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The Christian & the Mosaic Law

by David Dunlap

Reformed theology has long given great significance to the term “the believer’s rule of life.” By this term they are referring to the “moral” law given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Reformed teachers acknowledge that this phrase does not occur in the Bible; nevertheless, they argue that it is an indispensable principle in the life of a Christian. These teachers fully concede that the ceremonial law and civil ordinances and statutes have been done away by Christ on the cross of Calvary (Rom. 7:4-6, 10:4). However, they contend that the moral law is God’s method of leading a Christian into a life that pleases God.

Representative of this perspective, Reformed preacher D. Martyn-Lloyd Jones writes, “The Christian has been delivered from the curse of the law. But that does not release him from the law as a rule of life. Holiness means being righteous and righteous means keeping the law. The ten commandments and the moral law have never been abrogated.”¹ Similarly, Anthony Hoekema, a former professor at Calvin Theological Seminary writes, “The Christian life must be a law-formed life. Though believers must not try to keep God’s law as a means of earning their salvation, they are nevertheless enjoined to do their best to keep the law...the law is one of the most important means whereby God sanctifies us.”² The question naturally arises: What was the purpose of the “moral” law? And what does the New Testament teach concerning God’s way to a holy life. Let’s take a closer look at these and other questions.

The Law of Moses and a Life that Pleases God

The New Testament makes it clear that a Christian is not under the law as a means of his salvation or living a life that pleases God. The law in its entirety, moral, civil and ceremonial, has been done away (Rom. 6:14,15). Time and again the New Testament states “we are not under law but grace.” This truth includes our justification, sanctification, and the rule of life. What was the purpose of the law? The law was given to reveal sin. “What shall we say then? is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin but by the law...” (Rom. 7:7). The law can “show sin to be exceeding sinful!” (Rom. 7:13) The law can condemn, penalize, and punish, but never make a Christian more holy. Just as our nation’s system of law does not empower men to live moral lives, but punishes; so too God’s law cannot

“What then is the rule of life? The answer is contained in one word, ‘It is Christ.’ Our eyes are directed to Him, that, in the power of the spirit, we might walk even as He walked. Thus we have one object for the soul-- Christ in glory.”

Edward Dennett
(1831–1914)

***“The
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not under the
law of God.
Instead of the
law of God
being over
him it is in
him. The
Christian,
then, can be
free from the
old covenant
law.”***

**Renald Showers
(1935-2019)**

make a believer more holy, but exposes him to be a sinner.

The book of Romans makes this principle exceedingly clear. The apostle Paul first presents the doctrine of justification in chapters 3:21-5:11, and then in chapters 5:12-8:4 the doctrine of sanctification. Concerning the doctrine of justification, the apostle writes, “a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28). The law has no part in the justification of man. Then as he takes up the doctrine of sanctification in chapter six, he writes, “for ye are not under the law but under grace”(Rom. 6:14). Here the law has no part in the sanctification of a believer. He is making it clear that the Christian is not under the law, including the “moral” law, concerning his sanctification. The way to be free from sin’s power and dominion is through the grace of God, Spirit of God, through the cross of Calvary (Rom. 6:1-13), not the law given to Moses at Sinai. In another place the apostle writes, “I through the law died unto the law that I might live unto God”(Gal. 2:19). The believer is delivered from the law and its bondage through the free from the “old man” and is empowered by the Spirit to live for Christ. John Bunyan has written:

“Run, run and do, the law commands.
But gives me neither feet nor hands.
Better news the grace-gospel brings.
It bids me fly and gives me wings.”

The Believer’s Rule of Life

What then, is the “rule of life” for a Christian? Where can he find the power to live a holy life? The Christian life is a dynamic, living relationship with the resurrected Christ. It is this power and life flowing out of the indwelling Christ that transforms the believer. The Spirit of God in the souls of men does not set the believer's affections upon ordinances, statutes and regulations, but rather fills him with a vital, living relationship with Christ. This love relationship so completely empowers us that the Christian, with a holy desire, finds himself yielding to the holy and righteous requirements of God.

The apostle Paul describes this spiritual phenomenon when he writes, “... that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4). This powerful reality is surely the New Testament's teaching concerning our “rule of life.” Listen to the apostle: “...for me to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21); “looking unto Christ the author and finisher of our faith...” (Heb. 12:1-2); “the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God...”(Gal. 2:20). Interestingly, the word “rule” in respect to living the Christian life only occurs once in the New Testament.

In Galatians 6:16 we read, “as many as walk according to this rule.” What is this “rule?” Just two verses earlier we read, “But God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal. 6:14). We may conclude from these verses that our rule of life is not the law, but Christ and His death. It is our focus upon Christ that is the “rule of life” for the believer.

As a Christian is taken up with Him, he is transformed “from glory to glory” by the power of the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18). This is the secret to power and holiness in the Christian’s life.

C. H. Spurgeon and the Rule of Life

It is noteworthy that this principle is recognized in reality, though not doctrinally, even by Reformed and Calvinist leaders to be God’s way to power and effectiveness in the Christian life. Following the death of Calvinist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon, Mr. William Olney, a deacon for many years at the Metropolitan Tabernacle and a close friend of Spurgeon’s, was asked, “What was the secret of Spurgeon’s power?” Mr. Olney almost leaped out of his chair and with deep emotion said, “It was his personal love for Christ.”³ Was Mr. Olney familiar with the Reformed doctrine of the “rule of life?” Undoubtedly, he was. Did Spurgeon believe, preach and teach this Calvinist doctrine? Indeed, he did. How forcefully, then, does this illustrate the reality of the New Testament doctrine of Christ, not the law, as the believer’s “rule of life!”

Antinomianism and the Believer’s Rule of Life

Dispensationalists, who teach that Christ is the believer's rule of life, have been branded as unorthodox and unjustly accused of antinomianism. Reformed writers have incorrectly concluded that if dispensationalists have set aside the Mosaic law as the rule of life, then they must be lawless in Christian life and conduct. Moreover, they charge that the standard of holiness has been lowered, thus corrupting the church of God. Certainly, nothing could be further from the truth; instead of debasing the standard of holiness in the church, this teaching has elevated it to a level higher than the law—to Christ Himself. In 1907, respected author and then president of the Rochester Theological Seminary, Dr. Augustus Hopkins Strong unjustly accused the so-called “Plymouth Brethren” of antinomianism in his book *Lectures in Systematic Theology*.⁴

Mr. Harry A. Ironside, in the spirit of Christian love, silenced this unfounded criticism. Regarding this charge he wrote, “We are neither saved by the law, nor under it, as a rule of life; we are not lawless, but ‘under law, (enlawed) to Christ.’ ” Is Christ Himself a lower standard than the law given at Sinai? This is not antinomianism, but its very opposite. It is subjection to Christ as Lord of the new dispensation and mediator of the New Covenant.”⁵ How can obedience to Christ be a lower standard than the Mosaic law? For Christ is the very source of the law. Is the moon a greater light than the sun, whose light it reflects? The Scriptures speak eloquently for themselves concerning this point. The law of Moses commanded, “...thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Lev. 19:18); but the Lord says, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another” (John 13:34). The New Testament urges, “He that saith he abideth in Him, ought himself also to walk even as He walked” (1 John 2:6); and in another place we read, “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His

**“As to the
believer’s rule
of life, the
apostle does
not say, for to
me to live is the
law; but, for
me to live is
Christ. Christ
is our rule, our
model, our
touchstone,
our all...”**

C. H. Mackintosh
(1820–1896)

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Correspondence should be sent to:

BIBLE & LIFE Newsletter
c/o David Dunlap
3407 Brenford Place
Land O' Lakes, FL 34638
(813) 494-1680

e-mail

daviddunlap100@gmail.com

web site

www.bibleandlife.org



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A life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). Is this teaching lowering Christian character or enhancing it? How can emphasis laid upon the imitation of Christ ever be considered a vice and not virtue? Conformity to the image of Christ, who is the highest measure of holiness, is God's way to a godly life. When He is our heart's desire and our love is upon Him, we will find our lives and character being daily transformed into His likeness.

Conclusion

This is not a one-time crisis event, but a daily discipline; this is not holiness attained nor perfectionism sought after; on the contrary, it is a humble heart and mind looking away from self unto Christ. W. E. Vine, Bible commentator and respected authority on the Greek New Testament, may have described the believer's rule of life best when he wrote, " 'Sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord' " (1 Peter 3:15). This is not an attainment to be reached by the Christian of mature experience; it is the daily, joyous rule of life for every believer." 6

Endnotes

1. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermon on the Mount*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1979), p. 179
2. Anthony Hoekema, *Five Views of Sanctification*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 1987), p. 88
3. Richard Day, *The Shadow of the Broad Brim:: The Life of C. H. Spurgeon*, (Chicago, IL, Judson Press, 1934), p. 227
4. A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, (Chicago, IL, Judson Press, 1907), p. 895-896
5. H. A. Ironside, *The Teaching of the So-called Plymouth Brethren: Is it Scriptural?*, (New York, Loizeaux Brothers, 1930), p. 13
6. Percy O. Ruoff, *W. E. Vine; His Life and Ministry*, (London, Oliphants LTD, 1951), p. 146