behavioral change model we critiqued in Week 3.)

Rom. 7:6 But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.

Unfortunately, many believing churches teach, or imply, that although Christians are no longer under the law for their justification, they remain under the law for their sanctification—they must obey God’s moral law by their own moral will-power (EXPLAIN PROHIBITION-FOCUSED CHURCHES, REFORMED THEOLOGY’S 3RD USE OF THE LAW, ETC.).

Until we are convinced that serving God this way is doomed to defeat, we will not depend on God’s Spirit to empower us to serve God. Once again, the law will serve as a “pedagogue,” to break us of our prideful self-sufficiency so that we learn to depend on Christ’s Spirit. In Rom. 7:7-24, Paul relates his own efforts as a Christian to serve God “in the oldness of the letter.” He relates two important discoveries:

First, the law exposed his sinfulness on a deeper level. The commandment against coveting increased his knowledge of how deeply covetous he was.

Rom. 7:7 Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “YOU SHALL NOT COVET.” 8 But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead . . . 12 So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. 13 Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.

Second, the law convinced him that he was impotent to reform himself. No matter how hard he tried to stop coveting, he was unable to change his heart.

Rom. 7:14 For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. 15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate . . . 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not . . . 22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, 23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? 25 Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . .

Notice that only after this painful realization does Paul cast himself on Christ to liberate him from the power of his sinful nature to do God's will. Only when we are convinced that we are unable, can we trust that He is able. For an excellent illustration of this lesson, see Watchman Nee's "drowning man" in *The Normal Christian Life*.¹ For another autobiographical example, see Rose Marie Miller, *From Fear to Freedom*, pp. 49-51.

Morally sensitive Christians can certainly relate to Paul's experience! Whether it is breaking a sinful habit, or trying to sacrificially love others, we have to learn to depend on Christ's Spirit instead of our own moral will-power. This was evidently a lesson that Paul had to learn more than once, because he describes Rom. 7:14-25 as a recent experience (present tense) even though he was by now a seasoned Christian worker. So we shouldn't be surprised that we have to learn this lesson many times. Through this painful process, God teaches us to look away from ourselves to Christ, and to walk according to His Spirit (see Week 4).

When we walk according to the Spirit, we are free from God's moral law as a sanctification "pedagogue." We focus on relating to Jesus and depending on His Spirit to gradually change us and to empower us to serve God. Now we view God's moral law in a positive light: *it describes the life of loving God and others when we live by the power of the Spirit.*

Rom. 13:8 Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. 9 For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

God's moral law is not an impersonal set of ethical rules; it is a description of what it looks like to love God and other people. When we walk according to the Spirit, we do not have to take from others to gratify ourselves. Instead, we can serve them for their good. So love fulfills the law, and the law describes love in action.

Christians who walk according to the Spirit are motivated, guided, and empowered to thrive from a life of self-giving love! As we saw in Week 4, the moral imperatives of the New Testament become concrete opportunities to actively trust God to live His life of love through us. This is why New Testament authors urge us to aggressively seek progress in Christ-like character.

1 Tim. 4:12 Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe . . . 15 Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all.

¹ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Fort Washington, Penn.: Christian Literature Crusade, 1970), p. 117.

1 Tim. 11 But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.

2 Tim. 2:22 Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

Living under law vs. under grace

Living under grace by the Spirit produces a very different kind of spirituality than living under law. The contrasts below are a helpful way to diagnose whether you are living under grace or under law.² We'll go through this quickly, but take note of the areas of legalism that the Holy Spirit shows you are personally applicable. It will also help you do the same with your Christian friends.

Area	Legalistic/Under Law	Under Grace
View of the Law	A set of detailed obligations that I must keep to "be good" or to guarantee I receive the blessings I want	A description of the lifestyle that glorifies God & loves other people
View of self	I am regenerate, and therefore I am able to keep the law	I am regenerate, but I can't keep the law by my own power
View of others	A threat to my acceptability if they are more righteous than me An excuse for self-righteousness if they are less righteous than me	I don't compare myself to others for identity &/or validation Others are opportunities to give God's love, and sometimes a means through which God gives His love to me
View of the Holy Spirit	Little practical understanding of the Spirit's ministries	I depend increasingly on the Holy Spirit for power, motivation, and direction
View of the "means of growth"	Ways to appear spiritual to others &/or to get/keep the blessings I want	Avenues through which I receive the life-changing grace of God
The "key" to spiritual growth	Moral will-power OR . . . Special experiences	Self-effort is futile. As I walk by the Spirit, God will gradually change me. I welcome healthy spiritual experience, but do not depend on dramatic experiences as quick-fixes.
Mental focus	What do the rules require? What am I allowed/not allowed to do?	Walking by the Spirit: focusing on God's love for me & giving God's love to others
Motivation	Guilt & fear of God's punishment Self-aggrandizement Human approval/praise Duty ("I have to")	Confident gratitude for God's grace Servanthood Compassion for people's needs Privilege ("I get to")
Reaction to trials	Interpret as God's retribution Anger toward God if I've "been good;" guilt feelings if I've "been bad"	Interpret as God's loving discipline & anticipate the good it will produce

² The chart is adapted from Dennis McCallum's book, [Walking in Victory](#).

Reaction to spiritual failure	Surprised and distressed Rationalizations, minimization, blame-shifting, and self-recrimination Vows to do better	Concerned, but not surprised Confident of God's acceptance & therefore can admit sins to myself & others Repentance & return to walking by the Spirit
Reaction to spiritual success	Boastful (overtly or covertly) Condescending & intolerant of others less successful "I have arrived"	Humbly grateful—credit goes to God and others. Still able to empathize with those who fail "I need continued growth"
Reaction to others' offenses	Retributive through lashing out, withdrawal, writing off, silent treatment, etc.	Willing to forgive because God forgave me Constructive correction for their good
Ethical priorities	Emphasizes external, humanly-keepable commands &/or prohibitions	Emphasizes love, honesty, sexual purity, forgiveness, generosity, etc.
Extra-biblical rules	Justifies them in order to protect myself/others from sinning	Rejects their authority, but willing to forego freedoms out of love for others
Expectation of moral improvement	Often perfectionistic with myself &/or others Hyper-critical; impossible to please	Hopeful about improvement, but not perfectionistic with self or others Thankful for progress
Focus in ministry	My efforts &/or others' response to my efforts Proud over fruit & easily discouraged	God's promises to convict, lead, empower, etc. Grateful for fruit & faithful
Long-term result	External, superficial conformity, but increasing internal defeat & hypocrisy which leads to: Cynicism & giving up OR . . . Self-righteous self-deception	Gradual transformation into a person who focuses on Christ & enjoys increasing victory over sin A more humble, grateful, other-centered person

Memory Verses

Gal. 3:24,25*

Romans 7:7-25**

Assignment