

The Purpose of Laws Like the Ten Commandments

Romans 5:12-20
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If you were Jewish in the first century, you might have idolized Saul. He studied the Hebrew Bible under one of the best Jewish teachers of the Law, a man named Gamaliel.

To his credit, he zealously lived out his faith-based on the Law of Moses as he understood it. He was very religious.

He was regimented and very driven. His every waking moment was devoted to keeping himself in a state of alertness about whether he was pleasing God with his thoughts and actions.

If he had been an athlete, you might say that Saul stayed in the zone. If he had been a firefighter, you might say he was always on high alert. If he had been a military man, he would have been the kind of man you would have recruited as a Navy Seal. That's the kind of zealous, high intensity, extremely focused person Saul was.

He was a Pharisee of Pharisees. He was a fiery defender of his religion, even to the point of persecuting those who became followers of Jesus.

Saul thought he was doing the will of God.

Then when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus through a bright light that blinded him and a voice that spoke to him, it changed his life forever. The light that blinded Saul on the road to Damascus also exposed his sinfulness in a way that he had never expected and he was humbled in a way he'd never been humbled in his life.

Those who were with Saul had to lead him the rest of the way to Damascus. He sat in darkness for three days until God sent a man named Ananias to restore his sight.

We are not told what went through Saul's mind in those days that he sat in darkness. I imagine that through the years he recalled that experience over and over and continued to gain insight from it.

Up until Saul met Jesus, he believed that the more of the Law one kept, the more pleased God. The more you pleased God, the more God would bless you.

However, Saul, who later became Paul and wrote much of our New Testament, realized that it was impossible and even misguided to believe a person could keep all of the Law. He would later quote the Psalmist, "There is none righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10).

While we should all strive to live by the standards God sets, we all come up short. "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (I John 1:8).

So Paul had to rethink the purpose of the Law. If it was not possible to keep all the commandments, should we even try? Should we give it our best effort and just hope we fare O.K. in the judgment?

His conclusion that he wrote to the church at Rome will leave you scratching your head at first. He said that the Law was added so that our “sins might increase.” This, of course, sounds like Paul’s brain was affected by that bright light. Why would God want our sins to increase? Well, of course, God doesn’t want our sins to increase.

Let’s take a closer look at what Paul means.

In Romans 5:13, Paul says that sin was in the world before the Law was given, but sin is not taken into account, when there is no Law.

Try to imagine a time when cars were first built. Roads already existed and were being used for walking and non-motorized transportation, like horses and buggies. When the motorized vehicle came along, there were no laws about how fast cars could go or who had to yield to whom. So if there were no laws about cars being driven on the roads, did that mean no one was at fault when an accident happened? How could you say someone was at fault if there were no road rules to break? There were not stop signs and no speed limits.

Just because there were no laws to break, that does mean that no one at fault. However, road rules were later added so that those at fault might be more obvious and so the roads would be safer.

Likewise, there was a time when there was no Law, but that doesn’t mean that people did not have evil thoughts in their hearts and were not carrying out evil actions. In fact, it was so bad at one time that God sent the Great Flood that destroyed the earth.

The Law was given to help people stay within accepted boundaries and allow people to have healthier, more abundant lives. It was given to help hold people accountable for the wrongs they were doing—to show the faults the people were committing.

For Paul, the main purpose of the Law is to bring to light our sins, our wrongs, those things that do not square with the example of Christ.

The crime drama CSI portrays forensic scientists who use sophisticated methods of science to solve crimes. One of their methods of finding evidence is to use special lighting to enhance evidence at a crime scene.

At many crime scenes, there’s no evidence at first glance. In such cases a trained detective will bring in special lighting and powder to find evidence the naked eye cannot see.

Fingerprints that don’t usually show up can be dusted and found with special lighting.

On areas like a rug, trace evidence like fibers will show up that normally will not show up without using special lighting.

With these special tools, evidence can be collected that can help the investigator link a specific person to a specific crime. Criminals who might otherwise be set free are often found guilty all because the light exposed the evidence that linked them to the crime.

Sometimes people that are falsely accused of a crime can be vindicated because the light proved someone else did the crime.

This is the way Paul portrays the Law. It lights up areas in our lives where sin exists. Think of the Ten Commandments in this way. The Ten Commandments have no lifesaving value of their own. They are good rules to live your life by. However, you will not be able to keep them all, all the time.

When Paul says, “The law was added so that the trespass might increase” (Romans 5:20), he is saying that God wanted us to see that we are incapable of living lives by the standards He has set. The Law is designed to show us our sin.

Because of the Law, our sin pops out. It becomes obvious.

The Law functions like a PET scan that’s used with cancer patients. A PET scan is the definitive scan that’s done to determine if there are any more cancer hot spots in the body after treatment.

If there is still cancer in the body, those areas light up on the scan from a color change to show the doctor where cancer cells still exist. A cancer patient wants to see a dark scan. No lights or color change, please.

When the Law is applied to our lives, we don’t want it to expose any sin, but inevitably it does, because that is our nature. When we pass the Law over us, what we discover is that there are hotspots of sin all over our lives.

There are many healthy things we can and should do to restore health and balance to our lives including exercise, counseling, diet, extending and receiving forgiveness, letting go of guilt, learning to trust, letting go of the past, healing from old wounds, being thankful, practicing gratitude, learning to be positive, practicing solitude, listening to others, and living with a serving attitude.

However, until we learn that we need a Savior and that we need grace in our lives because we will always struggle with getting it right, always, we will suffer from some of the same blindness Saul had even before he was literally struck blind.

He thought his religion had all the answers and he was doing everything it told him to do, but regardless of how much he did, he always came up short.

Being struck blind was the best thing that happened to him. It made him stop and ask himself a lot of questions.

It was the beginning of his understanding that the purpose of the Law and the purpose of the prophets was to point us to a Savior.

If we could have mended our relationship with God through keeping his Laws, Saul would have done that 2000 years ago. There was no one better at keeping the Law, but even Saul came up short.

So he says to the Roman church, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

All of us know how miserable we all are and feel when we fail time and time again as we fall short of God's standards.

What Saul discovered for the first time when Ananias came and laid hands on him and restored his sight was the grace of God, a free gift, something he did not work for, something that had not been earned. Grace was a foreign concept to Saul up until that day.

That's why he was able to add to that verse that we "all are justified (made right in the eyes of God) freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

In China, 2600 years before the birth of Christ, a great general by the name of Genghis Khan made a name for himself. Under his leadership, his men defeated enemy after enemy. Genghis had one problem, though. After wandering so far from home to defeat neighboring armies, he had trouble finding his way home. What could be more embarrassing for a great man of war than to get his men lost while returning from war?

Genghis was fortunate enough to have some intelligent men in his army who helped him solve his problem. Imagine the good humor that may have occurred one day as horses rode into the camp pulling a chariot with a wooden man standing tall with an arm pointed in a fixed direction.

"Sir, we have a gift for you. Now after we have defeated our enemies we can rely on this wooden man to point us in the direction of our homes."

At first it may have appeared to be a joke. Then the genius of the men unfolded as the geared mechanisms of the chariot were explained. The complex gears worked together so that regardless of which direction the horses went or how many times they turned the chariot, the wooden soldier that stood on top always pointed home. It worked like a compass.

A miniature replica of this chariot, known as a "South-Pointing Chariot," is on exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution at Washington, D.C.

Thirty years ago, Robert Adair, who at that time was an instructor for the Moultrie Area Vocational-Technical School, built one for his students as a model to challenge the advanced students in his shop class.

Robert also thought it would be a great idea if we made large ones to hook up to the back of some vehicles of our church members so they can find their way back to the church each Sunday.

I think the South-Pointing Chariot is a great metaphor for the Law.

That's right. You see, the purpose of the Law is to point us to Jesus.

Paul wrote in verses 20-21: "The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

This is the gospel. There is no amount of sin that the sacrifice of Jesus cannot cover if you place your faith in Him.

But there is also no amount of your goodness that can win God's favor apart from Jesus. You are still blind if you believe you can be good enough to win God's favor apart from the grace of Jesus.

When the Law is applied to your life, you will always come up short. Hotspots of sin always show up.

If you have Jesus as your Savior, you have grace and you will always have life.

This morning, allow the Law to lead you home. Find your way to the Heavenly Father. Ask the Lord for his life-giving, life-sustaining grace. You don't have to work for it.

However, once forgiven, once the grace of Christ has been given to you, you will want to work for Him out of your obedience, thankfulness, and the joyfulness of your heart.

That's one reason we find our way back to church time and time again, and then back out into the world. We serve Him out of our love and appreciation for our gift of life and salvation.

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