

## **Freed from the Law, to Fulfill the Law**

October 6th, 2013

Luke 16:14-18

*<sup>16</sup>“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. <sup>17</sup>But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void. <sup>18</sup>“Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”*

I made the point at the outset of last Sunday's sermon on these verses, reiterating what many commentators confirmed, that this is a difficult passage to understand. Specifically, verses 16-17 pose what seem to be a contradiction coming from Jesus' lips concerning the law. On the one hand He seems to be saying that the Law served a purpose only for a season, and that season is over, having given way to the gospel (v.16).

Then in the next breath He says, "But don't you dare think the Law is going anywhere. It's easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for a dot of the Law to become void" (v.17). So the Law were until John, but now that he has come the gospel is being proclaimed and it replaces or supersedes the Law; but the Law isn't really ever going away. Can we agree that this is a little bit confusing?

In pondering that difficulty, another difficulty pressed upon me: does anyone care about this? I can imagine some of you feeling that such a philosophical conundrum is irrelevant to what you're grappling with this week: "Larry, my marriage is crumbling, my children are a mess, my finances are out of control, my job is a dead-end nightmare that's getting worse every week, my health is deteriorating, and you want to wax intellectually about how the Law of God has been superseded but is still binding for today? Why must you be so nitpicky and out of touch with the real world in which I live?" It seems like that difficulty should be dealt with before the textual difficulty.

So what I would say to the person who feels this way is: suppose that you are on trial in a courtroom for a capital offense. Your life hangs in

the balance. A guilty verdict will mean death, and a not-guilty verdict will mean freedom and life. And suppose the judge says to you: "There are two ways we can deal with this. I can acquit you right now, decisively and irrevocably, and release you so that you can go and live a free and joyful and loving life that shows you really are not a rebellious, crime-loving law breaker, though you have been. Or I can postpone the trial and the verdict for several years and assign you a parole officer to watch you all that time, and let you go out and prove yourself to the court by your life, and then have the trial after that, and base the verdict on whether your behavior was satisfactory or not."

Now does the difference between these two options sound like nitpicking? This is what's at stake when we talk about the relationship between the Law and the gospel. These are not small things! These are among the great things of the universe. And we have the privilege this morning of lingering here and looking at them and meditating on them and being transformed to see the world the way the living God means for us to see them, and to live in the light of Truth. I know that some of you are not the least interested in these things. What you really get excited about is a new app on your phone, or a new outfit, or losing five pounds, or watching a ballgame, or adding a room to your house, or getting a new car or computer. But this is not what you were made for!

Don't be like the person who goes to the Grand Canyon with a little garden shovel in his hand, and before the brilliance of that majesty turns his back to the Canyon, kneels down, and digs a little trough with his shovel and shouts, "Hey, look at this! Look at my trough! Isn't that cool!" I know that the pressing and desirable things of your life seem big. But there is so much more to life than what feels urgent to you, and maybe what you really need this morning is to get up and turn around and look at the Canyon. And when we talk about Jesus Christ, and the Law of God, the gospel of the Kingdom, we are talking about glory infinitely more staggering and wonderful than the Grand Canyon.

So, briefly, let's consider the two issues I mentioned earlier: in what way were the Law and the prophets "until John", indicating they only had a temporal purpose which, now, in light of the gospel, has passed? And then, in what way is the law still abiding today?

## **The Law and the Prophets: All About Jesus**

The simplest statement that Jesus made to help us understand what He means here in Luke 16 is found in Luke 24:

*"<sup>25</sup>And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! <sup>26</sup>Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" <sup>27</sup>And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."*

Everything written in the Old Testament was pointing to and preparing the way for Jesus. In that sense it was "until John," the last prophet who was bearing witness to Jesus, the coming Messiah. Before Genesis 1:1, we're told that the names of redeemed sinners were written in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). So it was always God's plan -- before the world was made, before the Law was given -- to save sinners through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. That was God's plan A, from the beginning.

The Law was never given as a way of salvation; even in the Old Testament, God was a God of mercy and grace: "<sup>6</sup>The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup>keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.""

This tension (how could God forgive iniquity, yet by no means clear the guilty) was the puzzle of the Old Testament, solved in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Law served a purpose for a time, to expose human sinfulness, and give a shadow of the redemption that was to come through the elaborate system of animal sacrifices, but all of it was bearing witness to Jesus.

So this proclamation should have been met with a ferocious, violent pressing into the Kingdom through Jesus (v.16b), the long-awaited Redeemer who would fulfilled all that the Law and Prophets pointed to. could not. But the Pharisees, glorying in their rule-keeping and the human praise that it gained them, missed this aim of the Law, and so Jesus is warning them, "Don't glory in something that is passing away; the Law, which you have put your hope in, was pointing to Me as your substitute and Savior, yet you ridicule and reject Me!" (see John 5:39, also Galatians 3:21-26).

### **But Not a Dot of the Law Will Pass Away**

But, what then do we make of Jesus' statement in the next verse, "<sup>17</sup>But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void." If we are set free from the Law, if the Law showed us our need for redemption, and gave a pointer to the way that redemption would take place, but the redemption has now come in Jesus, what need do we have for the Law? Why is Jesus so intent on communicating that the Law isn't going anywhere?

I think we can sum up the answer most succinctly in the line of the song we just sang a few minutes ago, "Your love has set me free to glorify Your name..." As a society, we're very confused about what it really means to be free, and I think this might be one reason why we struggle to love the Law the way the saints in the Old Testament did. We think of freedom as the ability to do whatever *I* want to do, but real

freedom, biblical freedom is the freedom to be and do what we were made for, which is to glorify God in everything that we do.

God made you for relationship with Him, to live close to Him, to know and taste and see His goodness, and out of love and gratitude and confidence in who He is and what He's done and what He will yet do, to bring every aspect of our lives in conformity with His will. That is real freedom, and the Law, then, is good and has abiding value for us because it shows us the will of God, which those who have His Spirit want to do. It's this understanding of Law -- as an expression of the will of the God who has loved us and saved us by His grace -- that is underneath expressions of love for the Law like:

*"<sup>97</sup> Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day."*

*"<sup>127</sup> Therefore I love your commandments above gold, above fine gold."*

*"<sup>72</sup> The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces."*

What is this affection? This is not the heart of a person looking to the Law to justify himself. This is not the heart of a person who sees Law only as the thing that shows us how corrupt he is. This is someone seeing something else (though not contrary to that). This is someone who has tasted God's love and grace, and aided by God's Spirit, knows that God is good and that His commands are His loving expression of how life works best, and because his desire is to honor and glorify God with his whole being, he takes pleasure in knowing God's will and doing it (imperfectly, but truly).

And that will, most basically and beautifully, is a life of love, which the Spirit works in us by His power, and thus enables us to fulfill the Law:

*"<sup>12</sup> So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."*

*"<sup>37</sup> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the great and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is*

*like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. <sup>40</sup>On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. ””*

*”<sup>13</sup>For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. <sup>14</sup>For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>15</sup>But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. <sup>16</sup>But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”*

## **Moving Towards the Lord's Supper**

So here is what Jesus means in these verses: the Law in its function to expose our sinfulness and to point to a coming sacrifice of redemption was until John. It was all pointing to and fulfilled in Jesus, the Lamb of God who slain for the sins of the world. It is the height of spiritual insanity to claim devotion to the Law and the Prophets yet reject the One who all of it was pointing to, as the Pharisees were doing.

But the Law of God -- that is, the commandments of God, coming through the filter of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, summed up in a life of love for God and others -- are not negligible because we are under grace and saved by the gospel. They are doable because we are under grace. And so not even a dot of the Law is passing away, now that the gospel of the Kingdom is being preached. In Christ, we are freed from the Law to fulfill the Law. The New Covenant gift of the Spirit is the power to obey the Law, the revealed will of God, the Law of liberty, the Law of love. And the path along which the Spirit moves is faith in Jesus.

How that applies to divorce and remarriage will have to wait for another day. For now, let's celebrate God's grace and rekindle our faith by remembering Jesus' broken body and shed blood.