

Sermon on Mount (19)
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Sermon Text: Matthew 5:21-48 NKJV

Having completed vv17-20 last week—I thought it would be helpful, before we actually come to v21, to spend a few messages addressing the issue of law in a more general way—thus I want to spend this hour considering the subject of law in a very generic manner, and then this afternoon, narrow our focus to deal with some interpretive issues with regards to vv21-48...

I think I'm right in suggesting that fewer subjects are more necessary in our day than a careful study of the meaning and place of the moral law of God—there exists great confusion what the NT means by the term “law”—and frankly, no small amount of this confusion is because the NT itself often speaks of the law in various ways—sometimes we're said not to be under law, and yet other times described as fulfilling, keeping, and doing the law...

Let me begin with a few clarifications—[1] for many of you, much of what I'm about to say is review, in fact some of what I'll say this morning I said last week, [2] for some of you what I'm about to say may be difficult to understand—that is, it will demand that you put forth a measure of mental energy, but [3] for all of you, what I'm about to say is of extreme importance—in fact I would argue, fewer things have a more practical impact upon our lives than a proper understanding of the saint's relation to the law—this isn't some abstract subject that makes good for a theological debate—nothing less than the salvation and comfort of our souls is at stake...

- I. The Meaning of Law in the NT
- II. The Superior Nature of the Moral Law
- III. The Relation of the Moral Law to Christians

- I. The Meaning of the Law in the NT

- A. The ceremonial system or law

1. Oftentimes the NT Scriptures use the term “law” as a reference to the more ceremonial and thus temporal law of the sacrificial system...
2. Heb.10:1—“for the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect...”
3. Here the word “law” has primary reference to the ceremonial system with its sacrifices, priesthood, and tabernacle/temple...
4. Let me suggest a few reasons—[a] the law is said to be a shadow of things to come—“for the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things...”
5. A shadow in Scripture is something that points to something—it is a type or figure of—“the good things to come...”
6. Thus the ceremonial law was a type or shadow of gospel—which was the good things to come—and when the reality comes the shadow is no more...
7. Notice [b] the law is expressly spoken of as sacrifices offered year by year—“can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year...”
8. John Gill—“By [law] is not meant the moral law, for that is not a shadow of future blessings, but a system of precepts...but the ceremonial law is intended; this was a ‘shadow’, a figure, a representation of something true, real, and substantial; was dark and obscure, yet had in it, and gave, some glimmering light; and was like a shadow, fleeting and transitory: and it was a shadow of good things; of Christ himself, who is the body, the sum and substance of it...”

- B. The Mosaic Law as a means of justification

1. Oftentimes, especially within the letters of the apostle Paul, the term “law” is used of the entire Mosaic system considered as a means for justification...
2. By “Mosaic Law [or system]” I refer to the entire law given to the nation of Israel, comprising the moral, judicial, and ceremonial law...
3. The Jews of Jesus’ day [as seen in the scribes and Pharisees], were attempting to obey this law as a means for their acceptance with God...
4. Gal.2:15-16—“we who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, 16 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...”
5. These are the words of Paul to Peter concerning his apparent hypocritical behavior towards the Gentles in Antioch (v11)...
6. The majority of Jews in Jesus’ day, and the days of the apostles, were seeking to be justified before God by keeping the law...
7. By “law” here is meant the whole Mosaic system, including the Ten Commandments, but also including the judicial and ceremonial aspects of the law...
8. Paul is reminding Peter that they are no longer bound to that entire system as a means to find acceptance with God...
9. Notice v14b—“I said to Peter before them all, If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews...”
10. In other words—Peter Himself was no longer living according to the temporal aspects of the law—and yet he was making some distinction between the Jews and Gentiles...
11. Paul makes very clear in v16 that we are no longer bound to the law as a means of our acceptance with God but are justified by faith...
12. Thus by “law” here is meant the entire Mosaic law, that includes the judicial, ceremonial, and moral aspects...

C. The moral law as summarized in Ten Commandments

1. Oftentimes the NT Scriptures use the term “law” in a more narrowed sense to refer to the abiding law as summarized in the Ten Commandments...
2. In fact, if we were to tally all of the uses of the term “law”—I think we would find that this is the most common way the NT uses it...
3. Rom.2:11-16—“for there is no partiality with God. 12 For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law 13 (for not the hearers of the law *are* just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; 14 for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, 15 who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*) 16 in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel...”
4. Notice several phrases relative to our purposes—[1] v14—“Gentiles, who do not have the law...”—this refers to pagans who are without the revealed will of God...
5. They have never seen nor read the Scriptures—and as a result they are without the law in this sense—they are without the written law...
6. Notice [2] v14—“by nature do the things in the law...”—this refers to a general morality common to all men by nature...
7. Notice [3] v15—“who show the work of the law written in their hearts...”—that is—they possess a knowledge of God’s law as made in His image...

II. The Superior Nature of the Moral Law

A. It has its beginning at creation

1. This is the place we must begin—the moral law of God has its historical beginning in the creation of man, upon whose heart it was written...

2. That Adam had commands [or at least a command] is evident from Gen.2:16-17—“and the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...”
 3. Our Reformed and Puritan forefathers have taught that the law given to Adam was the same law as summarize in the Ten Commandments...
 4. Shorter Catechism [Q.40]—“What did God at first reveal to man for the rule of his obedience? A. The rule which God at first revealed to man for his obedience, was the moral law.
 5. Q.41—“Wherein is the moral law summarily comprehended? A. The moral law is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments...”
 6. Rom.5:12-14—“therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned -- 13 (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. 14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come...”
 7. From v12 till the end of this chapter, the apostle is contrasting the first and last Adams—Adam as the federal head of all men, and Christ as representative of His elect...
 8. In vv12-14 Paul is concerned with Adam the first as he acted as representative of all men without exception...
 9. V12—“therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned...”
 10. All men die because all men sin—both in Adam [we might call this positional sin], and in themselves [we might call this personal sin]...
 11. In vv13-14 Paul sets out to prove that while the Ten Commandments had not been formally given until Moses—the essence of that law yet existed in some form...
 12. For our purposes I want to briefly examine these two verses, notice [1] v13—“for until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law...”
 13. In short—because there was sin during the time between Adam and Moses, there of necessity was law—for—“sin is not imputed when there is no law...”
 14. Notice [2] v14—“nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come...”
 15. Because there was a law between Adam and Moses, there was sin between Adam and Moses, and thus death...
 16. By “the likeness of the transgression of Adam” is meant—sin against an express commandment—Adam sinned against the express, verbal command—you shall not eat of the tree of knowledge...
 17. Notice those during the time of Moses are also said to sin in this way—as from Moses onward, man sinned against the express, verbal commands given on Mount Sinai...
 18. The point here is this—Adam and those who lived after Mount Sinai, sinned against the law expressly—yet—those between Adam and Moses still sinned...
 19. In other words—there is a universal law, which was essentially given to Adam, binding upon those in the world during the patriarchal period, and re-given on Mount Sinai...
 20. Now my question is this—what law could this be—my friends, it can only refer to the moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments...
- B. It was uniquely given at Mt. Sinai
1. As we have seen from Rom.5:13-14 the moral law of God, that is upon the heart of man by nature, was reissued in a more formal and systematic way...
 2. But what I want you to here notice is that the Ten Commandments were given on Mount Sinai with unusual and undeniable uniqueness...
 3. Notice [1] they were alone written by the hand of God, Ex.32:16—“now the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God engraved on the tablets...”
 4. Ex.31:18—“...He [God] gave Moses two tablets of the Testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God...”
 5. All other words [judicial and ceremonial] God gave to Moses who wrote them down—only the Ten words were written with God’s hand...

6. Notice [2] they were alone spoken by the voice of God, Ex.20:1—“and God spoke all these words, saying...”
7. All other laws [judicial and ceremonial] God spoke to Moses who mediated them to the people—only the Ten words were spoke by the voice of God...
8. Notice [3] they were alone placed within the ark of God, 1Ki.8:9—“and there was nothing in the ark except the two tables of stone, which Moses put there at Horeb...”
9. All other laws [judicial and ceremonial] were put outside the ark or behind it—no law was put in the ark but the ever abiding moral law of God...
10. Why—for two reasons—[a] because over the ark would sit the mercy seat, upon which blood would be poured every year...
11. This illustrated the fact that their sins [which were violations of two tables] were covered by blood and thus atoned for...
12. But [b] because the ark of the covenant was a picture of Christ, who would have the law of God within His heart, fulfilling it on our behalf...
13. Thus putting the Ten Commandments within the ark foretold of the life and death of Christ—His active and passive obedience...

C. It has a continuing presence in the NT

1. Because the moral of God, as summarized in the Ten Commandments, had its historical beginning at creation, and was uniquely given at Sinai, its NT presence ought not to surprise us...
2. Now there is no possible way to examine all of the many places within the NT where the presence of the Ten Commandments is found—let me suggest a few...
3. Rom.13:8-10—“owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if *there is* any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love *is* the fulfillment of the law [cp.Lev.19:18]...”
4. Jas.2:8-12—“if you really fulfill *the* royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well; 9 but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one *point*, he is guilty of all. 11 For He who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. So peak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty...”
5. Notice [a] the law is to be fulfilled, v8—“if you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, You shall love your neighbor as yourself, you do well...”
6. By “royal law” James refers to the law of the king—it is a supreme law given by Royalty—it is the law of our Lawgiver...
7. In v12 it is described as “the law of liberty”—which harkens back to the fact that the Ten Commandments was given to a liberty people...
8. Ex.20:1—“and God spoke all these words saying: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of th4 land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me, etc...”
9. Notice [b] the law is a unit or unbroken whole, v10—“for whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all...”
10. In other words—the law is a single whole—it continues within the NC community as a whole—as a single law...

III. The Relation of the Moral Law to Christians

A. They are free from the curse of the law

1. Here I refer to the fact that the by nature we are all under the condemnation of the law—which is eternal death...
2. Gal.3:10-14—“for as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed *is* everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them." 11 But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God *is* evident, for "the just shall live by faith." 12 Yet the

law is not of faith, but "the man who does them shall live by them." 13 Christ has 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"), 14 that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith..."

3. This passage divides humanity into two groups—those who are “of the works of the law” and those who “of faith...”
 4. By nature we are all under the law as a covenant of works—we are attempting to find acceptance with God through works of the law...
 5. And this is possible, providing we—“continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them...”
 6. Because we are born sinners and sin from the beginning, we are all under the curse of the law—which is eternal death...
 7. Notice v13—“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us...”—that is, Christ bore the penalty of the law thereby delivering us from it...
 8. Thus a Christian, has been delivered from the curse or condemnation of the law—he is freed from the law as a covenant of works...
 9. And in this sense he never again has any relation to it—he is freed from the law in that it can no longer condemn him for his sins...
 10. But oh my friends, if this is true, then how miserable is that person who has never been delivered from the curse of the law...
- B. They are free from the bondage of the law
1. Here I refer to the relation the law had to us as bound to the power and dominion of sin—strictly speaking we’re not so much bound to the law as the law helps to bind our chains to sin...
 2. In 1Cor.15:56 the apostle makes this interesting statement—“the strength of sin is the law...”—that is—it tightens sin’s grip upon us...
 3. Let me illustrate—think of Pharaoh who commanded the Hebrews to make bricks without the necessary straw...
 4. The fact that the Hebrews lacked the ability to comply with the demands of Pharaoh—only increased their misery and bondage...
 5. So it is with the law—the fact that it makes demands of us without providing the needed ability needed—only stirs up our willingness to rebel against it...
 6. It—in this sense—gives strength to sin—the law, as it comes to us in our native condition, demands what we can not do and thus tightens sin’s grip upon us...
 7. John Murray—“The law, therefore, instead of relieving or relaxing our bondage to sin, intensifies and confirms that bondage. The more the light of the law shines upon and in our depraved hearts, the more the enmity of our minds is roused to opposition, and the more it is made manifest that the mind of the flesh is not subject to the law of God, neither can be...”
 8. Rom.6:14—“for sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace...”—this is a favorite verse for those who attempt to divorce Christians from any obligation to the moral law...
 9. Notice a few things—[a] whatever this verse means it is true of every Christian regardless of what age he lived—it is as true of Abraham as it was of Paul...
 10. Regardless whether a man lived in the Old or New Testament era—a converted person is no longer under the law but under grace...
 11. Notice [b] we must remind ourselves of the entire verse—oftentimes, only the latter half is quoted with no regard to the first...
 12. But in rightly understanding the latter half we have to keep in mind the first—thus the conjunction “for”—“for you are not under law but under grace...”
 13. The latter half of the verse is a reason for the first part—“sin shall not have dominion over you, for [or because] you are not under law but under grace...”
 14. In other words—sin no longer has mastery over you because you now have the grace needed to live righteously...
 15. To be under the law is to be bound to do the law without the grace needed—this was one of the reasons Christ came to earth—to give us grace to keep the commandments...

16. Notice [c] this interpretation is bore out by the broader context, v15—“what then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not...”
17. In other words—grace was never intended to remove our obligation to obey God—but to enable us to comply with our obligation...
18. Thus beginning with v16 to the end of the chapter, the apostle contrasts our former lives as a slave to sin and our new life as a slave of righteousness...
19. V19—“I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness...”
20. Think back to Pharaoh and the Hebrew slaves—let’s say that Pharaoh had a son and for some reason he commanded the same thing of him...
21. But because of his love for his son, he not only commands him to make bricks, but gives him an abundance of straw and several servants to help...
22. Now the son, provided he was an obedient son, would delight in making bricks for his father and the task would be far from a burden...
23. So too—what happens in the gospel is that we are changed from slaves to sons—and thus the law comes as the voice of our Father, in the hand of our Savior...
24. Furthermore, it comes accompanied with all the straw [or grace] necessary for us to delightfully and effectively make bricks...
25. 1Jn.5:3—“for this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome...”
26. Rom.7:4-6—“therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another -- to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God. 5 For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. 6 But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not *in* the oldness of the letter...”
27. Notice two things—[a] the law and the sinner, v5—“the sinful passions which were aroused by the law,” and [b] the law and the saint, v6—“but now we have been delivered from the law, etc...”
28. Gal.5:16-18—“I say then: walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law...”
29. Notice [a] the phrase—“but if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law” is identical to Rom.6:14—“for sin shall not have dominion over, for you are not under law but grace...”
30. Notice [b] the Spirit and the law, Ezek.36:26—“I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep my judgments and do them...”

C. They are under the law as a rule of life

1. Christians are under the law as it is the law of Christ, 1Cor.9:21—“...not being without the law of God but under law toward Christ...”
2. Here the apostle describes himself in some sense as “under the law”—but only as the law has reference or relation to Christ...
3. In other words—the law comes to the Christian in “the hand of Christ”—which means—it no longer condemns them nor commands them without grace...
4. But this doesn’t mean that the law changes as to its content—for the law remains law in that it [1] reveals our sin, and [2] shows us our duty...
5. Notice [1] the law reveals our sin—according to 1Jn.3:4—“sin is lawlessness...”—it is a violation of the moral standard of God...
6. The law continues to show the Christian what sin is, humbling him, and driving him back to Christ for strength and grace...
7. Notice [2] the law shows our duty, Jn.14:15—“if you love me, keep my commandments...”—that is—obedience to the law of Christ is an expression of love to Christ...
8. This can be illustrated in the Heidelberg Catechism which has been divided into three sections—man’s guilt, deliverance, and gratitude...

9. The first section shows how we are all condemned under the law because of our sins, the second shows how Christ came to deliver us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...
10. The third part then shows how Christians can show or express their gratitude for deliverance which includes an exposition of the Ten Commandments...