

Doesn't Keeping the Law Keep Me Right with God?

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The Premise of the Law: There is a common misconception about why the Law (or Torah) was given. That misconception is that by keeping the Law the Jewish people merit righteousness before God. In other words, “We Jews don’t need salvation through your Messiah Jesus because we’re made holy by keeping the Law. After all, aren’t the Jews God’s chosen people? Weren’t we set above the other people of the world by God?” Close, but no bagel. As popular a

thought as this may be, it is without scriptural basis.

The Law of Moses is actually a conditional covenant, or agreement. Notice what God stated when the Law was given: “Now therefore if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you will be a special treasure to Me above all the people; for all the earth is mine” (Exodus 19:5).

We read the same idea in the reiteration of the Law: “And it shall come to pass, if you will listen diligently to the voice of the Lord your God, to observe and do all His commandments which I command you this day, then the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come on you, and overtake you, if you shall heed the voice of the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 28:1-2).

After this follows 12 verses of blessings. Once more the words “if” and “then” are emphasized. These words describe a conditional covenant or agreement. The phrase “conditional covenant” means that the benefits are only received when the conditions are met. For instance, if I said to my son, “if you clean your room, then I will give you a dollar”. If he didn’t clean his room, he could not expect to receive the payment. But what if he partially cleaned his room, would I be bound to pay him? If I wrote up the agreement the way that God wrote the Torah, I would still owe him nothing. You see, in the Deuteronomy portion above another word is highlighted, “all” (כֹּל, kol). In other words, God’s obligation to reward His people depends on them first obeying all His commandments. (It’s been determined there are 613 laws in the Jewish Scriptures.) Any expectation for rightful blessing under the Law is dependent upon our perfect obedience to the Law.

As if this is not clear enough, the Deuteronomy portion restates the same idea in the negative: “But it shall come to pass that if you will not heed the voice of the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you” (Deuteronomy 28:15). Then follows 53 verses of curses.

So what happens if there is imperfect obedience, if even one commandment is disobeyed? If you don't do "all" God legislated, then all the curses will come upon you. To those of us that see imperfect yet sincere effort as "good enough," this can seem shocking and even unfair: "How does God expect anyone to get blessed with that impossible standard? Doesn't He want to bless His people?"

The Purpose of the Law: The purpose of Torah is to demonstrate how holy God is and our desperate need for His mercy. Its purpose was never to reveal how good we are or how deserving we are of God's blessing. God had made an unconditional covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3 etc.). On the basis of the Abrahamic Covenant the Jewish people's existence and survival (and land) is guaranteed. But if we think such great promises demonstrate our worthiness rather than God's graciousness, God provided the Law to show us what we're really like (Deuteronomy 9:6 etc.). In the Law itself there are provisions for our moral failures (sins). That's why there is so much material on the sacrifices for sin (Leviticus 1-7 etc.), and the need for atonement, as in the Day of Atonement. A cursory, yet objective reading of the Scriptures makes it plain: the Law reveals our sinfulness not our righteousness. The Law is like a perfect mirror that can only reveal our flaws, but do nothing to improve them.

The Promise Beyond the Law: Not only can we not adequately keep the Law, but also the Law cannot keep us as a people, either. We are kept as a people (and even blessed) by God's mercy and gracious promises. When Israel's sin of the Golden Calf deserved God's utter destruction (Exodus 32:10), Moses didn't plead for their welfare on the basis of the Law he had just delivered, but on the basis of the gracious Abrahamic Covenant (Exodus 32:13).

The Law gave God the prerogative to judge His people by His objective, holy, legal standard. God wants His people to recognize His holiness, the evil of their sins, and absolute graciousness of His promises.

It would only be the Law in all of its holy demands upon Israel ("You shall be holy even as the Lord your God is holy," Leviticus 19:2) that would demonstrate Israel's constant need for mercy. This would prepare God's people for the coming of His ultimate demonstration of mercy, Messiah. God's Messiah would provide final atonement for sins through His own sacrifice: "He was bruised for our iniquity . . . The Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all . . . He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgressions of my people, to whom the judgment was due . . . He bore the sin of many" (Isaiah 53:5-6, 8, 12).

As we read the actual Scriptures, as opposed to the rabbinical traditions concerning the Law, we face a holy and yet loving God. Before Him we all fall morally short, but we also see One who has mercifully provided the promise of forgiveness and life to all who will trust in His Word, Individually as Jews, or corporately as Israel, it is the gracious promise of God that is our Hope. This promise is fulfilled in Yeshua HaMashiach (the Jewish way of saying Jesus the Messiah), even as the *New

Covenant proclaims: “. . . Him of whom Moses in the Law and the Prophets did write” (John 1:45; see also Jeremiah 31:31-34).