

Tuesday's Touch #65

...from Pastor Ed ...April 20, 2010

The Law and the New Covenant

But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter. Romans 7:6

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. Romans 10:4

...not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith. Philippians 3:9

If you love me, keep my commandments... John 14:15

From the beginning of the gospel, Christians have struggled with the relationship between law and grace. The New Testament says repeatedly that we are not under the law, yet it also repeatedly quotes commandments from the Old Testament and even issues new ones. The Apostle John says, “He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments is a liar...” (1 John 2:4). What’s up with that???

The term “law” is used in various ways in the Bible. It is used to refer to the first five books of the Bible written by Moses. It is also used specifically of the Ten Commandments (Words) which formed the heart of the Mosaic Covenant, upon which God established the nation of Israel as a peculiar covenant people. It is used by Jesus as a general designation for all of the scriptures (at least all of the Old Testament) when He refers to the Psalms as law (John 10:34). Paul makes several incidental uses of the word to refer to any consistent (persistent) dynamic or spiritual principle when he refers to the *law in his flesh*, the *law in his mind*, the *law of sin*, etc. (Romans 3:21-23).

So, when we talk about our relationship to the law, it is important first of all to understand what we mean by *law*. I believe it helpful in our current consideration to limit the term to two primary aspects: first, as referring to the Mosaic Covenant, which, as I said, defined the relationship between God and the Old Testament nation of Israel; and then, as referring to all of the *imperatives* contained in all of the scriptures. One’s view of the Christian’s relationship to both of these aspects of law is absolutely critical to understanding life under the gospel – life in the New Covenant era.

First, it should be clear from the New Testament, that the old *covenant* under Moses, has passed away (2 Corinth 3:7-10). It served a transitory and temporal purpose (Gal 3:16-19; 23-26). In its abiding significance it points, through shadows and types (Colos 2:16-17; Heb 8:5; 10:1), to a new and better covenant (Heb 7:22; 8:6) that would be embodied in the coming Messiah, and administered by the indwelling Spirit (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:26; Heb 10:15-16). With the coming of Christ, in His life, death, and resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the *Law and the Prophets*, the OT, has been fulfilled; the old covenant has been replaced by the *New Covenant* in His blood (1 Corinth 11:25). Such is our relationship to the law in its *covenant aspect* – we are no longer under its jurisdiction. Christ is our covenant (Isaiah 42:6). We are complete in Him. He is our righteousness and sanctification (Colos 2:9-10; 1 Corinth 1:30).

We are still left, however, with the dilemma of those imperatives (commands) which are enjoined upon Christians, and often extracted from the old covenant writings. How do we deal with this aspect of *law*? It is common to say that the “moral commands” are abiding, and that the believer is obligated to live according to them. There are two huge problems with that. First, nowhere do the scriptures divide the law into moral and non-moral aspects (i.e. moral, civil, and ceremonial). The second problem is, that while the old covenant commands dealt *primarily* with external manifestations of righteousness, the New Testament, deals *primarily* with internal righteousness, focusing upon the heart. To adopt a legal approach to the New Covenant imperatives becomes even more condemning and impossible to keep than the old covenant was. One may quickly reply that we now have the empowering of the Holy Spirit to help us keep the law. Well, let me ask you something: How’s that workin’ for ya? If you say that you are now keeping the law and not sinning, John says your nose is going to get mighty long, Pinocchio (1 John 1:10). As we move into a New Covenant perspective, it is certainly a step in the right direction to say that all of scripture, especially the

Old Testament, must be interpreted in the light of Christ through New Covenant lenses; and to that I say a hearty, amen! But, if we end up simply exchanging old covenant law for New-Testament-Jesus-Commanded “law,” or some hybrid of the two, we have gained nothing; in fact the end is worse than the beginning.

In struggling with this issue, it is important to remember (or realize) that the moral commands of scripture are not a substance and end unto themselves. They are not the object and goal of salvation, nor are they to be our longed-for righteousness (Matt 5:6). Quite to the contrary, they are but faint reflections of the very character and nature of God Himself, embodied fully in the person of Jesus Christ. No commandment or set of commandments could possibly embrace the fullness of the glory of God in Christ, which glory far surpasses the glory of the written “righteousness” engraved upon stone (2 Corinth 3:7-11). Christ is the *end of the law for righteousness to every one who believes* (Rom 10:4)!

Jesus words in John 16:8-11 are extremely instructive. Speaking of the Holy Spirit, He says, “*And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged [by Me].*” What is He saying? The Holy Spirit’s work in communicating the realities of sin, righteousness and judgment is accomplished by revealing Christ, who *is* the standard. The inspired Word of God is now the Spirit’s instrument to reveal Christ to us, and *in* us. He is not conforming us to the image of the law, but into the very image of Christ; as we behold His glory we are being changed from glory to glory *by* the Spirit (2 Corinth 3:18). (*Note: the NIV translation of this verse is most unfortunate. Nearly all other translations get it right.*) As we abide in, and behold Him, *without Whom we can do nothing*, we bear the fruit of righteousness from *within* (John 15:5; Eph 5:8-9). From *within* flows out living water (John 7:37-39). Just as sin comes from within, out of the heart (Matt 15:19), so must righteousness come from within, out of a new heart created by new birth (John 3:3, 21).

Now, please hear this: Our present pursuit of sanctification unto holiness has nothing to do with our ‘*becoming*’ anything in ourselves. If we are in Christ, our perfection and glory is *already* certain. The Father *already* loves us with the same love, and to the same extent, that He loves Jesus (John 17:23, 26)! We cannot add or detract anything from that love. We are *already* complete in Him (Colos 2:9-10); and one day we will see Him as He is, and in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, we shall be made perfectly like Him (1 Corinth 15:51-52; 1 John 3:2). The moment we view holiness to as goal to be pursued in and of itself in order to make us in any way better, or more acceptable to God, we cast ourselves right back on legal ground, as if Christ had never come. But if we are already complete, why, then, should we be concerned at all about sin and righteousness in the present? Precisely because (as others have pointed out) in Christ, by new birth we are born *incurable God-lovers*. As such, motivated by love, it is our heart’s desire to *display Him*! Whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, we are to glorify Him (1 Corinth 10:31). That means, as we move through the circumstances of each day, in every aspect of our being, we make it our aim in love to *display the beauty of our Lord* with an excellent spirit and demeanor (the fruit of the Spirit! Gal 5:22). And this display is not only to the people around us as a letter known and read by all (2 Corinth 3:2), but it also makes known to the principalities and powers in heavenly places, the manifold wisdom of God in His redemption of the church (Eph 4:10).

Next week I will attempt to focus on the practical outworking of this New Covenant reality.

Christ, Our Covenant,

Teach us to abide in you and bear fruit to your glory.

Amen

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