

What is the law?

Laws play a crucial role in our daily lives – in society, they maintain order and safety; in education, they facilitate learning and achievement. These laws set clear expectations, and adhering to them typically brings order and blessings. This understanding often extends to our perception of God’s law. We see it as a divine guideline akin to a roadmap to lead us to righteousness and divine favor. It’s commonly thought to be a set of directives for becoming more godlike, a pathway to God’s presence that hinges on our obedience, sacrifice, and adherence to rituals and commandments.

Yet, when we turn to the Bible, we find that God’s expectations, as laid out in his law, are vastly different and exceedingly beyond our reach. This difference raises a pivotal question: **What is the purpose of God’s law if it presents us with commands that seem impossible to keep?**

Through this article, we aim to explore the true essence and role of God’s law as depicted in the Bible. Moving away from the traditional view of the law as a means to earn righteousness or a set of rules to acquire blessings, we delve into a biblical understanding that sees the law not as a checklist for righteousness but as an indicator of our need for something greater—the grace and redemption found in Jesus Christ.

What does the narrative of the Bible show us about the law?



As revealed in the Bible, the law unfolds as part of the grand narrative that spans the entirety of human history, beginning in the Garden of Eden and weaving its way through the lives of patriarchs, prophets, and kings, culminating in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and finally confirmed by the apostles.

From the very beginning, the law was woven into the fabric of God’s relationship with humanity. In the Garden of Eden, God’s command to Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17) was an early manifestation of his law – a boundary set out of love, designed to protect and preserve life. This law was not a burdensome mandate but a loving directive from a caring Creator designed to maintain harmony and fellowship between God and his creation.

After Eden, as humans multiplied and spread across the earth, the law remained present, even if not explicitly codified, as it is seen in the lives of patriarchs like Noah and Abraham. Their stories show a deep awareness of God’s standards as integral to their covenant relationship with him.

The narrative reached a pivotal moment at Mount Sinai. Here, amidst thunder, lightning, and a trembling mountain, God’s law was given a tangible form. The Ten Commandments, etched in stone by the finger of God, were a comprehensive expression of his will for his people. These commandments covered every aspect of life – from worship and reverence for God (the vertical relationship) to interpersonal ethics and morality (the horizontal relationships).

This systematization of the law in the Ten Commandments was just the beginning. The law expanded through the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, encompassing not just

moral directives but also civil and ceremonial laws. These detailed laws covered aspects of daily life, societal justice, and religious rituals, forming a holistic system that governed the Israelites' lives in every aspect. The law set them apart as a people dedicated to God, a light to the nations.

However, as the narrative of the Bible continues, it becomes evident that the law, in its complexity and rigor, highlighted a fundamental problem—the human inability to adhere to God's standards fully. While perfect and holy, the law illuminated humanity's sinfulness and need for atonement. This need was demonstrated in the sacrificial system, an integral part of the law. It pointed to the need for something—or someone—greater for true and lasting atonement.

Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel spoke of a new covenant, one that would write the law not on tablets of stone but on human hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). This promised a transformation from within, a fulfillment of the law that was not possible through human effort alone.

This prophetic vision was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, the narrative of the law finds its climax in him. Jesus, the Son of God, embodied the law perfectly. He taught the law, bringing out its deepest meanings (as seen in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7), and lived it out flawlessly. In his life and death, Jesus fulfilled the law's righteous requirements, offering himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin.

In Christ, the law is not abolished but fulfilled (Matthew 5:17). The narrative of the law thus transitions from a focus on external adherence to a call for internal transformation, a change of heart and mind enabled by the Holy Spirit. This is the new covenant promised by the prophets, brought to fruition in Christ, and available to all who trust in him.

Therefore, the narrative of the law in the Bible is a story of God's unchanging standard of holiness, humanity's failure to uphold it, and God's ultimate provision in Jesus Christ, who upholds the law perfectly. The narrative runs from Eden to Calvary and beyond, a story of love, redemption, and grace.

What is a biblical definition of the law?

God's law refers to his righteous commands and precepts revealed in Scripture (Exodus 20:1-17, Deuteronomy 5:6-21). It expresses his holy will, reflecting his pure character and nature (Romans 7:12, Psalm 19:7-11). The moral law defines what is good, right, just, and pleasing to God. It demands perfect love for God and neighbor.

God's law reveals God's perfect expectations for us. It reflects his holiness and righteousness, setting the standard of divine goodness (Romans 7:12). However, any infraction of the law is a serious offense to God, punishable by eternal death (Romans 6:23). The law is a mirror, showing us our sins and inability to meet God's perfect standards (Romans 3:20).

What is the purpose of God's law?

The primary purpose of God's law is to expose humankind's sinfulness and inability to save ourselves by our righteousness or merits. It shines a spotlight on our rebellion against God's commands (Romans 3:19-20, 7:7). Not only does the law act as a mirror to confront us with the reality of our sin, but it also can act as a curb that restrains evil in society, and a guide that shows

redeemed believers how to live a life of praise (Psalm 119:9-11, Romans 3:31). Ultimately, the law pronounces judgment and condemnation on unrepentant transgressors (2 Corinthians 3:6-9).

What is the power of God's law?

On its own, the law has no power to justify or save us (Galatians 3:21). Rather, its power is to kill and destroy all self-righteousness by revealing the depth of human sin and inability to merit righteousness before God through obedience (Romans 3:20, 7:9-11). The law demands absolute lifelong perfection with threats of punishment but cannot enable adherence to its requirements (Matthew 5:48).

Do I have to keep God's law perfectly?

According to the Bible, God's standard for obedience to his law is indeed perfection. James 2:10 states, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." This verse highlights that even a single transgression renders us guilty of breaking the *entire* law. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus amplifies this by teaching that even our thoughts and intentions can make us guilty of sin (Matthew 5:19). He explains that anger is akin to murder (Matthew 5:22) and lust equivalent to adultery (Matthew 5:28), thereby emphasizing that sin is not only a matter of actions but also of the heart and mind.

Romans 3:9-20, 23 further clarifies that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This passage indicates that no one can claim righteousness based on their adherence to the law, as everyone fails to meet God's standard of holiness.

The Bible also consistently underscores the importance of intentions and motivations behind our actions. In 1 Samuel 16:7, God reminds us that while people look at the outward appearance, the Lord looks at the heart. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, performing righteous acts for show rather than from genuine devotion (Matthew 23:5-7). He taught that true obedience comes from a heart transformed by God's love, not merely external compliance to rules.

Thus, in the Christian understanding, keeping God's law *perfectly* goes beyond mere external adherence; it requires pure intentions and motivations. This realization brings us to the heart of the gospel: recognizing our inability to live up to God's perfect standard on our own and our need for Christ's redemption. In Christ, we find forgiveness for our sins and the transformation of our hearts to live in a way that pleases God, not through our strength but through his grace working in us (Philippians 2:13).

Therefore, while Christians desire to obey God's commandments, they do so understanding that their salvation is not based on our perfect obedience but on Christ's perfect fulfillment of the law and his sacrificial love for us. This perspective transforms obedience, moving it from a burden of trying to earn God's favor to a grateful response to the love and grace we have already received in Jesus Christ.

What are the different types of commandments in the Bible?

The Old Testament contains civil laws regulating Israel's society, ceremonial laws foreshadowing the Messiah, and the eternal moral law summarized in the Ten Commandments that reflects God's character. Jesus fulfilled the civil and ceremonial laws in himself, bringing them to an end, but not God's unchanging moral commands (Matthew 5:17-18). Those moral laws continue as binding obligations for believers today.

Did Jesus institute a "higher law" than Moses?

The concept that Jesus introduced a "higher law" than the Mosaic Law is a prevalent belief in some religious teachings. This idea suggests that Jesus' teachings significantly elevated moral and ethical standards. However, according to the Scriptures, Jesus did not institute a new or higher law but fulfilled and revealed the deeper intention of the existing law.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-48), Jesus emphasizes that *true* obedience involves not just external actions but the condition of the heart. He explains that righteousness under God's law extends to thoughts and attitudes, not just observable behaviors. This interpretation doesn't replace the Mosaic Law but uncovers its full meaning, focusing on internal compliance rather than merely external adherence.

Jesus' mission was to fulfill the law, as he states in Matthew 5:17, "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." His teachings, life, and sacrificial death perfectly met the law's requirements on our behalf, as affirmed in Romans 10:4, "Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."

Therefore, the biblical narrative shows that Jesus' role was not to create a higher set of rules but to embody and complete the law, calling us to a transformative obedience that springs from trust in him. This understanding shifts the focus from adhering to a stricter set of commands to embracing unconditional love and truth that comes through Christ, from whom we receive our true righteousness.

In what sense did Jesus fulfill the law?

Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament ceremonial laws by becoming the reality those types, symbols, and sacrifices pointed to. He fulfilled the moral law's righteous demands by keeping it flawlessly for us - in our place. His sinless life and atoning death accomplished the redemption which the law could never provide (Romans 8:3-4).

Why does God give us commands we can't keep?

God gave the moral law to reveal the depth of human sinfulness and helplessness - not provide a checklist to earn righteousness (Romans 3:20). The law's divine purpose was to expose our lost condition and need for a Savior, driving us to trust in Christ alone. Our inability to keep God's law should lead us to the freedom of the gospel.

By showing us how far we fall short of God's standards, the law drives us to seek salvation outside of ourselves. It points us to Christ, the only one who fulfilled the law's demands perfectly. In doing so, the law guides us away from the impossible task of trying to justify ourselves and towards the grace and mercy available through faith in Jesus Christ.

What is the continued role of God's law for believers?

For Christians freed by the gospel, the law continues to unveil sin and increasingly leads a believer to depend on the forgiveness earned by Christ. (Romans 7:7-25). The law also guides the redeemed heart that now desires to live in a way that honors God (Psalm 119:97-105). Yet the law never replaces or supplements Christ's finished work as the sole basis on which we stand righteous before God.

A Closer Look: Law

The story of the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-22 provides a vivid illustration of the purpose of the law. A young man approaches Jesus, seeking to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. He confidently claims to have kept the commandments since his youth.

Jesus, knowing the condition of his heart, lists some of the commandments, and the young man proudly asserts that he has kept them all. However, Jesus, who sees beyond outward appearances, reveals the actual state of the young man's heart.

"Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor," Jesus tells him, "And you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." Hearing these words, the young man's face fell, and he left sad because he was wealthy.

In this encounter, the law serves as a mirror, exposing the young man's true affections and priorities. He claimed to have kept the commandments but faltered when faced with the ultimate test of self-sacrifice and surrender to God. The law revealed his love for wealth and possessions, which had become an idol in his life.

The young man's response reflects the reality that the law is not a ladder to climb to attain and approach God. Instead, it shows us our sins and our need for a Savior. It reveals our inadequacy to fulfill God's perfect standards and dependence on God's grace and mercy.

In contrast to the young man's struggle, Jesus fulfilled the law and lived sinlessly. He is the only one who can meet God's standard of righteousness. As the rich young ruler walked away saddened, Jesus extended the invitation to follow him, recognizing that salvation comes through faith in him alone.

What does the law mean for you?

You might have felt like the rich young man, believing that obeying the law is the way to earn God's favor. But trying to climb the ladder of good behavior to reach God's approval is an impossible task. The law can't help you rise to God. Instead, it serves as a mirror to show you the reality of your sins and your need for a Savior (Romans 3:23). It reveals your human nature and how you can't save yourself, not ever, not even in a thousand thousand years.

Acting like the self-righteous rich young man, trying to tweak or water down the law to make obedience seem achievable, will only lead to a false sense of accomplishment. It won't change the fact that we all fall short. The Bible warns against trying to justify ourselves through the law because it only alienates us from Christ and his grace (Galatians 5:4).

The truth is you can't cleanse yourself by keeping all the commandments. The law was given to show you your sinfulness, not to be a checklist of achievements. It's like a diagnostic tool to reveal our need for Jesus. He is the only one who can provide the cure for our sin. Embrace this truth: Jesus is enough to justify and cleanse you from all your sins. Trust in his finished work on the cross and experience the freedom and peace that comes from knowing that Jesus is sufficient to secure the forgiveness of sins and eternal life with God (Romans 3:24-25).

When you see your reflection in the mirror of God's law, it might be shocking to realize the extent of your sins. But remember, God provided the solution: Jesus, the only antidote for sin (1 John 2:2). Like seeing your filth in the mirror and turning to the bath for cleansing, surrender to his grace and find rest for your soul, knowing that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). He is the fulfillment of the law, and through him, you can have a restored relationship with God, receiving his abundant grace and unconditional love. So, let go of the burden of trying to earn your way to God and instead trust in Jesus, for he is enough.

Bible Verses about the Law

- Exodus 20
- Romans 7:1 - 8:4
- Romans 10:4