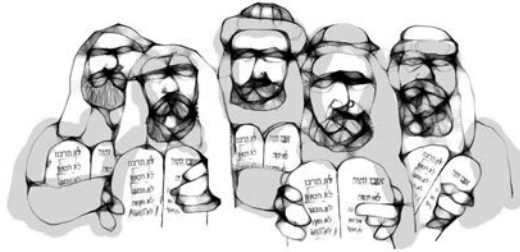


The Apostles *and the* Law



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rom. 3:31, 6:15, Acts 10:9–14, John 15:1–11, James 2:1–26, Heb. 3:7–19, Jude 5–7.*

Memory Text: “Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (*Romans 7:12, NKJV*).

With so much evidence for the continued validity of God's law, why do so many Christians argue against it? First, some (as we have seen) look at certain New Testament texts that condemn a false understanding of the law's function but conclude that the problem is with the law itself. As a result, they claim that the Ten Commandments are not obligatory for those under the new covenant.

Second, others are so convinced that the Sabbath is not binding on Christians that, in order to justify this position, they claim that all the commandments have been crucified with Jesus on the cross.

Third, some argue that the other nine commandments are in effect but that the fourth, the seventh-day Sabbath, has been superseded by Sunday, which is kept in honor of the resurrection of Jesus.

Numerous problems exist with all these positions. This week we'll look at the attitude of Christ's apostles concerning the law, because surely if it were to have been nullified or modified after Christ's death, the apostles would have known something about it.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 14.

Paul and the Law

Paul, it has been said, was the true founder of Christianity. That is wrong, of course. Though Paul contributed much to our theological understanding of Christian doctrine, including 13 of the 27 New Testament books, practically all the teachings in his writings can be found elsewhere in Scripture. The main reason why some claim that Paul started a “new” religion is the misconception over his teaching about law and grace.

Look at the following texts: **Romans 3:28; 6:14; 7:4; and Galatians 3:24, 25.** From a first glance, why isn’t it hard to see why some think that these verses nullify the law?

Read in isolation, these texts definitely give the impression that the law is no longer relevant for the Christian. However, all these verses belong to a broader context that we must see in order to understand what Paul is truly saying.

Examine the passages in which each of the above texts occurs, paying special attention to **Romans 3:31, 6:15, 7:7–12, and Galatians 3:21.** How do these verses, as well as the context as a whole, help us to better understand Paul’s point about the law?

For those who don’t understand the concept of justification by faith, Paul may seem to be contradicting himself. In the same breath he claims that the Christian is not under the law; yet, the same Christian is obligated to keep the law. The problem is solved when we remember that God demands righteousness from those who claim to be in relationship with Him. The standard of righteousness is His law. However, when people measure up against His law, they fall short and are therefore condemned by the law. If the law were the means to salvation, then none would have any hope of eternal life. The hope of the Christian is not found in the law but in Jesus Christ, who not only kept the law perfectly but through God’s miraculous power allows believers to share in His righteousness (*Rom. 8:3, 4*). The Christian can now serve the law of God with a free conscience because Christ has taken away the law’s condemnation (*Rom. 7:25–8:2*). The grace that comes through Christ does not release us from the law but rather compels us to obey it.

Peter and the Law (1 Pet. 2:9)

Peter was one of Jesus' closest apostles. Among the first selected, Peter was present at many of the major events in the ministry of Jesus. It was he who, at Caesarea Philippi, made the declaration that Jesus was the Messiah; and Peter followed his Savior to the house of Caiaphas on the night that Jesus was arrested and tried. And on the morning when the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples by the sea, it was Peter who received specific instructions regarding the ministry of Christ. When the first group of believers gathered on the day of Pentecost, Peter was the chief spokesperson. Certainly, if the law had been changed in any way, Peter would have known.

What does Acts 10:9–14 tell us about Peter's adherence to the Jewish law after Jesus' ascension? If Peter thought this way about laws concerning food, what can we imagine his view was on the perpetuity of the Ten Commandments?

Peter received his vision several years after the ascension of Jesus. As a result of the disciples' preaching, thousands of Jews had already accepted Jesus as the Messiah. There is nothing in the biblical record to suggest that the content of the Christian message included instructions to reject the law. In a powerful way, the incident in Acts 10 demonstrates that the earliest Christians fully identified with their Jewish roots.

Compare 1 Peter 2:9 with Exodus 19:6. What is the context of Exodus 19:6?

When Peter referred to his audience as a "royal priesthood, a holy nation" (*NKJV*), they would have recalled instantly the story of the giving of the law at Sinai. As the heirs of Israel, they were expected to abide by the terms of the covenant made explicit in the law of God. So, immediately after reminding the people of their status, Peter urges them to live lives of righteousness (1 Pet. 2:11, 12). He also warns his audience to be wary of false teachers promoting a law-free gospel (2 Pet. 2:21, 3:2).

Remember how badly Peter messed up; and yet, look at the grace extended to him. How can we learn (1) to extend that kind of grace to others and (2) to accept grace for ourselves when we mess up?

John and the Law

John is second to Paul in the number of books contributed to the New Testament. This is the same John who wrote the Gospel, three letters, and the book of Revelation. Like Peter, he was among the first disciples Jesus chose, and he also had a special relationship with Jesus. Because of his closeness to Jesus, he is often referred to as “John the beloved.” Judging from the ending of his Gospel (*John 21:25*), John knew a lot of personal information about Jesus. Surely one who was as close to Jesus as John would have known if Jesus had set aside God’s law.

Read John 15:1–11 and 1 John 2:3–6. What do these verses together tell us about how we should relate to God’s “commands”?

Toward the end of His earthly life, Jesus could testify to His disciples that He had been faithful to His Father’s commandments and, as a result, had “remained” in His Father’s love (*John 15:10*). Jesus did not see the commandments as negative obstacles to be dismissed or discarded; rather, He saw them as guidelines for a loving relationship with Him and with other people. When John, the beloved disciple, reminds Christians of their obligation to God, he uses the same language of love and unity that Jesus does in the Gospel. In fact, John understood that love has always been the essence of the law (*for example, 2 John 6*). A person cannot claim to be keeping the law if he or she is not involved in loving relationships with God and other people.

“The law of God requires that we love our fellow men as we love ourselves. Then every power and action of the mind must be put forth to that end—to do the greatest amount of good. . . . How pleasing to the Giver for man to hold the royal gifts of the soul so that they shall tell with power upon others! They are the connecting link between God and man, and reveal the Spirit of Christ and the attributes of heaven. The power of holiness, seen but not boasted of, speaks more eloquently than the most able sermons. It speaks of God, and opens to men their duty more powerfully than mere words can do.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 20, p. 138.

What is your own experience with the link between law and love? That is, on a personal practical level, how is love expressed by obedience to God’s law?

James and the Law

“Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called? If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself; you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors’ (*James 2:7–9, NKJV*).

There is only one book in the New Testament that is attributed to James. While the author does not stipulate which James he is, it is generally accepted that the letter comes from James, the brother of Jesus. Though perhaps at first skeptical about Jesus’ Messiahship (*John 7:5*), James eventually rose to an influential leadership position in the New Testament church (*Acts 15:13, Gal. 1:19*). Again, if Jesus had intended to abrogate the divine law, His own brother certainly would have known.

Read James 2:1–26. What is the basic message of the chapter? Why would James summarize the law as he did in verses 7–9, only then immediately to say what he said about keeping all the commandments? How do these verses show the link between love and obeying God’s law?

Misunderstanding Paul’s teaching on the law, some argue that James and Paul are opposed to each other regarding the role of the law. The major point of contention is over the place of works in salvation. Paul declares that we are saved by grace through faith apart from works (*Eph. 2:8, 9*), while James emphasizes that “faith without works is dead” (*James 2:26, NKJV*). These statements are not contradictory; James is merely expressing in a forceful manner what Paul had said numerous times about grace not nullifying the law. Like Paul in Romans 13:9, James fully understands that the essence of God’s law is love (*James 2:8*). No one can truly claim to keep God’s commandments if he or she does not demonstrate practical acts of love.

Jude and the Law

Jude, one of the shortest books in the New Testament, is believed to have been written by another brother of Jesus. While the author refers to himself as a “slave” of Jesus Christ, he does admit to being the brother of James. Because Matthew gives James and Jude as names for two of Jesus’ four brothers (*Matt. 13:55*), the Jude (sometimes called Judas) of this brief epistle is generally accepted to be the Savior’s brother. As with all the other biblical writers we have studied, Jude would have known if Jesus had set the law aside.

Although Jude makes reference to neither law nor commandments, his entire letter is about fidelity to God and the consequences of transgressing His law.

Read Jude 4. What is he saying here that is relevant to our whole discussion?

The very mention of grace demands the existence of law, because grace would not be necessary if there were no sin (*Rom. 5:18–6:15*). What these false teachers were saying was so bad that Jude equated it with denying the Lord Himself.

How does Hebrews 3:7–19 help to shed light on Jude 5–7? How do these verses together show us the relationship between obedience and faith?

In his own diplomatic style, Jude reminds his audience about the experience of the Israelites, who had been delivered from Egyptian bondage. God had demonstrated His strength to them and had even given them His law, but when they became unfaithful, they faced terrible consequences that came from being separated from Him. Jude makes it very clear that people can, indeed, fall away, and those who do will face judgment. Jude is as clear as is the rest of Scripture: all who claim to have faith must be willing to express that faith through an obedient life.

Read the book of Jude. Amid all his strong warnings, what promises can you discover there for yourself?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Law in the Christian Age,” *Signs of the Times*, August 5, 1886.

“Why should the apostles teach repentance toward God?—Because the sinner is in trouble with the Father. He has transgressed the law; he must see his sin, and repent. What is his next work?—To look to Jesus, whose blood alone can cleanse from all sin. Faith in Christ is necessary; for there is no saving quality in law. The law condemns, but it cannot pardon the transgressor. The sinner must depend on the merits of the blood of Christ. ‘Let him take hold of my strength,’ says our merciful Redeemer, ‘that he may make peace with me, and he shall make peace with me.’ Our Lord declared that he would love most to whom most was forgiven; and he only will feel that he needs forgiveness who sees himself as he is, defiled by sin, a transgressor of God’s holy law. He who has the fullest conviction of the sacred claims of the law, will most clearly see the enormity of his offenses, and will feel that he is indeed forgiven much.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, August 5, 1886.

Discussion Questions:

- ① Carefully read the above statement by Ellen G. White. How does this excerpt shed light on the biblical teachings covered in this quarter? What does it mean that a sinner must “depend on the merits of the blood of Christ”?
- ② Dwell more on the warning in Jude 4. If the men are proclaiming the grace of God, they obviously are believers. Yet, Jude says that they are denying the Lord. What serious implications does this have for those who claim that God’s grace nullified the law? When people claim the law was done away with, what are they really trying to get rid of?
- ③ How does the denial of the law, or even of one of the commandments, play into Satan’s hands as he seeks to “overthrow” the law of God?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Romans 3:31*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that the writings of the apostles do not demonstrate that the law was changed or nullified.

Feel: Feel confident in the changeless nature of God's Word.

Do: Demonstrate in everyday life a loving context for speaking about God's law.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God's Changeless Law

- Ⓐ What is the only context by which we can measure righteousness?
- Ⓑ Why did the apostles teach repentance? What were people supposed to be sorry for?
- Ⓒ How do James's and Paul's writings help us to avoid the two false extremes that people can go to concerning the law?

II. Feel: Let the Love Overflow

- Ⓐ What, according to John, has always been the essence of the law? Why? (*See 2 John 6.*)
- Ⓑ How can a Christian strive to serve the law of God with a free conscience and not be plagued by guilt?

III. Do: Embracing Context

- Ⓐ How does my lifestyle supply the context for the Seventh-day Adventist message that we are to give to the world?
- Ⓑ Why can't we claim to keep God's commandments if we don't demonstrate practical acts of love?
- Ⓒ Why should anyone who claims to have faith be willing to express that faith through an obedient life?

► **Summary:** The apostles make no mention of the law being nullified or modified after Christ's death. They explain that, rather than being released from the law, grace that comes through Christ compels us to obey the law.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Romans 3:31*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The grace that comes through Christ does not release people from the law but, rather, compels them to obey it.

Just for Teachers: For most Christians, the prevailing motivation behind Sunday worship seems to be based on the idea that the law was crucified with Jesus on the cross or that Sunday was instituted by the early Christians in honor of the resurrection of Jesus. These ideas are frequently based on certain New Testament texts that are often taken out of context. Reading the apostles' teachings in context shows that there was no nullification or modification of God's law.

During the cold war, the U.S. government tried to develop a machine that could translate Russian. Millions of dollars were spent, and the most talented linguists in the country were involved in the project. Soon the first Russian documents were typed into the newly designed computers, and everyone waited with bated breath. Within minutes, there were sheets of English feeding through the printers but, to the dismay of everyone involved, they meant very little. The words were right and some of the grammar was also right, but no one could make any sense of it. The project was a failure, not because of a lack of time, money, or talent but because the computer could not “read” the context of the conversation. Even today, with all of our artificial intelligence in computing, the best and most reliable translator is still a human being who not only knows the language and the subject well but understands the context of the language exchange.

In this week's study, we look at those who were closest to Jesus and examine how they saw Jesus interact with, and speak about, God's law. They then went on to communicate this meaning in their writings for the different contexts the early Christian church faced.

Opening Activity: Imagine the following scenario. Sister Jane, who is very overweight, has expressed a desire to head up your church's health ministry department. Your church is planning a big community outreach activity, which will involve lectures on healthy lifestyles. Would you let Sister Jane lead out in this department? Do you think she provides the right context for your health program? Why, or why not?

Discuss: How do our lives provide the context for what we are trying to

preach? Do we have to wait until we are “perfect” representatives of the truth before telling others? Give reasons for your answers.

►STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

I. Dealing With Tensions *(Review Acts 6:1–6 with your class.)*

In spite of marvelous shared experiences, the early church was familiar with tensions and challenges from within. Some theological or practical issues could be dealt with easily—they had the “Word,” and many had been eyewitnesses of Jesus and had heard His message firsthand. Other issues were more complex and required praying, studying, and thinking together as a community. The book of Acts and some references in the epistles help us see some of the dynamics of the internal discussions of the early church. It may be helpful to look at some of the moments of tension in order to glean some principles of faithful, loving, and committed discussions that are so relevant in a church that faces many challenges to its unity.

One of the first references to internal tension can be found in Acts 6:1–7. The explosive growth of the early Christian church and its commitment to living shared lives (including shared property) led to complaints related to distinctions based on ethnic groups. The biblical text indicates that the Greek-speaking believers complained to the Aramaic-speaking believers because they felt that their widows were often overlooked when it came to the daily sharing of food. Acts 6:2 provides the first important clue: the Twelve gathered all the disciples into one place. Recognizing the importance of care for widows and orphans within the Christian community, but at the same time cognizant of the importance of evangelism and the proclamation of the kingdom, they suggested (apparently by consensus, since there is not one specific speaker) to elect seven deacons who would do the job. Many of the names of those selected suggest Greek roots—something that would address the concerns of the Greek-speaking believers (*vs.* 5). The whole church was pleased and dedicated the new leaders to their role by praying and ordaining them to their special ministry. There are two important principles here: (1) we need to talk to each other, and (2) we need to find solutions that represent a win-win situation.

Consider This: Can all church disagreements be resolved with a win-win solution? Why, or why not?

II. Tackling Theological Tension *(Review Acts 15 with your class.)*

Tension existed in the early Christian church. We find one such example in Acts 6 over the food distribution to the widows, which did not center on a

theological issue. However, Acts 15 involves a situation that was theological. How did the church deal with this theological conflict?

The issue discussed during the first council held in Jerusalem provides a good learning moment (*see Acts 15*). You remember the issue at stake when the apostles met in Jerusalem. Some Jewish Christians from Judea had traveled to Antioch and had preached among the Christians that circumcision was necessary for salvation. The theological issue at stake was huge: how Jewish would the community of early Christians be? Did being a follower of Christ also mean that all the regulations of the Old Testament laws had to be fulfilled?

The biblical text notes a “sharp dispute and debate” between Paul and Barnabas and these anonymous brethren from Jerusalem (*Acts 15:2, NIV*). In consequence, the local Antioch church sends Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to discuss the issue with the leaders in Jerusalem. As they share God’s victories among the Gentiles, Christians belonging to the Pharisees stand up and challenge the account with the startling statement that all Gentile believers should be circumcised (*vs. 5*). The following section describes much discussion and several speeches by Peter (*vs. 7–11*), Paul and Barnabas (*vs. 12*), and James (*vs. 13–21*). Peter recalls his own experience with Cornelius while Paul and Barnabas focus upon God’s providence and blessings in their ministry. Finally, James quotes from Scripture (namely from Amos 9:11, 12) and makes a proposal: Gentiles should abstain from food dedicated to idols, from sexual immorality, and from the meat of strangled animals and blood.

There are more principles that can be gleaned from this important event in the life of the early church. First and foremost, challenging theological issues need to be discussed in a Spirit-filled environment and in community. Second, all elements of research are involved: reference is made to past Spirit-guided experience, Scripture is studied and applied to the new situation, and, based on these two criteria, a solution is reached by consensus.

Consider This: How does the appropriate tone (indicating respect and love) contribute to theological truth in a conflict situation?

III. Spirit-Led Compromise (*Review James 2:14 with your class.*)

Compromise is a bad word when principles are at stake. When we consider James’s compromise suggestion, it should be noted that he did not compromise on any important principle and certainly not on the key issue: salvation is by Christ alone and not by keeping laws or regulations. In other words, James reminds us that first things should be first. However, this is the same James who later writes, “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?” (*James 2:14, NIV*). Or, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (*vs. 26, NIV*). The point in question here is balance between justification and sanctification. Keeping a law (any law, including the Sabbath) will not secure our salvation.

Similarly, accepting Christ as our personal Savior and ignoring Him when He speaks from Sinai and the mount of Beatitudes is equally problematic.

An important postscript should be added to this quick review of two critical moments in the life of the early Christian church. The difficult issue did not just disappear. Paul's epistles hint at repeated theological discussion about the law and its role.

Consider This: Think about a number of current issues of conflict in your local congregation. Some may involve lifestyle issues; others may be related to biblical interpretation. How can the lessons learned from the moments of conflict in the early Christian church help your congregation resolve key theological issues and stay focused on mission and unity?

►STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

- ❶ How can Paul claim that the Christian is not under the law, yet also claim that the same Christian is obligated to keep the law?
- ❷ Is righteousness just the absence of sin, or is it something more? Explain.
- ❸ Can Peter refer to his Christian readers as a “royal priesthood, an holy nation” if they no longer have anything to do with the law (*1 Pet. 2:9*)? Why, or why not? How does this title connect the church to the law?
- ❹ When people claim that the law was done away with, what are they really trying to get rid of?

Application Questions:

- ❶ Why is it so important to read, study, and quote Bible texts in context?
- ❷ Why did Peter warn his audience to beware of false teachers that promote a law-free message (*2 Pet. 2, 3*)?
- ❸ Why is holiness something we never can brag about?
- ❹ How can God's law help us to demonstrate practical acts of love?

►STEP 4—Create

Activity: If you have a large Sabbath School class, you may want to subdivide the class into several groups and then, if you have time, you could have a moment for general feedback. Have each group or individual imagine being either Jude (Jesus' brother), James (Jesus' brother), John, or Peter. Answer the following two questions in character. How did you see Jesus relate to the law in His everyday life? What, in a one-line summary, is your position on the law of God?