

## Chapter 9

# The Law of Jesus Christ

Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ*

### Quote of the Week:

*Never suppose that Christians are without law. It is our responsibility and privilege to subject ourselves to the law of Christ. Christ intends for the church to match his love for her by the church's corresponding love for his direction over her. God designed the relationship in exactly this way.<sup>1</sup>*

### Key Scripture:

*Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall. (Matthew 7:24-27, NASB).*

### Lesson Outline:

#### I. Christ rules over his people.

A. Christians are his slaves, looking to him for our orders, both individually and corporately.

B. The church is Christ's body.

1. As the head, Jesus gives life and direction (Eph. 1:20-23, Col. 1:18).

2. Christ is more intimately connected with his church than with any other part of creation.

a. "Though Christ rules everything in the universe, he does so for the benefit of one part of it, 'the church, which is his body' ([Eph.] 1:22-23)" (122).

b. Christian growth, developmental sanctification [sometimes called progressive sanctification—MDY], is dependent on our connection between the body and our Head (Col. 2:19).

c. Paul speaks similarly of the connection between a husband and wife, a one-flesh union that is the basis for both nurturing and direction (Eph. 5:28-32).

C. Christ rules his people by the indwelling Spirit of God.

1. The Spirit dwells in Christians, both individually and corporately (124).

2. As the Son's agent, the Spirit moves us to follow and obey the Lord Jesus.

3. The Spirit writes the New Covenant law of Christ on our hearts.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2005), 140. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are from *The Priority of Jesus Christ*.

II. “How does the Lord Jesus issue his directives and commands to his people under the New Covenant” (124)?

- A. Galatians 6:2 refers to fulfilling “the law of Christ.”
- B. Everyone who lived under the Old Covenant was obligated to keep the law given by God through Moses.
- C. If in this New Covenant God has now spoken by Christ, his own Son, how much more ready must we be ready to hear and obey!
- D. Objection: “unlike the Mosaic law, which was clearly codified in the Pentateuch, the Lord Jesus has not left us with a single, plainly delineated code of rules and regulations for us to follow. We cannot set off, for example, five or ten chapters of the New Testament that we can call the law of Christ” (125). Answering this objection requires us to answer two questions:
  - 1. “Does the New Testament contain laws directed to Christians” (125)? We see three kinds of New Testament laws:
    - a. “Those that appear in passing as part of a larger discussion,”
    - b. “those that are contained in what are obviously parts of an extended discussion of ethics,” and
    - c. “those that summarize the principles from which Christ calls Christians to act” (125).
  - 2. Where do we find these laws for Christians? “The New Testament replaces Mosaic law with both individual laws and with a person, Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the Lord Jesus acted through agents in a way that Moses did not under the Old Covenant” (126).

III. “The Lord Jesus himself replaces the Mosaic law” (126).

- A. Moses was a good and godly man, but he was not in and of himself God’s revelation of God’s character.
- B. Jesus, however, reveals the Father’s character so fully in his life and words that he can truly say, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).
- C. Because Scripture calls us to be transformed into God’s moral likeness, when we see his character revealed in Jesus, there is inherently a command to imitate him. That’s why Paul says Christians are “predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29).

IV. Beyond this, Jesus taught his people in ways that go far beyond merely good advice.

- A. Some of these instructions were given in passing; others show up in longer passages that are clearly moral and ethical.
- B. The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), for example, is clearly intended as giving a law.
  - 1. [Jesus begins by seating himself, assuming a position of authority, and opening his mouth, a formal announcement that he was speaking with authority.—MDY]
  - 2. The sermon ends with a warning that surviving God’s judgment depends on hearing and obeying Jesus’s words (7:24-25).

- C. The first part of the Sermon on the Mount speaks of the character of Kingdom citizens. The passage is not specifically worded as law, but there is an implicit command to “become what you are” (128).
1. We aim to live up to what Jesus describes here more and more.
  2. “This is not pious advice, but the will of Christ who demands that we seek to follow it” (129).
  3. This call to become what we are shows up repeatedly in Paul; compare Romans 6:6, 18 with Romans 6:11, 19.
  4. In the Sermon on the Mount, the section on salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16) moves from the indicative that carries an implicit command, “You are the salt of the earth” (v. 13a), to the imperative, the explicit command, “Let your light shine” (v. 16).
- D. The rest of Matthew 5 contains a brief law code, with an extended discussion of ethical behavior.
1. Even if Jesus were only explaining the Ten Commandments, Jesus is clearly laying out a law to obey.
  2. But as we saw in chapter 4 of *The Priority of Jesus Christ*, Jesus is doing far more than that: “But I say to you...” (5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44).
  3. Where other teachers cited earlier authorities and agents, Jesus speaks as “one who had authority” (7:28-29).
  4. This authority can be clearly seen as we continue through Matthew 6 and 7.
- E. So we see Christ’s law as consisting, so far, as
1. “Christ’s own moral character as the brightest and best exposition of the character of God,”
  2. “His implicit demands laid out in his ideal descriptions of Christian character,” and
  3. “His explicit demands clearly set out as law for Christians to follow” (132).
- V. “The demands that the apostles and writers of the New Testament, as Christ’s authoritative agents, laid upon Christians are his laws as surely as if he had uttered them while still on earth” (132).
- A. This fits with Jesus’s promise to the Eleven (John 14:26).
  - B. The New Testament authors show that they were aware of their Christ-given authority.
    1. Paul: “If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment” (1 Cor. 14:37; see also 1 Thess. 4:2, 8).
    2. John: “We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1 John 4:6; see also Rev. 22:18-19). Note that John claims for *his* words the same authority as Jesus claimed for his in John 8:42-47.

3. Even when they don't explicitly claim such authority, the New Testament authors speak as Christ's slaves (James 1:1, Jude 1), his special agents (1 Pet. 1:1, 2 Pet. 3:2), or both (2 Pet. 1:1). Their commands are also Christ's law for us.

VI. "The Lord Jesus and the New Testament lay on Christians some summaries of principles from which we must act" (134).

A. The Great Commandment(s): Matthew 22:35-40

1. This speaks directly to a question about Old Testament law, rather than directly to how Christians should live (notice the context).
2. However, "we can well imagine the Lord Jesus addressing these Old Testament commands to us and there would be nothing inappropriate about it" (135)!
  - a. Paul does so in Galatians 5:14 (even if it may be to prod the Galatians for insisting on having the Mosaic law, and so giving Christ's law in Mosaic form, it is nonetheless Christ's law via Paul).
  - b. We see the same command to Christians in Romans 13:9-10, James 2:8.
3. "Commands to love...demand an attitude that can express itself in hundreds or thousands of ways" (135).
  - a. The way love is appropriately expressed varies from situation, and the NT authors don't spell out how to love in every conceivable situation, yet if we are to obey the love commands then we are commanded to express love.
  - b. "This often means that we will have to exercise our judgment to recognize how to address the varied situations" (135-136).
  - c. If we were not obligated to make and act on such judgments, a love command "would reduce itself to a benign glow of goodwill, a satisfaction that God is in his heavens and all is right with the world" (136).
  - d. "This, then, is a situation ethics that makes demands, and one that cannot be used as an excuse for inaction" (136).
4. Despite the questions raised by the term "moral law," we may describe the commands to love God and love neighbor as moral law because they are able to inform our decisions in such a wide range of situations.

B. "And the like": One final source of Christ's law that requires us to judge wisely is drawing analogies from stated law.

1. We are called not only to run from named sins, but from anything similar to them (Gal. 5:19-21).
2. Some who believe we need the Mosaic law to instruct our sanctification ask, "How can you prove bestiality is wrong, if you stick only to the New Testament? "And the like" covers a lot of ground, addressing issues that were spelled out in the OT, as well as situations that don't appear explicitly anywhere in Scripture (137, n.2).

VII. Summary: Where do we find the law of Christ?

A. Christ's "own moral character as the brightest and best exposition of the character of God."

- B. “His implicit demands laid out in his ideal descriptions of Christian character.”
- C. “His explicit demands clearly set out as law for Christians to follow.”
- D. “The demands laid out for Christians by his agents, the apostles and writers of the New Testament.”
- E. “The summary demands of Christ and his agents for love to God and neighbor.”
- F. “Acts of judgment we must make in light of those summary demands.”
- G. “Acts of judgment...on situations analogous to things he demands or forbids” (137-138).

VIII. How does this law differ from the law of Moses?

- A. “Each group [Israelites under the Old Covenant and Christians under the New] was bound to keep the laws that God had given them” (138).
- B. Mosaic law was a national law to govern both regenerate and unregenerate men, women, and children, while the law of Christ can only be obeyed by those who have been given new hearts.
  1. That affects the kind of laws that people are able to obey—hence a divorce law in Deut. 24 that Jesus says was given “because your hearts were hard” (Matt. 19:8).
  2. Though a small percentage of Mosaic laws addressed heart attitudes, the vast majority focus on actions; as national law, they could be obeyed by all in the Mosaic Covenant, whether regenerate or unregenerate.
  3. “Every law in any code demands perfection, not in the person to whom the command is given, but in the extent to which it must be kept” (139). [For example, “You shall not steal” doesn’t require a person to turn from stealing and instead give generously to others, but it does require a person *never* to steal, not just to steal less often.—MDY]
  4. Even though Israel did *not* perfectly obey the Mosaic law, it worked as a national law to restrain evil and preserve a society for centuries, despite much of Israel being unregenerate. In that sense, Mosaic law accomplished its purpose, and was “holy, righteous, and good” (Rom. 7:12).
  5. “What the law could *not* do was to justify a man before God. When it was adopted for that purpose it did what all law does, it demanded a perfection completely beyond the ability of the sinner. In response, Paul tells us that no law could give life (Gal. 3:21-22)” (140, emphasis added).

IX. Two further mistakes to avoid when we think about law:

- A. When Paul opposes Christians going back to Mosaic law, don’t assume he is therefore against all law.
- B. Do not imagine that, because we are not under the law of Moses, Christians are therefore without law.
  1. “It is our responsibility and privilege to subject ourselves to the law of Christ” (140).
  2. “Christ intends for the church to match his love for her by the church’s corresponding love for his direction over her” (140).