

Rich Ruler pt.2 The Role of the Law

Following Jesus to the Cross: Part 13
Mark 10:17-27 Pt.2 (Mt.19:16-30, Lk.18:18-30) 3/2/2020

Introduction

In the message on the rich young ruler, there were some points I didn't have time for that I'd like to cover. First, I want to explain a little further about the role of the law.

Why Perfection is Required

If you want to be justified by the law, you have to keep it perfectly.

Galatian 3:10-12 All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." 11 Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith."

Why is it that God requires perfection of imperfect beings? Why does he make it so hard? We read the Sermon on the Mount and find out that if you get angry you've committed murder, if you so much as look in order to lust you've committed adultery, etc. And if you hear all that and think, *Those examples are such minor infractions*, you're thinking exactly like the rich young ruler. What makes those examples minor? The only thing that could possibly make them minor is if your standard is set by the average sinful person. But Jesus already started this conversation by letting us know that we're not talking about goodness compared to other people. We're talking about goodness compared to God. James says if you keep the whole law but stumble at just one point, you're guilty of breaking all of it. It's not like bowling, where you can knock a few down and leave the rest standing. Breaking God's law is more like putting a brick through a picture window. One brick breaks the whole thing.

Sin is Adultery

And that would be obvious to us if we understood what sin is. It's adultery against God. It's any time you love something in the world more than you love God. It's a relational offense, not just a violation of a code. Imagine a wife is upset at her husband for committing adultery, and he says, "What are you so upset about? Sure, I slept with that woman, but not with that other woman. I didn't sleep with her or her or her. I didn't fall in love with hardly any of those other women—just two or three, that's it!" Is the wife going to say, "Oh well, I guess 7 out of 10 aint bad"? No. You commit adultery with just one other woman and you shatter the covenant.

Marriage exists to teach us what it's like between us and God. And what have you and I done? Did we love something in this world more than God just two or three times? Just a handful of instances of adultery? No. It would be in the thousands just in recent months. We're a lot closer to breaking all of God's laws than breaking none of them.

Not Fair?

Someone says, "But it's not fair! How can God require something of us that isn't even possible?" Think of it this way. Suppose you have a 1 year old, and you want to take the child to Dairy Queen. You're more than willing to pick the child up, put him in a car seat, and take him to Dairy Queen. But the child wants to do it another way. He wants to go on his own.

So he says, "Mom, what must I do to get to Dairy Queen."

"I'll take you there."

"No! I want to do it on my own. What must I do?"

“Well, you’d have to walk out the door, and—” “Mom! You know I can’t walk. Why are you making this impossible for me?”

Is that mom being cruel? No. Is she making it impossible? No. The child is making it impossible by insisting that he get there some other way besides being carried. God says, “I’ll carry you to heaven if you want,” and we say, “No! I want to get there on my own.” Jesus says, “Ok, then, you’d have to keep the whole law, perfectly.”

“Why are you making it impossible?” It’s only impossible if we insist on doing it in an impossible way. But if we will receive it like little children, then it’s very possible.

But at this point in the conversation, you’re a little concerned that your child is a little confused about what he is—a child. So you put your hands on your hips and say, “Go to Dairy Queen.”

He gives it a few tries, but can’t even stand on his feet, much less walk. So he starts crying and says, “I can’t!”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m a baby.”

“Ah, bingo. Now you understand. So how are you going to get to Dairy Queen?”

“Mom, will you take me?”

The Role of the Law

That’s what Jesus was doing with the rich young ruler in v.19.

Mark 10:19 You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.' "

Implication: Keep God’s law and you’ll get eternal life. In fact, in Matthew’s account, Jesus says that explicitly.

Matthew 19:17 "... If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."

The Condemning Ministry of the Law]

If this guy makes an honest attempt to do that, he’ll end up going through exactly what Paul went through in Romans 7. Paul had been using the law to justify himself, he had dumbed down the law enough to where he could keep it all, and he was convinced he was a good person.

Romans 7:9 Once I was alive apart from law.

You can put the word “alive” in quotes. Before the law went to work on me, I thought I was alive—cruising along just fine.¹ He was killin’ it as a pious Jew—morally good, righteous as they come. But then the law of God rolled up its sleeves and went to work on Paul—specifically the 10th commandment: thou shalt not covet.

Romans 7:7 ... I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." 8 But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. 9 ... the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. 10 I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. 11 For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

13 ... in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

¹ For a description of that period of his life see Php.3:5.

Romans 3:20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

Paul's eyes were opened to how deep-reaching that one law was, and he tried to keep it well enough to justify himself (to make him a good person), and the more he tried, the worse it got. That's that whole passage where he says, "The things I want to do, I don't do, but what I don't want to do, I keep doing." Then finally he just throws up his hands and says, "

Romans 7:24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God-- through Jesus Christ our Lord!

That's what the law of God is supposed to do in the heart of an unbeliever. It makes demands, you try to make yourself a good person by meeting those demands, the more you try that the more condemned you feel, until finally you have no other recourse but to run to Christ and beg for mercy and forgiveness. That's the condemning function of the law. That's how the law breaks pride and brings a person to the point of child-like trust that can do nothing but reach its arms out to God and say, "I'm hopeless. Rescue me."

Galatians 3:24 So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.

Not the Only Purpose

But that's not the only purpose of God's law. Remember, it was intended to bring life (Ro.7:10). There is a kind of lawkeeping that gives life. This isn't the only time when Jesus gave this answer.

Luke 10:25 ... an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" [same question] 26 "What is written in the Law?" he replied. ... [same answer] 27 He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" 28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

There is a kind of lawkeeping that results in life.

Romans 7:10 ... the commandment ... was intended to bring life.

And that's exactly what the OT teaches.

Deuteronomy 30:16 For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live.

Keep his commands and you will live. Someone says, "But wait—isn't that impossible? Out of reach?"

Deuteronomy 30:11 Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. 12 It is not up in heaven ... 13 Nor is it beyond the sea ... 14 No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it.

So keeping God's law is indeed possible, and if you do it, God will give you life.

You say, "Maybe it's possible, but no one ever did it." No, many people have done it. For example, King David.

1 Kings 14:8 ... you have not been like my servant David, who kept my commands and followed me with all his heart.

Law Can Bring Life or Death

So how do we reconcile this? Does keeping the law lead to life or not? It depends. The law of God can bring you life or it can bring you condemnation and death, depending on how you approach it. In Paul's case, it brought death.

Romans 7:10 I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.

Why? What determines whether the law brings you life or death?

If you keep the law as an expression of baby faith and love for God, it brings life. It's the pavement on the highway to eternal life. But if you keep it in an effort to justify yourself before God, that brings death. Two different times Jesus told someone to keep the law in order to have eternal life. And both times, it didn't end well. Why? Let's look at the law expert in Luke 10.

Luke 10:25 ... "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 "What is written in the Law?" [Jesus] replied. ... 27 He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart ... and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" 28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." 29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

This guy wanted to keep the law in a way that justified him. Notice—all those passages that speak about how we're not saved through the law—they don't say it's impossible to *keep* the law. They say it's impossible to be *justified* by the law.

Galatians 2:16 know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

Galatians 3:11 No-one is justified before God by the law.

Romans 3:28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Galatians 5:4 You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ.

If you strive to obey God's law because you love him and trust him and you want to follow his way, that is the path to life. But if you try to use the law to make yourself a good person in God's sight, that's the opposite of humble, child-like trust. That's prideful self-justification. When you come to God's law asking, "What is God's will? What does he desire? I trust him more than I trust myself, so I want to follow his way," that's an expression of faith, and God will credit that to your account as if it were moral perfection. But if you come the law trying to make yourself a good person so you can justify yourself, one of two things will happen. Either you'll dumb down the commands enough so that you can keep them all perfectly, and then imagine that you're a good person. Or you'll do what Paul did in Romans 7.

Childlike Faith

So you cannot be justified through lawkeeping, but you can express faith and love through lawkeeping. That's why when you see passages in the Old Testament about obeying God's law, you so frequently see references to trusting God or loving God. For example, go back to Dt.30 where God said there is a kind of lawkeeping that isn't out of your reach.

Deuteronomy 30:6 The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.

16 For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands

19 ... Now choose life, so that you and your children may live 20 and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life.

Holding fast to God, clinging to him, listening to him, loving him—those are all the activities of faith. They are ways of expressing loyalty to God. When you obey God's law as an expression of that, it pleases him, and he credits it to your account as righteousness in his sight.

Genesis 15:6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

When you love and trust God like a child, and that's your reason for obeying him, that brings life.

A minute ago I read the verse from 1 Kings 8 that says David kept God's law. How can God say that? David broke the 7th commandment with Bathsheba, the 6th commandment when he murdered her husband, and the 9th commandment when he lied about it. So how can he be called a lawkeeper? Answer: he repented, which showed he had child-like trust in God. David trusted God, repented of his sin, God forgave him, and David wrote:

Psalm 32:2 Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him.

The Condemning Purpose is Not the Only Purpose

I'm spending time on this because there are a lot of people these days who are teaching that the only purpose of the law is the condemning purpose. They say that when God commands something, he doesn't want you to put forth effort trying to obey it. They say any effort to obey is legalism—that's the flesh; every command in the Bible is intended only to show you how impossible it is to obey God.

Don't fall for that teaching. That's one purpose of the law—in cases where people are trying to justify themselves. But it's not the only purpose; it's not even the main purpose. The main purpose is to point the way to life.

John Calvin talked about this in his *Institutes*. He delineated three purposes of the law: 1) to condemn, 2) to restrain evil in society, and 3) to teach the believer how to live. And I would adjust that third one just a bit to say it's to teach us how to express our baby faith in God and love for God. What is God's love language? What does he receive as a gesture of love? Faith. Trust.