

The Law *and the* Gospel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ps. 19:7, 8; Exod. 23:1–9; 1 John 5:3; Rom. 3:19, 20; Exod. 20:11, 12; Deut. 5:15.*

Memory Text: “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (*1 John 2:3, 4, NKJV*).

Key Thought: God’s entire moral law is what reveals our sin and, thus, our need for a Savior. The law and the gospel are, therefore, inseparable.

The law and character of God are central to the great controversy, and when the controversy is finally over, God’s law and character will be vindicated before the onlooking universe. Until then, the controversy rages on. As human beings we wind up on one side or another, and the side we choose decides which master we follow. In the words of Bob Dylan, “*You’re gonna have to serve somebody, / Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord / But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.*”

Those who choose to serve the Lord do so out of love and appreciation for what has been done for them through Christ. Having been buried with Christ by baptism into His death, they know that the body of sin was destroyed so that they no longer need to serve their former master, sin; but now have been given the freedom to obey God and His law.

In this week’s lesson we will look at the nature of the law, its purpose, and its relation to the good news of God’s saving grace. For, rightly understood, God’s law helps to reveal just what God’s grace has offered us in Christ.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 8.*

God's Laws and Regulations

The word *torah* is a commonly used Hebrew word in the Old Testament and is often translated as “law.” The New Testament uses the Greek *nomos* (law) to translate *torah*. *Torah* means “direction” or “guidance.” Because the Bible is a record of God’s relationship with humans, *law* in the Bible generally refers to all of God’s instructions to His people. And because God Himself is good and righteous, and guides and instructs His people in goodness and righteousness, we rightly assume that His law reveals His goodness and righteousness. Or, as we like to say, the law is a reflection of God’s character.

What do the following texts tell us about the law and, ultimately, about God? *Ps. 19:7, 8; Rom. 7:12; Ps. 119:151, 152, 172.*

It is by way of the Bible that God has explicitly revealed Himself to humankind. As one reads through the sacred texts, one comes across an abundance of materials that are, basically, directions or instructions that cover many aspects of human life: morality, ethics, health, sexuality, diet, work, et cetera. Some of these instructions are clearly universal; others appear to be more limited in time and scope. But because all of them are God’s instructions (*torah*), the greatest care is needed in the development of principles that help us to understand what is universal and what is limited. Seventh-day Adventists and many other Christian groups generally make a distinction between “ceremonial” laws (regulations that teach the plan of salvation by symbols and ritual practices), “civil” laws (instructions regarding the community life of the nation of ancient Israel), and “moral” laws (instructions of God’s pattern of conduct for humanity).

The book of Leviticus contains many ceremonial laws, especially with regard to the sanctuary service and its ritual system. The nature of civil laws and the principle of justice underlying them can be seen, for example, in Exodus 23:1–9. Then there is the moral law, the Ten Commandments, which most Christians (in theory, at least) believe are still God’s law for all humanity.

Look through Exodus 23:1–9. What universal moral principles can we take from what was given specifically to ancient Israel?

The Moral Law Today

Most Christians claim that the Ten Commandments are God's universal moral code. This view is seen, for instance, in various legal battles in the United States in which Christians have sought to have the Ten Commandments posted in various public places, especially public schools. Years ago, Alabama was involved in a legal battle involving a state judge who refused to remove a monument of the Ten Commandments from a courtroom, despite orders from a higher court to do so. In the minds of many, the Ten Commandments, far from being invalidated, remain God's legal standard for morality.

And with good reason too. To begin with, although the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) was codified at Sinai, the book of Genesis suggests that most of the commandments were known before then.

What do the following texts reveal about the existence of the law prior to Mount Sinai? *Gen. 35:1–4, 2:3, 4:8–11, 39:7–9, 44:8, 12:18.*

On logical grounds alone, it makes no sense for the Ten Commandments to have been purely a Jewish institution, something intended only for a particular people in a particular time and place. Doesn't it make sense that moral issues such as stealing, killing, adultery, and idolatry are universally wrong, regardless of culture? Also, when the Bible is so clear that sin is defined through the law (*Rom. 7:7*), the notion of the law being abrogated or superceded is, on the face of it, an illogical position for any Bible-believing Christian.

How does James 2:11 help us to understand the perpetuity of God's law?

First John 5:3 says that obedience to God's commandments is an expression of our love for Him. What does that mean? Why is obedience to the commandments an expression of this love?

The Law and the Gospel

Though many understand that the Ten Commandments remain binding in the lives of Christians, the role that they play in the plan of salvation can be confusing. If we're not saved by the keeping of the law, then what is its purpose?

How do the following texts help us to understand the role that the law plays in the lives of those who are saved by grace?

Rom. 3:19, 20 _____

Ps. 119:5, 6 _____

Rom. 7:7 _____

The law was never designed to be a means of salvation. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, the law creates in the sinner a need for the grace (gospel) of Christ. By pointing out what is right, what is good, and what is true, those who fall short of that standard (which is all of us) realize our need of salvation. In this sense the law points us to the need for the gospel, the need of grace. This grace comes to us through Jesus. The function of the law, even in the Old Testament, was to show us our need of salvation; it was never a means of providing that salvation.

“To ask whether the law can bring salvation is to ask the wrong question as far as Scripture is concerned—in both the Old and New Testaments! Never does either Testament affirm, imply, or even hint that this might ever have been the case. . . .

“It is a further error to argue that the writer of Hebrews (10:1–4) corrected the law, as if it had taught that ‘the blood of bulls and goats [could] take away sins.’ . . . The sacrifices were pictures, types, and models of the one perfect sacrifice that was to come.”—Walter C. Kaiser, *Five Views on Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 394, 395.

Look around at what violation of God’s law has done to humanity. How has your own life been impacted by the violation of God’s law? What does your answer tell you about just how relevant the law remains?

The Sabbath and the Law

As we saw in Monday’s lesson, many Christians still believe in the binding nature of God’s law. Again, as long as one accepts the reality of sin, it’s hard to see how anyone could believe anything else.

Yet, as we know so well, the whole issue of the Christian obligation to the law suddenly gets very murky when the question of obedience to the fourth commandment arises, particularly in regard to the seventh day itself. In fact, the irony is that the Alabama judge who got himself in trouble for his insistence on placing the Ten Commandments monument in the courtroom was himself living in violation of that law because, however strict a Sunday keeper he might have been, he wasn’t keeping the biblical commandment to rest on the seventh day. If we take the Bible for what it says, then, according to James—“Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (*James 2:10*)—the judge was guilty of violating every precept of the law that he had insisted upon leaving in the courthouse!

Exodus 20:9, 10 explains the Sabbath commandment. The text is careful to point out when the Sabbath occurs (the seventh day), and how it is to be kept (cessation of regular work by all under one’s shelter) in order for its holiness to be guarded. “The Sabbath is not portrayed as a day of recuperation from those too weak to keep working day after day without rest. It is portrayed rather as a stoppage good for everyone, for the purpose of refocusing on holiness (all concerns that stem from belonging to God, which is what holiness is) in order to enjoy God’s blessings of that day and its potential.”—Douglas K. Stuart, *The New American Commentary, Exodus*, vol. 2 (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), p. 460.

The spiritual potential of the Sabbath is embodied in what it symbolizes. What do the following texts tell us about the spiritual meaning of the Sabbath? How has your own experience with the Sabbath helped you to better appreciate what these texts teach us? *Exod. 20:11, 12; Deut. 5:15; Exod. 31:13; Ezek. 20:20; Heb. 4:3–9.*

The Sabbath and the Gospel

In the final question of yesterday’s lesson, we looked at both Exodus 20:11, 12 and Deuteronomy 5:15. What we see here is the Sabbath pointing us toward two ideas: creation and redemption, two concepts that are very powerfully linked in the Bible. God is not only our Creator, He is also our Redeemer; and both these important spiritual truths are brought home to us every week, every seventh day, as we rest on the Sabbath, “according to the commandment” (*Luke 23:56, NKJV*), just as the women who “c[a]me with Him [Jesus] from Galilee” (*Luke 23:55*) did.

Read Colossians 1:14–16 and John 1:1–14. How do these texts link Jesus as both our Creator and Redeemer?

“Since the divine law is as sacred as God Himself, only one equal with God could make atonement for its transgression. None but Christ could redeem fallen man from the curse of the law, and bring him again into harmony with Heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 63. Only as Creator, only as One equal with God, only as the One who had made “all . . . that was made” (*John 1:3*), could Jesus be the One to redeem fallen humanity.

By pointing us to Christ as our Creator and Redeemer, the Sabbath is a powerful symbol of the gospel of grace. In fact, our resting on the Sabbath reveals that we, indeed, are not saved by the works of the law but by what Christ has done for us. Thus, Sabbath rest becomes a symbol of the rest we have in Jesus (*see Heb. 4:3–9*).

Salvation, too, is restoration; it is re-creation, a process that not only starts now when we have accepted Jesus (*see 2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15*) but that culminates and climaxes with the re-creation of the heavens and the earth (*see Isa. 65:17, Rev. 21:5*). These verses show even more clearly how Creation and Redemption are linked, and both of these crucial truths are embodied in the Sabbath commandment, one of the Ten Commandments.

It’s one thing to say that you are a Sabbath keeper, and to even rest on the Sabbath. The scribes and Pharisees did that. But it’s another to experience the fullness and richness of the Sabbath. What about your own Sabbath keeping? What might you do in order to better reap the spiritual and physical blessings that God provides for us on the Sabbath day?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, pp. 140–146, in *A Solemn Appeal*; “God’s Law Immutable,” pp. 433–450, in *The Great Controversy*.

“God would have us realize that He has a right to mind, soul, body, and spirit—to all that we possess. We are His by creation and by redemption. As our Creator, He claims our entire service. As our Redeemer, He has a claim of love as well as of right—of love without a parallel. . . . Our bodies, our souls, our lives, are His, not only because they are His free gift, but because He constantly supplies us with His benefits, and gives us strength to use our faculties.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Review and Sabbath Herald*, Nov. 24, 1896.

“And the Lord says, ‘If thou turn away thy foot from the Sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on My holy day; and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honorable; . . . then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord.’ Isa. 58:13, 14. To all who receive the Sabbath as a sign of Christ’s creative and redeeming power, it will be a delight. Seeing Christ in it, they delight themselves in Him. The Sabbath points them to the works of creation as an evidence of His mighty power in redemption. While it calls to mind the lost peace of Eden, it tells of peace restored through the Saviour. And every object in nature repeats His invitation, ‘Come unto [M]e, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.’ Matt. 11:28.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 289.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Jeremiah 31:33 reads, “But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Some try to use this text to show that the law (or, really, the seventh-day Sabbath) has been abrogated under the new covenant. What’s wrong with this line of reasoning? In fact, in what ways does this text reinforce the Seventh-day Adventist position regarding the law, including the Sabbath?
- ❷ Because we do believe that the law, including the Sabbath, should be kept, why must we be careful of falling into the trap of legalism? In class, talk about what legalism is and how we can avoid it.
- ❸ Think through the role of the law in the great controversy. Why, in his attack on God’s law, has Satan singled out the Sabbath commandment for special attention? Why was that such a “brilliant” move on his part?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 John 2:3, 4*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Compare and contrast the roles of the law and the gospel in the great controversy.

Feel: Revere the overwhelming gift of the life of the Creator on the sinner's behalf in answer to the righteous claims of the law.

Do: Rest from labor on the Sabbath in recognition of the Creator's work in both the making and the redeeming of humanity.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Lawgiver and Savior

A What important role does the law play in salvation?

B What does the gospel provide that the law cannot?

C Why did it take the Creator to meet the requirements of a just and righteous law?

II. Feel: Gift of Life

A How does it feel to realize the impossibility of meeting the requirements of a law that is as righteous as God Himself?

B How does it feel to know that the requirement was met by the Creator Himself as He laid down His life to take the death penalty that sinners deserve?

III. Do: Sabbath Rest

A How does keeping the Sabbath honor Creation, redemption, and the new earth?

B How does the act of keeping the Sabbath (and other laws) honor the Law Maker?

► **Summary:** The law teaches the need of a Savior because it is impossible for us to meet the demands of the law's exacting requirements for salvation.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Typically one does not relate the words *law* and *obedience* with love and belonging. However, the word *heart* brings them all together as the location where God and child meet in full expression of all these words.

Just for Teachers: In this section we want to introduce the concepts of law and obedience, and discuss practical ideas about how the law relates to personal life. We also want to make sure that we reflect on the God who gave the law.

Opening Discussion: This week’s lesson examines the topic “The Law and the Gospel,” setting forth not only the necessity of the entire moral law but also stressing its relationship to God’s grace, as extended through Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How would you describe a law-abiding citizen?
- 2 Is there someone you know who reflects God’s law? If so, what characteristics does he or she display?
- 3 What does God’s law reveal about God?

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Bible Commentary

Just for Teachers: The goal of this section is to delve more deeply into the concepts of law, love, and obedience.

I. Law, Heart, and Belonging (*Read Jeremiah 31:31–34 with your class.*)

A talented writer with a brilliant poetic gift, Jeremiah’s deep emotion and insights are communicated in a manner that express God’s heart of mercy, ever calling His people to turn away from idolatry and the outright forsaking of His law.

Jeremiah 31:31–34 is one of the most profound passages in Scripture,

bringing together both the Old and New Testaments with the introduction of the words *new covenant*.

It is important to read Jeremiah's words in order to experience their full impact: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says 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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more" (*NRSV*).

Notice the deeply relational phrases in this passage; "I took them by the hand," "I was their husband," "I will write it on their hearts," and "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." All these phrases communicate both love in action and a law of love that expresses the belonging of all that we are to the God who gives all that He is to us.

Consider This: Notice also the intimacy of knowing and generosity of grace contained in the concluding words of this passage. Which words in particular describe the intimacy that God wishes to have with us? Which portray His generosity toward us? What do these words, when taken together, reveal about God's character?

II. Obedience and Conquest (*Read 1 John 5:3–5 with your class.*)

How do we actualize commandment keeping in our everyday lives? Notice what 1 John 5:3–5 states:

"For loving God means obeying his commands, and these commands of his are not burdensome. . . . In fact, this faith of ours is the only way in which the world has been conquered. For who could ever be said to conquer the world . . . except the man who really believes that Jesus is God's Son?" (*Phillips*).

Observe the connection between obedience, love, and belief. Jeremiah establishes the fact that love is at the center of the new covenant. In this passage, John is asserting that loving God is expressed by obeying His commands. Note his commentary on this process: "and these commands of his are not burdensome." Why does John make this statement and how does he clarify this view?

Note the following reasons that he sets forth: because the child of God

loves and obeys God, his or her faith and belief in Jesus Christ enables him or her to overcome the world. Therefore, the significant component of conquering faith is belief that Jesus is God's only Son.

In this context that presupposes love for God the Father and love for God the Son, obedience to God's commands is not burdensome or obligatory. Rather, the child of God will live the reality of Jesus' words, " 'For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' " (*Matt. 11:30, NRSV*).

In summary, there is no doubt that what we believe about God influences and shapes our understanding of love. This understanding, in turn, impacts our response to God's law.

Consider This: What is the relation between law and love in the writings of John? How does this compare with the teachings of Jeremiah, studied in the previous section?

► STEP 3—Apply

Activity: "Tested Obedience": a retelling of Daniel 3:1–30.

The great and mighty King Nebuchadnezzar builds and erects a towering gold statue, placing it on the plain of Dura. He invites all of the elite leaders and governors to the dedication ceremony.

At the sound of many instruments, all who are gathered for this great display are instructed to fall down and worship the image of gold. Those who do not will be thrown into a blazing furnace.

A group of young men named Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuses to bow. They know that the king's display is nothing more than an idol, and they also know that by bowing down and worshipping it, they would be going against God's command in Exodus 20:4, 5, " 'You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them' " (*NIV*).

The king-pleasing astrologers cannot scurry to the king fast enough. They inform him of the violation of the king's command, declaring, " 'Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego . . . pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up' " (*NIV*).

Nebuchadnezzar's anger blazes up like the heat of his furnace. He summons the three young men before him and asks why they refuse to comply with his commands to worship the statue, adding, " 'But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?' " (*NIV*).

Standing before the king, they respond, " 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the

blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up' ” (*NIV*).

How could one ever forget what happens next? The king throws them into the fiery furnace; however, their faithfulness is rewarded, and God meets them there.

Nebuchadnezzar is impressed, declaring, “ ‘Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king’s command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God’ ” (*vs. 28, NIV*). And then he promotes them!

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego actualize the truth of the words of Jeremiah, “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” (*Jer. 31:33, NRSV*).

Discussion Questions:

❶ Where do you find the concepts of law, obedience, and love connected in this story?

❷ What implications might this story hold for you in your spiritual journey?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Please provide paper and writing utensils for this exercise, if possible. Alternately, discuss and share the traditions below.

Activity: This week’s lesson also highlighted Sabbath and the law. Write down three Sabbath traditions that you practice that result in your enjoyment of the keeping of the Sabbath law. Share these with your class members. In turn, ask them to add to the list by sharing the traditions of Sabbath keeping that have been meaningful in their own experience. How have these traditions expanded their understanding of their love for God and God’s love for them?