



Fourth Sunday of Easter
Light of Christ Anglican Church
The Rt. Rev. John A. M. Guernsey
May 8, 2022

The Purpose of the Law

Text: [Acts 13:14b–16, 26–39](#)

In our reading from the Book of Acts, we hear the Apostle Paul explaining the Gospel and he emphasizes that in Jesus, who died on the Cross and rose again from the dead, that we can be forgiven from our sins and be set free, set free in a way that the Jewish law could never do.

He said,

Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

And that drives his listeners—and us—to wonder about this question: Then just what is the purpose of God’s law? If God’s law can’t save us, if God’s law can’t bring us forgiveness and freedom, then what good is the law?

In Scripture and in our worship, we told again and again to honor and obey God’s Law. Jesus said that he didn’t come to abolish the Law; he came to fulfill it. And yet at the same time, Christians know that we’re not saved by being good enough, we are saved by what Jesus has done for us by dying in our place on the Cross.

And so, some Christians ask, “Haven’t we been freed from the law? Aren’t we saved by grace? And if we are free from God’s law, does that mean we

don't have to obey his law? If I am saved only by what Christ has done and not by what I do, why should I try to live a holy life? Do I have to keep God's law, and if so, why?"

Those are great questions! In fact, once you've put your trust in Jesus, there isn't a more practical question than: what is my relationship to the law of God? Because that question will enable us to answer a lot of other questions about how to live: How do I treat my spouse? Can I cheat on my spouse or cheat on my taxes? How do I respond when someone hurts me, or when I hurt someone else? How should I spend my money? All those questions hang on my relationship with God's law.

The Apostle Paul says in [Romans 13](#) that love is the fulfilling of the law. But does that mean that if you are loving you're free to disregard the Ten Commandments? That's what a lot of contemporary voices are arguing.

Prominent evangelical megachurch pastor, Andy Stanley, son of the famous preacher, Charles Stanley, has argued in sermons and his book that the Gospel needs to be "unhitched" from the Old Testament. He says we need to leave the Old Testament behind and move on without it. He even said in his sermon that he thought about putting up a slide that read, "Thou shalt not obey the Ten Commandments." He doesn't argue that we should violate the Ten Commandments. But he is saying that we must not follow them as authoritative for our beliefs or our ethics.

And what about the church billboard Meg and I saw in North Carolina along Interstate 40 advertising a church that claimed it had "No rules. Just Jesus." Is that the Gospel? Is it enough to say we're all about "love"?

No, it's not! That is not at all what the Scriptures teach!

So what is the proper role of the Old Testament law for us and for our lives?

For example, in discussions about human sexuality you sometimes hear someone argue that since the Old Testament forbids the eating of shellfish and yet we eat crabs and scallops, it must be OK to violate Old Testament teaching about sexual morality. That argument is made not only on TV talk shows and in major newspapers, but in the church and by clergy who ought to know better. The shellfish argument sounds pretty convincing to many folks. What is the right Christian response?

It comes down to a proper Christian view of the Law. You see, there are three different types of Old Testament law.

- . The first kind of law is the Moral law. This includes the Ten Commandments. The Moral law is still binding on Christians. After all, Jesus himself quotes the Ten Commandments and makes it clear that they are still in force.
- . The second kind of Old Testament law is Civil law, laws that govern day to day life in society. My ox strays into your field and I must make restitution in a particular way. Christians have always understood that civil authorities in each society are free to follow or change Old Testament civil laws as they think best.
- . The third kind of Old Testament law is the Ceremonial or ritual law. This includes laws about the offering of animals for sin, and the dietary laws. These are not to be followed by Christians! The ceremonial laws which demanded the offering of animals were replaced by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. We don't confess our sins, pronounce God's absolution and then say, "Let's go outside to the parking lot and sacrifice a goat just to make sure we're forgiven!" That would obviously undermine the teaching that Jesus was the full and perfect sacrifice for sin. And as for the dietary laws, [Mark](#)

[7:19](#) says that Jesus himself declared all foods to be clean. And that's why we eat shellfish, but still obey the Ten Commandments.

The fact that there are three different kinds of Old Testament law has been understood by Christians for many centuries. In our Anglican tradition, this principle is taught clearly in Article VII of the [39 Articles of Religion](#), and by other historic Christian traditions, as well.

Sometimes we 21st century Americans think we're so smart that we're the first people to ask such questions. But the Church has long known these issues and taught God's answers.

But if God's moral Law is still relevant for contemporary Christians, what purpose does it serve?

The Apostle Paul says the Law was given because of sin. Jesus said that none of us keeps the law, but Paul explains that one surprising purpose of the Law is actually to increase sin.

In [Romans Chapter 5](#), Paul tells us, *"The law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace increased all the more..."*

What a strange idea: the Law was given in order to increase the trespass, to increase sin!

Let me unpack that.

There are 4 ways the law "increases sin":

- First, the Law increases our awareness of sin.

It does this by defining what is sin and what is not. That is, the Law shows us where the boundaries are. The Law shows us where we were sinning and didn't know it.

Romans 5:14 says, *“death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command...”*

In other words, sin and death existed before the Law was given to Moses at Mount Sinai. Before the Law was given, people sinned. They sinned even though they didn't know it was sin, because the Law had not been given. But it was still sin.

Romans 3:20 puts it this way: *“...through the law we become conscious of our sin.”*

You see, just because you're not bothered by something doesn't mean God approves. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:4, *“My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent.”* You couldn't ask for a clearer biblical contradiction of the mindset of our culture that what matters is “my truth.” We're told: You may think something's wrong, but that's just your truth; my truth says it's OK for me to do it.

But the Bible says the opposite. Feeling something is OK doesn't make it OK. It is the Law that shows us the truth, it shows us where God puts the boundaries and so the Law increases our awareness of our own sinfulness.

- The second way the Law “increases sin” is by increasing our conviction of sin.

This is not just head knowledge, where we merely agree in theory that what we did might have been wrong. No, through the Law, we come to know that our sin grieves God's heart.

When King David was confronted about his adultery with Bathsheba, he said, *“I have sinned against the Lord.”* And then when he poured out his heart to God in [Psalm 51](#), he showed that the Law had brought true conviction of sin. He said to the Lord: *“Against you, you only, have I sinned.”* All sin is sin against God. The Law reveals this to us and brings true conviction in our hearts.

- Third, the Law increases our sinful behavior.

[Romans Chapter 7](#) speaks of our *“sinful passions aroused by the Law.”*

The more we focus on a particular law, the more likely we are to break it. This is the “wet paint” sign phenomenon. You walk down the hall and there on the wall is a sign that says, “Wet paint. Do not touch.” You see it, and what rises up in you is this almost irresistible urge to touch the wall. You had no interest in touching the wall until you saw the sign forbidding it, but now it’s all you can think about.

Touching the wet paint isn’t the sign’s fault, it’s ours.

And our sin isn’t the Law’s fault, it’s ours.

[Romans 7:12](#) says the law is holy, righteous and good, yet our response to the Law is to increase our sinful behavior and do the very thing the Law tells us not to do.

- And, fourth. The Law increases our sense of moral helplessness and brings us to Christ.

Paul very vulnerably shared his own struggle with sin in Romans Chapter 7: He wrote,

For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”

The Law shows us that we can never save ourselves. We can never fully obey the Law because it is not just about externals, it’s about the heart.

And so when Jesus taught about the Law, he said that it’s not enough not to commit murder; you mustn’t nurse anger in your heart. It’s not enough not to commit adultery physically—don’t lust after another in your heart.

The Law means more than just don’t do bad things; the Law means love God with your whole heart and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. That’s why Paul says that *“Love is the fulfillment of the law.”*

But we simply cannot do this. The Law shows us that we are incapable of loving God and our neighbor that fully, that perfectly. The law exposes our fallen nature, the law shows us our inherent sinfulness. And so we turn in our desperation to Jesus, who alone can save us.

The Law was not given to make us perfect.

[Hebrews 7](#) says the Law made nothing perfect.

The Law was not given to save us.

[Galatians 2](#) says that no one will be made right with God by sufficiently obeying the Law.

The Law was not God’s Plan A that failed, and so then he tried the Cross, as if God thought, “Let’s give them commandments—that’ll make ‘em perfect...Oh no, they’re still sinning! What’ll I do now? Let’s try the cross!”

No, the Law was given to show us our need for forgiveness through Jesus Christ.

No one gets to heaven by being good or by being good enough or by being better than someone else. We get to heaven by being forgiven, by receiving the free gift of forgiveness and salvation is only offered to us through Jesus' death on the cross.

But once we have surrendered our lives to Jesus and received his forgiveness, we seek in every way to live the life he desires for us.

And it is here that the Law serves its other purpose.

The Law was also given so that it may go well with you as a Christian who is saved by grace.

That's what Moses said to the people in Deuteronomy Chapter 5. Moses reminded the people of the Ten Commandments and then he wrote in Deuteronomy 5:29 what God had said about the Law:

Oh that they had such a mind as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their children for ever!

This idea that following God's laws brings life and wholeness and well-being runs all through Scripture. When the Holy Spirit first highlighted that verse for me, Deuteronomy 5:29, and helped me to see that principle, I began to see it again and again in my daily reading of Scripture. And whenever I saw that truth again in another passage in the Bible, I'd write in the margin next to that verse, Deuteronomy 5:29. And then I'd flip back to Deuteronomy 5:29 and write the other passage there in the margin. Last time I checked, I have over 50 passages listed alongside Deuteronomy 5:29,

passages that also declare that truth, that, as followers of Jesus, we obey the Law so that life will go well for us.

The Law was not given to spoil our fun! It was given so that we would understand that life goes better God's way.

Our culture increasingly rebels against the idea of commandments or rules or limitations on personal autonomy. We feel they're inappropriate, they're restrictive, and we should be free to pursue our own path.

But is that really right? Does God's law take away our freedom? Or does it give us freedom? In reality, God's Law can create freedom and increase our experience of the joy that Jesus desires for us.

There's a wonderful example of this we sometimes used in the Alpha course. A man tells about a soccer scrimmage involving one of his sons, age eight. A friend of his named Andy (who had been coaching the boys all year) was going to referee the scrimmage. Unfortunately, by the start of the game, Andy had not shown up. The boys just couldn't wait any longer. And so this poor father was talked into being the substitute referee. He described it later in this way, "There were a number of difficulties with [my being the referee]: I had no whistle; there were no sidelines marked on the field; I didn't know any of the other boys' names; they didn't have uniforms so I couldn't tell which side they were on; and I didn't know the rules nearly as well as some of the boys.

He said, "The game soon descended into complete chaos. Some shouted that the ball was in. Others said that it was out. I wasn't at all sure, so I let things run. Then the fouls started. Some yelled, 'Foul!' Others said, 'No foul!' I didn't know who was right. By the time Andy arrived, there were three boys lying injured on the ground and all the rest were shouting, mainly at me! But the moment Andy arrived, he blew his whistle, arranged

the teams, told them where the boundaries were and had them under complete control. Then the boys had the game of their lives.”

So, were the boys more free without the rules or were they in fact less free? Without any effective authority, they were free to do exactly what they wanted. The result was that people were confused and hurt. They much preferred it when they knew where the boundaries were. Then within those boundaries they were free to enjoy the game.

In some ways God’s Law is like that. God tells us what is “in” and what is “out.” He tells us what we may do and what we must not do. If we play within his boundaries there is freedom and joy. [James 1:25](#) says that God’s perfect law is the law of liberty. Exactly. There is liberty under God’s law.

When we break the rules, people get hurt. God didn’t say, “Do not murder,” in order to cramp our style. He didn’t say, “Do not commit adultery,” because he is a spoilsport. God doesn’t want people to get hurt. When people betray their wives or husbands and children to commit adultery, families and lives are devastated.

But Jesus says that when we live life God’s way, we experience more of the abundant life that he wants us to enjoy. He puts his law in our hearts, so that we respond to him with joy and we delight to do his will. As Christians, we live the same way we got saved: by grace. We study the Scriptures and learn of his commands, not so we will earn God’s approval, not to add more “oughts” to burden us, not so we can work to deserve our salvation, but so that as sinners forgiven and saved by grace we will discover more of the abundant life promised to us by our merciful Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And that is really Good News.

Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, we are fallen, broken people, sometimes defiantly rebelling against your law and at other times overwhelmed by our failures or our guilt. Thank you that through your moral law you show us ourselves as we really are so that we will turn to Jesus. Thank you for showing us the abundant life you desire for us to enjoy. We invite you to continue your work of grace in each of us: teaching us, convicting us, forgiving us, renewing and empowering us, that more and more we would truly know you and love you and serve you. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

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