

“Leading People: The Law is a Gift”

Exodus 20:1–17; Leviticus 19:17–18; Psalm 119:33–35; Matthew 5:17–18

The true story

God brought his people to Mt Sinai for a reason, to create a people who would live in covenant relationship with God. He would dwell with them. He would be their God and they would be his people. So he taught them how to live as they

were created to live. As its heart the instruction was simple, they were to love God and love their neighbor. Acts of love were to mark every day of their lives. And the people responded enthusiastically. “Yes!!!” they shouted. They would sign onto this covenant and live by this law, God’s Law.

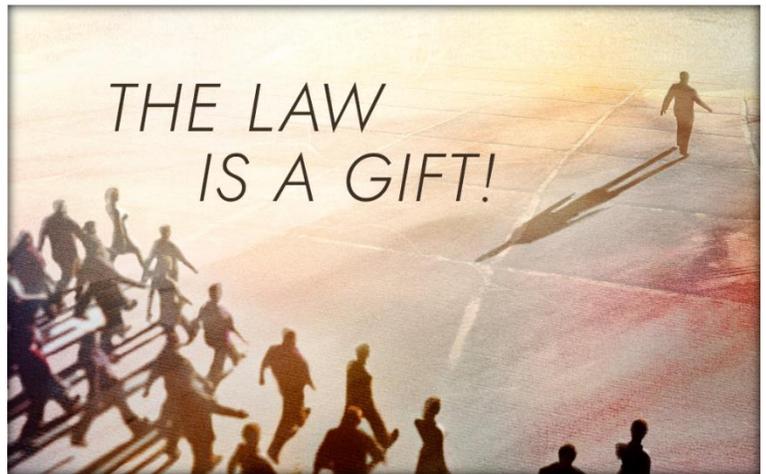
When it comes to the Bible, few topics are as puzzling to modern-day Christians as the Law. When did the Law begin? What is in the Law? What does it mean for us today? Do I have to obey the Law? So let’s take a closer look.

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, let’s look at an alternative 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).

The dark side of the Law

In some ways, ignorance is bliss. Everyone has a general idea that they don't do the things they should and do the things they shouldn't. But the Law makes the general, specific. The Law turns "sin" into "transgression." For example, it is wise not to drive too fast. The Law turns that wisdom into a speed limit. Thus, the Hebrews could never plead ignorance of God's expectations, for "through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20).

Further, the Law shined a magnifying glass on the people's sinfulness. In large ways and small, the Law taught the people how far short they fell of God's expectations, how unholy they were. The Hebrews came to learn that none of them could truly love God and love neighbor in all things. If we think of the Law as the teacher and the Jews (and ourselves!) as the students, the teacher was unable to shape the students into the people they needed to be. The teacher was not incompetent; rather, the students were burdened with a learning disability that they could not overcome. The problem is not with the Law, it is with us. This may be easier to understand if you remember that, as Jesus said, the Law is summed up in the commandments to love God and to love one another.

Thus, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes, "Is the law therefore opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law" (3:21). But since we, the students, are unable to learn sufficiently because of the power of sin,¹ then we must be put right with God by faith, our faith in Jesus Christ.

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

¹ This is what Christians are trying to convey when we speak of "original sin." It is like a flaw in our moral DNA that prevents us from truly loving God and loving neighbor, no matter how hard we try. Further, it is a flaw that we are not able to repair, but that can only be repaired by God. Still further, Jesus was born without this defect in his moral DNA. He could love God and love neighbor without fail.

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 a passage from Deuteronomy 6 (Love God) and Leviticus 19 (Love your neighbor).

It is one thing to say that we should love others, it is another to really know what that means, how it plays out in our daily lives. That is why we have God’s moral Law, to teach us and guide us in our call to love. Should we obey this Law? How could we possibly do otherwise?