

The Major Purpose for the Mosaic Law

A Study on Romans 3:19-20

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

An old German educator said, “The first principle of teaching is repetition, the second principle is repetition, and the third principle is repetition.” This is our ninth lesson on the sinfulness of man. Paul has proven the pagan, the moral man and the religious man guilty before a holy God, and under his wrath because they are sinners. In Romans 3:9-18, he shows that all men are so sinful that they are in a helpless and hopeless condition in their natural state. Unless God sovereignly intervenes in his life with the miracle of the new birth or regeneration, a person stays in his sins and will perish. Romans 3:19-20 is Paul’s final indictment against man. He brings the Mosaic Law, namely the Ten Commandments, to the forefront to show that the Law does not save men, it only condemns them.

THE MOSAIC LAW PROVES A MAN GUILTY — Romans 3:19

“Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law.” The Jews prided themselves on the Mosaic Law. They were under it as the chosen people of God. Paul now removes this last prop and shows the Jew that his own law proves him guilty and a sinner before God. In a Jew’s mind, keeping the Law of Moses was salvation, but Paul says the law condemns; it does not save.

“That every mouth may be stopped.” The reference is primarily to the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments. These commandments are:

1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make yourself a graven image.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and mother.
6. You shall not kill.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet.

What Jew or other person who has ever lived can say he has never broken any of these laws? A person is a sinner if he breaks one of the laws only once. When he faces the Law

honestly, it shuts his mouth for he knows he is guilty. Law that is not kept demands retribution!

In a church I used to pastor, I visited a man who had a pseudo-Christian background. He went to church twice a year and felt like no one was really a sinner, although people might do wrong at times. He turned and pointed to the Ten Commandments on a plaque on the wall and said, "If a man lives these every day, that is enough!" He was so proud and vain that he did not realize this Law only pointed out the fact that he was a sinner because no one, except Jesus Christ, has ever kept the Law perfectly. The thing on which he prided himself actually condemned him.

It isn't enough to have this code hanging on your wall, nor is it enough to subscribe to the Law mentally. The question is, "Do you always obey it?" The answer always has to be, "No."

"And all the world may become guilty before God." The word "guilty" should be translated "under judgment." The Mosaic Law has reference to all people. The Jew stands as a representative of the human race as far as the Law is concerned. His guilt demonstrated the guilt of the human race.

A man had a large ranch in the desert. He was told that it was worthless for pasture or farming, but he fenced off twelve acres, broke it, harrowed it, fertilized it, sowed it, and cultivated it. He reaped only sagebrush and cactus! He knew it was no use trying out the rest; it was all good-for-nothing, as far as agriculture was concerned. It was like this with God and Israel: He gave them his Law, instructed them, disciplined them, warned them, restrained them, protected them, and sent his Son to them — whom they rejected and crucified. The Gentiles joined in this. All are under the judgment of God. There is no use for further tests.

Our children, relatives, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, business associates — the whole world — all are under the judgment of God and need Christ as their Saviour.

THE LAW OF MOSES CANNOT SAVE A PERSON — Romans 3:20

"Therefore [because] by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight." "Justified" means "declared righteous." No person can be declared righteous before God by his good works. No amount of good works can save a person.

If the Law is looked upon as a standard for living, then men will naturally come to consider it proper for God to take into heaven those who come nearest to keeping it. They think that God is like their public school teachers who set a certain mark as passing, letting

most of the people in the class get by and flunking very few, giving some an “A” for sincerity and others no mark at all for their failures. But God, by the very nature of his being, cannot pass anyone who does not meet his standard. If he would let people into heaven who were only 99.44 percent righteous, then heaven would be .56 percent imperfect and defiled. God must mark by perfection or he cannot be God.

“For by the law is the knowledge of sin.” The Mosaic Law served as a way of life for the Israelites, but no Jew could keep it perfectly. This proved him a sinner in line for God’s judgment. No man can be justified or have a right standing before God by his works. Man must receive Jesus Christ who alone can give him a righteousness that will make him acceptable to God.

WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

If the Mosaic Law only points out sin, what was its purpose in the Old Testament? It was given specifically for Israel as a gracious provision to instruct Israel in righteousness and to keep them separated from the Gentile world as God’s holy people.

“And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them. . . Ye shall observe to do therefore as the Lord your God hath commanded you: ye shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. Ye shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God hath commanded you, that ye may live, and that it may be well with you, and that ye may prolong your days in the land which ye shall possess” (Deut. 5:1,32,33).

The Law had three aspects and 613 commands. The *moral* law was the commandments and Decalogue. The *ceremonial* law was about the tabernacle, feasts, priesthood, circumcision, sacrifices, etc. All pointed forward to Christ. The *civil law* was about such things as sanitation, crops, quarantine, diet, lawsuits, and crime.

The Law was a unit. To keep the Law, one had to keep all of it. Breaking one command made a person guilty:

“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal. 3:10).

“For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law” (Gal. 5:3).

“For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (Jas. 2:10).

The Law was a rule of life, not a way of salvation. Neither Moses nor any other Jew was ever saved by keeping the Law. Abraham was saved by faith before the Mosaic Law was even given: “And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Moses was saved by faith in God’s promises of blessing, and in his promises of forgiveness through sacrifice:

“For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul” (Lev. 17:11).

“And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission” (Heb. 9:22).

The shedding of the blood of animals pointed forward to the death of Christ, the perfect sacrifice for sin. Like Abraham, Moses was saved by grace, through faith in the promise of Messiah to come. But Moses proved, demonstrated, and gave evidence of his salvation by attempting to keep the Mosaic Law which was God’s rule of life for Israel.

The Law was perverted by the Jew. God never gave the Law of Moses with the thought that anyone (except Christ) would ever keep it perfectly. He gave it as a rule of life for the Jew, never as a way of salvation. But the Jew soon confused the keeping of the Law with salvation, making the two synonymous. Law and tradition became the basis of salvation in the Jewish mind.

Even Christendom has become bogged down in its traditions and rules, and has failed to see that Christianity is not good works, church membership, or baptism, but a vital relationship with Christ, entered into by faith in his death for sin and his resurrection.

CONCLUSION

One cannot be justified by doing the deeds of the Mosaic Law. This is shown in the passage we have just studied and in other verses of Scripture:

“Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified” (Gal. 2:16 NASB).

“I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (Gal. 2:21 NASB).

“Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, ‘The righteous man shall live by faith’” (Gal. 3:11 NASB).

“Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses” (Acts 13:38, 39 NASB).

If a person is to be saved, he must receive a righteousness outside himself that will make him acceptable to a holy God. He must have a perfect righteousness to stand in the presence of a perfect God. This righteousness can only be found in 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. 3:9 NASB).

When Christ died he had our sins on him, and when we believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour we receive his righteousness: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21 NASB). Because we have Christ’s righteousness, which is positional and not felt or experienced, God accepts us. “But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30 NASB). We are accepted, not because of who we are or what we have done, but because we are related to Jesus Christ who is perfect righteousness. If anyone is going to heaven, it will be on Christ’s righteousness, not his own.