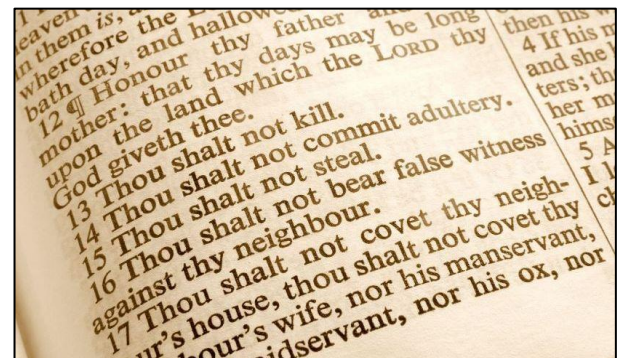


Living By The Spirit of The Law

“The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” -- John 10:10 (NKJV)

Understanding God’s law has been an ongoing challenge for people throughout mankind’s existence. Because all people sin (Romans 3:23), some mistakenly think we might as well not even try to obey God’s commands. Others mistakenly think that Jesus came to do away with the law and that Christians have been freed from the law. On the contrary, Jesus came to fulfill the law and to highlight the spirit of the law which brings peace and abundance.

Previously we examined the 6th commandment of God (*You Shall Not Murder*) in an effort to look at not just the letter of the law, but to understand the purpose and intent of the law more clearly. Jesus’ teachings regarding this commandment and others ... gives us greater insight to the spirit of the law and how that can ultimately impact our life in the kingdom. (Matthew 5:21-24)



A kingdom - like any nation today - cannot function without laws. There must be a standard of conduct for subjects and citizens to follow, or chaos and anarchy would result. Following the laws of a kingdom or nation does not grant a person citizenship - that is not the purpose of law. Law is simply a guide for people to follow to ensure cohesion, agreement, and **peace** in civil and interpersonal relationships. Without an understood standard, enforced by a sovereign ruler ... everyone would act according to his own whim or desire, and nothing good or worthwhile would be produced (Judges 21:25).

The Kingdom of God is no different. God is not the author of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33). His Kingdom will be peaceful and orderly because everyone who will enter into it will have voluntarily submitted himself to the law - the commandments - of God. God will not have anyone prosper in His Kingdom who demonstrates, by the pattern of his life, that he will not obey Him (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

To understand biblical law ... we must begin by understanding the concept of spiritual education and growth. Throughout the Bible, we are admonished to grow spiritually. Peter concludes his second letter with this challenge: “***But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ***” (2 Peter 3:18).

Human attitudes toward God’s law run the gamut. One way to view spiritual growth is as a four-stage process ... that shows one’s change in approach to God’s law:

1. **Anarchy and lawlessness:** For many, this is the starting point, where there is little understanding of God’s laws and little desire to obey them.
2. **Blind obedience:** This is the point where we come to realize that God has laws that should be obeyed, but we lack understanding of why and how to fulfill the law.
3. **Informed compliance:** This is the stage where we come to a basic understanding of the law and commit ourselves to obeying it. (This is living by the letter of the law and is often the point where we seek baptism.)
4. **Living by the spirit of the law:** This is the final and lifelong growth stage where we live by not only the letter of the law, but also the spirit of the law, which means the values behind the law.

Letter of the Law vs. Spirit of the Law

- The spirit of the law ... looks at the concept or reason why a law was created.
- The letter of the law ... focuses on the precise language of a law without looking at its overall purpose.

When one obeys only the letter of the law, one can often find loopholes and exceptions that allow technical obedience to the law and at the same time violation of the spirit of the law.

For example ... consider how a mother might tell her child that he cannot watch television until he finishes his homework. The spirit of the law—the purpose of this mother’s instruction—is that her son do his homework before playing.

If he plays an electronic game with his homework still not done, technically, he has obeyed the letter of the law (instruction) of his mother. He did not watch television as she forbade him to do until he finished his homework; instead, he started playing an electronic game—something his mother had not specifically forbidden him to do prior to completing his homework.

To have obeyed the spirit of his mother’s instructions, this young boy should have finished his homework first before engaging in any play (not just watching television).

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Perhaps the greatest difficulty is making the transition from stage three to stage four in the above noted stages of spiritual growth. Jesus made this clear when He admonished the scribes and Pharisees: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone”* (Matthew 23:23).

Here Jesus drew a line between **informed compliance** (just obeying the letter of the law) and **living by the spirit of the law**. These religious leaders were meticulously obeying God’s instruction to pay tithes—a tenth of one’s income—on some of the smallest of spices. Yet they overlooked other matters that are very important to God about *how we are to treat others* (justice and mercy).

Speaking of these leaders, Jesus said ... *“For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments”* (verses 4-5).

Meditating on the letter of the law can help us learn the underlying values—the spirit of the law. The law represents the desires and values of God. Many are like the scribes and Pharisees, never making it to the fourth stage of spiritual growth, where one lives by the spirit of God’s law as well as the letter of God’s law. This shortcoming may partly explain why Jesus said, *“For many are called, but few are chosen”* (Matthew 22:14).

But remember Jesus said, *“These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.”* Embracing the spirit of the law in no way sets aside obedience to the letter of the law. ***It is necessary to obey the law in order to also fully live by the spirit of the law.***

What Is The Role of Law In Spiritual Growth?

From a religious perspective, the reason for God’s law is clear (Romans 3:20). The law shows what is right and wrong in God’s sight. It shows what produces good results and what leads to death (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25). God’s law defines sin (1 John 3:4).

And there is another reason for law. ***Meditating on the letter of the law can help us learn the underlying values—the spirit of the law.*** ***The law represents the desires and values of God for successful kingdom living ... as we will see, as we examine the rest of the Commandments.***

TO BE CONTINUED ...