

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 22

The Law – Part Two

Many thanks are due Charles Mickey for filling in last week with a superb overview of Paul and the law. This week we are “back in the saddle again” (thank you Gene Autry) as we continue our study on Paul and the law.

I was in ninth grade when I decided I should read the entire Bible (Genesis 1 through Revelation 22) that year. I did not make it. Genesis was a fine read – I loved the early stories, thought the life of Abraham interesting, and found the Joseph story a page-turner!

Then I got into Exodus. It seemed to follow the movie (The 10 Commandments) fairly well. Careful reading did show me some liberties taken in the Hollywood drama. But it was still a great read, until about the middle of Exodus. Then things began to slow up a bit.

After Exodus, I hit what I would have termed, Biblical quicksand. The more common names are Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This was a ninth grader's quagmire! I could read a chapter and before getting far into it, I would find my mind reciting each word, but my thoughts understanding none of it. It seems almost blasphemous to suggest that the Scriptures could be boring, but I know no other word to use for me at the time.¹ My reading time was always at night before going to sleep. That did not make the reading any easier!

I confess; I did not make it through to Revelation that year. In fact, I did not get to the New Testament. Nor did I get to Psalms. Fatigue set in somewhere in Leviticus and I shelved the idea of reading through the Bible for another year.

The portions of scripture that caused me such struggle were the legal sections. I found them at times hard to understand, difficult to focus upon, irrelevant to my life, and out of date and place.

Even today, when those newly trying to understand the Christian faith tell me they are going to read the Bible, I urge them to find another reading plan beyond simply starting at page one and attacking it as if it were a novel. A good option is

¹ Reading through this lesson Edward Fudge reminded us, “**Not without reason has Leviticus been called ‘the vast graveyard of Through-the-Bible plans.’**”

to get one of the great reading plans that combine a section from the Old Testament, the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs each day.²

As I have aged, I have found the same portions of Scripture interesting and a bit more understandable, although I confess it is still at times a difficult read! It is an area we will consider in our class today, and, hopefully, we will make it a bit more understandable to all.

TODAY'S ISSUES

We are looking at Paul and the law from a slightly different perspective than Charles gave in the overview class last week. Charles provided us a good overview that helped us understand the different ways Paul used the word "law." Charles then used passages from Galatians and Romans to illustrate and teach important lessons from Paul's writings on the law.

Our goal this week is to go into greater detail from the perspective of the Old Testament concept of "law" to give us a framework for some further enriched study of Paul and the law. Understanding the Old Testament law is important if we are to address important questions about Paul's views on:

1. How does the law apply to the individual? Here we consider, among other things, the role of the law in salvation and in holiness.
2. How does the law apply to the church? Should the church worship on the Sabbath (Saturday)? What of the worship lessons and admonitions are relevant today?
3. How does the law apply to society? Should America (or any government) hold to the legal foundations given Israel? If so, which ones -- civil? Criminal? Some of both? Should a country rightly appropriate the promises that accompanied the law as given to Israel?

This class focus on understanding the Old Testament law will lay the foundation for our study next week as we consider what Paul has to say about these issues.

THE MEANING OF "LAW"

Charles gave us a good background data to see that Paul used the word "law" in a number of different ways.³ Paul was writing in Greek, using the Greek word

² A great layout for this is found in the "One Year Bible" published by Tyndale and available at most Christian bookstores or Amazon.

³ Charles's excellent lesson is available for download at our website www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

nomos (νομος) for law. As we study the Old Testament law this week, we will be considering the Hebrew instead. Both the Greek and Hebrew carry some different connotations than the English word “law.”

In English, we use the word “law” to mean a great number of things. In the Oxford English Dictionary (Second edition) the entry for “law” continues for six pages! Perhaps it is just my legal background, however, I suspect when most of us use the term “law,” we think of some rule or legal code. “Law” is, for many of us, the terms of conduct by which we (or our society) are expected to live.

The Hebrew is not so constrictive (nor is the Greek) as this modern concept. The Hebrew word most often translated “law” is *torah* (הַרְוֹת). It occurs 220 times in the Old Testament and the core meaning of the word is “instruction.”⁴ In this way it is distinguished from the modern concept of “law” as a code of behavior with accompanying penalties for violations. There are certainly times where the Hebrew is referencing what we would consider “laws,” regulated rules for life in society. But there are times where the *torah* instructions are more than simple “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not.”

The first five books of the Old Testament (the “Pentateuch” or the “Five Books of Moses”) are a splendid example of the breadth of meaning in *torah*. These five books are called *the Torah*, yet they contain a lot more than simply laws or moral instructions. We have the creation account, the stories of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We have the famine that takes the Israelites into Egypt and the Moses story that results in the exodus from Egypt. These were the easy sections for my reading in ninth grade. They are a part of the *torah*, the Old Testament “law” which are instructive in a different yet no less real sense than the rules handed down on Sinai.

With an understanding of the fuller meaning of the *torah* law, we can now focus more carefully on those difficult portions of the Old Testament *Torah* that brought me into many nights of sleep so long ago!

A WORD ON OUR APPROACH

If one reads the academic world on the Old Testament *torah*, one is met with a wide variety of interpretations and understandings based, more often than not, on the presuppositions of those writing. We should pause for a moment and explain this, not only to broaden our understanding of the different views, but to also put our approach into clear understanding for this class.

Early on the church understood the Old Testament *Torah* in a straightforward

⁴ See Jenni, Ernst, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Hendrickson 1997), v. 3 at 1415.

fashion. There were certainly elements that sought to understand the Old Testament in an allegorical sense (the Alexandrian school, for example), but the New Testament church certainly took the *Torah* as law handed down from God to Moses.

This accepted approach understood the laws in Exodus to Numbers as that revealed from God to Moses. Deuteronomy was understood to be Moses' inspired exposition on those laws.

This view held course, by and large, for over one thousand years. By the 1800's, however, certain scholars began asserting that the laws in the *Torah* were actually given over different stretches of time, much later than the life of Moses. In 1878 a German theologian named Julius Wellhausen published a work that rippled through certain academic circles up to and including today.⁵ Wellhausen argued that the Old Testament, including the *Torah*, was originally the work of a number of different schools and traditions in Israel. The works Exodus to Numbers had significant portions that Wellhausen believed were written by a priestly group in Israel and compiled sometime around the 500 or 400's B.C.

As one reads Old Testament works, even today, one can find those who follow this school of thought, albeit modified a good bit as further scholarship has shown Wellhausen wrong on a number of fronts.

Subsequent to Wellhausen, archaeology has unearthed a number of ancient texts from the Semitic cultures of the Near East that demonstrate the ancient nature of the Israelite code in the *Torah*.⁶ These findings show that the Israelite *Torah* clearly relates in form and substance to aspects of the legal structures of other communities in and around Israel at the time of the Biblical events.

Accordingly, as scholars have analyzed and considered this wealth of archaeological information, a rebirth has occurred in academia reasserting the antique integrity of the Old Testament *Torah* in its claimed time period.⁷

We take in this class the straightforward perspective. Namely we accept the claims of the Old Testament *Torah* as accurate in its description of its origin and historical development.

⁵ Wellhausen, Julius. *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*

⁶ See, for example, the examples in Matthews, Victor and Benjamin, Don, *Old Testament Parallels – Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (Paulist Press 2006).

⁷ A good review of this history can be found in Vanhoozer, Kevin, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, (Baker 2005) at 442ff.

BREAKDOWN OF THE *TORAH* LAW

Let us breakdown the *Torah* law into sections in order to better understand it. The historical background that places the law into context begins with God creating all things in Genesis 1 and 2. Genesis then gives the early history that ultimately leads us to the Israelites in bondage in Egypt. Exodus begins with the birth of the prophet Moses, through whom God brings the Israelites out of bondage. It is also through Moses as prophet that God calls the Israelites into a unique covenant, giving his commandments as a part of that covenant.

After the Jews have left Egypt, they arrive at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19 and Moses ascends to receive the law from Yahweh God. In classic style (by that we mean similar to what would have been done in that day among nearby cultures) God offers a covenant to the Israelites. The core of the covenant is then set out:

1. The history that led up to the covenant is emphasized as **God's acts of divine grace**. "You yourselves have seen ... how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Ex. 19:4). This was a selection of Israel by God, not at all based on Israel's merit.
2. Israel's **response is to be one of obedience** to God as Lord. "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant..." (Ex. 19:5).
3. This **response will produce blessing to and a special relationship for Israel**. "If you will indeed obey my voice... you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples... you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex. 19:5-6). The word for "treasured possession" is *segulla*. It references a King's private money that he can use however he wishes, apart from the national treasury.⁸ As Waltke puts it, "Israel will be the King's 'private property,' personally owned for his personal use."⁹
4. There are also **curse for violations** of this covenant. Should the law not be obeyed, Israel will suffer. Before striking the Jews with a plague because of their sin making the golden calf, God tells Moses, "When the time comes for me to punish, I will punish them for their sin" (Ex.

⁸ These were the sources David set aside for Solomon's building of the temple (1 Chron. 29:1-5). Similarly see the use of the word as Solomon describes his personal fortune amassed in Eccles. 2:4-11.

⁹ Waltke, Bruce, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Zondervan 2007) at 407.

32:30-35 (NIV).

It is into this framework of a covenant based on God's grace that the law is given. The law was not given so that the Jews might merit God's favor. Rather the laws were the response of God to the favor that called the Jews into covenant. It was part of God's bounty giving the Jews a blessing.¹⁰ As Vanhoozer puts it,

The law is not seen as a means of gaining God's favor: his favor is shown in the redemption of Israel and in his giving them the law. The law shows them how "to be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:45).¹¹

Into the framework of this covenant, we have God setting out laws for the Israelites. These laws contain ten commandments that stand out from the others as ones written by the very finger of God onto stone tablets. (Ex. 20:1-17; 31:18). The Ten Commandments themselves follow, in a nutshell, the same covenant structure as the overall covenant between God and the Israelites:

1. The history that led up to the covenant is emphasized as **God's acts of divine grace**. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). This was a selection of Israel by God, not at all based on Israel's merit.
2. Israel's **response is to be one of obedience** to God as Lord. "You shall have no other gods before me ... You shall not make for yourself a carved image... You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain... Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy... Honor your father and your mother... You shall not murder... You shall not commit adultery... You shall not steal... You shall not bear false witness... You shall not covet" (Ex. 20:1-17).
3. This **response will produce blessing** "Showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments ...that your days may be long in the land" (Ex. 20:6, 12).
4. There are also **curse for violations** of this covenant. "I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children ... the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name..." (Ex. 20:5, 7).¹²

¹⁰ See Vanhoozer at 443.

¹¹ *Ibid.* at 444.

¹² This pattern of divine grace, covenant obligation, covenant blessing and covenant curse is one primary element in the representative work of Jesus for our salvation. On behalf of all who will

Following the giving of these Ten Commandments, Exodus gives some additional moral principles and instructions in Exodus 20-23. Following that, instructions are given for worship, including the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus 25-40.

The disobedience of the Israelites is shown almost immediately in the recounting of the creation and worshipping of the golden calf (Ex. 32-34).

The *Torah* then returns to issues and instructions related to worship in Leviticus and Numbers. Sacrificing instructions are given in Leviticus 1-7. The establishment and activities of the priesthood take center stage in Leviticus 8-16 and 21-22. Following next are the instructions for worship regarding holy days and rules for holy years in Leviticus 23-25. Worship is further the subject of instruction in Numbers 2-10 and 15.

Deuteronomy gives us an exposition by Moses on the instructions God has already imparted. In chapters 12-26, Moses expands on the Ten Commandments giving greater details on worship, idolatry, blasphemy, and the Sabbath. He also goes into greater detail on observing feasts and celebration days, as well as sacrifices.

ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THE *TORAH* LAW

Mosaic Law and current legal systems

Scholars have tried to devise ways of classifying the laws of Israel in the *Torah* that correspond to legal categories of our modern systems. The German scholar Albrecht Alt made the groundbreaking effort in 1934, but further study has shown a good bit of fair criticism of these efforts.¹³

These efforts have some merit in explaining that some of the *Torah* laws are “casuistic” meaning they have an “if ... then” structure. These are laws that say, “If you do this... then this will happen.” A second category Alt gave was “apodictic” laws. These laws are the “Thou shalt nots...” categories.¹⁴ While these categories help sort and explain some of the laws, subsequent scholarship

finally be saved, God initiated grace through Christ; Christ accepted man’s covenant obligations; meriting the covenant blessings and bearing man’s covenant curses. The curses given in the Old Testament closely parallel the scenes portrayed in Psalm 22, for example, which were fulfilled in Christ’s death. For more detailed discussion, come back next week!

¹³ Alt, A., *The Origins of Israelite Law* (1934) translated and readable in English in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* by R. A. Wilson (1967).

¹⁴ Admittedly the name “apodictic” is not in everyone’s daily vocabulary. It means “necessarily or demonstrably true, incontrovertible.” Alt applied it to the laws that were not conditional, but were absolutes, like, “Thou shalt not murder.”

has shown that the categories are not steadfast.

This makes sense if we consider that our legal system today is quite different from that of ancient Israel. We should not expect our conventions to match up evenly. Still, a good bit of matching is possible because our legal codes, especially those from Western civilization and the Anglo Saxon heritage, were based on the Mosaic Law and other biblical concepts.

Our English common law system, which is the backbone of the American and British legal system, principally originated from King Alfred the Great in England (849-899). A number of scholars have noted that Alfred used the Mosaic Code (especially Exodus 20-23) as a basis for his Book of Laws.¹⁵

Mosaic Law and Israelite Society

As these laws and rules are set out, we are not given every law Israel needed or lived by. Reading through the rest of the Old Testament shows that Israel had other laws that governed their society.

For example, in Proverbs, it is clear that Israel had laws pertaining to property and surety that were not set forth in the Old Testament legal codes of the *Torah*. Prov. 6:1-3 provides,

My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor,
have given your pledge for a stranger,
if you are snared in the words of your mouth,
caught in the words of your mouth,
then do this, my son, and save yourself,
for you have come into the hand of your neighbor:
go, hasten, and plead urgently with your neighbor.

We can tell from reading this that there were property and surety laws that were in place in Israeli society. Those were laws of man, not laws set in place by God on Sinai. This Proverb then shows us how a godly man lives in reference to those laws, even though the surety laws themselves were never set out by God in the Bible. This is one of many examples demonstrating that Israel had laws and legal structures beyond that given in the Old Testament.

So the Old Testament was not the exclusive legal code for life, but it had the legal code God had delivered for instruction (*torah*). We might see God's code in the *torah* as the required unchangeable laws. Israel then had discretion to set up laws

¹⁵ See Vanhoozer at 442. Winston Churchill also makes this point in *The Island Race*, (Corgi 1964) v. II at 219. Edward Fudge also has a paper on this issue that can be accessed on line at www.edwardfudge.com/written/mosestorts.doc.

as needed to further society (as long as such laws followed the spirit and did not contradict the laws given by God).

Having said that, however, there are laws covering a number of different areas of life. Laws pertaining to:

- Sorcery (Ex. 22:17)
- Kidnapping (Ex. 21:6)
- Perjury (Ex. 20:16)
- Bribery (Ex. 23:8)
- Cheating in business (Lev. 19:36; Dt. 25:13-15)
- Property rights (Dt. 19:14; 27:17)
- Damage caused by animals or fire (Ex. 22:4-5)
- Return of lost property (Dt. 2:1)
- Sexual taboos, including adultery and rape (Lev 18; Dt. 22)
- Personal injuries and torts, including assessment of punitive damages (Ex. 21)
- Assault and battery (Ex. 21:24-25; Lev. 24:19-20; Dt. 19:21)
- Homicide (Ex. 20; Dt. 21)
- Theft (Ex. 22)
- Debts (Ex. 22:25-27; Dt. 24; Lev. 25; Dt. 23:15-16)

These laws gave core instructions and principles that defined and provided a basis for other laws to follow.¹⁶

The power and effect of Israelite Law

The laws given in the Torah are not simple directions of Moses or others. These were laws that originated from God himself. That brought a unique ethical dimension to all of these instructions, including those seemingly simple rules of society and conduct. Because God was the source of the laws, “the failure to

¹⁶ See the thorough discussion in the Anchor Bible Dictionary (Doubleday 1992), Vol. 4 at 243ff.

observe the law became an offense against the deity.”¹⁷ In this way, the laws of Israel differed from those of other ancient cultures. It is a similar distinction from our laws today!

How many of us have violated the speed limit when driving? As such, we are committing an offense against our state. If God, however, instructed us the speed limit to drive on a road, the offense for violating the law would be something quite different!¹⁸

This brought forth the cry from Moses, “what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?” (Dt. 4:8). The *Torah* statutes and rules were “commandments of the LORD your God” (Dt. 4:2).

With that warning, we should still see that many of the laws in the Old Testament were not in themselves a perfect reflection of God’s holiness. In fact, some were very clearly compromises God provided, made necessary by the sin of man. We can go back as early as Genesis to see this.

In Genesis 1, the world is free of violence. After Cain’s murder of Abel, violence begins to take over much of humanity. (Gen. 6:13 “the earth is filled with violence.”) The violence cries out to God who answers with a destructive flood. After the flood God lays out a legal principle: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image” (Gen 9:6). We see here a compromise between God’s ideal and the necessities of mankind’s fall. All life is sacred, yet to restrain violence, some lives are forfeited.

Jesus made this same point in reference to the Old Testament laws on divorce. Divorce was a compromise of God’s ideal for man necessitated by man’s shortcomings. Jesus explained that Moses allowed divorce, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” (Mt. 19:8).

Having pointed out that some of the *Torah* law were compromises, we should not fail to point out those teachings and commands that were morally ideal. The predominant two such commands were the ones Jesus listed as the greatest in the *Torah*:

- “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Dt. 6:5), and

¹⁷ *Ibid.* at 245.

¹⁸ Some one is bound at this moment to point out that Paul did say that we are to obey our governing officials in Romans 13!

- “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18).

NEXT WEEK

This review of the Old Testament law should provide us a good background to understand Paul’s teachings on the law. Paul knew the covenant from Sinai. He had studied it exhaustively. It is likely that he taught it. Yet Paul also knew that Jeremiah had prophesied of a coming day when a new covenant would be in place.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 32:31-34).

Paul lived that day. He saw the change in his own life and practice. He taught the new covenant throughout the world. What did that leave of the Old covenant? Where does that leave the instruction of the *Torah*? Come back next week to see!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “*Genesis ... Exodus ... Leviticus ... Numbers ... Deuteronomy*”.

These books are not always an easy read. But they are more than simply a long recitation of do’s and do not’s for the Jews. They have nuances and purposes that we shall discuss in the coming lesson. Take some time this week to read some of these books. Read different sections. Remember the root of “*torah*” is “instruction.” How does your reading “instruct you? Ask yourself, what applies today to me as an individual, to my church, to my society at large? Then come ready next week to discuss these issues.

2. “*You yourselves have seen ... Now therefore...*” (Ex. 19:4-5).

The Old Covenant found in the *Torah* was one initiated by God and his mercy. It was God who rescued the Israelites. It was God who delivered

them through the Red Sea and brought them to Sinai. It was God who set the covenant before them. In the same way, God has initiated the New Covenant by his mercy. God has rescued the sinner. God has delivered the sinner through death into eternal life. Just as this demanded a response from the Israelites, so it should demand one from us today. What is your response to God right now?

3. *“Love the LORD your God with all your heart”* (Dt. 6:5).

God gave the Israelite laws to teach holiness, to help society function, and to prepare a people for a coming salvation. In the midst of this, God had to make some laws that were less than ideal to try and bring the best out of situations broken by sin and the fallen nature of man. Yet God still put his moral best for mankind’s goal. To love God fully and to love our neighbor as ourselves is not fully achievable in this life, but that should never stop our best efforts in achieving such. As we have already learned in this class, we have the Holy Spirit at work in us to bring us release from the bondage of sin, and give us the power to walk in holiness. Let us choose to live in this power, rather than chained to the sins of our fallen nature!