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MINISTRIES

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The Law of Moses: All or Nothing? (James 2:10)

Christians worldwide are being drawn back to the roots of our faith. Many of us have embraced the Torah, or Law of Moses, and observe the Sabbath, biblical festivals, and biblical dietary laws, like Christ and the apostles did. But because of this, we often face a lot of questions and challenges from people who say that these biblical commands are not relevant to us today.

One objection to the law’s relevance is based on James 2:10. Let’s take a look:

James 2:10

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.

Some people think James is saying that since we can’t be perfect, then there is no point in *even trying* to obey God’s law. For instance, the popular Christian author, Matt McMillen, writes:

Obeying Law is an all-or-nothing proposition. If a person chooses to live by any of the Mosaic Law, first, they have to be Jewish (non-Jews were never invited to the Law). Second, they must never fail—as in *ever*. God does not grade on a curve if we choose to obey Law rather than live by faith.

—Matt McMillen, “Christians are Dead to Laws, and Alive in Christ,” *Matt McMillen Ministries*, www.mattmcmillenministries.com

McMillen’s statement here has several problems. First, his idea that non-Jews were not expected to follow God’s law is simply incorrect. Any non-Israelite who chose to follow YHWH, the God of Israel, had to obey the same laws as Israel, including the Sabbath and festivals (Exodus 12:49; 20:10; Leviticus 16:11; Deuteronomy 16:11, 14).

Second, McMillen is also incorrect in his assumption that obeying the law and living by faith are mutually exclusive. According to the apostle Paul, living by faith and obeying the law go together:

Romans 3:31

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

But let's focus on McMillen's claim that those who choose to live by any of the Mosaic law must never fail. Since nobody obeys God's law perfectly, should we just give up trying to obey *any* of God's laws?

There are some problems with this idea. First, John is explicit that believers *will not* be perfect and that we deceive ourselves if we say that we are:

1 John 1:8

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

As we can see, John is clear that believers will sin, that is, break God's law (Romans 7:7; 1 John 3:4). And yet, John *still* tells us to obey God's commandments despite that fact:

1 John 2:1-4

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. **But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ [Messiah Yeshua] the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.**

John is not alone. There are numerous passages in the New Testament that admonish believers to obey God's commandments (Matthew 19:17; John 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 Corinthians 7:19; 1 John 2:3-4; 3:22-24; 5:2-3; Revelation 14:12). Why would John and other New Testament authors call for imperfect believers to obey God's commandments if it were pointless? That wouldn't make much sense.

Now, some people might object and say that the New Testament is not referring to the Torah when it calls for believers to obey God's commandments. Some suggest that Christ abolished the Law of Moses and gave a different law for believers to obey. But the Scriptures don't support that view. When the New Testament authors wrote about God's law and commandments, the New Testament had not yet been canonized. So, for the New Testament authors and their original readers, the Old Testament was the only place that God's commandments could be found. That was their "Bible." When the New Testament authors spoke of God's commandments, they were referring to the commandments found in the Old Testament—namely, the Torah.

For more on this, see our teaching, [What is the Law of Christ?](#)

Second, the idea that it is pointless for imperfect believers to try to obey God's law does not fit the context of James 2:10. Just two verses later, James says to live in accordance with the "law of liberty" (James 2:12). This is a direct reference to the Torah. For more on this, see our teachings, **Be Doers of the Word: Does James Affirm the Torah's Validity?** and [Why Bother?](#)

So, if James is not saying that it's pointless to try to obey God's law in James 2:10, then what does he mean? Let's look at the verse again, along with verse 11:

James 2:10-11

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

Here, James states that the “whole law” is valid and authoritative. The God who said, “Do not commit adultery,” is the same God who also said, “Do not murder.” James’s point is simply that we can’t pick and choose which commandments we are going to keep. We have no authority to declare some commandments valid and others invalid. If you have rejected God’s authority in one law, then no matter how many other laws you keep, you have still rejected God’s authority. To be clear, James does not expect perfection. In chapter 3, he admits that “[we all stumble in many ways](#)” (James 3:2). But like we saw earlier with the apostle John, the fact that we are imperfect sinners does not mean that we shouldn’t try to be obedient.

It’s worth noting that James is not the only one who taught that rejecting one law from the Torah was tantamount to rejecting the entire Torah. Other ancient Jewish authors said the same thing (4 Maccabees 5:19-21; b.*Bekhorot* 30a). Certainly, these other Jewish authors did not mean to imply that trying to obey God’s commandments is pointless if you can’t obey them perfectly. James and these other authors are simply saying that the Torah is a unified whole. That’s the point.

Again, for more on these passages in James, see our teaching, **Be Doers of the Word: Does James Affirm the Torah’s Validity?**

The fact that the Torah is a unified whole might raise a different question. Many of the Torah’s commandments cannot be kept today because they depend on things like a functioning Levitical priesthood. There are also laws that can apply only in a theocratic government in the Promised Land. None of that exists today. So, then, since there are parts of the law that we can’t keep, does that mean that we shouldn’t keep any of it? Some think so. For instance, Christian theologian J. Hampton Keathley writes this:

The Mosaic Law was a bilateral covenant made specifically for Israel alone **to govern her life in the promised land** ... By its very nature, the Mosaic Law was not to be, and could not be, obeyed to the letter by any other people in any other place as a rule of life.

—J. Hampton Keathley, III, “The Mosaic Law: Its Function and Purpose in the New Testament,” www.bible.org

However, the Torah itself refutes this notion. Moses declared that one of the curses for Israel’s disobedience was that they would be exiled from the Promised Land. Moses also described the remedy for when Israel finds themselves in that situation:

Deuteronomy 30:1-3

[And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD \[YHWH\] your God has driven you, and return to the LORD \[YHWH\] your God, you and your children, **and obey his voice in all that I command you today**, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD \[YHWH\] your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, **and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD \[YHWH\] your God has scattered you.**](#)

Here, Moses describes a scenario in which Israel is scattered among the nations. They have no functioning priesthood. They do not live in the Promised Land. They do not have their own Torah-based government. Just like us, they are incapable of keeping many of the Torah’s commandments. And yet, what does Moses tell them to do? He says to return to YHWH and obey “all” that he commands in the Torah.

Based on this passage, there are two observations we can make. First, Keathley is wrong when he says that the Torah “was not to be, and could not be, obeyed to the letter by any other people in any other place.” Deuteronomy 30 clearly calls Israel to obey the Torah while they are not in the Promised Land.

Second, even though Israel would be incapable of obeying many of the Torah’s commandments while in exile, God still requires their heartfelt obedience to the commandments they *could* obey.

The same thing is true for us. In our current situation, much of the Torah cannot be kept. But that does not absolve us from our responsibility to obey God where we can. We cannot tithe to the Levitical priests or present a burnt offering at the Temple, but we can still keep the Sabbath, be faithful to our spouse, and love our neighbor as ourselves, among other things the Torah commands.

So, as we have seen, James does not teach that imperfect believers shouldn’t even try to obey God’s law. James agrees with other New Testament authors that believers will never be perfect in this life but should still do their best to obey God’s commandments. James’s point in James 2:10 is that believers must not “pick and choose” which commandments are valid but instead must consider the “whole law” to be valid and authoritative. Moreover, according to Deuteronomy 30:1-3, the fact that much of the Torah cannot be kept today does not mean that it is irrelevant or that we shouldn’t obey the commandments we can obey. The Bible calls us to be faithful to God’s commandments and do the best we can with what we have and where we are.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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