

Is God's Law Still Relevant?

There is much confusion as to whether the law of God as found in the Ten Commandments and civic laws are still in use in this New Testament era. On the one side there are hyper-grace teachers who say that the law is no longer necessary and is only useful as shadows and types that point us to Christ. On the other hand are people who overstate the role of the law and actually put Christians in bondage—similar to the way the Judaizers did to the church (see the books of Galatians and Hebrews and Acts 15).

For further clarity in this article, I will separate the law of God into three main components:

The Ceremonial Law

The Civic Law

The Moral Law

The ceremonial law has been done away with in Christ since Jesus was the lamb of God who took away the sins of the world (John 1:29). As a result, we no longer need to sacrifice animals for God's forgiveness, and we no longer need to observe ceremonial washings and cleansings (see Heb. 10:10-14; Col. 2:20-23).

Consequently, the ceremonial law is no longer applicable to us today in the church; hence, this expression of the law will not be the focal point of this article. From this point onward when I refer to the law of God, I am referring either to the Ten Commandments or to the 613 civic laws that apply the Ten Commandments to a nation.

To simplify this important subject, I have collapsed the role of the law into the four main functions.

The Four Main Functions of the Law of God

1) To Reveal Sin

The Scripture teaches us that through the law we discover the knowledge or severity of sin (Rom. 3:20). Paul said, "But I did not know sin, except through the law" (Rom. 7:7). Paul was writing this passage in the context of a letter to the church of Rome. Hence, the law served a necessary function for believers.

The law of God—especially the Ten Commandments—brings conviction of sin and should be used as a standard for all believers. Many in the hyper-grace camp don't understand the fact that without these commandments the Holy Spirit has no knowledge to work with in human hearts to bring repentance and conviction of sin. Because of this, I believe it is very important for believers to memorize these commandments so the Holy Spirit can use them to convict us. Most saints I know cannot even recite the Ten Commandments, to their detriment. Furthermore, Jesus taught that these laws were meant to be carried out in the heart—not just in outward behavior (see Matt. 5:27-29).

2) To Restrain Sin in Society

The second purpose of the law is to restrain sin in a civil society. Most believers don't realize it, but the original purpose of the Ten Commandments was to serve as a framework for the laws of a nation. Exodus 20 teaches us that Moses gave these commandments to the whole nation of Israel—not just to individuals. 1 Timothy 1:8-11 teaches us that the law was not given primarily to the just but to the unjust. Paul then proceeds to give us a litany of lawless behavior it condemns. This shows us beyond a shadow of a doubt that the law of God (both the moral and civic law) is an important element for any nation to use as a restrainer of evil in their society. The law served as our schoolmaster until Christ came (Gal. 3:24). Hence, the law's convicting and constraining power even helps prepare a people for Christ.

When the law disappears in a country so does conviction of sin because through the law is the knowledge of sin. Unless we have the law, people will not understand how utterly sinful they are and will not think they have need of a Savior. When a culture is not imbued with the framework of the moral law, sin and evil will be unrestrained. Evil will be rampant, and good will be called evil and vice versa (Is. 5:20). Consequently, it is much harder to preach and win converts to Christ in a nation that has no knowledge of the moral law of God.

3) To Serve as a Standard of Perfection

The Ten Commandments are universal laws that are applicable for all generations and all cultures because they are a reflection of God's nature and character and are rooted in the created order. Consequently, the moral law is a standard of perfect holiness and serves as our ideal when it comes to inward and outward holiness. This is why Jesus said in Matthew 5:48 to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. Although we are all sinners who fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 6:23), we all need a perfect ideal to strive for so we can continually grow in grace and be conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29). If the ideal was anything less than perfect, some will claim they have already arrived and will stop their process of maturing in Christ.

4) To Frame a Nation's Civil Laws

The moral law of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20) are extrapolated and applied in the 613 civil laws taught by Moses in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. A good example of this is in Exodus 20, which gives the 10 moral laws. Then chapters 21-23 expound on these laws in the context of a civil society. The Ten Commandments are broken up into two parts: Commandments 1-4 deal with our obligation to God and Commandment 5-10 deal with our obligations to other people. Each of the Ten Commandments serves as a category that is

unpacked in numerous civil laws that explain each of the 10 laws in more detail. For example, the Seventh Commandment teaches us not to commit adultery, but in order to explain the full range of application for this category regarding sexual sin, we have to read a chapter like Leviticus 18 that describes all the various forms of sexual activity God condemns.

In closing, it is important that every serious believer understand these four functions of the law of God. Many popular Bible teachers today disregard the law because they only have a theology for individual salvation and do not understand the law's function for a civil society. They also do not understand that the grace of God teaches us to renounce ungodly actions—which are elucidated in the standard of the moral law of God according to Romans 7:7—and that the Spirit came inside of us so that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk in the Spirit (Rom. 8:4). Furthermore, they do not understand the fact that the Ten Commandments were quoted either exactly (for example, Eph. 6:1-3) or in principle hundreds of times in the New Testament—hence, proving that the law of God is still necessary for individual believers. The law doesn't save us but is a standard for sanctification for Christ-followers and serves as a guide and restrainer of sin for a civil society.

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