

God's Law for Modern Man

Chapter 2: Key Passages on the Law

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Matthew 5:17-18

A crucial passage regarding God's law comes from Christ Himself in the Sermon on the Mount. "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Mt. 5:17-18). Jesus Christ in this section of the Sermon on the Mount deals with God's law and righteousness. Christ first sets out to eliminate any misconceptions of His view and teaching regarding the Old Testament Law. "He says that everything He is going to teach is in absolute harmony with the entire teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures."¹ Jesus in no way intends to destroy, abrogate or contradict God's inscripturated word. In verses 19 and following Jesus explains how His teaching is in complete harmony with God's law, while the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees is a perversion of God's law. "They buried the divine oracles under a load of tradition and regarded the doing of the law to be the only way to obtain salvation. Therefore in reality they were the ones who were setting aside the Old Testament. With Jesus, the case was entirely different."²

In verse 17 Jesus begins His teaching with very strong speech; the Greek means literally, "Do not begin to think." Jesus Christ emphatically forbids people even *to begin to think* that He came to abolish God's law. "The implication is that Christ knew the danger that His hearers or scribal opponents might misunderstand or willfully distort His doctrine of the law, so He commands them not even to start thinking that the Messiah abrogates the law."³ The idea that Jesus came to abolish God's law should be anathema to the Christian. Christ tells us emphatically not to entertain such a foolish thought even for a moment. Thus the idea, now popular in Evangelical seminaries, that the whole Old Testament law comes to an end in Christ, and a new law flows out of Christ, is unbiblical.

Jesus did not come to destroy or abolish God's law. The Greek word *kataluo* (translated "destroy" in the King James Version and the New King James Version, or "abolish" in the New American Standard Bible, New International Version, and the Revised Standard Version) in first century Greek literature, with regard to civil law, meant to deprive by force, to annul, to abrogate and to disregard. The same verb was used to describe the tearing down, dismantling, destroying and demolition of buildings. Thus, Christ says that He did not come to do away with, annul or repeal the law; on the contrary, He came to fulfill it.

The expression "the law and the prophets" is repeatedly used in the New Testament to denote the whole Old Testament (e.g., Mt. 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Lk. 16:16; 24:44; Rom. 3:21). When used in conjunction with the prophets, the law generally refers to the five books of Moses.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies on the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 181.

² William Hendriksen, *An Exposition of the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), p. 289.

³ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 47.

Thus, when Jesus says “the law,” He means the entire law: moral, judicial, and ceremonial. Although in Matthew 5:21ff, Jesus focuses His attention on the moral law, given the broad terminology noted above, one should not restrict verse 17 to the moral law alone. Since in the whole section, from verse 18 through verse 48, Jesus concerns Himself with God’s commandments, His use of the word “prophets” probably refers to the prophetic exposition of the law. The prophets called people back to obedience to the law. “The concern of Matthew 5:17 is Christ’s *doctrine* as it bears upon Theonomy (God’s Law). While ‘Law or Prophets’ broadly denotes the Older Testament Scriptures, Jesus’ stress is upon the ethical content, the commandments of the Older Testament.”⁴

Jesus said concerning the law: “I did not come to destroy, annul, or abrogate the law but to fulfill it.” What did Jesus mean when He said *fulfill*? The most popular interpretation of this word among Evangelicals reflects a total misunderstanding of the word. They propose that Christ came to finish or bring an end to the law. Although the Greek verb *plerao* (to *fulfill*) can mean to bring to an end in certain contexts, it would be absurd to give it that meaning in this context. Christ wants to eliminate any idea that He came to destroy or abrogate the law. Would He accomplish this by saying, “Do not think that I came to abrogate the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to annul the law but to bring it to an end?” Not only are such words self-contradictory, but if that had been Christ’s meaning, His audience would have expressed shock and outrage.

Another popular interpretation is that Christ came to replace the Old Testament law with a new law—“the law of Christ.” The Old Testament law flows into Christ and is fulfilled in Him; then Jesus establishes His own law. “The phrase can be viewed as a way of stating the new code of conduct applicable to New covenant believers. As the O.T. had its Law of Moses, so the N.T. has its Law of Christ.”⁵ Some who hold this position argue that Jesus has replaced the Old Testament law with the law of the Spirit. A favorite proof text is Galatians 5:18: “If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law.” But, this interpretation is unscriptural for a number of reasons. First, the verb *to fulfill* never means “to replace” in the New Testament. Second, the idea of Christ replacing the law suffers from the same objections noted above regarding Jesus coming to abrogate the law. To replace the law is to ‘end’ it or ‘annul’ it. Furthermore, Galatians 5:18 teaches that Christians are not under the law *as a way of justification*; however, they are under the law *as a way of life and sanctification*. R. J. Rushdoony writes, “In Galatians 2:21, the contrast is between justification by law and justification by the grace of God through Jesus Christ; in the use of law as a means of justification, no righteousness can be gained. In Galatians 5:16-18, the contrast is between the way of ‘the flesh,’ fallen, unaided human nature, and the way of ‘the Spirit,’ the redeemed and aided new man. The law is associated in this context with ‘the flesh,’ so that the reference is again clearly to the misuse of the law as a way of justification.”⁶

Another view is that Christ came to perfect the law; that is, Christ supplements it and adds an internal aspect to it. This view is based on a misunderstanding of God’s Old Testament law. The idea that the Old Testament was concerned with only external behavior is simply not true. For example, the tenth commandment covers unlawful lust in all its parameters. The command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:14) comes from Leviticus 19:18.

⁴ Ibid, p. 51.

⁵ Douglas J. Moo, “The Law of Moses or The Law of Christ” in John S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspective on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1988), p. 208.

⁶ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 738.

Even Jesus' command to "love your enemies" (Mt. 5:44), is an application of the Old Testament laws which teach the proper treatment of strangers and sojourners. The Old Testament emphasized the need for inward heart obedience and repeatedly condemned the Jewish people's sinful drift toward externalism and ritualism. David said, "Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You make me to know wisdom.... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart" (Ps. 51:6, 10, 17; cf. Ps. 40:8; 119:10-11; Hos. 6:6; Pr. 16:18-19; Mic. 2:1; Job 31:1; etc.). Jesus was not subjecting His disciples to a new, higher ethical standard but was countering the perversion of the scribes and Pharisees who externalized the law and rendered it void by their additions.

If Jesus added to the law, either in His own teaching or through His apostles after the ascension, one would expect to find new ethical standards in the New Testament. There are no new ethical standards in the New Testament. The difference in the New covenant is not a new ethical standard but Christ's completed work and His sending the Holy Spirit to empower and enable believers to more faithfully obey God's law. "Neither are the aforementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but do sweetly comply with it: the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done."⁷

Thus far consideration has been given to interpretations of *fulfill* that are unbiblical and outside the pale of classical Reformed interpretation. The next four views of *fulfill* in Matthew 5:17 reflect other New Testament teachings on the law and are common among Reformed interpreters. The first view is that Christ came to obey the law. The second view is that Christ came to confirm or uphold the law in exhaustive detail. The third view combines other views. For example, Christ came to fulfill prophecy, to perfectly obey the law and to uphold or confirm all of its precepts. The fourth view is that Christ came to uphold or confirm the moral law.

An excellent representative of the first view is D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: "The real meaning of the word *fulfill* is to carry out, to *fulfill* in the sense of giving full obedience to it, literally carrying out everything that has been said and stated in the law and the prophets.... There we see the central claim which is made by our Lord. It is, in other words, that all the law and all the prophets point to Him and will be fulfilled in Him down to the smallest detail. Everything that is in the law and the prophets culminates in Christ, and He is the fulfillment of them."⁸ Is it true that Jesus Christ perfectly obeyed the law? Yes, absolutely: "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). "Christ also suffered for us...Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth" (1 Pet. 2:21-22); "And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin" (1 Jn. 3:5). Did Jesus Christ perfectly fulfill the prophecies regarding the Messiah given in the Old Testament? Yes, He was both God and man (Isa. 9:6). He was born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14), in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:12), and so on. Although this interpretation is in harmony with the New Testament, the immediate context favors the second view.

Christ came not to abolish the law but to confirm or establish the law. "The meaning is, that 'not so much as the smallest loss of authority or vitality shall ever come over the law.' The expression, 'till all be fulfilled,' is much the same in meaning as 'it *shall* be had in undiminished

⁷ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chap. XXI, sec. 3.

⁸ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 186-187.

and enduring honour, from its greatest to its least requirements.”⁹ Matthew Henry concurs: “The rule which Christ came to establish exactly agreed with the Scriptures of the Old Testament.... ‘Let not the pious Jews, who have an affection for the law and the prophets, *fear* that I come to destroy them....’ He asserts the perpetuity of it: that not only he designed not the abrogation of it, but that it should never be abrogated (v. 18).”¹⁰ *Fulfill* refers not to Christ’s perfect obedience but to His *teaching* or doctrine regarding the law.

There are a number of indicators within the context which support this interpretation. First, “the context of Matthew 5:17 indicates that *plerao* (fulfill) refers to Jesus’ work as a *teacher*. There are no allusions to predictions of the Older Testament and the question of Jesus’ good works, or of His own ethical holiness in behavior, so they are not really at stake in this passage. But the issues of moral *authority*, pronouncement, and direction *are* prominent. The teaching of Jesus, not His doing of the law, is decisive here; the context speaks of Jesus’ doctrine, not His life.”¹¹ Second, the word *fulfill* is set in direct opposition to the words “destroy” or “abrogate.” One does not annul, abrogate or destroy the law by breaking it. The person who transgresses the law destroys himself, not the law. “Whoever commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding; he who does so destroys his own soul” (Pr. 6:32). The natural antithesis to abrogating the law is upholding the law. Jesus allays the fear of the Jews that the messianic advent meant an abrogation of the Old Testament law. Third, in verse 18 Jesus says that not “one jot or one tittle” of the law’s *content* or teaching will pass away. “In connection, then, with the immediately preceding verse, in which Jesus had said that he had not come to set aside the law or the prophets but to fulfill them, he now, sharply contradicting what the opponents must have been saying about his attitude, reaffirms his complete loyalty to the sacred oracles.”¹² Fourth, in verse 19, Jesus warns “his disciples, carefully to preserve the law, and shows them the danger of the neglect and contempt of it.”¹³ “Whoever shall loose or annul the authority or obligation of the least of the commandments of the Old Testament law “shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:19). “It follows from verse 19 that keeping the law and teaching it to others in the manner in which it should be taught is very important.”¹⁴

In the rest of chapter 5, Jesus “proceeds to expound the law in some particular instances, and to vindicate it from the corrupt glosses which those expositors [i.e., the Pharisees] had put upon it. He adds not anything new, only limits and restrains some permissions which had been abused: and so as to the precepts, shows the breadth, strictness, and spiritual nature of them, adding explanatory statutes that made them more clear, and tended much toward the perfecting of our obedience to them.”¹⁵ Given all these considerations, *plerao* (fulfill) is best understood in the sense of *establish* or *confirm*. “Jesus says in Matthew 5:17 that He came to confirm and restore the full measure, intent, and purpose of the Older Testamental law. He sees the whole process of revelation deposited in the Older Testament as finding its validation in Him—its actual embodiment.... *Plerao* is subject to the norm of both literal Older Testamental wording

⁹ David Brown, *The Four Gospels: A Commentary, Critical, Experimental and Practical* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976 [1864]), p. 31.

¹⁰ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Co., n.d.), 5:55-56.

¹¹ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, pp. 60-61.

¹² William Hendriksen, *Matthew*, p. 293.

¹³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:56.

¹⁴ William Hendriksen, *Matthew*, p. 293.

¹⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:57.

and the meaning of salvation manifested in Jesus Christ. Therefore, *plerao* should be taken to mean ‘confirm and restore in full measure.’”¹⁶

Any view of Matthew 5:17-18 which says that Christ came to abolish or replace the Old Testament law must be rejected as unbiblical. Such a view has Christ saying, “I came not to abrogate the law but to eliminate it.” Would Christ contradict Himself in the same sentence? No. Jesus Christ is a friend and champion of the law. He commands strict obedience to the law, and He commends those who faithfully teach the law to others.

What about the interpretation of *fulfill* that gives the word multiple meanings? It is common among some of the older commentaries to discuss three or four different senses of *fulfill* when discussing verse 17. For example, Christ came to fulfill prophecy, to fulfill Old Testament types, to establish the law, and to enable the elect to have greater obedience to the law through His redemptive work. Although all of those things are true, one should not read back into a text more meanings than were intended by the author. “You may not avoid or alter the *linguistic meaning* of a text by looking at *other* biblical teachings out of the corner of your eye. You may import whatever theological distinctions and qualifications which are appropriate into the matter as an interpreter and preacher of the text, but you *may not* read them *into* that text (in the name of ‘exegesis’), reading them out.”¹⁷ While there is nothing wrong with discussing the different ways Christ fulfills the Old Testament as an *application* of a text, giving a word multiple meanings at the same time defies both logic and normal word usage. One must avoid importing preconceived ideas into a text, even when these preconceived ideas are biblical and taught in other parts of the New Testament.

A biblical understanding of Matthew 5:17-19 is crucial if believers are going to have a proper understanding of God’s Old Testament law. If Jesus Christ came to completely abolish the Old Testament law, then only what is repeated in the New Testament can be applied to Christians and society. But if Jesus Christ explicitly taught the binding validity of God’s Old Testament law for the New covenant era, then one must presume the continuity of the Old Testament law.

An obvious objection to the interpretation that Christ did not come to destroy the law but to uphold, confirm, and establish the law is that the New Testament modifies and sets aside certain laws. The New Testament has clearly altered laws related to the land of Israel’s inheritance (1 Pet. 1:3-5; Heb. 11:16; 13:12-14) and the identity of God’s people¹⁸ (Mt. 21:43;

¹⁶ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 64. Bahnsen in response to critics who argue that “confirm or establish” is a novel or unusual interpretation, points out that many excellent scholars hold the same view, such as B.H. Branscomb, W.H.P. Hatch, G. Dalmen, Robin Nixon, David Wenham, and John Murray. “The idea that in Matthew 5 Jesus was confirming or establishing the law in its full measure, thus upholding the validity of the Old Testament commandments, can be found (despite differences of response or application) in a wide variety of scholars: Calvin, Bolton, Plumer, Fairbairn, George Campbell, David Brown, J. P. Lange, Hans Vindisch, J. A. Alexander, B. B. Warfield, Ernest Kevan, Carl Henry, John Stott, G. S. Sloyan, W. C. Allen, Alfred Plummer, William Hendriksen, Herman Ridderbos” etc. (*No Other Standard*, pp. 318-319).

¹⁷ Bahnsen, *No Other Standard*, footnote, pp. 273-74.

¹⁸ A common argument used against the obligation of modern nations to obey the moral case laws contained in the judicial law is that Israel was a church-state; that membership in the state and church was coextensive and that no separation of powers existed between the religious and political spheres of life. But now that the international church has replaced Israel in the New covenant era, all laws dealing with state law and penology are thought to have ceased and been carried out only by spiritual means alone (i.e., church discipline, resulting ultimately in excommunication). Such a view is based on a false understanding of the Old Testament theocracy. Israel was not a church-state like modern Iran; it had a clear demarcation between responsibilities in the political and priestly spheres. The king was not a priest: King Uzziah was struck with leprosy for intruding into the priestly office (2 Chr. 26:16-21).

Gal. 3:7, 29; Eph. 1:13-14). Furthermore, the ceremonial laws have been put away by Christ and His perfect redemption (Acts 10; Gal. 3:9, 10; Col. 2:16; Heb. 9-10). Although this appears to be a problem, the fact that certain laws were typological and were *never* intended to continue in their Old covenant form does not contradict Christ's assertion.

The Bible refers to ceremonial laws as "shadows" (Heb. 10:1; 8:4-5), "inferior" (Heb. 9:11-15), "obsolete" (Heb. 8:13), "symbolic" (Heb. 9:9), "ineffectual" (Heb. 10:4), and as "weak and beggarly elements" (Gal. 4:9-11). The ceremonial laws were never meant to stand on their own. A type must have an anti-type. When the reality comes, it takes the place of the shadow. Thus, the ceremonial laws that pointed to the person and work of Christ are upheld and continue in principle in Him. Therefore, the person who believes in Jesus Christ (the anti-type) has obeyed the ceremonies in Him. "In Him you were circumcised with the circumcision made without hands" (Col. 2:11). A person who rejects Jesus Christ yet keeps the ceremonial laws violates the ceremonial law because the reality has come. "Calvin points out that the meaning of the ceremonies is eternal, while their outward form and use are temporal; consequently Christ confirms even the ceremonial law. 'That man does not break ceremonies who omits what is shadowy, but retains their effect.'... These ceremonial laws are organically connected with Christ and His work in salvation history. The truth depicted in these ritual commands is embodied in Christ and is valid yet today. Only the pre-incarnation *use* of these ceremonial procedures is removed for the Christian in the New covenant—because they were observed once for all by and in the person and work of Christ. The principle involved in these particular ordinances is confirmed, not repealed in Christ's coming."¹⁹

Another interpretation is that Christ came to establish or uphold *the moral law*. This interpretation avoids the need to explain how Jesus upholds the whole law in exhaustive detail while in a sense abrogating a large portion of the law by His sacrificial death. This interpretation is based on the immediate context and the analogy of Scripture. After Christ states His position on the law in verses 17 to 19, He discusses the need for righteousness and refutes the scribes' and Pharisees' false interpretation of the moral law. He tells His disciples that their righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees (v. 20) and He refutes His opponents' false interpretation of the sixth commandment (vs. 21-26), the seventh commandment (vs. 27-32), the law regarding oaths (vs. 33-37), the law of retaliation (vs. 38-42) and the law of love (vs. 43-48). Our Lord concerns Himself not with ceremonial ordinances but with specific abuses of the Ten Commandments and certain moral case laws. Does this interpretation refute the central thesis of Theonomy? No. It does not. If in Matthew 5:17ff. Jesus was arguing for the continuance of the Ten Commandments and all the moral case laws into the New covenant era, then Theonomy is thoroughly scriptural for that is the Theonomic position.

Some Christians have used a variation of this argument to assert that Christ was teaching that only the Ten Commandments continue into the New covenant era. This teaching must be rejected for the following reasons. First, Jesus did not restrict His discussion to the Ten Commandments but also discussed the laws regarding oaths and retaliation. Second, the Ten Commandments are not the whole moral law but are a *summary* of the whole moral law including all the moral case laws. Third, those who want to restrict Jesus' teaching to the Ten Commandments need to explain how laws regarding homosexuality, rape, incest, bestiality, theft,

Furthermore, "membership of the state was not coextensive with the membership of the religious body (for example, the sojourners in Israel)" (Bahnsen, *By This Standard*, p. 331). If nations are not obligated to follow God's law, then what standard do they have?

¹⁹ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 49.

the protection of life, aiding the poor and so on are not moral but positivistic. It is obvious that many civil laws are moral applications of the Ten Commandments. Thus, they cannot be set aside without setting aside the Ten Commandments themselves. Fourth, long after Christ preached the sermon on the mount He rebuked the Pharisees and scribes for disregarding the moral case law concerning incorrigible, young adults (cf. Mt. 15:14; Deut. 21:18-20; Ex. 21:15). The omniscient, sinless Son of God certainly would not contradict His own teaching regarding God's law.

Matthew 5:17-19 teaches that Christians should assume the continuity of the Old Testament laws into the New covenant era unless there are clear theological and exegetical reasons otherwise. There are no New Testament texts which (when understood biblically) can be used to disregard the whole Old Testament law. The assumption of a radical discontinuity between the Testaments is unscriptural and is primarily the legacy of Dispensationalism. When Christians simplistically argue “against applying an Old Testament command because it comes from the Old Testament (i.e., was intended for Israel, was part of the theocracy, is not revealed in the New covenant, comes from the era of law and not grace, is too horrible to follow today, etc.), he is”²⁰ violating Matthew 5:17-19, covenant theology and biblical hermeneutics.

Galatians and the Law

A number of passages in Galatians have been used by Dispensational scholars to argue that the Old Testament law has been abrogated by the coming of Jesus Christ. A brief consideration of some of these passages is necessary in order to have an understanding of God's law as it applies to the present day. In order to understand these passages, one must first consider the historical context of the book.

Paul wrote the epistle to the Galatians to deal with certain Judaizers in the church. “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ” (Gal. 1:6-7). The Judaizers believed that in order for Gentiles to be justified by God, they first had to be circumcised and become Jews. These are the same type of false teachers described in the book of Acts.²¹ “And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’.... some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses’” (Acts 15:1, 5).

In interpreting Galatians, one must keep in mind that the Judaizers were unbiblical in two different ways. First, they asserted that in order for a Gentile to become a Christian he must first become a Jew in the Old covenant sense; that is, he must submit to circumcision and the whole Mosaic law, including the ceremonial laws. Second, the Judaizers taught that believers must keep the law in order to be saved. They taught a system of human merit, of works righteousness *in addition to faith in Christ* in order to be justified before God. These heretics believed the Pharisaical lie of salvation by law. In the book of Galatians Paul dealt with these two unbiblical

²⁰ Bahnsen, *No Other Standard*, p. 274.

²¹ When the apostle Paul preached in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia, he explicitly refuted Jewish notions of justification by law: “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Ac. 13:38-39).

views. Paul wanted the Galatian believers to have a proper understanding of salvation and the true purpose of the Old Testament law.

Justification

The paramount issue in this epistle is justification by faith alone. Paul says: “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified” (Gal. 2:16). Paul refutes the pharisaical notion that man can become right before God by obedience to the law. Thus, when Paul says, “For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God” (Gal. 2:19), he does not mean that the law as a moral guide to life is dead, but rather that the law has shown me that I am dead, that I cannot save myself through the law. The law demands absolute moral perfection in thought, word, and deed. Hendricksen writes,

That standard Paul had been unable to meet. In fact, he had missed the target *by far*. In the meantime, moreover, the law had not relaxed its demands, nor its threats of punishment, nor its actual flagellations. It had not given Paul the peace with God which he so ardently desired. It had scourged him until, by the marvelous grace of God, he had found Christ (because Christ had first sought and found him!) and peace in Him. Thus, through the law he had died to the law. Through the law he had discovered what a great sinner he was, and how utterly incapable in himself of extricating himself from his position of despair and ruin (cf. Rom. 3:20; 7:7). Thus the law had been his custodian to conduct him to Christ (Gal. 3:24). And when by Christ he had been made alive, the law, viewed as being in and by itself a means unto salvation and as a cruel taskmaster who assigns tasks impossible of fulfillment and who lays down rules and regulations endless in their ramifications, had left him cold, dead like a corpse, without any response whatever.²²

Paul emphasizes that it is Christ who saves and not the law: “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, Christ died in vain” (Gal. 2:21). In other words, if it were possible to attain to a perfect righteousness by which one could stand in God’s presence, then Christ did not have to die in order to bring men unto God.

Some commentators have attempted to show that Paul’s concern in the book of Galatians was not justification by law, but sanctification by law. This false interpretation is based upon Galatians 3:2-3: “Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?” Dispensationalists have argued that Paul is saying that the Old Testament law has no place in the sanctification of believers. The Dispensational approach to this passage is unscriptural and, thankfully, quite rare. In verse 2, Paul teaches that becoming a Christian and receiving the Holy Spirit can only occur through faith in Jesus Christ. Remember that elsewhere Paul teaches that baptism in the Holy Spirit and becoming a Christian are coterminous (1 Cor. 12:13; Rom. 8:9). No one, Paul says, has ever received the Holy Spirit through works of righteousness. Paul then sets up a contrast between the Spirit and the flesh. He points out the absurdity of the Judaizer’s position. If faith in Jesus Christ alone results in the baptism in the Holy Spirit, why, then, were the Galatians seeking perfection through personal merit? The Galatians were no longer looking

²² William Hendricksen, *Exposition of Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1968), pp. 101-102.

solely to the merits of Christ for salvation but were trusting in the flesh, in works of righteousness, in circumcision, in ceremonies, and so on. The idea that perfection before God can come in any way apart from Christ is insanity. Paul calls it foolishness. “If one bases his hope for this life or the next upon anything apart from Christ he is placing confidence in *flesh*.”²³ The idea that Paul is arguing against the use of the Old Testament moral laws as a guide for sanctification is not taught in Galatians or anywhere else. If we do not use the moral law as a guide for conduct and sanctification, how, then, are we to even identify sin? Paul says, “for by law is knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). “We know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully” (1 Tim. 1:8).

The Law as a Tutor

Those who teach that God’s Old Testament law has been completely abrogated by Christ use Galatians 3:23-25 as a proof text for their assertion: “But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.” In order to understand this passage one must answer two questions. First, what does Paul mean by the term *law*? Second, what does he mean when he says we are no longer under a tutor? In order to properly answer these questions, one must keep in mind the historical context of the book and the specific problems that Paul was dealing with. The Judaizers had two serious doctrinal errors. They believed in salvation through Christ *and* human merit. And they wanted Gentiles to become Jews in order to become Christians; that is, they expected Gentiles to completely follow the Mosaic ceremonial laws. This second error is clearly in Paul’s mind when he condemns circumcision (Gal. 5:2-3) and when he refers to the rudiments or elements in Galatians 4:3, 9. “But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain” (Gal. 4:9-11). Since Paul is concerned with counteracting the Judaizers’ view that Gentiles are obligated to keep the whole system of Jewish ceremonial laws, it is clear that he is speaking of law as the Mosaic administration of God’s covenant with the Jews. Paul is focusing upon what is distinctive to the Mosaic administration. He is telling the Galatians why it is no longer necessary to follow the ceremonial laws of the Old covenant.

This view of law is supported by Galatians 4:21-31 where Paul contrasts the two covenants. “For these things are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all” (Gal. 4:24-26). When Paul speaks about the “Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage,” he probably has in mind more than bondage of the ceremonial law. This bondage could include the false pharisaical notions regarding salvation by law current at that time in Jerusalem. The apostle says that the true Christian church is free from the bondage of the ceremonial law. Christians are free from the Old covenant administration with its types, shadows and ceremonies. Furthermore, Christians are not under bondage to the false notions regarding the law as a source of human merit unto salvation, as taught by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. “The church of the Gentiles was not typified in Hagar but in Sarah; from whence the scope of the

²³ Ibid, p. 114.

apostle is to conclude, that we are not under the law, obliged to Judaical observances, but are freed from them, and are justified by faith in Christ alone, not by works of the law.”²⁴

What, then, does Paul mean when he says that those who have come to Christ are no longer under a tutor? Given the meaning of law discussed above, Paul is saying that the ceremonial law served as an instructor in salvation by grace. It taught the Old covenant people of God about the perfect redemptive work of the coming Messiah through types. But since Christ has come and offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice “once for all” (Heb. 10:10), the tutor is no longer needed. Under the old administration, the Jews were saved by faith in the coming Messiah, not by their works. But the Old covenant administration with its types, shadows and ceremonies was *inferior* to the New covenant. Paul compares the Old covenant administration to the immature life of slavery under a tutor. But New covenant believers are described as sons, as those who receive the full rights of adoption (Gal. 4:1-7). John Calvin writes,

A schoolmaster is not appointed for the whole life, but only for childhood, as etymology of the Greek word [*paidagogos*] implies. Besides, in training a child, the object is to prepare him, by the instructions of childhood, for maturer years. The comparison applies in both respects to the law, for its authority was limited to a particular age, and its whole object was to prepare its scholars in such a manner, that when its elementary instructions were closed, they might make progress worthy of manhood. And so he adds, that it was our schoolmaster [*eis Christon*] unto Christ. The grammarian, when he is trained as a boy, delivers him into the hands of another, who conducts him through the higher branches of a finished education. In like manner, the law was the grammar of theology, which, after carrying its scholars a short way, handed them over to *faith* to be completed. Thus, Paul compares the Jews to children, and us to advanced youth.²⁵

The Law as a Covenant

Dispensationalists have misunderstood this passage in Galatians because they fail to recognize the distinction between the law as a covenant and the rule of law. After the fall of man in the garden of Eden, God has *always* dealt with man on the basis of the covenant of grace.²⁶ That is, from the fall of Adam until the second coming, anyone who is saved, is saved by grace through faith. No one, from the fall to the consummation, can be saved by his own works of righteousness. Even the sacrifices of animals under the Old covenant did not really save; “for it

²⁴ Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1963 [1685]), 3:655.

²⁵ John Calvin, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), p. 108.

²⁶ In the garden of Eden, God made a covenant with Adam (the covenant of works) in which He promised Adam (and in Adam his posterity) eternal life if he personally and perfectly obeyed God’s command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). Adam disobeyed God’s command and cast himself and the whole human race into sin, misery and death. God, in His mercy, immediately instituted a second covenant, commonly called the covenant of grace. According to the covenant of grace sinners are saved solely by the sinless life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. While there is only one covenant of grace there are a number of different covenantal administrations (e.g., Noah, Abraham, Moses and David). Paul wrote, “For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us” (2 Cor. 1:20). From the promise of a seed that would crush the serpent (Gen. 3:15) to the covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:6ff), and even the Mosaic administration, faith in the blood, the sinless substitute Jesus Christ was paramount. From Genesis to Revelation salvation is only through the Lamb of God. The different administrations of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament built on the earlier administrations; that is, the promise of the coming Redeemer became enlarged and clearer as divine revelation progressed. The Dispensational approach which sets the “dispensations” in opposition to each other ignores the common Old Testament theme of the *promise* and the need for *blood atonement*, and pictures God as incompetent (i.e., going from plan *a* to *b* to *c* because each plan fails).

is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). The sacrifices were types that pointed to Jesus Christ who “by one offering has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (Heb 10:14). Galatians 3:21 teaches that the law of God is not against the promise. The law as a covenant was an expression of the covenant of grace. The shadows, type and ceremonies pointed to Jesus Christ and taught the people to trust in the shed blood of the coming Messiah (Isa. 53:3-12), “[t]he lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (Jn. 1:29). The law as a covenant (the Mosaic administration) ended with the coming of Christ and the New covenant because it served its purpose and was no longer needed. The shadows, ceremonies and types are replaced by the reality, Jesus Christ. A sailor who is given a model of a ship to learn from, no longer needs the model when the ship is in port. The covenant of law is now ended, but the rule of law is eternal.²⁷

The Law as a Curse

Another manner in which believers are no longer under the law is that believers are not under the *curse* of the law. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’), that the blessings of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:13-14). Paul says that by Christ’s death on the cross, believers are set free from the curse or penalty of the law. Anyone who commits sin is under a curse. God said, “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezek. 18:4). John the Baptist declared that “he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (Jn. 3:36). Paul said that the “law brings about wrath” (Rom. 4:15). “Having shown the absolute demand of God upon a man’s life, having defined what sin is, having convicted man of sin and shown him the nature of sinful rebellion, the law pronounces the just condemnation of God upon the sinner. The law shuts up all men under sin and seals off any escape to life for them in their own strength (Gal. 3:22). The sinner finds himself lost and sold under sin; the magnitude of his dilemma is revealed in the words, ‘It stands written that accursed is everyone who does not continue in all things having been written in the law-book to do them’ (Gal. 3:10).”²⁸ Jesus Christ bore the guilt and the penalty for the sins of His people on the cross at Calvary. The wrath of God that we deserved for our sins was placed upon Christ. But the fact that Christ bore the judgment that we deserved does *not* mean that believers are no longer under law as a guide for daily living and sanctification. Such a view “is antinomianism, and alien to St. Paul. St. Paul attacked man-made laws, and man-made interpretations of the law, as the way of justification; the law can never justify; it does sanctify, and there is no sanctification by lawlessness.”²⁹

²⁷ The division of the covenant into the Old and the New is a difference not in the way of salvation but in administration. “There can be no doubt that the spiritually minded Israelites did not rest in the sacrifices or sacraments themselves, but by faith really experienced Christ in them, as does the Christian” (Ernest Kevan, *Moral Law*, p. 67). This is obvious from the fact that the promise made to Old Testament Israel (Acts 7:17; 13:32), is explicitly referred to by Paul as the gospel (Rom. 1:2; 10:14-16). Furthermore, Paul mentions Abraham and David as examples of justification by faith (Rom. 4:1-12), and the author of Hebrews points believers to the examples of the faith of Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and so on (cf. Heb. 11). Paul says that the Israelites enjoyed the same spiritual reality and blessing in their sacraments as those of which the Christian partakes (1 Cor. 10).

²⁸ Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 271.

²⁹ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 674.

The Law Convicts Man of Sin

Christians are not under law as a covenant, nor are they under law as a curse. A third way in which Christians are no longer under law is as a means of conviction to lead us to Christ. Paul says: “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore, by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:19-20). It is a mistake to argue that God’s law is evil, bad or harsh. The law is not the problem; man is the problem. Man has an evil heart that loves sin. One of the reasons God has given the law is to expose sin, to convict rebellious hearts. “What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. Therefore, the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Rom. 7:7-12).

From his own personal experience Paul knew that “the law convicted him of his sin and sinfulness.”³⁰ As a Pharisee, Paul was taught that law-keeping was an external matter, something achievable by man. He says, “I was alive apart from the law” (v. 9). That is, apart from a biblical understanding of the internal aspect of law-keeping, Paul was self-deceived, self-righteous and self-complacent. But when the command “Thou shalt not covet” (v. 7) came into his consciousness, Paul’s complacent self-assurance came to an end. “And the commandment, which was unto life, this was found by me to be unto death.” The reference is to the original purpose of the law. “The purpose of law in man’s original estate was not to give occasion to sin, but to direct and regulate man’s life in the path of righteousness and, therefore, to guard and promote life. By reason of sin, however, that same law promotes death, in that it gives occasion to sin. ‘And the wages of sin is death.’ The more law is registered in our consciousness, the more sin is aroused to action, and law as law, can exercise no restraining or remedial effect.”³¹

Paul the Pharisee was truly a pitiful creature. He expected salvation through the law, but the law cannot change unregenerate hearts. He expected happiness and holiness through the law, but instead he descended into the despair of guilt, condemnation, misery, wrath, and the displeasure of a righteous, just and holy God. “Sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me” (Rom. 7:11). Sin deceived Paul. All of Paul’s hopes and dreams of self-righteous bliss were dashed on the rocks of sin and inner corruption. What Paul the Pharisee wanted the law to do, it could not do. Not because the law was defective, or because the law was evil, but because the law (in the post-fall world) was not designed by God to secure our salvation. “Such is the experience of every believer, in the ordinary progress of his inward life. He first turns to the law, to his own self-righteousness and strength, but he soon finds that all the law can do is only to aggravate his guilt and misery.”³² God uses the law to plow the furrows of man’s heart. Once he knows his guilt, once he knows that he cannot obey the law, he is brought to despair and, then he runs to the cross of Christ. The awful burden of guilt is washed

³⁰ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2:249.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 252.

³² Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972 [1835]), p. 225.

away by Christ's blood and His perfect righteousness. His perfect law-keeping is given to us as a gift.

Although the law cannot save, it prepares the elect for salvation. Many commentators argue that Paul's reference to the law as a tutor or guardian which leads one to Christ that one might be justified by faith (Gal. 3:24) refers to this function of the law. Before one can receive the Lord Jesus Christ he must be shown what sin is and how helpless he is. The law exposes many areas of one's life which would not have otherwise been recognized as sins. "It arouses sin, increasing its power, and making it, both in itself and in our consciousness, exceedingly sinful.... Before the gospel can be embraced as a means of deliverance from sin, we must feel that we are involved in corruption and misery."³³ "It is essential to declare the commandments in order to show the sinner his heart of hatred toward God and enmity toward men. Only then will he flee to the grace of God in Jesus Christ to provide him with righteousness and love.... When you see that men have been wounded by the law, then it is time to pour in the balm of Gospel oil. It is the sharp needle of the law that makes way for the scarlet thread of the Gospel."³⁴

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³³ Ibid, p. 226.

³⁴ Walter Chantry, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), pp. 42-43.