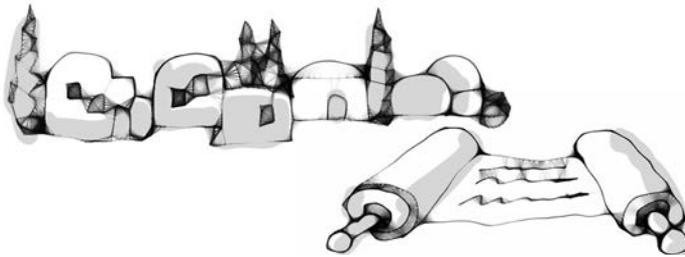


Laws *in* Christ's Day



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 2:1–5, Heb. 10:28, Deut. 17:2–6, Lev. 1:1–9, Luke 14:1–6, James 2:8–12.*

Memory Text: “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves” (*Romans 2:14, NASB*).

In most societies, various laws function at the same time. There can be general laws that apply to everyone and, simultaneously, local laws that prevail in one community but not in another.

In New Testament times, when a person used the common word for “law” (*nomos* in Greek, *lex* in Latin, and *Torah* in Hebrew), he or she could have been referring to any one of a number of laws. Often the only indicator as to the exact law being discussed was the context of the conversation. Thus, as we study this quarter, we’ll always need to keep the immediate context in mind in order to understand best what law is being discussed.

This week’s lesson investigates the various laws that functioned in the community during the time of Christ and the early church. We will study these various laws but only in the context of helping to set a foundation for the study of the law that will be the major focus of this quarter—God’s moral law, the Ten Commandments.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 5.

Roman Law

Read Luke 2:1–5. What lessons can we learn from the ways in which these two faithful followers of the Lord interacted with their political environment?

Since the time of the early republic, the Romans recognized how important written laws were for the governance of society. In fact, the system of constitutional law established by the Romans remains a foundation of the legal systems found in many of today's democratic societies.

For the most part, Rome allowed vassal kingdoms to maintain their own customs, but all subjects were expected to obey imperial and senatorial laws. Obviously, this included Joseph and Mary.

Roman law was concerned with order in society. As such, it not only addressed issues of government but also legislated behavior in the domestic arena. In addition to stipulating the procedures for selecting people to public office, Roman law also dealt with things such as adultery and master/slave relationships. Many of the social codes are similar to the ones found in the Old Testament and other societies.

All attempts to understand the culture in which the New Testament books were composed must take into account the fact that the Roman Empire formed the political backdrop for the world in which Jesus and the early church lived. Many things taking place in the New Testament, from the death of Jesus to the imprisonment of Paul, make much better sense when we understand whatever we can about the environment of their times. Of course, one doesn't need to be a scholar of Roman history in order to understand that which we need for salvation. However, when it is possible for us to obtain it, historical knowledge can indeed be helpful.

Despite the amazing providences of Mary's pregnancy and the obvious hand of the Lord in it, these two people still obeyed the law of the land, which required them to leave their home, even when Mary was quite far along in her pregnancy. Would it not have been better simply to have stayed home, considering the extraordinary circumstances? What might their actions say to us about how we should relate to civil law? (Think how easy it would have been for them to have justified not obeying.)

Mosaic Law: Civic

Although the Jews were under Roman rule at the time of Jesus, they were granted authority over those issues that were unique to their customs and religion (*see Acts 18:15*). The legislative body responsible for administering Jewish law was called the Sanhedrin. Sometimes referred to as the council (*John 11:47, Acts 5:27*), the Sanhedrin consisted of 71 men selected from among the priests, elders, and rabbis and was presided over by the high priest. It served as a type of Supreme Court that dealt with Jewish customs, traditions, and laws.

Jewish societal law was founded upon the civil codes revealed in the five books of Moses. Because Moses was the author of the first five biblical books, the laws are referred to as the law of Moses. When God originally gave the laws to Moses, He envisioned a state where He would be the head and the people would enforce His legal mandates. By the time of Jesus, the Jews were subject to Roman law. However, the Roman government allowed them to use Mosaic law in order to settle issues relating to their customs. Here is where the work of the Sanhedrin was especially important.

The New Testament provides several examples of the Mosaic law being applied, or alluded to, in civic matters: Jewish men were still expected to pay the half shekel temple tax (*Matt. 17:24–27, Exod. 30:13*); divorces were still being governed by the stipulations set forth by Moses (*Matt. 19:7, Deut. 24:1–4*); people still adhered to the law of levirate marriage, in which a widow was to marry her husband’s brother (*Matt. 22:24, Deut. 25:5*); boys were still circumcised on the eighth day (*John 7:23, Lev. 12:3*); and adulterers were to be punished by stoning (*John 8:5; Deut. 22:23, 24*).

Read Matthew 26:59–61, Hebrews 10:28, and Deuteronomy 17:2–6. What important principle is seen here? What does this tell us about biblical concepts of justice and fairness?

Read some of the civil legislation found in the early books of the Bible. Some of those laws do seem strange to us, don’t they? (See, for example, Deuteronomy 21.) Considering who the Author is of these laws, what should this tell us about how we must learn to trust the Lord in all things, especially those things we don’t fully understand?

Mosaic Law: Ceremonial

Read Leviticus 1:1–9, 2:14–16, 5:11–13. To what are these laws referring? What was their purpose? What important truths were they meant to teach?

Besides the civil laws in ancient Israel, there was also what is often called the “ceremonial law.” This law centered around the sanctuary and its services, all of which, of course, were designed to teach the children of Israel the plan of salvation and point them to the coming Messiah. In the texts for today, twice it is mentioned that through these services “atonement” would be made. In their own way, these laws were what have been deemed “miniprophesies” of Christ and His work of atonement for the sins of His people.

“The ceremonial law was given by Christ. Even after it was no longer to be observed, Paul presented it before the Jews in its true position and value, showing its place in the plan of redemption and its relation to the work of Christ; and the great apostle pronounces this law glorious, worthy of its divine Originator. The solemn service of the sanctuary typified the grand truths that were to be revealed through successive generations. . . . Thus through age after age of darkness and apostasy faith was kept alive in the hearts of men until the time came for the advent of the promised Messiah.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 367.

Though instituted by Jesus, the ceremonial system was meant to function only as a type, a symbol of a future reality—the coming of Jesus and His death and High Priestly ministry. Once He completed His work on earth, this old system—along with its sacrifices and rituals and feasts—no longer was needed (*see Heb. 9:9–12*). Though we no longer keep the ceremonial law today, by studying it we can garner insights into the plan of salvation.

Central to the sanctuary service was the sacrifice of the animals, which pointed to the death of Jesus. Think what it means that our salvation could come only through His death on our behalf. What should this tell us about just how costly sin is?

Rabbinic Law

In addition to the Mosaic laws, Jews at the time of Jesus were also familiar with the law of the rabbis. The rabbis were the scholastic arm of the Pharisees, and they took the responsibility of ensuring that the Mosaic law remained relevant to the people. The rabbis counted 613 laws in the five books of Moses (including 39 pertaining to the Sabbath), and they used these laws as the basis for their legislation. They supplemented these written laws with an oral law that consisted of the interpretations of leading rabbis.

Oral law is known as *halakah*, which means “to walk.” The rabbis felt that if the people adhered to their numerous *halakoth* (plural of *halakah*), they would walk in the way of the 613 major laws. Although originating as oral law, the rabbinic *halakoth* were collated and recorded in book form. Some of the interpretations from Jesus’ day survive in commentaries known as *Midrash*, while others are recorded in a legal collection called *Mishnah*. Many religious Jews through the ages, and even today, seek to adhere strictly to these laws.

Read Luke 14:1–6 and John 9. Although Jesus was accused of violating the Sabbath with His miraculous healings, where can you find in the Old Testament that it’s a sin to heal on the Sabbath day? How does the answer help us to understand some of the issues which Jesus had to address? More important, what lessons can we learn from these incidents that could help us to make sure that we don’t make similar mistakes in our attempts to “walk in the way” faithfully?

Though it’s easy from our perspective today to deride many of these oral laws, especially when they were used as they were against Jesus, the fault exists more with the attitude of the leaders and not with these laws themselves. Though often kept very legalistically, *halakoth* were meant to be very spiritual, infusing a spiritual element into the most mundane of actions, giving them a religious significance.

How can we learn to give even the most mundane tasks a religious significance?

The Moral Law

However much Roman law, Mosaic law, and rabbinic law impacted the lives of Jews living in first-century Israel, many people who followed the religion of Israel lived outside of Palestine and beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. Thus, many of these laws would not have played a big role in their lives.

At the same time, however, anyone professing to be a follower of the God of Israel would have adhered to the Ten Commandments.

“The Ten Commandments provide Israel with the moral framework for maintaining it [their relationship with God]. The metaphor that the Bible uses to express this relationship is covenant. While the metaphor comes from the sphere of international law, it is wrong to understand the commandments merely as a summary of Israel’s obligations toward God. . . . Israel’s obedience to the commandments was not a matter of submission to the divine will as much as it was a response to love.”
—Leslie J. Hoppe, “Ten Commandments,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 1285.

The Ten Commandments surpassed any system of law known to Jews in the first century. Even the Pharisees, who had meticulously memorized the 613 Mosaic laws, recognized the importance of the Ten Commandments. The division of the *Mishnah* called *Tamid* (5:1) contains a rabbinic command to recite the Ten Commandments daily. It was believed that all the other laws were contained in the Ten Commandments. In fact, the Jewish philosopher Philo, who was a contemporary of Jesus, wrote an entire book on the central place the Ten Commandments held among all biblical law.

Read Matthew 19:16–19, Romans 13:8–10, and James 2:8–12. What do these verses say about the role that the Ten Commandments play in the lives of those who are followers of Christ?

Like their Jewish counterparts, the inspired writers of the New Testament recognized the purpose of the Ten Commandments for God’s people. Although some of the lessons for this quarter will discuss the way in which Christ interacted with other systems of law in His day, the primary emphasis will be on His relationship to the Ten Commandments—what is often known as “the moral law.”

Further Study: Read also Ellen G. White, “Oath Taking,” pp. 201–204, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1.

“If Adam had not transgressed the law of God, the ceremonial law would never have been instituted. The gospel of good news was first given to Adam in the declaration made to him that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent’s head; and it was handed down through successive generations to Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The knowledge of God’s law, and the plan of salvation were imparted to Adam and Eve by Christ Himself. They carefully treasured the important lesson, and transmitted it by word of mouth, to their children, and children’s children. Thus the knowledge of God’s law was preserved.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 230.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Long before Moses penned the laws that were to govern Israel, the Egyptians and Babylonians had systems of societal laws that were, in some cases, similar in content to some of God’s laws. Even atheistic societies have laws that protect people and property. Law, though, is often based on moral concepts; that is, law should encourage people to refrain from certain types of evil and to do certain types of good. From where, though, do societies get their sense of good and evil?
- 2 How does the whole concept of good and evil impact the question of God’s existence? In other words, if there is no God, from where do the concepts of good and evil come? From where is the only place that they could come if no God existed?
- 3 We often use the concept of “law” in different ways. We talk about the law of gravity, the law of motion. We talk about international law. We talk about the law of the land. We talk about tax law. What do all of these laws have in common? In what ways do they differ? What is the probable consequence of violating any of these laws? What are the benefits of cooperating with these laws? How do the principles of law help you to understand the purpose of the Ten Commandments as it relates to the life of believers?
- 4 In class, go back to Wednesday’s lesson and deal with the issue of how we as a church need to be careful that we don’t make the same mistake that some of the leaders did by adding burdens to the law that were never meant to be there. Why is such a mistake easier to make than we might think, no matter how well-meaning we might be?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Romans 13:8–10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the different types of laws referenced in Scripture.

Feel: Appreciate God’s law as an expression of His eternal love and character.

Do: Respond in love to God by keeping His law.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Understand the All-Pervasive Character of Law

A How do the various law systems contribute to our understanding of God’s moral law, the Ten Commandments?

B What is the relationship between law and a particular culture?

C How do the Ten Commandments surpass any system of law known to humanity?

II. Feel: A Love for God’s Law

A How can I feel positive about God’s law?

B How can I effectively communicate appreciation for God’s law to my children?

C Are motivation and feeling the same thing? Why, or why not? Do I have to feel like keeping God’s law, or are there times when keeping God’s law will go against my feelings? Explain.

III. Do: A Love Response

A What is the link between God’s love and His law in practical terms?

B How should I, as a Christian, respond to the local civil laws of my country?

C Seeing that God values my motivation, how can I inject a love response into everyday mundane tasks and obligations?

► **Summary:** Various laws governed society in the time of Christ. An understanding of the historical and cultural context provides a framework for God’s moral law, the Ten Commandments.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Psalm 19:8*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The Ten Commandments are not just a list of obligations. Rather, they provide the moral framework for maintaining a covenant relationship with God in response to His love.

Just for Teachers: A lot of people, both in and outside of the church, have relatively negative associations toward God’s law. Some find the letter of the law—particularly the fourth and the tenth commandments—to be irrelevant, ancient relics. Others fear the law, believing that their salvation depends on strict adherence to the Ten Commandments. This week’s lesson looks at various laws in operation at the time of Christ in order to help us set a foundation for a more positive approach to God’s law.

We all need laws in order to enjoy a high quality of life. While some laws, such as those that uphold segregation or slavery, are morally wrong, our man-made laws generally provide security and protection and enable us to lead productive lives. All good civic laws are based on moral concepts and can be traced back to the God of love, the Lawgiver who wants the best for us.

Opening Activity: Ask the class to reflect on the possible results of doing away with all traffic laws (or perhaps property laws). Explore the effects this would have on the quality of life that members would experience. Be sure to highlight the protective quality of laws for everyday life.

Discuss: Why are so many civic laws concerned with the relationships between people? Why are laws needed in relationships?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

Since the time of the Reformation, the key theological concepts of *law* and *grace* have often been set in opposition. To highlight the important message of righteousness by faith, the Reformers (and their heirs) often thought of law in a negative way and emphasized the futility of trying to attain righteousness by accumulating “brownie points” that had to be measured by their compliance with the law. Law and grace were considered to be worlds apart, representing two extremes of a continuum.

Yet, a careful look at the larger biblical picture regarding law and grace reminds us that both terms describe two sides of the same coin and should not be set in opposition. Over the past decades, biblical theologians have recognized that law in both testaments is an expression of God’s will and character that requires careful (and joyful) study and obedient application. In the commentary that follows, we will focus upon several key characteristics of biblical law.

I. Biblical Law Is Wide-Ranging (*Review Psalm 119 with your class.*)

But before we discuss these characteristics, it would be good to remember that “law” in Scripture is not always easily dissected and defined—something that those who are trained in Western logic and reasoning are, nonetheless, prone to attempt. We want to know what kind of law we are talking about and have found labels, such as moral, civil, or ceremonial, to describe law in a particular context. While these divisions may be helpful in some circumstances, they tend to be rather artificial. For one thing, there are numerous Hebrew terms that appear to be interchangeable and that can be translated as “law,” “statute,” “commandment,” “precept,” or any other variation on the theme. Psalm 119, one of the most enthusiastic Old Testament texts focusing upon the law, contains at least eight different Hebrew terms that denote “law” or one of its synonyms. These terms are used interchangeably and in varying combinations throughout the 22 stanzas of this magnificent poem. Writes Old Testament scholar Gordon Wenham: “‘Law’ or ‘instruction’ covers all God’s revelation to Israel, whether it is found in the Pentateuch or other parts of the Bible.”—*Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2012), p. 97. It is so closely linked to God, the Lawgiver, that the psalmist writes about it in Psalm 119:10: “With all my heart I have sought You; do not let me wander from Your commandments” (*NASB*).

Consider This: If straying from God’s commandments means wandering away from God Himself, what can we do to encourage a positive focus upon God’s law?

II. God’s Law Is Good and a Gift to His Creation (*Review Psalm 19:7, 8 with your class.*)

As creation was “good” (or “very good”; compare with *Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31*), so is God’s law characterized by its goodness and perfection. Psalm 119:39 says, “Your ordinances are good” (*NASB*), echoing a similar concept found in Psalm 19:7: “The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple”

(*NIV*). In the Old Testament, goodness and perfection are closely associated with God. Lawgiver and law reflect the same basic characteristics. In this context, it does not matter what kind of law is considered. Since this law (as part of God's eternal expression of His will or spoken into a specific historical context) emanates from God, it is good and a gift to His creation (*Neh. 9:13*). A similar notion is expressed by Paul in Romans 7:12.

Consider This: How can Scripture equate “good gifts” with law?

III. God's Law Defines God's Covenant Community (*Review Romans 9:31 and 10:4 with your class.*)

God's expression of His covenant establishes a people (or, in New Testament terms, a body of believers). These people are characterized by obedience to God's good law. Through the covenant—with its blessings and potential curses—they are adopted into God's family. However, disregard of the covenant conditions results in divine punishment, as the history of Israel amply illustrates. In the New Testament, Paul uses the unique expression the “law of righteousness” in Romans 9:31 (*NASB*). This law does not achieve righteousness but bears witness to the righteousness that is intricately linked to God as Lawgiver and Savior. It provides a taste to those who have sampled it—not bitter or poisonous but sweet and promising a more complete solution.

Consider This: In light of the above, how should we understand the law in Romans 10:4? In your answer, consider the role of a Roman tutor who leads his student.

IV. Law and Life (*Review Leviticus 18:5 and John 10:10 with your class.*)

Living a life that is faithful to the divine law (*torah*) means living life to its fullest. Leviticus 18:5 expresses this notion: “So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD” (*NASB*). This text (and others, such as Ezekiel 18:5–9; Psalm 119:93; and Deuteronomy 30:15, 16) highlights the close link between law and life. Yes, obedience meant life in the Promised Land for Israel, but obedience is closely linked to the Lord Himself and should be connected to Jesus' programmatic statement in John 10:10: “‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’ ” (*NASB*). Obedience, as well as a close relationship to the Lawgiver, is essential for a true authentic life. Obedience does not pay for eternal life but is the experience of those who are already sampling this abundant life in a kingdom that is both here and, yet, still to come.

Consider This: Why are Christians often tempted to try to earn their salvation through keeping the law rather than letting law-keeping be the result

of a vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ, the One who came to give us “abundant life”?

►STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

- ❶ When God originally gave the laws to Moses, He envisioned a state wherein He would be the Head of the government. In what ways are God’s laws and secular states compatible? Explain.
- ❷ Fifty years ago, some behaviors, such as the practice of homosexuality, were seen by societies, at large, as being wrong. Now there seems to be a shift in many societies in which such lifestyle choices are no longer viewed that way. Where does society get a sense of what is moral and amoral?
- ❸ Why do we say that the Ten Commandments are still relevant while we view other laws in the first five books of the Bible as no longer relevant; for example, circumcision on the eighth day? (Hint: Look at the big picture of the relationship between God as the Lawgiver and the law as the expression of His character.)
- ❹ Revelation 12:17 puts obedience to God’s commandments within the context of the final conflict between good and evil. Does keeping the commandments really save this final remnant, or is this just an outward sign of something bigger? Explain your answer.

Application Questions:

- ❶ How should we as Christians react to civil laws that we find irritating or pointless?
- ❷ The rabbis in Jesus’ day tried to ensure that God’s law remained relevant by adding lots of rules. How do we as Seventh-day Adventists show the world how relevant God’s law is without making our own lists of rules—for example, what you can and can’t do on Sabbath? Are all such rules bad?

►STEP 4—Create

Activity: What would be the effects on human relationships and our relationship with God if even one of the Ten Commandments were done away with? Imagine, hypothetically, that a specific commandment were indeed abrogated. What would be the consequences of doing away with that one in particular? What does this activity teach us about the necessity of God’s law in preserving and protecting our happiness and our relationships to others?