

IS THE LAW

Sin?

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"Is the law sin?" A strange question! How could anything that God made be evil?

Stranger still, the question is stated, not by us, but by Paul (see Romans 7:7) during his discussion of the Christian life (Romans chapters 6-8).

His immediate reply comes next: "God forbid" (KJV), or "Certainly not!" (NIV)

Earlier Paul had written a cryptic statement which offers a clue to his doctrine: "the strength of sin is the law" (1 Corinthians 15:56 KJV). Let it be noted that both the question of Romans 7 and this comment use the present tense. He is talking about the law in the Christian era, not the past Jewish age.

The Question Is Important

J. I. Packer suggests a reason why the Apostle's standpoint is so important:

There have always been those who have claimed that if the Spirit indwells you and the motive of love is strong within you, you do not need to study God's law in Scripture in order to learn his will, for you will always be made immediately aware in every situation what it is that he wants. (J.I. Packer, *Keep in Touch with the Spirit*, p.166)

Falling Off the Horse

Men have not improved since the day that Luther declared we were all like a drunken peasant, prone to fall off our steed on one side or the other. Legalism and antinomianism are the options for the uninformed and careless Christian.

For those who know the gospel, it is a blessed truth that they are not under law as a covenant. They are not under any sort of law, including New Testament commandments (such as the Sermon on the Mount), for acceptance with God.

Love Me, Keep My Commandments

It remains a testing truth for all Christians, however, that obedience to Christ is the evidence of the free gift of

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some undo by overdoing.*

*To Luther's horror, his friend, John
Agricola, taught that Christians are in
every sense free from the Ten
Commandments. John wrongly
thought that belief in justification by
faith overturned the need for law.*

justification. Our Lord said, "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me" (John 14:21).

And in case we err by thinking he is proposing an altogether new guide for duty, he also affirmed, "I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love" (John 15:10).

Didn't Jesus Know?

When questioning the sincerity of the rich young ruler, Christ pointed him to the Decalogue, saying, "This do, and thou shalt live" (Luke 10:19).

Didn't Christ know that no man or woman could ever EARN eternal life that way?

Of course he did.

But he also knew that only when a believer's vision is focused on the known will of God can his or her shortcomings be covered by the imputed merits of Christ.

None Better Than Bunyan

No man has ever known the gospel better than John Bunyan. He put the words in Christian's mouth to rebuke Formalist and Hypocrisy: "I walk by the Rule of My Master, you walk by the rude working of your fancies" (*The Pilgrim's Progress*, page 40).

The saintly Samuel Rutherford often warned similarly:

If the law in the heart be the only Rule that obliges a Christian, it must oblige as it stirreth and moveth us; then when it stirs or works not, it is no Rule; and if so, in all the sins committed by Christians, be they never so heinous, the Christian sins not; for he goes against no Law, or any obliging Commandment. (Survey, part 1, p. 225, cited by Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law*, p. 197)

Duty Is Not Always Obvious

Most Christians believe that the pillars of duty stand out like mountains. The problem is not knowing WHAT ought to be done, but being sufficiently motivated to DO what they KNOW.

But the real test may be when duty does not stand out that

clearly, and one is forced to give God the benefit of the doubt.

Theologians have always felt that this is the way God tests men and women—not by the obvious, but by such instances as involve faith and discernment.

Nothing but God's Word

What was there in Eden to show our first parents that there was a good reason for God to select one tree as sacred?

Nothing but his word.

There are warnings in the Scripture to help save us from unintentional transgression. Our Lord clearly says that duty is not determined by human tradition and that, “every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up” (Matthew 15:13). “But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:9).

Don't Follow Men

In Colossians we find a series of warnings against following human direction for our conduct.

I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. (2:4 NIV)

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition. (2:8)

Therefore do not let anyone judge you. (2:16)

The Today's English Version (TEV) is an excellent translation of Colossians 2:16, “So let no one make rules . . .” for the Greek verb here means “distinguish” or “decree” or “ordain.”

Again the TEV has grasped the essential meaning when in verses 22 and 23 it says:

They are only man-made rules and teachings. Of course, such rules appeared to be based on wisdom . . . but they have no real value.... (Colossians 2:22–23 TEV)

Both Testaments warn strictly against obeying human customs rather than “the law and the testimony.” See also Isaiah 29:13.

What Goes Around Comes Around

The two special charges made against the apostle Paul—the charges of antinomianism (anti-law) and legalism—are today being made again against some of us who preach the gospel.

In response to the charge of antinomianism, Paul asked, “Do we make void the law through faith?” (Romans 3:31 KJV); and, “Shall we continue in sin, then, that grace may abound?” (Romans 6:1).

If such charges are not also made against modern gospel teachers, it is certain that they are not properly presenting the gospel.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

How careful the apostle was to answer both charges. Especially in Romans 6 to 8, we find his detailed answer, as he steers a narrow course between Scylla and Charybdis.¹

Paul does not surrender one breath or particle of the message of grace, but he makes it clear that his devotion to God's revealed will is absolute.

Steering this delicate course is no easy task.²

Mission Impossible

In Romans 6, Paul says it is impossible for someone who is truly converted to knowingly pursue a course of known sin.

We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? (Romans 6:1 NIV)

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. (Verses 6–7)

Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. (Verse 12)

For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. (Verse 14)

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace. By no means! (Verse 15)



Freed from Law's Threats

In the following chapter, chapter 7, Paul says that by virtue of our faith-union with Christ in his death, we now have a new relationship to law. Law can no longer condemn us. And thus freed from law's threats, we are married to Christ and bring forth the fruit of holiness (see 7:1–4).

Next he traces his own experience with the law—as seen by him in the light of the Cross. He had no known sin but by the law. “For apart from law, sin is dead” (Romans 7:8).

And he concludes: “So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous, and good” (7:12). And in verse 14, he calls the law spiritual.

Furthermore, Paul describes the Spirit-filled new covenant life as one in which “the righteousness of the law might be [is] fulfilled in us” (Romans 8:4 KJV). Later in the same book, he quotes several of the commandments of the Decalogue as he counsels Christians about behavior (13:9).

The Law's Role: New and Improved

The will of God must never be limited to the Decalogue which is but a thumbnail sketch of the character of God and the ideal human worshipper. Even for ancient Israel it was necessary that the Ten Commandments be elaborated with judgments and statutes which applied the Ten to their national needs.

Similarly, in the Gospels and the Epistles, we have the divine principles interpreted for the Christian church. Christ and the Apostles have replaced Moses but not dishonored him.

We now obey according to the spirit, not the letter, of duty. The spirit of duty always means deeper not shallower service, more and never less.

Principles Taken for Granted

It is true that some moral obligations are NOT spelled out in detail in the New Testament, but they are always present in principle.

For example, the Gospels give no detailed legislation regarding incest, and but for the licentious Corinthian rebuked in 1 Corinthians 5, the Epistles would be similarly lacking. Yet the sacredness of family relationships is emphasized, though not detailed.

Some truths the early Christians took for granted—and with good reason. Nowhere do we find in the New Testament the forbidding of the making of images. (Keep in mind that the Decalogue makes a distinction between worshipping of other gods and making representations of them.) So the second commandment is never found in the New Testament, but it is assumed throughout.

Similarly, in the doctrinal realm, some truths such as the Virgin Birth are taken for granted rather than repeatedly restated.

Tests of Loyalty

Christ's commandments included the commands to baptize and keep the Lord's Supper. Neither of these is saving in an absolute sense. The thief on the cross was never baptized; nor did he keep the Lord's Supper. Both these practices accompany salvation; they show our loyalties, but do not contribute to our salvation.

Likewise, Sabbath-keeping, instituted in the Old Testament and taken for granted in the New, does not contribute to our salvation, but is a test of loyalty.

Our Witness to Those of Other Faiths

Here in the USA, there are many who worship without Christian assumptions. Their religious backgrounds may spring from the Middle or Far East. Should we abstain from practicing our faith lest we offend people of other faiths?

We know the answer is obvious. To fail to live up to our beliefs would dishonor God and rob our neighbors of our true witness to Christianity.

What About Our Witness to Other Christians

Likewise, should we pursue any Christian obligation recognized by us yet not by other Christians?

A question arises particularly in respect to the seventh-day Sabbath. Some ask, "Will not Sabbath-honoring be perceived by some as creating a wall between us and fellow Christians?"

The answer must be the same as when we ask about our witness to non-Christian neighbors: Neither fear nor favor should lead a believer to swerve from duty, though all must be done in love and humility.

Paul said he hesitated not to declare the WHOLE counsel of God (Acts 20:27). Should we do less?

A Counterfeit Month

There is a fascinating story in the Old Testament, included for our admonition. Jeroboam wished to divert the people of Judah from worshipping Yahweh, so he instituted a festival in the eighth month as a counterfeit of the one divinely appointed for the seventh month. Having thus instituted "a month of his own choosing" (1 Kings 12:33 NIV), he next offered his own

sacrifices on his own altar at Bethel.

But the succeeding chapter tells of divine judgment, beginning with the shriveling of the hand of the king and the destruction of his altar.

Worship Choices Matter

Is God really so fussy about our religious choices? Read Matthew 23 for the most searing curses ever uttered by a religious man to religious men. Christ scathingly dressed down those who were the most rigorous people on earth in matters of worship. "You . . . white-washed tombs" (Matthew 23:27).

Compare Christ's warning words with this story:

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."

When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. (Acts 5:1–11)

As for Me and My House

Before all else fails, let us follow the directions.

Nothing we can do can ever make God love us more. Nothing we can do can make God love us less.


Because of that, our response should be to please God in everything he asks.

Footnotes

1. In Greek mythology, Orpheus steers carefully between Scylla and Charybdis, two perilous rocks that threaten to sink his ship.

2. Many have wrestled with the paradox that the law is both described as abolished and not abolished in the writings of Paul. (See Ephesians 2:15 and Romans 3:31; the Greek verb is the same in both texts.)

The solution, in essence, is that the whole Jewish system is



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abolished as a system of condemning power, as an unauthorized means of salvation by works, and as something both immature and preparatory. But the way of love to God and man set out in the Decalogue could never be abolished as a standard of holiness and a revelation of duty.

One of the greatest theologians of recent centuries, Patrick Fairbairn, wrote the classic work on this topic, and we append some illuminating comments from his pen:

The history of Israel knows nothing of law except in connection with promise and blessing. It was as the Redeemer of Israel that God spake the words—as in a special sense Israel's God ('I am Jehovah thy God')—a relation which, we have our Lord's explicit testimony for asserting, carries in its bosom the dowry of life eternal; so that grace here also took precedence of law, life of righteousness; and the covenant of law, assuming and rooting itself in the prior covenant of grace, only came to shut the heirs of promise up to that course of dutiful obedience toward God, and brotherly kindness toward each other, by which alone they could accomplish the higher ends of their calling. In *form* merely was there anything new in this, not in *principle*. For what else was involved in the command given to Abraham, at the establishment of the covenant of promise, to have it sealed with the ordinance of circumcision the symbol of a

sanctified nature and a holy life? Nay, even before that, the same thing in effect was done, when the Lord appeared to Abraham and said, 'I am the Almighty God, walk before me and be thou perfect,'—a word which (as Cocceius justly observes) was comprehensive of all true service and righteous behavior. [Patrick Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture* (1957), p. 161]

Consider, first, how the Christian scheme of doctrine and duty was adjusted, under the hand of the apostles, with reference to things of a ceremonial nature—to a *law of ordinances*? and, secondly, what relation it bore to the great revelation of *moral law*?

I. As regards the former of these relations, the way had been made, so far at least, comparatively plain by Christ Himself: the law of ordinances, as connected with the old covenant, now ceased to have any binding authority. The hour had come when the Temple-worship, with every ceremonial institution depending on it, should pass away, having reached their destined end in the death and resurrection of Christ. Not immediately, however, did this truth find its way into the minds even of the apostles, nor could it obtain a footing in the church without express and stringent legislation.

Now Jew and Gentile were on a footing as regards the

blessings of Christ's salvation; that, as a matter of course, the observances of the ancient ritual had ceased in God's sight to be of any practical avail.

The cycle of Christian instruction on the subject was completed by the explanation given in the epistle to the Hebrews of the general nature and design of the Old Testament ritual, as at once fulfilled and abolished in Christ. [*Ibid.*, pp. 254-256]

We never find the evangelists and apostles thrusting baptismal services into the foreground, as if through such ministrations they expected the vital change to be produced, but first preaching the Gospel, and then, when this had come with power into the heart, recognizing and confirming the result by the administration of the ordinance. [*Ibid.*, p. 265]

The most distinguishing characteristic of the Gospel dispensation undoubtedly is its prominent exhibition of grace, as connected with the mediatorial work of Christ. The great salvation has come; and, in consequence, sins are not merely pretermitted to believers, as in former times, through the forbearance of God, but fully pardoned through the blood of the Lamb, freedom of access is gained for them into the presence of God, and the gift of the Spirit to abide with them, and work in them much more copiously than had been done before. But there is a gradation only, not a contrast; and as under the Old Covenant the law-giving, was also the loving God, so under the New, the loving God is also the law-giving. [*Ibid.*, pp. 272-273]

Paul, who in a very peculiar manner was the representative and herald of the grace that is in Christ, is, if possible, still more express: 'Ye have been called to liberty,' says he to the Galatians, 'only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another; for all the law is fulfilled in one word—in this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,—plainly identifying the love binding upon Christians with the love enjoined in the law. The same use is made by him of the fifth commandment of the Decalogue, in the Epistle to the Ephesians, when urging the duty of obedience to parents. And in the Epistle to the Romans, when the course of thought has brought him to the enforcement of vital godliness and the duties of a Christian life, the reference made to the perfection and abiding authority of the written law is even more full and explicit; for he gives it as the characteristic of the spiritual mind, that it assents to the law as 'holy and just and good,' and 'serves it;' while of the carnal mind he says, 'it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.' And when speaking of Christian obligation in its varied manifestations of kindness between man and man, he sums up the whole, first in the specific precepts of the Decalogue, and then in the all-embracing precept of loving one's neighbor as one's self.

I should reckon it next to impossible for any one of unbiased mind—with no peculiar theory to support—with no desire of any kind, but that of giving a fair and natural interpretation to the teaching of Scripture—to weigh calmly the series of statements now adduced, and to derive from them any other impression than this—that the

moral law, as revealed in the Old Testament, had with the apostles of our Lord a recognized place in the Christian church, and was plainly set forth by them as the grand test of excellence, and the authoritative rule of life. [*Ibid.*, pp. 274-275]

The Israelites were strictly a representative people; they were chosen from among mankind, as in the name of mankind, to hear that law of God, which revealed his righteousness for their direction and obedience; and through this came in connection with another revelation, a covenant of promise through which life and blessing were to be obtained, yet, considered by itself, it brought out before them, and charged upon their consciences, the sum of all moral obligation whatever is due from men as men, as moral and responsible beings, to God himself, and to their fellow-men.

But the law could only demand the right, could not secure the performance of it; it could condemn sin, but not prevent its commission, which, by reason of the weakness of flesh, and the heart's innate tendency to alienation from God, continued still to proceed in the face of the commends and threatenings of law:—so that the law, in its practical working, necessarily came to stand over against men as a righteous creditor with claims of justice which had not been satisfied, and deserved retributions of judgment which were ready to be executed. In this respect, it had to be taken out of the way, got rid of or abolished, in a manner consistent with the moral government of God—its curse for committed sin borne—and its right to lord it over men to condemnation and death brought to an end. It is this great question—a question which only primarily concerned the Jews, as having been the direct recipients of the revelation of law, but in which all men as sinners were alike really interested—that the apostle chiefly treats in the larger proportion of the passages recently referred to. It is of the law in this point of view, that he speaks of it as a minister of death—of believers being no longer married to it or under it—yea, of their being dead to it, dead through the law itself to the law and of the law being consequently removed as a barrier between them and the favor and blessing of God. And he was led to do so the rather because of the deep-rooted and prevailing tendency of the time to look at the law by itself—apart from the covenant of promise and to find in obedience to its commands a title to life and blessing. This, the apostle argues, is utterly to mistake its meaning and pervert its design. Taken so, the law works wrath, not peace; instead of delivering from sin, it is itself the very sting of sin; hence brings not blessing, but a curse; not life, but condemnation; and never till men renounce confidence in their deeds of law, and lay hold of the hope set before them in him who for sinners has satisfied its just demands, and made reconciliation for iniquity, can they obtain deliverance from fear and guilt, and enter into life. Thus Christ becomes 'the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth:' in him alone it reaches its proper aim as regards the interests of righteousness, for he has perfectly fulfilled its commands, in death as well as life has honored its claims: and this not for himself properly, but for those who through faith join themselves to him, and become

partakers, both in the work of righteousness he has accomplished, and the spirit of righteousness he puts into their hearts.

Such, briefly, is the import of that class of statements in Paul's writings; and in this sense only do they warrant us to speak of the moral law being done away, or of our having been set free from it. [*Ibid.*, pp. 277-279]

But there was another respect in which the position of Israel is to be considered, one in which it was peculiar, since, according to it, they occupied a particular, and that a comparatively early, place in the history of the Divine dispensations. In this respect, the revelation of law had a prominence given to it which was also peculiar, which was adapted only to the immature state to which it belonged, and was destined to undergo a change which the more perfect state of things had come. Considered in this point of view, the law must be taken in its entire compass, with the Decalogue, indeed, as its basis, yet with this not in its naked elements and standing alone, but, for the sake of greater prominence and stringency, made the terms of a covenant; and not only so, but, even while linked to a prior covenant of grace, associated with pains and penalties which, in the case of deliberate transgression, admitted of no suspension of repeal—associated, moreover, with a complicated system of rites and ordinances which were partly designed to teach and enforce upon men's minds its great principles and obligations of moral duty, and partly to provide the means of escape from the guilt incurred by their imperfect fulfillment or their occasional violation. It was in this complex form that the law was imposed upon Israel, and interwoven with the economical arrangements under which, as a people, they were placed. It is in that form that it was appointed to serve the design of an educational or pedagogical institute, preparatory to the introduction of Gospel times; and in the same form only that Paul, in various places—especially in the Epistle to the Galatians, also in Ephesians 2:14-17; Colossians 2:14-23—contended for its having been displaced or taken out of the way by the work of Christ. In all the passages the moral law is certainly included in the system of enactment spoken of, but still always in the connection now mentioned—as part and parcel of a disciplinary yoke, a pedagogy suited only to the season of comparative childhood, therefore falling into abeyance with the arrival of a manhood condition. And the necessity of this change, it will be observed, he presses with special reference, not to the strictly moral part of the law, but to the subsidiary rules and observances with which it was associated—the value of which, as to their original design, ceased with the introduction of the Gospel. His view was, not that men were disposed to make more of the Decalogue, or of the two great commandments of love, than he thought altogether proper—precisely the reverse: it was, because they were allowing the mere temporary adjuncts, and ritualistic accompaniments of these fundamental requirements, to overshadow their importance, and pave the way for substituting a formal and fictitious pietism for true godliness and virtue. And hence to prevent, as far as possible, any misunderstanding of his meaning, he does not close the epistles in question without pointing in the

most explicit terms to the simply moral demands of the law as now, not less than formerly, binding on the consciences of men. [*Ibid.*, pp. 280-281]

He who is replenished with this spirit of life and love, no longer has the law standing over him, but, as with Christ in his work on earth, it lives in him, and he lives in it; the work of the law is written on his heart, and its spirit is transfused into his life. 'The man (it has been justly said) who is truly possessor of "the spirit of life in Christ Jesus," *cannot* have any other gods but his Father in heaven; *cannot* commit adultery; *cannot* bear false witness; *cannot* kill; *cannot* steal.'

Christ's cross, then, delivers Christians from what may be termed moral drudgery; they are not oppressed and pined serfs, but freemen and fellow-heirs, serving the Lord Christ with all gladness of heart. It magnifies the law and makes it honorable, yet delivers those who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior from the bondage of the letter. Instead of throwing the commandments into contempt, it gave them a higher moral status, and even Sinai itself becomes shorn of its greatest terrors when viewed from the elevation of the cross. Love was really the reason of the law, though the law looked like an expression of anger. We see this, now that we love more; love is the best interpreter of God, for God is love.'

Thus it is that the Gospel secures liberty, and, at the same time, guards against licentiousness. [*Ibid.*, pp. 282-283]

We merely sum up in a few closing sentences what the church is entitled to hold respecting the still abiding use of the law. (1.) Though not by any means the sole, it yet is the formal, authoritative teacher of the eternal distinctions between right and wrong in conduct; the special instrument, therefore, for keeping alive in men's souls a sense of duty. Nothing has yet occurred in the history of mankind which can with any show of reason be said to supersede this use of the moral law.

(2.) The law, as the measure of moral excellence and commanded duty, provides what is needed to work conviction of shortcomings and sins—by looking steadfastly into which, men may come to be sensible of the deep corruption of their natures, their personal inability to rectify the evil, their guilt and danger, so that they may betake for refuge to where alone it can be found—in the blood and Spirit of Christ. The experience of the apostle must be ever repeating itself anew, 'I had not known sin but by the law;' 'Through the law I am dead to the law, that I might live unto God.' Thus we come to the practical knowledge of our case; and 'to know ourselves diseased is half our cure.' (3.) Finally, the imperfections too commonly cleaving to the work of grace in the redeemed, call for a certain coercive influence of law even for them. If it has not the function to discharge for such which it once had, it still has a function, there being so little of that perfect love which casteth out fear, and fear being needed to awe where love has failed to inspire and animate. [*Ibid.*, pp. 289-291]

