

The Law of God



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 5:17–19, 5:21–44, Mark 7:9–13, Matt. 19:16–22.*

Memory Text: “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (*John 14:15, NKJV*).

Though many leaders in Israel highly exalted the law, some misunderstood its purpose, believing that they could obtain righteousness by obeying the law. As Paul was to write: “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God” (*Rom. 10:3*).

This is why Jesus often questioned, and even disapproved of, the traditions of the religious elders (*Mark 7:1–13*). And their misunderstanding was why they criticized and confronted Him about His views of the law.

It is important to understand that, although Jesus criticized the openly legalistic practices of the Pharisees, He exalted the Ten Commandments, clearly affirming the perpetuity of the Decalogue and explaining its meaning and purpose. Christ Himself said that He had come to fulfill the law (*Matt. 5:17*). In many ways, His death was the ultimate revelation of the continued validity of God’s law.

This week we will analyze Jesus’ teachings in regard to the law and the impact His teachings should have in our lives.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 6.

Jesus Did Not Change the Law

What does Matthew 5:17–19 teach about Jesus’ attitude toward the law?

Although the word *law* is often used to refer to the first five books of the Bible (also known as Pentateuch or *Torah*), in this case the context seems to indicate that He was referring primarily to the Ten Commandments. When saying He had not come to “destroy” the law, Jesus is literally saying, *I have not come to make invalid or abolish the Ten Commandments*. His statement is very clear and probably meant to show that it was the religious elders, not He, who had been destroying the law, reducing its effect through their tradition (see *Matt. 15:3, 6*). In contrast, by filling it with a deeper meaning, Christ had come to “fulfill” the law, thus giving us an example of what perfect obedience to the will of God looks like. (See *Rom. 8:3, 4*.)

Read Acts 7:38. Who was the Angel who spoke to Moses and gave him the law on Mount Sinai? (See *Isa. 63:9, 1 Cor. 10:4*.) Why is this important?

“Christ was not only the leader of the Hebrews in the wilderness . . . but it was He who gave the law to Israel. Amid the awful glory of Sinai, Christ declared in the hearing of all the people the ten precepts of His Father’s law. It was He who gave to Moses the law engraved upon the tables of stone.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 366.

The fact that Christ Himself gave the law to Moses on Mount Sinai makes it even more important for us to take it seriously. Also, if the Lawgiver Himself further explained it through His teachings, as we find in the Gospels, we would do well to obey that law. One would be hard pressed to find in the life and teachings of Jesus anything implying that the Ten Commandments are not binding on Christians. On the contrary, His words and example teach us the opposite.

Though we know that the law is still binding, we also know that it does not, indeed cannot, save us. (See Gal. 3:21.) How then do we understand the relationship between law and grace?

Jesus Deepened the Meaning of the Law

After establishing the perpetuity of the Ten Commandments, Jesus continued His Sermon on the Mount, now setting forth a few specific examples of Old Testament laws. People had so greatly misunderstood these specific commandments that Jesus felt the vital need of explaining their true meaning.

What contrast did Jesus make with each aspect of the law mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount? To what authority did He appeal in each case? *Matt. 5:21–44.*

Note that in each instance Jesus first cites an Old Testament text (*Exod. 20:13, 14; Deut. 5:17, 18; Exod. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21*) and then appears to argue against it. Was Jesus discrediting the law? Of course not. By further explaining and expanding what the religious leaders had narrowed down to nothing but formality, He was simply contrasting the teachings of the Pharisees with the true meaning of the law.

The rabbis cited tradition as their authority for their interpretation of the law. In contrast, Christ spoke on His own authority, as the Lawgiver Himself. The expression “but I say unto you” appears six times in this chapter. Who alone but the Lord Himself could rightly make a claim like that?

What’s fascinating, too, is that Christ’s requirements went radically beyond the simple form of the law. His teachings included the spirit behind the letter of the law. The spirit imparts meaning and life to what otherwise can only be pure formalism. Law-keeping, in and of itself, as an end in itself, leads to nothing but death if the law is not understood as an expression of what it means to be saved by grace.

Consider the scribes’ and Pharisees’ attitudes as described in Matthew 23:3–5, 23–28. How can we obey God’s commandments wholeheartedly without falling into similar hypocrisy and legalism? What crucial role does understanding grace play in sparing us from legalism?

Jesus and the Seventh Commandment

How did Jesus expand the meaning of the law, as seen in Matthew 5:27, 28? What did He say in verses 29 and 30? How are we to take these words?

In this passage Christ referred to two commandments: the seventh and the tenth. Until then, the Israelites considered adultery to be only the overt physical sexual act with another person's spouse. Jesus points out that in reality, because of the tenth commandment, adultery would include lustful thoughts and desires, as well.

In verses 29 and 30, Christ was using a figure of speech. Of course, one could argue that it would be better to go through life mutilated than to forfeit eternity with Christ. However, rather than pointing to mutilation, which would be contrary to other biblical teachings (*see Lev. 19:27, 28; 21:17–20*), Jesus was referring to the control of one's thoughts and impulses. In His references to plucking out an eye or cutting off a hand, Christ was figuratively speaking of the importance of taking resolute decisions and actions toward guarding oneself against temptation and sin.

What did the Pharisees ask Jesus in Matthew 19:3, and why was it a trick question? (*See vs. 7.*) What was Jesus' answer? *See Matt. 19:4–9; compare with Matt. 5:31, 32.*

Both texts (*Matt. 5:31, 19:7*) are citing Deuteronomy 24:1. In Jesus' days there were two rabbinic schools that interpreted this text in two different ways: Hillel understood it to allow divorce for almost any reason, while Shammai interpreted it to mean only explicit adultery. The Pharisees were trying to trick Jesus into taking sides with one school or the other. However, they had overlooked the fact that it was not God's original plan for anyone to divorce, ever, which is why Jesus said: " 'What God has joined together, let not man separate' " (*Matt. 19:6, NKJV*). Later, because of the "hardness" of their hearts, they asked why God had allowed a man to give his wife a " 'certificate of divorce' " if he found some " 'uncleanness in her' " (*Deut. 24:1, NKJV*). Christ corrected the misuse of this passage by uplifting the sanctity and permanence of marriage: the only cause for divorce, before God, is "sexual immorality" or "fornication" (in Greek *porneia*, literally "unchastity").

How seriously do we take Jesus' warning about plucking out our eyes or cutting off a hand? How much stronger a warning could He have given us about what sin can do to our eternal destiny? If this warning scares you, good. It should!

Jesus and the Fifth Commandment

During another encounter Jesus had with the scribes and Pharisees (*Matt. 15:1–20*; see also *Mark 7:1–13*), they questioned Him about a tradition of the elders, one not found in the Law of Moses. This tradition stipulated that one should ritualistically wash his hands before eating, something Jesus’ disciples had neglected to do. Christ immediately responded by citing another tradition of the Pharisees, one that invalidated the fifth commandment.

Before analyzing Christ’s argument, we need to understand that the tradition the Pharisees had established, called Corban, comes from a word that means “a gift.” When a man applied the words, “It is Corban” to anything, it was considered an oath: it was something dedicated to God and the temple.

Read Mark 7:9–13. In what ways was the Pharisees’ tradition such a subtle way of violating the fifth commandment? Consider the importance of presenting offerings before God (*Exod. 23:15, 34:20*) and the sacredness of an oath made before the Lord (*Deut. 23:21–23*).

It seems as if the Pharisees had found the perfect excuse to deny one’s parents their rightful support. They had expanded the solid principles found in the Pentateuch and transformed them into man-made commandments, which, in their leaders’ own thinking, could supersede one of God’s commandments.

This isn’t the only time Jesus dealt with the same spiritual perversion: “ ‘But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God. *These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone*’ ” (*Luke 11:42, NKJV; emphasis added*). They should have kept both commands, first by honoring their father and mother, without leaving aside their giving to the Lord.

No wonder Jesus summed up His argument by applying to the Pharisees a description Isaiah made of the Israelites 700 years earlier: “ ‘ “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” ’ ” (*Matt. 15:8, 9, NKJV*). Once again, Christ upheld the Ten Commandments and contrasted His position with that of the Pharisees.

In what ways might you be seeking little technical loopholes in order to avoid doing what’s clearly your duty?

Jesus and the Essence of the Law

Read Matthew 19:16–22. From the immediate details of this specific story, what broad and important truths can we derive from this account about the law and what the keeping of the law entails?

The rich young man couldn't comprehend that salvation from sin does not come from following the law, even strictly. It comes, rather, from the Lawgiver, the Savior. The Israelites had known this truth since the beginning, but they had forgotten it. Now Jesus set forth what they should have heeded from the start: that obedience and full surrender to God are so united that one without the other becomes only a pretense of Christian life. "Nothing short of obedience can be accepted. Self-surrender is the substance of the teachings of Christ. Often it is presented and enjoined in language that seems authoritative, because there is no other way to save man than to cut away those things which, if entertained, will demoralize the whole being."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 523.

In another encounter, the Sadducees had been questioning Christ about the resurrection, and Jesus had astonished and silenced them with His answer. So, now the Pharisees gathered together, ready to make a final attempt to lead the Savior into saying something that they could interpret as being against the law. They chose a certain lawyer to question Jesus about which was the most important commandment (*Matt. 22:35–40*).

The lawyer's question probably arose from the attempt of the rabbis to arrange all the commandments by order of importance. If two commands appeared to be in conflict, the one assumed to be more important took priority and left a person free to violate the less important one. The Pharisees particularly exalted the first four precepts of the Decalogue as being more important than the last six and, as a result, they failed when it came to matters of practical religion.

Jesus answered in a masterful way: first, and most important, there must be love in the heart before anyone can begin to observe God's law. Obedience without love is impossible and worthless. However, where there is true love toward God, a person will unconditionally put his life in harmony with God's will as expressed in all ten of His commandments. That is why Jesus later said: " 'If you love Me, keep My commandments' " (*John 14:15, NKJV*).

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “The Spirituality of the Law,” pp. 45–78, in *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*: “The Sermon on the Mount,” pp. 307–314, and “Controversy,” pp. 606–609, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Speaking of the law, Jesus said, ‘I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill’ . . . ; that is, to fill up the measure of the law’s requirement, to give an example of perfect conformity to the will of God. . . .

“His mission was to ‘magnify the law, and make it honorable.’ Isaiah 42:21. He was to show the spiritual nature of the law, to present its far-reaching principles, and to make plain its eternal obligation. . . .

“Jesus, the express image of the Father’s person, the effulgence of His glory; the self-denying Redeemer, throughout His pilgrimage of love on earth was a living representation of the character of the law of God. In His life it is made manifest that heaven-born love, Christlike principles, underlie the laws of eternal rectitude.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, pp. 48, 49.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In what ways can we fall into the temptation of being legalistic in our observance of the law, as the Pharisees were? On the other hand, what danger exists when we assume that loving God exempts us from obeying His law? Make a list of practical ways in which we could avoid falling into one or the other pitfall in our days. Bring your ideas to share with your class.
- 2 As we know, the argument against the continued validity of the Ten Commandments often is nothing but an attempt to get around the seventh-day Sabbath. Review all the Sabbath healing stories in the Gospels. How do they affirm not only the continued validity of God’s law but also of the seventh-day Sabbath? Why are the words and example of Jesus the last place anyone who wants to deny the Sabbath should go?
- 3 Theologians sometimes talk about “a moral universe.” What does that mean? How is our universe a moral place? If it is, what do you think makes it so? What role would God’s law have in a moral universe? Could the universe be a moral place without God having a moral law to govern it? Discuss. How does the idea of God’s law in a moral universe help explain Satan’s attempt to undermine that law?

Labor of Love

Muthu is a Bible teacher in a Seventh-day Adventist high school in southeastern India. But his ministry extends beyond the classroom. He takes students and adults to villages to hold branch Sabbath Schools. Most of the villagers know little about Jesus.

The children come first, gathering under a tree to hear stories and sing songs. Then team members visit villagers' homes to pray for the sick or discouraged. Eventually adults join in the meetings.

One day Muthu visited a village and discovered that heavy rain had damaged an old mud house, causing it to collapse and leaving the woman who lived there homeless. She had leprosy, and no one would go near her.

Instead of holding branch Sabbath School, Muthu and his team cleared the debris from the home site. Soon villagers pitched in to help as well. They cut some poles and stretched a tarp over them for a temporary shelter.

During the week, Muthu and his team began building a small, sturdy house for the woman. The villagers saw that no harm came to Muthu or his teammates, and they began treating the woman as one of them again. Some gave her clothes and household goods to replace what she had lost.

The next Sabbath the woman met Muthu and begged him to come to her house. There she pointed to two large gunnysacks filled with coconuts. "Those are my offering," she said. Muthu was touched as he realized that this woman had gathered about 100 coconuts and carried them, one by one, to her little home. Her labor of love had taken her all week.

Today a large group meets in the village for worship. The village has no church of any denomination, but they welcome the Adventists because they know these people care. The nearest church is three or four miles (five or six kilometers) away, and there is no reliable transportation. The new believers are learning to pray and are asking God for a church in their village.

Thousands of villages such as this one have only a stone god to worship. The people still wait to hear that Jesus loves them and wants to live with them forever. Our mission offerings help to make it possible for these people to have a simple church in which to worship God and invite others to worship as well.



MUTHU KUTTI is a lay worker living in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.