

The LETTER vs THE SPIRIT of the LAW (TORAH)

Romans 8

Romans 8:2-4, Galatians 5:16-17, 2 Thessalonians 2:13

Romans 8:2

In Romans 8:2 what is the "law of the spirit of life"?

Law; Law

What Is the Law, and Does it Have Purpose for Us Today?

SPIRIT OF THE LAW

SPIRIT OF THE LAW

Spirit of the Law Law and Legal Definition

the spirit of a law, rule, etc.

The Spirit of the Law

What is the spirit of the law?

Spirit Of The Law

THE SPIRIT vs THE LETTER

The letter versus the spirit of the law: A lay perspective on culpability

The Spirit of the Law vs. the Letter of the Law

The Spirit of the Law vs. The Letter of the Law

What Christians Need to Understand about the Spirit of the Law vs. the Letter of the Law

AN EXAMPLE OF A BAD TEACHING

The "Spirit" of the Law v. The "Letter" of the Law

SPIRIT OF THE LAW

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As opposed to the letter of the law, this refers to the meaning and intent of the law and those who created the law and what they intended to accomplish in the creation of the law.

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Spirit of the Law Law and Legal Definition

Spirit of the law refers to ideas that the creators of a particular law wanted to have effect. It is the intent and purpose of the lawmaker, or framer of the Constitution, as determined by a consideration of the whole context thereof. Spirit of law is determined from the letters and the circumstances surrounding its enactment.

the spirit of a law, rule, etc.

phrase

Add to word list

the principle that a law, rule, etc. was created to make stronger, rather than the particular things it says you must or must not do:

They followed neither the spirit nor the letter of the law.

We expected them to honor the spirit of the contract, not to try to trick us.

We felt that their actions were at odds with the spirit of the reform measure.

Any ban on imports would violate the spirit of the trade agreement.

Their approach was unusual, but within the spirit of the law.

[The letter versus the spirit of the law: A lay perspective on culpability](#)

Abstract

The letter of the law is its literal meaning. Here, the spirit of the law is its perceived intention. We tested the hypothesis that violating the spirit of the law accounts for culpability above and beyond breaking the mere letter. We find that one can incur culpability even when the letter of the law is not technically broken. We examine this effect across various legal contexts and discuss the implications for future research directions.

[PDF](#)

Law

Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology - Law

Law [N] [E] [S]

The Nature of Biblical Law. The usual Hebrew term translated as "law" is *tora* [h'r/T]. *Tora* [h'r/T], used 220 times in the Old Testament, more specifically means "instruction." Our English term "law" usually brings to mind the norms of society as enforced by the state. The Old Testament, however, often presents moral admonitions that are hardly amenable to state enforcement (e.g., [Exod 20:17](#) ; [23:4-5](#)); is silent about state enforcement ([Exod 21:2-6](#)); or specifies God rather than the state as the enforcer ([Exod 22:21-27](#)). In addition, the label "law" seems inappropriate for certain ceremonial instructions.

Biblical civil laws differ from the "positive law" of modern jurisprudence, which tries to legislate in exhaustive detail. Biblical laws are insufficiently comprehensive to be considered a "law-code, " but served as paradigmatic illustrations (not rigid rules) of justice that a judge could apply or modify according to circumstances. For example, whereas capital offenses state the maximum penalty for certain crimes, extenuating factors could lead a judge, legitimately, not to execute the offender. This is stated explicitly in the case of murder ([Exod 21:12-14](#)), and is implicit elsewhere. Thus, although Exodus 21:15 states "Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death" (NASB), it would be absurd to apply this rule to an angry toddler.

Many biblical precepts are expressed as broad principles without legalistic detail. For example, "work" is prohibited on the sabbath yet is never defined legally. This ambiguity, which allowed for some flexibility, was considered a liability by Pharisaic Judaism. In an attempt to make sure the command proper was never violated, the rabbis created secondary, rigid rules which, if followed, would theoretically prevent a person from ever violating the biblical command itself. This was known as "putting a fence around the law." Such nonbiblical rules (e.g., the sabbath day's journey) are prescribed exhaustively in the Talmud, but this burdensome "tradition" is contrary to the spirit of biblical law ([Matt 15:3](#) ; [23:4](#)).

An important law is the *lex talionis*, "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" ([Exod 21:22-25](#) ; [Lev 24:19-20](#) ; [Deut 19:15-21](#)), which is sometimes misunderstood as a barbaric justification of personal vengeance and maiming. On the contrary, it expresses the just principle that judicial punishments should fit the crime, thereby limiting permissible punishment. One who is responsible for the loss of another's eye deserves, in principle, to give up his own eye. In practice, however, the offender ordinarily would placate the aggrieved party by paying an amount proportional to the degree of the maiming to substitute for the infliction of literal *talion*. Note how such "ransoming" operates in Exodus 21:29-30, and how literal *talion* fails to occur in 21:18-19 and 21:26-27 where it might be expected. The availability of ransom seems to be so prevalent that it must be explicitly prohibited to exclude it ([Num 35:31](#)). Jesus, in accord with Leviticus 19:18, teaches patient suffering instead of the misapplication of *lex talionis* for personal revenge ([Matt 5:38-42](#)).

Legal Corpora in the Old Testament. The laws (traditionally 613 in number) are concentrated in certain passages in the Pentateuch. Some of these are given special names.

The Decalogue was given at Mount Sinai ([Exod 20:1-17](#)) and repeated in Moses' sermon over forty years later ([Deut 5:6-21](#)). The formulation in the Decalogue (the traditional "thou shalt/shalt not") is apodictic, that is, unqualified; God as King imposes demands upon his subjects. These commandments represent the minimum moral and religious requirements for those in covenant relationship with God.

The Book of the Covenant ([Exod 20:22-23:33](#), ; partially repeated in [34:10-26](#)) consists of cultic, humanitarian, and civil regulations. Most of its civil regulations follow the casuistic formulation of cuneiform laws: "If X happens (protasis), then Y will be the legal consequences (*apodosis*)."

Deuteronomy has many regulations. Chapters 5-11 emphasize the general requirement to obey God; chapters 12-25 offer specifics in various areas of life (worship, festivals, officials of the theocratic state, manslaughter, warfare, sexuality, etc.). The structure of Deuteronomy follows that of second-millennium covenant treaties in which the laws correspond to stipulations

within the covenant. The topical units of chapters 12-25 are arranged according to the order of the Ten Commandments.

Cultic laws concerning the tabernacle, sacrifices, priests, ritual purity, festivals, and ethical and ritual holiness (especially in sexual and social matters; cf. Lev. 18-26, the so-called Holiness Code) are scattered throughout Genesis through Numbers, Leviticus consisting almost entirely of this kind of material. Some call these laws the Priestly Code on the dubious assumption that they once existed as an independent collection.

Biblical and Cuneiform Laws. Scholars commonly compare biblical civil laws with contemporary laws found by archaeologists in the ancient Near East. Extrabiblical laws include those by Ur-Nammu of Ur (ca. 2112-2095 b.c.), Lipit-Ishtar of Isin (ca. 1925 b.c.), some ten Sumerian Laws (ca. 1800 b.c.) of unknown provenance, the Laws of Eshnunna (ca. 1800 b.c.), the Laws of Hammurapi (ca. 1750 b.c.), the Edict of Ammisaduqa (ca. 1650 b.c.), Middle Assyrian Laws (ca. 1100 b.c.), Hittite Laws (before ca. 1200 b.c.), and Neo-Babylonian Laws (seventh century b.c.).

Biblical civil laws resemble extrabiblical laws in topics covered and formulation. For example, cases of striking pregnant women resulting in miscarriage (presumably an unusual circumstance) occur in HL 17, Sumerian Laws 1-2, LH 209-214, MAL A 21, 50-52 as well as Exodus 21:22-25. There are general parallels with laws on slaves and goring oxen, and in one (*but only one*) case, a cuneiform law's reading is identical with a biblical one: LE 53 and Exodus 21:35. The parallels are insufficient to suppose biblical laws were simply borrowed from ancient Near Eastern ones. On the other hand, the parallels seem too close for chance. It is best to say that the Bible shows awareness of extrabiblical laws and often deliberately chooses type cases from such laws on which to make moral comment. Where an existing law is just, the Bible can happily adopt it (e.g., [Exod 21:35](#)). Accordingly, comparison with cuneiform law is useful; nonetheless, the contrasts with cuneiform laws are usually more telling than the similarities.

These contrasts reflect differences in ideology between Israel and Mesopotamia. Cuneiform laws are overwhelmingly secular whereas the Bible freely mixes moral, civil, and cultic laws, and more often includes religious

motivations for compliance. It is true that Hammurapi receives authority to rule from the god Shamash, but Shamash is custodian of impersonal cosmic truth that Hammurapi uses to make his own laws that are only indirectly attributable to deity. In the Bible, however, the laws are directly from God; Moses is only a mediator. Biblical law is designed to educate the public, to mold the national character, and to glorify Yahweh as a just lawgiver; cuneiform laws are meant to glorify the kings who created them and lack pedagogic application, being placed in a temple outside public view in a script (cuneiform) only academics could read.

Contrasting ideology is reflected in biblical law's setting limits on the authority of kings ([Deut 17:14-20](#)), cuneiform laws reflect the unlimited authority of the king. Biblical laws elevate human life over property to a greater degree than do cuneiform laws. Hence, cuneiform laws required up to thirtyfold restitution for theft and the execution of the thief who could not pay (LH 8, 265; HL 57-59, 63, 67, 69); biblical law limits restitution to no more than fivefold and prohibits the execution of a thief ([Exod 22:1-4](#)). Similarly, cuneiform laws make no sharp distinction between cases involving an ox goring a slave, and that of an ox goring an ox, both being property (LE 53-55); biblical law deliberately separates these cases ([Exodus 21:28-31](#) [Exodus 21:35-36](#)), expressing by its structure the ideology that cases involving humans are of an entirely different category than those involving animals.

Cuneiform law agrees with biblical law in condemning murder, adultery, and incest (LH 1, 129, 157); however, biblical law differs by making many religious sins, so-called victimless crimes, and crimes against family capital offenses.

"Law" and "Covenant." All biblical laws are placed in the context of God's covenant with Israel. Covenant, not law-keeping, establishes a relationship, just as signing a contract, rather than doing the specified Job, establishes an employment relationship. The covenant in Genesis 15 was not established by "law" but by God's gracious offer accompanied by Abram's faith (although he later in some sense kept "the law, " [Gen 26:5](#)). Nor did Israel establish a relationship with God by keeping "law." The commandments are given to a people who are already "saved" ([Exod 20:2](#)) through a covenant relationship based on God's gracious love and despite Israel's lack of merit ([Deut 7:7-9](#) ;

[9:4-6](#)). "Legalism" that makes "law-keeping" a means of salvation is not taught in the Old Testament.

The role of law is to administrate the covenant. Laws prohibit things destructive to a relationship with God (e.g., worshiping other gods). The law gives direction to what a loving response to God should be, and tells how to reap the full benefits of the relationship. Viewed from one perspective, the promises formalized by covenant were unconditional; but from an individual's perspective, benefits could be forfeited by disobedience. Disobedience does not automatically invalidate a covenant, any more than a husband's rudeness to a wife he vowed to cherish invalidates his marriage covenant. Yet disobedience mars the relationship, and may reduce its benefits. In the desert a whole generation of Israelites forfeited their covenant benefits (the promised land) through disobedience, yet the covenant continued.

The Law under the New Covenant. The New Testament's statements about Old Testament law are difficult to harmonize. On the one hand, some New Testament statements indicate that under the new covenant the whole law is in some sense abrogated ([Rom 6:14](#), "you are not under law" [Rom 10:4](#), "Christ is the end of the law"). Direct application of cultic laws is clearly excluded in the New Testament. Food laws, circumcision, sacrifices, temple, and priesthood have been superseded ([Mark 7:19](#) ; [1 Cor 7:19](#) ; [Hebrews 7:11-19](#) [Hebrews 7:28](#) ; [8:13](#) ; [10:1-9](#)). Christ has abolished in his flesh the commandments and regulations that separated Jew from Gentile ([Eph 2:15](#)). Dispensationalism concludes from these statements that Christians are under no Mosaic laws, not even the Decalogue, but are instead under the law of Christ ([Gal 6:2](#) ; [1 Cor 9:21](#)).

On the other hand, the law cannot be altogether invalid since the New Testament affirms its abiding applicability. "All Scripture is useful" ([2 Tim 3:16-17](#)), including Old Testament laws. Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it ([Matt 5:17-20](#)). The law is the embodiment of truth that instructs ([Rom 2:18-19](#)). It is "holy" and "spiritual, " making sin known to us by defining it; therefore, Paul delights in it ([Romans 7:7-14](#) [Romans 7:22](#)). The law is good if used properly ([1 Tim 1:8](#)), and is not opposed to the promises of God ([Gal 3:21](#)). Faith does not make the law void, but the Christian establishes the law ([Rom](#)

[3:31](#)), fulfilling its requirements by walking according to the Spirit ([Rom 8:4](#)) through love ([Rom 13:10](#)). When Paul states that women are to be in submission "as the Law says" ([1 Cor 14:34](#)) or quotes parts of the Decalogue ([Rom 13:9](#)), and when James quotes the law of love ([2:8](#) from [Lev 19:18](#)) or condemns partiality, adultery, murder, and slander as contrary to the law ([James 2:9](#) [James 2:11](#) ; [4:11](#)), and when Peter quotes Leviticus, "Be holy, because I am holy" ([1 Peter 1:16](#) ; from [Lev 19:2](#)), the implication is that the law, or at least part of it, remains authoritative.

Part of the problem is that not all the "laws" are of the same order. Jesus designates justice, mercy, and faithfulness as "more important" matters in the law ([Matt 23:23](#)). A similar distinction was made by the prophets who indicate that cultic observance was less important than treating people decently, and ritual without repentance was ineffective. That these cultic regulations were, even in the Old Testament, considered of secondary value, prepares the way for their elimination in Christ.

Covenant theologians have traditionally divided laws into three categories: moral, civil, and ceremonial. Moral laws (e.g., the Decalogue), based on the unchanging character of God, are eternally binding. Civil laws (e.g., Exod. 21-23), although they may illustrate moral law, were limited historically to the theocratic state of Israel and are not binding on the church. Ceremonial laws (e.g., sacrifices) were intended to prefigure Christ, and ceased to be applicable upon his first advent. A problem with this approach is that the categories "moral, civil, and ceremonial" are artificial. There is often a mixture of these categories: the ceremonial sabbath among "moral" laws ([Exod 20:8](#)), ceremonial food regulations among "civil" laws ([Exod 21:28](#) ; [22:31](#)), "moral" motivations in civil laws ([Exodus 22:21](#) [Exodus 22:26-27](#)) and in cultic laws ([Exod 20:26](#)). There is considerable subjectivity in labeling laws as "moral, " "civil, " or "ceremonial."

Another approach is that of theonomy or Christian reconstructionism. Theonomists wish to work toward a theocratic state where Mosaic civil laws can again be instituted into modern society. However, this approach takes insufficient account of the new theological and cultural setting of the new covenant. Some laws became impractical and unenforceable if applied literally

even in Old Testament times. The Year of Jubilee regulations, requiring the return of property to original families every forty-nine years, seem *never* to have been enforced as law because (among other reasons) by the time Israel controlled the land, there were no records of the original owners. Moreover, although Jubilee was a practical solution for a tribal, agricultural society, this model would already be somewhat antiquated under Israel's urbanization during the monarchy, and is certainly impractical in modern, mobile, urban societies. Some laws assume the existence of conditions such as debt slavery ([Exod 21:2-11](#)), specific species of animals ([Exod 29:22-fat](#) ; tail sheep), or the climate of Palestine (feast held at end of harvest season, [Lev 23:33-39](#)), which make these laws inapplicable in other cultural environments. Some laws seem tied to the specific theological context of the Old Testament. The death penalty for cultic offenses was based on the special holiness of Israel with the tabernacle of God among them. Violation could bring immediate wrath upon the people. However, the church is not a nation, and does not camp around the tabernacle.

Usage of Old Testament laws suggests that biblical authors sought out and applied the inherent religious and moral principles in the laws even when changed historical, cultural, and theological settings made literal application inappropriate. Ezra applied a law prohibiting marriage to Canaanites, who had ceased to exist historically, broadly to marriage with non-Canaanite foreigners, because *in that situation* the same principle (marriage to foreigners leads to religious assimilation) applied, even though the letter of the law could not ([Ezra 9:1-2](#) ; cf. [Deut 7:1-5](#)).

The New Testament writers also apply the principles in the law. From Deuteronomy 25:4 ("Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out grain"), Paul derives a principle that workers ought to be rewarded for their labors and applies that principle in the case of Christian workers ([1 Cor 9:9-14](#)). In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul again quotes Deuteronomy 25:4, this time in parallel with a saying of Jesus ([Matt 10:10](#)) as if both are equally authoritative. Likewise, the principle of establishing truth by two or three witnesses ([Deut 19:15](#)), originally limited to courts, is applied more broadly to a church conference ([2 Cor 13:1](#)). The principle that believers are not to be unequally yoked together with

unbelievers is derived from a law concerning the yoking animals ([2 Cor 6:14](#) ; cf. [Deut 22:10](#)).

In 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 13, Paul affirms on the basis of Leviticus 18:29 that incest, a capital offense in the Old Testament, is immoral and deserves punishment. A person practicing incest in the church must be excommunicated to maintain the church's practical holiness. Paul maintains the law's moral principle, yet in view of the changed redemptive setting, makes no attempt to apply the law's original sanction.

The Law and the Christian Today. Mosaic law is of value for the Christian in several ways.

The Law Prepares Sinners for the Gospel. No one can receive eternal salvation by works of the law ([Ga 2:16](#)) because none perfectly keeps the law ([Rom 3:23](#)), and violation of any part of it makes one guilty of the whole ([James 2:10](#) ; cf. [Rom 2:25](#) ; [Gal 3:10](#)). Instead, salvation is a gift obtained by faith, not works ([Rom 4:4-5](#) ; [Eph 2:8-10](#) ; [Php 3:9](#)). Nonetheless, the law was meant to lead us to Christ ([Ga 3:24](#)). It makes the sinner conscious of sin ([Rom 3:20](#) ; [7:7](#) ; [1 John 3:4](#)). It provokes and incites rebellion ([Rom 5:20](#) ; [7:13](#)), thereby making one fully accountable before God for violation of God's moral requirements ([Rom 3:19](#) ; [4:15](#) ; [5:13](#) ; [7:8-10](#)). By this means, the law shows sinners their need for a mediator to redeem them from the law's condemnation ([Ga 3:13](#)). Hence, the law is an essential prerequisite in preparing sinners for the gospel.

The Law Is a Guide for Christian Living. The believer, through the Spirit, keeps the righteousness requirements of the law ([Rom 8:3-4](#)), following the principle of love which is the fulfillment of the law ([Rom 13:8-10](#) ; [Gal 5:14](#) ; [Mark 12:31](#) , cf. [Lev 19:18](#)). As the New Testament use of Old Testament laws shows, the moral aspect of the law continues to define proper and improper behavior for Christians. Old Testament laws supplement New Testament morality by addressing some issues not directly treated in the New Testament. God's commandments were intended to bring life ([Rom 7:10](#)), and the promises of life associated with the law remain applicable ([Eph 6:2-3](#) ; cf. [Exod 20:12](#)).

The Law Is of Value for Jurisprudence. Law, when enforced by the state, serves to restrain evildoers ([1 Tim 1:9-10](#)). Biblical civil laws, although not directly applicable under the new covenant, are at least suggestive for improving

modern jurisprudence. The Bible treats theft and manslaughter as torts against the victim (or the victim's family) rather than crimes against the state, and requires monetary restitution to the victim's family rather than imprisonment or fines to the state. This is arguably superior to the modern system where victims often get nothing, and where incarceration is ineffective for rehabilitation and extraordinarily expensive. The capital offenses in the Bible are suggestive for what crimes might legitimately be permitted as capital offenses for today (e.g., intentional murder), and crimes that should never be capital offenses (e.g., crimes of property).

The Law Points Typologically to Christ. The laws foreshadow Christ typologically in many ways. Moral and civil laws reflect the righteousness of Christ and his kingdom, while the cultic laws emphasize his holiness. The tabernacle prefigures the presence of Christ among his people; the sacrifices foreshadow the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The priesthood anticipates Jesus' priestly function. The whole cultic system with tabernacle, sacrifices, and priests prefigures union with Christ through the atonement. The penalties in the law anticipate Christ's judgments; the annihilation of the Canaanites anticipates the judgment of hell. Commands concerning occupying the promised land anticipate the future kingdom of God, heaven and the blessings in Christ himself. Joe M. Sprinkle

See also [Command](#), [Commandment](#); [Decrees](#); [Ordinance](#); [Requirement](#); [Statute](#); [Ten Commandments](#)

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[Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology](#). Edited by Walter A. Elwell
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What Is the Law, and Does it Have Purpose for Us Today?

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“God’s requirements have not altered, but we are not the ones to meet them. Praise God, He is the Lawgiver on the Throne, and He is the Lawkeeper in my heart. He who gave the Law, Himself keeps it.” -Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*

The discussion of “law vs. grace” is a common one among Bible-believing Christ followers. For some reason, we have trouble harmonizing what feels to us like two conflicting ideas. Either Christianity is all about grace, or it’s all about law. The truth is, like many “God-sized” concepts in Scripture, both are integral parts of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Is the Law something relegated to “Old Testament” days, or does it have meaning for us today? What is the Law, and what was (or is) its purpose?

What Is the Law, and Where Do We See It in Scripture?

The first use of the Hebrew word translated as “law” is found in [Genesis 26:5](#), in which God restates the promised blessing given to Abraham to his son, Isaac, blessings which are being passed on to future generations because, God says, “Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws.” The word is *tôrâ* and is used in the Bible to describe teaching or instruction. While the Law (capitalized) generally refers to the [Ten Commandments](#) and the sacrificial laws given to Moses on Mount Sinai ([Exodus 20](#)), God gave *instructions* to men long before the children of Israel left Egypt as a nation.

The law is God’s perfect standard of obedience and holiness as described in the commands, statutes, and ordinances given to those who would worship and serve Him. The very first “law” was given in the [Garden of Eden](#) when God

told Adam not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ([Genesis 2:16-17](#)). God's commands are His laws.

God gave [Adam and Eve](#) the free will to choose to obey the command, or to break the law. They chose disobedience and transgressed, or violated God's law. As [1 John 3:4](#) says, "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness." Sin is often referred to in the Bible as a "transgression" or a "trespass." The Greek word translated "trespasses" in [Ephesians 2:1](#), *paraptōma*, is a lapse or deviation from truth and uprightness; the word literally means to fall aside. The Hebrew word for transgression, *peša*, indicates revolt or rebellion.

In the simplest of terms, the Law is the sum total of God's requirements and expectations for man's behavior, words, and attitude, and to turn aside from them or rebel against them is sin.

Can We Follow the Law?

God's laws are a reflection of His character, which is exactly why they are an impossibly high standard that fallen human beings can never meet perfectly. Only God is holy and perfect; He alone is good and righteous. In articulating specific laws to govern man's behavior, God was revealing Himself. Consider the [ten commandments](#).

The first four commands have to do with man's relationship to God:

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not make or worship any graven images or idols.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain.
4. You shall remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy.

The next six commands have to do with man's relationship to others.

5. You shall honor your father and mother.
6. You shall not murder.

7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness (lie).
10. You shall not covet.

Such a simple list, yet impossibly difficult to keep perfectly, especially as we view them through the words of Jesus. In His teachings, Jesus both elevated and simplified the Law of God.

[Matthew 22:34-40](#) – “But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him: ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And He said to him, ‘You shall [love the Lord your God with all your heart](#), and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Upon these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets.’”

Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind (the first four commandments) and love your neighbor as yourself (the second six commandments). Jesus summed up the entire Law and Prophets in those two statements. Yet, before we conclude we can even attempt to fulfill them, He expands the Law beyond simple outward obedience to the secret attitudes of our heart. Here are just a few examples from His [sermon on the mount](#) in [Matthew 5-7](#).

“You have heard...You shall not commit murder...but I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court.”

“You have heard...You shall not commit adultery...but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

“You have heard...You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord...but I say to you, make no oath at all.”

When God gave the Law to the children of Israel, He included the standard of expected behavior, the punishment when the law was transgressed, and the

corresponding atonement needed to restore the sinner back into fellowship with God and His people.

What Can Fulfill the Law?

The Jewish nation was given an intricate and detailed list of sacrifices – offerings by blood – that would provide a temporary covering for their sinful law-breaking and make them acceptable for God’s presence to dwell among them. The entire sacrificial system was built on the premise of atoning blood.

In the Old Testament, the blood sacrifices were provided by lambs and bulls and goats, something which could never permanently atone for [sin \(Hebrews 10:4\)](#). They were simply a representation of the once-for-all perfect sacrifice that God’s perfect and holy Son, Jesus Christ, would make when He offered Himself on [the cross](#).

[Hebrews 10:1-3](#) – “For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the form of those things itself, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually every year, make those who approach perfect. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.”

The Law was given to expose man’s sinfulness; it was never intended to make men righteous. By declaring the Law, God was being gracious. He was showing us our need for an imputed righteousness not gained by obedience to the Law – a righteousness that would come as a gift of grace through Jesus, by [faith](#).

[Romans 3:19-20](#) – “Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.”

The Law Is a Gift of Grace

[Galatians 3:24](#) – “Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by [faith](#).”

Paul expresses this same idea in [Romans 7](#), just before describing the lifelong conflict that occurs in believers between walking according to the Spirit who indwells them and their natural, human flesh that is still drawn to [sin](#). He notes that sinful passions are aroused by the Law, and this might lead us to conclude that the Law itself is sinful.

He's right – there's something rebellious in our human nature that exerts itself when we are told we can't, or shouldn't, do something. And indeed, man's attempt to govern one another often results in laws and restrictions that are wrong and sinful. But God's law is perfect; He is the Righteous Judge, and His laws are given not to burden us, but to expose the sin within us so that we understand our desperate need for Christ's righteousness. The Law is a gift of grace.

[Romans 7:7-8](#) – “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.”

God's law does not produce sin; it only names it for what it is.

Is the Law Still Valuable Today Since We Are under Grace?

The New Testament clearly teaches that those who have repented of their [sin](#) and placed their [faith](#) in Jesus Christ are not judged according to the Law. Christ came to fulfill the Law, and in Him, we are presented to God as perfect and holy. All our sin has been forgiven and covered by the sinless, sanctifying blood Jesus shed on [the cross](#).

Salvation is a gift of grace, not of works ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)). We cannot obtain it by attempting to keep God's laws perfectly or by being a good, moral person. Neither can we lose our salvation when we transgress His commands and disobey by sinning. Either the blood of Jesus atoned for all of our sins, or none of them.

But God's commands are still in effect, only now they are written on our hearts. The Holy Spirit has come to indwell us and produces obedience and good works according to God's commands *in* and *through* us. As Watchman Nee

observed in the quote above, through Christ, God is both the Lawgiver and the Lawkeeper. This is the secret of the Christian life as we learn to walk by the Spirit and not by the flesh.

[Romans 8:1-4](#) – “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

As Christ-followers, we are still obligated to obey God’s commands, but now we have the Spirit of God in us giving us the ability, the desire, and the power to do so. “For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” ([Philippians 2:13](#)). It pleases God and brings Him glory when we obey His commands. In fact, our desire and willingness to walk in God’s commands are evidence that we belong to Him.

[1 John 2:3-5](#) – “By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, “I have come to know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him.”

The value of teaching God’s commands is not to place a burden of perfection or legalism on believers, but to expose what displeases God and the sin we are to avoid. God’s law is good; it is still our tutor to show us our need for Him, both in salvation and the sanctifying process as we grow in faith and Christlikeness. By all means, let us teach God’s commands to our children so they may know Christ.

[In James 1:25, What Does “Law of Liberty” Mean?](#)

[The Spirit of the Law](#)

Topical Encyclopedia

The concept of "The Spirit of the Law" is a theological and ethical principle that emphasizes the intent and purpose behind God's commandments, as opposed to a mere literal or legalistic adherence to the rules. This principle is rooted in the teachings of both the Old and New Testaments and is central to understanding the fullness of God's expectations for His people.

Biblical Foundation

The distinction between the letter and the spirit of the law is most explicitly addressed in the New Testament. In [2 Corinthians 3:6](#), the Apostle Paul writes, "He has qualified us as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Here, Paul contrasts the old covenant, characterized by strict adherence to the law, with the new covenant, which is guided by the Holy Spirit and brings life.

In the Gospels, Jesus frequently challenges the Pharisees and religious leaders for their legalistic interpretation of the law. In [Matthew 23:23](#), Jesus rebukes them, saying, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You pay tithes of mint, dill, and cumin, but you have disregarded the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former." Here, Jesus emphasizes that the spirit of the law involves deeper moral and ethical principles such as justice and mercy.

Old Testament Insights

The Old Testament also provides insights into the spirit of the law. In [Deuteronomy 6:5](#), the command to "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" underscores the importance of a heartfelt devotion to God, beyond mere ritual compliance. Similarly, the prophet Micah encapsulates the spirit of the law in [Micah 6:8](#): "He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Jesus and the Fulfillment of the Law

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is a profound exposition of the spirit of the law. In [Matthew 5:17](#), Jesus declares, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Jesus fulfills the law by revealing its true intent and calling His followers to a higher standard of righteousness that surpasses mere external observance.

For instance, in [Matthew 5:21-22](#), Jesus expands the commandment against murder to include anger and insult, thus addressing the heart's condition. Similarly, in [Matthew 5:27-28](#), He extends the prohibition of adultery to include lustful thoughts, again highlighting the importance of inner purity.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in guiding believers to live according to the spirit of the law. [Romans 8:2-4](#) states, "For in Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful man, as an offering for sin. He thus condemned sin in the flesh, so that the righteous standard of the law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit empowers believers to live out the ethical and moral imperatives of the law, transforming their hearts and minds to align with God's will.

Practical Implications

Living by the spirit of the law requires discernment and a heart attuned to God's desires. It calls for a balance between obedience to God's commands and an understanding of their underlying purpose. This approach fosters a relationship with God that is characterized by love, mercy, and justice, reflecting His character in the believer's life.

In summary, the spirit of the law is a profound biblical principle that calls believers to look beyond the surface of God's commandments and to embrace

their deeper, life-giving intent. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Christians are empowered to live in a way that honors God and fulfills His righteous standards.

The Spirit of the Law vs. the Letter of the Law

Topical Encyclopedia

The concept of "The Spirit of the Law vs. the Letter of the Law" is a significant theme in biblical theology, particularly in understanding the relationship between the Old and New Covenants. This dichotomy addresses the difference between a strict, literal adherence to the law (the letter) and the underlying intent or purpose of the law (the spirit).

Biblical Foundation

The Apostle Paul addresses this theme in his epistles, particularly in [2 Corinthians 3:6](#), where he writes, "He has qualified us as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" . Here, Paul contrasts the old covenant, characterized by the letter of the law, with the new covenant, which is animated by the Spirit. The "letter" refers to the written code of the Mosaic Law, which, while holy and righteous, could not impart life or righteousness to its adherents. Instead, it often highlighted human sinfulness and the need for a savior.

In [Romans 7:6](#), Paul further elaborates, "But now, having died to what bound us, we have been released from the law, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" . This release from the law's binding nature allows believers to serve God in a manner that aligns with the Spirit's transformative work in their hearts.

Jesus and the Spirit of the Law

Jesus Christ exemplified the spirit of the law in His teachings and actions. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus frequently reinterprets the Mosaic Law, emphasizing its deeper, spiritual intent. For instance, in [Matthew 5:21-22](#), He expands the commandment against murder to include unrighteous anger, thus revealing the heart's condition as the true focus of the law.

Moreover, Jesus' interactions with the Pharisees often highlighted the tension between the letter and the spirit. The Pharisees were known for their meticulous observance of the law's details, yet Jesus criticized them for neglecting the law's weightier matters, such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness

([Matthew 23:23](#)). He accused them of being like "whitewashed tombs," outwardly righteous but inwardly corrupt ([Matthew 23:27](#)).

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit plays a crucial role in enabling believers to live according to the spirit of the law. In [Romans 8:2-4](#), Paul explains that "through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" . The Spirit empowers believers to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law, not through their own strength, but through the transformative work of the Spirit within them.

Practical Implications

Understanding the spirit of the law encourages believers to focus on the heart and intent behind God's commandments. It calls for a life marked by love, mercy, and justice, reflecting the character of God. This perspective does not negate the importance of obedience but rather deepens it, urging believers to go beyond mere external compliance to embrace the fullness of God's will.

In summary, the distinction between the spirit and the letter of the law underscores the transition from the old covenant, based on external adherence, to the new covenant, characterized by internal transformation through the Holy Spirit. This understanding invites believers to live in the freedom and life-giving power of the Spirit, fulfilling the law's true purpose.

What is the spirit of the law?

The “spirit of the law” is often contrasted to the “letter of the law.” In that context, the spirit of the law has to do with the deeper meaning or reason for the law, whereas the letter of the law refers to exact wording, literally applied, without regard for any deeper meaning. Children are good at emphasizing the letter of the law to the exclusion of the spirit of it. The following example may help:

A child comes home from school and is told, “Do not watch TV until you finish your homework.” A few minutes later, his mother finds him watching cartoons on his tablet, with his homework untouched. The child protests that his mom only told him not to watch TV—she never said anything about watching cartoons on a tablet. In this example, the child has kept the letter of the law, but he has violated the spirit of the law. If the mother had said, “Finish your homework before you watch cartoons,” then perhaps the child would have watched a baseball game instead—once again keeping the letter of the law. She could have been even more specific: “Do not watch any kind of show on any electronic device until you finish your homework,” but then the child might decide to go outside and play, leaving his unfinished homework inside. The frustrated mom could have said, “Don’t do *anything* until you finish your homework,” but the child, taking it literally, could then claim to be unable to open his book bag to get his homework. Obviously, focusing on the letter of the law can be a tactic to negate the intent or spirit of the law.

[Leviticus 19:14](#) says, “Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind.” Here the letter of the law forbids exactly two things: cursing the deaf and tripping up the blind. However, no law can explicitly cover every possible situation. The spirit of the law in [Leviticus 19:14](#) forbids taking advantage of the disabilities of another, no matter what those disabilities are. The letter of the law may be narrow, but the spirit of the law encompasses something far broader—and is therefore more difficult to obey. It is possible to go through life without ever cursing a deaf man or tripping a blind man, but it is far more difficult to never take advantage of someone else’s weakness.

In the [Sermon on the Mount](#), Jesus interprets the Mosaic Law according to the spirit of the law, not the letter. The law forbade murder, but Jesus said that anger or mockery makes one guilty of murder, because the same attitudes that produce murder first produce anger and contempt (see [Matthew 5:21–22](#)). The law forbade adultery, but Jesus said a lustful look is adultery in the heart. A man who never touches a woman other than his wife but who indulges in sexual fantasies is obeying the letter of the law, but not the spirit of it (see [Matthew 5:27–28](#)). And, according to Jesus, obeying the letter of the law but not its spirit is not an option.

When Jesus was asked about the [most important commandment](#), He invoked the spirit of the law: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All [the Law and the Prophets](#) hang on these two commandments” ([Matthew 22:37–40](#)). Every Old Testament law and every standard of behavior for the Christian can be summed up in these two commands because they embody the spirit of the law; that is, the two greatest commandments express the ultimate point of all the other laws.

In [Luke 10](#) a teacher of the law, “wishing to justify himself,” asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” (verse 29). It might be possible to keep the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” if *neighbor* is defined narrowly enough. Jesus’ response is the story of the [Good Samaritan](#), in which He demonstrates that your neighbor is anyone you come into contact with. In fact, the real question is not “who is my neighbor?” but “who will I be a neighbor to?” The spirit of the law requires that we be neighborly in a proactive manner, looking for people who need help. Ultimately, none of us are able to keep this law perfectly, in letter or in spirit, and we are therefore convicted as sinners in need of a Savior.

People who focus on the letter of the law often point to their compliance as a means to justify themselves, even as they flagrantly violate the law’s intent; however, God will judge according to the spirit of the law, not just the letter.

What Christians Need to Understand about the Spirit of the Law vs. the Letter of the Law

There is a stark difference between following the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. These differences are critical and need to be...

[Clarence L. Haynes Jr.](#)

Updated Aug 25, 2023

He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 [Corinthians 3:6](#))

The spirit of the law vs the letter of the law, that is the question. Forgive me for my poor attempt at Shakespeare. There is a stark difference between following the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. These differences are critical and need to be addressed because they will impact your relationship with God and how you engage other people. I am going to do my best to help you understand the difference between these two things and hopefully help you to walk in the freedom and life God has given you.

What Does It Mean to Follow the Letter of the Law?

To follow the letter of the law means exactly what it says. You must follow all the tenets of the law and obey them to be accepted in God's sight. I know this sounds like a daunting task and that's because it is. The problem with the letter of the law is that no one has been able to follow it completely. There are [613 commandments or laws](#) in the Old Testament that were required to be followed. Truth be told keeping the ten commandments is hard enough how are you going to manage following 613? If that is not enough pressure let's add this to the mix.

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ([James 2:10](#))

I think you can see that following the law is not easy and can be overwhelming. To top it all off mix in your sinful nature and this plan is basically useless or to say it a little plainer, "it ain't gonna happen." When you add all these things up

you see why the law kills, because you can't live up to its standards and requirements.

What Is the Spirit of the Law?

To follow the spirit of the law is to simply not put the strict adherence of the law above the person to whom the law is meant to serve. Jesus gave the ultimate summary of the spirit of the law when he said this.

Jesus replied: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘[Love your neighbor as yourself.](#)’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”* ([Matthew 22:37-40](#))

There really is no greater verse in my opinion that sums up the spirit of the law vs the letter of the law than these verses. It boils down to [loving God](#) and loving people. Every one of the 613 commandments has these two commands as the foundation, heart, or the spirit behind it.

What Does the Bible Say about the Spirit of the Law and the Letter of the Law?

Let's consider the difference between the spirit of the law and the letter of the law in action. To do this we will look at some of the most law-conscious people in the Bible: the Pharisees. Consider this passage:

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the [Sabbath](#). Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.”

Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent.

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. ([Mark 3:1-6](#))

If you look closely hopefully the differences become evident. Let's sum them up.

The [Pharisees](#) were looking for the "gotcha!" moment. They were trying to trap Jesus. They were more concerned about whether it's lawful to heal on the Sabbath than they were about the need and well-being of the man. They were following the letter of the law. Jesus saw the stubborn hearts of the Pharisees. He also recognized the condition and the need of the man and knew he had the power to heal him. He chose to do good and heal the man. He was following the spirit of the law.

Here is an interesting side note for the "law-abiding" Pharisees. As much as they observed the law, when they left the synagogue they went and plotted how they would kill Jesus. So much for observing the law.

Do We Forget the Spirit of the Law Today?

This mindset didn't just happen then it continues to this day. My mom shared a story with me of a time she was going through a very difficult situation in her life. She wanted to find a place to pray and she went into a small church to pray. It happened to be extremely hot that day and she had on a dress that was sleeveless. The dress was not short or inappropriate in length it was just sleeveless. When she sat down a lady in the church approached her. Never greeted her, asked her name, or inquired why she was there but simply said these words. "Excuse me but this is not how a woman should come into the church you need to have your arms covered." This not only made my mom feel terrible, it provided no comfort for the situation she was dealing with. What happened? This woman was following the letter of the law. In this case, the policies of the church became the letter of the law. What she missed big time was the spirit of the law, caring for someone who was hurting and needed [prayer](#).

How Can We Live the Spirit of the Law in Our Everyday Life?

I always believe that whatever truths you learn in Scripture have no real impact on your life until you apply them. Let's do this with this truth. Here are three simple ways you can be certain you are living by the spirit of the law not the letter of the law. Two of them Jesus already mentioned.

1 – Love God First

If we learn anything from what Jesus said is that loving God is the most important thing. If you truly love God that will impact your obedience, your worship, your prayer, and how you treat others. This will make the spirit of the law alive in your heart.

2 – Love People

The reason Jesus said to love people is that this affects how you deal with them. Think of all the ways the Bible describes love and all the things it does. Patience, kindness, not keeping a record of wrongs, and the list goes on. Having love of people carries with it the spirit of the law as Jesus said.

3 – Depend on the Holy Spirit to help you

The letter of the law is really about you doing everything. The spirit of the law is about God doing everything through you. If you want to embody the spirit of the law then allow the Holy Spirit more room to work both in you and through you. As you do this what you will find is that you will be able to love God and love people better. This will keep you continuing in the spirit of the law and not falling into the trap of the letter of the law.

Final Thoughts on the Spirit of the Law vs the Letter of the Law

I think you will agree that life is far less complicated and much more enjoyable when you live by the spirit of the law. It becomes even better when you allow the Spirit of God to help you do it. Remember the law kills and does not produce life in you because it requires something of you that you are not able to give. Therefore, don't be bound again by trying to live to the letter of the law but live in the freedom God has given you. This is not freedom without boundaries but freedom without the bondage of adhering to all the tenets of the law. I leave you with the words of the Apostle Paul:

For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing! ([Galatians 2:19-21](#))

The Spirit of the Law vs. The Letter of the Law

“Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:5-6).

“But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (Romans 2:29).

In these verses we see the contrast between the “*Spirit*” and the “*letter*.” This topic comes up in discussions with liberal brethren regarding their departure from the New Testament pattern. Those brethren use these verses to justify their practices and condemn so-called “legalism.”

Legalism: Definition & Connotation

The American Heritage Dictionary defines legalism as “strict, literal adherence to the law or a particular code, as of religion or morality.” What do the Scriptures say about a “strict, literal adherence” to God’s word? Jesus told His apostles to make disciples of all nations, “*teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*” (Matthew 28:20). Paul said we are to be “*careful to engage in good deeds*” (Titus 3:8). James stated the principle that if we violate one part of God’s law, regardless of what it is, we “*become guilty of all*” (James 2:10). These passages give us the idea of what God expects of us – to be careful to observe all that He has instructed us without ignoring any part of His law. Sounds like “strict, literal adherence,” doesn’t it?

We see a slightly different definition from Princeton University’s WordNet – a lexical database for the English language. This source defines legalism as “strict conformity to the letter of the law rather than its spirit.” The connotation people have is found in this definition. The idea is that the law itself (in our study here, the word of God) and the purpose behind it sometimes conflict. Therefore, we can only really follow one or the other. We must choose to follow the spirit of the law *or* the letter of the law.

Reading the Connotation into the Passages

With the connotation of legalism in our mind, let us look again at the two passages cited at the beginning. We will attempt to read the connotation into the passages to show how these passages can be used to promote a liberal interpretation of God's word.

“But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (Romans 2:29). Generally, the Jews tried so hard to be justified by the works of the Law. This would not work (cf. Galatians 2:16) Now insert the connotation: The *“letter”* refers to strict obedience. The *“Spirit”* refers to the purpose. The Jews missed the point of the law they were given. They were focusing on the strict adherence to the Law rather than looking at the purpose of the commandments. [The Jews did miss the point, but not in this sense. They did so by following the traditions of men (Matthew 15:3) and rejecting Christ (Galatians 3:24). Nowhere were they condemned for strict obedience.]

“Who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6). The previous passage (Romans 2:29) addressed the Jews. This one speaks more directly to us as Christians. Insert the connotation: Following the letter of the law – “legalism” – produces death. Following the spirit, or purpose, of the law gives life.

This is how one can use these passages to condemn what has been branded as “legalism.” Instead of strictly following the word of God, we just need to be sure we are fulfilling the purpose for which the law was given.

Consequences of the Hermeneutic Approach

Interpreting these passages this way forces us to accept certain ideas. First, the New Testament becomes (or is) a guide, not a law. This loosens the teachings of Scripture. If the New Testament just a guide and not a law, then there is no need to be very careful in our interpretation and application of it. The problem with this idea is that the New Testament is specifically referred to as a law by inspired writers. In speaking of the new covenant, the Hebrew writer quoted the prophet Jeremiah: *“I will put my laws into their minds, and I will write them on*

their hearts” (Hebrews 8:10). Paul spoke of being “*under the law of Christ*” (1 Corinthians 9:21). The New Testament, new covenant, gospel, is a *law*. It is not merely a guide.

The second consequence of this approach is that details become irrelevant. It relinquishes the need for carefulness in our use of Scripture. But we referenced Titus 3:8 earlier that says we are to be “*careful to engage in good deeds.*” In Matthew 22, Jesus showed how careful we are to be in handling the word of God. The Sadducees came to Jesus to question Him about the resurrection (Matthew 22:23ff). When Jesus used the Scriptures to show that the resurrection was a reality, He made His argument based on the tense of a verb (“*I Am*”). The word of God is important, even the details like verb tenses. We need to be careful in our handling of it.

Another consequence of this approach is the idea that the instruction of Scripture can be set aside as long as what we perceive as the purpose of the instruction is still carried out. This is the concept of the spirit of the law over the letter of the law. But what indication do we have that some of God’s commands or instructions are optional? Actually, what this does is exalt human wisdom. Whatever we deem to be the purpose behind the command is what we do. But we cannot fully know the purpose behind one of God’s commands unless He has revealed it to us (1 Corinthians 2:10-11). If He has revealed the purpose, we follow that. If He has revealed the only the precept, we follow that. If He has revealed both, we follow *both*.

Finally, another consequence is the idea that we must simply appeal to a higher purpose. Usually, this is said to be love. Basically, what this amounts to is situation ethics. Right is determined by the situation. Whatever is determined to be the loving thing to do in a particular situation must be right. As with the last point, this exalts human wisdom. What it also does is use love as an excuse to disobey the word of God. But Jesus said our obedience to His word is proof of our love (John 14:15; cf. 1 John 5:3).

Purpose Over Precept

This concept that we are to follow the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law can be summarized this way – *purpose over precept*. As long as we fulfill

the purpose behind a command, we do not necessarily have to follow the command itself. If there is another way of fulfilling the purpose, we are at liberty to do it some other way. This is the basic point of this concept.

When we look at God's word we see this is a tactic of Satan. He uses this idea to lead people into sin. This was what he did when he tempted Eve, which resulted in sin entering the world. Eve understood God's command regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – "*You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die*" (Genesis 3:3). How did Satan deceive her and lead her to eat of the tree she knew she should not eat? One thing he did was explain the reason for the command. His explanation was a lie. But he convinced Eve of his reasoning. Now that she supposedly understood the *purpose* behind God's command, she had justification to disobey. The idea is that if we understand the *purpose* of a command, we can find a reason to disobey. Many have this idea today. If we know *why* God requires something of us, we can surely find a loophole. After all, we are to follow the *spirit* of the law rather than the *letter*.

Let us notice some examples of how this reasoning is used today. In each of these, we will look at what we have been commanded to do and the reason why we are to do such. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes people *assume* they know the purpose for a command. Sometimes the purpose is clearly given. Here, we will simply look at commands that have the purpose behind them specifically revealed in God's word. We will not look at every reason given for a specific command. We can see the point by looking at one reason for each of these. After noticing the command and the reason behind it, we will see how the "purpose over precept" concept is used to justify certain things that we have no authority for.

Music in worship

PRECEPT – We are to sing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

PURPOSE – One reason why we sing is to teach and admonish one another (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

PURPOSE OVER PRECEPT – We can add instruments of music as long as we are still teaching. *[In this and the following examples, we see that people are*

looking for a “better” way to fulfill the purpose. The precept or instruction is not good enough.]

Evangelism

PRECEPT – We are to “*preach the gospel*” (Mark 16:15).

PURPOSE – We preach in order to “*make disciples*” (Matthew 28:19).

PURPOSE OVER PRECEPT – We can use other means than just the gospel, such as food, fun, and social programs, as long as we make disciples. The purpose is growth. Whatever means are helpful in causing growth can be used.

Lord’s Supper

PRECEPT – We are to take the Lord’s Supper “*on the first day of the week*” (Acts 20:7), and not make it into a common meal (1 Corinthians 11:22).

PURPOSE – We observe the Lord’s Supper to remember Christ and proclaim His death (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

PURPOSE OVER PRECEPT – We can take the Lord’s Supper anytime, even make it into a common meal, as long as we remember Christ and His death. In fact, if these things help us remember His death even better than a simple memorial on the first day of the week, then we not only can do this, but we should.

In the end, anything can be done as long as we can justify it in our own minds. We will no longer seek for authority given by God in His word. Why? Because we have found a *better* way to fulfill the will of God. This should not be our attitude. Instead, we need to be humble enough to realize that God’s way is best and we cannot improve upon it.

Explaining the Passages

Interpreting the passages we considered at the beginning in this way causes an apparent contradiction with other passages. We noticed Matthew 28:20 (“*observe all that I commanded*”), Titus 3:8 (“*be careful to engage in good deeds*”), and James 2:10 (“*whoever...stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all*”). These passages seem plain. Have we misunderstood them for so long?

Remember the principle of John 10:35 – “*The Scripture cannot be broken.*” That is to say, the word of God does not contradict itself. That is the point Jesus is making in the context. If this concept is correct (purpose over precept), we have to find another way of interpreting these other verses (Matthew 28:20, Titus 3:8, James 2:10). But do the ones who promote this view ever stop to think that *they* are the ones misapplying Scripture? They reinterpret plain passages based on a twisting of others.

Let us look then at the real meaning of these passages (2 Corinthians 3:6; Romans 2:29). First of all, notice that neither passage uses the phrases “spirit of the law” or “letter of the law.” That being said, let us see what these verses are actually talking about.

“*Who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*” (2 Corinthians 3:6). The key to this passage is the term “*new covenant.*” This is a contrast between the old and new covenants – the Law of Moses and the gospel of Christ. This is explained further in the next verse. Since “*the letter kills,*” it is described as the “*ministry of death*” (2 Corinthians 3:7). The verse speaks of this being “*engraved on stones*” and delivered by Moses. The “*letter*” is the old law. The “*spirit*” is the new law – the gospel.

“*But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God*” (Romans 2:29). In context, Paul was talking about the acceptance of both Jews and Gentiles under the gospel (cf. Romans 3:19-30). We are not justified by the Law of Moses (Romans 3:20), but by the law of faith (Romans 3:27). Therefore, the true people of God are those who have been circumcised in heart – “*by the Spirit, not by the letter*” (Romans 2:29; cf. Colossians 2:11-12).

The “spirit of the law vs. letter of the law” concept is deceptive. These terms are not found in Scripture. As we have seen, the concept is not either. We can be justified by being obedient to the law of faith (Romans 3:27). As we seek to be justified before God, let us be diligent to “*observe all that [He] commanded*” and be “*careful*” to be sure we are doing only those things that are pleasing to Him (Matthew 28:20; Titus 3:8).

