

Love Is *the* Fulfillment of *the* Law



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 20:1–17; Rom. 6:1–3; Rom. 7:7–12; Jer. 31:31–34; Matt. 23:23, 24; James 2:1–9.*

Memory Text: “Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law” (*Romans 13:8, NKJV*).

While they were dealing with a problematic member, someone on the church board said to the pastor, “We can’t make decisions based on compassion.” *We can’t?* The pastor wondered what this person’s understanding of God and of God’s law must have been. Compassion certainly needs to be central in how we deal with people, especially erring ones. Compassion is part and parcel of love, and as Romans 13:8 tells us, to love one’s neighbor *is* to fulfill the law.

If love is indeed the fulfillment of the law, then we should be careful not to think of law in a way that is separate from love or to think of love in a way that is disconnected from law. In Scripture, love and law go together. The divine Lawgiver is love, and accordingly, God’s law is the law of love. It is, as Ellen G. White put it, the transcript of God’s character. (See *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 305.)

God’s law is not a set of abstract principles but commands and instructions intended for our flourishing. God’s law is, in part, an expression of love as God Himself expresses it.

* *Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 29.*

The Law of Love

God's law does not consist of abstract principles; instead, God's law is an expression of relationship. This can be seen explicitly in the Ten Commandments. The basic principles of the Ten Commandments were in place already in the Garden of Eden, the principles of love that were to govern the relationship between God and people and between people themselves.

When the Ten Commandments were written in stone in Exodus 20, they were given to Israel in the context of the covenant relationship. The commandments were written down after the Lord already had delivered the people from Egypt, and the commandments were based on God's love and on His promises to the nation (*see Exod. 6:7, 8 and Lev. 26:12*). One can see in the two divisions of the Ten Commandments that they are aimed at the flourishing of a human relationship with God and of relationships with one another.

Read Exodus 20:1–17. How do these verses reveal the two principles, those of love for God and of love for others?

The first four commandments deal with people's relationships with God, and the last six with people's relationships among themselves. Our relationship both to God and to other people must be regulated by the principles of God's law.

These two parts of the law correspond directly to what Jesus identified as the two greatest commandments—" "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart" ' ' (*Matt. 22:37, NKJV; compare with Deut. 6:5*) and " "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" ' ' (*Matt. 22:39, NKJV; compare with Lev. 19:18*).

The first four commandments are the ways in which we are to love God with all of our being, and the last six are ways we are to love one another as ourselves. Jesus makes it explicit that these two great love commandments are integrally related to the law. " "On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" ' ' (*Matt. 22:40, NKJV*).

The entirety of God's law, then, is grounded in God's love. God's love and law are inseparable. We often hear people say, *We don't need to keep the law, we just need to love God and to love others*. Why does that idea not make sense?

How could we express love to God, or love to others, if we are violating any one of the Ten Commandments?

The Law Is Holy and Righteous and Good

Love is the foundation of God's law. When God upholds the law, He upholds love. This is why Jesus died in order to save sinners, so that He could uphold the law while also extending grace to us. Thus, He could be both just and the justifier of those who believe (*Rom. 3:25, 26*). What an expression of love! Accordingly, the law is not invalidated by the process of redemption; rather, it is further confirmed.

Read Romans 6:1–3 and then Romans 7:7–12, with particular emphasis on verse 12. What are these verses telling us about the law, even after Christ died?

While some believe that grace and redemption cancel the law, Paul is clear that we are not to continue in sin so that grace increases. Rather, those who are in Christ by faith have been “baptized into His death” and are therefore to count themselves as dead to sin and alive to Christ.

The law of God is not sin, but (among other things) it makes sin and our sinfulness apparent to us. That is why, yes, “the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (*Rom. 7:12, NKJV*). It reveals, as nothing else does, our great need of salvation, of redemption—the salvation and redemption that come only through Christ. Accordingly, we do not “make void the law through faith” but “on the contrary, we establish the law” (*Rom. 3:31, NKJV*).

Christ came not to do away with the law but to fulfill all that was promised in the Law and in the Prophets. Thus, He emphasizes that “‘until heaven and earth pass away,’ ” not even “‘the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law’ ” (*Matt. 5:18, NASB 1995*).

The law of God itself represents God's holiness—His perfect character of love, righteousness, goodness, and truth (*Lev. 19:2; Ps. 19:7, 8; Ps. 119:142, 172*). In this regard, it is significant that, according to Exodus 31:18, God wrote the Ten Commandments on the stone tablets Himself. Written in stone, these laws are testimony of the unchanging character of God and of His moral government, which is founded on love—a central theme of the great controversy.

How does this link between law and love help us better understand Jesus' words, “‘If you love Me, you will keep My commandments’ ” (*John 14:15, NASB*)?

Law and Grace

As we have seen, law and grace are not opposed to one another. Instead, they serve different functions in accordance with the love and justice of God. A sharp contrast between law and grace would have puzzled ancient Israelites, who saw God's giving of the law itself as a great display of God's grace. While the "gods" of the surrounding nations were fickle and entirely unpredictable, leaving people without a way to know what the "gods" desired and what would please them, the God of the Bible very clearly instructs His people about what pleases Him. And what pleases Him is just what is for the ultimate good of all His people, individually and collectively.

Yet, the law cannot save us from sin or change human hearts. Because of our innate sinfulness, we need a spiritual heart transplant.

Read Jeremiah 31:31–34. What does this teach about God's promises to give us a new heart? Compare this with Christ's words to Nicodemus in John 3:1–21 about the new birth. (See also Heb. 8:10.)

The Ten Commandments were inscribed by God Himself on the tablets of stone (*Exod. 31:18*), but the law was also to be written in the hearts of God's people (*Ps. 37:30, 31*). Ideally, God's law of love would not be external to us but internal to our very characters. God alone could inscribe His law on human hearts, and He promised to do so for His covenant people (see *Heb. 8:10*).

We cannot save ourselves by law-keeping. Rather, it is by grace we are saved through faith, not of ourselves but as the gift of God (*Eph. 2:8*). We do not keep the law in order to be saved; we keep the law because we are already saved. We do not keep the law in order to be loved but because we are loved, and thus we desire to love God and others (see *John 14:15*).

At the same time, the law shows us our sin (*James 1:22–25, Rom. 3:20, Rom. 7:7*), shows us our need of a Redeemer (*Gal. 3:22–24*), guides us in the best ways of life, and reveals God's character of love.

What is your hope in the judgment? Is it your diligent and faithful law-keeping or is it Christ's righteousness, which covers you? What does your answer tell you about the function of God's law regarding what it can or cannot do?

Love Is the Fulfillment of the Law

The relationship between love and law cannot be overstated. Indeed, according to Scripture, to love is to fulfill the law.

In Romans 13:8–10, Paul teaches that “he who loves another has fulfilled the law” (*Rom. 13:8, NKJV*). After listing many of the last six of the Ten Commandments, Paul declares that these are “all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (*Rom. 13:9, NKJV*). Indeed, Paul teaches explicitly, “Love is the fulfillment of the law” (*Rom. 13:10, NKJV*). Again, in Galatians 5:14, Paul explains, “All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ ” (*Gal. 5:14, NKJV*). But what kind of love is that which fulfills the law? What does such love look like?

Read Matthew 23:23, 24. What are the “weightier matters of the law”?
Read Deuteronomy 5:12–15 and Isaiah 58:13, 14. How do these passages demonstrate the relationship between the law (particularly the Sabbath commandment) and God’s concern for justice and deliverance?

Jesus identifies the “weightier matters of the law” as “justice and mercy and faith.” And in relation to one law in particular—the Sabbath—we can see in Scripture that the Sabbath itself is integrally connected with deliverance and justice.

In Deuteronomy 5, the Sabbath commandment is grounded in relation to God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery. That is, the Sabbath is not only a memorial of creation but also a memorial of deliverance from slavery and oppression. And in the context about turning from one’s own pleasure to call the Sabbath a delight by taking delight in the Lord (*Isa. 58:13, 14*), the emphasis is on works of love and justice for others—doing good, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless (*see Isa. 58:3–10*).

Given all of these teachings (and many others), those who wish to fulfill the law through love should be concerned not only about sins of commission but also about sins of omission. Love as the fulfillment of the law involves not merely keeping the law in the sense of refraining from committing sins but also consists of actively doing good—doing the works of love that faithfully advance justice and mercy. Being faithful to God is more than just not violating the letter of the law.

Above All, Love One Another

If love is the fulfillment of the law, then one cannot keep God's law in the full sense simply by refraining from doing wrong things. The law of love itself (expressed in the fullness of Scripture) not only commands us to refrain from doing evil but the law prompts us to do acts that reveal the love of God to others—not only to other church members but also to the world at large, which is so desperately in need of a true Christian witness.

Read James 2:1–9. What crucial messages are we given here?

Here, James strongly decries injustice in society, specifically identifying the dishonoring of the poor and oppression by some who are rich. Then, he calls attention to the law of love for one's neighbor, saying if you fulfill this law, then "you do well" (*James 2:8, NKJV*).

As Ellen G. White has expressed it: "Love to man is the earthward manifestation of the love of God. It was to implant this love, to make us children of one family, that the King of glory became one with us. And when His parting words are fulfilled, 'Love one another, as I have loved you' (John 15:12); when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven; for we have heaven in our hearts."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* p. 641.

When we love the world, as Christ has loved the world—*then we are fitted for heaven*. What a powerful expression of what it means to be a follower of Jesus!

Jesus commands His followers to " 'love one another;' " even as " 'I have loved you' " (*John 13:34, NKJV*). Jesus also proclaims: " 'By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another' " (*John 13:35, NKJV*). Love is so central to Christian faith because God is love (*1 John 4:8, 16*). And those who claim to love God must love one another (*compare with 1 John 3:11; 4:20, 21*).

Accordingly, 1 Peter 4:8 exhorts Christians: "And above all things have fervent love for one another, for 'love will cover a multitude of sins' " (*NKJV; see also Heb. 10:24 and 1 Thess. 3:12*).

Dwell more on the idea of loving the world as Christ loved the world. How might this help us better understand the concept of Christian perfection and how we are made fit for eternal life? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Least of These My Brethren,” pp. 637–641, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“Those who minister to others will be ministered unto by the Chief Shepherd. They themselves will drink of the living water, and will be satisfied. They will not be longing for exciting amusements, or for some change in their lives. The great topic of interest will be, how to save the souls that are ready to perish. Social intercourse will be profitable. The love of the Redeemer will draw hearts together in unity.

“When we realize that we are workers together with God, His promises will not be spoken with indifference. They will burn in our hearts, and kindle upon our lips. To Moses, when called to minister to an ignorant, undisciplined, and rebellious people, God gave the promise, ‘My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest.’ And He said, ‘Certainly I will be with thee.’ Ex. 33:14; 3:12. This promise is to all who labor in Christ’s stead for His afflicted and suffering ones.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 641.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read 1 Corinthians 13:4–8. How does 1 Corinthians 13 shed light on the kind of people we ought to be?
- 2 What separates the sheep from the goats in Matthew 25:31–46? How can we understand what Jesus says here in a way that does not teach salvation by works?
- 3 What does it mean to you that “when we love the world as He has loved it, then for us His mission is accomplished. We are fitted for heaven; for we have heaven in our hearts” (see Thursday’s study)? What does this reveal about the nature of God and the nature of heaven itself? How can we live more like citizens of heaven here in this respect, relative to spreading God’s love in a way that brings light and justice to the oppressed?
- 4 What practical steps should be taken in your local church to reflect God’s concern for love and justice in your local community? What are you doing well in your community? What do you need to improve and focus on more? What tangible steps can you take individually and collectively to act on what we have studied about God’s love and justice?

Bowing to an Image

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Maria is familiar with adoration. As an opera singer, she has sung before admiring audiences in the main opera house of her native country as well as in a dozen other countries. She has received several top prizes.

But nothing prepared her for the adoration that she witnessed in North Korea. The admiration was not for her performance. It took place at a 72-foot (22-meter) bronze statue of North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung.

Maria is a faithful Seventh-day Adventist. For her safety, Adventist Mission is not identifying her by her real name or nationality. She spoke to Adventist Mission in a Zoom interview.

During the visit to North Korea, Maria and a group of other singers toured the Mansu Hill Grand Monument, a complex of monuments depicting heroes from the country's revolutionary history, in Pyongyang. The centerpiece of the complex was the towering statue of Kim Il Sung. (A second 72-foot statue, of Kim's son, Kim Jong Il, was later added to the complex.)

Crowds of people swarmed around the statue of Kim Il Sung. Maria saw foreign tourists from Italy, France, and other countries. She saw North Koreans. They all bowed before the statue. Then she learned that she also was expected to bow as a sign of respect.

"You need to bow," an interpreter told her group.

Maria's mind flashed back to the first commandment, which says, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (*Exodus 20:3, NKJV*).

Then she noticed a state video operator filming everyone. She didn't want to get into trouble.

As she stood there, she remembered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego refusing to bow to the 90-foot golden image of King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3. She thought, *The book of Daniel really is not a legend or a fairy tale. That same scene is acted out in real life every day.*

She stood straight and tall.

Some people might dismiss the bowing at Mansu Hill Grand Monument as a cultural experience connected to Kim Il Sung's cult of personality, but Maria saw it as much more. For her, it was the moment when she was asked to take a public stand for who she adores.

Several days later, as she prepared to leave North Korea, she gave a copy of *Steps to Christ* to her interpreter. She prays that the interpreter and all North Koreans learn about Jesus, the Man who she admires the most.

Reaching the people of North Korea with the gospel is an important focus of the Northern Asia-Pacific Division, the recipient of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering. Pray for North Korea, and thank you for planning a generous offering this Sabbath.