



What the Bible Says About Being Under the Law

Information Booklet E

Supplement to lesson 18

(Numbers in parenthesis refer to footnotes at the end of the document.)

The Scripture texts presented in Lesson 18 show clearly that God's commandments are just as binding upon Christians today as they were when God spoke them upon Mt. Sinai. However, some people have developed the idea that Christians have no obligation to keep the Ten Commandments. The purpose of this booklet is to discuss those objections and to demonstrate the unity of the Scriptures on the subject.

The Word "Law" in the Bible

The first thing we need to understand is what the Bible writers meant when they referred to "the law." The primary Hebrew word translated "law" in the Old Testament is "torah", which is so translated 216 times. In the New Testament, the word "law" is generally the Greek word "nomos", which occurs 195 times.

Old Testament Usage

To the Hebrew mind, "law" was a broad term which stood for God's revealed will. It encompassed all divine instruction, all God's communication of His purpose for man. To the devout Israelite, God's "law" was equivalent to His plan for the salvation of man.

The context of an Old Testament passage using the word "law" may indicate that the writer is referring to a particular portion of God's revealed will. God's instructions given through Moses became known as "the Law of Moses." Because the first five books of the Bible contained those instructions, that portion of Scripture was often called "the law of Moses" or simply "the law." To the Hebrew mind, God's instructions were His law, whether those instructions were moral standards, ritual requirements, or national policies. This general view of the law explains why the term can actually refer to a variety of things, the distinction between which was not necessarily considered significant since it all came from God.

New Testament Usage

By New Testament times, two distinct meanings of the term "law" had emerged, both of which reflected the thinking of the Jews in regard to the law as described above.

First: since the Scriptures were the place where God's revealed will was preserved, the term "law" began to designate the Old Testament Scriptures as a whole or in part.(1) Often the term referred to the Pentateuch, or books of Moses, as distinguished from the Prophets and the Writings; and at times to the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) as a part of the Pentateuch.

Secondly: the term "law" also began to designate the Jewish religious system(2) – whole or in part – which by that time had developed into an elaborate combination of Biblical instructions and rabbinical traditions. For the Jews, this use of the term "law" was natural; for to them Judaism was the practical demonstration of God's revealed will. New Testament references to works of the law often indicated the ceremonial element,(3) as that was the most apparent feature of the Jewish religious system.

So when using texts referring to "the law," it is wise to carefully study the setting of the passage to determine in what sense the word "law" is being used. It is also helpful to be familiar with the major elements of the Old Testament legal system, and understand the distinguishing qualities of each.

Three Types of Laws

The Old Testament contains three basic types of laws – Moral, Ceremonial, and Civil. All three were given under God’s direction.

Moral Law

The Moral Law is the basis of God’s universal kingdom. It is the expression of God’s character. It exists because God exists, and as God is, so it is. The Moral Law combines a perfect blend of justice and mercy. It may be summed up in one word: Love.

All the requirements of God’s Moral Law hang upon two great principles. The first is Deuteronomy 6:5 - “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” The second is Leviticus 19:18 - “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”

God created men with His law “written in their hearts.”(4) But because they “did not like to retain God in their knowledge,”(5) the law was, for the most part, forgotten. It was therefore necessary for God to express His law in such a way that it would ever be remembered. With His own mouth He spoke the Ten Commandments, and with His own finger, wrote them on two tables of stone. The first four commandments, written on the first table, express one’s love for God. The last six commandments, written on the second table, express one’s love for his neighbor.

To carefully guard the sacredness of the Ten Commandments, God gave Moses additional precepts with minute instructions for everyday life. These “right judgments” and “good statutes”(6) were simply applications of the principles of the Ten Commandments, and as such are classed as moral law.

The Moral Law defines righteousness, but has no power to redeem those who transgress it. A remedial system was therefore necessary whereby God “might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth.”(7)

Ceremonial Law

Ceremonial laws were those which regulated the services of the sanctuary, the offering of sacrifices, and the priestlyministration. The Ceremonial Law is clearly distinguished from the Moral Law.

Whereas the Moral Law defines the conduct of the righteous, the Ceremonial Law had to do with the plan of salvation and God’s work of grace for the repentant, believing sinner. It was through the Ceremonial Law that the righteousness of God was able to be “witnessed by the law and the prophets.”(8)

Every ordinance of the Ceremonial Law pointed to Christ and His work of saving man from sin. Every animal that was slain typified Christ’s death on the cross. Every function the priests performed symbolized Christ’s ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary. Every sacred festival foreshadowed a saving event in the redemption of the world.

God never gave the Ceremonial Law as a covenant of works whereby one could earn God’s favor through meritorious acts. There was no saving value in the sacrificial activities themselves. But through those activities the believer could by faith(9) claim the righteousness of Christ to atone for his sins. Thus the believer was continually to look forward to the “Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”(10)

Civil Law

Every country has civil regulations and the God-given authority for enforcing law and order. So to Israel as a nation were given laws governing the administration of justice.(11) These laws, distinguished by their very nature, were of an inherently national type. Israel was subject to these laws in the same way in which we are subject to the laws of the land in which we live. “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake.” “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For...the powers that be are ordained of God.”(12)

Unlike the Ceremonial Laws, which were wholly symbolic in nature, the Civil Laws were not abolished by the death of Christ. Rather, they lost their force when Israel ceased to be a nation. The following chart contrasts the three types of Old Testament law.

<u>TYPE OF LAW</u>	<u>SUBJECTS OF THE LAW</u>	<u>DURATION OF THE LAW</u>
MORAL	All people	Till heaven and earth pass
CEREMONIAL	All believers	From Adam's fall until Christ's death
CIVIL	All Israelites and strangers in the land	From the time of Moses until the dispersion of the Jews

The Moral Law: The Historic Protestant Position

The most widely accepted position on the Ten Commandments is reflected in the following quotations from an introductory article in a popular Bible produced for Sears, Roebuck and Co. (13)

“The enduring stone on which it was written is a clear symbol that His law is permanent and eternal.... What Moses received was the Word of God, which had, and still has the force of law.... They have been written out so that they may ever be before us, and we may become doers, as well as hearers of God's law. (Rom. 2:12-15).... It is through His love for us that He has brought these rules together so that we may be better prepared to face life.”

However, the idea has been promoted that God has withdrawn His great moral standard of Ten Commandments, so that we are no longer under obligation to obey it. This teaching represents a radical departure from the historic Protestant position. Never in the history of Christianity have churchmen spoken so openly against God's law as they do today.

Considering the admonition in Jude 3 to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints,” let us review what our forefathers taught regarding the unchanging, eternally-binding nature of the moral law of God. Here are a few quotations from various individuals and groups.

John Calvin:

“We must not imagine that the coming of Christ has freed us from the authority of the law: for it is the eternal rule of a devout and holy life, and must, therefore, be as unchangeable, as the justice of God, which it embraced, is constant and uniform.”(14)

“The law has sustained no diminution of its authority, but ought always to receive from us the same veneration and obedience.”(15)

Martin Luther:

“But how does it follow from this that on this account the law should be done away? Such a conclusion I cannot find in my dialectics; besides, I should like to see and hear the master who could prove it.

“...He was stricken for our sin – is the law thereby discarded?... Can anyone suppose that sin exists where there is no law? Whoever puts away the law must also put away sin.”(16)

Samuel Mather:

“The laws...delivered by Moses, were of three kinds – moral, ceremonial, and judicial.... The first, or moral law, being the law of universal or unalterable right, is binding upon all men, and is still in force.”(17)

Dwight L. Moody:

“The commandments of God given to Moses in the mount at Horeb are as binding today as ever they have been since the time when they were proclaimed in the hearing of the people....The people must be made to understand that the ten commandments are still binding, and that there is a penalty attached to their violation....Paul said: ‘Love is the fulfilling of the law.’ But does this mean that the detailed precepts of the decalogue are superseded, and have become back numbers? Does a father cease to give children rules to obey because they love him? Does a nation burn its statute books because the people have become patriotic? Not at all. And yet people speak as if the commandments do not hold for Christians because they have come to love God....Let us get alone with God and read His law – read it carefully and prayerfully, and ask Him to show us our sins and what He would have us to do.”(18)

Charles H. Spurgeon:

“He [Christ] took care to revise and reform the laws of men; but the law of God he established and confirmed....Our King has not come to abrogate the law, but to confirm and reassert it....The Lord Jesus does not set up a milder law, nor will he allow any one of his servants to presume to do so. Our King fulfils the ancient law, and his Spirit works in us to will and to do of God’s good pleasure as set forth in the immutable statutes of righteousness.”(19)

“The law is one of the most sublime of God’s works. There is not a commandment too many; there is not one too few.”(20)

John Wesley:

“In the highest rank of the enemies of the gospel of Christ, are they who...teach men to break...all the commandments at a stroke; who teach,...`There is but one duty, which is that of believing.’ ...It is no other than betraying him with a kiss, to...set light by any part of his law, under pretence of advancing his gospel.”(21)

“The ritual or ceremonial law, delivered by Moses to the children of Israel,...our Lord did indeed come to destroy....

“But the moral law contained in the ten commandments, and enforced by the prophets, he did not take away. It was not the design of his coming to revoke any part of this. This is a law which never can be broken, which ‘stands fast as the faithful witness in heaven.’ ...Every part of this law must remain in force upon all mankind, and in all ages; as not depending either on time or place, or any other circumstance liable to change.”(22)

Baptist:

“Thus it is, by disowning the law, men utterly subvert the gospel. Believers, therefore, instead of being freed from obligation to obey it, are under greater obligation to do so than any men in the world.”(23)

“We believe that the Law of God is the eternal and unchangeable rule of his moral government; and that the inability which the Scriptures ascribe to fallen men to fulfill its precepts arises entirely from their love of sin; to deliver them from which, and to restore them through a Mediator to unfeigned obedience to the holy Law, is one great end of the Gospel, and of the means of grace.”(24)

Church of England,(25) Protestant Episcopal,(26) Methodist(27):

“No Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called Moral.”

Lutheran:

“The Son of God redeemed them for the very reason that they might meditate on the Law of God day and night, and continually exercise themselves in the keeping thereof.”(28)

Presbyterian,(29) Congregational,(30) Baptist(31):

“The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator who gave it. Neither doth Christ in the gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen, this obligation.”

Southern Baptist:

“Not only is it unchangeable with respect to places and races, to days and seasons, to conditions and circumstances, but also to ages. It has been unchangeable. It will be unchangeable. This rule is unchangeable because it is in harmony with the unchangeable nature of God.”(32)

“Jesus did not give a new code, but he also did not say that the moral teachings of the Old Testament were suspended. The ceremonial and ritualistic laws of the Old Testament are abrogated for the Christian, but not the Ten Commandments.”(33)

The New Testament Teaches the Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments were taught and upheld in the New Testament by Jesus and the apostles. Below are listed several New Testament references for each of the commandments.

I - Matthew 4:10; 22:37; 1 Cor. 8:4; Gal. 4:8, 9

II - John 4:24; Acts 17:29; Romans 1:23

III - Matthew 5:33-37; 1 Timothy 6:1

IV - Matthew 24:20; Mark 2:27; Hebrews 4:4

V - Matthew 15:4-9; 19:19; Ephesians 6:1-3

VI - Matthew 5:21, 22; Romans 13:9; 1 John 3:15

VII - Matthew 5:27, 28; 19:9, 18; Romans 7:2, 3

VIII - Matthew 19:18; Romans 13:9

IX - Matthew 19:18; Romans 13:9

X - Luke 12:15; Romans 7:7; 13:9

Being Under the Law

Some who object to keeping the commandments cite Paul's words in Romans 6:14, "Ye are not under the law, but under grace." What did the apostle mean by that phrase?

It is clear from the rest of the book that Paul believed in the obligation of Christians to keep the commandments (see Romans 2:13; 3:31; 7:12; and 8:4 for example). So what did he mean when he said, "Ye are not under the law"?

If a person robs a bank, he is arrested, handcuffed, and taken to prison. He is locked behind bars and cannot free himself. He is under the law. Then suppose he is pardoned and released from jail. He is able to go home to his family. He is now under grace. Is he now at liberty to go back and rob the bank again without punishment? Certainly not. In fact, because of the pardon he received, he is under even greater obligation to keep the law than before.

To be "under the law" means to be under the condemnation of the law because of our violation of it. Romans 3:19 tells us that the sentence of the law against "them who are under the law" is that they are "guilty before God." Romans 3 emphasizes that all the world is guilty and therefore under the law, because all have sinned and transgressed that law. But Christ came "to redeem them that were under the law" (Galatians 4:5). He came to redeem us, not from the obligation of the law, but "from the curse of the law" (Galatians 3:13). Christ pays our penalty, He pardons our transgression, and places us under grace.

The Bible says, "For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14). It is when we are under the dominion of sin that we are under the law. In bondage to sin, we cannot free ourselves from its power. We have no means of escaping the curse pronounced by the law upon us. But when we decide to commit ourselves to Christ, take up our cross and follow Him as our Lord and Master, we are delivered from sin's dominion. By His amazing grace we are released from the chains which held us captive to sin. This is what the apostle meant when he said, "Ye are not under the law, but under grace." And it applies only to those who have surrendered themselves to be "led of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:18).

When Paul wanted to speak of people who recognized no obligation to obey God's law, he did not use the expression, "not under the law." Instead, he used the expression, "without law." And he also made it clear that all such people will "perish without law." Romans 2:12.

The difference between “not under the law” and “without law” is emphasized in 1 Corinthians 9:20-21. In verse 20 Paul uses the expression “under the law” in the same way he always does. “Unto the Jews,” he says, “I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law.” Then he says, “To them that are without law, as without law...” But at that point, to make it absolutely clear that he recognized that as a servant of God he was under obligation to obey God’s law, he added in parentheses, “being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ.”

So on the question of whether Christians are today under obligation to keep God’s law, Paul made it very clear by stating:

“Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.”
Romans 3:31.

“Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth....Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good” Romans 7:1, 12.

Being Delivered from the Law

In Romans 7:1-6 Paul tells the story of a woman who is “loosed from the law to her husband.” He concludes his illustration by stating, “Now we are delivered from the law.” Some people have used this story to say that Christians do not need to keep God’s law. But in fact, the story teaches the exact opposite.

In the illustration, Paul explains that “the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.”

“Wherefore,” Paul concludes, “ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God.”

To keep us from misunderstanding his point, Paul prefaced the story by declaring that “the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth.” That is clear. Even in the illustration he affirms that “if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress.” These facts show that Paul considered the commandments to be still binding.

Furthermore, notice that even the death of the husband does not change the law. Even after the man dies, the law still says the same thing it always said about remarriage. The law has not changed, only the woman’s relation to it. The woman is freed from the law, not because of any annulling of the law, but because there is no law against remarriage after a spouse’s death.

So it is with the one who has the power of Christ in his life. He is delivered from the law because he no longer violates the law. The law has not changed. It still requires just what it always did. But the Christian has changed. His life now exhibits the fruit of the Spirit:

“Love, joy, peace...against such there is no law.” Galatians 5:22-23.

The problem of being “in the flesh” (Romans 7:5) lies in “the motions of sins” which are defined by the law. The problem is not the law, but sin (verses 7-13). Here is the point. We are “delivered from the law” when we become “dead to that wherein we were held” (verse 6, margin). Since it was sin which held us, only death to sin (Romans 6:2) can deliver us from the law. By experiencing such death to sin we are enabled to serve the law “in newness of the spirit” (Romans 7:6).

17 Facts About Grace

- #1 – God is gracious (Exodus 34:6).
- #2 – His throne is described as a throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16).
- #3 – In the Old Testament those who served God were under grace (Psalm 84:11; Proverbs 3:34).
- #4 – Noah (Genesis 6:8), Lot (Genesis 19:18, 19), Moses (Exodus 33:13; 34:9), and Gideon (Judges 6:17) were all under grace.
- #5 – The Israelites in the wilderness were under grace (Jeremiah 31:2).
- #6 – The post-exilic Jews were under grace (Ezra 9:6-8).
- #7 – Grace has been offered to all men (Titus 2:11).
- #8 – Salvation comes only by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8).
- #9 – There is no difference between Jew and Gentile; all must be justified by grace (Romans 3:22-24, 29, 30).
- #10 – We are justified by grace, not by works (Titus 3:5-7).
- #11 – Some, however, turn God's grace into lasciviousness (Jude 4).
- #12 – Grace does not give us license to sin (Romans 6:15).
- #13 – Grace teaches us to deny ungodliness, to live righteously, and to be zealous of good works (Titus 2:11-14).
- #14 – Grace is the power of Christ (2 Corinthians 12:9).
- #15 – Grace looses us from sin's dominion (Romans 6:14).
- #16 – Grace is given to us for obedience to the faith, not for disobedience (Romans 1:5).
- #17 – Never despise the power of God's grace (Hebrews 10:29).

Footnotes

1. See John 12:34; 15:25; etc.
2. See Acts 18:15; 22:3; etc.
3. See Luke 2:22-24; Acts 15:5, 24; etc.
4. Romans 2:15.
5. Romans 1:28.
6. Nehemiah 9:13.
7. Romans 3:26.
8. Romans 3:21.
9. It was “by faith” that Abel “offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous” (Hebrews 11:4). And it was “through faith” that Moses “kept the passover, and the sprinkling of blood” (Hebrews 11:28).
10. John 1:29.
11. Specific instructions were given regarding the inflicting of penalties for the violation of the Moral Law (See Leviticus 24:16-20). These Civil Laws reflected mercy as well as justice (See Numbers 35:11-15).
12. 1 Peter 2:13; Romans 13:1.
13. The National Bible Press, Philadelphia, 1958.
14. John Calvin, Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, trans. by William Pringle (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1949), Vol. 1, p 277, comment on Matt. 5:17.
15. John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, bk. 2, chap. 7, sec. 15, trans. by John Allen (7th American ed., rev.; Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), Vol. 1, p 392.
16. Martin Luther, “Wider die Antinomer” (Against the Antinomians) in Sammtliche Schriften, ed. by Joh[ann] Georg Walch, Vol. 20 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1890), cols. 1613-1614.
17. Samuel Mather, The Gospel of the Old Testament (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1834), Vol. 1, p 210.
18. D. L. Moody, Weighed and Wanting, Addresses on the Ten Commandments, (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1898), p 10-17.
19. Charles H. Spurgeon, The Gospel of the Kingdom, comment on Matt. 5:17-20 (New York: The Baker & Taylor Co., 1893), p 47-48.
20. C. H. Spurgeon, Sermons, 2d series (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Co., 1857), sermon 18, p 280.
21. John Wesley, Works, Sermon 25 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan [reprint of 1872 ed.]), Vol. 5, p 317.
22. John Wesley, Sermon 25, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” Sermons on Several Occasions, Vol. 1 (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1836), p 221-222.
23. Baptist Publication Society, Tract 64.
24. New Hampshire Confession, article 12 [According to Philip Schaff, The Creeds of Christendom, (New York: Harper, 1919), Vol. 3, p 746.]
25. Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, article 7 [According to Schaff, p 491.]
26. Thirty-nine Articles, revised, article 6 [According to Schaff, p 816: Same as article 7 of the Church of England Articles of Religion.]
27. Articles of Religion, article 6 [According to Schaff, p 808: Same as article 7 of the Church of England Articles of Religion.]
28. Formula of Concord, article 6 [According to Schaff, p 131.]
29. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 19 [According to Schaff, p 641.]
30. Savoy Declaration [According to Schaff, p 718, same as the quotation from the Westminster Confession.]
31. Philadelphia Confession [According to Schaff, p 738, same as the quotation from the Westminster Confession.]
32. O.C.S. Wallace, What Baptists Believe, p 81. Copyright 1934 by the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville.
33. J. Philip Hyatt, “God’s Decrees for Moral Living.” The Teacher, 57 (Oct., 1943), 5. Copyright, Sunday School Board of the So. Baptist Convention.