

The Moral Law from a Christ-centered Perspective:

A Canonical and Integrative Approach

by

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Abstract²

This essay uses a canonical and integrative approach to examine the nature of the moral law from a Christ-centered perspective. The writer affirms that the Messiah, as the divine, incarnate Torah (John 1:1, 14, 16-18), fulfilled the law by carrying out its ethical injunctions, showing forth its true spiritual meaning, and bringing all that it stood for prophetically to completion (Matt 5:17). The Redeemer is the culmination (that is, the destination, goal, outcome, and fulfillment) of the law for believers (Rom 10:4) and the realization of the law's types, prophecies, and expectations (Heb 1:1-4; 8:8-8, 13). While His death and resurrection put an end to the administrative and ritual aspects of the law, its universal moral absolutes remain authoritative and applicable for His followers (Jas 1:19-20, 22-27; 2:8-27). The foremost way they heed the moral law is by showing unconditional, Christlike love to others (Rom 13:8-10; Jas 2:8).

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² This essay is a preliminary version of a chapter to appear in a forthcoming monograph being researched and written by the author. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the faculty and staff of SATS. © 2007 All rights reserved.

1. The Intent of This Essay

The intent of this essay is to examine the nature of the moral law from a Christ-centered perspective and to do so in a canonical and integrative manner. It builds on the findings and conclusions presented in my monograph dealing with the relationship between the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount (Lioy 2004). In that study, I maintained that God's universal ethical absolutes were applicable for the church today. In the last chapter, I noted some areas for further research. This included how Matthew 5:17-20 interlaced with other pivotal texts (for instance, Romans 10:4 and the Book of Hebrews) regarding the continuing applicability of the moral law. The latter part of this essay investigates these matters further, along with exploring other relevant portions of the New Testament, but before that is done, a foundation of understanding is laid regarding the biblical concept of the law and the relationship of Jesus and His followers to the law.

2. The Biblical Concept of the Law

Foundational to this study is the biblical concept of the law, an issue I have previously discussed at length (Lioy 2004:13-34). This includes understanding various legal terms used in the Old Testament, the primary one of which is the Hebrew noun *tôrâ*. Depending on the context in which the word is used, it can mean "direction", "instruction" or "law". *Tôrâ* appears not only in legal texts, but also in narratives, speeches, poems, and genealogies. An examination of Scripture indicates that for the ancient Hebrews, morality was not an abstract concept disconnected from the present; rather, it signified ethical imperatives concerning how people of faith should live.

A similar mindset is found in the New Testament, especially in connection with the Greek noun *nomos*. The focus of this term is on ethical standards and rules of conduct, as established by tradition. Such synonyms as "custom", "principle" and "norm" help to convey the lexical range of meanings found in *nomos*. The term also is used to denote what people should do, with such terms as "ordinance", "rule" and "command" helping to capture this sense of the noun. Depending on the context, *nomos* is used to refer to the Pentateuch, guidelines for ethical behavior and the promise of God. The noun denotes

ethical instruction that is divine in origin and concerns the way of life characterized by righteousness and blessing. While in the New Testament, *nomos* does not refer to the teaching tradition of Israel's religious leaders, an awareness of the oral Torah can help one to better understand and appreciate the New Testament concept of the law.

Clarifying the biblical concept of the law includes a discussion of its nature, various categories and interrelated purposes. With respect to its nature, the law reflects the holiness of God and His will for humankind. Also, by means of His law, God evaluates how closely people live up to His flawless moral standard (cf. Rom 3:20). While there is an essential unity to the law, it would be incorrect to view it as a judicial monolith, for its various ordinances deal with civil, ceremonial, and ethical matters. While the administrative and ritual aspects of the Mosaic legal code are no longer binding on Christians, the moral aspects of God's law remain authoritative for the church (cf. John 14:15; 1 Cor 9:21; Gal 5:13-14; 6:2; 1 John 5:2-3). Admittedly, Scripture does not explicitly map out these particular distinctions; nonetheless, they represent a valid and useful demarcation of the three main types of law appearing in Scripture.

The three main categories of biblical law served distinct, though related, purposes. Because ancient Israel was a theocracy (in which the people recognized God as their King), the civil codes and religious ordinances were limited in their application to that nation during the period of the Old Testament. The moral law, however, transcends the time and culture of ancient Israel and has enduring applicability for the household of faith today. Two premier examples of the ethical aspect of God's law would be the Ten Commandments (recorded in Exod 20:1-17 and Deut 5:6-21) and the Sermon on the Mount (recorded in Matt 5-7). Because these portions of Scripture represent the epitome of God's will for humankind, they also serve as useful starting points for recognizing His universal moral absolutes.

Just as there are various categories of biblical law, there are also several interrelated purposes. The first of these is to increase the cognizance people have of their sin (cf. Rom 3:20; 4:15; 5:13; 7:7-11). They recognize that they have violated God's will and fall short of His glorious moral standard (3:23). Second, the law spotlights the transgressors' need for a Redeemer, that is,

salvation through faith in the Son (Gal 3:19-24). Third, the law helps to restrain evil by specifying the kinds of acts that are wicked. In this way, it assists governing authorities to maintain civil order, protect the innocent, and penalize the unjust. Fourth, the law helps God's people to recognize and live uprightly by giving them an ethical frame of reference. They are able to do so, for they are indwelt by the Spirit and energized by the Father's love.

3. The Relationship of the Messiah to the Law

In any discussion concerning the relevancy of the law for believers, it is important clarify the nature of the relationship between the Messiah and the law. Throughout His time on earth, Jesus remained subject to the law (Gal 4:4), and as a righteous Jew, acted in accordance with its stipulations (Luke 2:21-23; 4:16). Jesus also upheld the truth that the moral law continued to be relevant and binding (Matt 5:17-18). Furthermore, as Israel's greatest teacher (cf. Matt 7:28-29; John 13:13-14), He expounded on the meaning of the law and clarified its significance for God's people (e.g., Matt 5:21-48). In particular, Jesus stated that love for God and all people were the foremost commandments of Scripture (Matt 22:37-40; cf. Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18).

In His teaching ministry, Jesus disclosed the true meaning and intent of the law. He also affirmed the divine authority of the Hebrew sacred writings. This included condemning the extra-biblical traditions added to the Mosaic code (cf. Matt 15:1-9; 23:1-36) and censuring rigid, inaccurate views of the law (cf. Matt 5:20, 38). His sought neither to invalidate God's commands nor add new edicts to what already existed; instead, He strove to undo humanly imposed notions of right and wrong that ran counter to the divine intent of the law (cf. Mark 7:1-23).

When Adam and Eve violated God's command (Gen 3:1-7), sin entered the world and brought death along with it (Rom 5:12). The law of God was within its rightful authority to condemn all people, for all Adam's descendants had violated what the Lord decreed (Rom 3:23). Through Jesus' atoning sacrifice at Calvary, the fundamental relationship between regenerate sinners and the law was radically altered. To be specific, the Messiah, through His work on the cross, rendered powerless the law's ability to condemn those trusting in

Him. As a result of their spiritual union with Christ (Rom 6:1-7), they were pardoned (or acquitted) of sin and delivered from eternal damnation (Rom 8:1).

In addition, Jesus' death and resurrection put an end to the need for the ritualistic elements of the Mosaic code. As the sacrificial Lamb of God, Jesus satisfied the demands of the law completely and for all time (cf. John 1:29; Heb 7:26-28; 9:1, 9-10, 23-27). In this way, the Saviour brought to pass the spiritual reality foreshadowed by the ceremonial laws, thus rendering them obsolete and outdated (Heb 8:13). The upshot is that neither the civil nor ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic legal code remain binding for believers today; nonetheless, these aspects of the law continue to have pedagogic value for believers, especially as they seek to understand and adhere to God's moral law.

4. The Relationship of Believers to the Law

Jesus, through His atoning death at Calvary, frees believers from the condemnation of the law, but not from living in accordance with its timeless moral precepts and injunctions. After all, the "law is holy"³ (Rom 7:12); likewise, its commandments are "holy, righteous and good". The implication is that God's universal moral absolutes are eternal in nature, unchanging, and perfect. As such, they transcend historical eras and societal constructs, having applicability for Christians down through the centuries.

The New Testament affirms the abiding validity of the ethical precepts of the Mosaic legal code. Paul noted that when we "live ... according to the Spirit", the "righteous requirement of the law" is "fully met in us" (Rom 8:4). Similarly, John exhorted the believers in his day to "keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21). This injunction brings to mind the second commandment of the Decalogue prohibiting idolatry (Exod 20:4; Deut 5:8). Clearly, the holy God revealed in the Old Testament is the same Lord disclosed in the New Testament.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from *Today's New International Version* (hereafter abbreviated, TNIV).

Some might argue that biblical concepts of God have changed between the time of Abraham and Moses in the Old Testament and Jesus and the disciples in the New Testament. This notion, however, is undercut by the indistinguishable theological orientation found throughout the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, especially as seen in their moral directives. As a matter of fact, legal imperatives are an inseparable part of the Lord's covenant relationship with His people. In short, the covenant and law go hand in hand to create a unified and holy community of the redeemed down through the ages (cf. Heb 12:18-29). Not surprisingly, then, the ethical instruction given by Jesus and His apostles reflects an affirmation of the Mosaic legal code and its reapplication to believers this side of Calvary.

5. The Messiah's Fulfillment of the Law (Matt 5:17-19)

I have previously discussed the way in which the Messiah fulfilled the moral law (Lioy 2004:104-106, 136-144), and a review of that information is in order here. The key biblical text is Matthew 5:17-20, with verses 21-48 forming a broader pertinent scriptural context. A pivotal interpretative issue concerns whether Jesus was taking umbrage with the Mosaic law recorded in the Old Testament or the Pharisaic interpretation of the same. In this discussion, I am siding with the latter premise; in other words, the Messiah was challenging the Halakha, the collective body of Jewish religious law, including talmudic and rabbinic ordinances, customs, and traditions.

In verse 17, Jesus' collectively referred to the Hebrew sacred writings as "the Law" and "the Prophets", which mirrors how religious experts of the day would have talked about the entire Old Testament. Some think the Messiah wanted to abrogate, supersede, or replace the Mosaic legal code. Others conjecture that He radicalized the demands of the law and intensified its requirements, and in the process nullified some longstanding injunctions. Still others maintain that Jesus introduced demands that go beyond and in different directions from those found in the law (cf. Banks 1975:210, 229-230, 235; Barth 1976:153-159; Davies 1962:33-34, 39; Geisler 1989:204-207; Guthrie 1981:676-677; Fanning 1994b:431; Jeremias 1971:206; Lowery 1994a:47-48; Marshall 2004:118-119; Menninger 1994:104-108; Moo 1992:450, 454-456;

Moo 1993:350-353; Pate 2000:350-351; Sanders 1985:260; Sanders 1990:93-94; Thielman 2005:87, 89-90).

None of these options are acceptable, for they contradict Jesus' statement that He did not "come to abolish the Law and the Prophets". "Abolish" renders the Greek verb *katalyo*, which means "to put an end to the effect or validity of something". The idea is that during the Saviour's first advent, He did not seek to annul, repeal, do away with, or make invalid the Mosaic legal code. Instead, His primary concern was to dismantle incorrect views about the law, especially faulty interpretations promulgated by the religious specialists of the day. This included a works-based form of righteousness in which strict adherence to the law would gain people their salvation (cf. Rom 9:30-33).

Rather than tear down all that the law stood for and represented, Jesus came to "fulfill" (Matt 5:17) the same. The Greek verb *plērōo* has three interrelated meanings (cf. Barth 1976:67-68; Branscomb 1930:226-229; Jeremias 1971:84-85; Meier 1976:73-75; Motyer 1996:61; Sanders 1985:261; Suggs 1970:115-119), each of which apply to what Jesus said about Himself. The Messiah fulfilled the law by carrying out its ethical injunctions, showing forth its true spiritual meaning, and bringing all that it stood for prophetically to completion (cf. Bock 2002:132; Bolton 1978:61-62; Henry 1957:318-319; Ladd 1997:122-123; Loader 2002:167-168; McQuilkin 1995:46-49; Murray 1957:150; Sprinkle 2006:27; VanGemeren 1993:38-39). The idea is that Jesus obeyed the law perfectly, thoroughly, and absolutely. He is the realization of its types and prophecies and the exclusive inspired interpreter of its teachings. Furthermore, He alone fully satisfied the payment for sin required by the law. Thus, He is more than an ideal example of how God's people should act. The Son is the object of the believers' faith, enabling them to be declared righteous in the Father's sight. Jesus also leads them beyond a surface-level compliance with the law to an inward adherence to its moral expectations.

There is no dichotomy, then, between Jesus and the Mosaic legal code. What He taught and did stood in continuity with the Old Testament, while at the same time made a break with the prevalent legalistic traditions of the day. Jesus endeavored to clarify what God originally revealed in the law, truths that had been obscured by some religious experts in the intertestamental period. The Saviour made it clear that erroneous views about the law were separate

from it and worthy of being rejected. Accordingly, His goal was to abrogate unscriptural notions by replacing them with the truth.

The moral law forms the backdrop of Jesus' declaration recorded in verse 18. This is due in part to the fact that during His earthly ministry, He began to nullify the ceremonial aspect of the Mosaic legal code (cf. Mark 7:19; Acts 10:15; 1 Tim 4:4). Indeed, because of Jesus' high priestly ministry, the ceremonies and sacrifices connected with the Levitical priesthood ceased to be valid (Heb 8:13). While the administrative and liturgical functions of the law were no longer in force, God's universal moral absolutes remained in effect. This is made clear when Jesus solemnly assured His listeners that "the smallest letter" (Matt 5:18) and "the least stroke of a pen" found in the law would never "disappear" from it until everything recorded in it was achieved. Not even "heaven and earth" would vanish before God had "accomplished" all that He declared would come to pass.

Ginomai is the Greek verb rendered "accomplished" and it refers to attaining to or arriving at something. From a Christ-centered standpoint, Jesus satisfied all the demands of the Torah, fulfilled their prophetic announcements, and flawlessly elucidated their divinely inspired teaching. These interrelated purposes find their fullest and most ultimate expression in the Saviour's atoning sacrifice on the cross. Through His death and resurrection, He makes it possible for believers to live in accordance with the ethical standards of the law. Likewise, all the hopes and dreams for saved humanity, as expressed in the law, reach their consummation and closure as a result of the Son's redemptive work.

Behind Jesus' statements in verse 19 is His refusal to countenance any misinterpretations and misapplications of the law. The religionists of the day ignored the least commandment by using the Mosaic legal code to win acceptance with God; and they encouraged others to disregard the law by perpetuating the incorrect notion that a mere outward compliance with rules and regulations ensured the intactness of one's relationship with God. In the end, the meticulous observance of human traditions and opinions is an inadequate substitute for the moral law. Those who so depreciated the ordinances of Scripture would be considered least in the kingdom of the Lawgiver. Oppositely, those who affirmed the moral law—from the least to

the greatest of its injunctions—would correspondingly be “called great in the kingdom of heaven”.

The ethical demands of the kingdom exceed what anyone can humanly achieve on their own. Indeed, no matter how closely religionists might try to abide by the technicalities of the law, their sinful nature undermines their best efforts (cf. Rom 7:7-25). Even the smallest infraction makes one guilty of breaking all of God’s commands (cf. Jas 2:10). This was just as true for such pious leaders as “the Pharisees and the teachers of the law” (Matt 5:20). Because they remained entrenched in their legalism and hypocrisy, they would fail to secure redemption for themselves. Only those who rely on God—completely and exclusively—will be admitted to the divine kingdom.

6. The Messiah as the Divine, Incarnate Torah (John 1:1, 14, 16-18)

I have elsewhere explored the Johannine view of Jesus’ relationship to the Mosaic law (Lioy 2005:66-71, 80-87), information that is germane to this essay. Foundational is the apostle’s presentation of Jesus as the eternally preexistent, divine Word. John 1:1 uses the Greek noun *logos* to refer to the Messiah as “the independent personified expression of God” (Danker 2000:601) to the world. *Logos* represents a fusion of the religious-philosophical outlook of ancient Greece and the monotheistic orientation of biblical Judaism. The resulting emphasis is on Jesus being the Creator, Sustainer, Ruler, and Judge of the universe. In short, He is the divine, incarnate Torah, the One who embodies God’s wisdom, revelation, and command.

The opening verse of John’s Gospel uses the Greek term *archē* (translated “beginning”) in connection with the Messiah. At the dawn of time, when the material universe came into being, the Logos already existed. Every aspect of life, whether temporal or eternal, originated from and was consummated in the Logos. Also, because He is the divine, incarnate Torah, the Logos is the source of whatever is considered right and true. With the enfleshment of the Word, God has entered the scene of human history to usher in a new age of redemption. The climax of this cosmic drama is the Son’s atoning sacrifice at Calvary, which proves to be the success, not failure, of His divinely

foreordained mission. In this way, the Logos reveals the heart of the Father and enables believing sinners to become His spiritual children (cf. v. 12).

John 1:1 states that the divine, incarnate Torah was with the Father from all eternity. Their relationship is intimate, personal, and (in a manner of speaking) face-to-face. The apostle, by using the Greek noun *theos* in reference to Jesus, emphasized that the Logos is truly God, just as are the Father and the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the fullness of the Godhead resides in all three Persons of the Trinity, implying that they each fully share the same divine nature (cf. John 5:18; 8:58; 10:30; 17:11; Rom 9:5; Phil 2:6; Col 2:9; Heb 1:3; 2 Pet 1:1). Also, because the Son is uncreated, He is not dependent on anyone or anything; instead, every entity throughout the universe exists because of Him and for Him.

Logos is again used in John 1:14 in connection with the divine Torah of eternity becoming a human being (literally, “flesh”) and taking up residence among humankind. Jesus, without giving up any of His attributes as God (cf. Phil 2:6-8), took upon Himself a full and genuine human nature. Thus, within the person of the Messiah was the complete and perfect union of His divine and human natures (Col 1:19; 2:9; Heb 1:3). In becoming incarnate, the Word remained untainted by and free from sin (cf. Rom 8:3; Heb 4:5; 7:26). These truths are not a theological abstraction, but rather signify the literal enfleshment of the Creator in space and time.

“Made his dwelling” translates the Greek verb *skēnōo*, which is more literally rendered “tabernacled”. This serves as a reminder of the shrine in the wilderness wherein the Lord displayed His glory among the Israelites (cf. Exod 25:8; 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:10-11). The grandeur and splendor of God were also present in the Messiah, whose “glory” (John 1:14) the disciples noted. In one sense, the luminescent perfection of God shining forth from Jesus is implied by the Greek term *doxa* (cf. the account of the Transfiguration recorded in Matt 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36); but the most profound way in which Jesus’ followers witnessed His glory was through His death on the cross, followed by His resurrection and ascension (cf. John 7:39; 12:23, 28; 13:31-32; 17:1, 4-5).

This is none other than the glory of the divine, incarnate Torah, whom John 1:14 refers to as “the one and only” Son. The phrase renders the Greek word *monogenēs*, a term that points to something distinctively unique, special, or one-of-a-kind. With respect to the Logos, He alone is the eternal Son of God, the extraordinary object of the Father’s love, and equal to the Father and the Spirit as God. Just as important is the apostle’s statement about the Logos being “full of grace and truth”. *Charis* (literally, “grace”) denotes God’s enduring love (*chesed* in Hebrew), while *alētheia* (literally, “truth”) refers to God’s faithfulness (*’emet* in Hebrew). In the Old Testament, the Lord made His mercy and compassion known through an intermediary such as Moses (cf. Exod 33:18-19; 34:6-7). Now, with the advent of the Messiah, grace and truth from God have reached their full and final expression (cf. John 14:6; Eph 2:8).

The eternal preexistence of the divine, incarnate Torah was the basis for John the Baptizer declaring that the Messiah far outranked him (John 1:15). The same preeminent, incarnate Lord inundated His disciples with the fullness of His presence. The apostle referred to it as *charin anti charitos*, which is literally rendered “grace upon grace” (v. 16). Admittedly, God’s unmerited favor was already present throughout the Old Testament era; yet John, without diminishing this truth, noted that the enfleshment of the Logos resulted in even more of an inexhaustible supply of divine grace being piled on top of grace for the redeemed. Less likely is the view that the grace of God available under the new covenant somehow replaces or displaces what was available under the old covenant (cf. McQuilkin 1995:52; Moo 1992:461; Räisänen 1986:196). Ultimately, there is a strong correspondence and continuity between the testaments with respect to the compassion and faithfulness of the Lord that He made available to the faith community.

This emphasis on continuity between the testaments also applies to the “law” (*nomos*), which is mentioned in verse 17. After all, it was the triune God who revealed the law to Moses, and he in turn made it known to Israel (cf. Heb 1:1). That same body of teaching pointed to the long awaited Messiah, the very individual about whom Moses wrote (John 5:46). Likewise, Abraham and Isaiah foresaw the advent of the Redeemer (cf. 8:56; 12:41). Admittedly, the perspective of these and other Old Testament saints was limited (cf. 1 Pet 1:10-12); nonetheless, the Spirit enabled them to prophesy about the

humiliation and exaltation of the Messiah (cf. Deut 18:15, 18; Ps 2:1-2; 22; 28:16; 118:22; Isa 52:13—53:12; Matt 21:42; Luke 24:25-27, 44-47; Acts 4:11, 25-26; 1 Cor 10:3).

As the divine, incarnate Torah, Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God (cf. Heb 1:2-3). He is also the one through whom God's "grace and truth" (John 1:17; cf. Exod 33:13) are made available to believers in fullest abundance. While there is an implied contrast between Moses and the Messiah in John 1:17, it would be incorrect to conclude that Jesus either displaced and repudiated the law or questioned its abiding validity and authority (cf. Loader 2002:448-451; Pancaro 1975:539-543; Paroschi 2006:162-165); instead, the emphasis is on Jesus fulfilling the Mosaic corpus (Fernando 2004:70; Ladd 1997:266-267; Murray 1957:123, 150; Motyer 1996:61, 134; Sloyan 1978:118; Sprinkle 2006:31-32, 38-39; VanGemeren 1993:37-38). Jesus is not simply a new Moses. More importantly, the Son utterly transcends Israel's lawgiver as well as all other prominent individuals in the Old Testament (cf. Heb 3:1-7). With the advent of the divine, incarnate Torah, the old era is subsumed by the new one. Indeed, all the redemptive-historical types and prophecies recorded in the sacred Hebrew writings find their consummation in the Son (cf. 10:1).

Although the Mosaic law is holy (cf. Rom 7:12), it could only provide an incomplete understanding of God (Guthrie 1981:684; cf. Heb 1:1-2). In addition, He who "lives in unapproachable light" (1 Tim 6:16) has never been seen in the fullness of His glory by human eyes (John 1:18; cf. Exod 33:20; 1 John 4:12). The only exception is the divine, incarnate Torah (John 6:46). All that the law anticipated and declared is embodied in the Messiah. He is not only the "one and only son" (1:18; Greek, *monogenēs huios*), but also "God" (*theos*) made in "human likeness" (Phil. 2:6). John 1:18 uses the Greek noun *kolpos* to declare that the Lord Jesus abides in intimate relationship with the Father (as well as the Spirit). As the premier soteriological and eschatological revelation of the Torah, the Son has made the Father known to humankind (cf. Fernando 2004:65-66; Paroschi 2006:158-161; Sprinkle 2006:37).

With the advent of the Messiah, the Father's revelation to believers is ultimate, complete, and final (cf. Fernando 2004:68). This truth is emphasized by the Greek verb *exegeomai*, which means "to expound" or "to set forth in great detail". Interestingly, the English noun "exegesis" is derived from the

verb and refers to a critical explanation or interpretation of a text. What the law of Moses could not elucidate about the triune God has now been fully unveiled by the divine, incarnate Torah. Only He could reveal the essential being of the Godhead, for the Messiah alone is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), the “exact representation of [God’s] being” (Heb 1:3), and the One in whom “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col 2:9). We should not be surprised, then, that Jesus said to Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

7. The Messiah as the Culmination of the Law (Rom 3:21, 28, 31; 6:6, 14; 7:5-6; 8:1-4; 9:30-32; 10:3-4; 13:8-10)

The Pauline writings contain a wealth of information about the moral law, and the apostle’s letter to the Romans is possibly his most seminal text on the issue. His epistle affirms the truth that there is a fundamental unity and continuity between the testaments, in which the same world view and theological message is consistently maintained (cf. Lioy 2005:15). For instance, the gospel Paul declared had its origin in the Hebrew Scriptures and previously was the subject of the prophets’ interest (Rom 1:2). In fact, the message of truth had even been proclaimed to Abraham (Gal 3:8); and so the good news Paul heralded was not something novel or deviant, but rather grounded in the revelation of the Old Testament.

This literary and theological coherence between the testaments is reflected in Paul’s discussion of the moral law. By way of example, Romans 3:21 states that the entire Hebrew corpus testified to the “righteousness of God”. The precise meaning of this phrase is debated among scholars, with some asserting that the emphasis is on God’s attribute of righteousness. Without denying the truth of the latter, a more likely exegetical option is that Paul was emphasizing God’s justifying activity in conferring an upright status on believers; hence, the verse is referring to righteousness from God, which He imputes to sinners who trust in the Messiah for salvation (cf. Kruse 1996:170, 188-189; Martin 2001:126-127; McGrath 1993:520-521; Thielman 2005:346; VanDrunen 2006:43; cf. 1:17; 3:22).

In 3:31, Paul asked whether his stress on faith in the Son as the basis for imputed righteousness nullifies the law (that is, renders it inoperative). Expressed differently, does an emphasis on faith somehow imply that believers can forget about the law? The apostle's response was an emphatic "not at all!" The basis for this assertion stems from the interrelated purposes of the law, which were mentioned earlier in this essay. In short, God did not give the law to provide justification but rather to show people their state of sin and their need to be reconciled with Him. Consequently, the faith of those who trust in the Messiah actually "uphold the law", especially its continuing authority to condemn those who reject the Son. From what has been said, the Messiah is central to the believers' ongoing relationship with the law.

In 6:14, Paul revealed that sin is no longer the believers' master. Here the apostle metaphorically depicted sin as a powerful foe that enslaves people (cf. Ps 19:13). Sin misuses the law to arouse evil desires within the lost. In turn, these forbidden passions yield a harvest of ungodly deeds, resulting in death (Rom 7:5). The situation is different for believers. Their identification with Jesus' in His death, burial, and resurrection means they have died to the law (6:1-14). Consequently, they are no longer held captive like prisoners under its condemnation. Now that they are "released from the law" (7:6), they can serve God by living in the Spirit (cf. VanDrunen 2006:4).

Paul, in saying that believers are no longer "under the law" (6:14), did not mean they have no obligation to heed God's universal ethical absolutes. In fact, when believers operate "under grace", the Spirit enables them to do all that the moral law enjoins. Put another way, under the disciplinary authority of grace, believers have the freedom to live according to a higher principle—a principle that is rooted in the resurrection life of the Lord Jesus (cf. Titus 2:11-12). He has unshackled them from slavery to sin so that they can become slaves, or willing servants, to righteous living (cf. Rom 6:15-18).

Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross is the basis for God showering believers with His love and grace, rather than giving them the punishment they deserve (cf. 5:1-11). Jesus' redemptive work at Calvary is also the reason why there is no condemnation, or looming eternal punishment, for those who are united to Him by faith (8:1). His followers operate in the power of the Spirit, who is life-giving, rather than the power of sin, which is death-producing. In verse 2,

the Greek noun translated “law” (*nomos*) can refer to a controlling principle (cf. 3:27; 7:21-23). Another possibility is that Paul meant the law of God functioning within two different contexts. In one situation, sin misuses the law and brings about death for sinners. In the opposite situation, believers operate in the Son through the Spirit to obey the moral law, which leads to life (cf. Bandstra 1964:108-110; Martin 2001:31; Thielman 1994:201-202).

The viability of this second option is reinforced by the explanation Paul supplied in 8:3. He noted that the sinful nature weakened the Mosaic law by arousing forbidden passions within the lost; and in this crippled state, the law was “powerless” to free them from sin and death. What the law failed to achieve—providing righteousness for humanity—the Father did by sending His “in the likeness of sinful humanity”. The latter phrase implies that sin never controlled the Messiah; in turn, His human nature remained morally pure and spiritually undefiled. This qualified Him to be God’s offering to atone for the sins of the world (cf. John 1:29; 1 John 2:2).

By one righteous act on the cross, the incarnate Messiah “condemned sin in human flesh” (Rom 8:3). Likewise, the believers’ “old self” (6:6) was crucified with the Son. “Old self” refers to everything people were before trusting in Jesus for salvation, when they were still enslaved to sin (cf. 3:9), were ungodly (cf. 5:6), and were God’s enemies (cf. 5:10). In short, the old self is our state before being born again. The crucifixion of our pre-conversion, unregenerate self is the basis for sin losing its power in our lives and for our post-conversion, regenerate self being enlivened and empowered by the Spirit.

When people trust in the Son, a miraculous exchange occurs. Their guilty status as condemned sinners is transferred to the Messiah on the cross and His perfect righteousness is transferred to them. Through this exchange, the requirements of the law are met in full. Jesus’ righteousness operating in believers enables them to live consistently according to the Spirit of God, rather than according to the sinful nature (8:4). Additionally, the Saviour makes it possible for the moral law of God to become a part the innermost being of believing sinners and for its ethical injunctions and principles to affect their thoughts, emotions and decisions (Ladd 1997:553-554; cf. Jer 31:31-34).

These truths have sobering implications. To be specific, those who trust in the Son and operate in the power of the Spirit are declared righteous. Also, they live in such a way that they fully satisfy the requirements of the moral law. In contrast, those who reject the Messiah and operate in the “old way of the written code” (Rom 7:6)—that is, the letter of the Old Testament law—remain eternally condemned sinners (9:30-32). Their unregenerate status will never change as long as they insist on trying to get right with God by scrupulously keeping the law or assert that maintaining their covenant status as God’s people depends on them performing a never-ending catalog of meritorious works (Thielman 1993:532, 538; VanDrunen 2006:9-11, 45). The fundamental truth of the gospel is that people receive God’s imputed righteousness through faith in the Messiah, not earn it by doing what is commanded in the Mosaic legal code (Schreiner 1993c:975, 978; cf. Acts 15:11; Rom 3:28; 10:3; Gal 2:16).

Recent critical scholarship has largely abandoned the “traditional Reformation understanding” of the doctrine of justification by faith taught in Paul’s writings (Hafemann 1993:671). Indeed, despite the “plethora of new proposals” that specialists have offered, “no consensus has yet emerged” (Hafemann 1993:673; cf. Gager 2000:146; Thielman 1994:45-47). For instance, one current paradigm known as the “new perspective” on Paul (or NPP) is not a “unified, homogenous group”, but rather a “spectrum of viewpoints” (VanDrunen 2006:36; cf. Chancey 2006:21; Farnell 2005:201-202; Waters 2004:151). Admittedly, supporters of the NPP are right in disapproving any caricature of rabbinicism prevalent during the Second Temple period of Judaism (approximately 515 B.C.-A.D. 70; cf. Chancey 2006:20; Gieschen 2004:121, 144; Lichtenberger 2001:7, 22). Moreover, adherents are correct in emphasizing the importance of carefully analyzing primary sources written during that time, especially to obtain a clearer, more accurate understanding of the New Testament corpus, including the Pauline epistles (cf. Bird 2005:63-64, 68-69; Mattison 2006; Mitchell 1996).

Such affirmations notwithstanding, the major tenets of the NPP are undermined by an objective analysis of the biblical and extra-biblical data. According to Carson (2001:544), the NPP tries to adopt a single, tidy explanation for a diverse array of extra-biblical literature, with the result that the formulation is both “reductionistic” and “misleading” (cf. O’Brien

2004:253). Kim (2002:294-295) notes that the NPP sociological and philosophical reconstruction of Second Temple Judaism has attained the “status of a dogma” that “insists on interpreting Paul” only through the distorted lens of that credo. Others have observed that the NPP contradicts far more accurate and nuanced interpretations of the apostle’s theology found in conservative, confessional forms of Protestantism (cf. Busenitz 2005:258-259; Farnell 2005:203, 243; Riddlebarger 1996; Trueman 2000; Venema 2003; Waters 2004:151, 191-198; Watson 2001).

VanDrunen (2006:54) advances the discussion with the observation that those favoring the “new perspective” put too much “interpretive weight” on the literature found in first-century Judaism (Diaspora, Palestinian, and Qumran writings) and too little on the Judeo-Christian Scriptures (especially the broader historical and theological perspective found in them). They redefine “righteousness” as living in covenant relationship with God and remaining faithful to His covenant promises, over against the more traditional understanding of conforming to God’s perfect “moral standard”. “Works of the law” is said to refer to “boundary markers identifying Israel as God’s covenant people” (in particular, being circumcised, keeping the Sabbath, and observing dietary regulations), not attempts to create one’s own upright status before God by doing what the Mosaic law demands. “Justification” refers to the vindication of God’s covenant people before the pagan nations, not His unconditional pardoning and acceptance of believing sinners. The basis for justification is shifted from the “finished work” of the Lord Jesus at Calvary to the “Spirit-produced works of the believer”. Finally, NPP adherents reject the notion that the sin of the first Adam has been imputed to humanity and that the righteousness of the second (eschatological) Adam has been imputed to believers (cf. Bird 2005:58-63; Das 2001:5, 273; Gaffin 2002; Gieschen 2004:121-122; Horton 2004; Hughes 2005:275; Johnson 2004; O’Brien 2004:295-296; Seifrid 2006:19-28; Thomas 2005:315-316; Waters 2004:151-190; Westerholm 2006:16-25).

Romans 10:4 explains that the Saviour is the *telos* (literally, “end”) of the law for all who trust in Him. One implication is that He is the terminus of “using the law to establish one’s own righteousness” (Schreiner 1993b:121, 135; cf. Das 2003:93). There are two other interpretive options worth mentioning in connection with this verse. The first is that Jesus somehow brings about the

cessation or abolition of the Mosaic law, either historically, existentially, or both (cf. Adeyemi 2006:133-136, 206; Kruse 1996:226-229; Martin 2001:133-134, 141, 154; Pate 2000:248-249; Räisänen 1986:54-56, 82, 199-200; Sanders 1983:38-40; Strickland 1993:266-270). While it is true that the Messiah's death and resurrection put an end to the civil and ceremonial aspects of the law (a point made in the third section of this essay), its universal moral absolutes remain authoritative and applicable for His followers. Also, as I explained in the fifth section of this paper, it is incorrect to suppose that Jesus sought to annul, repeal, or do away with the Mosaic legal code. Accordingly, a second interpretive option is preferred, namely, that *telos* points to Jesus being the culmination (that is, the destination, goal, outcome, and fulfillment) of the law (Badenas 1985:114-115, 117-118, 143, 151; Bandstra 1964:101-106, 183; Bolton 1978:61; Das 2001:249-251; Fairbairn 1957:443-444; Gager 2000:134-135; Guthrie 1981:694; Henry 1957:180; Kaiser 1993:188; Meyer 2004:86, 89, 92; Moo 1993:358-359; Moo 2004:214-215; Morris 1990:62; Motyer 1996:38, 182; Rhyne 1981:103-104, 113-114, 118; Rhyne 1985:492-493, 498-499; Sloyan 1978:171; Thielman 1994:207-208; Wenham 1995:228; Wright 1991:24-244; cf. Matt 5:17). The implication is that all its types and prophecies are realized in Him, its teachings find their most perfect expression in Him, and its demands are most fully satisfied in Him (cf. Gal 3:24).

The ongoing relevance of the ethical and social aspects of the Mosaic law for believers is evident in Romans 13:8-10, where Paul stressed that Christians are duty bound to show love to all people (v. 8). This reflects Jesus' teaching in Matthew 22:34-40. He said the greatest commandment is to love God unconditionally and to love others as we love ourselves. There are always opportunities for believers to help others in need (Gal 6:10) and thus "fulfill the law of Christ" (v. 2). The latter phrase refers to "the moral norms" of the Old Testament legal code (Schreiner 1993a:542, 544; cf. Bandstra 1964:111-114; Das 2003:171-173; Ridderbos 1975:284-285; Sprinkle 2006:21; contra Adeyemi 2006:108-119), especially as interpreted by the Saviour (Kim 2002:267; Stanton 2001:115-116; Stanton 2004:113, 116, 122). To refuse to assist the disadvantaged would be a denial of God's love for us (cf. 1 John 3:16-18). We must pay the debt of love even to those who do not love us. For

this, we must rely on the Spirit for the strength to be kind to the mean and coldhearted (cf. Gal 5:22).

To love others unconditionally fulfills the moral requirements of the law of Moses (Gal 5:14). Romans 13:9 lists four of the ten commandments that appear in Exodus 20:1-17 (cf. Deut 5:6-21), and these four all concern relationships with other people. The Lord forbids His people from committing adultery, murdering, stealing, and coveting the possessions of others. Paul could have mentioned numerous additional injunctions. This was unnecessary, however, for the command in Leviticus 19:18 sums up every conceivable law: “Love your neighbor as yourself”. This directive acknowledges a self-evident truth, namely, that we instinctively love ourselves. When we make every effort to treat others with the sensitivity and compassion of the Messiah, we do what is prescribed in the moral law. In fact, love is the essence of God’s universal ethical absolutes (Rom 13:10).

8. The Messiah as the Realization of the Law’s Types, Prophecies, and Expectations (Heb 1:1-4; 8:8-8, 13)

The Book of Hebrews occupies a distinctive place among the New Testament writings for its emphasis on the superiority of the Messiah to leading figures and institutions existing during the Old Testament era. The epistle teaches that because of who Jesus is and what He has done, He is the realization of the law’s types, prophecies, and expectations. This truth harmonizes with what has been said up to this point concerning the Saviour’s relationship to the Mosaic legal code.

Hebrews 1:1 declares that during the era of the Old Testament, God spoke redemptively to His people through His prophets on a number of occasions. The Lord did so in various portions and in a variety of ways (for example, through visions, dreams, and riddles). The idea is that His revelation was fragmentary and partial, though fully inspired and authoritative. Prophets used a variety of means to convey God’s message to people, including oral, dramatic, and written forms. Prophets did not spend all of their time predicting the future. Much of their efforts went into observing what was taking place around them and declaring God’s message concerning those situations. The

prophets were not speaking on their own behalf or for their personal benefit. Rather, they were God's messengers, whom He authorized to convey vital truths to others.

The basis for God choosing to reveal Himself in progressive stages rests on the fact that He works with us according to the level of our understanding. At first, He revealed Himself only in shadows and symbols; but as people came to know more about Him and the way He works, He became more explicit in His dealings and disclosures. It is important to acknowledge these ancient revelations for what they taught people about God, while simultaneously noting that they pointed to a time when God would reveal Himself more fully and finally in "his Son" (v. 2).

The candid statements appearing in verse 1 were not meant to diminish the value of God's revelation through the Hebrew prophets. The fact that He considered them the transmitters of divine truth is evidence of just how much respect He held for these faithful servants of the Lord; but the same God who had partially revealed Himself in times past, now had disclosed Himself totally and ultimately in His Son. With the advent of the Messiah, everything is centered in Him. Expressed differently, He is the meta-narrative of life, whether temporal or eternal in nature. He in turn gives full and final expression to all that was previously revealed (cf. Luke 24:44), and He does so in a way that is focused, clear, and relevant.

"In these last days" (Heb 1:2) would carry a special significance for the first readers of the epistle, who probably interpreted the phrase to mean that Jesus, as the Saviour, had ushered in the messianic age. He is not merely the end of a long line of Old Testament prophets, but more importantly the one for whom the Hebrews had waited for centuries. He is the complete and distinct revelation of God. Even with the coming of the Saviour, the inspired nature of God's communication has not changed. The messages He conveyed through the prophets to the community of faith were graced by His power and love; and this remains true now that the Son has unveiled the Father to us. In fact, what the Messiah has disclosed is in harmony with all that appears in the Old Testament, for what the prophets foretold finds its realization in the Messiah (cf. Rom 1:2; 3:21).

Having pointed out Jesus' distinction as the Son of God, the author of Hebrews proceeded to explain ways in which God's revelation through the Saviour is better than all other revelations of the Lord. To show this superiority, the writer made a number of statements describing the Son. First, the Father appointed His Son as "heir of all things" (1:2). In Hebrew culture, the firstborn son was the highest ranked of all children. Therefore, he was also the family heir. Jesus is the heir, owner, and Lord of God's creation. Second, it is through the Son that the Father "made the universe". The Greek term rendered "universe" refers to the temporal ages and includes the spatial realm, which exists in those time periods. Before time and matter were created, the Messiah eternally preexisted.

Third, the Son is the "radiance" (v. 3) of the triune God's glory. This does not mean Jesus is merely a reflection of the Lord's majesty. The Messiah is God Himself, for the glory of God is His radiance. In Jesus' incarnation, He unveiled to humankind the majesty of the divine. Fourth, the Son is the "exact representation" of the triune God's being. The Greek word behind this translation originally referred to the die used in minting coins. The term later came to refer to the impression on coins. The writer of Hebrews was saying that who Jesus is corresponds exactly to that of the Godhead. Thus, He alone is the precise image of God's essence. While the Son is one with the Father and the Spirit in terms of their being, there remains a distinction of the divine persons of the Trinity. Fifth, not only did the Son create the universe, but He also holds it together by His powerful word. Through His sustaining royal decree, He prevents the cosmos from destruction. Clearly, the Son has a continued interest in the world and loves it. Thus, He is carrying it toward the fulfillment of His divine plan.

Sixth, at the heart of the divine plan and revelation to humankind is making redemption available for the lost. This is why the Son died to wash us from the stain of our sins. The Greek noun for "purged" is *katharismos*, from which we derive the term *catharsis*, meaning a purging that brings about spiritual renewal. The idea is that through His atoning sacrifice at Calvary, Jesus accomplished cleansing for humanity's transgressions. The writer expressed his thoughts in the past tense to underscore that the Messiah's redemptive work on our behalf has already been accomplished. Seventh, because Jesus completed the task for which He was sent, He was granted the place of highest

honor—to sit at God’s right hand in a posture of rest (as opposed to endlessly ministering in a standing position; cf. 10:11). The Lord Jesus did once and for all what the Hebrew priests were required to do on a regular basis. Now, as our great High Priest, the Messiah continually applies to us the purification for sins He obtained at the cross. This enables us to worship in God’s presence.

For the various reasons given by the writer of Hebrews, the Son is to be considered superior to everything else. This includes the angels (1:5-2:18), Moses (3:1-4:13), the office of the Aaronic priests (4:14-7:28), and the sacrifices the priests offered (8:1-10:18). In short, the Messiah is the realization of all the types, prophecies, and expectations connected with the Mosaic legal code.

Of particular relevance is the discussion appearing Hebrews 8 concerning the interrelationship between the old and new covenants (cf. Lioy 2006). Verses 1-5 indicate that because Jesus’ ministry is heavenly and unlimited, it is superior to that of the Levitical priests. The Saviour, as the mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5), has inaugurated a new and better covenant than the old one based on the Mosaic law. The new covenant is superior, precisely because it is “established on better promises” (Heb 8:6). The writer of Hebrews argued that if the first covenant had sufficiently met the needs of people and had adequately provided for their salvation, then there would have been no need for a new covenant to replace it (v. 7). But the old covenant was insufficient and inadequate in bringing people to God, and therefore a new covenant had to be established.

The nexus of the shortfall was not the covenant in and of itself, but those living under it. God had found fault with the Israelites, primarily because they did not continue in that covenant (v. 8). While God initiated the old covenant with His people, they also willingly agreed to it (cf. Josh 24). Thus, the covenant was a mutual obligation between God and the people. Nonetheless, the people often failed to live up to their part of the obligation (cf. Neh 9; Dan 9:1-19). As a result, human failure rendered the old covenant inoperative (cf. Rom 7:7-25).

The establishment of a new covenant naturally implies that the old covenant—especially its “ceremonies and rituals” (Kaiser 1993:186)—is obsolete, needs

to be replaced, and will eventually disappear from the scene altogether (Heb 8:13). It would be incorrect to conclude from the preceding remarks that the writer of Hebrews disparaged or maligned the old covenant, or that he indicated the abrogation of the moral law associated with it (cf. Fanning 1994a:401-403; Rhee 2001:144). The contrast is not between an evil system (namely, the old covenant) and a good system (namely, the new covenant), but between what is good and what is better. According to Jones (1994:110), the way in which the administrative and liturgical aspects of the Sinaitic covenant were “rendered nonbinding is by redemptive accomplishment rather than legislative repeal”. Furthermore, as Ladd (1997:630) notes, “all that the old order symbolized was fulfilled in the reality of Christ” (cf. Murray 1957:150-151; Portalatín 2006:58-60).

9. The Abiding Relevance of the Moral Law for Christians (Jas 1:19-20, 22-27; 2:8-27)

The implications of the moral law, especially its abiding relevance for believers, receives considerable attention in the Letter of James. Of particular importance is the biblical concept of righteousness, which is first mentioned in 1:20. In verse 19, James exhorted his readers to be slow to get angry. Human anger is a volatile emotion that can easily get out of control, especially in tense situations. When inappropriate forms of anger erupt, whether toward evildoers or unwanted circumstances, it does not accomplish God’s “righteousness” (v. 20). This means the aftermath of human anger falls short of God’s righteous moral standard, does not reflect the upright standing He gives believers in the Messiah, does not result in any of the good things God wants done, and is contrary to the equity and justice He will establish in His future eternal kingdom. In short, human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires, regardless of its form.

For many Christians, the concept of righteousness might seem too abstract to understand. This difficulty is decreased as they grow in their appreciation of what it means to live in a holy, or morally pure, manner. People are considered righteous when their personal behaviors are in harmony with God’s will as it is revealed in Scripture. The righteous person voluntarily serves the Lord (Mal 3:18), takes delight in Him (Ps 33:1), and gives thanks to Him for His mercy

and love (140:13). The righteous are blessed by God (5:12) and upheld by Him (37:17). The righteous may experience hardships and trials in life, but God promises to help them through the difficulty (34:19).

No matter how severe the believers' afflictions might be, the Lord will never forsake them (37:25) or allow them to fall (55:22). The prospect for the righteous is joy (Prov 10:28) and the way of the Lord is their strength, or refuge (v. 29). The Lord promises to be with them in their darkest moments (11:8) and to be a refuge for them in death (14:32). In summary, James was urging his readers to leave whatever sinful path they might have been on, and to follow the path of uprightness. Otherwise, they would be sinning by refusing to do what they knew to be "good" (Jas 4:17). Here we see that sins of omission (neglecting to do what is right) are just as inappropriate as sins of commission (opting to do what is wrong).

James told his readers that passively listening to God's Word was not enough to promote spiritual growth. It was just as important for them to obediently act upon what it says (1:22). To hear what the moral law declares without implementing its teachings is nothing but self-deception. Those who hear but do not heed God's Word are like people who observe what they look like in a mirror, walk away, and quickly forget the image they saw (vv. 23-24). James exhorted his readers to look carefully into and fix their attention on the "perfect law that gives freedom" (v. 25). They were to live out, not forget, what the law of liberty taught. The sustained and thoughtful study of God's universal ethical precepts would bring them true liberty, spiritual vitality, and abundant blessing in whatever they undertook.

"Religion" (v. 26) is another important biblical concept in James, especially in terms of the abiding relevance of the moral law for Christians. The Greek word translated "religious" denotes the practice of external rituals and observances of a spiritual tradition, such as attendance at worship, prayer, fasting, and giving to the poor. Merely doing these things does not in itself constitute true religion. Those who are genuinely pious demonstrate their faith by controlling what they say. On the other hand, failure to bridle the tongue betrays the self-deception in those who regard themselves as religious and exposes a form of spirituality that has no eternal value.

Verse 27 shifts the focus from outward observances to service for others, particularly “orphans and widows”. In Scripture, widows, orphans, and aliens are usually depicted as the most helpless among people. Often, they had none but God as their patron and protector (cf. Exod 22:22-23; Deut 10:18; Isa 1:17). Moreover, in Bible times, there was no social safety net to catch the dispossessed and homeless when their source of support was suddenly gone. Widows, orphans, and foreigners were frequently reduced to begging, especially if there was no friend, relative, or benefactor to care for them (cf. Gen 38:11; Ruth 1:8).

James 1:27 reflects this biblical perspective by focusing attention on orphans and widows who live in a state of distress. The writer maintained that clean and undefiled religion is demonstrated, not just in rituals and observances, but also in the upright conduct and righteous character associated with God’s moral law. Examples of this type of behavior include caring for those in anguish and keeping oneself clean in a morally polluted world. The writer’s intention in this passage was not to give a formal definition of religion. Rather, his aim was to draw a contrast between religion as mere ritualistic observance and faith in action that pleases God. Religion that demonstrates genuine spirituality and Christian maturity is an active faith motivated by love.

A similar emphasis can be found in 2:8, in which the writer focused on the directive recorded Leviticus 19:18. It is the supreme commandment in terms of defining how people should treat one another. This dictum is also royal, for among all the commandments given by God (who is the sovereign King of the universe), it sums up the entirety of the “moral norms” contained in the Old Testament legal code (Schreiner 1997:645). James 2:8 builds on this truth by stressing that the royal law will become the guiding principle in the future messianic kingdom. The author observed that believers are doing well when they love others as much as they love themselves. The point is that they cannot heed the most important directive in Scripture and discriminate against others at the same time (cf. vv. 1-7).

As this essay on the nature of the moral law has maintained, both testaments of Scripture are one unified expression, given by one Lawgiver. This means believers cannot make exceptions or subtract the ethical injunctions of God they dislike. Against the backdrop of His infinitely perfect moral standard

(Rom 3:23), the person who observes every divine law except for one, is still liable for violating them all (Jas 2:10; cf. VanDrunen 2006:5-6). The sobering reality is that everyone fails to heed the whole law (Rom 3:9-18), which is why people must depend on the imputed righteousness of the Lord Jesus in order to be saved (v. 24).

James set up a clear contrast between treating others the way we would like to be treated and showing favoritism toward somebody for any reason (Jas 2:9). Doing the first pleases God, while doing the second is sin. Accordingly, failing to observe the royal law—the most liberating, relationship-building command God ever gave—makes one a lawbreaker. Perhaps James thought that some among his readers would look upon showing favoritism as more a social convention than as sin. How, they might ask, could such a custom compare to sins like adultery and murder (v. 11)? The answer James provided is clear and direct. If we transgress any part of the moral law, we are guilty of breaking all of it (v. 10).

To better understand this concept, imagine a balloon with all the commands of God written upon it. Next, imagine trying to cut out one of the commands with a razor blade without affecting the others. James used the weighty sins of adultery and murder to explain that selective obedience to the provisions of God's universal ethical code was absurd. The author would scoff at the popular notion that certain iniquities do not affect our relationship with God because they are less serious than others.

The author seems to have associated obedience to the moral law with fellowship with God, the one who gave the law. From this perspective, heeding the precepts of God's abiding ethical absolutes is a display of faith and springs from love. Disobedience to the moral law, on the other hand, is a breach of faith that disrupts fellowship with God, the Lawgiver. In James 2:12, the author placed an equally strong emphasis on talking and acting as if one is going to be judged by the liberating law of God. There is also an emphasis in the original language to make this behavior a matter of habit. Because of the wise counsel contained in God's perfect moral law, James could say that it gives spiritual freedom (cf. 1:25)—but only if it is respected and obeyed. Disobedience results in bondage and restricted living (cf. John 8:34).

According to James 2:13, the believer who has been merciful will be shown mercy when his or her character flaws and weaknesses are exposed on the final day. In contrast, those who have shown little mercy to others will receive little themselves. Furthermore, the believer who has demonstrated mercy to others will have nothing to fear at the time of divine assessment, for the mercy shown to him or her will triumph over that judgment (cf. 1 John 4:17). As Jesus' followers strive to become more merciful, there is hope. The liberating power of the Son working within them makes it possible for them to obey God's moral law more fully and completely.

James 2:14-27 spotlights the relationship of faith to good works. For some, these verses seem difficult to reconcile with Paul's teaching concerning justification by faith (cf. Laato 2006:213-215); but an objective and balanced study of the New Testament indicates the two men were in agreement and that James was possibly "responding to a misunderstood Pauline teaching" (Davids 1993:458; cf. Guthrie 1981:598-599; Ladd 1997:639; Marshall 2004:692-693; Sloyan 1978:112). Both writers would affirm that saving faith is a voluntary change in a sinner's mind that results in a turning to God with a corresponding turning away from sin. It includes a transformation of one's view, feeling, and purpose in life. An exercise of faith involves the whole person—the mind, emotions, and will—and eventually one's behavior. With the mind one believes in God's existence and in the teaching of Scripture; emotions are connected to personal faith in the Son as the only one who can redeem from sin; and with the will one surrenders to the Messiah and trusts Him as Lord and Saviour. The natural consequence of saving faith is a lifestyle that actively promotes and demonstrates righteousness through the doing of good works (McGrath 1993:522; Morris 1990:314; cf. Eph 2:8-9; Titus 2:11-14).

James used two rhetorical questions to begin his discussion about the nature of genuine, saving faith. To paraphrase, those questions were: (1) What good is faith that is not accompanied by righteous deeds? and (2) How can a faith that is devoid of good works save anybody (Jas 2:14)? The author's point was that faith resulting in eternal life will naturally manifest itself in virtuous acts. The construction of the second question in the Greek shows that "No" was the expected answer. There is no contradiction here with Paul's teaching that salvation cannot be attained through works (cf. Rom 3:28). James was simply saying that true faith will manifest itself in a life of active obedience to God's

moral law. The author's rebuke is directed toward a spurious kind of "faith" that is merely an intellectual assent, not a life-changing trust in the Messiah. Because this kind of "faith" is void of good works, it is worthless. Expressed differently, belief without action is dead on arrival (Jas 2:16-17).

Verse 18 anticipates an imaginary objector declaring, "You have faith; I have deeds". The idea is that there are two equally valid types of faith—one that simply believes and another that acts on that belief. James challenged the idea that genuine, saving faith has no effect on the way a person acts. In short, trusting in the Messiah is authenticated by doing kind deeds to others. Next, the author commented on the presumed value of merely believing in the existence of God by noting that such by itself does not result in eternal life. After all, even the demons are monotheists, for they affirm that there is only one God and it causes them to tremble with fear (v. 19; cf. Deut 6:4; Mark 12:29). The obvious conclusion is that "faith without deeds is useless", for dead orthodoxy is barren of eternal fruit (v. 20).

To reinforce his point, James presented illustrations from the lives of two prominent Old Testament characters—the patriarch Abraham and the prostitute Rahab. James introduced each example by means of a question with which his readers were expected to give full and hearty agreement. In the case of Abraham, when he was about 85, he believed God's promise concerning a son to be born through Sarah (Gen 15:5). Verse 6 indicates that the patriarch considered the Lord's pledge as being reliable and dependable. Indeed, the patriarch was confident that God was fully capable of bringing about what He had promised. Consequently, Abraham's faith was "credited ... to him as righteousness". Expressed differently, the Lord considered the patriarch's response of faith as proof of his genuine commitment and evidence of his steadfast loyalty. Paul referred to this verse in Romans 4:3 to stress that an upright standing before God comes through faith, not by means of obedience to the law (cf. Gal 3:6). As Abraham's life illustrated, God forgives the believing sinner on the basis of Jesus' atoning sacrifice (Rom 3:25-26).

Years later, when Abraham was about 116, he submitted to God's test to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22:1-19). This was an act of faith on the part of the patriarch (Heb 11:17-19) in which he demonstrated that he feared God (Gen 22:12). This meant Abraham followed the Lord in absolute obedience. James

2:21 explains that the patriarch's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, proved that his faith was genuine and that he existed in a right relationship with God. It was not the deed that justified Abraham; rather, he showed himself to be justified through the saving faith that was manifested in his virtuous deed. Verse 22 says that the patriarch's faith and actions worked together, with his actions making his faith complete.

James 2:23 and Romans 4:3 both quote Genesis 15:6 when referring to Abraham's justification. Paul maintained that God counted the patriarch to be righteous because of his faith. James stressed a related truth, namely, that Abraham vindicated the reality of his previously-existing faith and his upright status before God by obeying the Lord (Fanning 1994b:429). The patriarch showed by his actions that he genuinely was God's friend (cf. 2 Chr 20:7). This indicates that Abraham so pleased God by his life that the Lord showered the patriarch with His favor in a distinctive way.

A superficial reading of James 2:24 seems to teach that people are justified by what they do and not by faith alone. Moreover, some have been confused by the author's concept of justification here and how it relates to Paul's teaching on the subject (cf. Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; 3:11); but a careful examination of Scripture indicates there is no contradiction. For Paul, "justification" means to declare a sinner not guilty before the Father by means of faith in the Son and His death in the sinner's place. Because the Messiah died for sin, the repentant sinner can enjoy a standing of righteousness before God. In James, the concept of "justification" is taken one step further to include the validation of one's faith in the sight of God and others. Expressed differently, the upright status of believers with God is vindicated by the way they choose to live.

Rahab the prostitute is the second example James put forward of genuine, saving faith. Joshua 2:1-21 records the episode in which Rahab hid the Israelite spies and sent them safely away by a different road. Like Abraham, Rahab was shown to be righteous when her trust in God prompted her to act in a way that met with His approval (Jas 2:25). He was pleased with Rahab's virtuous deed because she operated in faith (cf. Heb 11:6, 31). James 2:26 reveals that the connection between genuine, saving faith and godly deeds is as close as that between body and spirit. When the spirit is separated from the body, the latter dies (cf. Eccl 12:7). Likewise, faith that is barren of any fruit is

just as dead. Oppositely, living faith manifests itself in good works advocated by God's moral law.

It is worth noting that John also insisted on the inseparable connection between genuine faith and righteous deeds. He wrote that loving God meant keeping His commands (1 John 5:3). The idea is that love for God has less to do with emotions than with an across-the-board compliance with His universal ethical absolutes. Likewise, our love for other believers is not just something we talk about. It is also demonstrated by truly helping those in need (cf. 3:18). Regrettably, when people who are not Christians think about God's demands, they equate them with regulations like those of the scribes and Pharisees, something that was truly irksome and overwhelming (5:3). The new birth, however, changes the perspective of believers and gives them strength through the Spirit to live in accordance with God's moral law. As Jesus Himself declared, His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matt 11:30).

10. Conclusion

This essay has examined the nature of the moral law from a Christ-centered perspective and done so in a canonical and integrative manner. The discussion began by considering the biblical concept of the law. From the vantage point of the Old Testament, morality concerned how people of faith should live. Similarly, the New Testament regarded ethical instruction as being concerned with a way of life that is characterized by righteousness and blessing. The Mosaic legal code dealt with civil, ceremonial, and ethical issues, of which the administrative and ritual aspects are no longer binding on Christians. In contrast, the universal ethical absolutes of God's law remain authoritative and applicable for Jesus' followers. Two interrelated purposes of His moral law are helping people recognize their sin and see their need for a Redeemer.

This essay maintains that the Lord Jesus always remained subject to the law and sought to fulfill it. He did the latter by carrying out its ethical injunctions, showing forth its true spiritual meaning, and bringing all that it stood for prophetically to completion. He also endeavored to dismantle incorrect views about the law, such as the erroneous interpretations put forward by the religious elite of His day. Jesus particularly took issue with the works-based

form of righteousness they promulgated, especially its insistence on people earning their salvation by strictly following the law.

As the atoning sacrifice for humankind, the Messiah satisfied the demands of the law completely and for all time. Accordingly, those who trust in Him for eternal life are freed from the condemnation of the law. The natural consequence of saving faith is a lifestyle that actively promotes and demonstrates righteousness through the doing of good works. In short, the Holy Spirit empowers believers to do what the moral law enjoins.

The implication is that God wants believers to abide by His universal ethical absolutes, not ignore, disregard, or minimize them. The sustained and thoughtful study of the moral law brings them true liberty, spiritual vitality, and abundant blessing in whatever they undertake. Through their new life in the Son and the enabling presence of the Spirit, all that the moral law advocates influences the believers' thoughts, emotions, and decisions. The foremost way this is demonstrated is by showing unconditional, Christlike love to others.

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