

Chapter 21

Behavioral expectations in the new covenant

The most important command of the Bible is this: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matthew 22:37). John states it this way: “This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 3:23). People will be saved or condemned on the basis of this command (Mark 16:16; John 3:18).

Jesus also told us the second most important command: “The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:39). John states it this way: “and to love one another as he commanded us” (1 John 3:23, last part).

This is the visible evidence of Christianity (John 13:35). “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20-21). And this command, because it is so broad, fulfills the Law and the Prophets (Romans 13:10; Galatians 5:14; Matthew 7:12).

Hundreds of commands

The New Testament contains *hundreds* of commands. All of them come under the general heading of love, for God is love. Everything he commands is an expression of love.

Although some of Paul’s comments about the law seem negative, Paul himself gave us hundreds of commands. He is not against law in itself, but he argues that the Law of Moses is no longer valid. In regard to the Mosaic law, he could say, “I myself am not under the law.” But in regard to obeying the Lord, he said, “I am under Christ’s law” (1 Corinthians 9:20-21).

In many of Paul’s letters, he begins by explaining some theological principles and ends with some practical application of those principles in the way we live. The book of Romans ends with numerous commands:

- “Love must be sincere.
- Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

- Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.
- Honor one another above yourselves.
- Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.
- Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.
- Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.
- Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.
- Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.
- Live in harmony with one another.
- Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.
- Do not be conceited.
- Do not repay anyone evil for evil.
- Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.
- If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.
- Do not take revenge” (Romans 12:9-18).

And there are more commands in this chapter, and in the remaining chapters. Paul has some rather definite ideas as to how Christians ought to live, how we ought to respond to the grace God has given us in Jesus Christ. All this is part of the new covenant; we are not lacking for guidance on how to live!

Put on the new way

The book of Galatians has some critical words about the law, but it also has some commands of its own — new covenant commands. Paul even unites the concepts of liberty and obligation: “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13). Paul lists some behaviors that the Galatians should avoid (verses 19-21) and some that they should include (verses 22-26).

Ephesians also has direct advice for Christians. Paul begins his exhortations in this way: “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3).

We are to put off the old self, and put on the new self, which God is creating in us to be more like Jesus (verses 22-24). Then there are some very practical admonitions. For example: “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body” (verse 25). The Christian lifestyle is summarized in this way: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:1-2).

The gospel of Christ has implications for the way we should live and think (Philippians 2:1-7; 4:8). When we identify ourselves as followers of Christ, we are to eliminate evil: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:5-10).

Five reasons to obey God

If God saves us by grace, apart from the good works that we do (Titus 3:5), why should we obey him? If there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1) and our salvation is not in jeopardy, why should we struggle to obey?

- 1) The simplest reason is: It's our duty. Through his death on the cross, Christ has purchased us (Acts 20:28), and it is only fair that we do what he says. We are children of God, and we are to do what he commands. Of course, we do not obey in order to be saved. Salvation comes first, and obedience should follow. But obedience goes deeper than duty. Obedience should come from the heart, done because we *want* to, not grudgingly, because we have to. So why should we *want* to obey? There are

three main reasons: faith, hope and love.

- 2) In faith, we believe that God's commands are for our own good. He loves us and wants to help us, not to give us unnecessary burdens. As our Creator, he has the wisdom to know how we should live, what works best and what causes the most happiness in the long run. And we have to trust him in that; his perspective is much better than ours. Obedience expresses faith in his wisdom and love. Obedience is what he made us for (Ephesians 2:10), and life works better if we are in tune with the way we were made.
- 3) Obedience also involves hope in a future blessing. If there is no future life, then Christianity would be foolish (1 Corinthians 15:14-18). Jesus promised that his disciples would find eternal life worth far more than anything they might have to give up in this age (Mark 10:29-30). Everyone who is saved will have the joy of knowing God in eternal life, but there are also rewards in addition to eternal joy. Jesus encouraged his disciples to “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:19-21). Several of his parables indicate that we will be rewarded for what we do in this life. God rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6). Paul also wrote about rewards: “The Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does” (Ephesians 6:8). This is not talking about salvation, but about rewards in addition to salvation. He described the judgment as a fire that tests the quality of every person's work. “If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward” (1 Corinthians 3:14). If it is burned up, he will lose it, but he will still be saved (verse 15).
- 4) But reward is not the only reason we work, for we are children of the King, not employees who do only what we get paid for. Our fourth motive for obedience is love. This includes love for people around us, because they will be better off if we obey God than if we do not. God's instructions are sensible, not arbitrary rules. They help people get along with other people. But most of all, it is our love for God that causes us to want to obey him. He has done so much for us, that we cannot help but be thankful and want to please him. “If you

love me,” Jesus says, “you will obey what I command” (John 14:15). “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching” (verse 23). John later wrote, “This is love for God: to obey his commands” (1 John 5:3). “The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar.... But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him” (1 John 2:4-5).

- 5) Our love for God means that we want to bring him favorable publicity, so that others will come to love him, too. Obedience serves as a witness to God and the gospel. Obedience says that God is great and good and wise, and we adore him. Obedience says that God is important, that he is valuable, and that he deserves our loyalty. Let your good deeds be seen, Jesus said, so that people can see them “and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). A bad example will bring the gospel into disrepute (Titus 2:5). But a good example can help people be favorably disposed to God. “Live such good lives among the pagans,” Peter wrote, “that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Peter 2:12). “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). Help the gospel be associated with good things, not bad.

It is easy to find dozens of commands in the new covenant. Almost every book in the New Testament has lists of things we should do, ways in which we can conform more closely to Christ. Most of the commands are easy to understand. They are plain, and yet very demanding. They demand all our time, all our emotions, all our thoughts and all our actions. In this life, we will never achieve all they ask.

Contrast with the Sabbath

We might briefly contrast these clear commands with the idea of a Christian Sabbath-day command. The New Testament has space for all sorts of commands, from obvious things to subtle things, but it never commands the Sabbath. This would be odd if the Sabbath were an important command. We find sweeping statements that make the old covenant law obsolete, but unlike other commands, we never find the Sabbath commanded again or made an exception to the

rule. Paul and John say a lot about the godly behavior that springs from Christian faith and love, but the Sabbath is simply never commanded.

Paul dealt with numerous problems of Christian living, and he listed numerous sins that characterize people who will not inherit the kingdom of God, but he never mentions Sabbath breaking. In describing sins of the Gentiles (Romans 1), he says nothing about the Sabbath. If the Sabbath is essential, it is certainly surprising that no one is ever criticized for ignoring it.

In the first-century Roman Empire, slaves would have found it particularly difficult to keep the Sabbath. Some of them had unconverted, harsh masters (1 Peter 2:18). Some parts of the Roman Empire didn’t even use a seven-day week.

But Peter and Paul did not have to answer questions about how slaves could keep the Sabbath. Why not? Because slaves didn’t have to keep the Sabbath.

For one thing, first-century Jews did not believe that Gentiles had to keep the Sabbath. For another, the decision at Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, was that converted, Spirit-filled Gentiles were not required to become circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. Little is said about the Sabbath because it was not a problem.

Instead, the Sabbath was a neutral matter, neither commanded nor forbidden. People were free to rest on that day if they chose, or to use the day in other ways, as long as they did what they did to the Lord (Romans 14:5-6).

Likewise, the New Testament does not say that any other day ought to be a day of rest. There is no command to keep the first day, either as a day of meeting or a day of rest. It is neither commanded nor forbidden. Christians are free to work these things out for themselves. We are commanded to assemble together for worship, but we are not commanded when (Hebrews 10:25).

The important thing is not which day we observe, but whether we have faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. He is the test commandment, the center of faith, the standard by which we will be judged. He is the answer to our deepest need.

The human problem

Everyone has some concept of right and wrong, and everyone has done something wrong even by his or her own definition. “To err is human,” says a common proverb. Everyone has betrayed a friend, broken a promise or hurt someone’s feelings. Everyone has

experienced the feeling of guilt. People therefore want God to stay away from them. They do not want a day of judgment, because they know they cannot stand before God with a clear conscience. They know they should obey him, but they also know that they have not. They are ashamed and guilty.

How can their guilt be erased? How can the conscience be cleared? “To forgive is divine,” the proverb concludes. God himself will forgive. Many people know the proverb, but somehow do not believe that God is divine enough to forgive their sins. They still feel guilty. They still fear the appearance of God and the day of judgment.

However, God has already appeared — in the person of Jesus Christ. He did not come to condemn, but to save. He brought a message of forgiveness, and he died on a cross to guarantee that we may be forgiven. The message of Jesus, the message of the cross, is good news for all who feel their guilt. Jesus, the divine human, has paid the penalty for us. Forgiveness is given freely to all who are humble enough to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel is that even when we were sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). He did not come to save the righteous (there is no such person), but the sinners (Matthew 9:13). What are we supposed to do to be saved? Believe the gospel — just trust in Christ. He has done what we need.

Problem: Everyone falls short of what God commands (Romans 3:9-10, 23). Even people who do not have the law, know that they don’t always live up to what is right.

Another problem: the penalty of sin is death (Romans 6:23; 5:12).

Good news: Jesus paid the penalty for us (2 Corinthians 5:14-15; 1 Peter 2:24). Our sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ! (Acts 2:38; 10:43; 13:38-39; Romans 3:24). God is perfect, but human beings are not. God is holy, humans are not. No one deserves to live forever with God. No one can claim such an eternal blessing as a right. No one can claim to have *earned* the right to be with God forever. On judgment day, no one can say: “You have to let me in. I’ve been good enough.” No one is ever “good enough” to obligate God to do anything for them. What we deserve is death.

The role of faith

However, God does want us to live with him forever. He loves us and wants us, so he paid the

penalty for us, as a gift. God loves us so much that he sent his only Son to die for our sins, for us. Through faith in him our sins are forgiven and we are given eternal life with God (John 3:16).

This is wonderful news, that God wants to live with us! However, sin continues to live in us (Romans 7:17-23). We all struggle with sin. No one can live perfectly (1 John 1:8, 10). No one is able to live up to the perfection that God commands. We are unable to be perfect and holy in the way God is perfect and holy (Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:15-16). Therefore, we have a continuing need for God’s mercy and forgiveness. No one can say, “I’ve been so good that I deserve to live with God forever.”

When judgment day comes, everyone will need mercy. Because all Christians sin, we continue to need God’s grace — and the good news is that we continue to be forgiven and made clean through the atoning work of our Savior. Salvation is a gift from start to finish.

Paul sometimes talks about forgiveness by using the term *justification*, which means not only forgiveness but also giving us the status of being just or righteous. Christians are not just declared neutral, but are declared good and righteous, acceptable to God. How can this be? Let’s take a closer look at what Paul wrote about justification.

Can a person be declared righteous by obeying God’s law? Absolutely not! “We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Romans 3:28). “A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16). “Clearly no one is justified before God by the law” (Galatians 3:11). “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy” (Titus 3:5).

How then can we be declared righteous and acceptable to God? Through faith in Christ — and only through faith! “Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the Law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39).

We “are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24). “Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (Romans 5:1-2). “The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified *by faith*” (Galatians 3:24).

Our need for grace

We are incapable of earning our salvation. We can never perform enough good deeds to make up for the fact that we are sinners. We can never be saved on the basis of righteous things we have done. Salvation is always by God's mercy and his grace.

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). This gift has been made possible by the death of Jesus on the cross. He paid the penalty of our sins, and through faith in him — by accepting what he has done for us — we are clean and forgiven.

God's grace does not mean we are given permission to sin (Romans 3:31; 6:1). Paul specifically says that God created us to do good works (Ephesians 2:10), and that grace teaches us to quit sinning (Titus 2:11-12). Throughout the New Testament, we are exhorted to obey God, and we are warned about sin. But regardless of how obedient we might be, salvation does not come from our good works, but through the grace of God given to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

Of all humans, Paul had an excellent claim to his own righteousness, both in the Old Testament law and in zeal for Jesus Christ. But he did not trust in his own works. “If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ...in regard to the law, a Pharisee...as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (Philippians 3:4-9).

The perfect righteousness that we need for salvation cannot come from ourselves. It can come only from Jesus Christ. The good news of the gospel is that his righteousness is given to us by faith, not by works of the law. It is in Christ that “we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

“Christ Jesus has become...our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Corinthians 1:30). He becomes our righteousness, and in him we become the righteousness of God. Through faith in him, we are justified — counted among the righteous.

At the pearly gates

Many Christians haven't fully understood the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ. Many people still think that salvation is by faith plus works. The truth is that works can't save us at all, since even at their best they fall short of what God has commanded.

As an illustration, let's suppose that people are at the gates of paradise, and the gatekeeper asks, “Why should I let you in?” And many Christians would say: “Because I've been good. I went to church every week, I always gave a generous offering, I read the Bible every day, I never took anything that wasn't mine, I never looked at pornography, etc.” Alcohol abstainers would mention what they did, and Sabbath keepers would mention what they did.

But the gatekeeper would reply: “So what? You didn't do everything perfectly. And even if you would have, those things wouldn't erase your sins and corruption. If that's what God wanted, he could make machines to do those things.”

The correct reply, in contrast, is that we rely in faith on the sacrifice and righteousness of Jesus Christ, knowing we have nothing to offer God. His death covers all our sins; that is the only excuse we have to live with God forever. Salvation is given to us because of God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ, nothing else. The faith and love God has granted us lead us into obedience and wholehearted devotion to him, but salvation does not depend on our success in obedience, or else we would never be saved. Since our obedience is never perfect, it can never count for salvation.

The law can deceive us

This is where the law can deceive us. I used to keep some of the old covenant laws, and they gave me visible evidence that I was trying harder than most people to obey God. The fact that most Christians did *not* keep these laws made it even more deceptive for me, because that was further evidence that I was more obedient than others, and I assumed that God was impressed with what I was doing.

I was different, so I assumed I was special. In that, I was deceived. All my emphasis on law-keeping had distracted me away from Christ. Although I trusted in him for my salvation, I preferred to look at something more visible — my works, something that I could boast in. But as Ephesians 2:9 says, our salvation is not of works, so that no one can boast. No one can get into the kingdom of God thinking that they did it themselves.

But as I learned that the old covenant laws were not even required, I could see how flimsy my boast was. All my “obedience” counted for nothing but well-meaning mistakes!

Obedience — especially to laws that most Christians don’t keep — can deceive us into thinking that our diligence is worth something to God. No, Christ had to die on the cross for us just as much as he did for the prostitute and the child-molester. That hurts our pride, but it is true.

Even so, obedience is important. If we have faith in our Lord, we will obey him. We live for our King who died for us and now lives for us and in us (2 Corinthians 5:15). Our deepest allegiance is with him forever.

Words for salvation

The Bible sometimes describes salvation with the word *redemption*. This word comes from the ancient slave market. People who could not pay their debts were sold into slavery. If their friends and relatives were able to get enough money to pay the debt, then they could redeem or buy the person back from slavery.

To use this figure of speech for salvation, we see that we have a debt to sin that we cannot pay, and we find ourselves in the slavery of sin. We cannot work our way out of slavery, but Christ is able to pay our debt for us. His death on the cross redeemed us out of sin and debt. He purchased us, and we became his slaves. We are now obligated to our new Master, and we owe him our obedience and loyalty (Romans 6:15-18).

Of course, God values us much more than slaves. We are his children and heirs; we are his friends and family, members of his household. And through our Savior Jesus Christ, even our broken personal relationship with God is restored! To describe this, the Bible uses the term *reconciliation*. We were once enemies of God, working against him. But through Christ, we are reconciled to him, made friends again. Once we were rebels; now we are allies. We have given our allegiance to God because of what he has done for us. Let’s see how Paul develops this concept.

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God

through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Romans 5:8-11).

We were reconciled — made acceptable to God — through the cross of Christ. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:18). Because he died for us, we therefore have an obligation: “He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (verse 15). We are to live for him, doing his work, living in the way he wants. Our new life is in Christ (verse 17).

Because Jesus died for us, we now live for him. We obey him. We have a new life. This is described in other places as being “born again” (John 3:3; 1 Peter 1:23). Our purpose and orientation in life is changed by our new relationship with God.

Our new identity as God’s children has practical results in the way we live. As he is living in us, he is also changing our hearts and minds toward his purposes. The Holy Spirit leads us to continue to put off old ways and to put on Christlike ways. Because Jesus loved us, we love him, and we love the people he loves.

“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel” (Colossians 1:21-23).

As part of our love for God and neighbor, we support the “message of reconciliation” — the good news that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ — the good news that forgiveness is given through faith in him (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). As Christians, we are Christ’s representatives, and God is making his appeal to humanity through us. Just as Paul did, we urge people to be reconciled to God through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

A chosen people

Peter says that Christians are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” And why have we been chosen? “That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Once we were not God’s people — we were alienated from him. Now, through the reconciliation given to us through Christ, through the mercy of God, we are now his people, his children (verse 10).

How then should we live? Peter continues: “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (verses 11-12).

As Christ saves us, the Holy Spirit puts us into a body, the body of Christ, the church of God. God puts us into a community of other believers, for fellowship, for mutual assistance and encouragement, for growing in the faith. Throughout the New Testament, believers are often found meeting together. Although their homes may be scattered among unbelievers, they form a new community, the church.

In the church, we are learning to love each other, to be reconciled to each other, to help each other. We worship God together, we pray together, we study the Bible together and encourage each other in the faith. And together, we reach out to share the gospel with those who walk in darkness.

As an organized community, the church encourages its members to serve others, each according to his or her ability. But our interactions are not just with one another — they are also spiritual. Our fellowship is also with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As we express love to one another, we also express love for God, since God wants us to love one another.

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

“This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:9-11).

Review

- The New Testament gives us a lot of guidance on how we should live.
- Obedience is not an attempt to earn salvation, but is an expression of faith, hope, and love. Which reason motivates you most?
- Although the New Testament has space for hundreds of commands, it does not command the Sabbath.
- Law-keeping can never make us good enough for salvation. Christ is our only hope of salvation.
- Question: How do we live for Christ? (2 Corinthians 5:15)

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