

# 28: Kaiser #7

## The Theology of the Law of God

Ralph D. Winter

### Introduction

Now we are coming to Kaiser's seventh lesson topic: *The Theology of the Law of God*. This is a very significant subject. It is one of the great stumbling blocks of biblical study and interpretation. You have already been exposed to the character (and I think 'character' is the right word) named Marcion. You should remember that Marcion was the businessman-scholar who reacted so strongly against Jewish culture that he essentially threw the whole Old Testament out. While trying to rid his Hellenistic (Greek) mentality from any further Semitic or Judaic influences, he had to throw out a lot of the New Testament as well. This is what you would call a mono-cultural approach to the Bible. Nevertheless, the Bible is determinedly and irretrievably multicultural.

The multicultural nature of the Bible has great significance for the missionary movement because missionaries are crossing from one culture to another all the time. What seems to be the Law of God or the will of God in one particular culture changes subtly in others due to cultural divergences, just as is the case in the Bible. In a missionary setting, the tendency of the new believers in the newly reached culture is to throw out everything from the old culture, and even throw out the missionary authority and tradition completely and develop their own Marcion-like "contextualized approach."

This, by the way, reminds us that the word *contextualization* is a dangerous word. Marcion contextualized. But he over-contextualized when he threw out the Old Testament. Thus, our lesson topic involves a very basic missionary problem.

It is even more basic than just a missionary problem, however. It is very basic to our understanding of our relationship to God and to the Bible. I realize that the Protestant tradition has an ambivalent relationship to this whole subject of law. Protestants, after all, revolted against the imposition of a foreign cultural interpretation of Christianity, and their reactions were diverse. Even if you did not know anything about the Reformers, if all you did was read the New Testament, you might easily misunderstand the reaction of the

Apostle Paul to the Pharisaic legalism of his day. That is, it would be easy to confuse his reaction to that legalism with a reaction against the entire Old Testament, which was not the case.

I can remember (how can I forget?) as a teenager running into that series of six illustrations Jesus gives in Matthew 5 and 6, where He says, "You have heard it said unto you, but I say unto you...." Each time Jesus says, "but I say unto you." The first impression for many people is that Jesus is setting aside the Mosaic Law in each of those six cases. In fact, some modern translations actually say, "Moses said to you, but I say...." Now that would be the ultimate dichotomy, would it not—that Moses is being set aside for a new authority?

I do not have any question at all in my mind that Jesus came with the ultimate authority of the Living God—as the Son of the Living God. He spoke in a way that Moses never spoke. On the other hand, it is a very practical and significant question: was Jesus trying to get rid of the Mosaic Law?

Well, one of the immediate, nearby contexts that begins to call in question that interpretation is in Matthew 5 itself. In taking up this series of six illustrations, we see that Jesus says, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to abolish but to fulfill (Matt 5:17)." Some of those who would like very much to get rid of the Old Testament—and any kind of law or authority—actually agree with that, in a certain sense. They say, "Sure, He did not come to abolish these things, but to fulfill them in the cross. Therefore, they are gone, but they are fulfilled. We don't need to worry about the Ten Commandments or anything else." So you can still get around the Old Testament, despite the seemingly opposite meaning of Jesus' statement.

However, back to my personal illustration. I will never forget that day, although I am not sure exactly when it was. I had for years assumed that Jesus was contrasting Moses' teaching with His own teaching. I don't know how I arrived at this idea. I don't blame anybody. I may have just stumbled across this myself and assumed it rather than being taught it. However, it was a special day when I suddenly realized—it was like a

revelation—that Jesus was not opposing Moses’ teaching, but was opposing a *misinterpretation* of Moses’ teaching.

Note that in each of these six cases He says very clearly, “You have *heard* that the ancients were told....” In other words, “You have heard from your present-day teachers what they think the ancients were saying. But let me clarify what the Old Testament really says or means. I am not setting the Old Testament aside. I want you to get at the real meaning of the Old Testament.”

The most lurid example He gives is the very simple statement, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy’” (Matthew 5:43). I can remember during many years assuming that this statement was a direct quotation from the Old Testament. But Jesus was saying something else. Jesus did not say, “The Old Testament says, ‘You can hate your enemy’, so I’m going to contradict the Old Testament by saying ‘Don’t hate your enemy!’”

Look it up! The Bible does not say, “hate your enemy.” The Pharisees, the human interpreters of the Old Testament, were the ones widely teaching that because God (through Moses) said, “Love your neighbor,” that a person does not need to love those who are not neighbors. It appears that the Pharisees reasoned that if you do not have to love someone who is not your neighbor, maybe, just maybe, you are permitted to hate him. This kind of wooden, logical, and rational elaboration of the Law is what gets people into trouble, both then and now. And this type of reasoning is what Jesus was trying to clarify.

Now you say, “Wait a minute! These Pharisees were Bible students. They were the Bible Institute people of their day.” In some respects that is true. If all you read of the Pharisees was the New Testament, you would have a rather jaundiced view of them. They were really very faithful, sincere people. But they desperately missed the point—the spiritual meaning of the Law—in many cases. Let us just take a few examples.

For one, notice in Matthew 12 and Mark 2, when Jesus’ disciples are walking through the fields. They are a little hungry, so they grab hold of a stalk of wheat, pull out those grains, and eat them. (This is called a macrobiotic diet, where you don’t bother to cook the grains and you get the full value!) Somebody saw them and said, “Aha! They did this on the Sabbath! They are destroying the meaning of the Law. They are working on the Sabbath!” In other words, the interpreters of the law did not just condemn a full day’s worth of work. Even if, with your left hand behind your back, you were to reach up and pull off a few

grains and pop them into your mouth on the Sabbath, you would be in violation of the Law! That does it—you are lost and gone forever!

The extremism went further. If pulling up some grain is work that cannot be done on the Sabbath, then, pulling up anything else should be forbidden on the Sabbath. This is where the human elaboration comes in. For instance, the interpreters of the law began to teach that pulling out a gray hair on the Sabbath would be work and so this action is unlawful. Pulling out a gray hair for women is a very great temptation; therefore, by extension, it must be wrong for women to expose themselves to such a temptation. As a result, it was wrong to look in a mirror on the Sabbath if you were a woman, because if you saw a grey hair, you might be tempted to pull it out, which would be similar to pulling up some grain. Pulling up grain would be working, and working would be an infraction of the Law, and so therefore....

Hundreds and hundreds of little rules like this were developed. This is what is called *legalism*—cultural rules which do not reflect the purposes behind the Law of God.

Jesus came along and said, “Man was not made for the Sabbath; but the Sabbath was made for man” (Mark 2:27). This is characteristic of all of the Law. The Law, as given to us by God, is given not to burden us or to tie us down or to restrict our inner spirits, but to liberate our spirits and to give us freedom within what is right. The very opposite of legalism would be John Wesley’s statement, “Love, and do what you want.” Jesus said the same: “Love is the fulfillment of the Law.” He could have said, “Love, and you will not run into trouble with the Law.” He said that you can sum up the whole Law in both its vertical and horizontal relationships by loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and body, and by loving your neighbor as yourself. Thus energized, you will not get into trouble with the Law.

The Apostle Paul referred to this same experience of the inner grace and power of God giving us love and goodwill which simply does not infract the Law, by speaking of the fruit of the Holy Spirit and observing, “Against such there is no law” (Galatians 5:23). The ways in which Paul was energized were not likely to run against the Law, even if, as the Pharisees measured his life, they might possibly have been able to devise certain infractions of a technical nature (such as they would have with the life of any free spirit, born again by the Spirit of God). Basically, the Law is merely a description of what godly people already do. The Law is merely a checkpoint against the presence or the absence of the inner spirit. Evil

deeds are not a symptom of a failure to understand the Law in intellectual terms, but a symptom of the absence of the energizing power of grace and love and the other fruits of the Holy Spirit.

However, we do have a huge difference of opinion in the minds of different people down through history as to how to deal with the Old Testament. Kaiser describes the Old Testament as a way of life. He is saying that the Law of God, when you are empowered by the Spirit (and this could have taken place in the Old Testament as well as in the New), becomes a way of life. The law is not simply a burdensome penalty or a restriction.

This clearly stated position of Kaiser's is a magnificent and marvelous thing. For much of my life I never had his searching, thorough, scholarly weighing of things in this area. For example, it is really fascinating to see him point out that Luther and Calvin are really on both sides of this matter. He quotes Luther as whisking away the whole Law. Luther says, in various places, that the Law can be done away with because it was only given for the sake of Israel. That is a legitimate view, if legitimate means widely held. It is Lutheran, which is a massive section of modern Christianity. There are many others who follow his point of view for one reason or another.

Calvin, on the other hand, basically says: "We are not to think one era or age is so different from another." Calvin's concept is that the life of a righteous man is a continual meditation upon the Law. For the Law is just as applicable to every age, even to the end of the world. This is a bit different from what Luther said.

Not being a Lutheran, but not wanting to be unkind to Lutherans, let me point out something. Luther's first blush reaction was against the legalism of a Latin formulation of Christianity, which had been clamped down over the ears of German Christians. Any cultural elaboration of Christianity, however wholesome and normal and natural within the originating culture, will be a bit legalistic, perhaps very legalistic, when mechanically applied in another situation. This is where missionaries come in.

Luther, in reacting against the Latin tradition, discovered the freedom of the new birth in Christ and the freedom of living by faith. Luther then emphasized an inner response of trust and obedience to the Living God as opposed to outward works of religion. That essentially made all of the Law passé, including the immense detail added by the Roman tradition. The Roman tradition was not out of date historically, but psychologically. As he read the New Testament and came to the book of

James, which talks about the Law of God as a beautiful and wonderful thing, he felt he had to refer, in his early scholarly endeavors, to the letter of James as "an epistle of straw." Later in life, he changed his viewpoint; but you can now, hopefully, see where he is coming from. Let us not be too hard on Luther.

Later on, however, it became clear that the Lutheran Reformation and the Calvinistic Reformation were both struggling with this whole matter of how we handle the Law of God, especially in its written elaboration by the Roman tradition.

For example, a couple of hundred years later, in Wesley's England, a book came out called *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. A holy life! Not just a mental assent, but to a holy life. The word 'believing' is not merely a mental assent. But it is often thought to be, even in English. We say, "I don't know for sure, but I believe so"—meaning that believing is not a very sure thing. Thus the English word 'believe' is a terrible word to translate what the Bible is talking about: whole-hearted believing, an obedient believing. "The obedience of faith" is an oft-repeated phrase in the Bible. One can see it in Romans 1 and Romans 15 and all through the Bible. There is no way to cut between the obedience of the heart and the believing heart.

So William Law wrote his book: *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. This was to offset what we now sometimes call "easy believism." Others have also written about this type of 'belief', such as Fletcher in his book *Checks Against Anti-Nomianism*. *Nomos* is the Greek word for law. Anti-nomianism means somehow you have construed the Bible and your theology to get rid of all law and authority. Americans, in particular, will think this is a great thing, for we are almost instinctively set against authority.

Kaiser has the antidote!

## Review

### 1. What is the common basis for the moral law of the Old Testament and the moral principles of the New Testament?

We started this lesson by observing that the Law of God as a subject has got to be one of the most important subjects we can possibly take up. The word 'law' in modern English has a very restrictive and narrow meaning. It refers normally to books of civil rules that citizens are supposed to follow. But in the Hebrew era and even today,

there are other meanings for the word. We can say that there are certain “laws of nature,” or certain “laws of physics,” and so forth. I mean the word ‘law’ can mean that this is the way things should be. Thus, even in English the word *law* does have ample meaning.

But in the Hebrew situation, the word law referred specifically to the first five books of Law—the Torah—a word which carries the flavor of what ought to be. But law also referred to the whole corpus of writings. Sometimes when they said “the Law,” they were simply referencing what we call the *Bible*. Kaiser reduces the word down to the moral law, the ceremonial law, and the civil law. There might be more categories that the law could fit under, but these are three major ways of looking at this corpus.

But as missionaries go around the world, they run into a similar phenomenon. The idea of law is not just some unique feature of Hebrew civilization, which was picked up by Romans like Justinian and then passed down to modern generations through the English Common Law.

No, we are not just talking about the history of law as a unique contribution of Jewish people to Western civilization. We are talking about an essential body of understood “oughtness” that is part of every human society, whether it is written down or not, whether it is called law or not, and whether it is divided into moral, ceremonial, and civil or not. Every human society has what is called a culture, and a culture is a structured, prescriptive, predictive reality. If you know the culture, you know what is going to happen at different times of the day, and even what is going to happen weekly, monthly, annually. Thousands of details of a society are embodied in what Dr. Buswell would refer to as culture, but what Hebrews would refer to as law, the Law.

So when the collision of the Greek way of life with Hebrew law and Jewish civilization took place in the ministry of the Apostle Paul, Paul realized that these two ways of life were relatively equal things. Paul could see that the Jews had their New Moons and Sabbaths and certain holidays and certain dietary regulations. Likewise, the Greeks had certain New Moons and holidays and dietary regulations. And they were equivalent systems. Of course, one might be better than the other in certain respects.

For example, the law of the Greeks favored, or at least allowed, homosexuality. This was totally forbidden in the Hebrew tradition. On the other hand, the Hebrew tradition and culture allowed for plural marriage. This practice was totally

disallowed by the Greeks. And so, there were clashes between these two civilizations.

Both of them were defective as cultures. Human cultures are always defective. The law of man and the Law of God are not quite the same. Man consistently puts down in law books and oral traditions systems of thought and conduct that are imperfect understandings of God’s purposes. Therefore, it is very, very important for God to get into the picture at some point. This is where the Bible comes to the fore. The Bible records God’s intervention in human society, and it allows us to stand in judgment on human customs and improve them.

For example, Abraham was immersed in a society where the sacrifice of the firstborn son was one of the highest expressions of devotion. God apparently expected him to be willing to match the performance and the standards and the expectations of that society. Abraham was up to it. God went along with this, and was willing for him to do this to prove his willingness for anything that God would have.

Only at the last minute did God intervene in human society and interrupt that particular feature of the culture—you could call it a law. It was a custom, it was an expectation, and it was a pattern. It was part of the cultural structure of the society. God intercepted that culture, changed it at that decisive point and said, “This is not going to happen.” A lamb was substituted for a human life. Human sacrifice ceased due to divine intervention in human culture. The human culture had no problem with human sacrifice; but God did. God was the Creator of those human beings subject to sacrifice, and He did not intend for them to be destroyed in that fashion.

So, we have all over the world human cultural structures that can be referred to as law.

Let’s take another example. One of the largest and strongest Christian movements in Southeast Asia is the Batak Christian movement. It was originally a large, strong tribe that became Christian all at the same time. This is a fascinating story. It is the story of a tribal group that had their own leadership structure, had their own way of thinking, and had their own decision-making processes intact. They decided that instead of being Muslims—which was the pressure coming down from the north of Sumatra—they would perhaps do something different. They did not want to be involved in the same religion as the next tribe to the north (which had already become Muslim).

So they went to the Christian missionaries, who happened to be German—representing both Lutheran and Reformed traditions.

(The word “Reformed,” in case you didn’t know it, refers specifically to Calvin in Geneva, not to Luther, even though he was certainly a Reformer. But Luther’s theological tradition is not usually called “Reformed”. Rightly or wrongly, that is the way church historians do it. The Calvinistic tradition is called the Reformed tradition, and the Lutheran tradition is called the Lutheran tradition, although they’re both “reformed” in the general sense.)

Anyway, the Lutheran and Reformed missionaries (who had quite radically different theological backgrounds, as we have already seen in terms of the difference between Luther’s and Calvin’s attitudes toward the Law) decided that by a rather complicated process they would allow this tribe to become Christian *as a group*. They required each family to start studying the Bible in a plan encompassing the entire tribe. They said this would lead up to baptism, and so forth.

One of the fascinating features in all this was what was called the *adat*. This was the law of their society. It was a well-formulated system of behavioral expectations and social structure. The missionaries were wise enough to realize that contextualization in that situation would allow them to accept that *adat* still intact. Not every feature of it was kept. The missionaries found some features of the culture to counteract, but they would not replace the entire legal structure with one that was Lutheran or Calvinistic or German or Latin or Greek or Hebrew.

Now, they could have done any of those things; some missionaries have done all of those at different times. Some missionaries who come from Germany feel the people have to learn German and study Luther’s extensive writings in order to be Christians. Some Americans would want other cultures to learn English; some Catholics might force them to learn Latin. Many Christians would say, “You’ve got to learn Greek,” because the New Testament is in Greek. But none of those answers is correct. Every people has a right to their own language and to their own legal structure.

For that reason, therefore, law is not just one subject in this course. It has to do with the very basic structure of human society. Yes, this subject that we are taking up in Kaiser lesson #7 is a very significant subject.

Kaiser specifically asked these questions that you have in your Study Guide. The moral law, in his opinion, is based upon the character of God. That is the answer to Question 1.

## 2. How did Jesus describe the distinctions in the Law?

Then, the second question is very puzzling, because all of these distinctions have some significance and some value. But Kaiser feels that Jesus’ description of the law is best characterized as the weightier matters of the law versus the lesser matters.

Of course, Kaiser himself goes on, as in Question 3, to distinguish between the moral, ceremonial, and civil dimensions. The moral law, as we’ve just seen, is based upon the holiness and the character—the attributes—of the Person of God. In my opinion, when Matthew records Jesus saying that “you must be perfect as my Father in heaven is perfect (Matt 5:48),” the word *perfect* means *mature*. It means, “Your character must pursue the character of God.” That is the true meaning of being a child of God, allowing our character to grow into the characteristics, all of the attributes—not just love, not just justice, not just holiness, but the whole character – of the Living God.

This means, then, that the ceremonial law is simply a pedagogical system. These are my terms. Kaiser thinks of this portion of the law as an elaborate sacrificial system in the event of man’s failure to meet the moral obligations. But it is also pedagogical: it is an instructive system, just as the rite of baptism is instructive. Baptism was originally a washing ceremony. Later it became characterized as a resurrection ceremony. But the ceremony did not give up the washing analogy; thus, it is kind of a confused picture.

We are not too surprised, then, that in some parts of the world a coffin is employed in which to baptize people— letting a person down into a coffin, covering it over, declaring the person dead in trespasses and sins, and then pulling the person out of the coffin, raised up in newness of life. Why? By the end of the New Testament, after the resurrection, there was a much more powerful metaphor to draw upon in terms of the meaning of baptism, than mere washing.

But the rite itself continued to be that of washing, which is also a very significant aspect of the impact of the life of the Holy Spirit in our lives. He cleans us, washes us free of guilt, and frees us up for whole-hearted obedience.

So the ceremonial law was not a corrupt, inadequate system that never worked. It was an inferior system to a much more powerful image, namely, the death of Jesus Christ. It was Christ who once for all replaced the offering of sacrifices

just as sacrifices in the Mosaic legislation replaced human sacrifice. So, you have a succession of a very defective human cultural tradition. The peoples and cultures of early history had been led by Satan to believe that human sacrifice was what God wanted. And God said, “No, let’s shift over to animal sacrifice.” Ultimately, God’s plan was to shift to the sacrifice of His own Son. Another type of law that we should discuss is called ‘civil law’. We all know what civil law is: we come to a red traffic light and we press on the brake. We are bowing to a civil, legal entity, which is again characteristic of a particular society. But behind the civil law is moral law. The reason to put the pedal on is not because you will get a ticket if you don’t but because you could kill somebody if you don’t. God does not want people killed. And if streets are going to cross on the same level without having a separation of levels so that one can go above and the other can go underneath, people could get killed. The moral law, then, implies and suggests a civil law. In another society, which might not have any streets that cross or vehicles that would damage or kill people, they would not need that law. So the civil law – as well as ceremonial law – is an interpretation, in a given situation, of the moral law.

Therefore, as Kaiser very perceptively points out, civil law has built-in obsolescence. Now this phrase itself is so powerful, so significant, that it really makes a great deal of difference to us. It means that we should not think (as a shallow interpreter of Luther, or a shallow interpreter of the Bible, like Marcion, might think) that the Law is passed away. The Bible does not declare that now we have no law at all but rather that the specific Hebraic interpretations and applications of the Law are no longer relevant. As a matter of fact, Gentile cultures contained rough equivalents to those things.

Paul spoke of the Law of Christ giving authority to other formulations of the will of God in cultural patterns different from the Hebraic patterns outlined in the Bible. He stoutly resisted the thought that the New Moons and the Sabbaths and all the ceremonial and civil procedures of a particular cultural tradition were universal.

Now, notice the significance of this kind of thinking for missionaries. Missionaries do not have to say to the cultures with which they work, “You will have to divide the congregation with a middle aisle and with a red carpet and go through all kinds of motions that we do in our own particular churches.” We should not be surprised that churches, fellowships of believers, would take many rather different forms.

Let us take, for example, two Christian traditions—the Plymouth Brethren and the Anglicans. The two traditions are very different in their interpretation of the Bible but are very similar in their insistence that the biblical forms are permanent and universal. Both traditions have read the Bible and come out with two very different ways of running a church service. Yet both of them claim that theirs is the absolutely original, formal, cultural equivalent of the Bible. But in the missionary sense, both of them are wrong.

By giving us both Semitic and Hellenistic cultures in which the revelation of God is incarnate, the Bible is trying to teach us that no culture—neither Greek nor Hebrew—is the only right one.

Seventh-Day Adventists feel most confident if they can somehow go back to conducting their churches in sync with ancient Hebrew culture. So they throw out anything Greek. They throw out the Christmas tree; they throw out Christmas, for that matter Seventh-Day Adventists feel that Christmas is originally a Roman pattern that was taken over by Christians as a way of compromising with the world. They would also throw out Easter, which was a Teutonic spring goddess festival that was taken over. Easter became part of the law, you might say, of the Anglo-Saxon Christians. This ceremony is part of the law, you might say, of evangelical Christendom. It is not Hebrew; it is not Greek; and it is not universal. Not every culture once worshipped the sun when it rose on the longest day of the year, which was the pattern in pre-Christian England with the worship of the spring goddess Eostre.

The word that I have not used up to now, and which I do not want to use, is the word ‘relative’. We are not saying that everything is relative. We are saying that everything can be contextualized. Equivalent functions—not different functions, but equivalent ones — with different forms in different places can constitute a new law and a different law.

Finally, we have returned to the main point of this lesson: it is not legitimate to contrast Law with Gospel. Law is to be contrasted with license, with anarchism. The word *anarchism* refers to a situation where there is no authority. That is very nearly what we have in America today. The multiplicity of cultural traditions and laws that originate from a variety of peoples, including Vietnamese and Hmong tribal people, Germans, Italians, English, Norwegians, Eskimos and everyone else, have left some people disillusioned and left searching desperately for meaning. Those who have been heavily affected by this extreme multiculturalism sense a kind of a total cultural

weightlessness, like an astronaut. There is no law, there is no culture, there is no structure that will tell them anything about anything. They do not even know how to get married because they do not know what pattern to follow.

We have talked already about the fact that in Genesis 2:24, the man married into the woman's family. We are not to interpret this as a universal requirement but as a functional and meaningful pattern. An equivalent pattern would be for the girl to marry into the boy's family, as you find in Teutonic culture. But what you do find in the Bible is that people always would marry into one of the two families. The Bible does not contain an example of a person marrying and not moving into one family or another, which is what happens in America today. The American pattern often produces a new, unstable, nuclear family that breaks down half of the time. This failed marriage pattern is why we have the world's highest divorce rate. We live in a lawless culture and society, and Western lawlessness is now being sprayed out over the world through technological and educational institutions, primarily the university tradition. This pattern is exceedingly dangerous and un-biblical. The Bible does not discard the Hebrew law because law is not necessary, but because Hebrew law was specific and parts of it had built-in obsolescence, as Kaiser points out.

So we reluctantly leave this topic, and yet we really will not be leaving it. It will be with us forever, this business of how the will of God comes to us. It is an absolutely basic subject.

### **3. What are the three uses of the law, and how are they to be understood?**

The discussion for this reflection question is not listed here because much of the discussion concerning the previous reflection questions is also relevant for question 3.