

Righteousness Beyond the Law

By Dale Ratzlaff

Several people have communicated to me what they consider to be the main reason for *not accepting* the understanding of the covenants presented in the July/August *Proclamation* "The Continental Divide of Biblical Interpretation". These people are sincere, their questions are valid and they deserve a thorough, biblical answer. Their reasoning goes something like this. Christ lived in perfect obedience to the Law. Christ died for those who have the broken law. Thus, Christ's righteousness, which is imputed to the believer, is perfect obedience to the law, including perfect Sabbath keeping. Therefore as Christians we are to pattern our lives after Christ which is, in essence, perfect obedience to the law. This obedience includes Sabbath keeping. Therefore, the law, including the laws regarding Sabbath observance, could not have come to a functional end at the cross. Why would Christ have died for the law and then done away with it?

It is very tempting to immediately cite texts in Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians and Colossians, etc. which clearly state that the law did come to a functional end with Christ, however, I will not allow myself that luxury until we study the Gospel records to discover Christ's attitude toward the law. To bring the issue into focus, respond to the following true and false quiz.

___ True; ___ False: Christ did not keep the law as interpreted by the Rabbis but He did keep all the biblical laws.

___ True; ___ False: If Christ did not perfectly keep the biblical laws, He could not be my Savior.

___ True; ___ False: Christ kept the spirit of the law but broke the letter of the law.

___ True; ___ False: Christ died for the broken law.

___ True; ___ False: Christ's righteousness is perfect law-keeping.

___ True; ___ False: If Christ broke the Sabbath, then He could not be my Savior.

Before we get to the actual study of the Gospels we must lay a foundation. If we are going to be biblical in our study, we must conclude that the Mosaic Law is one law, not two or three. True, there are moral, ritual and societal aspects of the law but they comprise one law.¹

Let us first examine Christ's attitude and actions toward the ceremonial or ritual aspects of the Mosaic Law. Then we will investigate Christ's disposition and conduct toward the moral aspects of this law. Lastly we will tie down a number of loose ends regarding our subject.

Christ and Ritual Law

As the gospel record advances from the beginning of Christ's ministry to the end we will see a development in our topic. At first there are inferences, then we will see some evidence and then hard evidence. We start with Mark.

And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching Him and falling on his knees before Him, and saying, “If You are willing, You can make me clean.” Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away, and He said to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” Mk. 1:40-44

If Jesus could heal by a word of command² why did He *choose* to heal this unclean leper with a *touch*? Why did Jesus sternly warn this man to say nothing to anyone about this healing? The answer was obvious to the original readers of Mark’s gospel who knew the law and its interpretation. By touching this leper, Jesus made Himself unclean. While there is no specific biblical law stating that someone touching a leper becomes ritually unclean, it is nevertheless, clearly assumed in the passage below.

As for the leper who has the infection, his clothes shall be torn, and the hair of his head shall be uncovered, and he shall cover his mustache and cry, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ ‘He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. Lev. 13:45-46

This explains Mark 1:45

But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news around, to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city, but stayed out in unpopulated areas; and they were coming to Him from everywhere.

It is evident that the reason Jesus was forced to say out in unpopulated areas was that He was considered unclean because of His contact with the leper.

For the next example of Christ’s relationship to ritual law we turn to the episode of the healing of Jairus’s daughter in Mark 5:21–43. Jesus is approached by a synagogue official who implored Christ to come and heal his daughter who was “at the point of death.” As Jesus and the crowd that followed Him were on their way, a ritually unclean woman touched His garment. This was against the custom and was understood to make Jesus ritually unclean.³ At this point some people from the synagogue official’s home announced that the girl was dead to which Jesus responded, “Do not be afraid any longer, only believe.”

When they arrived at the home, Jesus said, “Why make a commotion and weep? The child has not died, but is asleep.” and they began laughing at him. Then Jesus taking only his three closest disciples and the child’s mother and father went into the room where the girl was.

Taking the child by the hand, He said to her, “Talitha kum!” (which translated means, “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). Immediately the girl got up and *began* to walk, for she was twelve years old. And immediately they were completely astounded. And He gave them strict orders that no one should know about this...Mk. 5:41-43

Again, we note that Jesus took the girl by the hand and the Gospel writer under the guidance of the Holy Spirit chose to record this fact. We see nearly the same instruction given to the parents as to the leper, “And He gave them *strict orders* that no one should

know about this.” In this incident, we now have moved from inference to fact. Note the following:

The one who touches the corpse of any person shall be unclean for seven days. That one shall purify himself from uncleanness with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, *and then* he will be clean; but if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean. Anyone who touches a corpse, the body of a man who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD; and that person shall be cut off from Israel. Because the water for impurity was not sprinkled on him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness is still on him. Num. 19:11-13

According to this biblical law Jesus made himself unclean by touching the dead girl. Further, according to this law, “He defiled the tabernacle of the Lord” and should have been “cut off from Israel.”

Some will argue that the girl was not really dead because Jesus said, “She is not dead, but sleeping.” However, this is the same term Jesus used when he described Lazarus who clearly was dead.⁴ In Luke’s account we read, “he took her by the hand and called, saying, Child arise!” and her spirit returned...” indicating the girl had come back to life.

In Mark 7:14–23 Jesus moves from *doing* things that were contrary to ritual law to *teaching* things contradictory to biblical ritual law.

After He called the crowd to Him again, He *began* saying to them, “Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. [“If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”] When he had left the crowd *and* entered the house, His disciples questioned Him about the parable. And He said to them, “Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated?” (*Thus He* declared all foods clean.) And He was saying, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting *and* wickedness, *as well as* deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride *and* foolishness. “All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.” Mk. 7:14-23

The statement, “Thus he declared all foods clean” is in the best manuscripts and therefore, should not be treated as some late scribal insertion. This teaching is in *direct contradiction* to the food laws in Lev. 11 but in harmony with new covenant understanding.⁵

We now turn to the well-known incident of the healing at the pool of Bethesda in John 5. Jesus sees a man who has been a cripple for 38 years lying on his pallet. There is no indication in the record that this was an emergency. Jesus instructed the man to pick up his pallet and walk. This happened on Sabbath and the Jews immediately accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath.

For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. But He answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.” Jn. 5:16-17

“Was doing,” in the sentence above, is in the imperfect continuous tense in Greek and could be translated, “was continually doing these things.” If the actions of Jesus were within the biblical Sabbath law and he was supporting obedience to the law, we would expect Jesus to explain to the Jews why His actions were within Sabbath law. However,

His answer is shocking. “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.” John now records the following loaded sentence.

For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. Jn. 5:18

Again, “was breaking” is in the continuous tense in Greek. The root word used here for “breaking”, is the same for “destroy” and is often translated that way. This verse could be correctly translated, “He was continually destroying the Sabbath.”

While there are many more examples we could consider,⁶ we can now make some general conclusions.

1. Jesus *always* let the moral and ethical considerations of a given situation dictate his actions weather or not his actions were in violation of Rabbinical or even biblical ritual law.
2. At times it seems that Jesus purposely went out of His way to violate ritual law. He would often heal by a word of command when a touch would have been appropriate. Yet when a touch would make Him ritually unclean, He often chose to heal in that manor. Again, He could heal by a word, yet on the Sabbath he chose to heal by “making mud”⁷ and telling a man to “pick up his pallet and walk.” When confronted by the Jews regarding his questionable Sabbath keeping His answer was “My Father is working until now and I, Myself, am working.”⁸

Some of our readers may feel very confused at this point. Please continue to read because what now appears confusing will become crystal clear very soon!

Christ and Moral Laws of the Mosaic Code

What was Christ’s attitude to the moral laws in the Mosaic Code? Probably the best examples are found in His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. Space limitations permit only a few examples.

“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty *enough to go* into the fiery hell.” Mt. 5:21-22

Here Jesus refers to the fifth commandment. This is not an exact quote because “shall be liable to the court” is not in the O. T. Scripture yet is appropriate and was true in Jewish law. Note how Jesus *modifies* and *expands* this moral law by showing that the evil passions of anger and angry, insulting talk are sins that when committed bring guilt worthy of fiery hell.

In Matt. 5:27, 28 Jesus does the same thing with the seventh commandment. He *modifies* and *expands* the act of adultery to include even the look and thought of lust.

Of special interest is Matt. 5:33–37 where Jesus refers to the law of vows found in Num. 30:2; Deut. 23:21–23. I list this in the “moral law” section because making a vow

(promise) to God is certainly a moral act and should be seen as an expansion of “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” which, by itself, is a very narrow law.

“Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.’ “But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. “Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. “But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ *or* ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil. Mt. 5:33-37

Granted the Jews of Jesus’ day were abusing vows, however, a careful reading of the above statement compared with the Old Testament law indicates that Jesus is condemning something permitted, even approved, in the Law. But how did he change it? He *modified* it and *expanded* it in such a way that it would correct the abuse the Jews were making of vows which were within the letter of the Mosaic Code.

In Matt. 5:43–48 Jesus said,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.’ “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous. “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? “If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing *than others*? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? “Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

While Scripture does not say, “hate your enemy,” we should not be too quick to condemn the Jewish leaders for teaching this for it could be implied from other portions of the law. There are many statements in the law that show a distinction in the moral and ethical nature of how an Israelite was to treat a fellow Israelite compared to how he was to treat a foreigner. For example,

“You shall not charge interest to your countrymen: interest on money, food, *or* anything that may be loaned at interest. “You may charge interest to a foreigner, but to your countrymen you shall not charge interest... Deut. 23:19-20

Therefore, when Jesus speaks about loving our enemies, He *modifies* and *expands* the Mosaic moral law beyond *ethnic boundaries* to include (foreign) enemies who persecute us!

It may be of interest to many of our readers how Ellen White interpreted this verse (loving our neighbors) as she was “shown by God” in vision. See <http://www.ratzlaf.com/downloads.htm>.

While there are many other examples that could be given, we can now make a generalized summary of Christ’s attitude toward the moral laws in the Mosaic Code.

1. Jesus *modified* and *expanded* the moral laws of the Old Testament raising their moral and ethical considerations *beyond* that of the written law.
2. Jesus *modified* and *expanded* the moral laws of the Old Testament changing them from legal rules to moral and ethical principles.
3. Jesus *modified* and *expanded* the scope of the moral laws of the Old Testament moving them *beyond* laws for Israel alone to ethical and moral principles for every nation tongue and people.⁹

Righteousness Beyond the Law—New Testament Agreement

Some have defined righteousness as “perfect obedience to the law.” This may be true for old covenant righteousness, but it falls *far below* that presented in the new covenant. Note how the following New Testament references associate law and righteousness.

But now **apart from the Law** *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, Rom. 3:21. For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was **not through the Law**, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; Rom. 4:13-14. What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, **did not arrive at that law**. Rom. 9:30-31. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. **For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness** to everyone who believes. Rom. 10:3-4. “I do not nullify the grace of God, **for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.**” Gal. 2:21. **You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law;** you have fallen from grace. Gal. 5:4. ...and may be found in Him, **not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law**, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, Phil. 3:9.

Personal Illustrations

When I was a seminary student I worked nights at the YMCA in Benton Harbor, Mich. About midnight, one cold winter night, I was crossing the street with the manager of the YMCA. We came to an intersection where the facing light was red. There were no cars in sight in any direction. However, I, a good law keeper, stood there waiting for the light to turn green. Suddenly, I realized my friend was walking into the red light. He said to me, “You are still under law. I am under grace.” While his statement may not fully apply, nevertheless it was instructive. The law of red and green lights was designed to prevent accidents. However in our case there was no chance to get hit by a passing car as none were in sight. It was therefore appropriate to violate *the letter of the law* as long as it did not violate *the principle of safety*—as long as no legalistic cops were watching!

The other day I was at the busy post office getting LAM’s mail. A mother was there with two small girls. As they approached the parking lot she said, “Now you must take Mommy’s hand as there are many cars here.” This was a very good *law* for two little girls, however, don’t put your 16 year old boy under the same *law*! Rather as soon as he is old enough, teach the *principle* of “safety first”! That principle will serve him well the rest of his life no matter what the circumstances.

I believe this is the way we should consider the old covenant laws. They are holy, just and good for the conditions and people to whom they were given. Now, however, life in the Spirit moves us to live *beyond* the letter of the law to follow the *principles* taught by Christ and written on our heart by the Holy Spirit. We are no longer children, we are sons and daughters of God.

Biblical Teaching

But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Christ, so that we may be justified by

faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Gal. 3:23-26; But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Gal. 4:4-5. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. Gal. 4:9-11

Righteousness Beyond the Law—Moral vs. Ritual

New covenant Christians must be diligent here. It is human nature to give moral significance to established ritual customs. I was taught that the communion bread *must* be made out of whole-wheat flour and olive oil. I was almost scandalized when I visited a church that used white flour! It was instructive to me that a detailed recipe was given in the old covenant law for the bread of the presence and how it should be laid out as an “everlasting covenant”.¹⁰ In the new covenant, however, no such details are given. New covenant righteousness deals with heart issues not rituals. Some argue over which way to baptize: forward, backward, three times, in the name of Jesus only or in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We could even extend it to sprinkling or immersion.¹¹ Again, the most important thing is our commitment to Christ, inviting Him to be Lord and Master of our lives! Anytime rituals become the important thing, the moral and ethical nature of new covenant righteousness is compromised.

Righteousness Beyond the Law—Found Only In Christ

New-covenant Christians have a much higher model to pattern after than the old covenant law. There is nothing in the new covenant or “living under grace” that opens any door to willfully living in sin. Rather, new covenant morality is *above and beyond* that of the law. When we say this there are two considerations that must be emphasized lest we misunderstand the good news of the gospel. The first is *motive*. When living under the law there is a motive to try to perfectly keep the law *so that we can be accepted*. This, as many of us can testify, is continually frustrating *if we take the law seriously*, be it the biblical law or the writings of Ellen G. White. There are many who instruct others to “keep the Sabbath” when there are few, *probably no one*, who has kept it according to the biblical law, let alone Ellen White’s numerous laws regarding Sabbath keeping.¹² However the new covenant motive is different. Our sanctified living is not done from the motive of trying to be good enough to be accepted. Rather, it springs from the *fact* of acceptance! We live like sons and daughters of God because that is who we are! Our goal is to live like the kind of person we now are in Christ!

The second consideration we must understand is that new covenant righteousness is found *only* in Christ! We look to Him and Him *alone* as our Representative and Substitute! If we are Christ’s then we, with the Apostle Paul may say,

More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, Phil. 3:8-9

Hopefully, we have answered the questions regarding the “righteousness of the law” for the sincere seekers of truth. We believe that the New Testament teaches that the law came to a functional end with Christ. Now we have moral and ethical principles above and beyond that of the law. We have life in the Spirit that empowers us to follow after the example of Christ. We can by faith claim Christ’s righteousness which far surpasses the righteousness of the law. Yes, we can enter true rest in Christ, the rest that remains for those who believe.

¹ See Riggle, *The Sabbath and the Lord’s Day*, p. 51-61 for the biblical support for this statement.

² See Mark 1:25.

³ See Lev. 15:19–25.

⁴ John 11:11.

⁵ Acts 10, 11; Rom. 14:14.

⁶ See Alan Watson, *Jesus and the Law* [University of Georgia Press, 1996] for many more examples.

⁷ John 9:6.

⁸ Note the stress on “working” in John 5:17; 9:3–6.

⁹ See Matt. 28:18–20.

¹⁰ Lev. 24:5–8.

¹¹ As a pastor I have always baptized by immersion as I think this is the biblical model and more fully follows the symbol of the reality. We must, however, keep ritual in its place and not allow it to take precedence over the ethical and moral commitment of the person being baptized.

¹² See Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Crisis*, pp. 57–59; 306–309.