

Law, Grace, & the Sabbath: Does A Christian Need to Obey the Old Testament Law

By Steve Ray

I sent this letter in response to a letter from a Baptist friend who said we are no longer “under the Law”. I thought this would help explain Christian understanding of Law and Grace.

Dear Jerry:

Hope you and your family are well. Having received your letter, I thought I would again respond. Please bear with me as I just right in.

Circumcision and the Sabbath

If you don't mind, and since this is my last letter for the foreseeable future, I would like to comment on your letter and pursue several points a little further. First about the Sabbath as *the* sign of the Mosaic covenant. I agree with you on this point if you say that as God's covenants progressed, He added new signs. If you say that it superseded circumcision, which I don't think you meant, I would have to disagree. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says in full agreement with you, “*God entrusted the sabbath to Israel to keep as a sign of the irrevocable covenant (cf. Ex. 31:16). The sabbath is for the Lord, holy and set apart for the praise of God, his work of creation, and his saving actions on behalf of Israel.*” Paragraph 2171.

I looked up the word *sign* in the Hebrew. The word for sign is ‘*owth* and is used almost one hundred times in the Old Testament. It is used to describe a variety of things. [Endnote 1] I have included a complete list of all the Old Testament usages of the word ‘*owth* for your information.

I have included other information I put together which we will both agree on completely. Circumcision is a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham, to give him a nation, with descendants as numerous as the sand of the sea.

Genesis 17:1: “*And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.*” [Endnote 2]

Genesis 17:10-14: “*This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is*

not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant.”

We see clearly that circumcision is the sign of the covenant, because God says it is so. He uses the word *sign* together with the word *covenant*. The words *sign* and *covenant* are only used together of the *rainbow* (Gen. 9:12, 13, 17) and of *circumcision*. They are not used together in the case of the Sabbath, but it is clear that the implication is.

We still find circumcision as a very real sign of the covenant well into the Mosaic Law and up until the time of Christ. The Sabbath does not supersede it, any more than it does the rainbow.

Leviticus 12:3 *“And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.”*

Joshua 5:2-5 *“At that time the LORD said unto Joshua, Make thee sharp knives, and circumcise again the children of Israel the second time. And Joshua made him sharp knives, and circumcised the children of Israel at the hill of the foreskins. And this is the cause why Joshua did circumcise: All the people that came out of Egypt, that were males, even all the men of war, died in the wilderness by the way, after they came out of Egypt. Now all the people that came out were circumcised: but all the people that were born in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of Egypt, them they had not circumcised.”*

John 7:22 *“Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers;) and ye on the Sabbath day circumcise a man.”*

Luke 2:21 *“And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”*

Philippians 3:5 *“Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, [of] the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee.”*

In the above verses we see Moses commanding the Jews under the Mosaic covenant to circumcise, then Joshua re-circumcising all those going into the Promised Land, then Jesus saying that Moses gave the Jews circumcision, then Jesus and Paul being circumcised. Circumcision remains a sign of the Old Covenant up until the New Covenant is established by Jesus at the institution of the Eucharist and with His death and resurrection.

In full agreement with you, we see the Sabbath as a sign between God and His people, as the covenants build upon each other. The Sabbath is a sign. The words *sign* and *Sabbath*, used together, are found in two passages:

Exodus 31:13 *“Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my Sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations; that ye may know that I am the LORD that doth sanctify you.”*

Ezekiel 20:12 *“Moreover also I gave them my Sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD that sanctify them.”*

There is nothing in this passage that indicates the cessation of circumcision and the implementation of the Sabbath as the sign of the covenant. The Sabbath was a sign, but not an exclusive sign of a covenant that somehow replaced circumcision. These passages refer to Sabbaths and signs but not as signs of a new covenant that replaces Abraham's. Covenants build on one another. They do not replace one another. The first covenant sign, that of the rainbow, still exists even today.

I hope I did not misunderstand you, and I think we agree completely. I appreciate you passing the references on to me. If I have misunderstood you, please let me know.

Salvation Discussion

Jerry, in the next paragraph it seems you take verses out of the overall biblical context and paste them together in an attempt to eliminate the need to obey God's commandments. You say that *“since the Ten Commandments were a ministry of death (2 Cor. 3:6-7) which ended at the cross (Gal. 3:19, 24-25), I cannot agree with the statement in the new catechism on page 502 which says that ‘all may attain salvation through faith, baptism, and the observance of the commandments’.*” Why do the Ten Commandments bring death? The Catechism says, *“According to Christian tradition, the Law is holy, spiritual, and good, [Endnote 3] yet still imperfect. Like a tutor (Gal. 3:24) it shows what must be done, but does not of itself give the strength, the grace of the Spirit, to fulfill it. Because of sin, which it cannot remove, it remains a law of bondage.”*[Endnote 4] This is a very concise paragraph. I would recommend you continue reading in the Catechism, and not stop with paragraph 2086 (page 504). Go back a few pages and read paragraphs 1961 - 1974. It is a wonderful overview of the Old and New Laws.

The Law cannot save, it does not give us the strength to obey, and therefore it is condemnation to us. In the law we are forbidden to sin, yet without grace we have no strength to obey. Our sinful nature inherited from Adam is inclined to sin, so we are condemned in our sins. The Law makes demands we cannot fulfill without the grace of God in Christ. The Law gives demands but no strength. At Calvary, we are freed from the curse of the Law, because Christ became the curse for us. He has given us His grace, through faith, and now we can obey His commands. The Moral Law of the Old Testament is subsumed into the Law of Christ which we are obligated to obey. In my seventh letter to you (October 7, 1994) I went into some detail on our relationship to the Law under grace and I hope you will look at it again.

Is the Law itself evil or sinful? Is the Law itself the problem? No, in fact we are told it is glorious. [Endnote 5] 2 Corinthians 3:7 *“But if the ministration of death, written and engraved in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away.”* It was not the Law that was evil, it was sinful man. The Law held out the character of God, and man being sinful fell short, so the Law condemned man. Now that we have forgiveness for sin, through the death of Christ, and the grace of God, we can obey His law and it is no longer condemnation for us but life. Is the Law no longer valid or required of us? Can we ignore the law of God? Please consider the following verses:

1 Corinthians 7:19 “*Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.*” [Endnote 6]

1 Corinthians 14:34 “*Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.*”

These passages are written to the same folks in Corinth that Paul later told that the Law was a ministry of death. The footnote gives an important perspective on this verse. I do not see Paul making such water tight compartments as you are constructing. God’s commands and works of law are quite different things. Paul did not consider the synonyms as you do. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says in paragraph 1967, “*The Law of the Gospel fulfills, refines, surpasses, and leads the Old Law to its perfection (Mat. 5:17 - 19).*” The negative prohibitions are now positive requirements. The Old Law is made new in Christ.

What was external law, is now internal action; what was commanded with no grace or strength provided, is now commanded with grace and the Spirit provided; what was once a negative prohibition, is now a positive command of action. The law has not been changed. The coin has only been flipped from the “letter-side” to the “spirit-side” of the Law. The Law remains and the *rest* of God now in Christ enables us to live righteously before God. One is not to be declared righteous only, one is to *be* righteous. This is the good work and obedience required of us. [Endnote 7] This is the “work” mentioned in James. But even this is not *our* work; it is the work of Christ in us. It is not *our* abilities. It is the grace of God and His Spirit working within us to enable us to have a *faith working itself out in love*. (Gal. 5:6). We are to work out our salvation, yet it is He that is working in us to will and to do (Phil. 2:12, 13).

In Galatians 5:18 Paul says, “*But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law.*” What does he mean? Among other things it simply means that the Spirit will give us the power to avoid the actions that violate the negative commands of the Law. Then, since we are living the fruits of the Spirit and loving our brother and our enemy (the whole Law encapsulated) we are already entering into the fullness of the *positive* side of the Law. By loving our neighbor (internal, positive, power from the Spirit to obey) we are not bound by the negative, external commands of the Law for we have already *exceeded* them. The spirit of the Law, the law of grace, *exceeds* the letter of the Law.

For example: **Do not murder!** It is negative, external, no strength provided to obey. Now the flip side of the coin: **Love your neighbor!** It is positive, internal, with God’s grace and Spirit to enable obedience. “Love your neighbor” is the flip side of “do not murder.” It is the same thing said in a positive way. Jesus came to fulfill the Law, to give it to us in its fullness, not to take it away. The character of God is the character of God, it does not change, and His desire for us to conform to it also does not change. He wants His people to be *like* Him, not just to have a declared righteousness. [Endnote 8] We exceed the requirements of the Law, when, by the Spirit, we live out the spirit of the Law, the good works spoken of so often in the Scriptures. Therefore Paul says in Galatians 5:23 after reciting the fruits of the Spirit, “. . . *against such there is no law.*” If the fruits of the Spirit are being manifested in our lives, we are not only obeying the Law, we are exceeding it and against such persons and behavior there is no law.

Matthew 5:17-20 *“Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.”*

Do you read the Sermon on the Mount as a sermon for another dispensation, or required of us today? Does this sound like Jesus no longer considers the Law of any importance? If you are reading this passage in an unbiased manner, doesn't it seem to imply He is not only holding us to the Law, but making it much *more* important and internal than the Old Testament requirements? Not only can you not kill, but you can't even be angry with your brother. The spirit of the Law is now required, not just the letter. Why isn't Jesus just telling us to just have faith in Him, that none of those old laws matter anymore? “Followers, you no longer have to be concerned with these Old Testament matters, they are ancient history, all you have to do is have faith in Me and you will get to heaven no matter what.” Jesus never said anything like this, yet many put these words into His mouth. Look at a few other verses:

1 John 5:3 *“For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.”*

Revelation 22:12-14 *“And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.”*

1 John 2:3-4 *“And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”*

Hebrews 5:9 *“And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him”.*

John 14:21 *“He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.”*

These are just a quick list of verses I put together in ten minutes; they are a small sampling. If I held to your view Jerry, as I once did, these verses, and a host of others, would cause me to sit back and reevaluate my theology. If I discovered that the early Church knew nothing of my shortsighted Fundamentalist view, it would make me sit back and wonder if my Fundamentalist theology was as tightly sewn as I thought.

You say in your letter, *“If we could be justified by keeping the commandments, then Christ's death on the cross was unnecessary (Gal. 2:21)”* [Endnote 9] As a Catholic, I heartily agree with you,

as has the Church for two millennia. We can bring to Christ nothing to earn our salvation and justification. As a son I can do nothing to earn my inheritance, but through disobedience I can disinherit myself. Christ and His grace are our only hope of salvation. Paul says “*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*” [Endnote 10] Even the obedience and work Paul demands is possible *only* through the grace of God. So, we are justified and saved by grace and grace alone. This grace is only available through the work of Christ on the cross, so how could we ever consider His death to be unnecessary?

Once we are *counted* (something quite different from “*declared*”) as righteous, can we ever lose it? Is it forever, no matter what? How does one prove such a bold declaration? Does our faith (belief at one-point-in-time) save us from all sins past, present and future? I used to believe this and I had my “proof texts.” Now I lament my old views, especially as I read my old “proof texts” in context and in the whole flow of salvation history. There was much in Scripture I had to ignore or twist in order to force the verses into my theological framework. And I emphasize *my theological framework* because each Protestant has to choose their doctrines and find a group somewhere (such as a “bible church”) that agrees with them. I am so glad to be freed from this self imposed infallibility.

I will cease on this point because we have belabored it in earlier letters. I would really suggest you read again the letter I sent you on October 7, 1994 regarding the Law and the Gospel. I’m sorry you and I can’t discuss these things further in the months to come.

The Last Three Paragraphs of your Letter

I will finish up with a few comments on the last three paragraphs of your letter. In your letter you say I misrepresent you: I do not misrepresent you and never have. If you think I have misrepresented you, then please show me where and how. Not only do I quote you accurately, but I know what you believe since I was once a Fundamentalist (until age 39) and even spent my childhood and teen years in *your* Calvary Baptist Church. If you are worried about misrepresentation then you could have written back (like you have this time) to insure against it. I make sure anyone reading *my* letters always reads the letter of the respondent, to make sure there is no misrepresentation. You said you cannot write letters because you don’t know everyone who has read mine. It is not necessary for you to know everyone who reads my letters in order to write your own. I would always include copies of yours along with my responses.

In your letter you say that my letters convey that you hate Catholics. I have never said, nor implied, that you hated Catholics, so please don’t misrepresent me. I think however, that you do hate the Roman Catholic Church (in the same manner we would *each* say we hate heresy or dislike the Jehovah’s Witness organization). One can love Catholics and hate the “Romish organization,” as Fundamentalists love to call the Catholic Church. I have never questioned your sincerity or love for others, or doubted that love was your long-term motivation. God will have to judge that for I certainly can’t read the intents of your heart. But just because love may be your motivation, that does not preclude your use of “calculated or clever tactics.” Such tactics are not necessarily wrong or ill-advised. They are what they are, tactics. And, you *do* use them, just like I was trained in evangelistic classes to use them. They are perfectly legitimate, but one should admit that they are used when they are.

Next, I never said you were a “Catholic basher.” You are much more refined than that. At least you’ve never been an open “basher” with me over the last six months. I don’t know, however,

whether that has been the case with your efforts over the last 20 years. I only have hints of how you and Veronica have treated others, especially your family, since you left the Church some twenty years ago. Considering the way your wife spoke with me on the phone, there is of course some question in my mind as to how refined you both actually are in the matter of loving your Catholic brethren.

You end your letter by saying that I should not hesitate to write if I have any questions. I have written this one last letter, since you changed your mind on the same day I received your letter. You told me on the phone that you do not want to meet, talk or write with me any more, and I will honor your request. I do however, think that your decision may have been made by someone other than yourself, and I think that the real reason for the discontinuation of our dialog is your frustration at coming up with the short end of the stick each time.

You may wonder why I am so persistent about these matters. One of the things I learned from Francis Schaeffer while studying with him in Switzerland, is that there is such a thing as absolute truth. If one thing is true, the opposite and opposing idea must be false. Two opposing “truths” cannot both be true. I think truth matters and I like to get to the bottom of things. I thought you held to the same idea of truth and were equally serious about “finding” it and making sure others did as well.

You have a very wonderful extended family; you have truly been blessed. I am fortunate to be acquainted with your whole family. Their friendships and many times of fellowship have enriched our lives. You have also enriched our lives, and I do not say this casually. Your nephew was here all evening with 35 other high schoolers for a youth group birthday party. I celebrate the Lord’s Supper frequently with your uncle and your mother. Next month our family is having dinner with your brothers and a few other couples. You have a magnificent and loving family of faith. I hope you realize how much God has blessed you with such a wealth of love, sincerity, patience, generosity, and devotion in your gracious family. Most people would give anything to be part of such a clan. I hope you and your wife realize how truly favored you are.

You assure *me* in your letter that your prayers are for my spiritual welfare, and I assure *you* of the same on my part. I would not take all this time writing if I did not like you as a person, and love you as a brother in Christ. I am also very concerned for your spiritual well-being. I pray for you and Veronica daily, and will do so also for your new baby and the upcoming delivery. God bless you both and may he pour out His mercy upon you.

May the grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord be with you.
In the Blood of the Lamb,

Steve Ray

END NOTES:

1. **‘owth** {oth} **AV usage** - sign(s) 60 times, token(s) 14 times, ensign(s) 2 times, miracles 2 times, and mark 1 time; total usage in Old Testament is 79 times. **Meanings and definitions:** 1) sign, signal; 1a) a distinguishing mark; 1b) banner; 1c) remembrance; 1d) miraculous sign; 1e) omen; 1f) warning 2) token, ensign, standard, miracle, proof.

2. To digress a bit: *First*, notice the tie in with being perfect. Even after justification by faith,

obedience appears to be a condition of the covenant, not just the “belief” expressed in Genesis 15. Obedience is important to God and the concept of obedience is inherent in the word “believe.” It appears that God takes a sinless life seriously, not just the “faith alone” that the man professes. Abraham is given the covenant well after his “believing” in Gen. 15. God now looks at his perfection as a condition of the covenant. And *second*, notice that God changes Abram’s name to Abraham, to signify his change of status. Notice other name changes such as Jacob to Israel and Jehoiakim to Eliakim. Could this shed light on the significance of Peter’s name change in Matthew 16? God changes His people’s names for very significant reasons, and He never does it lightly or often. Abram was no longer just a *father*, but a *father of nations*. Simon (from the Hebrew *Shim`own*, meaning “heard”) was no longer Simon but Peter (Kepha) meaning “rock.” He was not just “heard” as Protestants like to claim, but he was now a foundation, as the early Church clearly understood. Giving a new name signified a change in status. No one had been named Kepha (Cephas) before since it had been reserved for God alone. Now Jesus passed the name on to Peter. What could He have meant by such a significant name change? What was the status change in Peter’s case?

3. Rom. 7:12, 14, 16

4. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (from now on referred to as CCC) paragraph 1963. The following paragraph is excellent as well.

5. Romans 7:12-13 *“Wherefore the law [is] holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. 13 Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.”*

6. *“What counts is not sociological conditions, but >keeping God’s commands (cf. 1 Cor. 9:21). If Paul’s fellow Jew would have been scandalized by his former statement, he would have been quite mystified by this one. From his perspective these sentences would be totally non sequitur, indeed contradictory. To be circumcised is to keep the commandment of God. But Paul obviously thinks otherwise. It should be noted that more than one theology in the Protestant tradition has equally had difficulty with this statement. How can Paul eliminate “works” (circumcision) and then turn about and insist on “works” after all? **The answer of course is that Paul did not consider obedience to the “commands of God” as “works of the law.”** This is an unfortunate confounding of terms within Protestant theology that Paul himself would scarcely have understood.”* *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* by Protestant Gordon D. Fee, Professor of New Testament at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia. This volume is included in the Eerdman’s *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (MI: Eerdman; 1987; pg. 313).

7. Even you admit this, though it seems to contradict you original point: *“I want to be quick to point out that the Scriptures do not teach that the Christian is without law or that the morality demanded in the commandments have been done away.”*

8. This of course is the foundation of the Christian life, but the actual “becoming righteous: is the subsequent process.

9. Gal. 2:21 *“I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness comes by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.”*

10. Philippians 2:12 *“Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”*