

HOLY AND RIGHTEOUS AND GOOD



WHICH WORKS? (1)

T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Holy and Righteous and Good

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T. M. Moore
Susie Moore, Editor and Finisher

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Holy and Righteous and Good

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Welcome to *Holy and Righteous and Good*

This *ReVision* study is part 1 in a series entitled, “Which Works?” In this series we will explain the role of good works in the life of faith, and look carefully at which good works we should be trying to learn and do.

And this will take us into a study of the Law of God – the Law of life, of liberty, and of love. We will see that the Law of God is not an onerous burden, and it has not ceased being relevant to the life of faith. The holy and righteous and good Law of God is the source we turn to in order to learn the good works God has beforehand prepared for us.

No one is saved by keeping the Law of God. But no one who *is* saved should continue ignorant of, indifferent to, or scornful of the holy and righteous and good Law of God. In this first study in our series, we’ll try to help you see why this is so.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We’re happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you’ll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

And if you find this study helpful, please let us know. How have you benefited from this study? Go to our website, www.ailbe.org, and use the Contact Us button to share your story.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Greatly Exaggerated

Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. Romans 7.12

Good News

To rephrase a well-known quote from Mark Twain, the reports of the obsolescence of the Law of God are greatly exaggerated.

Many Christians today want to believe that they are no longer bound by the moral teachings of the Law of God. Many are willing to accept the idea that the Ten Commandments are useful in helping us to recognize sin, but they insist that the Law of God has no role to play in directing our moral lives.

I recall the first time this view came to my attention. As a seminary student, I was reading a book of practical theology by a well-known Christian educator. At one point he raised the question, “What, then, is the Christian’s relationship to the Law?” I thought the answer to that would have been self-evident. The Law was the standard of morality throughout the Old Testament. Jesus fulfilled the Law. The Spirit was given to teach it to us. Paul submitted to the Law and taught it. John, James, Peter, and the writer of Hebrews put great stock in the Law of God.

The answer to the writer’s question seemed pretty clear to me. But the writer continued without flinching: “The Christian,” he wrote, “has no relationship to the Law. For the Christian, the Law is a dead and a useless thing.”

That would have come as a surprise to the writers of the New Testament, and to generations of theologians, pastors, and great saints who devoted their lives to living and teaching the commandments, statutes, precepts, rules, and testimonies of the Law of God as distinguishing marks and principal parameters of a life devoted to following Jesus.

Sadly, however, this view of the Law’s obsolescence has become that of a good many people today who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ. The rejection of God’s Law – whether by denial, ignorance, dismissal, or neglect – is bad news for Christians, bad news for their churches, and bad news for the world.

But I have good news for us all: The Law of God is as ready and able to liberate us from sin and shape us for lives of love as it ever was, and to define and direct us in those good works that glorify God, build His Church, advance His Kingdom, bear witness to the fact that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, conduce to greatness in God’s Kingdom, and turn the world rightside-up for the Lord.

Misguided

Why are we so ready to consign the Law of God to the grave? Why do so many pastors teach that we don’t need to learn or obey the commandments of God? What do we propose to put in place of the holy and righteous and good Law of God to help us in bringing holiness to completion in our own lives (2 Cor. 7.1)?

It is misguided to dismiss the Law of God as of no ongoing or practical use in the life of faith. To be sure, the Law of God will not save anyone. And Christians do not keep the Law of God because they hope that by doing so they will find favor with God and earn a spot in heaven.

But many in the Christian community have become gun-shy about “works righteousness”, so that any notion of having to submit to written rules is abhorrent to them – that in spite of the fact that New Testament writers appealed to the written Law of God over and over as the standard of righteousness for all the followers of Jesus Christ.

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It is misguided to think that, because we aren't saved by works – by keeping the Law of God – that works and Law-keeping have no place in the life of faith. In this series we will ask the question, “Which works should we embrace and adopt as the evidence of true and saving faith?” And we will answer that question, following the teaching of Scripture – especially the New Testament – and the works commanded and outlined in the Law of God.

Some parameters

In this study we're going to review the teaching of the New Testament concerning the Christian's calling to do good works of love. As we shall see, this is the undeniable, unequivocal, universal teaching of every writer in the New Testament.

But that begs the question, “Which works?” We want to answer, “The works of the Law of God, and all His Word.” The Law of God is to all subsequent revelation in Scripture as the acorn is to the oak. Everything God wants us to know for living holy and righteous and good lives is packed into His Law, and unpacked throughout subsequent Scripture to help us understand how to apply the Law for full and abundant life.

By the Law of God we mean the Ten Commandments and the civil statutes and religious precepts that derive from and elucidate those ten words throughout Exodus-Deuteronomy. Not all the statutes and precepts remain valid, since many applied to a situation that no longer exists. But even those religious laws that have been eclipsed by the work of Jesus, and those civil laws that are no longer relevant in our social and cultural context, contain principles and guidelines for loving God and our neighbors which remain valid today. We will see how the apostles understood and applied those various statutes, following the teaching of Jesus and the Spirit to derive abiding principles and practices promoting holiness, righteousness, and goodness among the followers of Christ.

We have been saved by the grace of God, freely, completely, and eternally through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We receive this salvation as a gift, by faith. But our salvation only begins at that point. We must work out that salvation in fear and trembling before the Lord (Phil. 2.12), for we have been saved for good works (Eph. 2.10), works that make us shine like lights in the darkness, works that reach others with the grace and truth of Jesus, and works that glorify God and exalt His holy and righteous and good Name before the watching world.

We are created, redeemed, justified, saved, and called for good works. And our loving Father has not left us to ourselves to figure out which works He has before ordained for us to do. He has shown us in His Law, and throughout all His Word, which works give evidence of true and saving faith, and mark us out as His children and followers of His Son. In this series, we will, first, establish the place of the Law of God as the foundation for good works. Then we will consider the role of good works in the life of the believer. Finally, we will return to the Law for a concise overview of how that holy and righteous and good body of teaching equips us for every good work to bless our neighbors, glorify God, and fill our lives with joy.

And we will answer the question, “Which works?” by insisting on those works which are holy and righteous and good – like God, like Jesus, and like God's Law.

For reflection

1. How would you describe your attitude toward the Law of God? Why do you think that way?
2. Do you agree that Christians have been saved to do good works? How shall we know which works are good, apart from the Law of God?
3. What do you hope to gain from this study of the good works to which we are called as Christians?

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Next steps – Preparation: Give thanks and praise to God Who has called us to good works and Who, by His Word and Spirit, equips us for every good work to bless our neighbors and glorify Him. What opportunities for good works are before you today?

2 A Litany of Law

*The voice said, "Cry out!"
And he said, "What shall I cry?"
"All flesh is grass,
And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
Because the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
Surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God stands forever."* Isaiah 40.6-8

The purpose of the Law

God gave His Law to His people to lead them in the paths of holiness and life, and to lead them in the ways of love – not to save them, because we are already saved who believe in Jesus.

"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong *your* days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, *that* I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them." Deuteronomy 30.15-20

"You shall observe My judgments and keep My ordinances, to walk in them: I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them: I am the LORD." Leviticus 18.4, 5

The response of the faithful believer:

With my whole heart I have sought You;
Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Psalm 119.10

The Lord Jesus and the Law

Jesus fulfilled the Law and loved His disciples in so doing. He commands us to follow Him.

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled." Matthew 5.17, 18

The response of the faithful believer:

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked. 1 John 5.3-6

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The Holy Spirit and the Law

The Holy Spirit dwells in believers with the primary purpose of teaching and empowering them to learn and obey the Law.

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. Deuteronomy 30.6

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.” Ezekiel 36.26, 27

For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace. Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. Romans 8.6-8

The response of the faithful believer:

My lips shall utter praise,
For You teach me Your statutes. Psalm 119.171

The nature and power of the Law

The Law is the perfect and complete, eternal and unfailing counsel of God concerning life and blessedness.

The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
Moreover by them Your servant is warned,
And in keeping them there is great reward. Psalm 119.7-11

Jesus said to him, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*’ This is *the* first and great commandment. And *the* second *is* like it: ‘*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” Matthew 22.27-40

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. 1 John 5.2, 3

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.” Romans 7.7

Therefore the law *is* holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. Romans 7.12

The response of the faithful believer:

So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. James 2.12

“If you love Me, keep My commandments.” John 14.15

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Law and the life of faith

As is evident from all these texts, and as Paul affirms, the Law has a vital place in the life of faith.

Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law. Romans 3.31

The response of the faithful believer:

Oh, how I love Your law!

It *is* my meditation all the day. Psalm 119.97

Warnings and promises concerning the Law

We must not fail to seek and lay hold of the promises attached to God's Law.

Those who forsake the law praise the wicked,
But such as keep the law contend with them. Proverbs 28.4

One who turns away his ear from hearing the law,
Even his prayer is an abomination. Proverbs 28.9

“Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5.19

The response of the faithful believer:

I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes
Forever, to the very end. Psalm 119.112

For reflection

1. How would you summarize the teaching of all the verses in this litany?
2. What is the role of the Law in doing good works for the glory of God?
3. Why must we not be negligent when it comes to learning, obeying, and teaching the Law of God?

Next steps – Transformation: Praise God for His Law. Ask Him to show you increasingly, day by day, the beauty and power of His Law for leading you into the freedom and abundant life that is ours in Jesus Christ.

3 The Old Commandments and the New

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13.34, 35

Saved for good works

In this series we’re unpacking the clear teaching of Scripture which says that Christians are called to do good works. We are not saved *by* good works; we are saved *unto* good works. We are saved by grace through faith, by believing in Jesus and the work of salvation He has accomplished for us. We come to believe in Jesus as we hear the Gospel explained and God sends His Spirit to give us a new heart (Ezek. 36.26, 27); empower us to confess Jesus as Savior and Lord, and God as our Father (Gal. 4.6); and begin the work of remaking us in the likeness of Jesus (2 Cor. 3.12-18).

Christians who do good works become increasingly like Jesus, Whom they follow as His disciples (1 Jn. 2.1-6). The question we are particularly addressing is “*Which* works are *good* works?” Put another way, “How do we understand, amid all the various works we might imagine, which of those are *the* good works for which we have been saved and to which we have been commissioned?” Are we free merely to do whatever *we* think is good? Are our *best intentions* to be the standard of goodness? Or has God given us more help and guidance in this matter?

Paul says the good works appointed for us are those “which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2.10). The word “beforehand” points us back to some previous work of God in outlining and detailing the kind of good works that should characterize those who believe in Him and are members of His household. In this series we are insisting that those “beforehand” works are the works of the Law of God, which Jesus fulfilled and taught us to learn and obey (Matt. 5.17-19); and which the Spirit teaches and empowers us to live within those general categories of love for God and love for others (Rom. 8.5-8; Matt. 22.34-40). We want to see why embracing, learning, and working *these* good works liberates us into the full and abundant and powerful life of the Kingdom of God.

Again, we don’t keep the Law of God and walk the path of good works it stretches before *so that we may* be saved. We who are saved keep the Law and do the good works it prescribes *because we have been saved, and we desire to realize more of the good life God has beforehand prepared for us.*

But what about Jesus’ “new commandment”?

The new commandment

On the night of His betrayal, Jesus gave His disciples a “new commandment”: that they should love one another as He has loved them.

Some Christian teachers insist that it is precisely at this point that Jesus consigned the old commandments which God had given beforehand to the dustbin of history and spiritual life. No longer are we to love one another as we want to be loved; we must love *as Jesus* loved, and that, we are told, is much richer, clearer, and more significant than loving according to the Law of God.

However, Jesus Himself, quoting Old Testament Law (Lev. 19.18), taught precisely that we should love one another (Matt. 22.34); and Paul echoed and affirmed this teaching of Jesus’ *after* Jesus had given the “new commandment” (cf. Rom. 13.8, 9). It’s difficult to see how the “new commandment” could negate or deny the old one, when Jesus and Paul affirmed the Old Testament teaching without qualification.

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Indeed, the “new commandment” should beg a question in our minds: Since we are to love one another as Jesus loved His disciples, how did Jesus love His disciples? In John 13.1, the apostle reports that Jesus had loved His disciples throughout His time with them, and He would continue to love them “to the end.” Jesus loved His disciples not by *destroying* the Law of God – and all the rest of the Old Testament – but by *fulfilling* it (Matt. 5.17). He fulfilled all the Law of God in terms of the demands of righteousness it requires of us; and He fulfilled all the Law of God by bearing the sanctions and judgment of God for disobedient sinners such as we.

Jesus fulfilled the Law. This is how He loved His disciples. So when He says, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another”, it is not possible that Jesus could be annulling the very standard by which He Himself loved us.

So what did He intend?

The Old in the New

An old saying to guide us in interpreting Scripture is attributed to Augustine: “The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is by the New revealed.” This helpful insight makes some important points about the Old and New Testaments. First, it indicates that their message is *harmonious* and not *contradictory*. They work together. The one does not supplant or replace the other.

Second, the two Testaments *need each other* if their true meaning is to be fully understood. This is a point Richard B. Hays has made very well in his book, *Reading Backwards*. Without the Old Testament, we can’t really understand important New Testament teachings, such as why Jesus is the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world, or how the Kingdom of God is a Kingdom not of this world. And without the New Testament, much of the Old Testament remains a locked vault of revelation: Who is this suffering Servant about Whom Isaiah wrote so eloquently and hopefully?

And this is especially true when it comes to Jesus. Jesus taught that *all* Scripture is about Him (Jn. 5.39). When He said this, He was pointing to the “beforehand” Scriptures of Israel – the Old Testament. All the Old Testament is about Jesus. Should we set aside *any* of the Old Testament, since *all* of it can help us in knowing Jesus? No, of course not.

But Jesus is also turning a light on the Old Testament by saying this. Those who know and follow Him experience a kind of “Aha!” as they read the Bible in the light of Jesus. In the light of Jesus, those ancient sacrifices, which could never save, make perfect sense as preparation for Jesus’ coming (Heb. 7-9). Now we understand why David’s Kingdom is more a *type* than a *prototype* of the Kingdom Jesus has given to us. As we read the Old Testament *through* Jesus, *looking for* Jesus, and *allowing Jesus to be the key to understanding* the Old Testament, difficulties in interpreting the Old Testament begin to smooth out. Troubling places become clear. Truth comes to its fullest light.

In giving the “new commandment”, Jesus was not replacing the old commandments of God’s Law. He was teaching us how truly to understand and obey them, just as He had done, so that the love He showed for us might be in us and come through us to others, radiating the glory of Jesus and filling the earth with His Presence, promise, and power (Eph. 4.8-10).

Jesus did not jettison the Law of God. He kept it. Taught it. Told us to learn, obey, and teach it. And gave us in Himself the quintessential interpretive key for living love for God and neighbors through good works in every aspect of our lives.

For reflection

1. Why must we see Jesus as the key to interpreting all of Scripture, and to knowing how truly to love?

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2. Obeying the Law as Jesus did empowers us to love as He did. Did Jesus obey the Law in a merely *outward* way?
3. The Law can be difficult to understand, and even more difficult to apply. But if we look to Jesus and His teaching and example, we can learn, obey and teach the Law. Why is this so?

Next steps – Preparation: Think of some of the ways Jesus loved His disciples. Think of the ways He shows His love to you. Give Him thanks and praise for all these ways, and ask Him to help you love more like that.

4 The Uses of the Law

But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust.
1 Timothy 1.8-11

Unlawful uses of the Law

In our text, Paul says plainly that the Law of God is good if we use it lawfully, that is, in line with the reasons God gave His Law. This suggests that there are *unlawful* uses to which the Law may be put, and we should make sure we understand what these are. I'll mention three.

First, it is against the purpose of God's Law – it is *unlawful* – to try to gain salvation by keeping the Law. We have been careful to make this point all along in our study of which works are the good works for which we have been redeemed and saved. This only makes sense, and for two reasons. First, all people are sinners (Rom. 3.23), and therefore, by definition, no one can ever hope to keep the Law of God like Jesus did, fulfilling all its righteous requirements, all the time, and in every situation. We do not encourage anyone to seek salvation by keeping the Law of God, but by looking to Him Who alone has kept it perfectly, and thus accomplished all the righteousness we need to find favor in the eyes of God.

Second, it is unlawful to use the Law to lord it over others, or to seek to control them by one's position as a recognized interpreter of the Law. This is the role the priests, Pharisees, and scribes claimed in the days when Jesus came preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God. The religious leaders of Israel had set themselves as *the* interpreters of God's Law, and they looked with scorn on the people who did not know the Law as accursed (Jn. 7.49).

Third, it is unlawful *not* to use the Law of God as God intends. By failing to study, meditate on, learn, practice, and teach the Law of God, we deny the teaching of God Himself (Lev. 18.1-5), our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 5.17-19), the Holy Spirit of God (Rom. 8.5-9), and all the apostles. So we are not using the Law as God intends if we deny, neglect, ignore, or transgress it to any extent.

What does it mean, then, to use the Law lawfully?

Lawful uses

First, I might ask you to look over Paul's list of those for whom the Law of God is intended, and who should thus learn to use it lawfully. Do you see yourself in there anywhere? Are you a completely righteous person? If not, the Law is for you. Are you a sinner? The Law is for you. Do you – if only in your heart – hate, murder, commit adultery, or do anything at any time that is “contrary to sound doctrine”? If so, then the Law is just what you need to liberate you from these evils (Jms. 1.22-25; 2.12), plop you down into the Spirit's classroom (Ezek. 36.26, 27), and put you on course for a more consistent life of following Jesus (1 Jn. 2.1-6).

The first lawful use of the Law is to point us to Jesus for salvation (Gal. 3.24). As we look into the Law, the perfect Law of liberty and love, we realize that we cannot possibly fulfill the requirements of this holy, and righteous, and good body of instruction. But we *must* fulfill it, if we would be acceptable to God, Who is of holier eyes than even to look upon evil and sin. So the Law points us to Jesus, Who kept all that the Law requires us, and opens the way, through His life, death, and resurrection, into the very Presence of God. We need the Law to drive us to Jesus. The more we read and study the Law, the more it makes us look to Jesus, love Jesus, and call on the mercy and grace of Jesus to help us in our time of need. We should also use the

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Law in this capacity as part of our work of evangelism, for no one will be saved who does not acknowledge his sin and need of Jesus.

Second, the Law continues both to instruct us concerning the nature of sin and, in the hands of the Spirit, to convict us of sin whenever it appears in our lives (Rom. 7.7; Jn. 16.8-11). The better we understand the Law, and the more we meditate on it – as is commended in Psalm 1 – the more sensitive we will be to sin, the more alert to temptation, and more ready to confess and repent of sin and return to the Lord’s path (Ps. 119. 59, 60). The Law was our *tutor* to drive us to Jesus; it is our *coach* or *mentor* to keep us from allowing sin to nest in our souls. As Paul said, we won’t be able to know what sin is apart from reading and learning the Law of God (Rom. 7.7). The Law defines sin and transgression (1 Jn. 3.4), not we ourselves, nor our crowd, nor the temper of the times.

Third – and this is the emphasis in this series – the Law shows us how to live in the freedom that we have as sons and daughters of God, to tap into the mind and power of the Spirit, to follow Jesus in the path He Himself walked, and to bring the glory of God to light in works of love for God and our neighbors (Rom. 8.5-9; 1 Jn. 2.1-6; Matt. 5.13-16; Matt. 22.34-40). The Law is not intended to be *exhaustive* in cataloging those good works for which we have been redeemed and saved. It offers just enough in the way of abiding rules, instructive precepts, case laws and other examples, and interpretation by prophets, apostles, and the Lord Jesus Himself, so that we may be formed in heart, mind, and conscience to “read” what the Spirit is writing within us, and to do as He instructs and empowers us for the pleasure of God (Phil. 2.13).

So how can we prepare ourselves for learning and practicing the Law of God, so that we might do those good works which were beforehand prepared for us as His chosen, saved, and called people?

Using God’s Law lawfully

I’ll offer three suggestions here.

First, stop thinking that the Law is not for you – not for *any* of us as believers in Jesus. If you’re a sinner, and especially if you’re a *saved* sinner, the Law is lawful for you to use in living for Jesus and glorifying God in your life. You will not gain the benefit God intends from obeying His Law until you stop thinking about it as some onerous burden – John says it is not (1 Jn. 5.1-3) – and begin welcoming it as the path to life and the likeness of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 3.12-18).

Second, memorize the Ten Commandments. We’re going to be looking at each of these during this series. All the rules, statutes, precepts, commandments, and testimonies of the Law of God fit under one or another of these Ten Words. If we can fix these in our souls, they will guide us in understanding and making good use of all the Law of God, so that we may enjoy the liberty and express the love that Law unlocks for us.

Finally, make reading and meditating in God’s Law part of your regular devotional life. The easiest way to do this is to read through the book of Deuteronomy slowly, reflectively, and repeatedly. Add this or some other means of internalizing the Law of God, and you will become a true student of the Spirit as He writes God’s Law on your heart day by day.

We want the benefits of God’s Law – all the fullness of life God promises is encoded in that wondrous body of divine revelation. But we will not have it unless and until we apply ourselves diligently to it as an ongoing aspect of our growing into the likeness of Jesus Christ. The Law is good when we use it lawfully, but we won’t use it lawfully unless we commit to learning it thoroughly, joyfully, and obediently.

For reflection

1. How can we know when we’re using the Law *un*lawfully?
2. Why do we need to include the Law – in some form, perhaps summarized or abbreviated – in sharing the

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Good News about Jesus?

3. What will you do to improve on using the Law lawfully?

Next steps – Transformation: Set up a plan for regular reading of and meditation on the Law of God. Get started on this exciting discipline today.

5 The Law of God

Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. Romans 7.12

Let's be clear

As believers in Jesus Christ, we have been redeemed and saved to do good works, which God beforehand ordained that we should walk in them (Eph. 2.8-10). We are making the point that Scripture insists that the standard which is to guide us in doing good works of love is none other than the Law of God, given to Moses, appealed to throughout the Old Testament, fulfilled and commended by Jesus Christ, and embraced and taught by the apostles.

But what do we mean by “the Law of God”? Which aspects of the Mosaic corpus come under that rubric? How should we regard them? And what is this Law of God directing us to do?

The Law of God consists of three parts: The Ten Commandments, the civil laws and statutes, and the religious or ceremonial laws. The Ten Commandments are given twice in the Old Testament, once in Exodus 20 and again in Deuteronomy 5 – the first time, immediately after Israel had been delivered from Egypt, and the second time just prior to their beginning to conquer and settle the land of Canaan. The New Testament, either directly or indirectly, reaffirms all those Ten Commandments as the abiding standard for loving God and loving our neighbors (Matt. 22.34-40, etc.).

The civil laws of ancient Israel are given to elaborate and illustrate how the Ten Commandments should be applied in particular situations. They are the Old Testament equivalent of what is today referred to as “case law.” These statutes and judgments were to be obeyed explicitly where they applied directly to a situation. More often, as in Ruth 4, they served to guide the people of Israel in making sound judgments in situations not explicitly spoken to in the civil statutes. Both Paul and James appealed to the civil statutes of Israel as relevant to situations facing the churches in their day (cf. 1 Cor. 9.8-11; Jms. 5.4 [cf. Lev. 19.13]). Because we live in the age of grace and the Spirit, some adjustments of these statutes is necessary, and we will talk more about this in subsequent installments in this series.

The religious laws governed the spiritual lives of the people of ancient Israel, and revolved around the work of the priests and Levites at the tabernacle first, and then later, the temple. These laws especially find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ, as the writer of Hebrews argues (Heb. 7-10), and therefore no longer have binding application to the followers of Christ. Nevertheless, embedded in these religious laws are principles relating to worship and the life of the church which remain useful for us in discerning and following God’s will (cf. 1 Cor. 9.12-14).

The Law in Psalm 119

The longest chapter in the Bible is devoted entirely to the benefits that derive from and the obligations attached to obeying the Law of God. In Psalm 119, the psalmist uses a variety of terms to refer to the Law: Law, statutes, precepts, testimonies, judgment, and Word, primarily. The purpose in using *all* these terms, interchangeably, is to catch up all three aspects of the Law of God, and to commend the practice of them all.

The verbs used to describe the psalmist’s relationship to the Law are instructive. We are to “walk” in the Law; that is, the Law directs our steps and marks the boundaries of our path. We are to “keep” or even “guard” the Law, as a cherished treasure. The psalmist exhorts us to “learn” the Law, to “take heed” of it, hide it in our heart, declare it, remember it, long for and desire and delight in it, even to love the Law of God. The Law contains “wondrous things” to guide us in the paths of covenant blessedness. So we must meditate on the Law, turn to it for revival, call on God to help us understand it, choose it, run the course of it, observe it, and

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find it good in all its parts. We must trust the Law as truth; have it at the ready in our mouths; seek it diligently; find the life it holds in store for us; let it be a light on our paths; believe in the Law; hope in it; live by it; be found blameless in obeying it; seek it; consider it; find wisdom from it; be careful neither to wander nor stray from it; embrace it as our great heritage; rejoice in it; find safety in it; consider it to be right; and let our steps be directed by it.

Do we dare suggest that these words, so many and so carefully combined, no longer have any significance for us? And if we do, by what standard or criteria or mode of preference do we set aside that which this psalmist has so plainly, copiously, urgently, and comprehensively recommended?

It's about love

Why are we so reluctant to nurture the attitudes toward and relationship with the Law of God which Psalm 119 commends? Jesus told us that the Law – in all its forms and aspects – boils down to loving God and our neighbors. Surely, we would not suggest that we know better than Moses or David or the prophets about how to fulfill these two greatest of commandments? That somehow we may set aside all that has been so carefully and thoroughly set forth in Scripture and trust our feeble instincts, the social winds of the moment, or some kind of mere gut feeling in order to fulfill the mandate to love?

The world suffers from an acute dearth of love. We see it in a thousand different forms: indifference to God, racial tensions, corruption and squalor, poverty and greed, senseless crimes of passion, ridiculous and tyrannical laws designed to bridle free speech or increase some politician's sense of power. Everywhere it is evident that love has grown cold. And there is but one explanation for why this is so: "And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matt. 24.12).

If we want to love God and our neighbors, which is our very reason for being, then we must look to God to empower us for such love. We have neither the inclination, aptitude, nor ability to gin up love out of the finite and fallen resources of our puny souls. We need God to be at work within us, willing and doing according to *His good pleasure* – His holy and righteous good pleasure (Phil. 2.13; Rom. 7.12). And this He is pleased to do by giving to us who have been saved, His Spirit to dwell within us to teach and enable us to live in love according to His Law (Ezek. 36.26, 27).

Why do we kick against the goads, when our Good Shepherd seeks only to lead us into green pastures and still waters of love?

For reflection

1. If we will not love according to the Law of God, by what standard *will* we love?
2. What should we conclude about the writer of Psalm 119 and his view and practice of the Law?
3. Why does lawlessness *necessarily* lead to love growing cold?

Next steps – Preparation: Try reading one section (of twenty-two) of Psalm 119 each day. How could this help you grow in your understanding and use of God's Law?

6 The First Four Commandments

Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment.” Matthew 22.37, 38

First and great

The Law of God is to the rest of divine revelation in Scripture as the acorn is to the oak. It’s all there from the beginning, waiting only to take root and begin to grow. All the prophets – historical prophets and writing prophets – and the writers of the wisdom literature all look back to the Law of God before looking around at the situation of their nation and forward to the promises of God. As far as Old Testament writers were concerned, keeping the Law *defined* the people of Israel at their best, and *condemned* them at their worst. Even more than that, as Solomon put it, fearing God and keeping His commands is the whole duty of all people (Eccl. 12.13).

The Law in all its forms can be collected under two large headings, as explained by our Lord Jesus Christ. The statutes, rules, precepts, judgments, testimonies, and commandments that relate to or clarify the first four commandments are all given to teach us how to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, as well as all our strength (Deut. 6.5; cf. Mk. 12.30). Jesus described this as the “first of all the commandments” (Mk. 12.29) and the “first and great commandment” (Matt. 22.38). It is inconceivable that this commandment, and anything that attaches to it, explains it, directs us for its obedience, or guides and clarifies it for our understanding could be set aside and regarded as no longer valid.

The first and great commandment is an apt summary of the first four of the Ten Commandments, those that are given to teach us how to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Let’s take a closer, albeit brief, look at these commandments.

Loving God

First, it’s important to be clear that we will not love our neighbors as God does if we do not first love God. Loving God can be very difficult, and that for a variety of reasons.

One, because we are fallen, sinful, and prone to rely on our senses and fallible reason, loving God is difficult because we can’t *see* Him. Our ability to love people, places, and things is bound up with how they appear to us. To love God, Who does *not* appear to us, can therefore be very difficult. Even the liveliest imagination can struggle to envision God with sufficient clarity and consistency to love Him as if we were seeing Him.

Two, loving God is difficult because He is so infinitely different from us, and His ideas about love are far above and beyond and superior to ours. Apart from guidance from Him, we would be left on our own to show God that we love Him. In certain cultures, practitioners of religions other than that of the Scriptures have contrived practices as expressions of devotion to their god or gods which we find disgusting and reprehensible. This was the problem with true religion in the Old Testament. God’s people tended to look to *other* religions and their gods, and how to worship and honor those gods, and they ended up *offending* God to the point of His judging them. Our minds are just not clever enough to figure out the best or right ways of loving God.

So if we are to love God so that by knowing Him we have Him eternal life, (Jn. 17.3) unending joy, and power for full and abundant life, we need to look to Him for guidance. We need *God* to say to *us*, “This is the way to love Me, so that I am honored and you are blessed.”

And, happily, He has done just that.

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One to four

In the *first commandment*, God clears away any confusion about whom or what to worship, and He provides ample reason for why we who have been saved should love Him and no other gods (Ex. 20.1-3; Deut. 5.6, 7). He has saved us from our bondage to sin by sending Jesus to pay the debt and fulfill the righteousness we need to become sons and daughters of the living God (Jn. 1.12). He Who loved us enough to save us deserves alone to be the ultimate focus of our desire and our devotion. Nothing else can help us realize the fullness of abundant life in Jesus, so that we know our happiest, most purposeful, and most satisfying existence by having *only God* as the aim and desire of our hearts, mind, souls, and strength.

The *second commandment* helps us resist the all-too-human temptation to want to *see* God by insisting that we must not make any representations of Him (Ex. 20.4-6; Deut. 5.8-10). Instead of *enabling* greater love for Him, idols and graven images, embraced as aids to worship or devotion, end up *minimizing* God. If we can move Him from one room to the next, or rearrange His place on the mantle, how can we possibly trust Him with the big issues of life. Additionally, anything else that we love *more* than God, or *before* or *instead* of God, becomes an idol, even if it takes the form of a stock portfolio or other human enticements. In the second commandment, God says, in effect, “Let your heart and mind and soul grow in knowing and loving me according to My Word, not your ideas or works.”

The *third commandment* helps us to honor the Name of God, and thus to preserve and nurture authentic love for Him, in two ways (Ex. 20.7; Deut. 5. 11). First, it prevents us from reducing God’s Name to some kind of magic charm, invoked either to buttress our words or to make us appear more righteous than we are. Second, the third commandment teaches us to *take God’s Name* but to take it with *effects* that are *consistent* with that Name – effects such as good works. If we say we believe in God, then we expect to show that by effects that demonstrate His Name to the world – righteousness, peace, joy, good works, and so forth. As James reminds us, to take God’s Name without such effects is just dead faith, that is, no true faith at all (Jms. 2.14-26).

The *fourth commandment* is a standing invitation from God for a weekly retreat in Him (Ex. 20.8-11; Deut. 5.12-15). After a hard week of work and serving others, God invites us to the quintessential getaway for rest and refreshment – Himself. By devoting one day to Him, along with Christians everywhere, we empty the cares of the week onto His desk; participate in His Presence through worship and the Supper; are renewed by His Word in preaching that supplements our daily reading and meditation; and are strengthened in the use of our mind, heart, and soul to *know* and *love* God. Thus, when Monday comes around, we will be well prepared to go forth and love God with *all our strength* as well, in all the work He’s given us to do.

Raise your hand if you want to see God in His glory, know Him present with You in power, be refreshed and renewed in Him, and be transformed increasingly into the image and likeness of His Son. The first four commandments together make up the *great* commandment to love God first and foremost. Duly observed, they can keep you in the Presence of God day by day, so that you know Him in His glory, and He shows His glory through you to others.

Learn, obey, and walk within these commandments, and your love for God will increase dramatically.

For reflection

1. Why is loving God the *first* and *great* commandment?
2. How does each of the first four commandments aid us in loving God?
3. What would you say to someone who says we don’t need to keep the first four commandments?

Next steps – Transformation: Memorize the first four commandments. Pray through them throughout the day.

3. How would your life be different if revival began to occur in you today?

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Next Steps – Preparation: Add today's verses to those from Psalm 119 that you have begun praying already.

7 The Last Six Commandments

Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” Matthew 22.37-40

Love God first of all

The Ten Commandments were given in an order of importance. Skip the first four, and you’ll never fulfill the last six with the kind of thoroughness they require. Recall the young man who came to Jesus, asking what he needed to do to have eternal life (Matt. 19.16-22). Jesus knew this young man before he even spoke. So when he asked the question, Jesus drove right to what he was trusting in for salvation – his perception of himself as having fulfilled the Law.

Jesus first made sure that the young man understood Who He was: “Why do you call Me good? No one *is* good but One, *that is*, God.” In other words, Jesus was saying to this young man, “I, with Whom you are speaking, to Whom you come seeking eternal life, I am God.” Only after He had established that fact did Jesus expose the young man’s self-confidence: “But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”

No one had ever been able to do that, of course; and only One ever would. The young man, eager to prove his worthiness, answered, “Which ones?” In reply, Jesus unpacked five of the last six commandments, then rounded them off with “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

We can see the young man standing tall and smiling as he said, “All these things I have kept from my youth.” But he didn’t have eternal life; and he must have suspected he still had not done enough, because he continued, “What do I still lack?”

Jesus’ reply was, in essence, “Love Me more than your ‘great possessions.’” Which the young man could not. None of his virtue signaling throughout all his days would count for anything, because he did not love Jesus first, foremost, and entirely. He had another god that he worshipped, and he was not prepared to let it go.

As we turn to a brief, introductory overview of the last six commandments, we do well to keep in mind that we will only have success in keeping these as we work at loving God daily with all our soul and strength.

Loving our neighbors

The last six of the Ten Commandments outline what loving our neighbors requires, and shows us not only what we must do with respect to others, but what God wants for us from them as well.

The *fifth commandment* establishes the home as a place for “learning the ropes” about life in the world (Ex. 20.12; Deut. 5.16). By honoring our parents, we learn to honor others, who, like us, are made in the image of God. By keeping this commandment we also learn how to show proper respect and deference to those in positions of authority, whether in church or public life.

The *sixth commandment* reminds us that since only God can give life, only God can take it (Ex. 20.13; Deut. 5.17). Each of these last six commandments has a positive side. Not only must we not murder our neighbors, but we must do what we can to protect their wellbeing – as, we hope, they will do toward us as well.

The *seventh commandment* protects the integrity and importance of marriage and the family (Ex. 20.14; Deut. 5.18), and instructs us – as Jesus later clarified, both here and with the sixth commandment (Matt. 5.21, 22, 27, 28) – to keep our affections pure and undefiled.

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The *eighth commandment* protects the property, which God entrusts to us, from being unlawfully seized by others, whether robbers or governments or church leaders (Ex. 20.15; Deut. 5.19). The *ninth commandment* reminds us that only the truth sets us free from deceit, lies, slander, and false witness; therefore, we must always be careful to bear true witness to the world (Ex. 20.16; Deut. 5.20). And the *tenth commandment* reminds us that all sin, all violation of God's Law, every transgression and all rebellion against the Lord begins in the heart, where we covet above all the persistent tendency to want to be a law unto ourselves (Ex. 20.17; Deut. 5.21).

The way of love

The second great commandment summarizes the duties and guarantees provided in the last six of the Ten Commandments. As we love our neighbors as we love ourselves – even more, as Christ has loved us – we serve as channels of the grace of God to the world, communicating and demonstrating His love, and appealing to the hearts and minds of the people among whom we live to seek the Lord, Who loves them with the love they experience from us.

What do we propose to put in the place of these commandments, if we will not learn, receive, and obey the Law of God? Do we suppose that we can improve on God Himself for how we would be loved by others, and how we must love them? Will we just follow a hunch, or some fleeting intuition or flighty sentiment in showing “love” to the people to whom God sends us each day?

Or will we take up the plain, clear, Law of God, and the statutes, rules, precepts, and testimonies that help us understand how to apply that Law? The righteous person – the person who inhabits and expresses the righteousness of Jesus Christ – is *steeped* in the Law of God (Ps. 1), so that he thinks as God does, feels as God does, and values as God does with respect to how he will relate to the people around him.

Paul says that we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16). He likewise exhorts us to gain the mind of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8.5-9). The mind of Christ and His Spirit is a mind of love; this also is the mind of God the Father toward the world (Jn. 3.16). We have the privilege of being vessels of the love, love so amazing, so divine, that it fills and possesses us, and empowers us to live as vessels of grace to the world (2 Cor. 4.7-15). Is this the life we embraced when we professed faith in Jesus? If it is, then we will make it our business, as the Spirit writes the Law of God on our hearts (Ezek. 36.26, 27), to learning how that holy and righteous and good Word of God applies to all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities – loving God and our neighbors according to the great commandments of Jesus.

For reflection or discussion

1. Which of the last six commandments would you *not* like someone to obey toward you?
2. Why can we not fulfill the last six commandments without daily increasing in obedience to the first four?
3. Do you think reviewing and praying through the Ten Commandments each day would help you to increase in love for God and your neighbors? Explain.

Next steps – Transformation: Memorize the last six of the Ten Commandments, and pray through them throughout the day.

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Questions for reflection or discussion

1. We're not saved by good works, but we're not saved without them. Explain.
2. Why do some Christians insist that the Law of God is no longer relevant or applicable?
3. What is the first and great commandment? What makes it first and great?
4. What is the second great commandment? What makes it great?
5. Why did Jesus say that all the Old Testament – Law and Prophets – depended on these two commandments?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.