

SHOULD WE KEEP THE SABBATH? (Pt 10)

Love Fulfills the Law

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I have no doubt that many Sabbath observers wishing to be “Torah-compliant” believers, will have been rather restive when reading this little series *Should We Keep the Sabbath?* Indeed, the teaching will have been viewed as potentially dangerous, if not by some sincere God-fearing folks, as even God-denying.

In particular the idea that, we who are enjoying the transforming life and liberty of the new covenant apart from the regulations of the Ten Commandments, will appear to be promoting lawlessness. Since we are not being guided by the Law that says, “Thou shalt do” certain things, and “Thou shalt not do” certain other things, aren’t we seen to be promoting a break-down of decency, law and order? Isn’t everything that has elevated those societies that have upheld the Judeo-Christian ideals contained in God’s rules for decent living?

To such thinking, abolishing Sabbath-observance is the thin edge of the wedge towards moral breakdown, being a failure to honour God supremely on one day of every week. After all, doesn’t the NT right up to the very last book teach that, those **who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus** are God’s people (**Rev. 12: 17**)? Right to the very end, **the saints** who will have access to the Kingdom of God are those **who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus** (**Rev.14:12**). ¹

So, to the very end of this present evil Age, the identifying mark of God’s folks will be those who both keep the commandments of God and who hold firm to the testimony of Jesus. And what are **the commandments of God** if not the Ten Commandments --- which of course include Sabbath-keeping?

By writing in the last article that the new covenant is not like the Ten Commandments, are we found to be promoting lawlessness? Great question!

THE COMMANDMENTS IN JOHN

Without going into a lengthy word-study as to what John means by his use of **the commandments of God** in his Gospel, epistles, and the Revelation, let’s just cut to the chase. Invariably we find that whenever John wishes to refer to the old covenant law, including the Ten Commandments, he uses the Greek word *nomos*. This is the word translated “Law” or “law”.

Two examples to prove the rule will suffice for brevity’s sake, **For the Law (*nomos*) was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ** (**John 1:17**). And Nathaniel said, **“We have found him of whom Moses in the Law (*nomos*) wrote ...”** (v. 45). ²

However, whenever John wishes to refer to the new covenant commandments, he invariably uses the Greek word *entole*. A few examples to prove this rule will also suffice for brevity’s sake, **If you love me, you will keep my commandments (*entole*)... If you keep my commandments (*entole*), you will abide in my love; just as I have kept my Father’s commandments (*entole*), and abide in His love ... This is my commandment (*entole*), that you love one another, just as I have loved you ... This I command (*entolamai*) you, that you love one another** (**John 15: 10,12,17**). ³

¹ The very last chapter in the Bible (at least in some translations) gives a blessing to those who **do his commandments that they might have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city** (**Rev. 22:14**). The better MSS leave out the words, “**who do his commandments**”, but for the sake of our argument it does not hurt to include it.

² All examples where *nomos* means the Law are **John 1:17; 45; 7:19, 23,49,51; 8:5,17; 10:34; 12:34; 15:25; 18:31; 19:7.**

³ See also, **John 10:18; 12:49-50; 13:34; 14:15, 21, 31; 1 John 2:3-4, 7-8; 3:22- 24; 4:21; 5:2-3; 2 John 1: 4-6.**

Thus we see John *always* distinguishes the Law of Moses from the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus Messiah by invariably calling the first *nomos* and the second *entole*. Therefore ...

We conclude that the term, “commandments of God” as used by John in Revelation 12:17 and 14: 10 does *not* refer to the Ten Commandments. If he were referring to the Ten Commandments he would have used the Greek word (*nomos*) “Law”. ⁴

THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS

Before we may safely conclude that John does not mean the Ten Commandments in Rev. 12:17 & 14:12, we must also note that he uses two other phrases in conjunction with “the commandments of God”. In both verses John immediately qualifies the expression “the commandments of God”, with the following expressions, **and the testimony of Jesus** or, **and the faith of Jesus**, respectively. The true people of God are those who keep **the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus**, or, **and the faith of Jesus**.

In the original language, the word “testimony” in Rev. 12:17 is the word *martyr*. It means to testify, to witness to, and sometimes ultimately to be a martyr for the truth. The basic idea is to testify to the truth regardless of the consequences --- even to die for that testimony.

But notice the slightly different expression in Rev. 14:12 that follows “the commandments of God”. This time we read the saints obey **the commands of God and the faith of Jesus**. The Greek construction of **Jesus** can carry two ideas. **The faith of Jesus** can mean either the testimony from Jesus or the testimony about Jesus; that is, what Jesus himself said and taught and/or what are now the facts concerning Jesus. **The faith of Jesus** may be the Gospel from **Jesus the source** and/or, the Gospel about **Jesus as its subject**.

All of which is to simply say, the two expressions, **the testimony of Jesus** and **the faith of Jesus** are equivalent terms conveying **both** the truth as spoken by Jesus, and one’s testimony about Jesus. When we give our witness to the Gospel of Jesus, we are fearlessly testifying the truth as Jesus himself delivered it, as well as giving the facts concerning his life, death, resurrection and exaltation to the Father’s right hand.

JESUS HIMSELF WAS A FAITHFUL MARTYR!

The Bible calls Jesus **the author** of our salvation (Hebrews 2:10; 12: 2). The Greek word (*archegos*) is not so much an “author” in our modern use, but is more like a “pioneer” who first strikes the path and destiny for others who follow him. We might use the illustration of the strong swimmer who carries the rope ashore to first secure his own position, thus making it possible for the weaker ones to follow.

As the “pioneer” of our salvation, Jesus died for his confession of faith ... **Christ Jesus testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate (I Tim. 6:13)**. He was no armchair theologian! He was himself first **perfected through sufferings**, even **tasting death for every man (Heb. 2: 10,14)**. **Jesus himself was a martyr for the truth we follow!**

John also calls himself a **witness** (*martyr*) to the word of God and to **the testimony of Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:1-2, 9)**. Then he mentions a certain martyr by the name of Antipas who was faithful unto death (Rev. 2: 13). Jesus then praises the church in Pergamum, who also **did not deny my faith (Rev. 2: 13)**.

John later says he saw the **souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony (martyrdom) which they had maintained (Rev. 6: 9)**. And later again, John sees **the souls of those who had been beheaded because of the testimony (martyrdom) of Jesus ... (Rev. 20: 4)**.

The picture is that both John and the saints had borne faithful testimony to the Gospel which Christ first preached himself. This is evidently the meaning when we come to Rev. 12:17, **And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments (entole) of God and hold to the testimony (martyrian) of Jesus**.

⁴ Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Christ*, Life Assurance Ministries, Az., USA, 2003, see pp 373-377 (Italics emphasis original.)

So, the Dragon who is Satan, is raging against the faithful witness borne by the people of God because they are following faithfully in the obedient steps of their Lord and Master Jesus whom he also tried to destroy. That is, the Devil hates with a furious hostility the truth of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to which Jesus testified and for which he died to secure the purpose of God for the world.

The same idea is found in **Revelation 14:12, Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus** (or literally, **the faith of Jesus**). Again, the saints are described as those who hold true to the testimony Jesus himself spoke, thus keeping the commandments of God as left by him.

It is quite clear then, that keeping **the commandments of God and the testimony** (or **faith**) of Jesus in John's context, has everything to do with listening to Jesus and keeping his Gospel-testimony.

Let's put it this way. What was it that made the Gentile nations recognize Israel as God's chosen people? What alerted the Gentile nations to the fact that Israel claimed a special status before the Creator God? That's right. They saw a people who dressed differently, who ate differently, and who worshipped their God differently, who displayed different moral values to the nations round about them.

So what has changed with the advent of Christ's new Gospel covenant? What is it that is supposed to differentiate Christians from the world now? What should be the outstanding characteristic of the new covenant inaugurated by the death of Jesus? What should be the sign that we are God's redeemed people?

Let Jesus tell us in his own words; **A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. Buy this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35).** Loving others as Jesus loved is the sign of the new covenant of Christ!

Jesus repeated this commandment to love on many occasions; **If you love me, you will keep my commandments ... He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who love me shall be loved by my Father, and I will love him, and will disclose myself to him ... If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love; just as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in His love ... You are my friends, if you do what I command you ... And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he commanded us ... (John 14: 15, 21; 15: 10-12; 14, 17; I John 3:23).**

Now of course, the OT law had already said that we are to love one another. The part that was new is this challenging bit ... **as I have loved you**. No man under the old covenant loved others as Jesus did --- not Noah, not Moses, not Abraham, not Joshua, not any prophet, and not even Daniel! We only have to see how our Lord devoted himself so sacrificially to those stumbling, stuttering, faithless disciples to see the uniqueness of Jesus' love. Never a man loved his fellow-man as Jesus loved --- the godly for the ungodly! Just read the crucifixion story and see how the spotless Lamb loved as no man has ever loved.

But supremely, and even before his love for us, our Lord Jesus loved God his Father more perfectly than any previous person had ever done. No man or woman before him, nor since, could sincerely say as he confessed, **"I always do those things that please Him ... I and the Father are one ... Who among you can convict me of sin?"**

LOVE FULFILLS THE WHOLE LAW

Jesus summarised the whole Law and duty of man when he answered the Jewish scribe's question as to which is the greatest commandment of all? **Jesus answered, 'The foremost [commandment] is, "Hear O Israel; The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength [i.e. resources]."** The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' **There is no commandment greater than these (Mark 12: 29-31).**

Jesus went on to say to this good Jewish scribe (expert in the Law!), **"There is no greater commandment than these" (Mk 12: 31).** And, **"On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:**

40). In one revolutionary move Jesus cut through all the fog surrounding man's duty according to the Law. To love the one God supremely, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is to fulfill the lot!

Concerning the second great commandment, the apostle Paul agreed; **For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in this statement, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Gal. 5:14).** And, **He who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the Law. For this, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet', and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in the saying, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'** Love does no wrong to a neighbour; love therefore is the fulfillment of the Law (Rom. 13: 8-10).

And so we see that, far from promoting lawless lives, the new covenant upholds the Law to its fullest. The difference is that the motivation to fulfill that which is according to God's nature does not come from an external coercion, but from the new life of God within.

The Christian has been regenerated, renewed by the Spirit of God (Titus 3:5). . The new covenant man shares in the very nature of God Himself (2 Pet. 1: 4). He knows he has been "washed in the blood" of the new covenant, that is, justified by God's amazing lovingkindness and has been adopted into the Family. He automatically has an inner, elemental, exuberant cry, "O, Abba! My Father God!"

Indeed, **the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death ... in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8: 2,3).** The very Power of God that raised Christ from the dead and granted him immortality now works mightily in the children of God. Our minds are being renewed, transformed into the likeness of God's Son.

Once we did by nature those things the world delights in and seeks after. But now as new covenant people, we have been **born from above, born again!** ⁵ God has put His laws in our hearts because His Spirit dwells in us. We know God directly, immediately, personally (see Heb. 8: 7-13). Just try to keep us from wanting above all else, to be found in Him! The greatest delight of our lives is to know the God of the Bible and to be known by Him.

We are being carried in the flow of God's mighty life and doing His works. The fruit of God's indwelling Spirit is **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5: 22-23).** Against this beautiful crop there is no law, for as we are **led by the Spirit, we are not under the Law (Gal. 5: 18)!!!**

God has put His law within our hearts, so we share His very nature. And His nature is the law of love for Himself and for our neighbour. We now automatically do those things that please Him. And as soon as we do anything against His life within, or as soon as we say a wrong or unkind word, He checks us and we just know that was a grief to His loving heart. We move on in forgiveness. We walk with God as His friends.

WE ALSO LOVE HIS CREATED NATURE

This regenerated man or woman never willingly hurts others, and even the way we interact with God's creation is dynamically driven. We see ourselves as stewards of the His environment. We can never cruelly hurt even the lowliest of animals and birds and sentient creatures knowing they are God's gifts of love to us. We care for the water and the land. We cultivate and protect His trees and plants. Yes, we eagerly await the day when the created order itself shall be set free and enter into the glory of the children of God. We love God, His people, his natural world. We are saved and inspired by this hope announced to us in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

No matter how dire and desperate our world becomes, nothing can keep the risen power of Christ down. It's like that little seed that's fallen into a crack in the concrete. The power of life in that seed will break through the compacted pathway and its life will not be denied! We live by the Spirit of Truth implanted in our souls by the Gospel of Jesus that is springing up to life eternal;

⁵ In John 3:16 the expression **born again** in the Greek is literally **born from above**. God implants the seed or sperm of His word in Christ in our hearts! See also 1 Peter 1:23.

For we are the temple of the living God, just as God said, "I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people ... and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me, says the LORD Almighty" (2 Cor. 6: 16-17).

IT'S IRRESISTIBLE!

Others can also sense the blessing of God on our lives. Others hear about how our Father answers our prayers. Others will thirst for God's new life in Christ too. The old covenant, written on stone and in ink, is no match for the ministry of glory because, the love of God is being poured out into our hearts by the holy Spirit which He has given unto us (Rom. 5:5)!

You can see why the old covenant law set in stone no longer attracts. Yes, it was a wonderful revelation from God for the blessing and salvation of His people. But it was not His greatest nor final revelation --- it was a mere shadow of the reality we have in the new covenant in Messiah Jesus. Christ is greater than the Temple where God's presence tabernacled. He is greater than the Ark over which the Seraphim symbolically folded their wings, for he himself is the heir of all things and God has decreed that His angels shall worship him (Heb.1: 5f).

In a nutshell, the commandment of God is, "This is my beloved Son, My chosen one, in whom I am well-pleased. Hear him!" Any believer who devotes his or her life to obeying the testimony of the Son of God, is keeping the command of the Almighty God. The testimony of Jesus is, "This is eternal life, that they might know You, Father, the only true God, and [that] I am Jesus the Messiah whom You have sent" (John 17:3).

AN OBSERVATION

Here is something I have observed. I have now seen not a few folks get drawn into Sabbath-keeping. I do not judge their hearts or their motives. I know them to be some of the most genuine people I have met. But once committed to Sabbath-observance, I have seen their witness grow increasingly cold towards our blessed Saviour. It's not going to end well when giving up the Substance for a mere shadow!

Going back to a mere shadow, some have even lapsed into Judaism full-blown and now wear the distinctive clothes and eat the Jewish kosher diet, and keep the other sacred rituals of the old Law. The inevitable result is that some of those folks now even wonder whether Jesus is the Lord Messiah, the Son of the Living God, or not. Their previous glorying in Christ crucified for them and coming as their Deliverer has been replaced by skepticism. Oh Lord, my heart bleeds for these good folks. Having given up faith in God's Messiah, do they not realise there remains no more sacrifice for sin (Heb. 10: 26)?

FOREVER IS NOT FOREVER!

One of the objections to the cancellation of the old Law commandments, and particularly to the ending of the observance of the Fourth Commandment to keep the Sabbath holy, is that God Himself said it was to be kept "forever". We read for example,

The Israelites must keep the Sabbath, observing it in every generation as a covenant forever (Hebrew is *olam*). It is a sign forever between Me and the Israelites, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, but on the seventh He ceased work and refreshed Himself (Ex. 31: 16-17).

Reading this in English gives the distinct impression that the Sabbath is to be perpetually observed as the sign of an everlasting covenant with Israel.

However, one of the cardinal rules in correctly interpreting the Scriptures, is to read them in the context of their original audience. It is after all, very natural to read back into the Bible our own definitions of words and events. And this is a classic case in point. For when a Hebrew read the word *olam* he understood it did not mean what its English translation of **forever** would suggest.

In Hebrew usage, *olam* does *not* mean eternity without end. *Olam* means a limited period of time, provided the circumstances remain unchanged. Let me give an example. In *1 Maccabees 14: 41* we read,

The Jews and

priests were well pleased that Simon should be their governor and high priest **forever, until** there should arise a faithful prophet.

In this classic Second Temple Jewish writing, we see that *olam* is an unspecified length of time **until** circumstances change. In Hebrew-speak, forever is not necessarily world without end! The NT takes this Hebrew nuance for granted. Circumcision --- like the sign of the Sabbath --- was likewise commanded to Israel **forever**;

Thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an **everlasting** (*olam*) covenant (Gen. 17:13).

However, the new covenant does not now insist on circumcision. Circumstances have changed. Since the advent of Jesus Christ, circumcision is redundant --- unless of course, you want to keep the whole of the old covenant Law (Gal. 5:3). Thus we see that, circumcision was **forever, until** --- the coming of Messiah! Just so, the Law was **forever, until** Christ Jesus cancelled it.

A GOOD TEST OF OUR INTERPRETATION

You will recall at the beginning of this article I anticipated that good Sabbath-keeping folks will probably be alarmed at what I have written on the question, *Should We Keep the Sabbath?* To imagine that the Ten Commandments are no longer the basis for our relationship with God, may have seemed to be an open licence to lawlessness and to sin, indeed a rejection of God the Lawgiver Himself.

It may therefore come as a further surprise to such folk that Scripture itself anticipates this protest. Indeed, the NT teaches that unless our teaching appears to promote lawlessness, then we have not understood the radical nature of the new covenant at all! For as we have seen, whenever the Gospel of salvation by grace alone apart from law-keeping is presented, there will be the latent danger of being accused of 'antinomianism'.

Those who do not grasp the radical shift between the covenant of a righteousness based on lawful observance to be a member of the covenant community under Moses, and the new covenant of righteousness in Messiah's Gospel **apart from law**, will inevitably ask, **Shall we continue in sin that grace may increase (Romans 6: 1)?** The implication is: This Gospel is dangerous. This Gospel promotes indifference to the standards and commandments of God.

Allow me then, to ask a rhetorical question to all you who want to keep the Sabbath and observe the Torah of the old covenantal law: Have you ever been charged with promoting sin, encouraging lawlessness? You are horrified at the thought, are you not?

Then I suggest you need to ask what it is about your doctrine that is different to the apostle Paul's, for his understanding of the Gospel of Christ drew this precise objection: You are promoting sin! Paul's Gospel-preaching brought the ire of the keepers of the old covenant law down on his head, as his Master's had before him! This is the test of our doctrine!

Jesus said that, to love God with all our resources, and our neighbour as ourselves, is the fulfillment of the Law. Are we listening to this God Who has said, **"This is My Elect One, My chosen Son, Hear Him!"** Believing in the Name of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ and obeying his Gospel-promise is *the sign* of the new covenant of His grace.