



Love Letters

Paul shows that love is the fulfilling of the moral law

No Christian is without law. Paul tells believers to fulfil the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2) and Paul himself declares that he was not without law in relation to God but in law in relation to Christ (1 Cor. 9:21). All Christians are at least committed to the law of loving others.

When some Christians claim that they are “not under law” what they mean — rightly — is that they are not under obligation to keep God’s moral commandments in order to gain salvation. The joyful news of the Gospel is that Jesus has done this for us through his personal obedience so that he may be our righteousness before God for everything we need for salvation.

Is the moral law, summed up in the Ten Commandments, then of any use to the Christian? Those who deny this forget the many ways the New Testament borrows from and builds on the Old Testament. The New Testament writers constantly quote from the Old Testament to support what they say or choose examples from Israel to illustrate their case (e.g. Hebrews 11). As a result they may call on the Ten Commandments as part of their Christian ethics. For example, Christian children are bound to keep the sixth commandment in the Lord (Eph. 6:2-3).

Let us consider a number of biblical and theological reasons why the Christian is still involved with the moral law of God.

First, the moral law reflects the moral character of God. In his great chapter on the moral law (Romans 7) Paul quotes the tenth commandment (You shall not covet) and declares it holy. Then he reflects on the whole moral law and calls it holy, just and good (Rom. 7:12). The moral law has these qualities from its divine Author whose law it is. The old covenant revelation of Sinai was a glorious one because it made known the moral glory of the Lord who gave it (2 Cor. 3:7-9).

Second, the moral law is creation law. We inhabit a moral universe because God the Creator is a moral Being. This is the basis of Jesus saying that not one iota or dot will pass from the moral law (this is the subject under discussion) while heaven and earth remain (Mt. 5:17-18). In the same way he argues back to the creation for his views on marriage and divorce (Mt. 19:3-6). For this reason Paul can claim that homosexuality is contrary to nature and write against it as Christ’s apostle (Rom. 1:26-27). The gospel restores our humanity, which means that it enables us to live in conformity with moral standards. If what God did and said in creation is a moral guide to Christians on gender issues (1 Tim. 2:12-15), why not other moral issues? The oracles against the nations in the major prophets of Israel are further proof of a permanent moral order in the world that God measures us by (Isa. 13-24, Jer. 46-50, Ezek. 25-32, Amos 1-2).

Third, conscience has a place in the Christian life, yet conscience functions in relation to the truth and authority of God’s moral law (Rom. 2:14-15). If this is true for pagans, how much more for those who belong to Jesus Christ the righteous One! Thus Paul made a good conscience a standard of his Christian life and urged the same on others (Acts 24:16, Rom. 9:1, 1 Tim. 1:5, 2 Tim. 1:3). His leadership style depended on maintaining a good conscience (2 Cor. 4:2). How could he say and do all this without paying attention to the moral law that instructs a good conscience? He even warns that neglecting a good conscience will shipwreck a person’s faith (1 Tim. 1:18-19).

Fourth, Jesus includes the moral law in his teaching on the kingdom of God (Mt. 5:17-48). He even makes a person’s greatness relative to their support for or slackening of the practical

righteousness of the moral law (Mt. 5:19). Far from freeing his followers from the demands of the moral commandments Jesus intensifies their claim on those who want to live in the kingdom of God. Within the kingdom righteousness means more than an external conformity with external rules. That is the righteousness of the Pharisees that members of God's kingdom must exceed (Mt. 5:20). Christian righteousness is more radical than human morality, calling for the spiritual and imaginative practice of the commandments of God. Jesus illustrates what this means with six examples from Old Testament ethics (Mt. 5:21-48).

Fifth, all Christians are theoretically committed to love but love is meaningless without the moral law. Paul unites the two by saying that love is the fulfilling of the moral law (Rom. 13:8-10, Gal. 5:14). Love fulfils the law's intention of giving everyone their rights and avoiding any wrongs being done to them. But love by itself cannot spell out what these neighbour rights mean in particular cases. Once we dispense with the moral law as a guide to morals we fall into situationism, which means deciding what is right in a situation by the situation. This is subjective and unreliable since situations change and so do our feelings. We need the unchanging and objective principles of the moral law to guide us in every situation.

Jesus certainly gave a central place to love in his moral teachings (Mt. 22:35-40) but surely not with a view to renouncing the whole moral law. The whole moral law, he said, hangs on the two love commandments. Jesus did not mean that love replaces law, but rather that love is essential to our keeping the law. Those who pit law (Old Testament) against love (New Testament) are making a category mistake. Love is about our attitude to God and others, law is about the ways we express that love for God and others. Christians show their love for God by having no other god before Him, not falling into idolatry, not denying the claims of His name upon them and by keeping His day. They show their love for others (Christians and non-Christians alike since the Ten Commandments are a species of natural law) by honouring them, not destroying their life, their marriage, their property, their reputation, or craving their possessions.

Just as meaning is conveyed in and through the words we use, so love is expressed through God's moral commandments that we keep. Just as the soul inhabits the body and coordinates its movements, so does love empower and shape our Christian obedience through the commandments of the law. But just as we would never think of words without their meaning nor the body without the soul so should we never imagine love without the moral law. The two are inseparable though different. Law without love results in coldness and often masks double standards in someone's life; love without law encourages immoral freedom and masks the proud spirit of a person who imagines that he has a superior spirituality.

Sixth, the Holy Spirit has been given so that Christians may keep God's commandments (Rom. 8:4). In chapter eight of Romans Paul is referring not to justification but to sanctification or the actual practise of righteousness in the Christian's life. Because of the Spirit of Christ within him, the Christian has freedom from the controlling power of sin that leads to death. He is able to live out the mind of the Spirit in new obedience to God's moral law.

Seventh, the glory of the new covenant or the gospel is the inscribing of God's moral law on the hearts of believers (Jer. 31:31-34, 2 Cor. 3:2-6). The old covenant of the law failed, not because it did not communicate God's will for His people, but because it failed to change the people's hearts towards His will (Deut. 29:4). The new covenant of the Gospel remedies that by means of our recreation in Christ that leads to a new life of obedience from the heart (2 Cor. 5:17). When Paul experiences the moral law as the law of his mind and his inner self as a Christian (Rom. 7:22-23) he is echoing the terms of the new covenant in his opposition to the sin that remains within him and troubles him.

When Paul speaks negatively about the law he has in mind the law's inability to make us right with God for salvation (Rom. 3:20; 5:20; 7:7-12, Gal. 3:19, 1 Tim. 1:9) or its inability to make us holy within ourselves (Rom. 6:14; 7:13-25). When he connects the law with love and faith in Christ he affirms the law as a guide to Christian morals and wholeness (Rom. 13:8-10, 1 Cor. 9:21, Gal. 5:13-14; 6:2-3). The Christian still needs to be able to recognise sin and to avoid it. If he is to do

this he needs the help of the law which acts like a sin-detector in pointing out attitudes, notions and actions that are contrary to what God wants.

The Westminster Confession (chapter 19) indicates some of these uses of the moral law in the lives of Christians by saying that it reveals the depths of sin in us, helps us to hate and oppose sin more, gives a clearer understanding of the debt we owe to Christ and how great was his obedience to God's law, and makes us want heaven more when we will love God with an unsinning heart.

Douglas Milne

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