

Plan and Purpose Bible Lesson #III-14—Bible Law Introduction

In our last lesson, we looked at what is commonly referred to as the “Old Covenant” that God made with Israel as He formed them into a nation at Mt. Sinai. We saw that this covenant was a conditional covenant in that it was conditioned on Israel’s promise to do all that the LORD hath spoken. What the LORD hath spoken refers to the Ten Commandments that is recorded in the next chapter, chapter 20. (Read Ex. 20:1-21) These Ten Commandments are the foundation of God’s law. God’s Law has become quite controversial in today’s churches. I believe that most of this controversy has resulted from a failure to understand this Law, or law in general. I want to take time to discuss God’s Law in some detail as I believe it is essential to one understanding the whole Bible. I believe that if one understands the Law, controversy will be removed from one’s mind, and understanding prophecy, Jesus Christ and Paul and other authors of the epistles will all be much easier. A very important thing we need to understand is that not only is our God a law giver, but He keeps His own laws as well. Thus only by understanding His law can we understand much of what takes place in the rest of the Bible as well as what happens around us today.

So I would like to begin with the basics. First I believe we need to define “law.” If we seek this definition from the dictionaries, we immediately find it to be a far more comprehensive subject than we might first think. For example, Webster’s 1828 Dictionary has nearly a full page of definitions of the word “law.” Black’s Law Dictionary (Fifth Edition) is the same. Both give a general definition and then Webster defines a number of different types of law such as municipal law, physical law, moral law, etc., while Black cites case law for definitions that arose out of particular cases.

For our purposes, let’s begin with some general definitions then see if or how these definitions apply to God’s Law as presented in our Bibles. Webster defines law as: *“a rule, particularly an established or permanent rule, prescribed by the supreme power of a state to its subjects; for regulating their actions; particularly their social actions.”*

Black defines law as: *“That which is laid down, ordained or established. A rule or method according to which phenomena or actions co-exist or follow each other. Law, in its generic sense is a body of rules of action or conduct prescribed by controlling authority, and having binding legal force.”*

I came across another definition I like in the book Digest of Divine Law by Howard B. Rand. *“Law (in so far as it regulates the conduct and actions of men and nations) is a rule of action established by a recognized authority with power to enforce justice and direct duty.”*

When most of us think of law, we normally think of the laws enacted by our congress, our state legislature or our local governments. Because these same governments hire police forces in some form to enforce their laws and have judicial systems which determine guilt or innocence, render judgments on the guilty and then maintain facilities to carry out those judgments, I think we can see how Mr. Rand’s definition would apply.

However, suppose the state passed a law and a city passed a law contrary to it. Who is right? Which law do we obey? One can see that when dealing with basic law, i.e. the law upon which many man-made laws are based, there can only be one source or origin of law. For example, the law which says “you shall not steal” is a basic law. If I wrote the law, I might have the tendency to say “you shall not steal unless your family is starving and you can’t find work.” Someone else might in turn write the law saying “you shall not steal except when you are being stolen from.” Soon there would be no basic

law because each of us would see a possibility where there should be an exception and soon the basic law is lost in the exceptions.

For true basic law to work then, it has to come from only one source and that source has to be totally just. Most of us recognize that there is only one such source, whether the law governs our relationship to each other, the material universe, economics, the physical creation, etc. Our Father in heaven is that source, whether it be the law of gravity, physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology, or the moral and spiritual laws. To have more than one source could not help but put any of all of these various laws in opposition to each other.

Experimentation through the centuries has allowed us to “discover” the physical, mechanical, chemical, mathematical and other scientific laws (though sometimes at great expense to the experimenter), but it has been necessary for God to communicate to man the laws dealing with the moral, physical and spiritual well being of men and nations.

There is one more definition we need to know and understand as we begin our study of law. That is the definition of “liberty.” Webster gives as a general definition, *“Freedom from restraint, in a general sense, and applicable to the body, or to the will or mind. The body is at liberty, when not confined; the will or mind is at liberty, when not checked or controlled. A man enjoys liberty, when no physical force operates to restrain his actions or volitions.”*

It would then at first appear that true liberty can only be had where there is no law. But, suppose you wanted to farm a particular piece of land. In true liberty, you would have the freedom to do that. But, suppose that I also see that piece of property and I would want to build a house on it. Theoretically, I would have the freedom to do that as well. But someone else comes along and wants to mine the property. It becomes obvious that something has to be done to establish one of us as owner of that property at the exclusion of the rest of us. None of us really has true freedom to do as we please, unless we are big enough or powerful enough to physically force everyone else from the property and even then we would live in fear that someone bigger or more powerful than us will come along and do with us as we have done with others. No one will have the liberty to use that property unless there is some rule or law that grants us exclusive use of the property.

In this sense then, there can be no liberty or freedom apart from law. We have all heard the saying, “my liberty ends where the other fellow’s nose begins.” It is by law that we establish parameters that allow liberty for all. As part of the definition of liberty in Black’s Law Dictionary we find, “Freedom from restraint, under conditions essential to the equal enjoyment of the same right by others; freedom regulated by law.” In his epistle, James refers to God’s Law as the “**perfect law of liberty**” in James 1:25.

It is essential that we understand this vital relationship between law and liberty to understand the justice and truth exhibited by the one true source of all basic law, our Father God. **“The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honey comb.”** (Psalms 19:7-11)

As we look at the Laws of God specifically, we need to look at them from more than one perspective that we might get a more complete understanding of the Laws, their purpose and their place in the plan of God.

In Matthew 22, we find several instances of the Pharisees and the Sadducees trying to trip Jesus up on matter of the law. In verse 35, a lawyer attempted to tempt Jesus with a question recorded in verse 36, **“Master, which is the great commandment in the law?”** Jesus answered in verses 37-40, **“Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”** He is quoting Deut. 6:5 on the former and Lev. 19:18 on the latter. While I’m sure the lawyer was expecting Jesus to respond with one of the Ten Commandments for which I’m sure he had prepared arguments, what Jesus did was basically group all of the Ten Commandments under these two commandments. As we look at the Law in general, we will see that God has not only made this distinction, but we will also find that each of the Ten Commandments will head another group of laws that relate to that particular law.

In addition, God has provided another means of distinguishing the various laws as to application, purpose, etc. by providing four different categories, Commandments, Statutes, Judgments and Ordinances. Understanding each of these categories will greatly enhance our more complete understanding of the whole Bible, particularly the writings of Paul in the New Testament.

We also need to look at the principle of the law involved. Man has always been somewhat lazy in thinking, or distrustful of his thinking, so that he has always wanted to rely on the letter of the law rather than the principle of the law. This is why our man-made laws today fill volumes and volumes and are continually being added to virtually every day. To think as the prophets, as well as the apostles, and more importantly as God thinks, we need to be able to understand the principle and know how to apply it.

So let us look at the Law in each of these different perspectives before we proceed. In the Ten Commandments that we read, we see there are laws dealing with our relationship to God and laws dealing with our relationship to each other. The first four, **“Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”; “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...”; “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD THY God in vain...”** and **“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.”** could all come under the sub-head, **“Thou shalt love the LORD THY God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.”** (Matt. 22:37) Likewise, the next six could easily be sub-headed, **“Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”** (Matt. 22:39)-- **“Honor thy father and thy mother...”; “Thou shalt not kill.”; “Thou shalt not steal.”; Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.”; and “Thou shalt not covet...”** (The fourth Commandment could actually be a part of either group in that the sabbath is to be set apart unto the Lord, but also Jesus told the Pharisees in Mark 2:27, **“The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.”**)

Jesus makes the statement in Matt. 7:12, **“Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.”** Luke simplified the statement in Luke 6:31, **“And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.”** If we were willing to do as Jesus said, this Golden rule would be all the law we need. Matt. 22:37-40 is simply an expansion of this commandment. Jesus says in John 14:15, **“If ye love me, keep my commandments.”**

The Ten Commandments then are an expansion of Matt. 22:37-40. However, God knew the first thing most of us would do was to ask, “What if...?” We always seem to want to look for a loophole to keep from being obedient. Knowing this, God continued to expand these Ten Commandments so that

we would really be without excuse. For example, let us take the commandment, **“Thou shalt not kill”** and examine a few of the laws that further expand this commandment. (Read Ex. 21:12-14) If a person kills another

**“As ye would that men should do to you,
Do ye also to them likewise.”**

**“Thou shalt love the LORD thy God
with all thy heart, and with
all thy soul, and with all thy mind.”**

1. “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”
2. “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.”
3. “Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.”
4. “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.”

**“Thou shalt love thy
neighbor as thyself.”**

5. “Honour thy father and thy mother.”
6. “Thou shalt not kill.”
7. “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”
8. “Thou shalt not steal.”
9. “Thou shalt not bear false witness...”

person with the intent to do so, he or she is to be executed. However, if he kills another person accidentally, God says he will provide a safe place for that person to flee to. (Read Numbers 35:9-34) Certain laws applied to specify how long a person had to stay in this city and what would happen if he left prematurely. Also, we find a law specifying that a murderer was to be slain by the revenger of blood.

10. “Thou shalt not covet.”

There are certain rules or laws pertaining to how a trial is to be conducted, such as one witness is not sufficient to convict a person of the crime, there must be at least two.

While we will go into these laws in more detail later, let it suffice for the moment to say that each of the Ten Commandments is expanded similar to this commandment. This should give us an idea of how God expands His commandments in principle to close loopholes we might look for in our mind. Unlike man's laws that duplicate and even contradict each other in an effort to either accommodate a privileged class, to take vengeance on some person or group deemed undesirable, or to "clarify" another law, God's law expands the principle of His laws in a very orderly manner so that if we but study them, we will find the law very understandable, just and certainly not oppressive.

If we read the law as given in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy we will come across four terms, and possibly a fifth, that seem to categorize the law. These terms are "commandments," "statutes," "judgments," and "ordinances." We also find the term "precept" used at times. The terms "commandment" and "statute" are thought by many to be somewhat synonymous. Though they have different applications, we will find instances when a particular law will have applications that will fit more than one category. If we look at the laws the Bible calls commandments, we will see that the responsible party to these laws is usually the individual, while the responsible party to the laws referred to as statutes is usually government at some level or the nation as a whole. So I believe we have to let the Bible somewhat define its own terms by the way they are used.

An example of a law being both a commandment and a statute is in Ex. 27:20-21. Verse 20 says, **"And thou shalt command the children of Israel, that they bring thee pure oil olive beaten for light, to cause the lamp to burn always."** The people as individuals are commanded to bring oil to the tabernacle. Then verse 21 says, **"In the tabernacle of the congregation without the vail, which is before the testimony, Aaron and his sons shall order it from evening to morning before the LORD: it shall be a statute for ever unto their generations on the behalf of the children of Israel."** It was a statute that Aaron and his sons were to take care of the lamp all their generations. It was not the responsibility of each Israelite to see that this was done, but rather the responsibility of Israel as a corporate body, but more specifically the responsibility of the office of the high priest, a level of government. Thus it is deemed a statute.

It is not always easy to determine if a law is a commandment or a statute; indeed a law may be both, but in general a commandment is a law in which the individual has the ultimate responsibility to keep the law. The Ten Commandments are a good example. A statute in general then is a law which a corporate body (nation, tribe, city, etc.) has the responsibility to keep. The laws ordering the carrying out of many of the judgments are examples of this, i.e. if a person stole a sheep, the judgment might be he must restore two sheep, but it is the corporate body's responsibility to make sure he does so.

Speaking of judgments, this category of law specifies, or defines the penalty, the punishment, or the means to undo the damage done to others through violation of a commandment or statute. For example, the commandment says, **"Thou shalt not steal."** (Ex. 20:15) A judgment would be, **"If a man shall steal an ox, or a sheep, and kill it, or sell it; he shall restore five oxen for an ox and four sheep for a sheep."** (Ex. 22:1) A statute would be, **"For all manner of trespass, whether it be for ox, for ass, for sheep, for raiment, or for any manner of lost things, which another challengeth to be his, the cause of both parties shall come before the judges; and whom the judges shall condemn, he shall pay double**

unto his neighbor.” While these examples do not necessarily relate to the same crime they do give us an idea of how the three categories work.

Before we look at our fourth category, let's look at the possible fifth category, “precepts.” Basically, I believe as we read the law we will find “precepts” could apply to any law in any category, but really it is an unwritten law. So there really are not specific laws in the category of precepts, but any law in any category could be considered a precept. As such we will not deal with precepts as a separate category unto themselves.

Our fourth category is that of “ordinances.” In Gen. 26, God speaks to Isaac reiterating the promises He made to Abraham and his seed and then tells Isaac He made the promises to Abraham **“Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.”** (vs. 5) By this we can assume, I believe, God's law as we find it in the commandments, statutes and judgments is not new law, at least not all the law is new. For example, we find in Gen. 9:6, **“Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.”**

However, up until God gave the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments engraved upon them, as well as all of the commandments, statutes and judgments we find in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, at Mt. Sinai, God's law had not been written and a nation of people held responsible to them. The various nations, or kingdoms, had sets of man authored laws, and those nations or kingdoms held their citizens responsible to those laws. But, God's law, in its entirety, had not, prior to this time, been written, or codified. This status changed dramatically at Mt. Sinai. For the first time in history, a nation made itself responsible to God to keep His laws. Paul tells us in Rom. 5:13, **“For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law.”** It was just as wrong for Cain to kill Abel as it is to murder today, Paul is saying, but because no nation or individual had been specifically given the law and had agreed to keep it, God really did not impute (or reckon) that sin against the people prior to this day. If our state did not have a speed limit law and I drove faster than 45 mph on a road designed for a maximum speed of 45 mph, the state could not hold me responsible to that speed. But, if the legislature passed a law making it unlawful to exceed 45 mph on that particular highway, and I have basically agreed to this law through my voting (or even not voting) for that legislature and/or through my obtaining a license to drive, I am now responsible to that law and can be punished for violating it.

So when God gave Israel a written law containing commandments, statutes, and judgments, they as a corporate body agreed to keep this law as we see them do in Ex. 19:8, **“And all the people answered together, and said, all that the LORD hath spoken we will do.”** They repeated this assertion several times (Ex. 24:34 and Deut. 5:27), so there can be no doubt as to the fact they took this responsibility.

But, in so doing they committed themselves perhaps more than they first realized. In the commandments, statutes and judgments, they had a system of laws that, in effect, defined sin against each other and provided remedy for this sin. Again, using our example of the commandment, **“Thou shalt not steal,”** the follow up commandments and statutes further defined stealing as theft, armed robbery, extortion, etc., to use some of our modern terminology. The judgments, based on the principle of restitution, provides that a minimum of twice what was stolen had to be restored to the damaged party with up to five times as much to be restored depending on the method and circumstance of the theft. If the thief could not make restitution, the judgments provided a means of selling the thief for his

cost of restitution and also provided rules so that the thief would be treated fairly in this condition of forced servitude. So, within these laws, thorough provision is made for men to be able to live with each other peaceably and prosperously.

However, another factor entered the picture when Israel agreed to keep God's laws. Not only did men damage each other when they violated these laws, they also damaged God. If we study the complete plan and purpose of God as presented in His Word, we find it is God's intent that He and man will ultimately dwell together. But, we also see that God, in His total righteousness and perfection, cannot tolerate anything less than total righteousness and perfection in His presence. This why we see Adam and Eve cast out of the garden (Gen. 3:24), why people died if they touched the ark of the covenant when not authorized to do so (II Sam. 6:6-7), and why no one has seen God face to face in all His glory and lived (Ex. 33:20). So, to be in the very presence of God, man must be perfect and totally righteous. If man were able to keep all of the laws of God, he could attain to that goal. But, instead of attaining to that goal, we find the law defines all of the ways we fail. Paul gives us the ultimate result of our failures in Rom. 6:23, **"For the wages of sin is death..."**

In both the Old and New Testaments, the word "sin" is translated from words whose basic meanings are "to miss" or "to miss the mark" implying failure to receive the prize as a result of missing the mark. We fail to receive the prize of living in the presence of God because we miss the mark, or target of total righteousness. When we do this we damage God, or at least our relationship to Him, in that we detract from His intent to dwell with us. Because of our sin, His intent cannot come to fruition.

As a result, God provided a new group, or classification of laws that would provide a remedy for this damage to Him. As the judgments provided remedy for man's sin, or damage to other men, this new set of laws we will know as "ordinances," provided for a remedy against the damage done to God by our sin. Basically these "ordinances" are based on the law of substitution, something we will discuss in more detail as we continue our study. Also, these laws dealt with the holiness, or separateness of God to which it is God's intent that we also attain that **"God may be all in all."** (I Cor. 15:28)

Basically, these "ordinances" are the sacrifice and worship laws and the laws of the tabernacle and rituals that Israel was to practice. However, as with the commandments and statutes often being the same law in a particular case, we sometimes find an ordinance may also be a statute and /or a commandment also. We will deal with these laws in detail in our study, but keep in mind that we must understand these laws to understand the New Covenant that we deal with in the New Testament. JRL