

Wisdom about God's Law
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GFC – 7-16-23

Well, we are continuing our Bible study on the book of James called Wisdom for Everyday Life. Last week I preached on Wisdom about Discrimination. At the end of the teaching on discrimination, James 2:8-9 says:

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

We saw last week how that when we discriminate and show favoritism to some people groups, we sin against God's royal law of love.

I'm speaking today on Wisdom about the Law of God. Our text is James 2:10-11

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

Evidently, some people James wrote to were trying to justify themselves in regard to breaking the law. Our kids used to do that when they were teenagers. When they got into trouble for breaking the law of Joe and Deborah, they would say things like, "What I did was no big deal. At least I didn't rob a bank or kill someone."

And I would say, "Thanks so much for not robbing a bank or killing anyone today. I really appreciate that. But that's not the point. The point is that you still broke the law of Joe and Deborah." And then we would administer appropriate discipline to them.

Many Christians try to justify their sin by seeing it as no big deal. In their eyes, they are not committing big sins. That's especially true these days about sexual sin. Biblically, any sexual behavior outside of marriage between a man and a woman is sinful. But sex outside of marriage no big deal to many people who call themselves Christians. They say things like, "Those laws are outdated and do not apply to us." But James – a New Testament writer – says that in the eyes of God, they are still lawbreakers.

James is not saying that if you commit adultery then you are guilty of murder. He is saying that whenever you disobey the law of God you are a lawbreaker. The petty thief is a law breaker just like the murderer. You can keep the whole law except for one commandment and you are still a lawbreaker.

James is warning is against selective obedience that chooses which commands of God should be obeyed and which can be disregarded.

The problem with people who try to justify their sin based on their interpretation of Scripture is that like most people today, they do not know how to rightly divide the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:12 says:

Study to show yourself approved unto God, a worker that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

It will help to understand the biblical Greek word translated divide. It is only used once in the New Testament. The word is orthotomeo (or-thot-om-eh'-o); and it literally means to make a straight cut; to dissect correctly. The root is the same word from which we get orthodontics, which is the branch of dentistry devoted to helping people have straight teeth. The overall all sense of this word orthotomeo is to correctly expound, explain and teach God's word.

It takes work to rightly divide God's word. That means we can't try to make it fit our preconceived ideas or present it in a way to make it say what we want to say. We must cut it straight and present it straight and apply it straight.

I'm cautioning you today to make sure that when you read your Bible, you understand who is being spoken to and what things only applied to them and what things apply to us today. Accurately dividing the word means to know what applies when and where.

You need to know that God operates by covenants and there are differences between them – especially the Old and New Covenants. That's why we don't usually recommend new believers start reading the Bible in the Old Testament. They get confused by some of the things that happened or they get in fear by something they read in an Old Testament prophetic book. They need to learn what applied only to the nation of Israel and what applies to us today.

The point is that we need to be careful of taking a command or a promise given to a specific person in the Bible and arbitrarily applying it to ourselves. Now God can take a promise given to someone in the Bible and apply it to us – but we can't just take any promise given to a specific person in the Bible and apply it to ourselves.

Let me give you some examples.

God promised Abraham that he would be that father of the nation Israel. Can you claim that promise? NO.

God promised David that he would be the king of Israel.

Can you claim that promise? NO.

In Joshua 1:3 God told Joshua to lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land.

I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses.

In this case, God took a promise He made to Moses and applied it to Joshua. And God can do that for you! But you can't do it for yourself!

I've seen many people over the years take this promise for themselves and they take it to mean that they can have any territory they choose. They conveniently leave out what God told Joshua next in Joshua 1:4.

Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates — all the Hittite country — to the Great Sea on the west.

God said you can have every place you set your foot – WITHIN THESE BOUNDARIES!

Joshua could not have said "I claim the promise that I can have wherever I set my feet and I choose to set foot in Lebanon or Egypt or Africa or Europe." No – God gave Joshua a specific promise with specific limitations!

We *can* claim the general promises spoken to everyone in the Bible, like whoever will can be saved. And God can take a promise given to someone in the Bible and speak it fresh to you. Just be careful in claiming promises God gave to specific people. Some people do that and then get mad at God when the promise doesn't come to pass. I want to protect you from that.

A big controversy surrounds which laws New Testament believers are under. What part of the Old Testament laws apply to us today? All? None? Part? Some of those issues come from Matthew 5:17-18 where Jesus said:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

Jesus said He did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. Some people believe that this means that since the law was not abolished, we are still obligated to obey it. But they don't understand the purpose of the Law in the New Testament. Galatians 3:19-25 says:

What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was given alongside the promise to show people their sins. But the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised. Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! If the law could give us new life, we could be made right with God by obeying it. Before the way of faith in Christ was available to us, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

The law shows us what sin is. Paul said in Romans 7:7

I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet."

The law shows us our sinfulness and our need for a Savior. But after we come to the Savior in faith, we are no longer under that law.

Galatians 6:2 tells us to *fulfill the law of Christ*.

In 1 Corinthians 9:20-21 Paul told how he reached different people for Christ.

To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.

Believers are not under the Old Testament law as the way of salvation or as a way of life. But we are not lawless – we follow the law of Christ.

Here's the key: we must rightly divide the word by learning which parts of the Old Testament law ended at the cross – which parts were changed by the cross – and which ones continue.

For instance – animal sacrifices ended at the cross because the sacrifice of Jesus is sufficient for all sins of all people.

The Sabbath was changed by the cross. In Old Testament times the Sabbath had to be on the seventh day. Under the new covenant, you still need a day of rest every week, but you get to pick the day.

What continues after the cross is God's unchanging moral law. We know which laws to keep because they are repeated in the New Testament.

When we talk about the Old Testament laws, we must always distinguish between the civil laws God gave to the nation of Israel, the ceremonial laws God gave to the religion of Judaism – both of which do not apply to us – and the moral law of God that applies to everyone everywhere.

When you talk to people who don't understand this – and you tell them about one of the universal laws of God – they will say something like, "None of those outdated laws apply today because the law says to stone rebellious children and adulterers and the law says to sacrifice animals." They disregard the whole law because they confuse civil and ceremonial law with the moral law.

The early church had to grapple with this issue early on. Acts 15 is one of the most pivotal chapters in the New Testament.

It was the first Jerusalem council – convened to debate this very issue. Acts 15:5 says that the Judaizers were saying that when Gentiles got saved - *It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.*

There was much debate and then James – the same one who wrote the book – said in Acts 15:19-21

It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.

And graceless pastors in graceless churches are still preaching Moses to this very day! But grace-based pastors understand the truth of John 1:17

The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Lack of grace keeps you living under the old covenant rather than the new.

The old covenant was based on outward obedience to the Law.

The new covenant is based on an inner change of heart.

The old covenant was based on what man did.

The new covenant is based on what Jesus did.

That Jerusalem council decided that we are not under Jewish law. But there is a modern-day group of Judaizers trying to put believers back under the law of Moses. They teach that Christians must keep the Jewish Sabbath and feasts and dietary laws. They judge people for eating bacon or going to church on Sunday or not calling God Yahweh or not calling Jesus Yeshua.

We must resist these modern day Judaizers and their attempt to put Christians back under that law. Listen to how Paul addressed this in Galatians 2:14-16

How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

Galatians 4:9-11 says:

But now that you know God — or rather are known by God — how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.

Colossians 2:16-17 says:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

Do not buy into the fake news that you need to keep the Jewish religious laws or add to grace or add to the work of Christ on the cross! Any time someone tries to put me under the law of Moses, I do not argue with them, I just keep repeating Colossians 2:16-17.

Please understand, God still has laws in place – universal moral principles we must all obey. There are 3 major errors concerning God’s law that have been around since the beginning of the church – and 3 books of the Bible were written to correct those errors.

The first error is legalism which teaches we are saved by keeping the law. Paul addressed this in Romans.

The second error regarding the law is called Galatianism. It teaches that we are saved by grace, but we only stay saved if we keep the law. Obviously, the book of Galatians addresses this.

The third error regarding the law is license. The theological term is antinomianism, which means against the law. This error teaches that we are not under the law – we are under grace - so it doesn’t matter how we live. The book of James addresses this.

The major error I see being taught today is license. So many people are turning the awesome truth of grace into license to sin. In Jude 4 – the brother of Jesus and James warned us about:

...godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.

What is license? License is official permission for someone to do something. For instance – I have a driver’s license. I have been given official permission by the state of Texas to legally drive an automobile. If I want to drive a motorcycle – I need a license to do so. If I want to drive an 18-wheeler – I need a license to do so.

Spiritually, license is when Christians abuse the grace of God by thinking it gives them permission to sin without cost. But remember Galatians 6:7-9

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

This may surprise you – but keeping the law cannot change your heart!
 Keeping the law will not make you righteous! Romans 3:20-22 says:

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

The law requires some things of us. First – it requires keeping. Then it requires punishment for those who don't keep it.

This is the awesome thing about being in Christ. We can't keep the law, but Jesus did! Not only did He keep it – but here's the greatest thing – He took the punishment that we deserved for breaking God's law. When Jesus stood before Pilate being accused by others, Jesus gave no answer. When Pilate asked if He was King – Jesus said yes. But when he was accused – He did not answer. Why? Because He was not dying for His sins but for ours. He was standing there on our behalf so whatever He was charged with He was guilty of.

Jesus didn't go to the cross because He deserved it, but because we deserved it! Jesus didn't pay the price for His sin – He had none – He paid the price for our sin! He took the beating we deserved. He bore the shame we earned. He died the death we should have died!

When Jesus was crucified they nailed up a sign that everyone could see saying King of the Jews. But there was another sign nailed to that cross that no one saw! But the spirit world saw it and we'd better see it! Colossians 2:13-15 says:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; He took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Every law that was against you was nailed to the cross!

Every law that you broke was nailed to the cross!

Every sin you ever committed or will ever commit was nailed to the cross!

That's how the enemy is disarmed!

He has no ammunition against you because everything he can use against you was nailed to the cross!

So, when the enemy tries to condemn you for your sin – just agree that you are guilty but add this – The price has been paid at the cross!

When Jesus said "It is finished" – it was finished.

There's nothing you can add to it!

The blood of Christ was enough! The cross was enough!

The law was not enough, but grace is more than enough!