

Christ and the Law of Moses



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 2:21–24; Exod. 13:2, 12; Luke 2:41–52; Matt. 17:24–27; John 8:1–11; Deut. 22:23, 24.*

Memory Text: “‘If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me’” (*John 5:46, NRSV*).

Many Christians have been raised on stories about Jesus' supposedly negative relationship to the Jewish religion, an unfortunate misconception that has only helped feed anti-Semitism through the centuries. Jesus spoke out against abuses of the religion, that's true, but not against the religion itself. After all, He was the founder of it.

Indeed, the Gospel accounts of His life and ministry show that Jesus was a faithful Jew fully immersed in Jewish culture from the moment of His birth to the final week of His life in human flesh.

Like every loyal Jew in the first century, Jesus was subject to the Mosaic law. Raised in a home with loyal Jewish parents, He fully appreciated His rich earthly heritage, which was rooted in Divine providence. He knew that God Himself had inspired Moses to pen these laws, with the purpose of creating a society that reflected His will and served as a beacon to the nations. He adhered faithfully to the letter of the law. From circumcision to His visit to the temple to the feasts and to His attitude about taxes, Jesus remained steadfastly faithful to a system that, He knew, would over time be fulfilled through His death and His ministry in heaven.

This week we'll look at more of the laws that Jesus Himself kept.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 12.

Circumcision and Dedication *(Luke 2:21–24)*

God established His covenant with Abraham, saying that he would be the father of many nations (*Gen. 17:4*). When God made this covenant, the 99-year-old Abraham had only recently fathered Ishmael and had not yet seen the birth of his promised son, Isaac. Nonetheless, he was commanded to circumcise himself along with every male member of his household, and he was instructed to ensure that every son born into his household from that day forth be circumcised on the eighth day (*Gen. 17:9–12*). So important was this sign that the circumcision took place even if the eighth day fell on a Sabbath (*Lev. 12:3, John 7:22*).

This truth gives us a better understanding of the earliest days of Jesus’ life. The Gospels do show that Joseph and Mary were chosen to be the earthly parents of Jesus at least in part because of their piety. Joseph is described as a “righteous man” (*Matt. 1:19, NASB*), and Mary is said to have “found favor with God” (*Luke 1:30, NASB*). When Jesus was eight days old, His parents held a naming and circumcision ceremony in the same manner as an untold number of Hebrew males had experienced in times past.

Imagine, the spotless Son of God, now in human form, undergoing the very ritual that He Himself had instituted many centuries earlier!

Read Luke 2:21–24 in light of Exodus 13:2, 12 and Leviticus 12:1–8. What more do these texts tell us about Joseph and Mary? What can we learn for ourselves, in our own time and sphere, from their example?

The Bible is clear that Mary was a virgin when she was chosen to be the mother of Jesus (*Luke 1:27*); so, Jesus was the first child that “opened her womb.” According to Exodus 13, every firstborn among the Israelites (whether animal or human) was to be dedicated to the Lord. The law also stipulated in Leviticus 12:2–5 that after the birth of a male child, the woman was ceremonially unclean for a total of 40 days (80 for a female child). At the end of this period, she was required to show herself to the priest and offer a sacrifice. As pious Jews, Mary and Joseph meticulously fulfilled the obligations of the Mosaic law and ensured that the Son of God bore the marks of the covenant.

Jewish Feasts *(John 5:1)*

“After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem” *(John 5:1, NKJV)*.

The first major festival period in the Jewish calendar year is the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, which commences with Passover. The festival commemorates the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, when the angel of death *passed over* the homes of those who put the blood on their doorposts. The Gospels record three occasions when Jesus celebrated Passover (*Luke 2:41–43, John 2:13–23, Matt. 26:17–20*).

Fifty days after Passover came the feast of *Shavuot*, often referred to by its Greek name, *Pentecost*. Although the Scriptures don’t provide a reason for Pentecost, the rabbis believed that it commemorated the giving of the law to Moses. There is no record in the Gospels that Jesus celebrated Pentecost. However, before His ascension He counseled His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism of the Holy Spirit (*Acts 1:4, 5*). This event actually occurred on the Day of Pentecost (*Acts 2:1–4*).

The final festival season in the Jewish calendar were the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) and the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The Day of Atonement signifies the day on which sin was cleansed from the camp and the people were at one with God. The Feast of Booths commemorates the time when Israel had to live in tents in the wilderness.

In addition to the feasts of Moses’ laws, the Jews have two other festivals that commemorate God’s historical intervention. The first is Purim, which marks the deliverance of the Jewish people from genocide, when Esther appealed to the Persian king. The second is Hanukah, also known as the Feast of Dedication (*John 10:22*), which celebrates the victory of the Maccabees over the Greeks in 164 B.C.

Of course, the biblical feasts were done away with long ago, at least as far as Christians are concerned. They all met their fulfillment in Christ. However, we can learn a great deal through studying them and the messages that they contain, because all of them teach lessons about God’s saving grace and power to deliver.

Though we no longer keep the feasts, what things can we do that help to keep before us the reality of God, what He has done for us, and what He asks of us?

Jesus in the Temple

The New Testament does not tell us too much about the childhood of Jesus. One account, though, that gives great insight is Luke 2:41–52, the story of Jesus and His parents’ visit to Jerusalem during the Feast of Passover. Read it over and then answer the following questions:

How does this story help to illustrate the decidedly Jewish character of the Gospels and how central the religion was to all that took place?

How is it significant that this story took place during the Passover?

For how many days were Jesus’ parents not able to find Him? Of what does that remind you?

Though Jesus was an obedient child, His answer to His parents appears to be almost a rebuke. What important point does His reply contain? What does this say to all of us about what must have top priority in our lives?

Read Luke 2:51. What does it mean that He was “subject” to them? How does this verse give us even more insight into the amazing condescension on the part of God for our salvation? What can this teach us about the need for submission in the right time and place?

Taxes (Matt. 17:24–27)

As last week’s lesson noted, the law of Moses had both civic and ceremonial components. The ceremonial aspect means that the temple was at the center of Jewish religious life. In fact, by the first century, the temple was probably the only remaining structure that gave the Jews any sense of national identity.

The temple that stood in Jerusalem was undergoing renovations during Jesus’ ministry. Herod the Great had started the grandiose project in about 20 B.C., and it would not be fully completed until A.D. 66. Recognizing how serious many Jews were about their faith, the Romans allowed the Jews to collect their own taxes in order to cover the costs involved with the maintenance of the temple. Every Jewish male over the age of 20 was to pay the half-shekel tax regardless of his economic status (*Exod. 30:13, 38:26*).

Read Matthew 17:24–27. What did Jesus mean when He said: “Lest we should offend them”? What principle do we find here that we should apply in our own lives, as well?

It seems that the temple tax collectors traveled throughout the provinces to ensure that every male fulfilled his legal obligation. Peter’s initial response to the tax collectors gives the impression that Jesus regularly paid His taxes (*Matt. 17:24, 25*). However, as the Son of God, Jesus appears to question the appropriateness of having to pay taxes for the upkeep of His Father’s house.

“If Jesus had paid the tribute without a protest, He would virtually have acknowledged the justice of the claim [that He was under obligation to pay], and would thus have denied His divinity. But while He saw good to meet the demand, He denied the claim upon which it was based. In providing for the payment of the tribute He gave evidence of His divine character. It was made manifest that He was one with God, and therefore was not under tribute as a mere subject of the kingdom.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 434.

Notwithstanding, Jesus chose to comply with the authorities and directed Peter to retrieve the tax from the mouth of the first fish that he caught. The shekel in the fish’s mouth was enough to cover the tax for both Jesus and Peter.

Jesus paid His temple tax even though He knew that the magnificent structure would soon be destroyed (*Matt. 24:1, 2*). What should this tell us about our obligations to be faithful in our tithes and offerings, regardless of whatever problems we believe exist?

Law Enforcement *(Matt. 5:17–20)*

As we have seen, Jesus was a faithful citizen who fulfilled His responsibilities as a Jewish male, even when His life was in danger (see, for example, *John 7:1, 25, 26; 10:31*). In fact, Jesus makes it clear that it was not His purpose to abolish “the Law or the Prophets” (*Matt. 5:17–20, NKJV*).

How, then, are we to understand *John 8:1–11* and *Matthew 19:1–9* in light of *Deuteronomy 22:23, 24* and *24:1–4*? What is happening here?

Some of the Pharisees were always trying to expose Jesus as a law-breaker (see, for example, *John 8:6*). When they present Him with the woman who was caught in the act of adultery, they pose this question: Moses says she should be stoned; what do You say? Interestingly enough, Jesus does not directly respond to their inquiry. In fact, He affirms the law of Moses with His response, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first” (*John 8:7, NKJV*). He isn’t saying that she shouldn’t be stoned; He simply forces these men to see their own violations of the law. Even the woman’s release is in harmony with the law of Moses, because there is none to point an accusing finger, and at least two witnesses are needed to administer justice (*Deut. 17:6*).

In the incident concerning divorce and remarriage, Jesus appears to contradict the law of Moses with His insistence that there were originally no grounds for divorce (*Matt. 19:4–6*). When the Pharisees point to Moses’ commandment in *Deuteronomy 24:1–4*, Jesus places everything in perspective. Nowhere does Moses command that divorce should take place. However, because of the people’s obstinacy, Moses made an allowance for divorce (*Matt. 19:8*). Thus, we see that even when Jesus critiques a Mosaic law, He does not set it aside. Jesus was a faithful Jew in every way, adhering to the laws of Moses.

How do we learn to balance justice and grace for those who, like ourselves, fall into sin? If we are going to err, as we as fallen beings inevitably do, what side is it better to err on, and why?

Further Study: For more information on this week’s topic, read Ellen G. White, “At the Feast of Tabernacles,” pp. 447–454; “Among Snares,” pp. 455–462, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Three times a year the Jews were required to assemble at Jerusalem for religious purposes. Enshrouded in the pillar of cloud, Israel’s invisible Leader had given the directions in regard to these gatherings. During the captivity of the Jews, they could not be observed; but when the people were restored to their own land, the observance of these memorials was once more begun. It was God’s design that these anniversaries should call Him to the minds of the people.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 447.

“It was natural for the parents of Jesus to look upon Him as their own child. He was daily with them, His life in many respects was like that of other children, and it was difficult for them to realize that He was the Son of God. They were in danger of failing to appreciate the blessing granted them in the presence of the world’s Redeemer. The grief of their separation from Him, and the gentle reproof which His words conveyed, were designed to impress them with the sacredness of their trust.”—Page 81.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell on the incredible truth that though Jesus instituted these laws, when He enters into humanity He places Himself under them. What does this tell us about the character of God?
- 2 Try to put yourself in the position of Joseph and Mary. Is it any wonder that they didn’t fully understand all that was involved with Jesus? Are there not a lot of things about Jesus that we don’t understand either? How can we learn to trust and obey, despite the many things that we don’t understand?
- 3 What would you say to a Christian who argues that we are to keep the feasts? (Hint: You might start by asking, “How do you intend to keep them, given that the feasts all centered around the temple, which has long been destroyed, and the shedding of blood, which has stopped?”)

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *John 5:46*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Realize that Jesus gave the law of Moses on Mount Sinai.

Feel: Perceive the law as a positive gift of God.

Do: Follow Jesus' example of dynamically living within God's laws.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Jesus Was the Founder of the Laws of the Old Testament

- Ⓐ How did Jesus demonstrate His adherence to the law?
- Ⓑ What relationship did Jesus have with the law of Moses?
- Ⓒ How do the laws of Judaism contribute to our understanding of God's saving grace and power to deliver His people then and now?

II. Feel: A Love for God's Law

- Ⓐ How did Jesus feel about the law?
- Ⓑ Why is it important to see God's law as a positive sign of His covenant with us?
- Ⓒ Scan through Psalm 119. Pick out the verbs that David—the man after God's own heart—uses to describe how he feels about God's law. How do these verbs help us to perceive the law as a positive gift from God?

III. Do: Live the Law of Life

- Ⓐ How do you feel about God's law? If you don't exactly love it, what can you do to change your attitude?
- Ⓑ How can you relate to the law as Jesus did?
- Ⓒ Which of your behavioral patterns may be giving your family or friends a negative impression of God's law?

► **Summary:** Jesus as the Lawgiver was also subject to the law as a Jewish man. Although Jesus was critical of the man-made regulations that killed the spirit of the law, He respected the law and underlined in His ministry the lessons about God's saving grace and power revealed in the law.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *John 5:46*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: *As Christ’s followers, we should relate to the law as He did, understanding its beauty and power and its reflection of God’s character.*

All too often the law—and the Lawgiver, for that matter—seems to receive bad press. Many people see the Jesus of the New Testament as kind and forgiving, while viewing the God of the Old Testament as a stern heavenly policeman with a list of laws that He tries vigorously to enforce. We forget that the entire Godhead—the Trinity—authored the whole system of law in the Old Testament. Jesus modeled a life based on the law. And it was only by the Holy Spirit’s power that the first Christians could follow Jesus’ example in applying God’s law to their everyday lives.

Ellen G. White emphasizes the central place of God’s law by saying, “It is the sophistry of Satan that the death of Christ brought in grace to take the place of the law. The death of Jesus did not change or annul or lessen in the slightest degree the law of Ten Commandments. That precious grace offered to men through a Saviour’s blood establishes the law of God. Since the fall of man, God’s moral government and His grace are inseparable. They go hand in hand through all dispensations. ‘Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other’ (Ps. 85:10).”—*Faith and Works*, p. 30.

Opening Activity: Ask the class to reflect on why stars in the entertainment industry have a ready crowd of followers who dress and behave as their idols, even down to emulating their lifestyles, while Christians seem, all too often, to be resistant to following Christ’s lifestyle of law-keeping. Try to uncover the motivation in both cases.

Discuss: An exasperated police officer once said, “If we are ever going to have a genuine improvement in the crime situation, we’ve got to tackle the root cause of crime—we need to get rid of laws.” What effect on crime would implementing this solution have? By extension, what kind of impact might such a solution have in the religious sphere were it applied in relation to the problem of sin?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. The Power of Ritual (*Review briefly the sacrificial legislation in Leviticus 4 and 16 with your class.*)

Many Protestant Christians (including some Seventh-day Adventists) have a strained relationship to ritual. Yet, ritual is part and parcel of our daily life, even though we often may not be fully aware of its presence. Ritual transforms, orders, initiates, focuses, communicates, and fulfills many other functions in religious (and daily) life. Consider the importance of political rituals (for example, the swearing in of a new president) or rituals that mark important life transitions (such as coming of age, marriage, or death). The public nature of most of the rituals helps us to understand complex realities. Just imagine some of the sacrificial rituals (for example, the sin offering described in Leviticus 4) in Old Testament times and how they communicated to those living in Israel (or even the surrounding nations). The death of an innocent and pricey animal clearly taught the costliness of sin. The transfer of the individual's sin via laying hands on the head of the animal was symbolic. Somebody else had to pay the price. Blood had to be collected and smeared upon the altar, and then it needed to be brought into the sanctuary and sprinkled upon the veil separating the Holy from the Holy of Holies. The animal had to be burned and, once a year, the sanctuary, contaminated with the "sprinkled sin" of many, had to be "cleansed," which happened during the Day of Atonement ritual (*Leviticus 16*).

Consider This: What would you feel and think if you could participate in a Day of Atonement ritual today? What would it do to your understanding of sin, grace, and God's plan of salvation? Read Leviticus 16 carefully and act out the main action. Consider the meaning of the ritual and its application to the death and ministry of Jesus Christ.

II. Prophetic Critique of Ritual (*Review 1 Samuel 15:22, Hosea 6:6, and Amos 5:21–27 with your class.*)

However instructive it may be, ritual can also become a stumbling block, especially when it becomes rote repetition. Many biblical prophets criticized this mind-set of ritualized worship devoid of substance. Take, for example, 1 Samuel 15:22: " 'Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams' " (*NASB*). Samuel strongly reprimands King Saul, who has decided that obeying the divine instructions is negotiable. He has spared the pagan king as well as the best animals and all that is precious (*vs. 9*). The biblical text reminds us powerfully that ritual can never be sacramental but that it needs to be accompanied by the appropriate attitude and mind-set.

Two centuries later, Hosea follows suit: "For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings"

(*Hos. 6:6, NASB*). Hosea's critique of sacrificial ritual focuses upon attitudes and actions. The prophet uses two important Hebrew terms denoting covenant loyalty (*hesed*) and relational knowledge (*da'at*). Israel is busy sacrificing but has forgotten to connect sacrifice to real life: the way they treat the widow, the orphan, or the poor; the things they worship; the importance of things in relation to God. Somehow they do not show covenant mercy to one another but rather focus upon an outward show of piety.

Similar concepts are expressed in Amos 5:21–27 and Isaiah 1:15–18. Israel's prophets remind God's covenant people that ritual action does not replace the right attitude toward God and one's neighbor. The prophets do not criticize the divinely inspired laws and rituals, *per se*, but rather their thoughtless application.

Consider This: Considering the fact that God instituted, in minute detail, the sacrificial system, why would He inspire prophets to critique it?

III. Jesus, Ritual, and First-Century Judaism (*Review the institution of the Last Supper in John 13 with your class.*)

Ritual played a significant role during the time of Jesus. The temple represented the center of Jewish theology and practice. When we consider the texts found near the settlement of Khirbet Qumran that date roughly to the century prior to the arrival of Jesus, we suddenly understand the all-pervasiveness of ritual in the life of Jews living in that era. Purification, ritual washings, blessings—they all were expressed by ritual action. Biblical scholar Robert Kugler writes, “From the way they [the inhabitants of Qumran] measured their time to the way they consumed their meals, from their rising in the morning to their laying down at night, from the way they prayed to the way they saw to the purity of their bodies, from their entry into the community to their departure from it, the people of Qumran patterned their actions in ‘more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances’ aimed at bringing them closer to God.”—“Making All Experience Religious: The Hegemony of Ritual at Qumran,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 33, no. 2 (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2002), pp. 131–152.

Jesus was born and raised in this context. He was circumcised at the right time (*Luke 2:21*). His parents paid the ransom price for their first-born (*vs. 22*). He visited the temple and participated in the Passover ritual. Yet, paradoxically, at times Jesus consciously sets Himself in opposition to Jewish ritual practice (*Matt. 15:1, 2*). When it is time to celebrate the last Passover prior to His death, Jesus transforms an existing ritual (Passover) and institutes a new ritual that reminds His disciples of His death and resurrection (*John 13, Matt. 26:17–30*). Christians all over the world still celebrate the Communion supper. Seventh-day Adventists, in particular,

also reenact during each commemoration of the Lord's Supper the service of humility by washing one another's feet as Jesus washed the feet of His disciples. By its institution, Jesus made an important statement and underlined the important communicative power of ritual: ritual not only pointed to the Messiah but was also a preferred tool of communicating the new way of the kingdom. (Baptism is another example of a ritual that actually tells a story and communicates key concepts of the Christian life.)

Consider This: How could we celebrate the Lord's Supper more meaningfully? What elements would help us to "remember" and then "do"?

►STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

- ❶ What can the ceremonial laws tell us about God and His character?
- ❷ Think of all the ritual connections between Jesus' death and Israel's sacrificial system. Take particular note of the time and the place of Jesus' death.
- ❸ What difference will the realization that Jesus is also the Author of the law make in your attitude toward the law?

Application Questions:

- ❶ Jesus not only lived His life by God's laws, He also lived His life by God's timetable for Him (*see John 7:8*). How can I live God's laws and timetables in my daily life?
- ❷ How should I treat those who are living lifestyles contrary to God's law? Would I treat them differently if they were part of the church family?
- ❸ Jesus lived as a Jew and adhered to all the positive parts of His culture while shunning the negative aspects. What are some of the positive parts of our culture that can be celebrated, and what are some of the negative aspects that should be shunned?

►STEP 4—Create

Activity: As a class, imagine how Jesus would relate to some aspects of our culture if He lived here and now. Where do you think Jesus would eat out? How would He feel about sports or politics? Would He have a Facebook account or spend time watching movies? Be sure to back up your answers with examples from Jesus' life, showing the principles by which He lived that would inform His lifestyle choices.