

God's Law for Christians

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

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Scripture

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;
I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*

Matthew 5:17

*Christ is the culmination of the Law
so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.*

Romans 10:4

Sermon

What are Christians supposed to do with the Law of God? That's today's question. And it's an important question. But it's not an easy question to answer. Because the Law of God cuts both ways.

The Law is holy and good. The Law is delightful. But that same Law is also a harsh master. The Letter of James says, "Whoever breaks just one part of the Law is guilty of breaking the whole thing." (That's James 2:10). Can you imagine? That's like shoplifting and being convicted of armed robbery. That's like jacking a car and being convicted of first-degree murder. Ouch!

The Law is both good and dangerous. So it's no wonder Christians can't make up their minds about the Law. And it's no wonder we can't quite figure out what to do with the Law. But our theme this evening invites us to dive into the question of the Law. So let's brace ourselves. Let's seek and see what we find.

First, there's a question we need to answer. *What do we mean when we say, "the Law of God"?* The answer is more complicated than you might think.

Most of the time when we say, "the Law of God," we mean the Ten Commandments. After all, it was the Ten Commandments that God Almighty thundered from the mountain. And it was the Ten Commandments that were written in stone.

But when Jesus says he came to fulfill the Law, he means more than the Ten Commandments. And when Paul says Jesus is the culmination of the Law, he means more than the Ten Commandments.

Actually, it's clear from the Gospels and also from Paul's letters that Jesus fulfills not just the Commandments, but the entire five Books of Moses. And it's clear from the Gospels and also from Paul's letters that Jesus fulfills not just the Books of Moses, but also the Prophets and the Writings. In other words, Jesus fulfills all the Scriptures.

Jesus fulfills all the Scriptures. But don't go thinking that's about a bunch of predictions coming true. That's only the smallest part of it! No; when Jesus fulfills the Scriptures, a lot more is going on.

When Jesus fulfills the Scriptures, he keeps the promise they contain. When Jesus fulfills the Scriptures, he embodies the hope they express. When Jesus fulfills the Scriptures, he completes the story they tell, the story they tell from beginning to end. That's the big picture.

So when Jesus talks specifically about fulfilling the Law, he doesn't have in mind just the Ten Commandments. He has in mind the promise and the hope and the story that are found in the five Books of Moses from beginning to end.

But there was a problem, and it was a huge problem. Because that promise and that hope and that story were something that the Books of Moses and even Moses himself could never deliver on.

That's why the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law was inadequate. Their righteousness could only go so far, because it was based on an incomplete story, because it was based on an unrealized hope, because it was based on a still-pending promise.

When Jesus says, "Your righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law," he doesn't mean his disciples have to do a better job keeping the Commandments than those Jewish leaders did. Not at all. The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law did a terrific job keeping the Commandments.

But that kind of righteousness could only go so far. It never could go all the way. Something I read put it like this. Just as Moses himself was not able to lead Israel into

the Promised Land, so the Law that came through Moses was not able to lead anyone into Kingdom of God.

Let me expand on that. The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law had a righteousness that was based on obedience to the bits and pieces of the Law. And their obedience truly was astounding. Their obedience surpassed anything you or I could manage. Paul used the word “faultless.”

But a greater righteousness was needed. What was needed was a righteousness that wasn't based on an incomplete Law, a righteousness that wasn't based on a Law that always came up short, a righteousness that wasn't based on a Law that could never reach the Kingdom of God.

A greater righteousness was needed. And that greater righteousness is Jesus himself. He is our righteousness. That's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:30.

And Jesus is our righteousness, our surpassing righteousness, not because he obeys the Commandments perfectly—he does that, but it's not the point. No; Jesus is our righteousness, Jesus is the only righteousness, because he completes the story of the Law, because he fulfills the hope of the Books of Moses, because he is God's “yes” to all the promises of Scripture.

Jesus wasn't merely obedient to the rules found in the Law of God. No; beyond all that, he accomplished the purpose of the Law. That purpose was to redeem and restore Israel and all peoples and all creation. It was a great purpose, but a purpose the Law itself could never accomplish, because it was weakened by the flesh. That's what Paul said in Romans 8.

And he said more. He said the Law of God had become a law of sin and death. So the Law itself, like all creation, was in captivity. The Law itself was in bondage to decay. And its glory was diminished.

But Jesus accomplished the purpose of Law. Once and for all, he dealt with Sin and with Death and with the other enslaving powers. Once and for all, he dealt with the powers that held all people in bondage, Jews and Gentiles. He dealt with those powers on the cross, triumphing over them there. And his victory was sealed by his resurrection.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

And here's the result. And this is why surpassing righteousness is found in Jesus Christ alone. Because Jesus Christ himself, Jesus alone, leads the way. He is the first one to go where the Law pointed. The Law, weak as it was, could never take anyone there. But Jesus, through his faithfulness, makes the journey to the right hand of God. And when the time is right, he will take us to be with him there.

So no; we Christians do not need the Law. Like Moses himself, the Law can never bring anyone into the Promised Land. We don't need the Law, because we have Jesus Christ. He is our righteousness. Which is to say, he is the one who brings us into the Kingdom.

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Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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