



Must We Keep the Commandments?

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Part 1: Must We Keep the Commandments?

There is an old Jewish tale which states that God was seeking a people who would carry out his Laws. He went to the Canaanites, but when they found out there was no idolatry, they passed. When the Hittites heard that they could not covet they passed too. Eventually after going to the 70 nations He came to Moses who said he would agree to take two tablets and call back in the morning.

Well, all humor aside, the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai is one of the hallmark events in Israel's history. But just what is the Law? Ask most Christians that question today and the answer is almost unanimous, "The ten commandments."

In reality, God gave more than just Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. Recorded in the Torah (the five books of Moses) are, according to Maimonides, 613 commandments for Israel to keep. Some say that there are 248 positive commandments, one for each bone in the body, and 356 negative commandments, one for each day of the year.

I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. -- Lev 11:44

Exodus 24:3-4 When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the LORD has said we will do." Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.

Two Sets of Law?

According to Jewish tradition, there are two complete sets of law:

- 1) The written law found in the five books of Moses, and
- 2) The Oral law today found in the Talmud. The written law, according to the rabbis, cannot be fully understood by itself, it needs to be viewed through the lens of the Oral law, which, according to Jewish tradition, was given simultaneously with the written Law on Mt. Sinai:

Moses received the [oral] Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah. -- Mishna Pirke Avoth 1:1

The "fence" around the Torah refers to the rabbinic edicts handed down over the generations following the return from Babylonian captivity. If one did not violate the rabbi's dicta, then we would be safe from violating the Biblical command. Each new strata of leaders saw holes in the fence and added more dicta to plug the gaps.

Jewish scholars contend that the written law is like a skeleton and the oral law the sinew, muscles and flesh. You can't have one without the other to be whole or to completely understand the meaning and intent of a Biblical command.



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The oral law does not rise to the level of authority and import of the Biblical commands. It was one of the chief stumbling blocks for the rabbis as Martin Luther attempted to reason from the Hebrew Scriptures. Tragically, he realized that he was not on a level ground for scripture interpretation; Luther's approach was sola scriptura (scripture alone), not scripture as interpreted through the rabbinic commentaries.

What about the Law?

God's commandments enlighten our eyes. The Psalmist of old wrote, "The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes" (Ps. 19: 8). Again we read, "For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light; and reproofs of instruction are the way of life" (Prov. 6: 23). These words are not limited to the Law of Moses. The Christian is "not without law to God, but under the law to Christ" (1 Cor. 9: 21). We are to seek to "fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). Christianity consists of law and grace combined; hence, the "perfect law of liberty" (James. 1: 25).

Jesus fulfilled the law and thus offers life. The wise man enunciated a general truth when he wrote, "Keep my commandments, and live, and my law as the apple of thine eye" (Prov. 7: 2). He consistently wrote, "Whoever despises the word shall be destroyed: but he that fears the commandment shall be rewarded" (Prov. 13: 13). Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (Jn. 10: 10). This life Jesus offers to those who love him and keep his commandments (Jn. 14:21-24).

The Bible says that one reason God gave us the law is to drive us to Y'shua. You see, here is God's problem - His creation is sinful and doesn't ever measure up to the standard He has set. Yet, through pride, it thinks that it is 'good enough'. Now God has a solution to the sin problem... the death of His son as an atoning sacrifice...but what can He do about His creation who through pride does not even see its need of Jesus' sacrifice?

The law was given to show man his fallen nature, and believe it or not, to even increase his sin so that he would look away from himself as the answer and turn to the only one who ever could save - Jesus. These verses teach this -

Rom 5:20:

The law was added (given) so that the trespass might INCREASE. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gal 3:23-25:

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.



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The law exposes our sin. We see ourselves as we truly are. And having seen the problem, we will then look for the solution - which is that through the death of the Lord Jesus, we may be declared righteous in God's sight through faith in what Jesus has done on our behalf.



Part 2: Must We Keep the Commandments?

Torah and Keeping the Law

When we talk about “keeping the Law,” it is important to be clear what we mean by the “Law.” For many, that term identifies the Ten Commandments as an expression of God’s Will. In fact, the Ten Commandments, or “Ten Words” as they are called by Moses himself (Ex.34: 28, Dt 10:4), are, in their historical setting, a summary of statements that describe life as God’s people, the words of the covenant (Ex.34:28). In Jewish tradition, the first “word” is really a statement, “I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a house of slaves.”

This is actually a very good place to start, and it grounds the “commandments” in the “indicative” of God’s history of the exodus.

First God saved his people, then he affirmed a way of life for them as his people. It can even be argued that the grammar of the Decalogue is indicative; the Hebrew idiom is not in the form of negative commands. To those who found themselves in a land where the pharaoh was virtually deified, and where the power and presence of the God of the Hebrews would be understood as subservient to the gods of Egypt, the “statement” that “you will have no other gods before me” was an affirmation of the exclusivity of the claims of the God who had come to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3), revealed his name and identity, and won the ten-round knockout match over pharaoh, his spiritualists, and his army.

All this is to say that the Ten “Commandments” are not the way we come to be the people of God. We are the people of God because God has saved us by grace, not by works. This is a good thing, for despite what many may think, we cannot keep them, certainly not perfectly, really not at all.

This is not to say that they don’t matter. Messiah Y’shua himself affirmed them. In fact, he even deepened the interpretation of them to demonstrate that they are impossible to keep (Mt 5: 17-48). But now, as God’s people, we are free to hear them no longer as what we have to do, in order to win God’s approval, but what we want to do, as those who trust God’s will and ways and will follow him as sheep who hear the shepherd’s voice and follow him.

Many Jews understand the “law” the same way. They understand that they are God’s covenant people, and they live according to his torah because that is what God’s people do. It is not so much a way of becoming God’s people but of remaining God’s people. But herein lies a problem of human sinfulness, for often the things we do, even out of the right motivation, can easily become the standard by which measure salvation. The “Ten Words” become a specific list of do’s and don’ts that we actually think we can keep.

At this point, the second sense of the Jewish “torah” is helpful. In its Hebrew root, the verb “teach,” “torah” really means instruction, what is taught. Since the teaching comes from God, this is similar to revelation, what God wants us to know.

This includes his “law” and way of life, but it also includes the narrative history into which the Ten Words are set. In this way, the “Torah” as a whole helps us understand the role that the Ten Commandments actually play within the story of God’s salvation. And here we come back to that “first



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word," I am YHWH your God who brought you out of Egypt." That is the story of God's salvation, begun in the very promise of God to Adam and Eve to overcome sin and its evil effects in the seed of the Woman. It is the story of the promise to Abraham, and God's guidance of that promise through the generations of the patriarchs, into Egypt, and then out of Egypt by way of Sinai. It is the story of God's gift of the land as the place for his story to play out within the space and time of human history. It is the story of the kingdom of God, entrusted to a dynasty of David but always the kingdom of God, not of human kings, leaders, or politicians. It is the story that spoke to "that day" when God's Messiah would come to fulfill all God's promises (2 Cor 1:20; 1 Cor 10:11).

Isaiah summarized well in his vision of the "end" with which his book begins, in 2:1. "Zion" as the place of God's presence on earth will be raised as the high point of all human history. All nations will come, not to destroy to assert the dominance of other gods, but to hear the "Torah" which will go forth. The Hebrew parallelism is striking: "torah" is simply the Word of God.

St. John understood who the "Word of God" was. He was there at the creation of the world. He was with God, indeed he was God. But as Messiah, that Word became flesh and "tabernacled" among his people, right in the midst of all Israel as the tent and temple had been. Like the "new Moses," he taught torah from the mount (Mt 5-7), and like the new David, he announced that the "kingdom of God had come near (Mt 4:17, Mk1:14-15, Lk 4:43).

But unlike David and all the purely human kings, he came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom (Mt 20:28). That sacrifice was the once-for-all sin offering for the sins of all the world, and in his death and resurrection, the new creation announced in Isa.11 and Isa.35 has broken in to our world and his holy history. That is the "story," the narrative, the "haggadah" of Torah. It's not about keeping the law, it's about knowing the torah, God's plan of salvation for the Jew first, and also for the Greek, so that those of "every nation and tribe and people and tongue" can be part of the whole "Israel of God" (Gal 6:16, Rev 7:9).



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