

The Law of God



SABBATH—AUGUST 30

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Matthew 5:17–19, Matthew 5:21–44, Mark 7:9–13, Matthew 19:16–22.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘If you love Me, keep My commandments’ ” (John 14:15, NKJV).

MANY LEADERS IN ISRAEL HIGHLY HONORED THE LAW. But some misunderstood its purpose. They believed that they could become righteous (having a pure and perfect heart) by obeying the law. As Paul wrote, “They didn’t [did not] know how God makes people right with himself. They tried to get right with God in their own way. They didn’t [did not] do it in God’s way” (Romans 10:3, NIV).

This is why Jesus often questioned and did not agree with the rules of the religious elders (Mark 7:1–13). And their misunderstanding was why they criticized and challenged Him about His opinions of the law.

It is important to understand that Jesus disapproved of the practices of the Pharisees (a group of religious leaders). But He honored the Ten Commandments. He clearly supported the Ten Commandments. And He explained their meaning and purpose. Christ Himself said that He had come to fulfill (support) the law (Matthew 5:17). In many ways, His death was the greatest proof that God’s law remains in effect.

This week we will study Jesus’ teachings about the law and the influence His teachings should have on our lives.

JESUS DID NOT CHANGE THE LAW (Matthew 5:17–19)

What does Matthew 5:17–19 teach about how Jesus felt about the law?

The word *law* is often used to mean the first five books of the Bible (also known as the Pentateuch or *Torah*). But in this case Jesus seems to be talking about the Ten Commandments. When saying He has not come to “destroy” the law, Jesus is really saying, *I have not come to abolish (to get rid of) the Ten Commandments*. His wording is very clear and probably meant to show that it was the Jewish leaders, not He, who had been destroying the law. They were changing its meaning through their rules (read Matthew 15:3, 6). By *filling* it with a deeper meaning, Christ had come to “fulfill [satisfy]” (NKJV) the law. So, He was giving us an example of what perfect obedience to the will of God looks like. (Read Romans 8:3, 4.)

Read Acts 7:38. Who was the Angel who spoke to Moses and gave him the law on Mount Sinai? (Read Isaiah 63:9 and 1 Corinthians 10:4.) Why is this important?

“Christ was the leader of the Hebrews in the wilderness. . . . And He also gave the law to Israel. Among the great glory [power] of Sinai, Christ announced in the hearing of all the people the Ten Commandments of His Father’s law. It was Jesus who gave to Moses the law carved upon the tables of stone.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs [Forefathers] and Prophets [Special Messengers]*, page 366.

Christ Himself gave the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Knowing this makes it even more important for us to take it seriously. The Lawgiver Himself further explained it through His teachings in the Gospels. For this reason, we would do well to obey that law. One would not be able to find in the life and teachings of Jesus anything that would suggest that Christians should not obey the Ten Commandments. Instead, Jesus’ words and example teach us the opposite.

We know that the law is still binding (in force). But we also know that it does not and cannot save us. (Read Galatians 3:21.) How then do we understand the connection between law and grace?¹



Jesus, the Great Lawgiver, came to fulfill the law.

DEFINITIONS

1. grace—God’s gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

**JESUS WENT DEEPER INTO THE MEANING
OF THE LAW (Matthew 5:21–44)**

Jesus preached that the Ten Commandments were binding (cannot be broken) permanently. He now continued the Sermon on the Mount. He set forth a few examples of Old Testament laws. People had so greatly misunderstood these commandments that Jesus felt it was necessary to explain their true meaning.

What were the differences between the teachings of the Pharisees and the true meaning of the law that Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount? By whose authority (power) did Jesus speak in each case? Read Matthew 5:21–44.

Note that in each case Jesus first uses an Old Testament verse (Exodus 20:13, 14; Deuteronomy 5:17, 18; Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). Then He seems to argue against it. Was Jesus speaking against the law? Of course not. He first explained that the religious leaders were just obeying the law only for its sake. Then He showed the difference between the teachings of the Pharisees and the true meaning of the law.

The rabbis (Jewish teachers) argued that their knowledge and power as teachers gave them the right to interpret the law. But Christ spoke on His own authority as the Lawgiver Himself. The wording “but I say unto you” appears six times in this chapter. Who alone but the Lord Himself could rightly make a claim like that?

What is interesting, too, is that Christ’s requirements (rules) went beyond the simple form of the law. His teachings included the spirit behind the letter of the law. This is the spirit that gives meaning and life to what seems to be obeying the law for its sake. Law-keeping, by itself, leads to nothing but death if the law is not understood as a real example of what it means to be saved by grace.

Consider the scribes’ and Pharisees’ attitudes (feelings) as described in Matthew 23:3–5, 23–28. How can we obey God’s commandments from the heart without falling into almost the same trap as the Pharisees did? How does our understanding of grace spare us from this trap?

JESUS AND THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT (Matthew 5:27, 28)

How did Jesus make clear the meaning of the law, as seen in Matthew 5:27, 28? What did He say in verses 29 and 30? How are we to accept these words?

In these verses Christ talks about two commandments: the seventh and the tenth. Until then, the Israelites thought adultery to be only the physical sexual act with another person's spouse. But Jesus explains that adultery also includes lustful thoughts and desires too.

In verses 29 and 30, Jesus really was not talking about cutting off body parts. That practice would go against the teachings He once gave to Moses (read Leviticus 19:27, 28). Jesus was really speaking about the control of one's thoughts and desires.

What did the Pharisees ask Jesus in Matthew 19:3? Why was it a trick question? (Read verse 7.) What was Jesus' answer? Compare Matthew 19:4–9 and Matthew 5:31, 32.

Both verses (Matthew 5:31; Matthew 19:7) are talking about Deuteronomy 24:1. In Jesus' day, there were two schools for rabbis that interpreted this verse in two different ways: Hillel understood it to mean that a person could divorce for almost any reason. But Shammai interpreted it to mean only clear adultery. The Pharisees were trying to trick Jesus into taking sides with one school or the other. But they had overlooked the truth that it was not God's original plan for anyone to get a divorce. This is why Jesus said, " 'What God has joined together, let not man separate' " (Matthew 19:6, NKJV). Later, the Pharisees asked why God had let a man give his wife a " 'certificate of divorce' " if he found some " 'uncleanness in her' " (Deuteronomy 24:1, NKJV). Christ corrected their misunderstanding of this verse by arguing that marriage is holy and permanent. He also said that the only reason for divorce, before God, is "sexual impurity" (in Greek *porneia*, really "impure").

How seriously do we take Jesus' warning about taking out our eyes or cutting off a hand? How much stronger a warning could He have given us about what sin can do to our futures for eternity?



To cut off one's hand meant to guard oneself against temptation.

JESUS AND THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT (Mark 7:9–13)

During another meeting, Jesus was having an argument with the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 15:1–20; read also Mark 7:1–13). They questioned Him about a tradition (custom; rule) of the elders that was not found in the Law of Moses. This tradition required that one should wash his or her hands for religious reasons before eating. This is something Jesus' disciples had not done. Christ quickly answered by pointing to another tradition of the Pharisees. This one broke the fifth commandment.

Before studying Christ's argument, we need to understand the tradition of the Pharisees called *Corban*. This comes from a word that means "a gift." When a man said the words "It is Corban" in talking about something, it was considered an oath. It was something dedicated to God and the temple.

Read Mark 7:9–13. In what hidden ways did the Pharisees' rule break the fifth commandment? Think about the importance of giving offerings to God (Exodus 23:15; Exodus 34:20) and the holiness of an oath made before the Lord (Deuteronomy 23:21–23).

It seems as if the Pharisees had found the perfect excuse to deny one's parents their rightful support. They had changed the solid principles (important rules) found in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) into man-made commandments. They thought that their changes to the law were more important than one of God's commandments.

It is no wonder that Jesus summed up His argument by using Isaiah's words to describe the Pharisees as those who " 'honor me [God] by what they say. But their hearts are far away from me [God]. Their worship doesn't [does not] mean anything to me [God]. They teach nothing but human rules' ' " (Matthew 15:8, 9, NIV). They were almost the same words Isaiah wrote 700 years earlier. Once again, Christ supported the Ten Commandments and stood opposed to the Pharisees' position.

In what ways might you be looking for little loopholes (excuses) to avoid doing what is clearly your duty?

JESUS AND THE ESSENCE (REQUIREMENTS) OF THE LAW (Matthew 19:16–22)



**There can be no obedience
without surrender to God.**

Honor Thy Father



**There must be love in
the heart before the law
can be kept.**

DEFINITIONS

2. Sadducees—a group of Jewish religious leaders.

Read Matthew 19:16–22. From the details of this story, what broad and important truths can we get from these verses about the law and what is required to keep it?

The rich young man could not understand that salvation from sin does not come from following the law, even strictly. It comes from the Lawgiver, the Savior. The Israelites had known this truth since the beginning. But they had forgotten it. Now Jesus set forth what they should have done from the start. They should have known that obedience and full surrender to God are so united (joined as one) that one without the other leads only to a false Christian life. “Falling short of full obedience is not acceptable. Self-surrender is the basis of the teachings of Christ. Often it is given in strong language because there is no other way to save man than to call him to turn away from doing those things that will destroy his soul.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 523.

In another meeting, the Sadducees² had been questioning Christ about the resurrection (return to life from the dead). Jesus had surprised and silenced them with His answer. So, now the Pharisees met together, ready to try to lead the Savior into saying something that they could interpret as being against the law. They chose a lawyer to question Jesus about which was the most important commandment (Matthew 22:35–40).

The lawyer’s question probably arose because the rabbis had tried to list all the commandments in the order of importance. If two commands appeared not to agree, then perhaps one could be more important than another. If so, perhaps a person could be free to break the less important one. The Pharisees honored the first four commandments as being more important than the last six. As a result, they failed when it came to true religion.

Jesus answered in a very clever way. He said that there must be love in the heart before anyone can begin to follow God’s law. Obedience without love is impossible and worthless. But where there is true love toward God, a person will make his or her life fit with God’s will as revealed in all ten of His commandments. That is why Jesus later said, “ ‘If you love Me, keep My commandments’ ” (John 14:15, NKJV).

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Ellen G. White, “The Spirituality of the Law,” pages 45–78, in *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*; “The Sermon on the Mount,” pages 307–314, and “Controversy [War],” pages 606–609, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Speaking of the law, Jesus said, ‘I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill [satisfy].’ . . . That means to fill up the measure of the law’s requirement, to give an example of perfect obedience to the will of God. . . .

“Jesus’ mission was to ‘magnify [glorify] the law, and make it honorable.’ Isaiah 42:21. He was to show the spiritual nature of the law and to teach its principles that lead to eternal life if faithfully obeyed.

“Jesus was the exact copy of the Father’s person, the perfect example of His glory [perfection, beauty, and power], and the selfless Savior. During His mission of love on earth, He was a living reflection of the character [thoughts, feelings, and actions] of God and His law. In His life we see clearly heaven-born love and Christlike principles, which reflect the laws of eternal holiness.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, pages 48, 49.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 In what ways can we fall into the trap of trying to keep the law to earn our salvation as the Pharisees did? On the other hand, what danger do we have in thinking that loving God excuses us from obeying His law? Make a list of practical ways in which we could avoid falling into one or the other trap today. Bring your ideas to share with your class.
- 2 As we know, the argument against the Ten Commandments often is nothing but a way to get around the seventh-day Sabbath. Review all the Sabbath healing stories in the Gospels. How do they support God’s law and the seventh-day Sabbath? Why are the words and the example of Jesus the last place that anyone who wants to deny the Sabbath should go?
- 3 Bible thinkers sometimes talk about “a moral [righteous; holy] universe.” What does that mean? How is our universe a moral place? If it is, what makes it so? What part would God’s law have in a moral universe? Could the universe be a moral place without God having a moral law to govern it? Discuss. How does the idea of God’s law in a moral universe help to explain why Satan tried to destroy that law?