

# Abolishing the Law

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*It is he who is our peace, and who made the two of us one by breaking down the barrier of hostility that kept us apart. In his own flesh he abolished the law with its commands and precepts, to create in himself one new man from us who had been two and to make peace, reconciling both of us to God in one body through his cross, which put that enmity to death. (Eph. 2:14-16)*

The Mosaic Law was established by God as *the* way for God's people to live in peace and happiness. The Decalogue says essentially that this is possible only if the people are completely unified with God and with one another. However, over time, the Law, which was intended to clarify the righteous life that led to happiness and peace, became a legal code, which had obedience as its goal and which was protected by some—the Pharisees, for example—and withheld from others—the “sinners.” In addition, as the psalm says, the Law was given to no other nation by God except to the Jews, and so the Law was used as the basis for the Jews' seeing themselves as the “chosen people,” superior to other nations because God had spoken his Law directly to them.

So the Law had two effects: it gave the Jews as sense of cultural superiority—they alone were God's chosen—and it created a power structure within Jewish society, so that the elite had knowledge of, and access to, the word of God, while the commoners and sinners were excluded. The outcome, then, was that the Law's intended effect was defeated. As it was treated, the Law was no longer the Way to Peace and Happiness in society. It became a wedge, separating the Jews from other nations, and separating the elite within Jewish society from the disinherited. In these ways, the Law was rendered powerless to *save*. The Law, in the way that it was understood, could no longer unify all people with God and with one another, which is the only way to peace and happiness.

There is one more pertinent aspect of the Mosaic Law. Paul reflects that the Law demands such perfection of spirit—such righteousness—that no person can fulfill its demands. Therefore, the only effect of the Law among fallible humans is to point out to us our sinfulness. The Law shows us only where and how much we fail. It does not show us how to escape our sins and tend toward perfect righteousness—a righteousness that will lead us into perfect unity with God and with one another.

Therefore, as Paul reflects, the Law, as real human society uses it, obstructs the Divine intention that we all enter into union with God and with one another in order to find peace and happiness. It is therefore not the way toward fulfilling the Divine intention. Rather, Paul reflects, the fulfillment of the Divine intention is the Cross of Jesus. Paul says that since we cannot achieve righteousness by our own efforts to obey the Law, Jesus, the Divine Person who came among us as a human being, mapped out a different way. Jesus achieved the forgiveness of our sins against the Law by making the perfect sin offering—by giving up his own human life as the God/man, on a cross. In addition, Jesus offered to all people the opportunity to participate in that forgiveness and in the righteousness of Jesus, who is God himself. For us, knowing followers of Jesus, that way is Baptism, by which we “put on Christ” like a garment, covering our sinful selves and presenting ourselves to God in the splendid righteousness of Jesus. In doing this, we are graced to achieve—by accepting God's grace and cooperating with it—real union with God and with one another. This state we call the Mystical Body of Christ.

So, Jesus *fulfills* the Law, as the gospels say, in that he lived the Law perfectly—in complete union with God and in loving kindness toward the people with whom he interacted. But in addition, as Paul says to the Ephesians, Jesus also *abolished* the Law for us. We are so incapable of living up to the

Law and so prone to use it as an instrument of division rather than of unity, that it cannot fulfill its intended function. So Jesus set it aside, replacing it with the simple command to accept the grace of God by which we love God and love those around us—with the *agape* love of complete self surrender for the good of those around us.

Jesus calls *all* people (“this cup of the covenant, which is given for you and for *the many*,” which the colloquial, dynamic translation renders as “for you and for all,” embracing all human beings) to the way of peace by “putting on Christ” and living in his grace of unity and freedom. In doing so, Jesus offers an achievable way to fulfill the Divine intention—through our surrender to God and our willing acceptance of his grace (no matter what the costs), rather than through the old way of personal effort, which as Paul says, is futile because we cannot become righteous by our own energies.

Paul reflects in the passage from Ephesians quoted above that we have to give up simply “looking like” the People of God—circumcised, eating the right foods, obeying the Sabbath customs, speaking the preferred language, and all the other pieties and customs of Paul’s day and of our own. Instead, we have to really *become* the People of God, joined in love of God and of one another, not by our own efforts, but by our willing response to the forgiveness and love of God which he places in our hearts, through our clinging to the source and perfect expression of that love—the splendid, liberating, unifying Cross of Jesus.

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