

# What Is the Law of Christ?

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"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Although it is alluded to in other Scriptures, this is the only place in all the Bible that uses the phrase "law of Christ." What is the law of Christ? As Christians, we should have more than vague ideas about something so connected to Jesus Christ as His law. Is the law of Christ a set of commandments like the Ten Commandments? Is it one command, love, that can be expressed in slightly more detail as "bear one another's burdens"? Is it the law that Jeremiah prophesied God would put in our inward parts and write on our hearts? (Jeremiah 31:33). Let's find out.

## A Command

If there is a law of Christ, we should expect something in the way of commands, or, at least, a command. In John 13:34, Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, just like I have loved you; that you also love one another." But what about all of the other commands about loving our neighbor, loving our enemies, and the many things Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere? I believe that just as Paul, after quoting some of the Ten Commandments, said, "whatever other commandments there are, are all summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'" (Romans 13:9), so also all of Jesus' commands about how we are to live can be summed into His one command, "love one another."

What about, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind"? (Matthew 22:37). Loving one another isn't the same as loving God, is it? Actually, Jesus said that it is. In Matthew 25, Jesus, being represented by the king in the parable, says to people who have visited and given food, drink, and clothing to those in need, "Most certainly I tell you, because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (verse 40). And, in John 14:9, Jesus tells Phillip, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." The point is that under Old Covenant law, the law Jesus was discussing when He quoted "You shall love the Lord your God...", there was a great command for loving God and another for loving neighbor. Unfortunately, many of the Jews didn't see a connection between the two laws as they strove to serve God while they abused their less

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fortunate brethren. Under the New Covenant, there aren't two royal commands, there is only one. To love one another is to express love toward God.

### **The Law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus**

Something to notice is that when Jesus gave the command to love one another, he did not append a punishment to it for disobedience. That's because, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who don't walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death. For what the law couldn't do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God did, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh" (Romans 8:1-3). That's God's gift of love to us.

Let's take a closer look at some things we can learn from this passage. Paul here calls the law of Christ "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus." He contrasts it to "the law of sin and of death," which verse 3 reveals is operative because "the law" was "powerless, in that it was weak through the flesh." The powerless law he is referring to, of course, is the Old Covenant law. The Old Covenant law was powerless to prevent people, ruled by the law of their weak flesh, from transgressing it, so it produced death. But, "God did [what the law couldn't do], sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh; that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (verses 3-4). God did what the law couldn't do by sending His Son to condemn sin in the flesh (through the Atonement), fulfilling the law in us who walk after the Spirit. We see a contrast between law and Christ, and between flesh and Spirit. The "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" produces life because it has no condemnation.

The only law in a person prior to his being in Christ is the law of sin and death. It is the law of our depravity that drives us to sin, the wages of which is death (Romans 6:23). Now read what *Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers* says about "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus":

A phrase defining more fully the mode in which the union with Christ becomes operative in the believer. It begins by imparting to him the Spirit of Christ; this Spirit creates within him a law; and the result of that law is life—that

perfect spiritual vitality which includes within itself the pledge of immortality.

So believers have a new law in them that produces life. Because of this law, we are spiritually alive. Now notice a quite similar statement a few verses down in Romans 8:

Those who are in the flesh can't please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if it is so that the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if any man doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, he is not his. If Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the spirit is alive because of righteousness.

Verses 8-10

The Spirit Paul is speaking of is the Spirit of Christ, and then he plainly says, "If Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the spirit is alive because of righteousness." We are to have Christ in us, but notice that Christ being in us produces the same effect as the new law being in us. They are the same thing.

What am I saying? I'm saying that the evidence from Scripture is that the law of Christ is Christ Himself. Should this surprise us? Not really.

### **The Centrality of Christ**

It truly is enough to make me moan in despair when I come across Christians teaching the law, morality, political action, taking dominion of the earth, going to church, sets of dos and don'ts, charismatic gifts, being ready for the second coming, the desire for God, living a life of repentance, Bible study, prayer, and even faith as central to the life of a Christian. Some of these certainly have their place in a healthy Christian life, and others need to be heaved onto the dung pile; yet, NONE of them are what should be central to the life of a Christian. There is only one, single centrality in the life of a Christian, and He is Jesus Christ. Anything else occupying that central position is an idol.

It should be pretty obvious that the law that Jeremiah 31:33 says God would put in the inward parts and in the hearts of the house of Israel and the house of Judah is the law of Christ—Jesus Christ Himself—that the Spirit puts into the true Israel of God, Gentile and Jewish believers (further reading)(<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wp/israel-assembly-qa/>). As you read the passage, notice that this inward law is the law of the New

Covenant, which is also Jesus Christ (see "Our Better Covenant") ([www.wordofhisgrace.org/newworldcovenant.htm](http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/newworldcovenant.htm)).

Behold, the days come, says the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they broke, although I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people: and they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD; for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

As the neighbors and brothers of the physical Israelites in the two kingdoms were also physical Israelites, the neighbors and brothers in this prophecy of true Israel refers to those who are also spiritual Israelites. But unlike physical Israelites, who were in the Old Covenant by birth and circumcision even if they didn't know the Lord, all in the New Covenant know the Lord, and, thus, don't have to be told to know Him. He is already living in them.

Jeremiah's use of the labels "house of Israel" and "house of Judah" effectively hid until the New Covenant age the fact that the law would be internalized by Gentiles. Paul, writing to the Gentiles in Colossae speaks of it as a mystery:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the assembly; of which I was made a servant, according to the stewardship of God which was given me toward you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden for ages and generations. But now it has been revealed to his saints, to whom God was pleased to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Colossians 1:24-27

As A.T. Robertson writes in *Word Pictures*, "...the idea is simply that the personal aspect of 'this mystery' is 'Christ in you the hope of glory' (*Christos en humin hē elpis tēs doxēs*). He is addressing Gentiles, but the idea of *en* here is in, not among. It is the personal experience and presence of Christ in the individual life of all believers that Paul has in mind, the indwelling Christ in the heart as in Eph. 3:17."

### **The Law of Christ Cannot Really Be External**

The point of New Covenant law being written not on tables of stone but on the hearts of covenant members—believers—is that the Old Covenant law was external to the covenant members but the New Covenant law is internal. Thus, the New Covenant law can no more be words written with ink on paper (or LEDs on computer screens) than it can be carvings on stone. It is the internalization through the work of the Holy Spirit of the Logos, the living Word, in our minds.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-3: "Are we beginning again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as do some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being revealed that you are a letter of Christ, served by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tablets of stone, but in tablets that are hearts of flesh" (2 Corinthians 3:1-3). Here, Paul plainly contrasts ink with the Spirit, tablets of stone with hearts of flesh. He draws a clear distinction between the external and the internal.

Having or not having the Law of Christ in one makes the difference between a believer and an unbeliever. "Test your own selves, whether you are in the faith. Test your own selves. Or don't you know as to your own selves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified" (2 Corinthians 13:5). "Disqualified" is from the Greek word, *adokimos*. It literally means "not approved," but it is several times translated as "reprobate." The testing, by the way, is not to look at our works, but to look to Christ. Do we trust Him alone as our Savior? If we do, then He is in us. God approves of us because of Christ, not because of ourselves.

### **In What Way Do We Fulfill the Law of Christ?**

Wouldn't fulfilling the law of Christ mean that we are keeping a law, meriting something, maybe even contributing to our salvation? Without doubt, Paul is saying that by bearing one another's burdens,

we will fulfill the law of Christ. I believe that he purposely chose the context of bearing one another's burdens because bearing our burdens is one of the specific things Christ did for us. Prophesying of the Christ, Isaiah wrote, "Surely he has borne our sickness, and carried our suffering" (Isaiah 53:4a). Still, we have to ask, if Jesus fulfilled the law, if we are saved by grace, if we are justified and sanctified entirely by the work of Christ, if Christ lives in us, if the law of Christ is in us, in what way can it be said that our actions can fulfill the law of Christ?

Let's look again at Jesus' command, this time broadening the context to the verse that follows: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, just like I have loved you; that you also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). The command of Christ also contains an identifying sign. Our love for one another signifies to the world that we are the disciples of Jesus Christ. By loving one another, we fulfill that sign. No one can do that for us. I can walk down a crowded street with no one knowing I am a Christian. I can hold a Bible, I can go to church every Sunday, I can say pious-sounding words, but nothing will fulfill that sign except loving others.

Jesus said something similar in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy." But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.

Matthew 5:43-45

Does loving our enemies make us—actually *cause* us to be—the children of our heavenly Father? No. Being the children of God is one of the benefits of salvation, and salvation is entirely by grace alone. Loving others *shows* us to be the children of our heavenly Father. Fulfilling the law of Christ is demonstrating by loving others that you are a child of your heavenly Father and a disciple of Jesus Christ.

I will also mention here that Christ living in us is not Jesus working through us to keep the law. Jesus has already perfectly kept and fulfilled the law for us. Even as far as the law of love, He showed that He had a love that no one could exceed when He laid down His life for us: "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life

for his friends" (John 15:13). All we are doing when we fulfill Christ's law is to show that we are His disciples by following Him (Matthew 16:24).

### **What, Then, of the External?**

If the law of Christ is in believers, what of the externalities? For example, what are the words that we read in the Bible, the commands to love one another, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to love our enemies? What are these words that we can read and hear? Are they not the law? In answer, I will ask, is Jesus a door (John 10:7), is He a vine (John 15:5), what is water baptism? Is the bread literally Jesus' body, and is the cup of wine literally the New Covenant in Jesus' blood? All of these things are pictures of spiritual realities. They are symbols. Words are also symbols. "This is my commandment, that you love one another, even as I have loved you" (John 15:12) is a string of symbols that logically represent the law of Christ that is in you. I am not saying the words aren't true; they certainly are true. Just as "Earth" represents the reality of the planet on which we live, so do the words of that verse represent the spiritual reality of the law of Christ, which is Christ in us.

This really shouldn't be so strange a concept. As Christians, we know that Jesus Christ is the living Word of God. What does that make the Bible? It is the symbolic representation in words of the mind of Christ. Some professing Christians like to spout the idea that what is in man's mind and what is in God's mind never coincide, that what man knows is only an analogy of what God knows. Quite the opposite of this, knowing that the Word of God is truth (John 17:17) and that the Word of God is the written expression of Christ's mind and that we can read it, we can know that in the Bible, at least, God's mind and our minds coincide. But we have an even more perfect interface. Christ dwells in us, His mind is in us, and, thus, we can and do know the mind of God: "But we received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might know the things that were freely given to us by God" (1 Corinthians 2:12).

Of course, it becomes awkward to always talk about symbols. Even Jesus didn't say the bread was a symbol of His body. He expected we would understand that, although many people have not. We would soon become tedious and confusing if we also tried to explain the symbolic nature of words every time we said that the law of Christ is love. In everyday use, simply using the words serves perfectly well.

We can then occasionally remind people that the law of Christ is really Jesus Christ Himself, living and working in us through the Holy Spirit.

The fact that the law of Christ is Christ in us does not mean that what we read in the Bible, including the commands to love one another, aren't important. It just means that we believers can trust that the motivation and power to fulfill the law of Christ is in us already, waiting to be expressed as a witness to the world.