

COVENANTS AND COMMANDS: WHAT I WISH SOMEONE HAD TOLD ME¹

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1. Mankind was under moral *requirements*, moral *duties* or *obligations*, from creation. A few of those obligations were given as laws, as expressly stated commandments. There were commands to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth and subdue it (Gen. 1:22, 28), to work the Garden (Gen. 2:15), and not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). But there were many other moral obligations that were not declared expressly but which were known intuitively or innately as part of humanity being created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). These "non-law" requirements, these obligations that were not spelled out in express decrees, are what Paul refers to in Rom. 2:14-15 as the "law of the heart."

2. We understand this distinction between violations of express commands and violations of understood norms. It is the difference between saying to your child, "you knew better than to . . ." and "I specifically told you not to . . ." Both are wrong and subject to punishment, but the latter is a more flagrant act of insubordination. The latter is what Scripture calls a "transgression." Transgression is a specific kind of sin, the disobeying of an express command. So all transgression is sin, but not all sin is transgression. Transgression is a subset of sin. Douglas Moo, for example, says (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 277), "'Transgression' denotes a specific kind of sin, the 'passing beyond' the limits set by a definite, positive law or command."²

3. Because express commands are not a prerequisite for *sin* to occur, as distinct from *transgression*, Paul can say in Rom. 2:12, "For all who have *sinned without the law* will also perish without the law" and say in Rom. 5:13a "for sin indeed was in the world *before the law was given*."³

¹ This is a lesson I taught on 2/20/22 at the Mesa Church of Christ. It is largely a reorganization of material in "A Note on the Mosaic Law" and "The Mosaic Law and the Christian – Further Reflections."

² Paul's statement in Gal. 3:19 that the law was added "for the sake of transgressions" does not mean transgressions had occurred without a law. Rather, he probably means that the law was added to elevate what would be violations of the law of the heart to the graver offense of "transgression." This was to expose the Israelites' spiritual state, to make it more difficult to deceive themselves about their own righteousness (Rom. 3:20, 7:7), and thus to point the way to Jesus Christ by highlighting their need for a redeemer. Paul also may be alluding to the fact the Mosaic law, being given to people who in general were not indwelt by the Holy Spirit, stimulated and provoked disobedience (Rom. 5:20, 7:5, 8). That stimulation of sin magnified the Israelites' failure and thereby reinforced the point that grace was the only path of righteousness. (As Paul makes clear in Romans 7, it is Sin not the law that is to blame for this effect. Sin used the holy and good law against its subjects [Rom. 7:8, 11-14], but God was able to incorporate this work of Sin into his purpose.)

³ The statement in Rom. 5:13b that "sin is not counted (or *charged* or *reckoned*) where there is no law" does not mean it is not sin or that it is ignored and not punished. This is clear from the OT witness. Rather, it means that without law, without an express command, sin cannot be charged *as a transgression*, as a violation of an express command. Thus, Ben Witherington (*Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 147), in accord with many commentators, says of Paul's statement that "sin is not charged where there is no law": "Paul cannot mean that God simply ignored sin since he surely knows the story of Noah. Thus what Paul seems to mean is that sin was not reckoned as transgression, for the latter involves a willful violation of a known law." This fits with Paul's earlier statement in Rom. 4:15b, "where there is no law there is no *transgression*."

a. That is why, in the absence of an express command against murder, it still was wrong, sinful, for Cain to murder Abel (Gen. 4:8-14; 1 Jn. 3:12) and for Lamech to kill a young man for striking him (Gen. 4:23-24). Indeed, it was mankind's rejection of God's *unspecified* but *understood* moral requirements that caused God to flood the Earth in the days of Noah. He did so because the *wickedness* of man was great and the intentions of his heart were *evil* continually (Gen. 6:5); the earth was *corrupt* in God's sight and filled with *violence* (Gen. 6:11-13).

b. And that is why, before God gave his commandments to Moses, we are told the people of Sodom and Gomorrah *sinned* greatly (Gen. 13:13, 18:20), that Joseph's brothers *sinned* in selling him into slavery (Gen. 42:21-22, 50:17), and that Abimelech and Joseph *would have sinned* if they had slept with another man's wife (Gen. 20:4-6, 39:8-9).

c. And it is why the conduct of the Canaanites was sinful, (Gen. 15:16 and Lev. 18:24-25), the conduct of the pagan nations was sinful (e.g., Amos 1:2-2:3), and the conduct of the Gentiles was sinful (Rom. 1:18-32), despite the fact God had not issued express commands to them. They violated moral requirements of God that they knew simply by being human.

4. A "covenant" is what we might call a "pact" or "treaty" or "agreement." When made between parties of unequal status in the ancient world, the superior typically promised blessings and protection and the inferior pledged loyalty and submission.

5. After the Flood, God entered into a covenant with Abraham in which he promised to bless Abraham and his descendants and to bless the world through his "seed" (singular; Gen. 22:18). This Abrahamic covenant was the primary or fundamental covenant governing the relationship of God with his people.

6. The blessings God promised to Abraham and his descendants were predicated on their having a *living* faith, which includes their loyalty and submission to him (Gen. 12:1-4, 17:9-14, 18:17-19, 22:11-18, 26:4-5; Heb. 11:8-10, 17-19; Jas. 2:20-23). They would, therefore, heed God's directives and his understood norms. Note how God's reaffirmation of his covenant with Abraham in Gen. 22:16b and 18b is linked to Abraham's faithful obedience and how James describes the nature of Abraham's faith in Jas. 2:20-23.

7. In 1446 B.C., over 500 years after the institution of the covenant with Abraham, God birthed the nation of Israel after its time of gestation in Egypt, bringing them out in the exodus under the leadership of Moses. And on Mount Sinai, God entered into a covenant with the people of Israel (Ex. 20:1-24:8), what is known as the Mosaic covenant. It was an interim or temporary covenant given until God's prior promise to Abraham to bless all nations through his "seed" began to be fulfilled with the coming of Christ, as Paul explains in Gal. 3:16-19. That covenant specified the way in which the faith of God's people was to be expressed, the shape that faith was to take, until Christ came. Its temporary nature is evident in 2 Cor. 3:4-18; Gal. 3:15-4:7, 4:21-31; Eph. 2:14-16; Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 7:11-22, 8:6-13.

8. The Mosaic covenant included the grandest and most complete expression to that time of God's moral requirements, but as I say, moral requirements did not begin when God gave the law to Moses at Mount Sinai. In addition to incorporating and articulating universal moral

requirements that existed from creation, moral obligations that were known intuitively or innately as part of being created in the image of God, the Mosaic covenant included requirements that were peculiar to Israel, requirements that had no counterpart in the law of the heart to which all humanity was subject.

9. Those requirements that were peculiar to Israel – things like dietary laws, circumcision, ritual purity laws, marriage restrictions, Sabbath observance, religious feasts and holy days, the priesthood and prescribed sacrifices – erected civil and ceremonial or ritualistic ("amoral") distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, probably, at least in part, to keep the people of God untainted by pagan practices in order to help them serve as a witness to their Gentile neighbors of the blessed life that exists under God (Deut. 4:6-8; Ezek. 5:5; Isa. 42:6, 49:6). Paul refers to this separating effect of the law in Eph. 2:14-16. These elements of the law were a dividing wall, a religious-sociological barrier, that ended up generating hostility from Gentiles.

10. That there is a qualitative difference among the commands of the Mosaic law, that they are not all of the same nature, is confirmed in 1 Cor. 7:19 where Paul says (NIV), "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts." Clearly the command to circumcise is not among the commands Paul now considers important to keep. It was not part of God's ongoing moral desire for mankind but rather was one of those commands unique to Israel that functioned to separate them from the Gentiles (although they were not the only people to circumcise).

11. The commands of the Mosaic covenant provided a *theoretical* way of salvation (Rom. 2:13, 10:5), if they were perfectly obeyed, but because of sin the only way of salvation in practice was by grace through faith. In other words, the commands were never supposed to bring spiritual life because, as Scripture declares, all are under the power of sin and thus do not keep the law perfectly as would be necessary for the law to be the basis of one's right standing before God (Rom. 3:9-26, 4:15a; Gal. 3:10-14, 3:21-22).

12. So spiritual life, salvation, under the Mosaic covenant was by faith, not by keeping the commands, not by obeying the "law." It was the gracious provision of God, bestowed on those of genuine faith, which faith naturally and inevitably expressed itself in obedience, and in repentance at failure, including offering of the prescribed sacrifices, in conjunction with which forgiveness was provided (e.g., Leviticus 4-6, 17:11, 19:22; Numbers 15).

13. That is why Paul in Rom. 4:6-8 can cite David, who lived under the Mosaic covenant, in support of the idea that justification is *by faith*. And it is why he and the writer of Hebrews can cite Hab. 2:4 in support of the idea that righteousness is *by faith* (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:38). The list of OT saints in Hebrews 11 confirms the crucial role of faith in pleasing God under the old covenant.

14. Of course, the sacrifices prescribed under the old covenant were only a shadow of the true atoning sacrifice on which all divine forgiveness is based (Heb. 10:1-4). The blood of bulls and goats has no atoning efficacy (Heb. 10:4); rather, those sacrifices were the *occasion* on which forgiveness was granted under the old covenant *on the basis of* Christ's future sacrifice. One might say sins under the old covenant were forgiven on credit.

15. The forgiveness that accompanied those animal sacrifices restored a formal degree of fellowship with God, but it did not cleanse the conscience. It left a barrier to intimacy in the form of a lingering sense of guilt that was rooted in the intuitive awareness that animal sacrifices were inadequate to atone for sin (Heb. 9:8-14; 10:4). Because animal sacrifices are inadequate to deal finally and fully with one's conscience, their repeated offering served as a reminder of sins rather than as an ultimate cleansing (Heb. 10:3). And because Christ's sacrifice is the reality rather than a shadow, the forgiveness available under the new covenant surpasses that available under the old in that the blood of Christ *utterly* purifies, purifies even our *consciences* from sin that we might serve God in a greater state of intimacy (Heb. 9:8-14).

16. Though the Mosaic covenant was an interim covenant which was given until God's earlier promise to Abraham to bless the nations began to be fulfilled with Christ, some Jews gave it priority over the Abrahamic covenant and exalted it to the point that the works of the law, the commands that were part of that covenant, became the basis of one's relationship with God and thus the basis of one's inheritance (Lk. 18:9-14; Rom. 3:27–4:8, 9:30–10:8; Gal. 2:16, 3:2, 5, 10; Phil. 3:2-11). In other words, some turned the law into a legalistic path of salvation. Making salvation something gained by works impermissibly changed the prior Abrahamic covenant by canceling out its promissory character (Rom. 4:13-17; Gal. 3:15-18). Instead of God providing his blessings in fulfillment of a gracious promise, the implication of works righteousness was that God was obligated to provide his blessings because one had earned them.

17. A new covenant was instituted between God and Israel (Jer. 31:31) through the sacrifice of Christ, the effect of which was to render the old covenant, the Mosaic covenant, obsolete or no longer operative (2 Cor. 3:4-18; Gal. 3:15–4:7, 4:21-31; Eph. 2:14-16; Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 7:11-22, 8:6-13, 10:1). And with the fulfillment in Christ of the planned obsolescence of the Mosaic covenant, *the set of commands* that was part of that covenant, the Mosaic law, ceased to be binding. This is clear from texts like Rom. 10:1-4, Gal. 3:23-25, and Heb. 7:11-14. It also is clear from the fact specific regulations that were part of the Mosaic law – such as Sabbath regulations (Col. 2:16-17; Rom. 14:5-6), food laws (Rom. 14:1–15:13; 1 Cor. 10:23–11:1), and circumcision (1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 2:3-5, 5:2-6, 11-12, 6:12-13; Phil. 3:2) – are said to be no longer binding. That is why Paul, a Jew, could declare that he was not under the Mosaic law (1 Cor. 9:20).

18. Though the *set of commands* (the group, body, or package of commands) that constitutes the Mosaic law ceased to be binding, many of the *individual commands included in that set* have an ongoing or renewed applicability in the new covenant and indeed find their full expression there. Thus, Paul in Eph. 6:2 commands children to "honor your father and mother," quoting from the Ten Commandments in Ex. 20:12 and Deut. 5:16. The Ten Commandments also are reflected in NT commands and prohibitions against idolatry, swearing of oaths, murder, adultery, stealing, slandering, lying, and coveting. And many other commands issued by Spirit-inspired writers in the NT are based on OT commands outside the Ten Commandments.

19. A key point to note is that commands in the Mosaic law are not applicable *as Mosaic law*, that is, by virtue of being in the Mosaic law. Rather, they are applicable because they are preexisting, universal moral desires of God that were included in the Mosaic law. And because those desires were articulated for the people of Israel in the Mosaic law, one can cite that

articulation of God's universal desire as a Christian requirement. That does not mean the Mosaic law or the old covenant are still in effect. It means only that the Mosaic law included articulations of divine moral desires that preceded their embodiment in the Mosaic law and that continue after that set of laws was rendered inoperative.

20. The fundamental ethical requirement for the Christian is love (Mat. 7:12, 22:36-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14). Love is the center, the bullseye, but there are definite requirements on how it expresses itself. It is not a subjective free-for-all. As Paul indicates in Rom. 13:9, the command to love your neighbor as yourself encompasses the commands of the law not to commit adultery, not to murder, not to steal, and not to covet (and other commands he does not specify). Thus, the Christian, though not being under the Mosaic law, the set of commands that are part of the Mosaic covenant, upholds the transcendent moral requirements that were included in that law and fully expressed through Christ (e.g., Rom. 3:31, 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14). This ongoing moral law, centered in love, is the "law of Christ" (see 1 Cor. 9:21 and Gal. 6:2 with 5:14).

21. As Spirit-filled people, Christians are empowered to obey these ethical norms in a new way (though "not yet" perfectly). We fulfill the law by living out its true purpose. When Jesus says in Mat. 5:19 that anyone who relaxes one of the least of the OT commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, he is referring to OT commandments *as applicable to kingdom participants*, as applicable in light of his coming and fulfillment of the OT.

a. As I have explained, some commands do not apply in the new covenant era by virtue of his fulfilling work (e.g., sacrifices, food laws, ritual purity rules), but other commands have renewed applicability and find their fullest expression in the Lord's teaching, as he indicates in the Sermon on the Mount. All expressions in the Mosaic law of God's universal moral desires, those commands that have ongoing relevance, must be read through the impact of Christ's coming. Those who practice and teach those Christ-mediated commands, those commands as applied through the prism of Jesus, will be called great in the kingdom, whereas those who do not practice them and who teach others to do likewise will be called least in the kingdom.

b. These works, of course, do not save us. Rather, they are a Spirit-empowered accompaniment of the living faith through which we appropriate the grace of God (Eph. 2:8-9; Jas. 2:14-26).

22. Because the commands of the Mosaic law relating to circumcision, sacrifices, food laws, etc. – the Israel-specific commands that separated them from Gentiles – are not part of the law of Christ, not something applicable in the new covenant, Christ's ending of the Mosaic law ended the requirements that created the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. In this way, he created one new man out of the two, which is Paul's point in Eph. 2:14-18.

23. The Judaizers, such as those in Galatia, told the Gentile Christians that they needed to come under the Mosaic law to be saved (e.g., Acts 15:1, 5). If the Christians submitted to circumcision because they accepted that false claim, they would be seeking to relate to God pursuant to the obsolete Mosaic covenant and thus would be relying on its provisions for forgiveness (animal sacrifices), which were no longer recognized by God in light of Christ's having come.

24. In choosing to relate to God on that basis, Christ would be of no value to them (Gal. 5:2); they would have fallen from grace and been left with no forgiveness. They would be obligated to obey the entire law, but with its pre-Christ, gracious provision of forgiveness having expired, they would have no hope (Gal. 5:2-4). That is why it was so tragic.