



“Better Together – Love + Law”

Exodus 34:1–5, 10; Matthew 5:17–20;

Matthew 22:34–40

There is one God and one Law. And the greatest commandments in this Law are to love God and to love others.

This week, we begin a seven-week series bringing together the Old and New Testaments, looking at important threads that tie together the story of God’s redemptive work. Looking at this week’s thread,

the question that came to my mind and, perhaps, yours, is “what gives?” How do we bring together the Law of Moses and Jesus’ teachings on love? If grace is the expression of love, then isn’t the Law the antithesis of grace? How could Jesus have said he didn’t come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it? Let’s begin by reconsidering the Law of Moses.

When did the Israelites receive the Law?

After God rescues the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, they head directly for Mt. Sinai, where Moses had met God and received his mission to confront Pharaoh. When they arrive at the mountain, Moses ascends and brings down God’s Law. Though it is later elaborated upon, the heart of the Law is given at Mt. Sinai, three and a half millennia ago. We call it “Law” but that is only one way to translate the Hebrew word, *torah*; we could just as easily use “instruction” or “teaching.” God told the Israelites that he was going to live with them, and the Law was the means of enabling that to happen, for God is holy and his people were most unholy. Imagine that God came to live upstairs in your house; I’m sure some things would have to change.

What is in the Law?

You will usually find the Law described as having two components – ritual or ceremonial law (priests, food, etc.) and ethical or civil law (don’t murder, honor your parents, etc.) Over the years, I’ve found that this division is not very helpful, as it leaves too many unanswered questions. What’s the deal with not planting a field with two kinds of grains (Leviticus 19:19)? That just seems weird – neither ritualistic nor ethical. So, I’ve come up with my own three-part division of the Law (I welcome feedback on this!):

1. Moral Teachings

There is a lot in the Law that teaches us how our relationships with God and everyone else can thrive. For example, we are to keep God’s name sacred and not pursue other gods and idols. We are to honor our parents, refrain from murder, and give up our unhealthy desire for what someone else has. Sometimes these teachings are broad, but some are quite specific: “When you happen to come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey that has wandered off, you should bring it back to them. When you see a donkey that belongs to someone who hates you and it’s lying down under its load and you are inclined not to help set it free, you must help set it free.” Exodus 23:4–5 (CEB) These relational teachings often seem odd to us, in large part because they come from a very ancient and very foreign world. But if you look through the specifics at the underlying moral, you’ll learn a great deal about the character of God. Return my enemy’s ox/wallet/car/homework? Really? And if you were to put all these moral teachings into a big kettle and boil them down to their essence, you’d be left with two: Love God and love your neighbor (Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19). The two greatest teachings, as Jesus himself said.

2. The “Splint”

When Adam and Eve rebelled in the Garden of Eden, doing the one thing God had told them not to do, their relationship with God was ruptured and broken. They were separated from God. But God loved them and set about to repair what had been broken. The giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai was an essential step in that process of repair, renewal, and restoration. Of all the world’s people, it would be the “people of God,” the family of Abraham, who would know in great specificity how they were to live with one another. And God was going to live among them as God lived among no others. But this presented a problem. How were these most unholy people to live with a most holy God? So, God gave them a system of priests, sacrifices, and rituals that would provide a temporary fix, sort of a splint, that would enable them to live in God’s presence. This priestly system wasn’t capable of fixing the problem, i.e., healing the rupture from the Garden, but it could serve as a splint, holding things together enough until true healing could take place.

3. Training Wheels

The splint, the priestly system, was a help but there was still much for the people to learn. Most importantly, they had to learn that they were unholy people, plagued by sin. And they had to grasp that their unholiness could not mix with the holy. It would be like you or me flying too close to sun and being consumed by the heat. So, God included in the Law some instruction on the importance of keeping different kinds apart. The Israelites weren't to make shirts from two types of cloth, they weren't to plant two kinds of grain in the field. Don't mix! The Israelites were even taught that they were not to live like everyone. Since only the Israelites were given the Law and taught how to live in a right relationship with God, the Law marked them out as a special people. They were the ones who knew to keep the Sabbath, to avoid idols, to avoid certain foods, to say the Shema, to circumcise their male children, and so on. Some of these practices became important symbols of what it meant to be a Jew, emphasizing their separateness. As time went on, they became boundary markers enabling one to tell a Jew from a Gentile. Sabbath-keeping, food laws, and circumcision became the "membership badges" in the people of God. They became what Paul would refer to as the "works of the law" (see the text box for more on this).

Jesus and the Law

I use the metaphors of a splint and training wheels because both are temporary. They are good and needed and important, but temporary. That is how Paul saw the Law. Priests, food laws, sacrifices, and the rest were needed, but their time had passed with the arrival of Jesus. Paul speaks of the Law as a nanny – needed at one time, but needed no longer (Galatians 3:23-29). With Christ's arrival everything had been changed. Not only had Jesus atoned for humanity's sins through his utter faithfulness even unto death, the Holy Spirit had come to those who placed their faith in Jesus. God had once dwelt in the marble temple, but now God dwelt in the believers, individually and corporately.

Though God's people had moved on from the need for a splint or training wheels, did that also mean the teachings about living in a right relationship with God and others were also swept away? Of course not. The moral teachings embedded in the Law express the character and purposes of God. So, it shouldn't surprise us that Jesus said he hadn't come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. Or that when asked about the greatest of all the teachings, Jesus would point to passages from Deuteronomy 6 (Love God) and Leviticus 19 (Love your neighbor). There are two tablets.

Choices

Everyone wants to have a good life. We want to have close and lasting friendships. We want our kids to grow up loved, well-adjusted, and happy. We want to do the right thing. We want to make wise choices that lead to a good life. The hard part is that often we have trouble figuring out what the good life even looks like, and if we think we know what we want, we have trouble knowing which choices will lead us to the life we seek.

A slender volume on my shelves is entitled, *Smart Choices*. It is an excellent introduction to decision analysis (which is a fancy way of saying deciding among choices). The authors take the reader through a straightforward presentation of how to state the problem, define objectives, create alternatives, evaluate tradeoffs and so on. They are business school types who want to help managers make better choices.

But for Christians, any talk of the good life or making better choices or living ethically must first begin with God. This isn't to say that sound analysis is unimportant, but that the analysis must start with God. It is God who is good. It is God who made this world. It is God who made us in his image (the *imago Dei*). Thus, it must be God who points us toward the better choices. It is God who establishes what a really smart choice is. It is God who takes away our blindness and enables us to see the life that we seek and the life that God desires for us.

The ancient Israelites understood that the creator of the universe had created them in his own image, had sought a relationship with them, and had shown them how to live in right relationship with him and with each other. God's instruction to them was the Law and the heart of the Law was inscribed by God on two tablets. The first tablet spoke to the people's relationship with God and the second tablet spoke to their relationship with one another.

To reiterate, the first tablet speaks to our relationship with God. We are to have no other gods or take God's name in vain and so on. The second tablet speaks to how we are to live with others. We are not to steal or give false testimony. We are to honor our parents and our marriages. We are to forsake murder and so on.

Jesus, the Law, and the Two Tablets

When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai, he brought two tablets containing what we call the Ten Commandments. These commandments can be found in Exodus 20. The first four commandments speak to our relationship with God: do not worship any other God, don't make idols, don't abuse God's name, keep the Sabbath holy. The last six speak to our relationship with others: honor your parents, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't testify falsely against your neighbor, and don't covet other people's possessions. The Ten Commandments lie at the heart of the Old Testament law.

Many people mistakenly believe that Jesus came to abolish the Old Testament. On the contrary, Jesus came to fulfill the law. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples what God's Law is really all about. When tested by the young lawyer, Jesus said that all the Law can be summed in the commandments to love God (the first tablet!) and to love neighbor (the second tablet!). All of the do's and don'ts one finds in the Old Testament are simply concrete expressions of those two commandments – for an ancient people.

Christians understand that attempting to live out the “Judeo-Christian” ethic derived from the second tablet, while ignoring the first -- the “second tablet project” -- is doomed to failure. We are made in God's image. As the Westminster Confession puts it, we are “made to know God and enjoy him forever.” When we seek to build a good life or to do the right thing, we have to begin with God, God's way, and the very reason why we are here in the first place.

As larger and larger segments of western culture have tried to live an ethic apart from any notion of God, they have learned that a genuine ethic is impossible to sustain without a source of the “oughts” other than ourselves. As Nietzsche rightly saw, without God there are only preferences and power. Thus, trying to embrace the ethic of the second tablet while rejecting the claims of the first tablet is a doomed project.

God is relational and so are we!

In a letter, the apostle John wrote, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (1John 4:16b) What do you think John meant by saying -- “God is love”? Did he mean that God loves more than anyone? . . . that God loves without ceasing? . . . or perhaps that God loves truly? All this is accurate, but it isn't saying that God is love. After all, it seems almost nonsensical. Love must have an object; we love something or we love someone. How could any single person, in isolation, be love?

However, when we proclaim that God is unity in three persons, then the statement that God is love makes perfect sense. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been, are now, and always will be in loving relationship with one another. God is love because God is inherently relational. The loving relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form the basis of God's very essence. The three persons of the single Godhead live in eternal community, in a loving community of three persons.

What does this mean for us and the choices we make? The opening chapters of Genesis tell us that humans are made in God's image. One implication is that we too are inherently relational -- that we are

made to live in loving relationship with God and one another.

Thus, it should be no surprise that the heart of God's Law, God's instruction, is focused on relationships. It is almost too simple! As Jesus so succinctly put it, God's Law is summed up in the commandments to love God and to love neighbor. The first tablet sets forth some of what it means to love God. The second tablet sets forth some of what it means to love others. All the rest of the Law of Moses is a further elaboration of what it means to love God and neighbor. Granted, it was written for an ancient people and none of us would really want to live in a society governed by the Law of Moses (e.g. with stonings and more). But still, it points us toward a life lived in the light of God and the love of God.

Finding our way forward

Simply put, the good life we seek is built on loving God and neighbor. Such a life is a holy life. Of course, loving God and neighbor is much easier said than done. Indeed, the story of Israel is largely the story of the people's inability to live as God hoped. This is also our story. Even if we know what we ought to do, too often, we do the things we know we shouldn't and fail to do what we know we should (see Romans 7:14-25). Still, to live as God expects us to live and to build the good life that we seek, we must grow, each day, in our ability to truly love God and our neighbor. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).