

KINGDOM. SUPPLEMENT 12

[THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS] THE LAW IN THE BIBLE

The word “law” (Hebrew: torah, Greek: nomos) in the Bible has several different meanings.

In order to understand the letter to the Romans, we need to distinguish the various meanings of the word “law”

1. The law as God’s absolute requirement for salvation and absolute standard of condemnation.

The law consists of the moral commandments, teachings, principles and examples in the Bible, in short, the whole Bible. The law is a perfect expression of God’s character and will. Thus, the law is the nature of God expressed in commandments!

In the following Bible passages, “the law” primarily refers to God’s requirement for justification (salvation). In absolute sense, the law is God’s absolute requirement for salvation, God’s absolute rule of duty for living and God’s absolute standard for judgement and condemnation. Because God is absolute holy and righteous, he requires and demands:

- that all people *have the perfect (100%) holy and righteous legal status* before him. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).
- that all people actually *live perfect (100%) holy and righteous lives* before him. “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do” (1 Peter 1:15-16)
- that all sins are *absolutely (100%) condemned and punished*. “For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

The perfect God cannot, will not and does not require anything less than these perfections. Every form of “sin” misses God’s goal. Every imperfection is lawlessness (1 John 3:4) and subjects man to God’s condemnation and punishment (Galatians 3:10; James 2:10)!

God’s law is never like the law of people, where it is possible to score a 70% pass. With regard to God’s law, you are either 100% perfect or you fail 100%. You are perfectly saved, forgiven and a child of God. Or you are perfectly lost, not yet forgiven and stand eternally condemned.

It is clear that no man on earth will ever find a way to gain greater perfection in keeping the law; no man can pass the test of salvation. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory (the characteristics and approval) of God” (Romans 3:23).

But it is also clear that unless God by grace through faith gives his (100%) perfect holy and righteous state (legal position) in Jesus Christ to a person, no person can be saved (be declared righteous). “Jesus has become for us wisdom from God, - that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30). “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

This is the meaning of the word “law” in Romans 2:14-15; 3:19-21a; 4:13-15; 6:14-15; 7:1,4,6; 8:3,4,7; 10:4-5; and in Galatians 2:19,21; 3:2,5,10-13; 5:18.

(1) The law as the revelation of God’s character and will.

“The law” consists of the moral commandments, teachings, principles and examples in the Bible, in short, the whole Bible. It is a perfect expression of God’s character and will. The law is the nature of God expressed in (moral) commandments!

In absolute sense, the law is God’s absolute requirement for salvation, God’s absolute rule of duty for living and God’s absolute standard of judgement and condemnation. The law demands perfect obedience (Galatians 3:10; 5:3; James 2:10; 1 John 3:4).

Before the fall into sin, the law could have maintained the possession of eternal (Leviticus 18:5; Romans 7:10; 10:5; Galatians 3:12).

After the fall into sin, the law cannot save sinners and unbelievers, because sinners and unbelievers *do not submit* themselves for 100% to God’s law and *cannot submit* themselves for 100% to God’s law (Romans 8:7-8). After the fall into sin, even believers (Christians) cannot fully obey the requirements of the law (James 2:10; 1 John 1:8,10), even though God’s holiness and righteousness demands it (Leviticus 18:5). God will not justify a single person in human history and in the world for trying to keep the law (Romans 3:19-20,28; Galatians 2:16)!

(2) The law as a means to justification is a curse for everyone.

“The law” as God’s requirement for salvation and standard of condemnation has been given to Adam before the fall into sin (Genesis 2:16-17). It was also written in the heart of all people (Romans 2:14-15; 1:32), so that no one can make an excuse (Romans 3:19).

The law was given in written form to Moses and the people of Israel (Leviticus 18:5; Deuteronomy 4:1; 6:24; Nehemia 9:29; Ezekiel 20:11,13,21; Romans 10:5).

However, after the fall into sin man lost the possession of eternal life and he cannot regain eternal life through keeping the law. No human being (except Christ) can keep the law. Trying to keep the law is a curse, from which only Jesus Christ can free (save) a person (Galatians 3:10-25).

(3) The law as the whole Old Testament revelation or covenant.

For the Jews in the New Testament period, “the law” was the whole Old Testament, but especially the five books of Moses. The law was the absolute righteous and holy demands or requirements of God that were expressed in the moral laws, the ceremonial (ritual) laws and the civil laws of Israel. The Jewish learned men extended this law with 613 traditional interpretations.

- The moral laws (the Ten Commandments) taught the people during the Old Testament period how they should live holy and righteous as God’s saved people in their relationship to God and to their neighbours.
- The ceremonial laws (with regard to holy people, holy places, holy times and holy actions) taught the people during the Old Testament period how they should approach, worship and serve God.
- The civil laws (with regard to the kings and judges, the penal and compensation laws, laws about war and marriage, etc.) taught people during the Old Testament period how they should function as God’s theocratic nation (Israel) among the Gentile nations.

However, the Jews wrongly believed that trying to keep the Mosaic Law could save them (justify them). People need to be delivered from the belief that the works of the law could justify them in the eyes of God. This is called “a deliverance from the old covenant or Mosaic law” (and of every law that is made a condition for salvation). The old covenant or Mosaic law is called “the written code with its regulations that was against us” (Colossians 2:14) or “the letter” (2 Corinthians 3:6) (Romans 7:6; Galatians 3:10; 5:3; Hebrews 7:12,16,18-19,22; 8:5-13; 10:1-4).

(4) The law as extended by many interpretations and traditions of the Jewish teachers.

See “the tradition of the elders” in “the parable of the blind leading the blind” in manual 11, lesson 25. Jesus Christ and the apostles rejected the interpretations, traditions and additions that the Jewish teachers made with regard to the law (Matthew 15:6-9; 23:4; Acts 15:1,10; Galatians 5:1-4). The hundreds of religious laws made by religious leaders do not please God and cannot save anyone from his sins!

(5) The law as interpreted by modern legalists.

There have been people in the past that taught that the believer only died to the ceremonial law as a condition for salvation (their interpretation of Romans 7:4,6). According to them the Old Testament is “the literal law”, which no one could keep and this has been replaced by the New Testament, which is “the spiritual law” (the gospel), which everyone can keep! This becomes “a CHRIST PLUS gospel” (which must be rejected) (Galatians 1:6-9)! According to them, this spiritual law consists of FAITH PLUS EVANGELICAL OBEDIENCE. Consequently they believe that a person is saved not only when he believes in Jesus Christ, but ALSO when he fulfils the obligation to obey the moral commandments!

Their message is that salvation is absolutely dependent on FAITH PLUS SOMETHING THE BELIEVER MUST DO! Thus, certain Christians make the following additions an absolute requirement for salvation!

- joining their denomination (which according to them is the only true Church)
- being baptised with water in a particular way (which according to them is the only true baptism)
- giving evidence of being baptised with the Spirit by speaking in tongues
- living a particular sanctified life (like abstaining from certain foods, certain activities and certain relationship)

The letter to the Romans rejects all these notions. People are saved, not because of anything they do, but because God in Christ did the absolute necessary for believers in the place of believers (see Ephesians 2:8-9)! Although keeping the law saves no one, saved people thankfully express their salvation by living according to God’s moral commandments. The Ten Commandments were never given as a means for salvation, but as a guideline how to live gratefully in submission to God (cf. Exodus 20:1-2).

(6) The law has been fulfilled only by Jesus Christ.

The purpose of the first coming of Jesus Christ (his life, suffering, death and resurrection) was to fulfil God’s righteous requirement for the salvation of people (Matthew 3:15; 5:17; John 4:34; 17:4; 19:30).

- He already fulfilled the law as God’s absolute requirement for salvation, as the rule how a saved person should live and the standard for the condemnation of unbelievers.
- He already fulfilled all the Old Testament (Mosaic) institutions (the ceremonial law) as the priesthood, the temple worship, the festivals and fasting days, the circumcision, the sacrifices, the gifts and tithes, the cleanliness rules, etc. “The law was given through Moses, grace and truth (the reality) came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).
- He fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies (see manual 3, supplement 15), shadows and illustrations (Hebrews 9:8-10; 10:1; Colossians 2:17).

In short, Jesus Christ *fulfilled* the whole law (Matthew 5:17)!

By his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ:

- fulfilled the Law (and the Prophets) (Matthew 5:17)
- changed the law (Hebrews 7:12)
- set aside the law (Hebrews 7:18-19)
- made the law obsolete (Hebrews 8:13)
- cancelled the law with all its regulations (Colossians 2:14)
- abolished the law with its commandments (Ephesians 2:14-15)!

Jesus Christ has come to redeem people that formerly stood under the curse (and slavery) of the law, in order to receive grace and the legal status of being the children of God (Galatians 3:13-14; 4:5). In short, Jesus Christ has come to redeem people from God's law as God's absolute requirement for salvation (justification, acceptance) and God's absolute standard for condemnation.

2. The law as God's spiritual teachings and moral commandments how to live as God's people.

In the following Bible passages, the law does not primarily refer to *God's requirement for justification (salvation)*, but to *God's requirement for sanctification*, that is, the requirement for living as God's justified (saved) people. The law consists of the teachings of the Bible, especially the moral commandments.

(1) The law as the light that gives knowledge of sin (thus revealing the need for salvation).

The moral law (for example, the Ten Commandments) causes people to know what sin is (Romans 7:7).

- On the one hand the moral law reveals God's holiness, righteousness, goodness and spiritual nature.
- On the other hand it reveals man's unholiness, unrighteousness, evil and unspiritual or depraved nature (Romans 7:12,14).

Thus, the moral law prepares a person for salvation from his sins. The brilliant and pure whiteness of God's moral and spiritual laws very clearly reveals the blackness of man's moral and spiritual depravity (Galatians 3:19-25; 1 Timothy 1:8-11; Hebrews 8:10)!

(2) The law as instrument that arouses the sinful nature to life (and thus gives a sense of depravity).

The moral law is holy, righteous, good and spiritual (Romans 7:12,14) and cannot be the cause of sin. The sinful nature in man is the cause of sin. It uses the moral law as its instrument to excite and arouse every kind of sinful desire in a person. As soon as a person begins to give attention to the moral law, his sinful nature becomes a powerful tyrant in his body and a terrible reality in his conscience (Romans 7:8-11). The sinful nature causes him to bear fruit for death (Romans 7:5; cf. Galatians 6:19-21).

The more a man tries to keep the moral law, the more he experiences and realises his total moral and spiritual depravity (cf. Romans 7:14-15). Thus, the person "dies" to his fancied state of "being good", loses his false securities and comes into a state of misery and danger of eternal condemnation (Romans 7:9b).

(3) The law as God's standard for holy and righteous living (how to live as a saved person).

Although the believer is no longer "under law", that is subject to God's absolute requirement for salvation and God's absolute standard for condemnation (Romans 6:14), he is not exempt from God's standard for living as a saved person (namely, the moral law).

God's Word as the law. The believer desires to discover the wonderful teachings in "the law" (the Bible), meditate on them all day long, obey them and find peace and stability for his life (Psalm 119:18, 97,136,165). God's Word that is preached and taught, heard, read and obeyed is called "the perfect law that gives freedom" (James 1:25). The moral commandments, teachings, principles and examples in the Bible, in short, the whole Bible, is a perfect expression of the character and will of God. Thus, the law is the nature of God expressed in commandments! The law is therefore also the perfect way for God's children to live as God's children. Living in accordance with the law (the Bible) is the perfect way to genuine freedom.

The Ten Commandments as the law. Only after God had redeemed (saved) his people by leading them from slavery to freedom, he gave to them the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). He did not give them these moral commandments as a requirement for salvation. That would have brought his people from the slavery under the yoke of sin to the slavery under the yoke of the law.

He gave them the Ten Commandments as the way to maintain their saved condition! Living within the limits of God's moral laws is the only way to continue to experience freedom and to give freedom a concrete form! To live within the boundaries of God's moral commandments is the only possible way for God's people to maintain their freedom and to express their freedom. The moral law is therefore not a means to enslave people or to save (justify) people, but the means to live the saved and liberated life!

The royal law as the law. According to the Bible "the royal law" is love (James 2:8). "He who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8) Love is the fulfilment of the law, because whatever the Ten Commandments express in a negative way, love expresses in a positive way. Love turns the "you shall not" into "you shall ...!"

(Romans 13:8-10). The law describes how to love God, your neighbour and yourself (Mark 12:30-31; Romans 13:10; Galatians 5:14; 6:2; James 2:8) and how to live a holy and righteous life in gratitude for what God had done for you.

(4) The law as the only boundary for liberty (freedom).

The believers “must speak and act as people that will be judged by the law that gives freedom” (Greek: eleutheria, the opposite of douleia, slavery) (James 2:12). The law of God gives freedom in every form of slavery. Law and freedom are inseparably connected! There simply exists no genuine freedom without God’s law. God’s law consists of the Bible and God’s moral laws! The law of God is “perfect” (James 1:25) because the law expresses the nature of God in commandments and also because the law is the best means to express the (regenerate) nature of man! There simply exists no genuine freedom without living one’s life according to God’s nature that is expressed in God’s moral commandments! Christians must live according to God’s commandments and will be judged according to God’s commandments.

Unbelievers only want “freedom”. They want to be free from all rules devised by their parents, their religious community and their society in order to be free to do what they like and to experiment with sins like sex, drugs, greed for money, desire for glory and power, etc. But this kind of liberty or freedom from all boundaries only leads to bondage to these sins.

Believers are born again through the word of truth (James 1:18) and have God’s laws written in their minds and hearts (Hebrews 10:16). Believers have voluntarily bound themselves to God and to God’s law in the Bible. They want to, can and will obey God’s law. They find the greatest freedom by obedience to God and his commandments *within the boundaries of these commandments!* For Christians there is no genuine freedom without attachment to God’s law! Obedience is the way in which a Christian expresses his love for God. Jesus said, “Whoever has my commandments and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me, will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.” “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:21,23). This obedience to the commandments of God makes a person truly free (John 8:31-32,26; cf. Acts 5:32).

All disobedience to God’s law is the same as speaking against God’s law, criticising God’s law and judging God’s law as being “wrong”. Disobedience to God’s law means that a person displaces God as the Lawgiver and Judge (James 4:11-12). God, the Lawgiver and Judge will judge all people with “the law that gives freedom” (James 2:12), that is, with the teachings of the Bible and especially the moral laws in the Bible.

3. The law as a principle or a rule for action.

In the following Bible passages, the word “law” means a principle or a rule for action.

(1) The law of works (Romans 3:27).

“The law of works” is the principle that requires a person’s own works or dedicated efforts to obey the Mosaic Law as a requirement for his justification (salvation). Such a principle only leads to boasting (cf. Ephesians 2:8-9).

(2) The law of faith (Romans 3:27).

“The law of faith” is the principle that requires faith in Jesus Christ and his completed work of salvation as a requirement for our justification (salvation). Only such a principle keeps us humble.

(3) The law of sin (Romans 7:21,23ac,25b).

“The law of sin” is the indwelling sin, the sinful or depraved nature of man that functions as a law or as an unbending principle in him. It is a power that desires to coerce, dominate or control the Christian. Paul does not say that the Christian always commits sins, but he does say that the sinful nature in the Christian is a power from which he cannot free himself.

Time and again the sinful nature challenges and opposes the human will and turns the good intentions of the Christian into evil. Whenever the Christian wants to do good, evil is certainly not asleep, but stalks in circles around the Christian with the purpose to destroy him (cf. 1 Peter 5:8). “Sin crouches at the door” of the Christian, desiring to overcome him (cf. Genesis 4:7) and turn his good deeds into evil. The law of sin (that is, the sinful nature) is especially active in the members of his body (Romans 6:13,19; 7:14,17,20). The law of sin will continue to be a reality in the Christian until he is finally liberated from “the body of death” (Romans 7:24; 1 Corinthians 15:54-57), that is, liberated from his physical body in its present condition that is subject to the ravages of the depraved nature and death.

Non-Christians are not free from the absolute dominating and enslaving power of the sinful nature (the old self or the body of sin, Romans 6:6). And although Christians are once-for-all set free from the dominating and enslaving power of the sinful nature, the sinful nature is still a present and forceful power in their life (Romans 6:7; 7:18; 8:2). The sinful nature is in continual conflict with the Holy Spirit dwelling in the believer (Romans 6:13,19; Galatians 5:16-23). Genuine Christians again and again choose to be controlled by the Holy Spirit and not by their sinful natures (Romans 8:9,13). Again and again genuine Christians resist conformity to the sinful world and choose to be transformed into the likeness of Christ (Romans 12:1-2; Colossians 3:10).

(4) The law of the mind (Romans 7:23b).

“The law of the mind” is the regenerate nature of the believer (the real inner being or nature of the believer) (Romans 7:22) that functions as another law or power that desires to coerce, dominate or control the believer. To put it in another way, “the law of the mind” is the Holy Spirit living in the believer. Time and again with great determination the law of the mind desires to do what is good, that is, to obey God’s moral commandments (Romans 7:16,22,26) and “the form or pattern of teaching (Greek: tupos didachés) to which Christians were entrusted” (Romans 6:17).

(5) The law of the Spirit of life (Romans 8:2).

“The law of the Spirit” is the Holy Spirit that functions as a law or power that renews, leads and controls all aspects of the believer’s life.

(6) The law of sin and death (Romans 8:2).

“The law of sin and death” is the same as “the law of sin” in Romans 7:21,23ac,25b.

(7) The law of righteousness (Romans 9:31).

“The law of righteousness” is the matter of justification or gaining righteousness before God. On the one hand, this matter was of the utmost importance among the Jews. They pursued justification before God by doing the works of the law. Nevertheless, they failed to gain justification. The Jews never gained God’s righteousness by obeying the law or by doing the works of the moral laws, the ceremonial laws and the civil laws.

On the other hand, this righteousness was not important among the Gentiles. Although the Gentiles were interested in moral matters, they never pursued justification before God. Nevertheless, the Gentiles obtained God’s righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ and his completed work of salvation.

(8) Against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:23).

There is absolutely nothing against what God effects in believers through his Holy Spirit. While there are moral laws against the acts of the sinful nature (Galatians 5:19-21), there is no law against the fruit of the Spirit! This should be a great stimulus to live by the Spirit and bear the fruit of the Spirit!
