

The Law, God's Guideline for His People

By F. M. Perry

What is the meaning of the word "law?"

The general meaning of the word "law" in secular use today is: an authoritarian rule or body of rules imposed on people. Today people often use the word "law" to infer the use of force to get people to obey a body of rules, as in the expression "You must do it; it's the law."

But this is not the meaning in the Biblical use of the word "law." The Old Testament Hebrew word translated "law" is "Torah." The word "Torah" means: instruction, guidance, or direction to people. In the Bible the Law of God is something God, out of His deep love for mankind, desires to give mankind to guide him to as full and complete life as possible. The Law of God presented in the Bible is God's guidelines for His people to a full and useful life.

God's "law" (guidance) for man is an expression of God's love, grace, and mercy. It is not a set of rules given for man with expectation of perfect obedience in order to avoid punishment. It is not intended to be something that man must obey to avoid punishment, and it is not intended to be something that a man must do to earn a reward. No.

Laws Are God's Guidance Around Dangerous Obstacles.

Laws are God's statements to show guidance around dangerous obstacles to life that God knows will be encountered by His human creation. These "laws" do indeed carry a serious consequence, death, if violated. When violated, mankind can only avoid death by his faith in the grace of God. This has been true since creation when mankind was cast out of the Garden of Eden to inherit death as a consequence for breaking God's Law.

God Knew His People Would Be Disobedient.

God will save us from the consequence of our law breaking through our

faith in His grace simply because He loves us and desires to save us. This has always been true as God has loved mankind since the time of Adam and Eve. God did not give Law in order to separate the disobedient from the obedient, or in order to save the obedient and condemn the disobedient. Because, you see, He knew we would all be disobedient. God desires that all men be saved in spite of their disobedience to Law.

God gave Law to mankind primarily as a loving gift to guide him into a life of freedom and usefulness to His purpose. The Law, then, is a manifestation of God's love and grace, guidelines to make life easier, not harder. And also to make the faithful life useful for God's purposes.

God's Law Has Been in Effect Since the Beginning.

God has given Law (guidance) to all men since the beginning of the world. The 2nd chapter of Romans tells of God's law written into the hearts and consciences of people throughout all time since the creation. The Old Testament tells of God's special law (guidance) which He gave to a special nation of people, the Israelites. The New Testament tells of the law (guidance) given to people since the time of Christ until today. The Biblical principles behind God's Law has always been the same. They are guidelines from a loving God given to assist people in being faithful and useful to Him.

Principles Behind God's Law Same in Both Testaments.

The idea, that the Old Testament is a book of Law and the New Testament is a book of grace, is not true. The principles behind Law, Faith, and Grace are the same in both the Old and the New Testaments.

Paul, in the New Testament book of Romans, wrote to some people who misunderstood the law of God and misrepresented it as a means of salvation apart from God's grace and man's faith. We, today, sometimes misunderstand in that fashion also. Therefore, Paul said, "We maintain that a man is justified by faith and not by works of the law." (Romans 3:28). Then he went on in the book of Romans to show how God gives law (guidance) to show the faithful how to "walk" the spiritual Christian life and be useful to God.

Jesus Did Not Give New Set of Laws.

Jesus, in His Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7), was not laying down a set of new laws for the Christian dispensation separate and more demanding than the Old Testament Mosaic Law had been. Jesus was not laying down new guidance for His ministry in that sermon. He was urging the Jews to prepare for the new dispensation by going back to the true meaning of the Mosaic Law (God's guidance to Israel through Moses). Jesus in that sermon was speaking to Jews who misunderstood the Mosaic Law and misrepresented it somehow, even then, as a means of salvation apart from grace and faith.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, put God's Law through Moses back into proper context as God's gracious, loving guidance to make life easier for the faithful Israelite and to make him a useful member of God's chosen people. The life Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount was the life that God had always intended every Israelite to live through the guidance of the Law. Jesus, Himself, lived perfectly the principles of His Sermon on the Mount and thus it is said of Jesus that He "fulfilled the Law."

Jesus, Only Man Perfectly Obedient To God's Law.

No one else but God's Son, incarnated as Jesus, has been able to live perfectly the principles of the Law as given in that Sermon. Thus no one else has ever "fulfilled the Law." But Praise God! Our salvation is not dependent on our "fulfilling the law." For Jesus did it for us. We depend on God's grace in having sent His Son to "fulfill the law" for us. We only have to take "steps of faith" in God's grace thus expressed. Then the guidance of law is given to us as a loving, gracious gift to make us peaceful and free in a life of usefulness in God's service. Jesus said to the Jews of His day, as well as to Christians of our day, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light." (Matthew 11:30). He spoke of the assistance and help that God's people get when they "walk in the Spirit," and in the precepts and guidance of the law of God.

God has always required only that men turn to Him by choice in faith and acceptance of the guidance of His law. This is still God's principle of salvation and Christian living. When we turn to God in faith we will

repent of our sins and allow ourselves to be baptized into His death because He asks us to express our faith in those ways. He promised to forgive our sins and add us to His church, the assembly of people who belong to Him. He does not then abandon us to our own devices. No, then He give us further guidance in a “step by step walk” to a useful life. God loves us and serves our every need.

This does not explain all the purposes of God’s law. We have talked only about the law as God’s assistance to the faithful. God has designed the law also to give guidance and assistance to those who have turned away from God in unfaithfulness, and even for those who have never yet learned how to become faithful to Him. The law is good, says Paul in the 7th chapter of Romans, even for the sinful, for through it the sinful become aware that breaking of law is sin, and the consequence of sin is spiritual death. Were it not for the law, says Paul, he would not have known that he was in sin and spiritually dead. So he demonstrated how law is a “schoolmaster” to bring the sinner to the grace of God available in Christ. (See Gal. 3:24).

God Gives Law As a “Stumbling Block.”

If the sinner neglects or refuses to turn to God in faith, it is not disadvantageous to a man that the law becomes a “stumbling block” to him. The prophet Ezekeil warned of stumbling blocks: “Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you.” (Ezekeil 18:30). Jesus Himself said, “Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come;” (Matt. 18:7). Paul spoke in Romans about the “stumbling block” principle. “Stumbling blocks” figuratively cause people to “fall down and get hurt.” But the “hurt” that one gets at “first stumble” over the law is usually not one from which he cannot recover. God’s law is designed first to bring the sinner to a sense of awareness of why he has fallen and gotten hurt. The mercy of God awaits the sinner who has stumbled over the stumbling block of law. Paul reminded us, “God has shut up all in disobedience that he might show mercy to all.” (Romans 11:32).

From the time in Old Testament history that God gave the special Law to Israel through Moses, the Bible makes it clear what the real purpose

of Law was. It was not just to condemn the Israelites for their disobedience. Remember, Moses received the Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone from God Himself. When Moses took the stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments to the Israelites, he found them worshipping a golden calf. Moses threw down the stone tablets in disgust and they were broken. It appeared that the receiving of God's Law had been in vain. But God did not abandon the Israelites to sin as easily and quickly as Moses did. God had Moses come back into His presence and gave him instructions (Law) to guide them anyway. God told Moses, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness and truth; who keeps loving kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgressions and sin." (Exodus 34:6).

Thus, from the very beginning of God's giving of the Law, is dispelled any idea that the Law was for men to show their own righteousness or for the purpose of simply condemning the unrighteous. God said His true nature was to forgive sin. The Law was given to help the Israelites live in faith that God would forgive them if they repented, because He loved them.

Before God gave the special Law through Moses, God said, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." (Exodus 20:2). After God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, He did not then give them Law for the purpose of enslaving them again, but He gave Law to make them spiritually free under His guidance. Without God's guidance, no one can truly be free, for Satan is holding sway in this world, ready to deceive and enslave anyone who does not choose to believe God. Without God, we humans are no match for Satan. Without God we become enslaved by Satan.

God constantly acted in behalf of Israel when they followed Him in faith. God gave them the promised land of Canaan, not because they were able to follow God's Law perfectly, but because they turned to God in faith. They had often broken the Law and did not earn the right to have the land of Canaan. But God gave it to them anyway.

God gave Israel a special covenant relationship with Him in which He delivered Israel from enemies, delivered to Israel the land of Canaan,

and came to the aid of Israel when trouble arose. God did it because He loved Israel. God simply called upon Israel to react by doing her best to obey His Law out of love for and faith in Him. Jesus reminded Israel of God's first and greatest commandment on which the whole Law had been based, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Matt. 22:37).

Four Comprehensive Principles Behind God's Law.

God's covenant relationship with Israel was established by God's action in delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage, and by God's action in giving Israel His guidance with His Law. There are at least four comprehensive principles underlying God's law for mankind.

1. The law was made for man, not man for the law. The law was given to enrich man's life. Thus, if we interpret god's law in such a way that God's children are harmed by it, we must be interpreting it wrong. We must remember Jesus' teaching of principle about the law. When the Jews were ready to condemn the disciples of Jesus for violating the Sabbath law by picking grain on the Sabbath Day, Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27).

The difficulty we have sometimes is not in understanding the specific laws, but in discerning the principles and purposes behind them. We sometimes attempt to obey them in a narrow legalistic way and violate their principle "in spirit and in truth."

2. God's intention through law was to give man freedom. God's intention was not to restrict man's activities so much as to make him miserable, but to guide him in a dangerous world in ways that would allow him to express himself in the greatest freedom of which he is safely capable. For instance, Jesus condemned the Pharisees because "they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders." (Matt. 23:4). John affirms that God's "commandments are not burdensome." (1 John 5:3).

3. God's law respects human dignity. The way we treat our fellow men under God's law is to be governed by the knowledge that God created man in His own image. (Gen. 1:26). The law forbids the taking of

another man's life. It forbids the rich to despise the poor or to take advantage of the poor. This is because all men, rich or poor, are created in the image of God. An injustice done to man is an insult to God. Recognizing this principle behind God's law will prevent us from practicing racial discrimination or any other discrimination because of a person's fleshly characteristics.

We cannot separate God's law from the principle that "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart." Neither can we separate God's law from the principle that "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." The law respects human dignity.

4. Another principle behind the law is that we must do unto others as God has done unto us. A man should be motivated through law to treat others as God has treated him. Because God was merciful to the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt, the Israelites were to be merciful to the alien who came into their midst, even their enemies. Jesus illustrated this principle in His Sermon on the Mount when He taught, "Love your enemies and pray for them who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." (Matt. 5:44-47).

God's Law Convicts Us of Sin.

In addition to the purpose that God's law was given to guide us, it was given for the purpose of making it clear to us that we are law breaking sinners and, therefore, need God's grace. We have natural tendencies to depend on our own proud self reliance, and will continue that attitude until we are convinced that we have failed and always will fail on our own. God's law is designed to teach us that we cannot succeed in bringing ourselves to be "poor in spirit," or to save ourselves. We must learn to seek God's help.

God Law Guards the Weak.

God's Old Testament Law was designed to protect the weak, and also to guard the judge from punishing the guilty more than they deserved. For instance Exodus 21:22-23 calls for the Law to protect the innocent

and helpless pregnant women. It was also to guard the guilty from being the victim of mere revenge. In Leviticus 24:19-20, the specific punishment is spelled out, "eye for an eye, tooth for tooth." The Law called for justice but protected the guilty party from unjust revenge. Jesus taught that the true intention of the law was to take away from man any prerogative he may want for vengeance. Vengeance belongs only to God.

God's Law Preserves Community Life.

And finally, God gave law to preserve community life. The principles of law directed man toward those ideals which are best for man's relationship with God, and with his fellow men. The ultimate goal under Old Testament Law was that Israel would be pure, attracting the nations around Israel to the God of Israel. The New Testament guidance (law) for Christians has a similar purpose - to preserve the church pure and faithful, and to attract all men to God. Paul stated the purpose, "In order that the manifold wisdom of God might be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places." (Eph. 3:10).

God Has Subjected You to Law.

Now, whether you are a Christian or not, God has subjected you to law (given you guidance). Whether you have ever read the Bible or not, God has subjected you to law (given you guidance). Paul said, "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them." (Romans 2:14-15). Paul had already said before that, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." (Romans 1:20). A full reading of Romans, chapters 1 and 2, makes it clear that all men have been given guidance (law) to lead them to seek God. Since men have not sought God, and every man without exception has at some point rejected evident truths and guidance from God, then each and every man is without excuse, guilty of rejecting God's guidance (law).

It was just such a point that Paul preached to the people of Athens as recorded in Acts, chapter 17. Paul concluded his sermon with the invitation, “Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent.” (Acts 17:30). That is the invitation extended today to anyone who is not a Christian. God has already been working in your heart, giving you guidance. Up to now, if you have not sought God, you are without excuse. But you are ready now to realize a great truth that is of tremendous value to you. “GOD HAS SHUT YOU UP IN DISOBEDIENCE IN ORDER THAT HE MIGHT SHOW MERCY TO YOU.”

God loves you; wants to save you. Speaking through His Holy Spirit in the written words of the New Testament, He tells you to repent and be baptized for the remission of your sins, and then to receive the gift of His Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38). Through simple acts of obedient faith (repentance and baptism) God will add you to His family, where there is grace and mercy, and further guidance to make you a useful Christian.

Won't you respond to God's invitation?

With love, F. M. Perry.

(This sermon first preached in Homer, Alaska, 1983.)