

The Mosaic Law and the Christian: Further Reflections

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1. The Mosaic covenant included the grandest and most complete expression to that time of God's moral requirements, but moral requirements did not begin when God gave the law to Moses at Mount Sinai. Mankind was under moral requirements *from creation*. It was wrong for Cain to murder Abel (Gen. 4:8-14) and for Lamech to kill a young man for striking him (Gen. 4:23-24). Indeed, it was mankind's rejection of God's moral requirements that caused God to flood the Earth in the days of Noah, long before Moses. 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). The people of Sodom and Gomorrah sinned greatly (Gen. 13:13, 18:20), Er was killed for his wickedness (Gen. 38:7), Joseph's brothers sinned in selling him into slavery (Gen. 42:21-22, 50:17), and Abimelech and Joseph would have sinned if they had slept with another man's wife (Gen. 20:4-6, 39:8-9).

2. But until the Mosaic covenant, God's moral requirements had not been given as "law," had not been laid down as express commandments. (The only prior "law" in this proper sense was the express commandment that had been given to Adam.) Rather, they were known intuitively or innately as part of the law written by God on the human heart (see Rom. 2:15), which is part of our being made in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27). Remnants of that knowledge were reflected in various pagan cultural norms (e.g., Amos 3:9-10; 1 Cor. 5:1).

3. Violating these non-law moral requirements was sin. In other words, the existence of "law," express edicts to be obeyed, is not necessary for sin to occur. The Lord said in Gen. 4:7, long before the giving of the Mosaic law, "And if you do not do well, *sin* is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it." The pre-Mosaic examples of sinning given in paragraph 1 confirm the point. That is why Paul can say in Rom. 2:12, "For as many as *sinned without the law* will also perish without the law" and say in Rom. 5:13a that sin was in the world *before (until) the law was given*. Despite not having a "law," 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).

4. "Transgression," however, is a different story. To *transgress* is to violate the will of God as revealed in an express commandment.

(a) C. E. B. Cranfield states (*Romans*, 1:170, fn. 3), "The idea contained in these words [transgression and transgressor], as they are used in the NT, is that of the transgression of a known, concrete divine commandment." Douglas Moo 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. While every 'transgression' is also a 'sin,' not every 'sin' is a 'transgression.'" Thomas Schreiner says (*Romans*, 367), "Twice already in Romans (4:15; 5:13-14) Paul has distinguished between sin without the law and sin committed in violation of specifically revealed commandments. The latter is sometimes called "transgression" (cf. 4:15,

παράβασις, *parabasis*), and it can be distinguished from sin in general because it involves disobedience to a command revealed by God."

(b) So the existence of "law," in the sense of express commands, is a precondition to transgression but not to sin. That's what Paul means when he says in Rom. 4:15b, "And where there is not law, neither is there *transgression*." As Moo notes (p. 277), Paul in Rom. 4:15 "is not claiming that there is no 'sin' where there is no law, but, in almost a 'truism,' that there is no deliberate disobedience of positive commands where there is no positive command to disobey." It is the difference between "You knew better than to . . ." and "I specifically told you not to . . ."

(c) The statement in Rom. 5:13 that "sin is not *charged* when there is no law" does not mean it is not sin or that it is ignored and not punished. How could it mean that in light of the Old Testament witness? Rather, it means that without law sin cannot be counted as a violation of specific commands and prohibitions. As Ben Witherington remarks (*Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 147), "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." Cranfield writes (1:282):

["Not charged"] must be understood in a relative sense: only in comparison with what takes place when the law is present can it be said that, in the law's absence, sin [is not charged]. Those who lived without the law were certainly not 'innocent sinners' – they were to blame for what they were and what they did. But, in comparison with the state of affairs which has obtained since the advent of the law, sin may be said to have been, in the law's absence, 'not registered', since it was not the fully apparent, sharply defined thing, which it became in its presence.

Schreiner writes (p. 279):

How then do we explain verse 13, which says that sin is not reckoned apart from law? The purpose of that verse is to explain that apart from the Mosaic law sin is not equivalent to transgression (Cranfield 1975: 282-83; Bornkamm 1952: 84). This is confirmed by both Rom. 4:15 and the present context, for Paul notes explicitly in 5:14 that Adam's sin was different in kind from those who lived before the Mosaic law in that he violated a commandment disclosed by God.

5. In addition to incorporating and detailing universal moral requirements, the Mosaic law included requirements that were peculiar to Israel, requirements that had no counterpart in the law of the heart to which all humanity was subject. These commands 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. A distinction in the nature of Mosaic commandments is evident in 1 Cor. 7:19 where Paul says, "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; there is a qualitative difference among the commands included in the law.

6. A new covenant was instituted between God and mankind 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; Heb. 7:11-22, 8:6-13). 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 but also 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).

7. 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. In Acts 23:5 he accepts that it is wrong to speak insolently to the high priest on the authority of Ex. 22:28. In Rom. 12:19-20 he prohibits the Roman Christians from avenging themselves on the authority of Deut. 32:35. In 1 Cor. 9:9-10 and 1 Tim. 5:17-18 he cites Deut. 25:4 as authority for the right of missionaries and elders to be supported (a right Paul refuses to use). And in 1 Cor. 14:33-34 he argues for the silence of women in the assemblies by citing "the law" as requiring the submission of women.¹ In 1 Pet. 1:14-16 Peter grounds his command that they be holy in all their conduct on Lev. 11:44. And in Jas. 2:8-9 James applies to his readers the command of Lev. 19:18 that they love their neighbor as themselves, calling it the "royal law" because it was singled out by Christ, the fulfiller and authoritative interpreter of the law, as the essence of the interpersonal aspects of the Mosaic law (Mat. 22:34-40). The Ten Commandments also are reflected in New Testament commands and prohibitions against idolatry, swearing of oaths, murder, adultery, stealing, slandering, lying, and coveting. Indeed, there are literally hundreds of commands in the New Testament issued by Spirit-inspired writers, many of which are rooted in the Old Testament.

8. 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 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

¹ Paul does not identify a specific text from the Old Testament that expresses the principle of male leadership, but he probably has in mind a text like Gen. 2:21-23 in which Eve is shown to have been created after Adam and out of Adam and to have been named by Adam. In 1 Tim. 2:13 Paul cites the fact Adam was created first as a basis for male leadership in the church (see also, 1 Cor. 11:8-9). This is consistent with the Old Testament pattern of "primogeniture," the idea that the firstborn in any generation in a human family has leadership in the family. Other texts certainly could have factored into Paul's reference to the Law. For example, in Gen. 3:16 God tells Eve that as part of the curse her desire will be for her husband, probably meaning that woman in her fallen nature will desire to dominate her husband (see the use of "desire" in Gen. 4:7), contrary to God's created order, and that this desire generally will go unsatisfied because the husband has the leadership role. In Gen. 18:12 Sarah referred to Abraham as "her lord," and for that reason Peter cites her in 1 Pet. 3:6 as a paragon of wifely submission.

moral desires that preceded their embodiment in the Mosaic law and that continue after that set of laws was rendered inoperative.

9. When Jesus says in Mat. 5:19 that anyone who relaxes one of the least of the Old Testament commandments will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, he is referring to Old Testament commandments *as applicable to kingdom participants*, as applicable in light of his coming and fulfillment of the Old Testament. Some commands do not apply in the new covenant era by virtue of his fulfilling work (e.g., sacrifices, Sabbath commands, food laws, circumcision, ritual contamination), 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, of course 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.

10. The fundamental ethical requirement for the Christian is love (Mat. 7:12, 22:37-40; 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 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).

11. The Galatian Christians were being told by the Judaizers that they needed to come under the Mosaic law to be saved. Their submitting to circumcision would mean they had accepted that false claim. In that event, 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. In choosing to relate to God on that basis, Christ would be of no value to them; 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 very different from saying, "Though the Mosaic law (the body of law) is no longer binding, the expression in that law of God's abhorrence of bestiality, for example, applies to Christians because it is an expression of a moral requirement that transcends the Mosaic law."

12. Identifying what has ongoing applicability can be difficult, but it is a difficulty the New Testament thrusts upon us. What we cannot do is to fail to account for the biblical data by declaring that none of the law's commands holds any authority for the Christian. By my lights, that misrepresents God, leaves the members of the flock confused, and fuels frustration with the Scriptures.