

The Law of God



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 5:17–19, 5:21–44, Mark 7:9–13, Matt. 19:16–22.*

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

Though many leaders in Israel highly exalted the law, some misunderstood its purpose, believing that they could obtain righteousness by obeying the law. As Paul was to write: “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God” (*Rom. 10:3*).

This is why Jesus often questioned, and even disapproved of, the traditions of the religious elders (*Mark 7:1–13*). And their misunderstanding was why they criticized and confronted Him about His views of the law.

It is important to understand that, although Jesus criticized the openly legalistic practices of the Pharisees, He exalted the Ten Commandments, clearly affirming the perpetuity of the Decalogue and explaining its meaning and purpose. Christ Himself said that He had come to fulfill the law (*Matt. 5:17*). In many ways, His death was the ultimate revelation of the continued validity of God’s law.

This week we will analyze Jesus’ teachings in regard to the law and the impact His teachings should have in our lives.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 6.

Jesus Did Not Change the Law

What does Matthew 5:17–19 teach about Jesus’ attitude toward the law?

Although the word *law* is often used to refer to the first five books of the Bible (also known as Pentateuch or *Torah*), in this case the context seems to indicate that He was referring primarily to the Ten Commandments. When saying He had not come to “destroy” the law, Jesus is literally saying, *I have not come to make invalid or abolish the Ten Commandments*. His statement is very clear and probably meant to show that it was the religious elders, not He, who had been destroying the law, reducing its effect through their tradition (see *Matt. 15:3, 6*). In contrast, by filling it with a deeper meaning, Christ had come to “fulfill” the law, thus giving us an example of what perfect obedience to the will of God looks like. (See *Rom. 8:3, 4*.)

Read Acts 7:38. Who was the Angel who spoke to Moses and gave him the law on Mount Sinai? See *Isa. 63:9, 1 Cor. 10:4*. Why is this important?

“Christ was not only the leader of the Hebrews in the wilderness . . . but it was He who gave the law to Israel. Amid the awful glory of Sinai, Christ declared in the hearing of all the people the ten precepts of His Father’s law. It was He who gave to Moses the law engraved upon the tables of stone.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 366.

The fact that Christ Himself gave the law to Moses on Mount Sinai makes it even more important for us to take it seriously. Also, if the Lawgiver Himself further explained it through His teachings, as we find in the Gospels, we would do well to obey that law. One would be hard pressed to find in the life and teachings of Jesus anything implying that the Ten Commandments are not binding on Christians. On the contrary, His words and example teach us the opposite.

Though we know that the law is still binding, we also know that it does not, indeed cannot, save us. (See Gal. 3:21.) How then do we understand the relationship between law and grace?

Jesus Deepened the Meaning of the Law

After establishing the perpetuity of the Ten Commandments, Jesus continued His Sermon on the Mount, now setting forth a few specific examples of Old Testament laws. People had so greatly misunderstood these specific commandments that Jesus felt the vital need of explaining their true meaning.

What contrast did Jesus make with each aspect of the law mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount? To what authority did He appeal in each case? *Matt. 5:21–44.*

Note that in each instance Jesus first cites an Old Testament text (*Exod. 20:13, 14; Deut. 5:17, 18; Exod. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21*) and then appears to argue against it. Was Jesus discrediting the law? Of course not. By further explaining and expanding what the religious leaders had narrowed down to nothing but formality, He was simply contrasting the teachings of the Pharisees with the true meaning of the law.

The rabbis cited tradition as their authority for their interpretation of the law. In contrast, Christ spoke on His own authority, as the Lawgiver Himself. The expression “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’s fascinating, too, is that Christ’s requirements went radically beyond the simple form of the law. His teachings included the spirit behind the letter of the law. The spirit imparts meaning and life to what otherwise can only be pure formalism. Law-keeping, in and of itself, as an end in itself, leads to nothing but death if the law is not understood as an expression of what it means to be saved by grace.

Consider the scribes’ and Pharisees’ attitudes as described in Matthew 23:3–5, 23–28. How can we obey God’s commandments wholeheartedly without falling into similar hypocrisy and legalism? What crucial role does understanding grace play in sparing us from legalism?

Jesus and the Seventh Commandment

How did Jesus expand 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 take these words?

In this passage Christ referred to two commandments: the seventh and the tenth. Until then, the Israelites considered adultery to be only the overt physical sexual act with another person's spouse. Jesus points out that in reality, because of the tenth commandment, adultery would include lustful thoughts and desires, as well.

In verses 29 and 30 Christ was using a figure of speech. Of course, one could argue that it would be better to go through life mutilated than to forfeit eternity with Christ. However, rather than pointing to mutilation, which would be contrary to other biblical teachings (see *Lev. 19:27, 28; 21:17–20*), Jesus was referring to the control of one's thoughts and impulses. In His references to plucking out an eye or cutting off a hand, Christ was figuratively speaking of the importance of taking resolute decisions and actions toward guarding oneself against temptation and sin.

What did the Pharisees ask Jesus in Matthew 19:3, and why was it a trick question? See vs. 7. What was Jesus' answer? See *Matt. 19:4–9; compare with Matt. 5:31, 32*.

Both texts (*Matt. 5:31, 19:7*) are citing Deuteronomy 24:1. In Jesus' days there were two rabbinic schools that interpreted this text in two different ways: Hillel understood it to allow divorce for almost any reason, while Shammai interpreted it to mean only explicit adultery. The Pharisees were trying to trick Jesus into taking sides with one school or the other. However, they had overlooked the fact that it was not God's original plan for anyone to divorce, ever, which is why Jesus said: "What God has joined together, let not man separate" (*Matt. 19:6, NKJV*). Later, because of the "hardness" of their hearts, they asked why God had allowed a man to give his wife a "certificate of divorce" if he found some "uncleanness in her" (*Deut. 24:1, NKJV*). Christ corrected the misuse of this passage by uplifting the sanctity and permanence of marriage: the only cause for divorce, before God, is "sexual immorality" or "fornication" (in Greek *porneia*, literally "unchastity").

How seriously do we take Jesus' warning about plucking 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 eternal destiny? If this warning scares you, good. It should!

Jesus and the Fifth Commandment

During another encounter Jesus had with the scribes and Pharisees (*Matt. 15:1–20*; see also *Mark 7:1–13*), they questioned Him about a tradition of the elders, one not found in the Law of Moses. This tradition stipulated that one should ritualistically wash his hands before eating, something Jesus' disciples had neglected to do. Christ immediately responded by citing another tradition of the Pharisees, one that invalidated the fifth commandment.

Before analyzing Christ's argument, we need to understand that the tradition the Pharisees had established, called *Corban*, comes from a word that means "a gift." When a man applied the words, "It is *Corban*" to anything, it was considered an oath: it was something dedicated to God and the temple.

Read Mark 7:9–13. In what ways was the Pharisees' tradition such a subtle way of violating the fifth commandment? Consider the importance of presenting offerings before God (*Exod. 23:15, 34:20*) and the sacredness of an oath made before the Lord (*Deut. 23:21–23*).

It seems as if the Pharisees had found the perfect excuse to deny one's parents their rightful support. They had expanded the solid principles found in the Pentateuch and transformed them into man-made commandments, which, in their leaders' own thinking, could supersede one of God's commandments.

This isn't the only time Jesus dealt with the same spiritual perversion: " 'But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. *These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone*' " (*Luke 11:42, NKJV; emphasis added*). They should have kept both commands, first by honoring their father and mother, without leaving aside their giving to the Lord.

No wonder Jesus summed up His argument by applying to the Pharisees a description Isaiah made of the Israelites 700 years earlier: " ' "These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" ' " (*Matt. 15:8, 9, NKJV*). Once again, Christ upheld the Ten Commandments and contrasted His position with that of the Pharisees.

In what ways might you be seeking little technical loopholes in order to avoid doing what's clearly your duty?

Jesus and the Essence of the Law

Read Matthew 19:16–22. From the immediate details of this specific story, what broad and important truths can we derive from this account about the law and what the keeping of the law entails?

The rich young man couldn't comprehend that salvation from sin does not come from following the law, even strictly. It comes, rather, 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 heeded from the start: that obedience and full surrender to God are so united that one without the other becomes only a pretense of Christian life. "Nothing short of obedience can be accepted. Self-surrender is the substance of the teachings of Christ. Often it is presented and enjoined in language that seems authoritative, because there is no other way to save man than to cut away those things which, if entertained, will demoralize the whole being."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 523.

In another encounter, the Sadducees had been questioning Christ about the resurrection, and Jesus had astonished and silenced them with His answer. So, now the Pharisees gathered together, ready to make a final attempt to lead the Savior into saying something that they could interpret as being against the law. They chose a certain lawyer to question Jesus about which was the most important commandment (*Matt. 22:35–40*).

The lawyer's question probably arose from the attempt of the rabbis to arrange all the commandments by order of importance. If two commands appeared to be in conflict, the one assumed to be more important took priority and left a person free to violate the less important one. The Pharisees particularly exalted the first four precepts of the Decalogue as being more important than the last six and, as a result, they failed when it came to matters of practical religion.

Jesus answered in a masterful way: first, and most important, there must be love in the heart before anyone can begin to observe God's law. Obedience without love is impossible and worthless. However, where there is true love toward God, a person will unconditionally put his life in harmony with God's will as expressed in all ten of His commandments. That is why Jesus later said: " 'If you love Me, keep My commandments' " (*John 14:15, NKJV*).

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “The Spirituality of the Law,” pp. 45–78, in *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*; “The Sermon on the Mount,” pp. 307–314, and “Controversy,” pp. 606–609, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Speaking of the law, Jesus said, ‘I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill’ . . . ; that is, to fill up the measure of the law’s requirement, to give an example of perfect conformity to the will of God. . . .

“His mission was to ‘magnify the law, and make it honorable.’ Isaiah 42:21. He was to show the spiritual nature of the law, to present its far-reaching principles, and to make plain its eternal obligation. . . .

“Jesus, the express image of the Father’s person, the effulgence of His glory; the self-denying Redeemer, throughout His pilgrimage of love on earth was a living representation of the character of the law of God. In His life it is made manifest that heaven-born love, Christlike principles, underlie the laws of eternal rectitude.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, pp. 48, 49.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** In what ways can we fall into the temptation of being legalistic in our observance of the law, as the Pharisees were? On the other hand, what danger exists when we assume that loving God exempts us from obeying His law? Make a list of practical ways in which we could avoid falling into one or the other pitfall in our days. Bring your ideas to share with your class.
- 2** As we know, the argument against the continued validity of the Ten Commandments often is nothing but an attempt to get around the seventh-day Sabbath. Review all the Sabbath healing stories in the Gospels. How do they affirm not only the continued validity of God’s law but also of the seventh-day Sabbath? Why are the words and example of Jesus the last place anyone who wants to deny the Sabbath should go?
- 3** Theologians sometimes talk about “a moral universe.” What does that mean? How is our universe a moral place? If it is, what do you think makes it so? What role 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 explain Satan’s attempt to undermine that law?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *John 14:15*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand that the law’s perpetual nature has profound implications for Christianity’s communication of salvation.

Feel: Rest securely in the knowledge that believers serve a consistent God whose character and principles never change.

Do: Invite Christ, whose transforming power alone can impart the desire to do His will, daily, into the heart.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Christ’s Death at Calvary Testifies to the Perpetuity of Divine Law.

A Why did Jesus not redefine law-breaking by changing the law and thus avoid having to pay the penalty for transgression?

B In what ways did Jesus’ lifestyle, teaching, and death at Calvary deepen the law’s meaning and highlight its importance?

II. Feel: Believers Rest Securely Knowing That They Serve a God Whose Character and Principles, as Expressed Through Divine Law, Never Change.

A How would Christians feel serving a “chameleon” God whose whims constantly changed His expectations?

B How can believers assure others regarding God’s consistency when they have grown up in environments steeped in human inconsistencies?

C What effects do “chameleon” Christians have on the spread of the gospel?

III. Do: Although Real Obedience Lies Beyond the Capability of Human Willpower, God’s Indwelling Spirit Can Strengthen Us to Obey.

A What routines might be incorporated into our busy schedules that would encourage complete dependence upon the Holy Spirit for power to do God’s will?

B What things can believers do so that unbelievers are attracted to righteous living by seeing living examples of God’s principles?

► **Summary:** God’s consistent law provides stability and security. God’s grace facilitates living in harmony with its provisions.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 5:17–19*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: **Christians who wholeheartedly observe God’s immutable law position themselves for, and communicate to others, Heaven’s greatest blessings.**

The spiritual law’s immutability, likewise, applies universally. Adultery was immoral during David’s Jerusalem reign, and philandering remains immoral in Tallahassee, Florida, U.S.A., today. Jezebel’s assassination of Naboth three millennia ago in Samaria was iniquitous; likewise, murders in Montreal or Oslo today. God’s divine ordinances apply equally, social standing, nationality, personal prosperity, political connections, and gender notwithstanding. Wherever human legislation has countermanded divine legislation, morality has suffered. Nevertheless, God’s standards remain unchanged. Human law making fluctuates, swayed by unpredictable human opinions and societal pressures. But “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (*Heb. 13:8, NKJV*).

Opening Activity: Select some popular athletic activity with regulations that you know. Discuss what would happen should those regulations change from contest to contest or during one particular contest. Consider the consequences of having different regulations for different teams or squads. How would concepts such as justice, impartiality, and evenhandedness suffer? How might constantly changing boundaries affect long-range planning? What benefits accrue from having uniform standards for everyone? What advantages result from having consistently applied regulations?

Consider This: Have you ever played table games or other types of games with people who enforce their personal rules rather than the manufacturer’s rules or the traditionally accepted ones? How does it make you feel to play with people who constantly invent fresh rules? Why would it be impossible for you to respect God if He constantly changed His commandments?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. God’s Immutable Character and Unchanging Law (*Review Matthew 5:17–44 with your class.*)

Throughout its history, Christianity has spawned widespread disagreement regarding the law's proper understanding. The second-century heretic Marcion, who once commanded widespread allegiance throughout Asia Minor, postulated exaggerated distinctions between the law and the gospel. The law, accordingly, belonged to the Old Testament God, who specialized in justice and punishment. Conversely, the gospel belonged to the New Testament God, who specialized in merciful salvation, a separate entity from the Old Testament God. Divine mercifulness superseded justice, punishment, and law. While denying charges of antinomianism (rejecting the value of obedience to divine law), Marcion's theological presuppositions effectively nullified any appropriate role for divine law.

Antinomianism (from *anti* "against" plus *nomos* "law") flourished during the later Middle Ages, a reaction against legalistic monasticism. Monasticism's antidote for moral failure was ascetic practice whereby fleshly lusts were purged through silence, self-flagellation, and other "righteous works." Christianity's teaching of freedom counteracted this self-inflicted psychological and physical punishment; but extremists began teaching not freedom from the law's condemnation but freedom from obedience to the law. Sadly, the extremists' version of spiritual release underemphasizes the need for personal confession and Spirit-empowered and guided sanctification. Ultimately, this leads to unrestrained pleasure seeking and spiritual narcissism.

John Darby's dispensationalism inadvertently incorporated Marcion's objectionable features. His philosophical premise was that God interacted with people differently during different historical periods. This unabashed attack against divine consistency mirrored Marcion's belief in different gods, except Darby qualified his doctrine as one God acting in two different ways. God acted mercifully during the gospel period, nullifying the desirability of law-keeping. God had finally learned that His Mosaic restrictions were untenable, fixing the problem for successive generations by disallowing Moses' instructions. Unfortunately, Moses' followers were simply born too early!

Contrast these convoluted theologies with Christ's straightforward statement: " 'Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven' " (*Matt. 5:17-19, NKJV*).

Consider This: Law-breaking (sin) caused Christ's death. Why did Jesus not change His law to conform to prevailing practices and thus end law-

breaking? Would this not have been much easier and less painful? Discuss.

II. Specific Applications of Consistent Law (Review Matthew 5:27–30 and Mark 7:1–13 with your class.)

These passages disclose how Jesus accomplished the purposes of the divine commandments. The first application regarded the seventh commandment. Jesus' imputation of guilt for thoughts, rather than mere action, reflected the deeper intention of the commandment, whereby merely desiring another's wife was considered transgression. Christ applies this same principle to other commandments. Murder was no longer limited to premeditated homicide but incorporated hatred, angry recriminations, even abusive invectives. Properly understood, this sixth commandment disallowed personal vengeance and enjoined love for enemies. Honesty and charity were likewise elevated. No longer could satisfying minimal requirements be satisfactory. Motivation trumped action. Wholehearted service became the standard.

Elsewhere Christ confronted pharisaical, nonbiblical traditions. Jesus' primary contention was that their ritualistic purification ceremonies had displaced ethical behavior as defined by God's commandments. While Jewish commentators highly regarded parenthood and interpreted the fifth commandment to include supporting elderly parents, they allowed *Corban* to interfere with such responsibilities. Anciently, *Corban* appeared on sacrificial vessels, meaning "consecrated." Things declared *Corban* were restricted to God and forbidden to others. Greedy children, anxiously withholding parental support, would declare their financial resources *Corban*, hence restricted for eventual donation to the temple and thus unavailable for parental assistance. Realistically speaking, they kept the wealth for themselves, utilizing religious loopholes to justify greediness. While superficially submitting to God's law, they in practice behaved otherwise. " " "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" ' ' (Matt. 15:8, 9, NRSV).

Consider This: Which is better—assuming the antinomian position and forthrightly attacking obedience to divine law or publicly supporting but secretly undercutting the law? Give reasons for your answer. How might repentance change either of these approaches?

►STEP 3—Apply

Which is easier, verbally endorsing God's law or actually applying it to our lives? "Talk is cheap." "Actions speak louder than words." These aphorisms, among many others, underscore the importance of application.

Jesus addresses this question in a parable in which two sons were directed

to groom their father's vineyard. The first remonstrated but subsequently repented and worked. The second immediately agreed but did absolutely nothing. Christ then asked His listeners to identify the obedient child. How would your membership be identified—initially recalcitrant but subsequently cooperative; immediately submissive but actually misleading; or genuinely obedient? Christ said, “ ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments’ ” (*John 14:15, NRSV*). Jesus' brother James wrote, “Someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even demons believe—and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren?” (*James 2:18–20, NRSV*). Christ's beloved disciple admonished, “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (*1 John 3:18, NRSV*). The most eloquent statements supporting the perpetuity of God's law come not from seminary dissertations but from lives consistently lived in accordance with God's will. How can believers so live?

Thought/Application Questions:

- ① How can believers actively apply the positive intentions of divine law? (Otherwise stated, the positive intention of the negatively phrased command “Don't commit adultery” is spousal faithfulness. The positive intention of the negatively phrased “Don't falsely accuse neighbors” is absolute honesty.)
- ② How can believers joyfully experience law-keeping as opposed to begrudgingly acquiescing to divine commandments?
- ③ How can believers communicate the importance of law-keeping to nonbelievers without being pharisaical?
- ④ What safeguards might Christians utilize to ensure that genuine obedience does not become works-oriented salvation on the one hand or lip-service obedience on the other?
- ⑤ How can the gospel be presented so that nonbelievers understand the scriptural harmony between the gospel and the law?

►STEP 4—Create

Activity: Create “positive” Ten Commandments by reframing the originals to express, proactively, ways of establishing loving relationships. After completing the assignment, brainstorm ways to actively foster these principles through actions. Select, minimally, one action that you can commit to attempting this coming week.