

The Law of God *and* the Law of Christ



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 19:16–22; John 13:34, 35; Gal. 6:1–5; Acts 17:31; John 5:30.*

Memory Text: “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love’ ” (*John 15:10, NKJV*).

In most nations a hierarchy of laws exists. At the top are laws that come from the national government and that bind all who reside in the country. Then there are laws on the provincial level that pertain to the inhabitants of certain territories. Finally, local laws govern the smallest districts. Although each division within a country is permitted to make laws that are relevant to its constituents, none can make a law that contradicts the law of the nation. And though circumstances may dictate that a certain law be applied in different ways, the application cannot deviate from the spirit of the law.

As the Supreme Head of the universe, the Creator God has established laws for all of His creatures. When Jesus Christ voluntarily transformed Himself into human flesh, He gave Himself to a life of obedience to His Father (*Phil. 2:5–11*) and to His commandments. Thus, everything that Jesus taught, the perspective that He put on the law, even the “new” commandment that He gave, was always in full harmony with the law of God.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 24.

The Law and the Prophets

Some believe that the Ten Commandments, delivered through Moses at Sinai, were relevant only to the Israelites before the Cross and are not binding in the New Covenant era of grace. Others teach that Christians are free from the old law, but only those of Jewish heritage, and not Christians, are still expected to adhere to it. As we have seen, though the Bible does teach that the works of the law can save no one, no passage gives a person license to violate God’s law. If any did, it would be a license to sin, and the Bible would blatantly contradict itself on a crucial topic.

In this context we remember that God revealed the terms of His covenant to Israel on tablets of stone that contained the law. However, the Bible contains many other commandments that cover details not found in the Decalogue. In seeking a comprehensive understanding of God’s will, the rabbis counted 613 scriptural laws, which they anchored in the Ten Commandments. Jesus appears to go beyond the rabbis when He announces that He has not come to “abolish the law *or the prophets*” (*Matt. 5:17, NRSV; emphasis supplied*). While summarized in the Ten Commandments, the law of God contains every divine command spoken directly to or through His prophets.

Compare Matthew 19:16–22 and 22:34–40. What do these verses tell us about Jesus and the Ten Commandments?

Although there are hundreds of commandments that God has revealed in His Word, the Ten Commandments provide solid principles that can be applied to all other laws. Hence, Jesus mentioned five of the Ten Commandments when speaking to the rich young ruler. There is an even more potent summary of God’s law in the commandments found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, which is to love God and to love one’s neighbor. Jesus declares, “ ‘On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets’ ” (*Matt. 22:40, NKJV*). Ultimately, Jesus and His Father are united in purpose as they urge the people of God’s creation to love as they have been loved, and obedience to the law is foundational to how that love is to be expressed.

What in your life shows your love for God and for your neighbor?

The “Rules” of Love *(John 15:10)*

Scripture provides a number of examples of Jesus’ fidelity to the law of God. For instance, although His words in Luke 2:49 imply that at a young age He understood His identity, when His earthly mother expressed the hurt she felt that resulted from His straying from the family, He humbly accompanied His parents home and “was obedient to them” (*Luke 2:51, NIV*). On another occasion, Jesus refused to bow to Satan when tempted in the wilderness because worship was reserved for God alone (*Luke 4:8*). And there are several illustrations of His Sabbath keeping (*for example, Luke 4:16*). Paul wrote that Jesus’ entire life was based on obedience to God’s will (*Phil. 2:5–11*), and Hebrews says that, although tempted, He never sinned (*Heb. 4:15*). Thus, He could say as He approached His final hours, “ ‘I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love’ ” (*John 15:10, NKJV*).

Read John 13:34, 35. What did Jesus mean by saying that this was a “new” commandment?

Jesus understood that there is a relationship between commandment keeping and love. Though we’re not used to talking about “rules” of love, one could say that, in a real sense, the Ten Commandments are those rules. They show us how God wants us to express our love for Him and others.

God is love (*1 John 4:16*), and so in presenting His commandment to His disciples (*John 13:34, 35*), Jesus is simply amplifying the law of love that originated in His Father (*John 3:16*). Now, though, more than just loving each other as ourselves, we are to love as Jesus loved us.

“At the time when these words were spoken, the disciples could not understand them; but after they had witnessed the sufferings of Christ, after His crucifixion and resurrection, and ascension to heaven, and after the Holy Spirit had rested on them at Pentecost, they had a clearer conception of the love of God and of the nature of that love which they must have for one another.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 547.

With today’s study in mind, read 1 John 3:16. How can we have this kind of love in our own lives? How can we die the kind of death to self that is needed in order for us to express such love?

All Things to All Men

Take a close look at the references to law in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. What is Paul saying here? Why such a strong emphasis on law?

God’s desire is that all people accept His gift of eternal life and become citizens of His everlasting kingdom. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul reveals his method of attracting people to God’s kingdom. He understands that there are cultural barriers that hinder people from making a decision for the gospel. Paul is willing to adapt to the culture of the group to whom he was witnessing for the sole purpose of seeing them saved.

Ultimately, all who become a part of God’s kingdom will be subject to His law. Consequently, those who minister for God must also be in line with God’s will. Paul is quick to state that although he uses innovative methods to reach people, he is always careful to remain under the dictates of God’s law. His desire to see people saved will not allow him to compromise the laws of the God he is asking them to serve. He may adapt to cultural laws, but only if there is no conflict with the ultimate law. The principle that governs his method is the “law of Christ” (*1 Cor. 9:21, NASB*).

We can also understand Paul’s reference to the “law of Christ” as the method that Christ used. It was a method based on love for all people and not for just a select few. Paul does not intend for the law of Christ to be seen as an alternative to the law of God. The two work harmoniously together as the loving law of Christ is used to introduce those saved by grace to the law of a loving God. In fact, the entire section, in which Paul so openly explains all that He is willing to do in order to reach the lost, is a perfect example of the kind of self-sacrificing love that is revealed in the “law of Christ.”

How much self are you willing to deny in order to reach others for Christ? How much self have you already denied in reaching out to others? How much of the “law of Christ” do you follow?

Fulfilling the Law of Christ (Gal. 6:2)

Whether revealed in written documents or in nature, the law of God discloses His will to every person capable of understanding (*Rom. 1:20, 2:12–16*). Consequently, no one can claim to be ignorant of the basic requirements of God. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (*Rom. 3:23, NKJV*) and thus are destined for destruction (*Rom. 6:23, Ezek. 18:4*). However, all is not lost: the curse has been reversed by the gift of eternal life, which has been made available through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (*Eph. 2:8*).

According to Paul, grace should empower the believer to live an obedient life (*Rom. 6:15, Eph. 2:10, Titus 2:11–14*), though, as we all know too well, we don’t always live as obediently and faithfully as we should.

According to Galatians 6:1–5, what is one way to manifest the “law of Christ”?

It is important to remember that everyone is subject to temptation and can submit to sin in moments of weakness. With this recognition, it is insensitive for a person to immediately condemn a fellow Christian who has fallen. Even Jesus, who had never sinned, was willing to assist those who have been overcome by sin. As Ellen G. White wrote of Jesus, “He did not censure human weakness.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 353. Paul admonished Christians to provide assistance for the purpose of restoration (*Gal. 6:1*). In other words, the person who has sinned should be encouraged to abide once again by the precepts of God’s law.

The law of Christ is driven by mercy. Had it not been for His sacrificial death, there would be no reason to keep the law of God. However, because Christ has made eternal life possible, there is an incentive for the faithful to resume keeping God’s law after moments of weakness. Fellow believers should use the law of Christ as a vehicle to transport the repentant sinner back to the arena of God’s law of love.

Think about a time when you messed up and were shown grace, though you didn’t deserve it (after all, if you did deserve it, it wouldn’t be grace). How can you make sure that you remember the grace that you have received the next time that someone needs to beg some grace from you?

Law and Judgment *(John 5:30)*

Although God’s law is a law of mercy, God will eventually use it as the standard of judgment. God has continued to provide opportunities for sinners to repent and pledge loyalty to Him, but the hour is coming when the cry will go out, “ ‘Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy’ ” (*Rev. 22:11, NRSV*). This announcement serves as a prelude to the final judgment.

In Revelation 14:7, the first angel proclaims God’s judgment, though a number of other texts speak of Christ’s judgment (for example, Acts 17:31, 2 Tim. 4:1, 2 Cor. 5:10). How does John 5:30 help us understand the role of Jesus in judgment?

Although Christ had laid aside His divine nature when He became human (*Phil. 2:5–11*), He still had a special relationship with the Father. When the religious leaders accused Him of blasphemy, He informed His accusers that God had given Him authority to fulfill specific divine tasks (*John 5:19–30*), one of which was judgment. The fact that Christ has been assigned the responsibility of judgment demonstrates the mercy of God. Because Christ has become one with the human race, He is in a position to judge impartially. Given His familiarity with the human experience, Christ would not condemn a person unjustly. In fact, Christ suggests that condemnation does not come from Him, but that the unrepentant sinner condemns himself when he refuses to heed the command of God (*John 12:48*).

Many are familiar with the content of God’s law but don’t know how to keep it. The law is not a checklist we use to see how close we are to the kingdom; instead, it is an instrument that expresses various principles of love. Fulfilling the law does not mean that we obey it to gain personal favor with God, but it beckons each Christian to share the love of God with those who need it. As the standard of judgment, the law serves to measure the level of love that the individual has shared with God and humanity. When Christ presides over the final judgment, He will use God’s unchanging law of love as the standard by which to judge (*James 2:12*).

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Church Discipline,” pp. 260–264; “‘Consider One Another,’” pp. 265, 266, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7.

“‘Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.’ Here, again, our duty is plainly set before us. How can the professed followers of Christ so lightly regard these inspired injunctions? . . .

“We know but little of our own hearts, and have but little sense of our own need of the mercy of God. This is why we cherish so little of that sweet compassion which Jesus manifests toward us, and which we should manifest toward one another. We should remember that our brethren are weak, erring mortals, like ourselves. Suppose that a brother has through unwatchfulness been over-borne by temptation, and contrary to his general conduct has committed some error; what course shall be pursued toward him? We learn from Bible history that men whom God had used to do a great and good work committed grave sins. The Lord did not pass these by unrebuked, neither did he cast off his servants. When they repented, he graciously forgave them, and revealed to them his presence, and wrought through them. Let poor, weak mortals consider how great is their own need of pity and forbearance from God and from their brethren. Let them beware how they judge and condemn others.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, January 25, 1883.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Reflect on the above two paragraphs from *Signs of the Times*. Why is it so important that we bestow grace on those who fall into sin?
- 2 Think about some well-known Bible characters who fell into sin, whom God was yet able to forgive and continue to use. What important lesson is there for us in these examples?
- 3 In what ways can we enforce church discipline while at the same time showing grace and mercy toward those among us who fall into sin? Why should we see the two concepts, discipline and grace, as not being in contradiction with each other?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *John 15:10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that God’s law in its entirety is based on the principle of love.

Feel: Be assured in the knowledge that Jesus is both our Savior and Judge.

Do: Demonstrate love to God and others in all of life’s dealings.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Law and Grace Are Two Sides of the Same Coin.

A Jesus kept His Father’s law and remained in His love (*John 15:10*). Do I have to keep God’s law to remain in His love?

B For whom are the Ten Commandments applicable?

C How can the law serve to measure the level of love that an individual has shared with God and humans?

D How is Jesus’ “new” commandment (*John 13:34*) a revalidation of an old commandment (*Lev. 19:34*)? How is it new?

II. Feel: The Judge Is Our Friend.

A What are the “rules” of love?

B How do you feel about Jesus being your Judge (*John 5:22*)?

III. Do: Love Must Be Demonstrated.

A In what two guiding principles of action did Jesus summarize the Ten Commandments?

B Why is loving others as Jesus loved us more than just loving each other as we love ourselves (*John 13:34*)?

C How can we find practical ways of showing our love for God and others in our church family, community, and personal relationships?

D How can we enforce church discipline while showing grace and mercy?

► **Summary:** Everything that Jesus taught, including the “new” commandment that He gave, was in full harmony with the law of God.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *John 15:10*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God’s law is the unchanging law of love that has always been and will always be the divine standard for judgment.

Just for Teachers: The idea that the Ten Commandments were given only to the Jews and are no longer necessary in the Christian era is a popular but unbiblical theological position. Some say that Christians are not bound to the Ten Commandments but only to Jesus’ “new commandment” of loving one another. This week’s study highlights the fact that the Ten Commandments were given by Christ (as part of the Trinity) on Sinai and that they form the standard by which we can measure love to God and one another.

A little boy once came home with a gift for his mother. He loved her very much and wanted to give her something special. He had left very early in the morning and spent the whole day looking for it. And now he had found it. He came home and proudly presented his mother with—a big green frog! The mother screamed, and then, realizing that this was a gift of love, hugged her son. The boy had great intentions, but as he matures, he is going to have to learn to express his love in actions and words that others will understand. He will have to learn to speak their love language.

Gary Chapman, the author of several books on the five love languages, writes, “Love is not a solo experience. Love requires both a lover and a responder. If God is the divine lover, why do not all of His creatures feel His love? Perhaps because some are looking in the wrong direction.” —*The Love Languages of God* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2002), p. 13. Part of the problem is that we often define love as just a wonderful feeling. Feelings never can form the basis for a loving relationship. The relationship must be built on choices that show themselves in action. God’s law is a reflection of who He is and reminds us of the fact that God is love. Jesus came to show God’s love in action. Jesus showed the validity of God’s eternal law by living it out and reinforcing it in His teachings.

Opening Activity: (If the class is large, you may want to divide it into smaller groups to give each member a chance to give an answer.) What is your love language? What would you most like as an expression of love: a gift, words of encouragement, some quality time, practical help, or physical touch? How can you experience God’s love for you in your love language?

Discuss: If God is love and His character is expressed in His law, then what is God’s love language? How can we learn to speak His love language?

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. The Greatest Command (*Review Matthew 22:35–40 and Deuteronomy 6:5 with your class.*)

Throughout His life, Jesus consistently validated the Ten Commandments. When one of the religious experts asks Him to name the greatest commandment of the law, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5, part of the *Shema* pronouncement offered by every Jew when he or she would read Scripture and worship the Lord (*Matt. 22:35–40*). Jesus knew that this was a trick question meant to “test” the upstart Rabbi and, in the minds of the religious leadership of the time, would hopefully provide a quote or statement that could be used against Him. “ ‘ “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” ’ ” is a great reminder of our all-encompassing allegiance to the Creator who made us and redeemed us—and is worthy of our adoration (*Luke 10:27, NKJV*).

Consider This: What does the reference to heart, soul, and mind tell us about human nature?

II. Old Testament Roots (*Review Matthew 22:39 and Leviticus 19:18 with your class.*)

Jesus also quotes another text from the Old Testament that comes second but needs to be set on par with the one already quoted, at least according to Jesus (*Matt. 22:39*). “ ‘ “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, *but you shall love your neighbor as yourself*; I am the LORD” ’ ” (*Lev. 19:18, NASB; italics added*). Both quotes from the Pentateuch summarize the essence and foundation of the Ten Commandments without setting one commandment over or against another. While the first four commandments emphasize our commitment and relationship to God (in other words, a vertical dimension), the last six highlight the principles of horizontal relations, or how we deal and live in a divinely ordained manner with the people around us.

It is intriguing to note that Jesus’ quote from Leviticus 19 really emphasizes the entire law, a fact that would not have been lost on the rabbis and scribes. As noted by many scholars and Bible students, Leviticus 19 describes holy living and divinely ordained ethics, and it does so by mixing all three categories of biblical law: moral, civil, and ceremonial. The rationale for living a holy life

appears right at the outset of the chapter: “ ‘You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy’ ” (vs. 2, *NASB*). Numerous times, an abbreviated version (“I am the LORD your God”) appears in the chapter. All Ten Commandments are referenced in the chapter, at times repeatedly, as the following table illustrates. (The table is based on Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus*, The New American Commentary, vol. 3A [Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000], p. 252.)

Exodus 20	Leviticus 19
I am the LORD (vs. 2)	Verses 3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 25, 28, 30–32, 34, 37
Graven images (vss. 4–6)	Verse 4
God’s name in vain (vs. 7)	Verse 12
Sabbath (vss. 8–11)	Verses 3, 30
Honor parents (vs. 12)	Verse 3
Murder (vs. 13)	Verse 16
Adultery (vs. 14)	Verse 29
Stealing (vs. 15)	Verses 11, 13, 35, 36
False witness (vs. 16)	Verses 11, 16
Coveting (vs. 17)	Verse 18

Leviticus 19 highlights the holistic nature of Old Testament law, integrating all types of law and emphasizing holy living. Jesus’ reference to both vertical and horizontal dimensions of love reaffirms the basic layout of the Ten Commandments.

Consider This: Why would Jesus, when asked which law is the greatest, not pick out one particular law? Why does Jesus quote texts that seem to be more foundational than specific?

III. Jesus’ Interpretation of Law (Review 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Romans 10:4 with your class.)

While Jesus reaffirmed over and over the divine law, there is also something fresh to His way of expounding Scripture. The Sermon on the Mount contains many examples of these fresh explanations. In His final antithesis in Matthew 5, Jesus quotes from Leviticus 19:18 and then adds a section that is not found in Scripture (“and hate your enemy” [*Matt. 5:43*]). Most likely, Jesus is not only referring to a biblical quotation but adding to the positive love command a negative hate addition that may have been prevalent in the theology of His days. Interestingly, a similar concept is known from the writings of the Qumran community that represents the thinking of some Jews living prior to and during the time of Jesus.

In His antithesis, Jesus extends the love command of Leviticus 19:18 to include not only the neighbor. He specifically mentions love for enemies and prayer for those who persecute us. Again, Jesus highlights the attitude that the original law had envisioned and makes the implicit explicit. After all, we all have people around us who may not always “love” us. Does this reflect a major difference between the “Law of God” and the “Law of Christ”? Yes, and no. Christ’s antithesis, besides marking Him as the Lawgiver, provides a new and challenging angle that should bring us to the foot of the cross. Who of us is able to love our enemies or pray for those who torment and persecute us? While this is nearly humanly impossible, we are invited to come to the Savior and be transformed into a new creation (*2 Cor. 5:17*). The law becomes the tutor and guide that points to the Savior (*Rom. 10:4*).

Consider This: Why would Jesus add “and hate your enemy” in Matthew 5:43? If Jesus and the Father are one (*see John 17*), why would there be a difference between the laws of God and the laws of Jesus? What does the doctrine of the Trinity contribute toward the answer to this question?

►STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

- 1 How would saying that the law was not binding in the New Covenant era of grace be, in effect, giving us a license to sin?
- 2 How did Paul use the “law [of] Christ” as an outreach tool (*1 Cor. 9:21*)?
- 3 Jesus as part of the Trinity was involved in the giving of the law at Sinai; so, the law of Christ is really a revalidation of the law of God with one additional clause. What is significant about this addition (*John 13:34*)?

Application Questions:

- 1 Why do you need to “ ‘love the LORD your God’ ” first, before you love “ ‘your neighbor as yourself’ ” (*Luke 10:27, NKJV*)?
- 2 How can God’s law be the way that love for God and humanity is to be expressed?
- 3 What is the connection between commandment keeping and love?
- 4 Can I love others if I feel unloved? How?

►STEP 4—Create

Activity: Based on the different types of love languages (words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, acts of service, physical touch), brainstorm practical ways in which your class can show God’s love in your community.