

## **WHAT DID JESUS DO TO THE LAW? – Harmonizing Matthew 5, Ephesians 2, and Romans 2-3**

**By Bob Young**

### **BACKGROUND**

The Jewish mind of the first century understood citizenship in the kingdom of God as based on three factors: ethnicity, circumcision, and Torah observance. The description of the kingdom as proclaimed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) redefines these factors. The new covenant changes the understanding of these factors. First, the new ethnicity identifies citizens of the kingdom of heaven as family, one body, and sharers together. Second, Jesus brings a new understanding of what must be cut away in genuine circumcision (heart, not body only). Third, keeping God's word is expanded beyond Torah observance. It means honoring God's purpose through imitation, transformation, and actions that advance God's kingdom; that is, by faith, baptism, and obedience.

### **NEW TESTAMENT—THREE TEXTS TO BE HARMONIZED**

In Matthew 5:17, Jesus says very clearly that he did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them. Similarly, Paul says that the law is not nullified in Christ but fulfilled (Rom. 3:31). Against these statements is the more frequent emphasis on Eph. 2:15, that Jesus came "abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances."

So Jesus is wrong? Did he in fact abolish the law? Is Paul wrong in Romans but right in Ephesians? Despite a general insistence on harmonizing Scripture, the more common approach to these three texts is to begin with the conclusion already established. The Old Testament law is abolished; now we only need a proof text. Often the conversation ends with the declaration that Ephesians 2:15 is the final word. The purpose of this article is to suggest a harmony between these texts.

What do the three texts say?

Ephesians 2:15. Ephesians 2:15, considered as a whole and in its context, says that the law with its commandments and ordinances, specifically the things that separated and divided rather than uniting, is gone. The text uses the word "abolished." What was abolished—the law, the commandments and ordinances that were against us, the divisive spirit and enmity that came from applying the law? The purpose of the chapter is not to devalue or exclude God's revelation to the Jews. That revelation had a purpose in God's plan, which purpose was fulfilled in Christ. The focus is on the unity God made possible by removing a separating, dividing factor. Now access to God is through Christ.

Romans 2-3. As mentioned above, the Jews defined themselves by three factors. One must understand Romans 3 against this background. The context begins in Romans 2.

Look at Rom. 2:25ff and think about a member of Paul's first group: a Jew ethnically, focused on the necessity of circumcision as a sign of the covenant, but not keeping the Torah. Forgetting for a moment the ethnicity factor, such a person is at best one out of two. That is not good enough; it is as though that person were not circumcised.

Think about those in the second group, a person not a Jew ethnically. Again forgetting for a moment ethnicity, this person keeps the principles of the law, but is not circumcised physically. Such a person is also one out of two. That is not good enough, but that person has a better understanding of what kind of change pleases God. To say it as Paul does, that person has a better understanding of circumcision—what must be cut away to please God.

Comparing the two cases, the scores are the same; both are batting .500, both less than perfect. What must one do to please God? Paul says that the Gentile who is keeping the law and conscientiously removing from his life all that is evil (figurative circumcision) is more acceptable than the Jew who readily accepts physical circumcision but is disobedient.

The Jews had turned circumcision into a meaningless ritual; they were focused on the ritual and not on the intended result—the separateness circumcision was supposed to indicate. Consider how circumcision was supposed to function in the Abrahamic covenant. Circumcision was an evidence of separation, distinctness, being set apart to God, participation in the covenant, declaration of a commitment to be faithful.

To focus on the ritual without honoring the intent and adopting the accompanying lifestyle was meaningless. This does not mean that circumcision was unimportant; only that it was misunderstood and had for many of the Jews become the primary (only) indicator of faithfulness.

Parallel lessons for Christians seem obvious. The text does not explicitly mention baptism, but that is a frequent application in Christian circles. The temptation of some Christians is to think about baptism in the same way that the Jews thought about circumcision—to see it only a defining ritual. Analyzing the text to understand the parallel application—baptism is important, but how we live afterward is equally important. In fact, baptism without continuing obedience is no better than non-baptism. On the basis of the text of Romans 2-3, one might also say that non-baptism with obedience is equal to baptism without obedience, but do not miss the primary point—neither is pleasing to God!

From this foundation, Paul moves to Romans 3 to show that all have sinned, and thus all must be justified, declared righteous, by the faith of Christ. This absolute dependence on Christ's justifying grace, redemption, and propitiation excludes any cause of boasting. Justification is by faith apart from observing the law. Does faith nullify the law? No, it allows the law to fulfill God's purpose in giving it to the Jews.

Matthew 5. In this text Jesus is not promising salvation apart from fulfilling the commandments to love God and neighbor; Jesus is giving a way to live out the reality of salvation through loving God and neighbor. To appreciate this truth, one must consider God's purpose for Israel in the Old Testament. The coming of the Messiah was not the abandonment of God's plan for Israel; the coming of the Messiah was the fulfillment and expansion of God's plan for Israel. God's plan to form a just and worshiping society (healthy vertical and horizontal relationships) was not abandoned in Jesus; it was fulfilled. The text will continue to escape us unless we see the continuity between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament people of God, between the Old Testament kingdom and the New Testament kingdom.

McLaren describes the problem this way: "There has developed the half-baked, unspoken idea (and sometimes spoken) that God began something in Israel and then found it would not work, so he scrapped it for a different plan in Jesus. Such is terrible Bible interpretation. Jesus is not Plan B. God does not have a plan B. God's plans do not fail. God has always had one plan—it began in Abraham, continued with Israel, culminated in Christ, and is carried on by the church. God's single plan is to re-create a just and worshiping society through a reconstituted Israel, bringing light and healing to the nations."

Jesus came as part of God's eternal plan to invite all to participate with him. He enables and empowers us to fulfill God's purpose and to bear fruit (John 15), drawing life and strength from the Messiah, producing the fruit that was first intended by the Law and Prophets and continued into the new reign—the fruit of love for God and love for neighbor.

McLaren again: "Somewhere in the post-Reformation paranoia of anything that remotely references or resembles works—a paranoia not endorsed by New Testament—we have encountered a distorted salvation. Somehow the salvation of Messiah that fulfilled the Law and the Prophets became a salvation from (resulting from) the Law and the Prophets. Instead of ushering in a salvation that

brings law to its completeness and fulfillment, such an understanding maintains law as the separating, dividing factor that it was, and makes salvation dependent on keeping a new law. "This is a newly invented Christianity that completely separates the Golden Rule from the Narrow Gate; it is distorted; self-centered, afterlife-oriented, seeking to abolish the Law and the Prophets in favor of instituting a new law, the very thing Jesus said he did not come to do."

In Matthew 7, Jesus teaches about both the Golden Rule and the Narrow Gate. After those sections, he says that trees are judged by their fruit; he declares the danger of prioritizing miracles over works of mercy and justice, and then concludes with a parable of two builders and two houses.

### **Conclusion**

The three texts studied in this article present a harmony. Jesus came establishing a new model of God's kingdom, giving new meaning to what it means to be a citizen of the kingdom and follow God. Righteousness is not defined by law-keeping and eventually perfecting actions. Jesus came taking away the common misunderstanding of the Jews about the Law. The law was a source of division as the Jews understood and applied it.

God never intended the law to be permanent. Galatians 3 makes clear that God's dealings with Israel and humanity would be on the basis of the promise, not on the basis of the law. The law was added for a different purpose, "because of (or as the *Greek*, 'for the sake of') the transgressions," that is, to bring into clearer view the transgression of God's will; to make men more fully aware of their sins now understood as transgressions of the law, and in the context of Galatians 3, to make them long for the promised Savior.

The law fulfilled its purpose; Jesus came to fulfill the law. Faith does not nullify the law. In faith, the purpose of the law is fulfilled or upheld. The dividing capacity of the law was abolished as it found its perfect fulfillment in the coming of Jesus Christ.