

Why the Law Was Given

by John Piper

The law of Moses is not a job description for how to earn God's favor, but a call to trust in God's promises and to live out the obedience of faith.

Topics: "Gods Law", "Saving Faith"

Description

John Piper preaches about the importance of understanding the law of God and fulfilling it in the Spirit of love. He clarifies the misconceptions surrounding the Mosaic law, emphasizing that the law aims at producing faith and obedience, not meritorious works. Piper explains that love fulfills the law and is the fruit of genuine, saving faith in God's promises. He highlights the need to obey the Old Testament and New Testament commandments out of trust in God's grace, not to earn salvation. The sermon concludes with an exhortation to delight in God's law, meditate on it, and sing of its value for all generations.

Transcript

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WHY THE LAW WAS GIVEN One of my very great desires for our church is that we be a people who understand the law of God and fulfill it in the Spirit of love. The law which God gave to Moses at Mount Sinai a few months after bringing the people out of Egypt has been the victim of some very bad press in the past several hundred years. My guess is that there is a good deal of confusion in our minds when we read on the one hand in Romans 6:14, "You are no longer under law but under grace," but on the other hand in Romans 3:31, "Do we then overthrow the law by faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law." Part of our confusion is caused by the simple fact that the word "law" in the New Testament has at least three different meanings when used in different contexts. It can refer to the whole Old Testament as in Romans 3:19 (where the preceding quotations come from the Psalms and prophets). It can refer to part of the O.T. as when Jesus says, "I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets" (Matthew 5:17). Specifically, it can refer to that part of the O.T. written by Moses, the first five books, called the Torah. For example, Jesus said in Luke 24:44, "These are my words which I spoke to you... that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled. The third meaning of the term law is not a different part of the O.T., but the O.T. understood in a different way. We will see in a few moments how many in Israel twisted the Mosaic law into legalism. That is, they severed it from its foundation of faith, failed to stress dependence on the Spirit and thus turned the commandments into a job description for how to earn the wages of salvation. That is legalism. But there is no Greek word

for legalism, and so when Paul wanted to refer to this distortion of the Mosaic law he often used the phrase, "works of law" (e.g. Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:16,3:2,5). But sometimes he simply used the word "law" as when he said, "You are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14). We will see that this does not mean: you don't have to keep the law. It means you are not burdened by it as a job description of how to earn the wages of salvation. So whenever you read the word "law" in the New Testament, ask yourself: is this the O.T. or the writings of Moses or the legalistic distortion of Moses' teaching? This will keep us from giving such bad press to the Mosaic law when really it is the legalistic distortion of law that should get the bad press.

What I would like to do this morning is vindicate Moses from the widespread accusation that he taught a different way of salvation and sanctification than the New Testament does, namely, "by grace through faith ... not of works lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8). Now I know that hardly anyone says that God saved people differently in the O.T. than he does today. But many Bible teachers say (or imply) that the law of Moses offers a way of salvation different than the way offered in the gospel. That is, virtually everyone agrees that anybody that was justified in the O.T. was justified by grace through faith; it was a gift of God. But many will still say that the law did not call men to be justified this way, it called them to earn God's blessings through works, and in doing this it showed men their total inability and drove them to the Savior.

Or to put it another way, many Bible teachers will argue that the Mosaic covenant (made with Israel at Mount Sinai) is fundamentally different from the covenant with Abraham (made earlier) and the New Covenant (established at Calvary) under which we live. The difference, they say, is this: in the Abrahamic covenant and New Covenant salvation is promised freely to be received by faith apart from works of law. But under the Mosaic covenant salvation (or God's blessing) is not offered freely to faith, but instead is offered as a reward for the works of the law. Since only perfect works could merit salvation from a perfectly holy God and nobody can achieve that, the law simply makes us aware of our sin and misery and pronounces our condemnation. This is probably the most popular view of the Mosaic law in the church today, and it is wrong. It makes a legalistic Pharisee out of Moses, turns the Torah into the very heresy Paul condemned at Galatia, and (worst of all) it makes God into his own enemy, commanding that people try to merit his blessing (and thus exalt themselves) instead of resting in his all sufficient mercy (and thus exalt him).

I want to try to vindicate Moses from this misunderstanding by giving you a Biblical theology of the law in a nutshell. It's a huge topic, but sometimes if we press things together into a nut-size outline, we can plant it in the corner of our mind until it grows into a big tree of insight. Here's what I will do: I'll mention the five points I want to make, then go back and give their Biblical basis, and then sum them up again. We will close by singing the beauty of God's law with Psalm 19.

First, the law is fulfilled when we love our neighbor. Second, love is the out-working of authentic, saving faith. Third, therefore the law did not call for meritorious works, but for the obedience which flows from faith. Fourth, therefore, we must obey the O.T. commandments the same way we obey the N.T. commandments--not in order to win God's favor, but because we already depend on his free grace and trust that his commands will lead to full and lasting joy. Fifth, we should delight in God's law, meditate on it day and night, and sing of its value unto all generations.

First of all then, love is a fulfilling of the law. The crucial text here is Romans 13:8-10.

Owe no one anything except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not kill, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (See also Gal. 5:14)

Paul was not taking a big risk when he boiled the whole law down into one command. He had the authority of Jesus for doing so. Jesus said in Matthew 7:12, "Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets." James said it a bit differently (2:8), "If you really fulfill the royal law according to scripture, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you do well." So we have three testimonies in the New Testament that what God is trying to do through the law is make loving people out of us. Every single commandment, says Romans 13:9, has love as its aim. So the first point in our nutshell theology of the law is that the law is fulfilled in us when we love our neighbor.

The second point is this: love is not a work that we do on our own to show ourselves meritorious to God; it is the fruit of faith in the promises of God. To be sure, genuine love will lead to great labor. But it is not synonymous with labor. It is deeper than labor and prior to labor and enables labor. There are many people laboring for God and neighbor who are not doing it out of love. Love is more than religious practices and humanitarian services. That's why Paul can say in 1 Corinthians 13:3, "If I give away all I have and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." Someone may ask, "Well, if you can die for someone and not have love, what in the world is love?" The answer is that love is not in the world. "Love is from God" (1 John 4:7). Where there is no faith uniting the heart of God, there is no true love. Love is the out-working of genuine, saving faith. Here are the key passages: Galatians 5:6, "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love." The origin of love is the heart of faith. Further down in Galatians 5:22, love is called the fruit of the Spirit. In other words, it is something we cannot produce without God's enablement. So how do we become loving people? Galatians 3:5 answers, "The one who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you does so not by works of the law but by the hearing of faith." The path on which the Spirit comes to us is faith in God's promises; and when he comes the fruit he produces is love. Therefore, love is the fruit of the Spirit and the outworking of faith. In 1 Timothy 1:5 Paul puts it like this, "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith." Only genuine faith is going to issue into love.

I think we can illustrate the way this works by our present situation here at Bethlehem. There are three significant decisions we will probably make by the end of January: whether to buy the house next door for future expansion or parking, whether to amend the church covenant, and whether to call an assistant pastor for educational and young adult ministries and a children's worker in September 1982. I am eager for all three of these things to happen. But I also know there are some who are opposed to one, some opposed to two and some opposed to all three of these proposals. What will love look like between those of us who disagree over the next three months and where will it come from?

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not seek to avoid a brother who differs, it does not wear a scowl, it does not spread rumors or speak evil of a neighbor, it does not close its ears to the evidences. Instead, love rejoices in the truth and is peaceable, gentle, open to reason. Love looks people in the eye and communicate goodwill. Love does not pout, is not self-pitying, does not use ultimatums to get its own way. That's what love will look like in the next three months. And what a terrific opportunity we have to prove to ourselves and to the world that our peace is not based merely on sameness. It takes no Christian grace whatever to live in peace where everyone thinks and feels the same. And so the time of controversy in which we find ourselves is not bad; it is a good occasion

to test whether there is really grace within us or not.

When I list before myself the demand of love, I know what I must do. I must buttress my faith with some promises. Promises like:

I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5). "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I sent it (Is. 55:10,11).

When I still my heart with these things and catch a glimpse of God's bright and sovereign future, then I can love again. I don't feel threatened anymore, I don't feel angry or depressed or anxious. I feel like the future is taken care of. And if I am all taken care of, then it feels very natural to want to take care of you, to look you in the eye and smile and want only your good. The point is this: to whatever degree we achieve this divine love for each other, it will be owing to faith in the liberating promises of God.

So the first point in our theology of the law was that love fulfills the law. The second point was that love only comes out of faith in God's promises. The third point, therefore, is that the law did not call for meritorious works, but for the obedience which flows from faith. If love is what the law aimed at and only faith can love, then the law must teach faith. This is what has been overlooked so often. But it can be shown from Paul's teaching and from the law itself. The key passage is Romans 9:30-32. Here Paul explains why Israel has not fulfilled the law even though she pursued it for centuries. He says:

What shall we say, then? That gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, the righteousness through faith; but that Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on law (or: who pursued the law of righteousness) did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it (i.e. the law) through faith, but as if it were based on works.

That little phrase "as if" or "as though" is tremendously important. It shows clearly that Paul did not believe that God ever intended the law to be obeyed by "works." That is, if you try to use the law as a job description of how to earn God's favor you are doing something that the law itself opposes. The law itself is against "the works of the law." The law never commanded anyone to try to merit his salvation. The law is based on faith in God's promises, not on legalistic strivings. The mistake of Israel was not in pursuing the law, but in pursuing it by works instead of by faith. (See Romans 3:31; Matt. 23:23).

Now let's look at the law itself. The ten commandments are the heart of the Mosaic covenant and are found in Exodus 20. Israel has arrived in the wilderness of Sinai three months after the exodus from Egypt. The agony of slavery and the spectacular deliverance through the Red Sea are vivid in their memories. (Think how vivid the concentration camp would still be three months after the allied liberation!) One of God's purposes in the exodus was to cause his people to trust him, that he would take care of them and bring them to the promised land. So Exodus 14:31 says, "And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses."

Therefore when the ten commandments begin, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me," (Ex. 20:2,3), God meant: "Remember how I demonstrated my love for you and my incomparable power on your behalf! Trust in me

now and look to no other source for help." The ten commandments are based on a call for faith in the God of the exodus, just like the moral teachings of the N.T. are based on a call for faith in the Lord of Good Friday and Easter.

The exodus was a sign for Israel just like the death and resurrection of Jesus are a sign for the church. The meaning of the sign is that God is for you and will work for you and take care of you if you will only trust him. The past event of the exodus is a sign of God's willingness to help Israel in the future. Therefore, the faith God aims to produce through the exodus is a confidence that God will do for us in the future what he has done in the past. This is made clear in Deuteronomy 1:29-32 where Moses recounts why Israel refused to enter the promised land and was forced to wander 40 years in the desert. Moses had said to them when they first approached the promised land, "Do not be in dread or afraid of them. The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes ... Yet in spite of this word you did not believe the Lord your God..." (See also Num. 14:11, 20:12; Deut. 9:22-24). The exodus was a sign that God would take care of Israel in the future. Therefore, the exodus was the foundation of Israel's faith. And this faith is the basis of the law. The law of Moses simply spells out the way Israelites will live if they genuinely feel their future is secure in God. You don't steal if your future is secure in God. You can't abuse others for self-gain by killing or lying or seducing another's spouse or dishonoring your parents, if you really believe the God of the exodus and the God of Easter is at work to give you the future that is best for you. All these sins come from not believing God. The law is a description of the obedience of faith; it is not a job description for how to earn the wages of God's blessings.

So the first point in our theology of the law was that love fulfills the law. The second point was that love is the outworking of faith. And the third point was that, therefore, the law itself does not demand meritorious works, but only the obedience which comes from faith. The fourth point follows naturally, namely: we must therefore obey (or fulfill) the O.T. commandments the same way we must obey the N.T. commandments--not to win God's favor, but because we already depend on his free grace and trust that his commands will lead to full and lasting joy. Of course since Christ has come and fulfilled the sacrificial side of the O.T. (1 Cor. 5:7), and has declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19), and has founded a new people of God which is not a national or ethnic group, many of the O.T. commandments do not apply to us (e.g. dietary laws, laws about sacrifices, laws pertaining to political organizations and national action). But vast portions of the O.T. describe dimensions of obedience which are true for God's people in any age.

Romans 8:3,4 teaches that the law itself is powerless to produce this kind of obedience. The letter kills, it is the Spirit that gives life (2 Cor. 3: 6). Therefore, God sent Christ to atone for sin (Rom. 8:3) that he might pour the Holy Spirit into our hearts "in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:4). Thus Paul teaches that we should not leave the law behind, not reject the law for something else, but fulfill the law in the power of the Holy Spirit through faith which works itself out in love.

In conclusion then the points are these: first, the law is fulfilled in us when we love our neighbor as ourselves. Second, love is the outworking of genuine, saving faith. Third, therefore the law did not teach us to try to produce meritorious works, but only taught us to trust the gracious God of the exodus and to live out the obedience of faith. Fourth, therefore, the Mosaic covenant is not fundamentally different from the Abrahamic and New Covenants, for we should obey the commandments of all three from the very same motive--not to win God's favor, but because we already depend on his free grace and trust that his commands will lead to full and lasting joy. The final point then is that we should delight in God's law,

meditate on it day and night (Psalm 119:97) and sing of his value to all generations (Psalm 19:7-14).

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