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God's Law In New Testament Ethical Themes

(Part IV)

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We have observed that God's law is essential to many of the key themes of New Testament morality, such as righteousness, holiness, and the will of God. This fact underscores the continuing validity of the Old Testament commandments in the age of the New Testament. Those commandments are the implicit standard of kingdom righteousness, separation from the evil world, and anything which is good, perfect, and well-pleasing to God.

The Stature of Christ

The implicit endorsement of God's law in Christian ethics is evident from other New Testament ethical concepts as well. For instance, Paul exhorts us to attain unto "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13); he wishes for Christ to be "formed" in us (Gal. 4:19) because God foreordained us "to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:28). What does the stature of Christ entail as a moral standard for believers? Christ came to fulfill all righteousness (Matt. 3:15), to do God's will (Heb. 4:7, 9), and to establish the New Covenant wherein God's law is written on our hearts (Heb. 10:14-18). He sinlessly kept God's commandments (John 8:46; 15: 10; Heb. 4:15; 7:26-28), being perfect in His obedience (Heb. 5:8-9). To qualify as God's anointed (i.e., the Messiah, the Christ) He demonstrated a hatred of **all lawlessness** (Heb. 1:8-9). Our aim is to attain the Savior's stature of obedience to God's law (cf. Heb. 5:9), keeping His works (Rev. 2:26), walking as He walked (1 John 2:5-6; 1 Peter 2:21), and purifying ourselves as He is sinlessly pure (1 John 3:3,5). If the stature of Christ is our moral standard, then the Old Testament law must be kept in Christian ethics.

Resurrection Life

Another New Testament ethical theme is the newness of resurrection life. Because Christ's resurrection power works in us (Eph. 1:19-20; Phil. 3:10), and because we are spiritually united with the resurrected Savior, we are to walk in newness of life and not to live in sin (Rom. 6:2-4); sin no longer has dominion over us (Rom. 6:8-9, 13-14). Christ's resurrection power in us effects righteous living by means of the Holy Spirit uniting us to the Savior (Rom. 6:22; 7:4; 8:9-11). Therefore resurrection life in the

believer is something of an ethical concept. We walk in newness of life, no longer being dead in trespasses and sin. What does this mean for the validity of God's law to one who "serves in newness of the Spirit"? Paul asks, "What shall we say then? Is the law sin?" His answer is immediate: "Certainly not!" (Rom. 7:7). Quite the contrary. For one who enjoys resurrection life in Christ by means of the Spirit the law is the standard of righteousness exposing sin (Rom. 7:7-11), is holy, just, and good (7: 12), and is Spiritual (7:14). Paul affirms "I consent unto the law that it is good" (7:16). New life in Christ and resurrection power from the Spirit bring obedience to the once spurned law of God. Thus the test for whether the Spirit abides in us is the keeping of God's **commandments** (1 John 3:24). John also teaches us that we know that we have passed from death to new life by our love for the brethren, which is evidenced in keeping God's commandments (1 John 3:14; 5:2). Resurrection life as an ethical concept in the New Testament reinforces the validity of God's Old Testament law.

Spiritual Freedom

A theological and moral theme closely allied to that of new life in the resurrected Savior is the theme of freedom in the Holy Spirit. Jesus declared, "Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin" (John 8:34), and only the Son of God can truly set us free from that bondage (8:36). He does this by applying the redemption which He has accomplished for us in His death and resurrection -- applying redemption through the Holy Spirit, who frees us from the bondage of sin and death (Rom. 8:1-2). This Spiritual freedom does not give us the prerogative to live or behave in just any way we please however; Spiritual freedom is not the occasion of moral arbitrariness. Paul says, "Being made free from sin now and become servants to God, you have your fruit unto sanctification" (Rom. 6:22). The Holy Spirit does not give us the freedom to sin -- that is, the freedom to transgress God's law; rather, the Spirit gives us the freedom to be the slaves of Christ and produce holy behavior. The regenerate man is happy and willing to "serve the law of God" (Rom. 7:25). The very bondage from which the Spirit releases us is described by Paul as

precisely the sinful nature's inability to be subject to the law of God (Rem. 8:7). Obviously, then, freedom from this inability must now mean being subject to the law of God! This freedom does not turn the grace of God into licentiousness (cf. Jude 4) but inclines the heart of those once enslaved to sin to the Spirit-given law (Rem. 7:14). "The ordinance of the law" is to be "fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit" (Rem. 8:4). Therefore the Bible makes it quite clear that our Spiritual freedom is not liberty from God's law, but liberty in God's law. James calls the commandments of God "the perfect law of liberty" (2:25), thereby combining two descriptions of the law given by the Psalmist: "The law of the Lord is perfect" (Ps. 19:7) and "I will walk at liberty, for I seek Thy precepts" (Ps. 119:45). Genuine freedom is not found in flight from God's commands but in the power to keep them. God's Spirit frees us from the condemnation and death which the law brings to sinners, and the Spirit breaks the hold of sin in our lives. However the freedom produced by the Spirit never leads us away from fulfilling God's law: "For you, brethren, were called for freedom; only use not your freedom for an occasion to the flesh, but through love be servants one to another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, even in this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal. 5:13-14). When Paul teaches that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17), it is just in the context of the Spirit's New Covenant ministry of writing God's law upon the believer's heart and thereby enabling obedience to that law (2 Cor. 3:3-11; cf. Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 11:20). Consequently the ethical concept of Spiritual freedom in the New Testament is anything but indifferent to the law of God. The Spirit frees us from law-breaking for the purpose of law-keeping.

Love

One of the most conspicuous ethical themes in the New Testament is that of love. Indeed, the New Testament is a story about love -- God's love for sinners (John 3:16) and their subsequent love for Him and others (1 John 4:19). One of the most sustained ethical essays in New Testament literature is in fact a discourse on the necessity, supremacy, and characteristics of love (1 Cor. 13). Love is at the heart both of the gospel and of Christian behavior (1 John 4:10-11). Few who are knowledgeable of the New Testament writings will deny that love summarizes in one word the Christian ethic. It is noteworthy that the New Testament writers demonstrate the ethical authority of love by reference to the Old Testament law. Why is love so important? What gives love its ethical pre-eminence? Why must the dictates of love be respected? What makes love such an authoritative standard? Precisely that it communicates the substance of the law's demands!

In summarizing our moral duty in love, Christ actually quoted the love commands from the Old Testament case law (Matt. 22:37-39). He said that love to God and neighbor were crucial because "On these two commands hang the whole law and prophets" (v. 40). Love is a moral necessity for Paul precisely because it fulfills the law (Rem. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14). Likewise James considers love the fulfillment of the royal law (2:8), and John specifically writes, "This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments" (1 John 5:3). The assumption of the New Testament writers and the development of their thought, therefore, is that God's law is morally authoritative; and because love expresses that law, love too is a fitting standard of moral guidance. The foundational authority of love is thus the law of God.

The Fruit of the Spirit and the Golden Rule

The same can be said for other New Testament summaries of our moral duty. A prominent pattern of godly living is set forth by Paul in the list of "the fruit of the Spirit," which Paul sets over against the fruit of the sinful nature (or flesh) in Galatians 5:16-24. The attitudes or character traits mentioned by Paul as the outcome of the Spirit's work in a believer's life ("love, joy, peace..") area model for Christian morality. Yet Paul makes it clear that the ethical authority of these traits rests on the underlying authority of God's law. Having listed the Spirit's fruit, Paul explains why these traits are so important in Christian ethics: "against such there is no law" (v. 23). In the same way we can observe that the popular and pervasive summary of New Testament living known as the "golden rule" -- whatever you would have men do to you, do even so unto them -- is presented as morally authoritative by Christ just because "this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12). The golden rule communicates the essential demand of the law of the Old Testament, and as such it is a standard of ethics which we must respect. Thus we observe that the most common summaries of New Testament morality -- whether love, the fruit of the Spirit, or the golden rule -- derive their importance and binding character from the law of God which they express. The presupposition of the New Testament authors is continually and consistently that the Old Testament law is valid today then.

Any attempt to speak of New Testament ethics apart from kingdom righteousness, or the holiness of Christ's saints and their separation from the world, or the good, well-pleasing, perfect will of God, or the stature of Christ, or resurrection life, or Spiritual freedom, or love, or the fruit of the Spirit, or the golden rule is bound to be inadequate. And any attempt to understand these concepts apart from the Old Testament law is bound to be inaccurate.