

# **Christ and His Law**

## **Laws in Christ's Day**

Lesson #1 for April 5, 2014

Scriptures: Luke 2:1-5; 14:1-6; Hebrews 10:28; Deuteronomy 17:2-6; Leviticus 1:1-9; James 2:8-12.

1. In this series of lessons, we will explore the Christian's relationship to law. This includes all types of law but especially the moral law of the Ten Commandments. "From the very beginning of the great controversy in heaven it has been Satan's purpose to overthrow the law of God."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pages 582.1. And why would Satan want to overthrow that law? That law is the very basis for the government of God. (Compare *MB* 109.)
2. We live in a world where people are constantly challenging laws. Just as Satan did, people want to change almost every law one can think of. Of course, if God does not exist, then our world is really an amoral world—not immoral world, meaning having bad morals, but an amoral world—that is, having no morals at all. However, if God does exist, as we believe, then knowing what is right and wrong and what is good and bad comes from our understanding of His character and His government.
3. There are basically two kinds of laws: 1) *Proscriptive* laws. These are laws such as the speed limits. A group of individuals—hopefully after carefully considering all the implications—determines a certain speed as being somewhat safe to drive on a freeway. It is then passed into law, and we are all supposed to obey. But, there are no immediate consequences if one violates that rule unless s/he has an accident or is caught by an officer of the law. 2) *Descriptive* laws are the second type of laws. These laws govern physics, chemistry, and biology. The law of gravity is a descriptive law. If one tries to violate it, s/he will suffer the immediate consequences. Descriptive laws are laws that describe how things actually work. We do not have the option of setting them aside or changing them.
4. Most of us recognize that in almost every society, we are subject to a variety of laws. In the United States, we have federal laws, state laws, county laws, and sometimes city laws and ordinances. We are subject to all of these laws; and on some occasions, they conflict with each other.
5. There were also a variety of laws that people were subject to in Galilee and Judea in the days of Jesus. There were the overarching Roman laws imposed by the Roman government. Then, there were laws imposed dealing with Jewish customs and traditions set by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. There were also laws affecting the local synagogue and the community surrounding it.
6. Read Luke 2:1-5. Clearly, Joseph and Mary thought it was necessary to travel from Nazareth on that long journey to Bethlehem to pay their taxes to the Roman government. Understanding the laws and codes of the Romans in that day helps us in a number of ways to understand biblical stories. This is particularly true in the stories of Paul and his imprisonment and also the arrest, torture, and crucifixion of Jesus.
7. The Sanhedrin, or Council, (John 11:47; Acts 5:27) consisted of 71 men selected from among the priests, rabbis, and elders from the leading families of Judah. The high priest was the presiding officer. The members of the Sanhedrin were supposed to base all of their discussions and laws on the five books of Moses—the only part of the Bible accepted by the Sadducees. These five books of Moses were called the *Torah* or, in English, the Law of Moses because he wrote those five books. Of course, the original intent was that God would be King of the Jews with Jewish prophets and priests administering God's laws in a fair and just way over His people.
8. Consider some examples in which Mosaic law was still practiced in the days of Jesus.

Jewish men were still expected to pay the half shekel temple tax (Matt. 17:24-27, Exod. 30:13); divorces were still being governed by the stipulations set forth by Moses (Matt. 19:7, Deut. 24:1-4); people still adhered to the law of levirate marriage, in which a widow was to marry her husband's brother (Matt. 22:24, Deut. 25:5); boys were still circumcised on the eighth day (John 7:23, Lev. 12:3); and adulterers were to be punished by stoning (John 8:5; Deut. 22:23-29).—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*, p. 7.
9. In major civil or criminal cases, Jewish law required that there be at least two witnesses. (Matthew 26:59-61; Hebrews 10:28; and Deuteronomy 17:2-6) Some of the Mosaic laws seem quite strange to us. For example, consider the rules and laws in Deuteronomy 21 and Numbers 5:11-30.
10. In the Mosaic law, there were different kinds of commandments involving various aspects of life. There were: 1) The moral law of the Ten Commandments; 2) The ceremonial laws governing

sacrifices, etc.; 3) Health laws; 4) Civil laws; and 5) Marching laws.

11. Ellen White made some very interesting statements about why all those rules were given.

If Adam had not transgressed the law of God, the ceremonial law would never have been instituted. The gospel of good news was first given to Adam in the declaration made to him that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head; and it was handed down through successive generations to Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The knowledge of God's law, and the plan of salvation were imparted to Adam and Eve by Christ Himself. They carefully treasured the important lesson, and transmitted it by word of mouth, to their children, and children's children. Thus the knowledge of God's law was preserved.—*The Signs of the Times*, March 14, 1878; *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 230.

If man had kept the law of God, as given to Adam after his fall, preserved by Noah, and observed by Abraham [Genesis 26:5], there would have been no necessity for the ordinance of circumcision. And if the descendants of Abraham had kept the covenant, of which circumcision was a sign, they would never have been seduced into idolatry, nor would it have been necessary for them to suffer a life of bondage in Egypt; they would have kept God's law in mind, and there would have been no necessity for it to be proclaimed from Sinai or engraved upon the tables of stone. And had the people practiced the principles of the Ten Commandments, there would have been no need of the additional directions given to Moses.—*Patriarchs and Prophets* 364.2 (1890). (Compare 1SM 233-235.) [Words in brackets are added.]

12. It should be obvious from these two quotations that laws were added and added because God knew we needed them because of our sin, not because they were originally necessary.

But in heaven, service is not rendered in the spirit of legality. When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of. In their ministry the angels are not as servants, but as sons. There is perfect unity between them and their Creator. Obedience is to them no drudgery. Love for God makes their service a joy.—*Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing* 109.2. (See also 1 Timothy 6:8-10.)

13. Would it be correct to say that the more closely we obey and follow God's laws, the less we need them? Remember that Paul said that the "law" was added. (Galatians 3:19-25)
14. In Christ's day, the Jewish people also tried to follow a large collection of oral laws known as the Rabbinic law. In Hebrew this oral law was known as the *halakah* (pl. *halakoth*) which means "to walk." Over the years, the Jewish rabbis had determined that there were 613 major laws spelled out in the books of Moses. A number of those laws came to be known as the *Midrash*. Some of those laws regarded as more important were written down in a collection called the *Mishnah*.
15. Surely, all of us recognize that the Jews were particularly careful in Sabbathkeeping. The Jewish leaders were constantly accusing Christ of breaking their Sabbath rules. What were their Sabbath rules? Many of those rules have been preserved in the Jewish volume called the *Mishnah*. The Oxford University Press produced an English translation of the *Mishnah*, giving us some of those details. First, however, note that in giving the fourth commandment, God said simply: "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. In it thou shalt not do any work." But, He did not tell them what "work" He had in mind. So, they set about to solve the problem. See *Mishnah*, p. 106.

The main classes of work are 40, save 1. Sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, cleansing crops, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, sheering wool, washing, or beating, or dyeing the wool, spinning, weaving, making two loops [one would be all right but not two], weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying a knot, loosening a knot, sewing two stitches, [If the button just fell off a Sabbath suit on the way to church and it is our pastor—he does want to look tidy in the pulpit—that's too bad. He cannot sew it on.] tearing in order to sew two stitches, hunting a gazelle, slaughtering, or flaying, or salting it or curing it's skin, scraping it or cutting it up, writing two letters, erasing in order to write two letters, building, pulling down, putting out a fire, lighting a fire, striking with a hammer, or taking out ought from one domain into another. These are the main classes of work, forty save one. [Content in brackets is added.]

16. In the footnote it says: "These thirty-nine acts of work are treated in various degrees of detail in chapters eleven and following." So, what are those details? Consider this law.

## Bathing on the Sabbath and drying off!

If a man bathed in the water of a cave or in the water of Tiberias and dried himself, even though it was with 10 towels he may not bring them away in his hand.

You wonder what that would mean. So, there is a footnote:

From fear of offending against the principle of squeezing out however little the moisture in them.

Then you see the point. You are not allowed to squeeze a towel on the Sabbath. But, you want to dry yourself. Well, use 10 towels and none of them will get very wet, and you will not by mistake squeeze them. But, no, that is forbidden. So, the rule goes on like this:

But if 10 men dried themselves with 1 towel [Then it would be very wet; wouldn't it?] wiping their faces, their hands and their feet, they may bring the towel away in their hands. [Well, how could that be?] So many men would keep each other warned of the danger of squeezing. [Content in brackets is supplied.]

It would be much safer for 10 people to use one towel and get it very wet because they would remind each other that they must not squeeze it. But, if one man used 10 towels—even though the towels would not be very wet—there is the danger he would forget and squeeze one of them. Remember that next time you take a shower!

17. Is it any wonder then that Jesus seemed to go out of His way to break their man-made rules while keeping God's rules? Read Luke 14:1-6 and John 9. Seventh-day Adventists continue to observe the seventh-day Sabbath. Most of our Christian friends do not. They look at the many miracles Jesus performed on the Sabbath and suggest that by performing those miracles on the Sabbath, He was doing away with the Sabbath commandment. As you read the various ways in which Jesus performed miracles on the Sabbath, what is your opinion? Was Jesus trying to support a correct keeping of the Sabbath? Or, was He trying to do away with the Sabbath? Or, the *Mishnah*? Is the Sabbath law *proscriptive*? Or, *descriptive*?
18. Almost everyone who studies the Bible carefully will recognize that the Jewish people, especially the Pharisees, required a meticulous keeping of the Ten Commandments. There is a whole section of the *Mishnah* called the *Tamid* (5:1) saying that faithful Jews should recite the Ten Commandments every day. Should we be doing that? They believed that all other laws depended on or were derived from the Ten Commandments.
19. On one occasion, Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment. Read Matthew 19:16-19; Romans 13:8-10; and James 2:8-12. Seventh-day Adventists have suggested that the Ten Commandments are ultimately summarized into those two commandments: 1) Worshiping God supremely, and 2) Loving our neighbors as ourselves. These two commandments can ultimately be summarized again by the single word *love*. If we truly love everyone as we should, there would be no problem in our keeping any of the ten.
20. It should be obvious to all of us that any society that is going to survive must have some rules and laws that are agreed upon. So, where do societies get the idea of what is right and what is wrong? Even more or less atheistic societies such as the communist governments that we are familiar with have plenty of laws. Shouldn't laws be designed to help us live together peacefully and safely? Would you agree that the Ten Commandments understood correctly and fully form the basis of all moral law?
21. Is keeping the Ten Commandments something that we do naturally? Should Christians always feel comfortable observing the Ten Commandments? Why is it that, at times, we do not? Remember that we are born with selfish natures, and the Ten Commandments summarized by the two and by the command to love are just the opposite of selfishness. So, each one of us must constantly struggle between our natural selfishness and the laws of love which we believe God has given us.
22. If you were assigned the task of setting up a new society, are there any of the Ten Commandments that you would want to leave out? Could we leave out the Sabbath?
23. There are various ways in which people have looked at God's commandments over the generations. Even in our day, many people believe that the Bible is full of do's and don'ts—"deeds to be done and sins to be shunned!" They regard the Bible as a kind of blueprint.
24. Others regard the Scriptures with all its stories, rules, and laws as primarily a description of how we can be saved. They look for laws, rules, and statements about God's love and the plan of salvation.

25. Still others, with perhaps a deeper knowledge of Scripture, see the Scriptures as the story of God and His dealings with His sinful and rebellious children down through the generations. It is primarily a story about God.
26. So, how do you feel about God's laws and His commandments? If you are a believer and are seeking to do God's will, what makes you willing to obey?

Could you say, "I do what I do because God has told me to, and He has the power to reward and destroy"? Is this why you don't murder or commit adultery, because God has said you mustn't? You would otherwise, but you can't afford to incur His displeasure.

This might be all right for a beginner or a little child, but it suggests that God's laws are arbitrary and do not make good sense in themselves. That does not speak very favorably of God.

Would you rather say, "I do what I do as a believer because God has told me to, and I love Him and want to please Him"? Is this why you don't steal or tell lies? You would see nothing wrong or harmful about doing these things. It is just that you want so much to please God. For some reason He does not like it when you steal or lie, and since He has been so good to us, you feel under some obligation to please Him. It would only be grateful and fair.

Again, this might be all right for a beginner or child. It might even be progress beyond the obedience prompted only by fear of punishment and desire of reward. But it still implies an arbitrariness in God's commandments and does not speak so well of His character and government.

There is another possible approach to obedience. Could you say this? "I do what I do because I have found it to be right and sensible to do so, and I have increasing admiration and reverence for the One who so advised and commanded me in the days of my ignorance and immaturity." Then hastening to add, "Being still somewhat ignorant and immature, I am willing to trust and obey the One whose counsel has always proved to be so sensible, when He commands me to do something beyond my present understanding.—A. Graham Maxwell, *I Want to Be Free*, pages 33,34.

27. What do you think Ellen White had in mind when she said: "The law of ten commandments is not to be looked upon as much from the prohibitory side, as from the mercy side. Its prohibitions are the sure guarantee of happiness in obedience"? (*1SM* 235.1)
28. Do the Ten Commandments promote freedom and fairness? Many Christians regard the law and grace to be two extremes on a continuum. Is that true?
29. Even in the Old Testament, a careful look at the many different words used by the Hebrews to describe law suggest that these words could describe not only laws but instruction, guidance, statutes, commandments, or even precepts.
30. God's original creation was described as "good," even "very good." (Genesis 1) The laws of God were regarded by the angels as something so natural that they did not even think about them; they just did them naturally. (*MB* 109; compare *COL* 97,98)
31. Would you consider a life lived following the commandments of God a fulfillment of John 10:10 which says: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly"? (*NASB*)
32. Read Revelation 12:17 and 14:10. God's final group of people on this earth are described in the book of Revelation as standing out because they keep the commandments of God. Is it becoming more and more clear in your mind that the people of the world are moving away from God's commandments almost as fast as they can go? How should we respond to these societal changes? Do we still regard God's law as important to us?

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