

Christ Our Law | BY IVAN T. BLAZEN

Christ's
love
strengthens
the will
of God.

The question as to what is the first or greatest commandment of the law was much discussed in Jesus' time. The Torah (meaning "teaching" or "instruction"), which is the basis of Jewish thought and life, is contained in the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Materials in these books were divided into two categories: *Haggadah* and *Halakah*. The former term, derived from the Hebrew verb *haggad*, meaning "to narrate," referred to the stories of the Torah (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc.), and the latter term derived from the Hebrew verb *halak*, meaning "to walk," and referred to the commandments of the Torah. When Jews counted up the commandments of the Torah, they came to the figure 613. Such a large plurality of commands presented a problem: How could all these commands be handled and observed?

One way was to distinguish between lighter or easier commands (Matt. 5:19, "Whosoever breaks the *least* of these commandments...") [italics mine] and the weightier or more difficult commands (Matt. 23:23: justice, mercy, and faith[fulness]).¹ Another way was presented in the Talmud, as summarized in Anders Nygren's *Commentary on Romans*.² This tradition declares that on Mount Sinai Moses received

613 commands, and then indicates how successive abridgments were made to get to the essence of the law. After Moses, David came and summarized the law with eleven commands (Ps. 15). Then Isaiah summed up the law with six commands: those who will escape fiery judgment will be those who (1) walk righteously, (2) speak uprightly, (3) despise the gain of

oppression, (4) do not take a bribe, (5) stop their ears from hearing of bloodshed, and (6) shut their eyes from looking on evil (Isa. 33:15). After this Micah presents three commands: to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God (Mic. 6:8). Once more Isaiah appears, this time with two commands: to maintain justice, and do what was right (Isa. 56:1). Finally, Habakkuk drew the ultimate

summary: the just shall live by faith[fulness] (Hab. 2:4).

So the issue was a live one. How did Jesus deal with it? Note the chart, opposite:

A Proposal

When the biblical testimony to God's grace is understood in all its fullness, it becomes clear that God's law is not called for in order to balance grace—as if God's grace might lead us into sin (Rom 3:8, 6:1, 6:15)—but God's law is seen precisely *in* his grace. The will of God is



Paying taxes to Caesar

The Great Commandment in the Settling of the Controversy Stories

Matthew 22

Paying Taxes to Caesar
22:15–22

The Resurrection
22:23–33

The Greatest Command
22:34–40

22:40

On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (unique to Matthew's story)

Mark 12

Paying Taxes to Caesar
12:13–17

The Resurrection
12:18–27

The Greatest Command
12:28–34

²⁸ **One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"**
²⁹ Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."
³² Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; ³³ and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."
³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." **After that no one dared to ask him any question.**

Luke 20

Paying Taxes to Caesar
20:20–26

The Resurrection
20:27–40

The Greatest Command

20:39 **And some of the scribes answered, "Teacher, you have spoken well."**

Luke 20 has the beginning and ending to Mark's great commandment story, but lacks the story itself. It is found ten chapters earlier in Luke 10:25–37, and is connected with the parable of the good Samaritan, which interprets the meaning of the Great Commandment.

20:40 **For they no longer dared to ask him any questions.**

David's Son
22:41–46

David's Son
12:35–37

David's Son
20:41–44

The Parable of the Good Samaritan
Luke 10:25–37

²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."
²⁸And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'
³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

revealed ultimately in Christ himself, not in a code outside of him. The error of Judaism was that it considered the law its Christ, whereas God intended Christ to be its law. Christ as the ultimate revelation of the love of God is the supreme revelation of the will of God.

In describing how he became all things to all men, in

order that he might win them for God, the apostle Paul says, "To those under the law I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:20–21,

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RSV). The expression translated “under the law [ennomos] of Christ” literally means something like “in-lawed to Christ.” In other words the ultimate will of God is seen only in Christ. Christ in his redemptive deed and word was Paul’s law. It is in harmony with this that Paul says that when we help to heal the fractured lives of others and bear one another’s burdens, we fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:1–2). This is the law of self-giving love. Believers are called to serve one another in love (Gal. 5:13).

The manifestation of this love in Christ is the fundamental principle of the rule of God. All other commandments, codes, and ethical instructions are subservient to the meaning of love revealed in Christ. These moral principles are understood properly only in connection with his love. To see Christ as the supreme exemplar of the will of God is the heightening of morality, not its diminution. Christ’s love strengthens the will of God. The claim of God in Christ allows no loopholes, as often occurs when morality centers on law. Indeed, Galatians 5:13–14 and Romans 13:8–10 make clear that the whole law, with all its commandments, is fulfilled in the command to love. It is love understood as the self-giving love of Christ, which fulfills the law, or fills it full. It is possible to keep laws, even the Ten Commandments, yet not really love. But it is impossible to love as Christ loved and not to keep the laws of God. Love is the fulfilling of the law, but law is not necessarily the fulfilling of love. We may say that the law defines love, and in part this is true. But on a deeper level, love defines the law and gives it its true meaning.

Fulfillment of the law and focus on the law are to be distinguished. The law is only truly fulfilled when the focus is on Christ. To be sure, the law is holy, just, and good (Rom.

7:12). To be sure, its righteous requirement is fulfilled in the life of one who walks according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:4), and in the way of love (Gal. 5:13–14; Rom. 13:8–10). Nevertheless, the final rule of behavior for the New Testament Christian is the character and redeeming quality of Jesus’ life and death. This is what gives ultimate expression to the character and will of God.

In addition to the texts already cited that suggest that Christ is our law (1 Cor. 9:21 and Gal. 6:1–2) we may note three other significant passages in which following the will of Christ is stressed. According to 1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. *Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*” (italics mine). This means that when Paul acts in redemptive concern for others, rather than self-concern, he is imitating Christ. Ephesians 5:1–2 says, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ

loved us and *gave himself up for us*, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (RSV; italics mine). Here the imitation of God is found in following the sacrificial love of Christ.

Thus, we may say that the standard of human morality is set at its highest point by an act of God rather than by a command. This act is the manifestation of God’s love in the

life and death of Christ. Therefore, while precepts supply guidance, the ultimate pattern for behavior is given in a person rather than a precept. True, for believers the moral laws of scripture, whether embodied in the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, or



The resurrection

other ethical statements, continue to function as authoritative sources of guidance and concrete illustrations of what life in Christ involves. But the essence of New Testament teaching on the matter is that only by what God gives do we see with clarity what he requires, and does it become possible to begin fulfilling his requirement.

Biblical ethics has to do not merely with a listing of what the Bible calls us to do or avoid, but is a challenge to act toward others in a way that derives from, and is empowered by, the way Christ redemptively acted toward us. The indicative of God's grace (what God in Christ has done) is the presupposition for the imperative (what we are to do).

There are a number of passages that ground what believers are to do in the gift,

example, and strength of what Christ has done for them. The following are a sample of these:

John 13:34: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

Ephesians 4:32: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

Romans 12:1: "I appeal to you therefore...by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."

Romans 15:7: "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you."

2 Corinthians 5:15: "He died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them."

Galatians 5:25: "If we have gained life through the Spirit, let us also conduct our lives by the guidance of the Spirit" (my translation).

These texts, and others like them, make it clear that in Christ's act of self-giving our

redemption was accomplished and the nature of our discipleship was revealed. In Christ the biblical commands are not left behind, but are radicalized, internalized, and brought within the structure and service of the higher will of God, that greater righteousness, which was revealed in the self-giving love of Christ. The will of God for Christ was the cross; it is the same for the Christian. The cross stands for



The greatest commandment

that unselfish love which always seeks to help and heal and never to hurt. The cross reveals love that is willing to lose itself so that others may live (though the self which is lost through love is, like Christ, bound to rise again). As worthy and permanent as the Ten Commandments are, they cannot by themselves, as a written code (2 Cor. 3:6-7; Rom. 7:6), fully define the

claim of God that God's grace lays upon us. The will of God can be strongly suggested, but never completely exhausted by any group of rules. Judaism put its rules and regulations into the thousands of pages of the Talmud. But the largeness of the Talmud would look timid by comparison if we tried to set forth a codified rule for every possibility in life.

We can cap off an oil well; we can put a ceiling on a house; but we can never cap off or put a lid on the ethical commitment the gospel calls us to. Even when we have exemplified love itself, the apostolic call is to love more and more. Paul says that the Thessalonians are living to please God, but they are to do so more and more (1 Thess. 4:2). And even though they have no need to be taught about love and are showing much love, they are to do so *more and more* (9-10). Paul prays, "May the Lord make you to *increase and abound* in love" (3:12). It is important to point out that the fundamental reason for the "more" of these texts is not because original sin keeps us from doing the

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good, or doing it perfectly, but because of the inexhaustible nature and challenge of Christ's love. In other words the "more" is related to a positive rather than negative reality.

In Philippians 1:9–11 the apostle says, "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." This text uncovers the nature of the Christian ethic. As the Christian lives in the insight of Christ's love, he or she is to *learn* the excellent way that meets with God's approval. This concept coheres with that expressed in Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may *discern* what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (NRSV; italics mine). Within the framework of the love of Christ transforming the mind, the Christian is called to discover and discern what God's will is in the varied circumstances of life. According to Ephesians 5:8–10, "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. *Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord*" (italics mine). In other words, the Christian is one who in every situation seeks the will of God, for what pleases him (see 1 Thess. 4:1–2).

Is this situation ethics? Yes, but not in the sense that many understand the phrase. It is situational in the sense that the very specific nature of Christ's love, its self-giving quality, which is the basic principle for Christian existence, is applied to every situation of life. Every problem is to find its resolution in the life and love of Christ. And the very

fact that it is the principle of love that has to be applied means that in every case the action must be in real measure a creative reaction to the situation. It can never be mere legalistic or formalistic obedience to a precept. The beginning of right relations with one's neighbor is to see in him or her one for whom Christ has died (1 Cor. 8:11; Rom. 14:15). The Christian will always say, when tempted to injure another or use another for his own purposes, "But how can I do this? This person is one for whom Christ (no less than *he!*) died (no less than *that!*). Can I now bring hurt, when Christ's purpose was only to heal?"

As already observed, the Christian life is not a legally conceived or oriented life. A list of rules can never in extent or depth express the fullness of God's will. To those who think morality can be reduced to a list of commands and who claim, like the rich young ruler: "All these I observed from my youth" (RSV)—to these Christ will always reply, "One thing you still lack" (Luke 18:22, RSV). Not only can the totality of morality not be encompassed in a list, but there is no strength to do God's will in such lists. Romans 7 makes this clear with its picture of a person who wills the right, but cannot but do the wrong. As the law cannot justify, neither can it sanctify.

The gospel offers us first and foremost a new life, not a new list. That is why Paul says in Romans 7:4, 6, "Likewise my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God... But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we

serve no longer under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (RSV). According to Romans 8:3–4, "What the law could not do"—it could not save from sin—God did,



David's son

through the offering of Christ who died in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk by the Spirit. The law is not fulfilled in terms of legal or formal service to commandments, but in terms of following the guidance of the Spirit, which produces the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23).

Against such things Paul contends, “there is no law.” This has a twofold meaning, I believe. Not only does the law not make stipulations against such qualities, but the intention of the law is fulfilled when the Spirit with its fruit is present. The latter point is supported by Galatians 5:13, which declares that love fulfills the law.

Paul also uses the word “fruit” in Philippians 1:11, “the fruit of righteousness,” and in Ephesians 5:9, “the fruit of light.” The word “fruit” suggests that the good deeds of believers are characterized by spontaneity. They are the natural outcome of a transformed nature rather than the strenuous attempt to conform to an external code. Ellen White says it well: “If we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to his will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses.”³ And though we speak of fruit and spontaneity, it remains true that the good things the law requires are still to be done, but the motive force behind these actions is love for the Christ who loved us, rather than legal striving after obedience. Ellen White makes this relevant statement:

In heaven, service is not rendered in the spirit of legality. When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of. In their ministry the angels are not as servants, but

as sons. There is perfect unity between them and their creator. Obedience to them is no drudgery. Love for God makes their service a joy. So in every soul wherein Christ, the hope of glory dwells, his words are re-echoed. “I delight to do thy will, O my God; yea, Thy law is within my heart.”⁴

The basic argument of this paper may be applied to the Sabbath. Adventists believe that the Sabbath represents the final test in the Great Controversy. This can only be possible if the Sabbath is understood in terms of



The good Samaritan

the reality of Christ himself. While the fourth commandment does require the keeping of the seventh day as the Sabbath, the Sabbath test is not only which day we are to keep, the *law* of the Sabbath, but whether Christ is the *Lord* of the Sabbath and the Lord of our lives. For Christians the center of the seventh-day Sabbath must be Jesus. In a

striking statement on the significance of the Sabbath, Ellen White states: “To all who receive the Sabbath as a sign of Christ’s creative and redeeming power, it will be a delight. *Seeing Christ in it, they delight themselves in Him.* The Sabbath points them to the works of creation as an evidence of His mighty power in redemption. While it calls to mind the lost peace of Eden, it tells of peace restored through the Savior. And every object in nature repeats *His invitation, ‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.’* Matt. 11:28” (italics mine).⁵ The question of the Sabbath is therefore the question of Christ.

In conclusion, we may represent the relationship of Christ to all the law in terms of the shape of a pine tree. At the bottom of the tree are the varied precepts found throughout scripture; higher up, as the tree narrows, are

Christ our law ➔ continued on page 59...

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