

“The ABCs of Faith: Law”  
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO  
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**Deuteronomy 26:16**

This very day the Lord your God is commanding you to observe these statutes and ordinances; so observe them diligently with all your heart and with all your soul.

**Matthew 5:17-20**

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

**Galatians 3:17-18**

My point is this: the law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise.

One of my favorite movies is *Prince of Egypt*, the animated story of Moses. I love the movie because of its energy, the beauty of its artistry, the art of the music that heightens the emotions of the story. I love the emphasis it puts on Moses discovering his true identity and then his purpose in leadership that God calls him to. All of these are perfectly fine reasons to love a movie. However, as much as I love it, I *cannot* love this movie for its *detailed* depiction of the Biblical story of Moses, for the simple fact that the movie conveniently skips over some details, and adds others that are not in the “original.” Like the fact that in the Bible, Moses is an 80-year-old man by the time he and Aaron approach Pharaoh, rather than the 20/30-something man he looks like in the movie. The movie also ignores the important Biblical observation that Moses had a speech impediment. So, while I still think the movie is wonderful and it’s still one of my favorites, I will *not* use it as my only source for Biblical information on Moses. The movie-makers had to interpret and re-work the story for their own purposes, as movie-

makers do all the time when re-working an original story. The interpretation is allowed, but a person shouldn't depend on it as the only source of information when it's only "based on a true story."

The thing is, we expect movies to take certain liberties with original stories, whether we like the end result or not. We *don't* usually expect those same liberties to have been taken in Biblical stories. But, that is exactly what happened. The stories that were recorded in the Bible are interpretations just like any movie, with the authors interpreting and re-working the story for their own purposes. It happened in the story of Moses *before* it was ever recorded in Exodus, it happened in the book of Deuteronomy, a second-telling of the Exodus laws, and it happened in the gospel account of Jesus' life and teachings. Everything is an interpretation written from specific perspectives, with specific purposes in mind.

With that in mind, this morning I want to re-look at one of the things in our Christian religion that has been interpreted and re-interpreted and used and mis-used and debated and argued over for thousands of years – for this "ABCs of Faith" sermon series, the letter "L" is for "Law." And I want to think about an important question – What is the Christian relationship to Old Testament Law?

What is the Christian relationship to the Old Testament Law? That's a pretty big topic, and as I said, something that has been debated and interpreted for thousands of years. So, I will do my best to summarize, and keep it simple. ☺

The topic *does* require a little background, though, a little teaching on what the "law" is in the first place.

What most Christians call the Old Testament is the exact same content as the Hebrew Bible, but usually in a different order. I often call the Old Testament the Hebrew Bible in order to honor this fact and keep it in mind as I read it.

The first five books that we have – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – are also the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible, and together are called the Torah, which in Hebrew translates to Instruction or Teachings. I originally thought that Torah just means “Law,” but it actually includes more than that. You know the Creation story, the story of Noah, the story of Moses, the stories of the Exodus, Abraham, Jacob and Esau. All of these stories are in the Torah. It contains many of the stories that we most often teach in Sunday School. And, these five books *also* contain the Hebrew Law. So “Torah” should be thought of as “Instruction” instead of just “Law” – the idea is that the law *and* stories give instruction for the proper norms of living and the relationship between God and the world. These books are always first in the Bible, both Christian and Hebrew – they have the place of honor, the foundation of the rest of the Bible both chronologically and thematically.

So what *is* Hebrew Law? Jewish tradition names 613 laws from the Torah; some are the very specific ones you might have heard, especially from Leviticus and Exodus, like the law to rest on the seventh day, or the Sabbath, and not to plant diverse seeds together. There are laws such as do not embarrass others, and do not oppress the weak. These laws, including the 10 commandments that Christians are more familiar with, instructed the Israelites on **how to live in relationship with each other, the earth, and**

**with God. Again, the purpose of the laws is to instruct on how to live in relationship with each other, the earth, and with God.**

Today, *practice* of the Hebrew law looks different for individual Jews and communities, just like with Christian practices. Just like the Christian faith, Jewish faith has had a long, long tradition of interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, both ancient interpretation and modern interpretation. The modern practice of the Jewish faith is divided up into different forms of practice and belief, just like we have hundreds of Christian denominations. To emphasize – there is no *one* understanding of the Law, even in Judaism, and it would be wrong for Christians to generalize one belief for all Jews.

That’s a very tiny portion of some background. Now, what does all of this mean for us? We’re Christian, not Jewish. We don’t follow Jewish law.

However, we actually *do* practice Jewish law. And **we can be reminded of our purpose in this world by reminding ourselves of the foundations of our religion – the law set forth in Hebrew scripture.** Christians can be better Christians by remembering our foundations.

Think of a building. This building is beautiful and strong, and has a *very* solid foundation, one built with care to withstand floods, earthquakes, and to support the structures above it. But it’s not *just* a foundation – a beautiful, strong, first floor has been built on top of that foundation, complete with everything a building should be. This building represents Judaism. It is not just a strong foundation for something else, but is a *complete* building. Then, centuries later, a carpenter comes who learned his trade in that building – he studied, and practiced with mentors; his life was built in that building. This

carpenter leads the way in adding on a *second* story. The foundation and first floor are still there, still creating the framework for this addition. Now, the building fits more people. More students can learn and practice and build their lives in that building. This second story represents Christianity. It turns out that both of these levels of the building have the same purpose, and so one is just an extension of the other; they are united in the same structure, and belong in the same building. The old building was not torn down to make way for something new; a second story was simply added on. And, it turns out that not only do these two levels have the same purpose, they also have the same architect. For both Judaism and Christianity, God is the architect. On both levels, God has designed the building to be a place for God's beloved people to learn how to relate to each other, the earth, and God. Not only Jews have a covenant with God, but non-Jews, or Gentiles, are part of the covenant, too.

You see, God's relationship with Israelites, with Jews, was built through *covenants*. For Jews and Christians, "covenant" is a very important term. The original covenant was made with Adam, and others follow made with Noah, then Abraham, then Moses, Aaron, and David. Then, we have what we talk about as the "new covenant" in Christ. Unfortunately, *that's* where things usually start to get tricky when Christians start thinking about what the relationship is between the New Covenant with Christ and the older foundational covenants in the Hebrew Bible.

Many many Christians have believed that the new covenant *replaced* the older covenants, so that Jews who did not have faith in Christ would not be acknowledged by God. But, look back at the scripture from Galatians. Paul, speaking of the covenant made with Abraham, says, "the law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not

annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.” The Abraham covenant was not nullified because a new covenant was made with the law 430 years later. In the same way, the covenant with Gentiles, or non-Jews, given with Jesus *does NOT* replace God’s previous covenants with the Jewish people.

Back to our original question – what *is* the Christian relationship to the Old Testament Law?

Jewish tradition holds very sacred what in Hebrew is called the *Shema* – the text that is written on the front of your bulletin, from the book of Deuteronomy. The Shema is what Jesus quotes as the Greatest Commandment, along with the second greatest, which is found in the book of Leviticus – love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus’ summary, and even many of his practices, would not actually have been seen as radical in his time. The Pharisees might have been looking for ways to judge him, but they actually found very little to fault him for within their own understanding of practicing the Law. Jesus *did not* oppose Jewish Law, but practiced it faithfully, interpreting it just like all Jews must.

It is that basis of Law that Christians, like Jews, like Christ, practice as well. One of my friends had office hours with a Hebrew Bible professor once, and the professor asked him “How do you know who God is and how God wants you to live?” As a Christian, he answered something to the effect of “through Christ’s example and teachings.” The professor responded, “That’s great. Rabbis on the other hand answer that question with the laws. We know who God is by who God asks for us to be on Sinai [in other words, in the Law] in order to be in relationship with God.”

For many Jewish practitioners, the purpose of their lives is work towards the concept of the “repair of the world” – in other words, doing things that make you a better

human, and that bring humankind to a better level. The Law is what helps them do that, especially those simple commandments from the Shema and from Leviticus – love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. *Practicing* these commandments is a means of helping to perfect the world, making the world a better place.

Our roots, our foundations of Judaism, have been centered in this idea in each covenant, each time God solidified God's relationship with us throughout our narrative. It is not something new that Jesus thought of, and not something that is radically Christian. Instead, it is a commandment, a law, that God gave to Gentiles in addition to Jews. As Christians, if we forget this foundation, we are forgetting the origins of our purpose. Hebrew Law is valid for us, too. Christians can be better Christians by remembering our foundations. We are part of a beautiful, strong building, Judaism and Christianity, with one purpose – to teach us how to be in relationship with each other, with the world, and with our God. Love God with everything you have, and love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law.

Amen.