
OUT FROM UNDER THE LAW

How Do Believers Relate to the Law?

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PREFACE

It surprises many people to discover that God issued only one commandment from the time He created Adam and Eve until the days when Moses led His people out of Egypt. That was a span of over 2500 years! He simply said,

“...From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.”

~Genesis 2:16-17

God’s first and only rule wasn’t a comprehensive list of rights and wrongs. Our forbearers didn’t need a moral code because they had no concept of wrong thoughts or behaviors. Being completely naïve to evil, Adam and Eve were like toddlers in a bath. They had no real awareness of their nakedness. It wasn’t until after they ate of the fruit that they realized they were undressed—and what such a state might suggest to teenagers a few years after puberty, or to men looking in magazines.

AN EARLIER SIN

Adam and Eve’s violation of that one command introduced sin into the world. Though God made no further statements about right and wrong for hundreds and thousands of years, He did warn Cain about sin. The sin God was talking about then is slightly different than what we think of today. Our present-day notion of sin is tied to specific acts or thoughts. We know coveting and gossiping are sins. It’s a sin to steal, lie, or murder. We know we shouldn’t cheat, hold a grudge, or fly off in a rage because to do so is to sin. Throughout the course of a week, we could easily tally the number of our sins.

But when sin first broke in on our world, it wasn't multiplied and mutated into vast numbers of contagious forms. Like a deadly strain of virus before it infects people, sin had not yet spread to our whole race.¹ Even after Adam and Eve's sin, God did not enumerate all the shapes sin could take. He didn't alert the people to all the things they could do wrong. Instead, He warned Adam's seed about a force, a newly introduced contaminant; a compelling influence that would entice people to corrupt their way.²

FLOODING SIN AWAY

That sin-force despoiled the Earth and created "*great wickedness*" so that the intentions of almost everyone's heart were continually evil.³ "*Grieved in His heart*" over the violence sinful humanity had visited upon His creation, God decided to "blot out man" and all flesh from the face of the earth with a flood of water.⁴ God wanted to wash away and blot out the sins of the world.

Not everyone succumbed to sin's influence. There were some like Enoch who "*walked with God,*"⁵ and through the centuries a few people were I⁶ Noah was such a man; so God preserved him through the flood. After the waters subsided, God made covenant-promises to him, but He did not give Noah a set of rules, a list of "Dos and Don'ts." Rather, just as He had done to Adam, God gave Noah the whole earth as a place to "*be fruitful and multiply.*"⁷ He promised never again to destroy the earth by a flood. God marked that covenant with a rainbow in the sky—the place from where the deluge had come upon the earth.⁸

THE PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

During the next four centuries, Noah's descendants and their extended families eventually became nations of people who "*separated on the earth.*"⁹ Not once during that era of human expansion did God lay down codes of conduct or moral precepts. He confined His words to promises like those He gave to Abram. Calling him to leave his father's house, God told Abram that he would be a "*blessing*

¹ Romans 5:12

² Genesis 4:7

³ Genesis 6:5; 11-12

⁴ Genesis 6:6-7

⁵ Genesis 5:24

⁶ Genesis 6:9

⁷ Genesis 9:1

⁸ Genesis 9:13

⁹ Genesis 10:32

to all the nations of the earth.”¹⁰ God vowed that Abram’s descendants would outnumber the stars visible in the sky.¹¹ At the time of the promise, however, Abram had no child.

Nevertheless, Abram believed God’s promise, and “it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”¹² That is one of the most powerful statements in the whole Bible. But our language struggles to explain the full dynamic of what happened when Abram believed God. *Reckoned* is another way of saying, *counted as something different from what appeared*. To *reckon* is to compute credit to another’s account. God saw Adam’s belief on earth, and accounted it as righteousness in Heaven. When an artist transfers a physical landscape onto a canvas, the landscape becomes a painting. Just so, God rendered Abram’s faith into righteousness. Abram became righteous by what he believed, not by what he did.

Circumcision

Abram’s faith was certainly tested. Nearly 14 years after the promise, he still had no child through Sarai. Then, when Abram was 99 years old, God reiterated the covenant and gave him a sign to mark it. God wanted to remove flesh from the very place where Abram’s life-seed would impregnate Sarai. With that sign, and the fulfillment of the promise one year later, God made Abraham the “*father of faith*.” He received and believed the promise before he was circumcised, so he could be “*the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them*,”¹³

Circumcision was not associated in any way with doing right or wrong. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived in the Promised Land without receiving any behavior-prescribing commandments from the Lord. That explains many episodes involving God’s people that we would be identified today as questionable or unbecoming. Right and wrong were not clearly spelled out for anyone—even for Abraham’s descendants. They had only promises to live by. One example of questionable morality was Joseph’s sale into slavery. His brothers sold him out, but he ultimately saved his family by opening the best of Egypt to them.

¹⁰ Genesis 12:1-4

¹¹ Genesis 15:5

¹² Romans 4:3; James 2:23

¹³ Romans 4:11-12

Promised Deliverance

The Egyptians eventually enslaved God's people. Moved with compassion by their misery and oppression, *God sent Moses as a deliverer*.¹⁴ Though circumcised, himself, Moses forgot to maintain the sign of the covenant within his own family. He had not circumcised his first-born, and that neglect disqualified Moses from being an instrument of rescue for others.¹⁵ God insisted that Moses line up with the covenant of faith before he went back into Egypt—and, long before he received the Ten Commandments (and the Law).

The message was clear. Moses would be a spokesperson for God and His *faith-covenant!* Moses could not deliver the people from Egypt in his own power, and neither could the people rescue themselves. Deliverance out of captivity was not a result of human works or effort. It was an act of grace—something God did for His *people-of-promise*. That is a critical reminder to us. God chooses and provides for His people on the basis of promise; hence, we name their future home the Promised Land.

COMMANDMENTS AND PROMISES

Believers sometimes get confused about commandments and promises. After all, God gives both to His people. Commandments and promises are very different types of statements. God's commandments govern our behavior. God's promises pledge His behavior. Commandments specify what we're supposed to do; promises announce what God will do. Commandments are about *right and wrong*; promises are about *favor and blessing*.

Commandments are equations of possible outcomes: "If you do (*X*), *the result will be (Y)*." Promises, on the other hand, are done-deals: "Because I AM (*X*), *the result will be (Y)*." They both describe consequences for our future. But there is a huge difference. With commandments, the future depends on our behavior; we receive reward or punishment based on our obedience. With promises, the future isn't determined by our behavior; we receive benefit or bounty based on God's words.

We're supposed to obey commandments, but believe promises.

¹⁴ Exodus 3:10-15

¹⁵ Exodus 4:24-26

WHY THE LAW?

On the way to the land of promise, God gave His people the Law. God had delivered them. He had already provided water in the desert, and manna—the very bread of angels, out of Heaven. The Law hadn't delivered God's people; neither would it define their relationship to Him. They were already His "own possession," literally His "special treasure."¹⁶ Neither their identity nor their secure relationship with God was in question. He was and always would be the God of their fathers.

Remember that ever since Adam and Eve opened the door to sin, it was active in the world, corrupting people and bending their hearts toward evil. Sin and its consequence (death) "*spread to all men.*"¹⁷ Adam and Eve were the only ones to disobey a direct command from God because He didn't issue any more commands in the intervening years; nevertheless, "*...death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned...*" exactly like Adam had (disobeying a clear command).¹⁸

So why did God give Moses the Law 430 years after the covenant with Abraham? Why did He lay behavior rules out that defined sin and prescribed provisions to atone for sin?

The Law provides a *detailed inventory of sins*. Without a set of commands listing sinful activities, it was difficult for individual people to recognize their specific sins. Until the Law came, sin couldn't be "imputed," or charged to anyone's account.¹⁹ In simple terms, the Law was added for the sake of defining sin and increasing everyone's awareness of its presence in their lives.²⁰ The Law convinced people that they were sinners. We would not know, for instance, that coveting was sin if the Law had not said, "*You shall not covet.*"²¹

The Law Convinces People of Their Guilt on Multiple Counts—With the Law came a sudden and indisputable increase of sin in people's lives—not that they committed a greater number of sins, but that much more of what they did was identified as manifestations of sin. The Law convinces and convicts people of their sin. We break the Law and "sin" with such regularity that our sinfulness is undeniable. Realizing the many places where we come up short of God's Law,²² and

¹⁶ Exodus 19:5

¹⁷ Romans 5:12

¹⁸ Romans 5:14

¹⁹ Romans 5:13

²⁰ Galatians 3:19

²¹ Romans 7:7

²² Romans 3:23

violate its commandments, we accept the “guilty” verdict. God uses the Law to “shut up all men under sin.”²³

The Law Tutors People Toward Christ—But that isn’t where God wants to leave them. Once people realize the abundance of their sins, God’s plan is to have an even greater grace abound to them.²⁴ The Law was meant to be a tutor to lead people to Christ—and the forgiveness He offers. People who have been convicted and jailed for a crime have only one hope. Nothing but a pardon will get them out. The Law points people to their need for Jesus’ pardon. People who know they are sinners want forgiveness; those who don’t acknowledge their sinfulness, don’t seek forgiveness. The Law’s one assignment is to tutor us for life’s most important final exam questions: (1) “Are you guilty of sin?” and, (2) “Would you like to be forgiven?”

The Law Guarded Humanity from Overwhelming Evil—God used the Law to keep the world from getting completely out of hand, like it was in the days of Noah. God promised never again to destroy (flood) the world because of sin, but He could not abide the evil that would have multiplied among people if they had no restraint on sin’s corrupting influence. Imagine the wickedness that would spawn on the earth if people had no clear sense of right and wrong. The Law held humanity in protective custody, acting like a sentry to warn us of sin’s encroachment in our world and its violation of our life.²⁵

Limitations of the Law

God never intended the Law to invalidate His faith-covenant with Abraham. It didn’t nullify God’s promises or replace them with commandments.²⁶ Abraham’s inheritance, as a “FATHER OF MANY NATIONS,”²⁷ and His righteousness in the sight of God both came because he believed God’s promises, not because he obeyed the Law. In the kingdom of God, all inheritance is based on faith. Heirs come from promises, not commandments! The Law was never capable of producing heirs of God. If it could, faith would be neutralized and promises would be nullified.²⁸

In exactly the same way, the Law could never give life or produce righteousness.²⁹ Remember, God reckoned Abraham’s faith as righteousness. Our righteous deeds and works according to the Law

²³ Galatians 3:22

²⁴ Romans 5:20

²⁵ Galatians 3:23

²⁶ Galatians 3:17-18

²⁷ Romans 4:17-18

²⁸ Romans 4:13-14

²⁹ Galatians 3:21

are reckoned as “a filthy garment.”³⁰ Righteousness “comes from God on the basis of faith,” and no one can derive their own righteousness from the Law.³¹ The Law “was not made for a righteous person,” but for people who still need to be convinced that their chosen ways of life are contrary to the ways of God.³² The Law increases people’s awareness of unrighteousness in their lives, it doesn’t increase their righteousness.

The Law has no power to perfect people or to make them fundamentally sinless.³³ Time after time, the same sacrifices are offered for the same sins, and although a particular sacrifice might atone for a past sin, nothing in the Law has the power to alter someone’s heart to make them less inclined to sin in the future. The Law offers people a chance to “make up for” what they have done. Grace, on the other hand, offers complete forgiveness, and because of that forgiveness, “*there is no longer any offerings for sin.*”³⁴

Faith Again

The Law was not a new covenant between God and His people. In fact, it wasn’t a covenant at all. Covenants are made of promises—and faith. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed, that is Christ.³⁵ Abraham’s biological descendants enjoyed the blessings of their inheritance, but they had no promise of their own to believe. In the same way, Gentiles had no natural ancestor of faith, nor did they have a promise to believe themselves. Since it is by faith that people become righteous, how could righteousness be reckoned to the rest of the world?

The answer was a New Covenant, one that fulfilled the Old Covenant (with Abraham)—that required a new promise from God to every person who would ever live. Anyone who believed that promise by faith would become righteous in the sight of God, and become part of His family. Believers become His people of promise.

Good-Bye, Guardian

Until God spoke that new “*promise of the Spirit*” to all people,³⁶ the Law acted like a guardian who oversaw the affairs of our life. We were like under-age heirs, and as children, we were held under

³⁰ Isaiah 64:6

³¹ Philippians 3:9

³² 1 Timothy 1:9

³³ Hebrews 10:1; 4; 11; Acts 13:39

³⁴ Hebrews 10:18

³⁵ Galatians 3:16

³⁶ Galatians 3:14

the Law's authority.³⁷ It trained us and told us what we could and could not do. But now, through the New Covenant promise, whoever believes in Jesus Christ, becomes righteous in the sight of God. We are "saved through faith" as a gift from God.³⁸ We already have everlasting peace with God because we have been justified by faith, so we stand before God in a place of grace.³⁹

Believers in Christ have come of age and no longer remain under the guardianship of the Law. Christ redeemed us from its authority to manage our affairs.⁴⁰ We are now full-fledged members of God's family, and He has placed "*the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'*"⁴¹ Like a woman whose husband has died, we have died to the Law and are no longer bound to it.⁴²

NOW WHAT?

The Law could not cure the sinful infection in our flesh. It taught us which symptoms to look for, and it treated them as well as it could. That's why it put so many requirements on our flesh. But our flesh has a sinful nature, and it continues to sin even though we don't want to! We end up—even as believers—committing sins that we know are wrong and that deep down in our heart we don't want to commit.⁴³ It's like we have an evil twin who can't be controlled.

We do! That evil twin is called our "old self."⁴⁴ That old nature has been completely and irredeemably infected by the power of sin, and its allegiance is to the law of sin.⁴⁵ It continues to sin just as it did before we came to Christ because its fundamental make-up and disposition never changed when we got saved! Its "evil is present" even in those of us who want to "do good."⁴⁶ We feel like hypocrites. We repent and promise never to do something again. And then do it again.

³⁷ Galatians 4:3-5

³⁸ Ephesians 2:8

³⁹ Romans 5:1-2

⁴⁰ Galatians 4:4-5

⁴¹ Galatians 4:6

⁴² Romans 7:1-4

⁴³ Romans 7:14-24

⁴⁴ Romans 6:6; Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:9

⁴⁵ Romans 7:18; 23; 25

⁴⁶ Romans 7:21

“YES, I’M GUILTY...AND FORGIVEN”

That’s why it’s critical to remember two truths: first, the Law has not passed away.⁴⁷ It’s still doing its job very effectively in the world. It identifies sin, and it convinces people of their guilt. So, it continues to convict believers of sin. The conviction isn’t the problem. What stumbles and confuses most believers is what to do with that conviction. If we were still under the Law, we would be required to offer a sacrifice to remind us of our guilt. But since we are no longer under the Law, we have already received forgiveness—and there is no point in a sacrifice. When we get convicted of sin, we can simply say, “Yes, I am guilty and, thank You, Jesus, for already forgiving me!”

“THE OLD MAN DIED”

The second truth for us as believers is often forgotten. The “evil twin” has a twin. Not only do we have an “old self” that is completely sinful, but we have a “new self” that is completely sinless. The real you, the spiritual you, the new you is completely unbound from the old self and its sins. What the Law could not do to change our inner nature, God did through Jesus Christ;⁴⁸ we are completely freed from judgment, guilt and condemnation.⁴⁹ When we get convicted of sin, it’s like getting a bill in the mail addressed to the former occupant of your house. We can simply say, “The sin and guilt aren’t mine. They belong to the old man who used to live here. He died!”

⁴⁷ Matthew 5:18

⁴⁸ Romans 8:1-4

⁴⁹ John 3:16-18