

Law and Grace

The Christian and the Law

If salvation is by faith alone apart from the law (see the Statement of Faith), and if the believer is "not under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14), then what do we need the law for? What do we need the Old Testament for? Are we under all or any part of the law? If we are, then what is the penalty? These are questions that scholars have debated for centuries. In this article, we will examine these questions by taking a look at the law and what the New Testament says about it,

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A Summary of the Law and the New Covenant

A Brief Summary of the Law

The Old Testament law was given to the nation of Israel upon her founding by God. The basic principles of the law were embodied in what we called the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17; the Hebrew is literally "Ten Words"). From there, the law expanded to cover every part of Israel's life. Israel was to obey the law to remain separate from her pagan neighbors and avoid worshiping foreign gods. The law contained blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

Many people find it easier to talk about several different “types” or “categories” of the Old Testament law: ceremonial, civil, and moral. We will adopt these categories purely for the sake of convenience.

- *The Ceremonial Law* - God gave these laws to Israel as a means of directing their worship and standing before Him, as well as certain aspects of cleanliness.
- *The Civil Law* - The civil laws of the Old Testament were given to a nation that was to be a theocracy – ruled solely by God through His representative. Later, as we know, they asked for a King, “so that we can be like the other nations.” He granted that request, but the king was subject to His decrees. The civil law contained regulations regarding daily living, political affairs, and the judicial system, including crimes and punishments (e.g., Exodus 21:1-23:9; Lev. 19:35; 24:17-23).
- *The Moral Law* - The Moral Law relates to right and wrong, character and attitudes. It includes, but is not limited to, the Ten Commandments. Jesus mentioned nine of the Commandments in the New Testament (the only one not mentioned was the Sabbath).

The law is found in the books of Exodus-Deuteronomy. The rest of the Old Testament is generally the record of how Israel lived under that law, both successes and (ultimately) failure. Paul gave a good summary of the law when he wrote:

For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them (Rom. 10:5).

The New Covenant

Before turning to the New Testament's treatment of the law, we need to look at the New Covenant. This was a prophecy given primarily in Jeremiah and Ezekiel:

"Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers. . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:31-34).

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God (Ezek. 36:25-28).

What follows is a brief summary of the blessings of the New Covenant.

Cleansed

Notice the first thing that the Lord says in the Ezekiel passage: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you." Under the Law, if someone became unclean (either through sin or because of certain diseases, or by touching a dead body, for example), they had to go through an elaborate ritual of cleansing (and staying away from people). If they, during their time of cleansing, encountered something else unclean, they had to start all over.

We read in Hebrews 10:4 that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." The best, then, that could be said to happen in the Old Testament rituals was that the sin was covered, not done away with. So, the person was only *declared* to be clean (that's how God saw him). Yet, under the New Covenant the believer would be truly cleansed. The sense of this verse is that "I'll cleanse you once, and you will be clean once and for all." No need to repeat the cleansing ritual.

Obedience

As we know, Israel continually failed to keep the covenant, turning from *Yahweh* to serve and worship other gods. For this, Israel was sent into

exile. As He promised, God did bring the back to the land to begin their restoration. But more was needed. Returning to the Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophecies, we read:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:26-27).

There are three big changes here that we need to take note of:

1. The law, instead of being an external force to be obeyed, is now part of the person, written on their heart.
2. The person receives a new heart. The “heart of stone” (the old heart that seeks to rebel against God) will be replaced with a “heart of flesh” (a heart that is inclined toward God and His ways).
3. Not only that, by now the very Spirit of God will dwell within the person, helping him to obey those things which are now written on the heart.

Summarizing the New Covenant

To summarize, under the new covenant, God’s people will receive a new *status* (forgiven, not just covered), a new *nature* (a heart that wants to obey God), and a new *motivation* (the law is part of us, and the Spirit lives inside us). This is what God promised to His people.

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Jesus and the Law

To begin our discussion of how the New Testament views that law, we start with Jesus' words:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:17-20).

This passage is of vital importance, since not only is it the first “commentary” of the law in the New Testament, but the statements come from Jesus Himself. There has been much debate and misunderstanding over this passage of Scripture, and it deserves a close look.

The first, and perhaps most fundamental, observation about this passage is this: *It was written by a Jew, spoken by a Jew, and written to Jews.* Why is this important? Proper interpretation of a passage always demands that the writer, speaker(s) and audience be considered. As mentioned above, the law was given to the nation of Israel. Here it is clear that Jesus was not talking to the Gentiles in this passage. In fact, He distinguished them from His audience.

The second point we should keep in mind is this: *The Law, as it is used in the Gospels, always refers to the Law of Moses.* Why is this important? Jesus wasn't talking about law “in general.” He was referring to a specific set of laws that governed (or were supposed to have governed) the nation. So, we have a Jewish writer writing what a Jewish speaker said to Jewish people about the Jewish law. Are we to just dismiss this passage, then, because it is set entirely in a Jewish context? Not at all! In this passage Jesus reveals the true intent of the law.

The Context of the Law

This passage cannot be separated from its immediate context, which is the “Sermon on the Mount”. Some writers have likened this discourse to “the Constitution of the Kingdom”, or the “Kingdom Code”. Both of those are, in a sense, accurate. In essence, the Sermon on the Mount reveals what

life in the Kingdom will look like. Here are some observations on this “Code”:

- *It is governed by the inner thoughts, motives and attitudes of the heart.* Jesus takes the outward commands of the Law and applies them internally, where God originally intended them to apply. It is not so much that He created a new law, rather that He corrected misunderstandings of the original law.
- *There is only one requirement for entrance into the Kingdom – poverty of spirit.* That is to say that someone who declares, “I am nothing, You are everything. I have nothing, You have everything,” is right at the door of the Kingdom. And what is it that Jesus said, “Come through me, the door, to enter the Kingdom.”
- *Jesus was talking to people, many of whom He regarded as being “in the Kingdom.”* Notice these phrases: “least in the kingdom,” “greatest in the kingdom,” “you are the salt of the earth,” and “you are the light of the world.” These phrases denote people who are already “in the kingdom.” By contrast, Jesus says, “If your righteousness does not exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees, you will *not* enter the Kingdom” (by implication, He viewed the Pharisees and the religious experts as “not in the Kingdom”).

At this point in the discourse many would wonder what the “Code” of the Kingdom (the law, if you will) would be. There were doubtless many who wanted to throw out the ritualistic sacrificial system and the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, and have no law. There were those who thought that the same Law would apply in the Kingdom of Heaven, and that outward observance would be all that was necessary. In Matt. 5:17-20, He spoke to both groups. Notice these points:

- He did not come to abolish the law (sorry anarchists!). In fact, He upheld its authority through the end of time – until it was fulfilled in Him (v. 17-18). Instead of abolishing it, He would fulfill it (v. 18, see next section). Once it was fulfilled, believers would be able to obey the law written on their hearts.
- To those who wanted merely outward observance (and perhaps the relaxation of the standards), He gave a strong warning: Not only would the standards not be set aside in the Kingdom, but they would invade every part of your life – heart, soul, mind and body. He then goes on to elaborate this point. In fact, Jesus warned that this group

would not see the Kingdom because their “righteousness” is merely outward. That, Jesus says, will simply not do.

The remainder of Matthew 5, along with chapters 6-7, teach what the proper application of the law was to be. By this time in history, observance of the law had become an outward show, and many scholars had found ways to give themselves “loopholes.” Christ addresses many of those in His teaching. He contrasts their interpretations of the law with the real depth of its meaning. Some examples of this include:

- “You say, ‘Don’t murder.’ I say, Don’t let hatred remain in your heart. Make peace with your brother and your enemy” (5:21-26).
- “You say, ‘Don’t commit adultery.’ I say that looking with lustful intent means you already have committed adultery in your heart” (5:22-30).
- “You say, ‘Do not break the oath you have sworn.’ I say, Don’t swear at all. Your word should be enough—let your ‘yes’ mean ‘yes’, and your ‘no’ mean ‘no’” (5:33-37).
- “You say, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for tooth.’ I say, Turn the other cheek. Give when asked. Go the extra mile” (5:38-42).
- “You say, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ I say that you must love your enemy! Bless them, pray for them. In this way you show yourselves to be sons of your Father. Be perfect.” (5:43-48).

The Consummation of the Law

What did Jesus mean when He said, “I have not come to abolish . . . but to fulfill,” and “until heaven and earth pass away not [the smallest part] of the law will pass away . . .”? This is the question we will answer in this section, by looking at the passage in detail.

Notice first that Jesus says he did not come to abolish the law. Indeed, he upholds the authority of the Old Testament until heaven and earth passes away. At the same time, Jesus said that he came not to abolish but to fulfill the law and the prophets. The word rendered “fulfill” is the Greek *plēroō*, which can mean (among other things) “to fill up; to complete or perfect; to bring to an end; to perform fully, discharge; to consummate; to realize, accomplish, fulfill.”

He further says that “not a single iota or one little stroke [of the law] will pass from the law until everything takes place” (emphasis mine). The word rendered “takes place” is the Greek *ginomai*. It has a range of

meanings, but a basic summary of its meaning can be stated as, “To be completed or perfected; to be in an expected condition or state; to take place.”

Thus, Jesus *did* put an endpoint on when the law would pass away – when everything takes place. Taking the two ideas together we get the idea that the law of Moses would remain in force until Jesus fulfills it or fully discharges it. Did this happen? If so, when? In John 19, we find the answer.

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:28–30)

The word “finished” is also translated “accomplished.” The Greek word is *teleō*, which means “to finish, complete, conclude, an operation; to fulfil, to carry out into full operation; to pay dues; to be fulfilled, realized.” The term was stamped on legal documents to show that a debt had been paid or an obligation fulfilled. So, we might also render Jesus’ statement as, “Mission accomplished! The debt has been paid!”

In this, Jesus captures what he said about the law in Matthew 5. He said he came to fulfill the law. He fulfilled the law by carrying it out perfectly, showing that the law pointed to himself. He “fully discharged” the law, having taken the penalty for human sin that the law demanded upon himself.

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Looking More at the Law

Having looked at what Jesus said about the law, we now look at what the New Testament writers have to say about Jesus, the law, and us. Due to space, we won't touch on every single instance, but we will attempt to develop an overall understanding of the message of the New Testament.

The Jerusalem Council

We start in Acts 15. Before we begin, it is wise to keep in mind something we mentioned concerning the Sermon on the Mount: We are reading about Jewish people discussing Jewish Law (and in this case, how it applies to Gentile believers). With that in mind, let's begin. We read at the start of the chapter,

[S]ome men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (v. 1).

What men does this verse refer to? The same men that criticized Peter for entering the house of a Gentile and eating with him in Acts 10. They came to the church at Antioch (we learn the location from Acts 14:24-28), intent on causing trouble for Paul. They were staunch observers of the law. They wanted the Gentile believers to be circumcised, and obey the law of Moses. Why was this important? Remember, circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant. It was given to Abraham. All who wanted to be part of the Chosen People had to obey this edict. By agreeing to be circumcised, the Gentiles would become Jews. In essence, the "Law-Keepers" were saying that this "gospel" still only applied to Jews.

In addition, they were teaching "Jesus plus" theology. "It's fine to believe in Jesus, but you still have to keep the law if you want to be saved," they said. Paul, having been brought up under the law, knew full well their argument. And his love of Christ and His gospel compelled Him to take action. Luke uses strong words for the debate that followed. This was probably a church "meeting" like none of us have ever seen before. Finally, "Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question" (v. 2). The church sought guidance from others in the faith (and the apostles who had walked with Jesus). Continuing, we read,

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who

belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses" (vv. 4-5).

Paul and Barnabas related the miracles and the salvations to the elders and apostles, which according to the text, caused great joy. But then, Paul's opponents stood up. At this point Peter takes over the discussion:

Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will (vv. 7-11).

Peter makes a sound argument here: 1) God made the decision to open the Gospel to the Gentiles. 2) He gave them the same Holy Spirit, bearing witness that their hearts had been cleansed by faith. 3) Therefore, to place a heavier burden on the Gentiles (i.e., the law) would be testing God.

Having heard comments from everyone, James, the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem church, pronounces a judgment, with which the other elders and apostles agree. Accordingly, they wrote a letter to the churches, disavowing the teachings of the "Pharisee" party, and sent it with trusted elders – and Paul and Barnabas. The last part of the letter is the most important:

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell (vv. 28-29).

That is the clearest statement that could possibly be given. The Gentiles were not under the law of Moses, and would not be required to "become Jews." Gentiles would be free to worship Christ as His Spirit led them. Paul would reinforce this discussion in his letter to the Galatians.

The New Testament Letters

We now turn our attention to the New Testament letters and how they treat the law.

Romans

Much of Paul's thoughts on this subject are found in Romans, with other implications and applications found in other letters. His argument in

this book is thorough, detailed, and lengthy. Entire books have been written concerning this book of the Bible and Paul's treatment of the Bible. It is not our purpose here to add to that collection, so we will merely summarize the apostle's findings:

1. Everyone – Jew and Gentile alike – is judged by the same standard (2:1-11). While there are obvious blessings to being a Jew (3:1-4), the Jews are no better than the Gentiles in terms of being justified, since all – Jew and Gentile – are under sin (3:9-19).
2. No one is justified by the works of the law (3:20). Instead, the righteousness of God is through faith in Christ, apart from keeping the law (3:21-4:25; this is one of Paul's most central and longest arguments).
3. It is only by this justification by faith that enables us to have peace with God (His wrath no longer rests on us; 5:1). Not only do we have peace with God, but we stand in His grace, and now look forward to the Eternal Hope of His glory (5:2).

Of course, there is much more to the apostle's argument. He shows us how to walk by faith and not by flesh. Here is the bottom line of the apostle's statements: *We were all under law (the standards of the law), and we failed to meet them. No one can meet them, so God sent His Son to fulfill the Law and justify us by faith.*

Galatians

Next, we will turn to Galatians. It is this book that gives "Paul's side" of the argument found in Acts 15. Much of this is simply restatements of his arguments in Romans. But, there are some key ideas that are found here:

1. Paul reminds us that Christ died for our justification apart from the law. He then draws the argument to a logical conclusion: "I do not nullify the grace of God [by trying to be justified by works of the law], for if righteousness were through the law, *then Christ died for no purpose*" (2:21, emphasis mine). Paul says that if we could be made righteous by the law, then Christ's sacrifice was for nothing!
2. Paul points out to the Galatians that to accept one part of the law (circumcision) is to place oneself under the entire law (5:2-3). The point here is that the law stands as a unified whole and is not as easily compartmentalized as many would believe. He then makes a

pointed statement to those who want to be circumcised, saying, "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace" (5:4). What is the point here? It is simply this: *You can be under law or under grace, but not both at the same time.*

3. The only "law" in the realm of faith, Paul says, is "faith, working through love" (5:5, that is to say that our faith is shown in our love). He restates this point, talking to those who would think, "I can live however I want!" He says, "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (5:13-14).

What Paul has done in Galatians is to give a forceful statement for Christian liberty. Of course, as he does in all of his letters on the subject, he reminds us that our freedom should be used to serve one another (to walk by the Spirit), not fulfill the desires of the flesh.

Ephesians

When contending for the unity of the believers in his letter to Ephesus, Paul wrote the following:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Eph. 2:14-16).

Here Paul says several things about the law: 1) it is a unified whole; 2) it was expressed in ordinances and commandments; 3) it was used to separate Jews from Gentiles; and 4) it was abolished in Christ to bring Jew and Gentile together.

Colossians

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations – "Do not handle, Do not

taste, Do not touch" (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Col. 2:16-23).

Here Paul teaches the Colossians that observing certain feast days or holy days is part of the law, and the believer will no longer be judged for not observing them. (In other words, on *may* observe them but is not *required* to do so.) He says two more things here about the law:

- These things were only a foreshadowing of what was to come (Christ).
- While they may look like one is pursuing wisdom, such requirements do nothing to help the believer stop fleshly indulgences.

First Timothy

When writing to Timothy, Paul is instructing him to correct certain people who were teaching false doctrines.

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted (1 Tim. 1:8-11).

The law, in Paul's view is good (in Romans he calls it good and holy), but he qualifies it: "if one uses it lawfully." So the law is only good and useful when used for its intended purpose and in the right way. The law, he says, is not given for the righteous. Why is this so? The law is not given for the righteous because such a person has no need of external laws to control his behavior. The law is given, rather, for the one who cannot control his behavior (i.e., living a life full of the sins Paul lists).

In another letter, Paul tells a group of believers that they were unrighteous people (i.e., people that the law was made for). He says,

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

His point? They were unrighteous people, but they are no longer. They have been washed and cleansed. Thus, in Christ, they are righteous. Their identity has been changed from unrighteous to righteous--and thus have no need for the law.

James

The letter of James is often contrasted with Paul regarding the place of works and law in the life of the believer. There are two key passages in which he speaks about the law.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing (James 1:22-25).

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead (James 2:8-26).

What is the primary point of these passages? Simply this: Salvation leads to change and obedience. One cannot claim to have faith and yet have no evidence. On this all New Testament writers agree. (And note here that James uses the phrase "justified by works" rather than "justified by the law." This is an important distinction. Paul agrees with this when he writes,

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10).

The believer is told to "walk in good works" because that's why he was created and saved. In other words, his works are the evidence of his faith and salvation.

Second Corinthians

There is one more passage that we will look at. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul gives a detailed explanation of what happened to the law when Christ came. This passage is one of the most striking passages dealing with the law, and the clearest statements of our relationship to the law.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory (2 Cor. 3:4-11).

The first thing we notice in this passage is the contrast Paul makes between "the new covenant" and "the letter" (3:6). The contrast obviously refers to the New Covenant of Jer. 31:31-34, where it is said that God will write His covenant on the heart.

In addition, nowhere in this passage does he mention "the law". Instead, he uses terms such as: *ministry of death*, *ministry of condemnation*, and *letters of stone*. It is reasonable to suppose he chose those words deliberately, not only for their intended meaning, but also because he was writing to a largely Gentile church. However, it is clear in the passage that he is speaking of the law as given in the Old Testament, since he specifically refers to Moses in relation to this "ministry of death." In addition, we notice:

1. Paul calls the law a "ministry of death [and] condemnation" (vv. 7, 9). Why is this so? *Because that is all that the law can offer.* It has no power

to give life. Indeed, one can only have life and be “saved” as long as they perform its demands fully.

2. Paul acknowledges that the ministry of death had glory, but the ministry of the Spirit has more glory, to the extent that now it can be said that this ministry of death has no glory any longer (vv. 7-8).
3. Paul states that the ministry of death was “being brought to an end” (vv. 7, 11). More specifically, he says that the “ministry of death, carved in letters on stone” was being brought to an end. In this, he can only be referring to the Ten Commandments, since that is the only part of God’s law that was written in stone (and that by God Himself). Here, he not only includes the Ten Commandments specifically, but uses them to symbolize the whole of the Law.
4. Paul uses the veil that Moses wore to symbolize the truth that, “For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed” (vv. 14-16). That is a startling truth, but it goes along with Paul’s statement that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (v. 6). We will address the implications of this statement later. For now, let it be said that we are not discouraging the reading of the Old Testament, fully more than half of Scripture.

Paul makes it clear that the law has passed away. We are under a New Covenant – not just a new set of “laws”, but an entirely new way of living. We live by faith, not by law.

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The Place of the Old Testament

If all that we've said about the law and the New Covenant is true, what, then, of the Old Testament? Has it no value for the church today? Some people don't even read it, some preachers avoid preaching from it, for fear of becoming "legalistic." Yet, the Old Testament (and even the Law) has a valuable place in the life of the believer. It may seem obvious, but when the church in Acts 15 was debating whether Gentiles had to keep the law, *they only had the Old Testament to look at!* How, then, do we view the Old Testament and the Law?¹

We learn about God and man.

The Old Testament has a lot to say about God. In fact, in terms of the Bible, the Old Testament is where we get most of our knowledge of Him. We learn about Him from His own pronouncements (example, Exodus 20:1-2; 34:6-8) and from the statements of others (for example, many of the Psalms). We learn of His character, love, holiness, and justice. In learning about Him, we also learn about ourselves through the lives of others. We see men and women fall, though they sought to obey Him. We see God forgive and cover sin. We see people rise up against God and His people only to be judged. In short, we learn that God is *holy and righteous*, and we learn that man is by nature *sinful and unrighteous*. Thus, the stage is set for the New Covenant and the ministry of Christ.

We are taught attitudes to avoid and to cultivate.

Throughout the Old Testament, we learn that God looks with favor on those who walk before Him in humility and seek wisdom. In contrast, He disdains the proud and arrogant. By studying the people and events of the Old Testament we gain an understanding of how God wants His people to walk with Him.

We are inspired to believe God.

David and Goliath. Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Samson, Abraham, Gideon, Deborah, Ruth. The list could go on and on of the men and women in the Old Testament who believed God and because of their

¹ Much of the material in this section is taken from "The Other 60% of the Bible," a blog post by the present author, accessed at: <http://voiceshepherd.home.blog/2019/01/18/the-other-60-of-the-bible/>

faith saw their world change. God gave them a word, a promise, and they acted accordingly. Even though they were under the Law as Israelites, it was their faith that made them righteous, just as their father Abram, who “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). We can learn from them that when God gives us a promise, He will be faithful to keep it, no matter how long it takes.

To summarize, the law is given for examples to us (1 Cor. 10:6, 11). Paul tells us that we should not live as they did, who were idolaters and sexually immoral. Also, the law is given to us as “training in righteousness” (1 Tim. 3:16-17). Being free to live in the Spirit does not mean that we automatically know how to live in the Spirit, and so we have concrete examples of how to live (and how not to live).

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Summary and Conclusion

Based on what we have seen in Scripture, we conclude the following:

1. The law is a unified body given to Israel. No Gentile was ever placed under the law (unless he or she wanted to become part of the Chosen People). There is therefore no biblical warrant for splitting the law into convenient categories.
2. The law was holy and good, representing God's character and will that His people be holy and separated to Him.
3. The law was not intended to save, nor did it have the power to save man.
4. The New Covenant freed the believer from the law. Law-keeping as a means of obtaining or maintaining righteousness has no place in the life of the believer.
5. The believer's motivation for obedience comes not from any external standard but from the change in his new nature. He now has a heart that desires to obey, thus his motivation is internal and based on identity, not external and based on regulation.

As we mentioned, what it comes down to for the believer is *motivation*. I obey God's word because *it is who I am as a redeemed child of God*. Let us therefore live in the New Covenant, by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit and the new heart of flesh.