

Clarifying on The Law of Christ

Charles Leiter *Interview*

Question: Why is the topic of the law of Christ important to understand?

Charles: Well, first of all, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9, he says speaking of the Jews, he says to the Jews I became as a Jew, to those who under the law as under the law. And then he immediately says though not being myself under the law. So he's saying that he's not under the Law of Moses. And then he goes on and he says concerning the Gentiles, to those who are without law - that is, those without the Bible, without the law of Moses, I became as one without law. So immediately you have the thought, well, he became as one without law. Did he just become totally lawless? Immoral? And he immediately corrects that. He says though not without the law of God, but under the law or in law to Christ. So he mentions that his standard there is the law of Christ. Another question comes up for Christians. You'd have the question of what is my standard? What is my rule of duty? And Paul immediately says it's the law of Christ. And so the question comes up, what is the law of Christ? And why haven't we been taught about the law of Christ? Can I articulate what's the really big things for me to keep in mind as a Christian? What is the standard that the Lord Jesus Himself put forth as being the ultimate thing for me to remember? The guideposts?

So, immediately we're faced with that question - the law of Christ. This works itself out in many areas. He said to those who are under the law, I became like one under the law. (incomplete thought) We even find him in the book of Acts taking a vow and shaving his head, so he's trying to reach the Jews who are under the law, but he says though not being myself under the law. So that was something he voluntarily did, but it was not required of him. So, a lot of questions begin to come up. And as soon as you become a Christian, you face this question of: how do I understand the Old Testament? I see these verses about homosexuality as an abomination to God, but then there's another verse that says eating pork is an abomination to God. And how am I to sort through all this? Tattoos - tattoos are mentioned. But right next to the verse about tattoos is "you shall not harm the edges of your beard." So shaving your beard...

So it's a very practical thing. How do Christians relate to the law of Moses? How do we sort through all that? So these are things that the book deals with. What is the law of Christ? What is the Christian's relationship to the law of Moses? How are we to understand all that? They're very practical issues. I might just say a little bit more. Some people, they have the idea that the ceremonial laws as they're called, as we call them now as Christians, they have the idea that those are sort of

like health food laws from God or health laws from God. And they kind of have in the back of their mind, well, it's bad for you to eat pork, for example. And some people don't eat pork. And they kind of have in their mind that that's biblical. That's more biblical if I don't eat pork than if I do. So there's divisions that come up between Christians. And those can be more or less extreme depending. All of those things are very practical issues. It keeps on going clear into areas of Christians being involved in war and there's all kinds of questions that come up about God commanding Samuel to hew Agag to pieces. And commanding the children of Israel to spare neither man, woman, or child. All of those things we have to try to begin to work through when you become a Christian. So it's a very practical area.

Question: What would your response be to those who might accuse you based upon the teachings in the book that you deny God's moral law?

Charles: Well, of course, the statement that you've denied God's moral law, that comes from the idea that the Ten Commandments are the moral law of God. And of course, in the book what I'm presenting is that Christ is our standard; that He represents a much higher standard than the Ten Commandments. We can see that in several areas. For example, the Ten Commandments say, "you shall not commit adultery," but yet men were allowed to marry multiple wives. King David had multiple wives. Solomon not only had multiple wives but concubines. And that was not considered adultery, but when David committed adultery with Bathsheba, that was treated in an entirely different way. It was totally different than him taking multiple wives. So, what that means is that the definition even of adultery under the Ten Commandments was a looser definition - more permissive, not as high of a standard as we have in the New Testament. Also, the Ten Commandments acknowledged or recognized the validity of slavery. And if we look at the kind of slavery, the standards of slavery; that God gave those different regulations of slavery in the Mosaic law, one of the examples is that you could beat your slave. If he lived longer than 3 days, then there wasn't guilt associated with that. Well, that's a much lower standard than to love others as Christ loved us. And so, it's not to say that the law of Moses was imperfect in any way. There was not one dot in the law of Moses that was not perfect. It was exactly right for the situation that it was in. But it's the same way with the commandment about divorce. Jesus said because of the hardness of your heart, Moses permitted that. The law of Moses had that written in, and it was basically a protection of women. There were many things like that where God in giving these laws, they were wonderful laws. No other nation had such laws as the nation of Israel. And God says they'll look at you and they'll see what a wise and discerning people and what great laws God has given you. And that was true. And all you have to do is compare the law of Moses with the code of Hammurabi and you can see how superior it was. But God was

dealing with them on the level that they were in some way. And He's pulling people up out of a culture that's totally corrupt and preparing them more and more for the coming of the Messiah. (Incomplete thought) If you say the Ten Commandments are the moral law, then what that means is there's nothing higher than this. This is the highest thing there is. So what it means is there can be no greater revelation of man's duty than what we see in the Ten Commandments. And the life of the Lord Jesus and His commandments and the commandments of the apostles - all those things are simply viewed as footnotes to the Ten Commandments. And so if you read a lot of reformed theology, there's hundreds of pages written on the Ten Commandments trying to show that all the commandments of the New Testament are really there in the Ten Commandments. But if you look at, for example, "you shall not commit adultery," that's a much lower standard than, "husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church." We have a much higher revelation of duty and of law. Law in an expression of the character of God. And so it spells out for us what our standard is to be. The standard of loving your wife as Christ loved the church is a much higher standard, and it gives us a clearer picture of God's character than what you would see in the negative commandment: "you shall not commit adultery." I don't know, maybe there's more that I could say on this. Here's another problem.

First of all, the Bible does not divide the law into parts. It doesn't divide it into the civil, the ceremonial, and the moral. That's something that basically the reformers followed Aquinas in that. And it's a helpful distinction for Christians because as Christians, we can look back and we can pretty much sort out, this is ceremonial, this is civil. For example, a civil commandment would be what type of penalty is attached to adultery. Well, the death penalty was attached to it. That's a civil thing. Ceremonial - well, circumcision. But the problem is, how is that I know that circumcision is a ceremonial law? Well, I know it because Paul says in the New Testament circumcision is nothing. And no Jew would have ever said circumcision is nothing. In fact, if you wouldn't be circumcised, you'd be cut off from Israel. And Moses just about died because he delayed circumcision. His wife didn't like that idea. And you can see why. It's a bloody thing. But this was the sign of the covenant with Abraham. And to break that commandment was very serious. They would never have said this is just a light thing; it's nothing. And Paul says it's nothing. So when you say, well, why does a civil/ceremonial/ moral distinction work as well as it does? Well, the reason it works as well as it does is that as Christians, we have that perspective and we can look back and look at those things through the lens of the New Testament. That's the first point. Those distinctions are not made. So when Paul talks about the law, for example, he almost always has in mind the Mosaic covenant; the old covenant. For example, he says, the law entered that sin

might increase. Or he says until the law, sin was in the world. Death reigned from Adam to Moses. That's when he's talking about the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai. So, law is viewed as a unit - the Mosaic law, the Mosaic covenant. So when Paul says we're not under law, he means that whole thing. And when you get the civil/ceremonial/moral distinction in your mind and you practice it a little bit, you find yourself unconsciously reading into it.

For example, "sin shall not have dominion over you, for you're not under the law, but under grace." And people read into it immediately in their mind. Well, I'm not under the condemnation of the law. I'm not under the ceremonial law. They'll read something like that into it, but Paul does not do that. In fact, he immediately says, what then? Shall we sin because we're not under the law? So he's thinking of moral things there. And he's thinking of the whole thing. So there's never this division that we make. All the law is viewed as a unit. So, there's all kinds of things wrong with the idea that you divide it all up. And the biggest thing wrong with it is that some commandments, we can't figure out whether they're partly moral or partly ceremonial or partly civil. There's a mixture. And back on the Ten Commandments, if you say they are the moral law, then what you're saying is these are the ten greatest, most important things for all mankind. They're binding on the Gentiles as well as the Jews for all time. So these are the big things. Well, concerning Sabbath keeping, right now, for example, I myself do not believe that the 4th commandment is enjoined upon Christians and somehow now we keep the Sabbath on a different day even though there's no commandment to do that, and that we don't keep it the same way that the Jews did even though there's no commandment about that. You know, all these things have to be added in. Well, if I don't believe that way; if I don't "keep" the Sabbath, and this is on par with adultery or stealing or murder, then you can't say this is a Romans 14 issue or you're welcome to be in our church or whatever even though we don't believe that. What you have to say is is that you're not a Christian. Just as we would say if a man was an adulterer or a murderer, and he continued on in that in an unrepentant state. So, it's a very inconsistent position to say this is the moral law, and then to say, well, we differ on this, but you can be part of our church. It's one way or the other. You can't have it be sort of a moral law. So the problem with that is that there are many inconsistencies in that.

Question: So as far as those who say that you deny God's moral law?

Charles: There's no possible way. If you put Christ as your standard, there's no way you could be denying the moral law. Because He is the highest revelation of moral law that there is. Usually what they're thinking there is that you don't believe that the Christian is under the 4th commandment of the Decalogue. And I would say that the Christian is not under any of the commandments of the

Decalogue. We fulfill all those and far beyond. If you love your wife as Christ loved the church, you're doing far more than: "Thou shalt not commit adultery." All those things - even the Sabbath commandment the Christian fulfills in its deepest meaning which had to do with resting in Christ and ceasing from our own works and so on. We don't deny any of the moral law. That's never an issue. If you had a group of people that were just like Christ, you wouldn't have to worry about any of them denying the moral law. They would be perfect fulfillments of it. But even in the Lord's life, He broke the Sabbath on some occasions. So, I can talk about a little if you want. I don't know if you had another question on that, or if I've said enough on this.

Question: So what is the most misunderstood aspect of your position and could you clarify on it and why is it misunderstood?

Charles: I think probably the most misunderstood aspect would be for people to have in their head that somehow I'm saying that holiness is not necessary for a Christian; that a Christian shouldn't be concerned about holiness. And of course, I'm saying the opposite throughout, that Christ is the higher standard, and that the Christian should be like Christ.

The only explanation that I could have for why that would be misunderstood is that people so revere their reformed tradition and the things that they've been taught that they don't listen to what's actually being said. In fact, a lot of times, they're not even willing to listen at all because they have in their mind: this must be heresy. I've had similar things in my own life whenever I was a new Christian, I'd hear some term and I'd think that must be the worst heresy around. I'd find out ten years later that it was true. And so I think that's probably the reason that people don't allow themselves to listen. In fact, they either would not make it through a sermon, really give it an opportunity to hear what's being said, or they wouldn't make it through the book. They'd put it down. They didn't like to even think about that possibility.

In my own testimony, I'd been a Christian for over 20 years. I look back at this as to the time where the transition really took place, and it had been over 20 years that I'd been a Christian, and a lot of the things that began to make me change my mind were things that I already knew, but it was like they hadn't had their full impact in my life. (Incomplete thought) The situation where things began to change, I was speaking through the Gospel of John in a series and I got to John 5 and the verses about how Jesus was breaking the Sabbath and how He defended His position: "My Father works until now and I work." And in the course of that, I began teaching the people the different views and so on and it began to dawn on me that the early church specifically said we do not keep the Sabbath. And the fact was that they worshiped early in the morning - the Gentile converts worshiped

early in the morning. And of course, when they said, we don't keep the Sabbath, they meant Saturday. We're not resting on Saturday. But the Lord's Day - they said The Lord's Day we give to joy. So they worshiped early in the morning, and then they went to work all day. And sometimes they met again at night. So what other commandment would there be where we would say, well, you know, a man's got to do what a man's got to do? You've got to break one of the ten greatest moral laws of God because otherwise you'll get in trouble with your boss or whatever. No one would ever say that, and yet they went to work on the Lord's Day. And so that began to dawn on me. John 5 there also where it says for this cause, the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but was calling God His own Father making Himself equal with God.

One time I had a discussion with some Jehovah's Witnesses. And I brought up that passage. He was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. They said well that was what the Jews said; that's not what He was actually doing. And I pointed out, no, this is what John said He was doing. That He was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. And later it dawned on me that it was also John who was saying He was breaking the Sabbath. So what about this thing of Jesus breaking the Sabbath? That was very difficult for me to accept because I always had in my mind that He kept the Mosaic law in the letter of the Mosaic law. And I began to see that actually He broke it a lot. But He broke it in a way - not of someone who is less than, but someone who is sailing over it; He's magisterial in His approach. So He's touching lepers. You're not supposed to touch a leper. He touches them and instead of Him becoming unclean, they become clean. And it's just glorious stuff. They come and they say why are Your disciples doing what's not lawful on the Sabbath? And He doesn't say it is lawful. He says don't you see the priests in the temple, they break the Sabbath in order to serve the temple. What's that mean? Well, they're in there working and slaving away on the Sabbath. But then He says, something greater than the temple is here. So He's saying My disciples are breaking the Sabbath in their service to Me, but I'm so much higher than the temple that the Sabbath takes subservience to Me. And then He goes and says the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. And so, He was breaking the Sabbath. They were breaking the Sabbath. But He was keeping on the highest level, He was keeping love to God and love to your fellow man. And those two commandments are sufficient to totally fulfill man's obligation to God. A certain scribe came to Jesus and said what must I do to have eternal life? If you want to lay out the highest, if you want to talk about moral law, and the highest standard imaginable, (Incomplete thought). Jesus said what do you read in the law? What's it say? How does it read to you? And this guy must have been brilliant. He said well, two things - love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your

neighbor as yourself. And Jesus didn't say, well, no, there's a lot more than that. You've got 613 commandments. He said you've answered correctly. You do those two things and you'll have eternal life. "Do this and you shall live," and He quotes from Leviticus. And that's what Jesus did. And that's how He earned, merited righteousness for us. And Romans 5, we receive the gift of righteousness. It's His righteousness. Our sins are imputed to Him. He gets the curse that we deserve. His righteousness, His perfect fulfillment of the law, His merit is imputed to us and we get the blessing that He deserves. I kind of like to think of it like a time card. You know Paul says not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law. Well, there's the idea that if you keep the law, it will be righteousness unto you, and you'll live because of that righteousness. In other words, you fulfill it perfectly, you get its reward. He that does those things shall live. And Paul says I don't have any righteousness of my own. But Christ did have righteousness. He perfectly fulfilled everything. And so He made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. And when you think of a time card, you go in every day, you punch your card. At the end of the week, you've got this card that has all these times on there. You fulfill your time. You put in your time. You're entitled to a reward. And that's what Christ gives us is His time card; His righteousness that He's earned; that title to eternal life.

Question: So as you study John 5 and these things, is that when your position started to change?

Charles: Yeah, what happened was I actually left that series and I've told people that I didn't come back until a year later, but it was actually over two years later. And I came back to John 5 a couple years later and took up again. And I had already prepared a standard message on the Sabbath. It was already ready, and I couldn't give it. And so the next morning, I don't remember what I gave, but I gave something entirely different. And another thing, I began to realize that all of my studies - all the theology and everything that I had read was from a couple centuries of church history. And I'm sometimes asked, this new covenant theology, it's a new thing and that's dangerous, which I agree with totally. But my response to that is that covenant theology is the new thing in terms of church history. You look at that and John Murray has a history of covenant theology and goes into where it really began to be developed. It's not the idea that covenant theology is some thing that's existed since the 1st century. A lot of people have that in their mind because that's all they've ever heard. And I had the standard view. I had those books about how the day has been changed and the Sabbath has been preserved and all of those things to try to explain how you could have the 4th commandment shift over. The early church, in church history, they never viewed the Lord's Day as fulfilling the 4th commandment until much later, like 700 years

later. And so, the idea that we're under the Ten Commandments and the Ten Commandments - the 4th commandment we fulfill on the Lord's Day, even when they began resting on the Lord's Day, when Constantine made it a legal holiday, he called it the Venerable Day of the Sun. And made that a legal holiday when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. And so they began having the day off, but even then, it wasn't thought of as we're fulfilling the 4th commandment. Those are things that came later.

Question: When you changed your views, did anyone cut their relationship off with you?

Charles: No, not at that time. A lot of these things were things that under the surface bother you as to how does this fit? How does that fit? But it never came down with real weight on me where I really saw that this is so inconsistent. It's like it kind of fell apart.

Question: Did you at any point have a shift to where the Scriptures had a greater emphasis on your life in comparison with church history and confessions?

Charles: I never was affected a lot by the confessions as much as I was affected by men that I admired theologically. And covenant theology has a lot of really good things. One of the dangers - and I don't want to identify myself with new covenant theology either, because I feel like there's extremes and errors - I may talk about that.

James: That would be good to hear what some of those errors are.

Charles: Well, covenant theology is founded on the idea that there are two basic covenants: a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. And the covenant of grace is this super-historical or a-historical thing that unifies this overarching covenant of grace. The Bible never talks about "the covenant of grace." And when the Bible talks about covenants, it's covenants that are made in time with specific people. And so this is a theological construction. And what happens when you bring in "the covenant of grace," - the theological construction - then you say, well, the Mosaic covenant was one administration of the covenant of grace. The new covenant is a different administration of the covenant of grace. And so you end up saying that the Mosaic covenant was a gracious covenant and basically similar to the new covenant. Rather than, contrasting. Paul says the opposite. He says the law was not of faith. He says the law has to do with works. The principle of law is: do this and you shall live. And so the Mosaic covenant was very gracious in that it had a gracious purpose and it was part of God bringing them toward the Messiah. But to say that the covenant itself was gracious misrepresents. It's not at all what Paul said about it. The Mosaic covenant represents this principle of blessing and curse. You have those there in Deuteronomy. Verse after verse after verse about all these curses: If you don't do... If you disobey... Curse, cursed, cursed, cursed. If you obey,

blessed, blessed, blessed. And those things had to do with temporal blessings - life in the land, living along in the land and being blessed, having rain from heaven and all those things, victory over your enemies. But that represented a legal principle that is true in the realm of eternal life. And the way we know that for sure is whenever they ask Jesus what must I do to have eternal life? He went back and talked about things out of the law. And those were representative, like loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; loving your neighbor as yourself. That was a principle there that if you did that, you would have eternal life. Do this and you will live. And Paul does the same thing. He talks about this curse of the law. Well, the curse of the law ultimately it was not being kicked out of the land, but it was eternal punishment. And Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law. The Mosaic covenant is a legal covenant of works. Initially of works that they could do to remain in the land or not do. But then representing a deeper meaning of works in terms of meriting eternal life or not, and of course, no one ever did that for a moment. Except for the Lord Jesus Christ. That's covenant theology.

Let me say a little more. Covenant theology makes too little of a discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. It sees too little of a shift. And so you have men like B.B. Warfield saying God put children in the church in the days of Abraham. It's a total anachronism - it's from back here. And a lot of covenant people view Old Testament Israel as basically the same as the church. And you have John Stott getting up and rebuking Martyn Lloyd-Jones in 1966. Rebuking him basically. Lloyd-Jones was calling people to come out of these apostate churches. And he said, "Dr. Lloyd-Jones, both history and the Bible are against you. The remnant is not outside the church. The remnant is within the church." In other words, this remnant is believers. And "the church" is this big apostate mass like Anglicanism is where you can have an archbishop that denies the Bible and the virgin birth. So that's what he views as the church. And the remnant is inside - this little group of believers and they're supposed to stay in. Well, of course, the logic of that is that the reformation should never have happened. They should have stayed in the Catholic - "the church" - the Catholic church. And the remnant should have stayed inside there. And lo and behold, that's what happened. There was this shift and those men that believed that way there was a shift back towards Catholicism, both by John Stott and by J.I. Packer. So, in covenant theology, there tends to be this too little distinction made between the two covenants and too little of a contrast and too little of a break.

In dispensationalism, it's the opposite problem. There's too many breaks and there's no continuity. And in the old dispensationalism, like with the original Scofield Bible, basically almost taught that they were saved by lawkeeping in the

old covenant. And many wrong views there. Not enough continuity particularly between true believers in the Old and in the New.

New covenant theology is closer to the truth on all of it, and of course, that's what my position would be categorized as. But the problems with it if you just identify yourself with that, there's a lot of things that I feel like sometimes they tend to react too much to covenant theology. There's many wonderful things in covenant theology and wonderful theologians that have taken those positions. If we study through in our men's theology time on Saturday mornings, if we study through a systematic theology, we're going to get one of these guys that is a really good covenant theologian because they're just better. But that doesn't make them infallible. And there are certain areas where you get into certain areas of their teaching, and they're floundering and pulling things out of the air. But other areas, they're very, very good. It's possible to overreact. That's the biggest danger I would say about new covenant theology.

All of these things, we say that we're always reforming, but as long as you don't change anything. You're always reforming as long as you stick to whatever's accepted. And there's always a danger in trying to come up with a better definition of something or a little closer to the Bible. There's always danger there. That's what happened when Luther stood before the emperor. And the emperor said, "a thousand years of church history can not be wrong and one monk be right." Well, he had a great argument. The only trouble is he was wrong. A thousand years of church history was wrong. He had a wrong view of the church. That was the problem.

Question: So in regards to those who would label themselves as new covenant theology, where do they take things too far to an extreme?

Charles: Well, one example is that some have denied the idea of Christ's righteousness being imputed. Some have denied that Christ merited eternal life by His positive obedience to God's law. They say that the Bible only talks about the death of Christ and not about His life and not about what's called His active obedience. I think those things go too far. In that area for example, we have Paul specifically talks about through the obedience of the one, the many are made righteous. And I think he's talking about more than just the cross. It's this whole righteous life viewed as a unit. And it says that we receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness. That's very clear there. We receive a gift of righteousness. That would be one area.

Question: If they hold to that position, what does that lead to?

Charles: Well, if you lose the imputation of righteousness, to me, that's a very big thing. If you lose the fact that we're saved not only by Christ's death, but by His obedience. I had one dear brother say to me Jesus could have died when He

was an infant and it would have put away our sins. I don't think we see that at all in Scripture. Righteousness and testedness is something that cannot be concreted, that is, you cannot be created with testedness. That'd be like faking it. That's like God creating a tree that's already old and has rings. And it has a fake history. He had to pass through, He had to go through; He learned obedience through the things which He suffered.