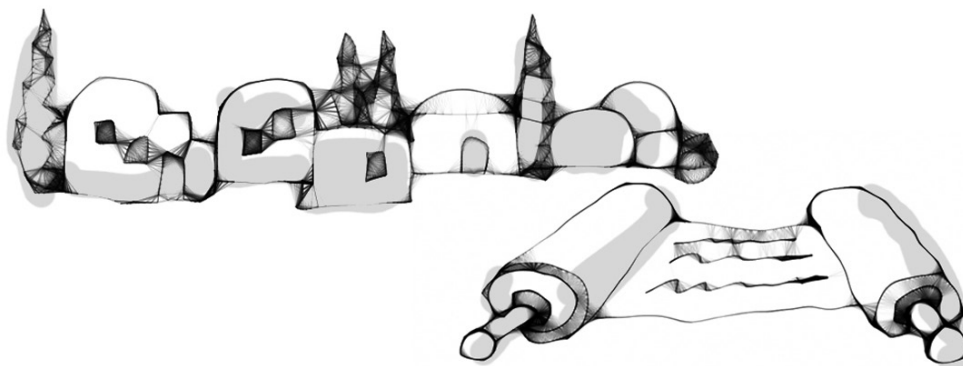


Laws in Christ's Time



SABBATH—MARCH 29

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Luke 2:1–5; Hebrews 10:28; Deuteronomy 17:2–6; Leviticus 1:1–9; Luke 14:1–6; James 2:8–12.

MEMORY VERSE: “Those who aren’t [are not] Jews do not have the law. Sometimes they just naturally do what the law requires. They are a law for themselves. This is true even though they don’t [do not] have the law” (Romans 2:14, NlrV).

IN MOST SOCIETIES, DIFFERENT LAWS WORK AT THE SAME TIME. There can be general laws for everyone. But, at the same time, there are local laws in one community but not in another.

In New Testament times, a person could use the common word for “law” (*nomos* in Greek, *lex* in Latin, and *Torah* in Hebrew). In doing so, he or she could mean any one of the many laws. Often, the only example of the exact law depends on what law we are talking about. So, as we study this quarter, we will always need to remember what subject we are dealing with in order to understand best what law is being discussed.

This week’s lesson studies the different laws that worked in the community during the time of Christ and the early church. We will study these different laws to help us to understand God’s moral¹ law, the Ten Commandments.

DEFINITIONS

1. moral—what is right and good.

ROMAN LAW (Luke 2:1–5)

Read Luke 2:1–5. What lessons can we learn from these two faithful followers of the Lord in their political environment?

Since the time of the early government of Rome, the Romans recognized how important written laws were for governing (ruling) society. In fact, the system of constitutional law established by the Romans remains a foundation of the legal systems found in many of today's free nations.

For the most part, Rome let smaller kingdoms keep their own customs. But all people were expected to obey Roman laws. Clearly, this expectation included Joseph and Mary.

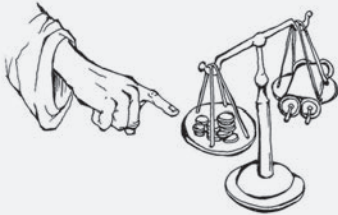
Roman law was responsible for making sure there was order in society. It covered problems of government and controlled actions of the people in public places. Roman law also set up a system for selecting people for public office. And it dealt with things such as adultery² and master and slave relationships. Many of the social rules are very much the same as the ones found in the Old Testament and other societies.

To understand the culture as described in the New Testament books, we must remember that the Roman Empire set up the political system for the world in which Jesus and the early church lived. We can understand many things happening in the New Testament when we study the historical background and environment of these times (for example, the death of Jesus and the imprisonment of Paul). Of course, we do not need to be deep students of Roman history in order to understand what we need for salvation. But when it is possible for us to get it, historical knowledge can be helpful.

The leading of God was involved in Mary's pregnancy, but she and Joseph still obeyed the law of the land. This law required them to leave their home, even when Mary was close to giving birth to her Child. Would it have been better for them to have stayed home because of Mary's condition? What could their actions say to us about how we should deal with civil law? (Think about how easy it would have been for them to excuse themselves from obeying.)

DEFINITIONS

2. adultery—sex outside of marriage.

THE LAW OF MOSES: CIVIC³ (Acts 18:15)

The Sanhedrin served as a type of Supreme Court in Jesus' day.



According to Moses, Jewish men must pay a half-shekel temple tax.

The Jews were under Roman rule at the time of Jesus. But the Jews had authority over those issues that were special to their customs and religion (read Acts 18:15). The ruling group responsible for handling Jewish law was called the Sanhedrin. Sometimes called the council (John 11:47; Acts 5:27), the Sanhedrin included 71 men chosen from among the priests, elders, and rabbis with the high priest in charge as its head. The Sanhedrin served as a type of Supreme Court that dealt with Jewish customs, traditions (man-made rules), and laws.

Jewish law was founded upon the civil (local) rules shown in the five books of Moses. Moses was the author of the first five books in the Bible. For this reason, the laws are known as the law of Moses. When God originally gave the laws to Moses, He desired a government where He would be the Head and the people would obey His laws. By the time of Jesus, the Jews were under Roman law. But the Roman government let them use Moses' law to solve problems dealing with their customs. Here is where the work of the Sanhedrin was very important.

The New Testament gives several examples of Moses' law being used in government matters. For example, Jewish men were still expected to pay the half-shekel temple tax (Matthew 17:24–27; Exodus 30:13). Divorces were still governed by the rules given by Moses (Matthew 19:7; Deuteronomy 24:1–4). People still followed the law of levirate marriage: in this kind of marriage, a widow was to marry her husband's brother (Matthew 22:24; Deuteronomy 25:5). Boys were still circumcised⁴ on the eighth day (John 7:23; Leviticus 12:3). And adulterers still were punished by stoning (John 8:5; Deuteronomy 22:23, 24).

Read Matthew 26:59–61; Hebrews 10:28; and Deuteronomy 17:2–6. What important principle (rule) is found in these verses? What does this tell us about justice and fairness according to the Bible?

Read some of the civil laws found in the early books of the Bible. Some of those laws do seem strange to us. (Read, for example, Deuteronomy 21.) These laws were made by God. So what should this tell us about how we must learn to trust the Lord in all things, especially those things we do not understand fully?

DEFINITIONS

3. civic—having to do with a city or a town or the people who live there.

4. circumcised—to cut off the skin (called the foreskin) at the end of the penis of a man or boy.

THE LAW OF MOSES: CEREMONIAL LAW⁵ (Leviticus 1:1–9)

Read Leviticus 1:1–9; Leviticus 2:14–16; Leviticus 5:11–13. What are these laws about? What was their purpose? What important truths did they teach?

As we know, these were civil laws in Israel during Old Testament times. But there was also the “ceremonial law.” The ceremonial law was based on the sanctuary⁶ and its services. All of the services were designed to teach the children of Israel the plan of salvation and point them to the coming Messiah (Chosen One). Today’s verses show that through these services, atonement⁷ would be made. In their own way, these laws were “miniprophecies [examples]” of Christ and His work for the sins of His people.

“The ceremonial law was given by Christ. It was no longer kept, but Paul taught its importance to the Jews. He showed its place in God’s plan of salvation and the work of Christ. Paul announces this law as glorious [full of power and honor] and important to Christ. The serious service of the sanctuary showed the grand truths that were to be given to future generations. . . . So, through many hundreds of years, faith was kept alive in the hearts of men until the time came for the first coming of the promised Messiah.” —Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs [Leaders and Forefathers] and Prophets [Special Messengers]*, page 367.

The ceremonial system was started by Jesus. But it was meant to work as an example of the coming of Jesus and His death and High Priestly work. Once Jesus finished His work on earth, the old system no longer was needed (read Hebrews 9:9–12). We no longer keep the ceremonial law today. But, by studying it, we can have a better understanding of the plan of salvation.

Sacrificing animals was important to the sanctuary service. This pointed to the death of Jesus. Think about what it means that our salvation can come only through His death for our sake. What should this tell us about the high price of sin?



The ceremonial law pointed Israel to the coming Messiah.

DEFINITIONS

5. ceremonial law—the law dealing with Jewish religious services.
6. sanctuary—the place where God was worshiped.
7. atonement—sacrifice that would bring forgiveness and cleansing of sins.

LAW OF THE RABBIS⁸ (Luke 14:1–6)

In addition to the laws of Moses, Jews at the time of Jesus also knew the law of the rabbis. The rabbis were the deep thinkers. They were also Pharisees. They took the responsibility of making sure that the laws of Moses remained important to the people. The rabbis counted 613 laws in the five books of Moses (39 of them were about the Sabbath). The rabbis used these laws as the basis (foundation) for making their laws. They added to these written laws an oral law that carried the interpretations (explanations) of leading rabbis. Oral (nonwritten; spoken) law is known as *halakah*. This means “to walk.” The rabbis felt that if the people obeyed the *halakoth* (many oral laws), they would walk in the way of the 613 important laws. The rabbinic⁹ *halakoth* often started as spoken law. But they were later collected together and recorded (written) in book form. Some of the interpretations from Jesus’ day are found today in commentaries known as *Midrash*. But others are recorded in a legal collection called *Mishnah*.¹⁰ Many religious Jews throughout history, and even today, try to follow these laws strictly.

Read Luke 14:1–6 and John 9. Jesus was blamed for breaking the Sabbath when He healed others on this day. But where in the Old Testament can you find that it is a sin to heal on the Sabbath day? How does the answer help us to understand some of the problems Jesus had to deal with? More important, what lessons can we learn from these examples that could help us to make sure that we do not make the same mistakes in trying to “walk in the way” faithfully?

DEFINITIONS

8. rabbis—the religious teachers among the Jews.

9. rabbinic—having to do with the writings and teachings of the rabbis.

10. *Mishnah*—the published list of laws prepared by the rabbis.

It may be easy for us today to think of many of these oral laws as foolish, especially when they were used against Jesus. The fault, however, lies more with the leaders’ negative thinking than with these laws themselves. Often *halakoth* were obeyed for the wrong reasons. But they were meant to be very spiritual, giving a special spiritual meaning to everyday actions, helping to make them religiously important.

How can we learn to give even the most simple, everyday chores a special religious meaning?

THE MORAL LAW (THE TEN COMMANDMENTS) (Matthew 19:16–19)

The Jews were under Roman law. But the law of Moses and the law of the rabbis had much influence on the lives of Jews living in first-century Israel. Many people who followed the religion of Israel lived outside of Palestine and outside the borders of the Roman Empire. So, many of these laws would not have had a big part in their lives.

But, at the same time, anyone who claimed to be a follower of the God of Israel would have followed the Ten Commandments.

“The Ten Commandments give Israel the moral and spiritual reason for keeping it [their relationship with God]. The symbol [word-picture] that the Bible uses to explain this relationship is covenant.¹¹ However, it is wrong for us to think of the commandments as just a summary of Israel’s duties toward God. . . . Israel’s obedience to the commandments was not just about the people’s surrender to God’s will. More so, it was about the people’s answer to His love.”—Adapted from Leslie J. Hoppe, “Ten Commandments,” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), page 1285.

The Ten Commandments were higher than any system of law known to the Jews in the first century. True, the Pharisees had memorized the 613 Mosaic laws, which included the Ten Commandments. But they recognized the special importance of the Ten Commandments. The division (section) of the *Mishnah* called *Tamid* (5:1) holds the rabbis’ command to speak the Ten Commandments daily. It was believed that all of the other laws were under the Ten Commandments. The Jewish philosopher¹² Philo lived at the same time Jesus did. Philo wrote an entire book about how the Ten Commandments are the most important of all the laws in the Bible.

Read Matthew 19:16–19; Romans 13:8–10; and James 2:8–12. What do these verses say about how important the Ten Commandments are in the lives of those who are followers of Christ?

Like the Old Testament writers, the inspired writers of the New Testament recognized the purpose of the Ten Commandments for God’s people. Some of the lessons for this quarter will discuss the way that Christ handled other systems of law in His day. But the most important lessons will be on how He felt about the Ten Commandments—also known as “the moral law.”



When we obey God’s law of love, we show our love for Him.

DEFINITIONS

11. covenant—promise or agreement between God and His people.
12. philosopher—someone who thinks deeply and studies about life.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read also Ellen G. White, “Oath Taking,” pages 201–204, in *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 1.

“If Adam had not broken the law of God, then the ceremonial law would never have been made. The gospel of good news was first given to Adam when God told him that the seed of the woman [offspring] should bruise the serpent’s head [read Genesis 3:15]. Then it was handed down through many generations to Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The knowledge of God’s law, and the plan of salvation were given to Adam and Eve by Christ Himself. Adam and Eve carefully treasured the important lesson and taught it by word of mouth to their children and to their children’s children. So the knowledge of God’s law was carried on from generation to generation.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, page 230.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Moses wrote the laws that were to rule over Israel. Before that, the Egyptians and Babylonians had systems of laws that were very much the same as some of God’s laws. Even worldly groups have laws that protect people and property. Laws are often based on moral ideas. They should encourage people to not do certain kinds of evil and to obey certain kinds of good. But where do societies get their sense of good and evil from?
- ② If there is no God, where do the ideas of good and evil come from? Where is the only place that they could come from if there were no God?
- ③ We often use the idea of “law” in different ways. We talk about the law of gravity or the laws of motion. We talk about international law. We talk about the law of the land. We talk about tax law. How are these laws the same? In what ways are they different? What is the possible result of breaking any of these laws? What are the profits of cooperating with these laws? How do the principles of law help you to understand the purpose of the Ten Commandments in the life of believers?
- ④ In class, go back to Wednesday’s study. How do we as a church need to be careful that we do not make the same mistake that some of the leaders in Jesus’ day did by adding foolish rules to the law? Why is such a mistake easier to make than we might think, even though we might mean well?