

Chapter 6

Moses' Law and the Priority of Jesus Christ

Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ*

Quote of the Week:

I have proved before that “the commandment” in this verse [Heb. 7:18] is of equal extent and signification with “the law” in the next. And “the law” there doth evidently intend the whole law, ...moral and ceremonial, as it was given unto the church of Israel. And this whole law is here charged by our apostle with “weakness and unprofitableness;” both which make a law fit to be disannulled.¹

Key Scripture:

Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!” (Matthew 17:4-5, NASB).

Lesson Outline:

- I. “One of the common titles given to Christians in the Greek New Testament is the name ‘slaves’” (73).
 - A. The idea of being a slave is that one is completely subject to someone else.
 - B. In the ancient world this subjection may be a sign of honor, as when a king chose someone for high responsibilities in the kingdom, but that person was still utterly at the mercy of the king’s will—remember Haman, who went from being second only to Xerxes to hanging from the gallows without a trial.
 - C. A slave has a master.
 1. Scripture pictures both God the Father and Christ as Master, Lord, King—*“slaveholders...who demand submission from their subjects”* (74).
 2. Father and Son both “have the power of life and death, including eternal death, over all persons without exception” (74). [see Matt. 10:28—MDY]
 3. “There is no higher court of appeal from their decisions” (74)—see Rom. 9:19-20a.
 4. Christians belong to Christ even more because of his death and resurrection (Rom. 14:9; the context of Rom. 14:5-8 shows Paul is speaking of Christians).
 5. The Father is no less Lord over Christians, but he exercises his lordship through his agent, Jesus Christ.
 6. We look to Christ for our orders, “which he gives in the covenantal demands found in the New Testament” (75).

¹ John Owen *An Exposition of Hebrews*, vol. 5, 428; quoted in Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2005), 78-79. Italics are from Owens. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are from *The Priority of Jesus Christ*.

II. The New Testament view of the Law of Moses: To what degree is Mosaic law still in force?

A. Mosaic law was covenantal law, meant to rule those under that covenant.

1. It was meant to govern Israel under the Old Covenant.
2. Because Christians are under another covenant, we are no more bound by Mosaic law than Korean law binds an American in Denver or an English subject in Liverpool.

B. Different law codes may contain some of the same laws.

1. Korean law prohibits murder. An American can't say, "Because I'm not under Korean law, I'm allowed to murder"—American law also forbids murder.
2. The Puritans saw this, pointing to Christ as our only lawgiver—even as they insisted that Jesus taught us to obey the Ten Commandments (see p. 76-79).
 - a. Edward Fisher: "For when Christ the Son comes and speaks himself, then Moses the servant must keep silence; according as Moses himself foretold, Acts iii.22, saying, 'A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things which he shall say to you.' And, therefore, when the disciples seemed to desire to hear Moses and Elias...speak on the mountain of Tabor, they were presently taken away; and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him,' Matt. xvii.4, 5. As if the Lord had said, You are not now to hear either Moses or Elias, but my 'well-beloved Son'."²
 - b. Matthew Poole: "Which words [i.e., Matt. 17:5] establish Christ as the only doctor and teacher of his church; the only one whom he had entrusted [i.e. entrusted] to deliver his truths and will to his people; the only one to whom Christians are to hearken."³
 - c. John Owen: The *entire* Law, not just the ceremonial law, is declared weak and unprofitable, and therefore obsolete. (See Quote of the Week, above).

III. Mosaic Law has passed away entirely—yet some of the same commands appear in the New Covenant.

A. If you write a new church constitution, the previous constitution is replaced—the original has absolutely no authority. But there's a good chance that parts of the new constitution are copied word for word from the original. It had some good ideas that show up again.

B. Mosaic Law has ended. As the Puritans put it, we receive our law "in the hands of Christ."

1. Edward Fisher: "Beware that you receive not the Ten Commandments at the hands of God out of Christ [that is, apart from Christ—MDY], nor yet at the hands of Moses, but only at the hands of Christ; so shall you be sure to receive them as the law of Christ" (quoted p. 80, n. 40).

² Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1646; reprint, Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, 1978); quoted in Wells, 76-77.

³ Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (1685; reprint, London: Banner of Truth, 1963), 79; quoted in Wells, 77. Brackets are from Wells.

[2. As we'll see in the next chapter, we don't receive the Ten Commandments from Christ, because he gives a better law, but Fisher is right that we must take our law from no one other than Jesus Christ.—MDY]

IV. We must learn moral law from *Christ*.

- A. Classical Dispensationalism presupposes that we can understand OT prophecy by “literal” or “natural” interpretation, without learning from Jesus how to read Scripture.
 - 1. This concern doesn't mean that a literal interpretation is *necessarily* wrong.
 - 2. But as good slaves, we have to ask our master, rather than assuming what seems to us to be obvious.
- B. Similarly, many brothers and sisters assume that “moral law” is so obvious that we can proceed without specific instructions from Jesus Christ.
 - 1. This is a more serious error—in the ancient world, if a slave came to a new master, the new master didn't re-teach the slave how to read, but he certainly taught the slave whom to obey.
 - 2. The Ten Commandments as *the* moral law is only obvious if Jesus makes it so.
 - a. The fact that these laws were given together at a spiritual high point in Israel's history doesn't make them eternal moral law.
 - b. The death and resurrection of Jesus marked the end of the whole Mosaic covenant, and with it the Mosaic law; it is replaced by Christ's law.
- C. Objection: If Jesus established a new moral law, a new ethic, why don't we see this spelled out in Luke and Acts?
 - 1. Frank Thielman: “After Jesus' death... Luke emphasizes the faithfulness of Jesus' followers to the Mosaic law. Suddenly the storm over the law, which thundered so loudly during Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, dissipates, and we return to the serene world of Mosaic piety familiar from the infancy narratives. Jesus' followers observe the commandment to rest on the Sabbath (Luke 23:56) and remain continually in the temple, where they bless God and pray at the appropriate hour (Luke 24:53; Acts 3:1). They observe the feast of Weeks (Acts 2:1), are defended by a famous legal scholar (Acts 5:43), and attract a great many priests to the faith (Acts 6:7). ... What has happened?”⁴
 - 2. Thielman explains: Luke was writing, in part, to show that Christians weren't destabilizing society by starting a revolution against ethnic traditions (quoted p. 83).
 - 3. But even if the end of the Mosaic Law wasn't immediately preached, the apostles “left it to discover itself as an undeniable consequent of what they taught concerning the Lord Christ and the righteousness of God in him” (so Owen).⁵
- D. Paul holds out two views of the Law in tension: “On the one hand it is ‘holy, righteous and good’ (Rom. 7:12); on the other, it has reached its end or goal in Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:4). The Christian henceforth has ‘died to the law through the body of Christ, that [he/she] might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead’ (Rom. 7:4). Paul's attitude

⁴ Thielman, *The Law and the New Testament* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 152; quoted in Wells, 82-83.

⁵ John Owen, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, 462-463; quoted in Wells, 83.

toward the Torah is a subset of his view of all the Old Testament revelation. It was glorious, but its glory dims when held up to the mirror of the Lord Jesus, to which it pointed” (Wells’s summary, including brackets, 84).

- E. Jon Zens: “In [John 5:45], Jesus states that Moses is an accuser of unbelievers...Christ [however] does not refer the accusing action of Moses to a conviction brought about by preaching the Ten Commandments. Rather, he refers to the fact that Moses wrote about his person, and yet they would not believe in him. This passage, then, teaches clearly that the Old Testament writings converge on the person of Jesus Christ—they are Christocentric in nature and purpose. To view them otherwise will lead to various errors.”⁶
- F. The Ten Commandments are not “God’s moral law” (see next chapter), but if someone believes they are because he believes Jesus taught so, they have adopted the key principle here: that Jesus is our only lawgiver.

⁶ Jon Zens, “*This Is My Beloved Son, Hear Him!*” (St. Croix Falls, WI: Searching Together, 1997), 4; quoted in Wells, 84-85.