

LAW OF THE SPIRIT—HIGHER THAN THE MORAL LAW

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There is a great deal of discussion among Christian theologians and philosophers regarding the tension that exists between the “positive” law, which is law that has been enacted by legislators and other governing bodies, and “natural law,” or the “moral law,” which is understood as God’s law that stands above all positive law. Most philosophers argue that the moral law should serve as the plumb line from which to evaluate the “goodness” of the enacted law. This is the position taken by most church leaders, and which is preached from most Christian pulpits. We recognize this distinction as a valid one. There is, however, a law that is of another realm entirely, that governs the conduct of those who are truly called out as part of the bride of Christ. This is the *law of the Spirit*, and it is the governing authority of those who live by the Spirit.

Before we came to Christ we were under the tutor of the law, and most of us regarded the moral law as the one to which we owed our ultimate allegiance. We even recognized this allegiance to be more compelling than the enacted, positive law. But having come to Christ, we find ourselves more and more compelled by another law—the *law of the Spirit*.ⁱ We are no longer under the old law; indeed, we are dead to it. The higher law of love demands our obedience. This presupposes a relationship with the Holy Spirit who is revealing the will of the Father to us and inscribing the mandates of this law upon our hearts. This, friends, is the operation of the law of the Spirit.

The recognition of the law of the Spirit is nothing new. Paul made frequent reference to this law as he exhorted the believers in the churches he established to live in obedience to the Spirit of God. Unfortunately, Christian leaders have failed to understand the radical and totally “other” nature of the law of the Spirit. Because the church has been so immersed in a “law” paradigm over most of the past 2000 years, the law of the Spirit has been reduced to little more than some noble expression of the “natural, or “moral” law. If you were to ask 100 preachers to define the law of the Spirit, I would venture to say that 99 of them would give a definition that would somehow juxtapose the law of the Spirit in relation to the moral law. Many would recognize that the law of the Spirit is that which is breathed by the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, the plumb line will still be the moral law as they understand it. Stated more plainly, if what God reveals to sister so-and-so does not conform to the “Word” (meaning their understanding of what the scriptures say), then the guardians of the faith will say that this revelation cannot be of God. They relegate sister so-and-so’s fresh revelation of God to a whim of a misguided believer who does not understand scripture, or worse, who is intent on construing her own fleshly fancy as the Word of God. While it is certainly possible that sister so-and-so’s revelation could be a fanciful whim, to dismiss it simply because it does not fit within a particular framework of scripture that has been handed down to us through centuries of tradition is to shut ourselves off to the Living Word that God might have for us today. We do this because we find it more important to maintain a logically consistent system of moral law than to be in

intimate relationship with Christ, and to conform our conduct to the demands that He places upon us through the Holy Spirit.

The fact is, attempting to maintain a logically consistent system of moral law presents us with all sorts of dilemmas. If we think about it, there are any number of instances in which God contradicts or asks His people to break His own moral law. Just looking quickly at examples in the Old Testament, we see:

- that we are commanded not to kill in the Ten Commandments; then several chapters later in Exodus, Moses is ordered of the Lord to have 3000 of his own countrymen slaughtered; and centuries later Elijah is ordered to kill 400 prophets of Baal;
- that despite the same prohibition against killing, the Lord, through Samuel, ordered Saul to kill all the men, women and children—even infants and nursing children—of Amalek, as well as every sheep, ox, camel and donkey. Indeed, God’s displeasure fell upon Saul and He rejected Saul as king because he failed to kill all of the animals.
- that despite the commandment to not bear false witness the Hebrew midwives blatantly lied when asked by the Pharaoh why they did not kill the male children when they were born. The scripture says that “God dealt well with the midwives” because of this.

These contradictions are made blatantly evident in the New Testament as well. For example:

- Despite the Commandment to honor our father and mother, Jesus commands us to *hate* our father and mother if we are to be his disciple. He is calling us to a higher calling than the moral law.
- Jesus Himself violated the law of the keeping of the Sabbath by picking grain with His disciples on that day.
- Jesus then points out, when accused of violating the law on this occasion, that David also violated the law by eating the holy bread of the temple when he was hungry, and was held blameless for it.
- The Lord ordered Peter in a vision to eat unclean food, which was in direct violation of Levitical law. When Peter protested that he would never eat any unclean thing, the Lord responded, “What God has cleansed you must not call impure.”
- Paul declares that it is not necessary to maintain the law regarding circumcision (and other Old Testament commandments such as those pertaining to the food we eat). He defends this freedom vigorously in his letter to the Galatians and elsewhere.

So is the Bible a bunch of contradictions? If we approach the New Testament through the lens of an Old Testament law still in operation, ignoring Christ’s sacrifice that has now taken it out of the way—obliterated it—it is *indeed* a bunch of contradictions. And most churches today approach scripture exactly that way. Hence, church leaders are left having to attempt to explain these inconsistencies. I am very well aware of many if not most of the “explanations” that have been given in an attempt to reconcile these and other moral contradictions found in scripture. They are all made in an effort to salvage the integrity and relevance of the moral law

to those of us who have been ushered into the Kingdom of the Spirit and now live by the law of the Spirit.

This higher law of faith dictates that we give allegiance to Christ and Christ alone—not to the old letter of the law that Christ came to fulfill. This allegiance comes about through a deep work of the cross applied to our lives, a work that nullifies or at least effectively diminishes all other loyalties in our lives. As this takes place, and as we grow ever closer to Him in our walk, we learn to live and breathe His Spirit. We learn to live by the law of the Spirit and to move and act at the impulse of this perfect law of liberty. Most of us encounter circumstances that require a response that may seem totally contrary to the moral law. Yet, as we search scripture in response to the prompting of the Spirit, almost inevitably, scripture itself will be quickened to us that challenges the understandings of traditional interpretations of scripture that have been imposed upon us over the years, and confirms this response of the Spirit.

An example of how the Spirit speaks in fresh and unique ways, and might even require very different, even diametrically opposed responses to different circumstances is provided by Richard Wurmbrandt in *Tortured for Christ*. In one example, he tells of a doctor who posed as a Communist officer in order to infiltrate a prison to free him (Wurmbrandt). The doctor's family did not understand his "abandoning" his faith and even disowned him. But the doctor, acting in obedience to the Spirit of God, knew that he had to do this. He found Wurmbrandt and was able to set him free. The result of this was a life-changing testimony of the gospel under persecution that powerfully impacted the world for Christ, and would not otherwise have been told. Wurmbrandt tells another story, however, of a young son who was being tortured in the presence of his father. The father was given the opportunity to deny his faith to save the young son. He did not, again in obedience to Christ. From the perspective of the moral law, these behaviors are diametrically opposed. In the first case, the doctor "denied" his faith to save an underground Christian; in the second, the father refused to deny his faith to save his son, also an underground Christian. Despite the contradiction, both actions were obedient to the law of faith and law of the Spirit. They were both responsive to the dictates of the Spirit upon them at the time.

It is this higher law of the Spirit to which we are called. The apostle Paul makes this clear:

- *Those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires* (Romans 8:5)
- *He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter, but of the spirit; for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life.* (2 Cor. 3:6)
- *No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code* (Romans 2:29)
- *But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code* (Romans 7:6)
- *...the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death* (Romans 8:2)

I sometimes wonder if the Bible may purposely express otherwise contradictory *moral laws* so that we cannot accept or be satisfied with any life based on maintaining a moral code. Jesus made it clear: “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees, you cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.” Was Jesus proclaiming that we needed to keep the law more diligently than did the Pharisees? Hardly! He was proclaiming that we can never achieve the righteousness He requires by keeping that law! *He* is our righteousness, and we walk in that righteousness as we are obedient to Him, through the Holy Spirit. It is almost as if the Bible is crying out, “Can’t you see...if you try to live by the law, you can’t succeed because in keeping one code you break another!” Ironically though, this misplaced allegiance to the moral law rather than to the Holy Spirit is the message either openly proclaimed or at least implied by most Christian leaders today, even those who claim to be Spirit-filled! The message I am proclaiming is the same one Paul so adamantly and passionately defended to the Galatian churches. We must not insult the Spirit of grace! We begin by the Spirit and must not revert back to the law from which we have been freed. For Christ has come to free us by His Spirit from the law of sin and death! *He* is the fulfillment of the law. Our faithful response is to His Spirit. But be warned: faithful obedience to this perfect law of liberty will invite the scorn and even persecution of others who can look only on the written moral law as the highest law. If it was so with our Master, so it will be with His disciples.

ⁱThe law of the Spirit has been variously referred to as the “higher law of love,” “law of faith,” and “perfect law of liberty.” All of these references generally reflect what I understand to be the law of the Spirit, and are used here interchangeably.

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