

IV. Law, Christ and the Christian

From the Scripture's perspective, law is *Torah*, which refers to God's disclosure of truth to His human image-bearers. Torah is the communication of truth from God to man, and thus it is fundamentally revelatory. But because Torah reveals divine truth to men, it also predicts, instructs and prescribes. This is true of the biblical covenants, which are a primary form of God's Torah. *Most importantly, the truth disclosed by Torah doesn't concern facts or information as such, but God's heart and intent for His creation and the way in which that intent is to be accomplished.* Thus Torah is preeminently *eschatological*: It looks to God's ultimate design for the world and progressively discloses and builds the case for that outcome and the scheme for arriving there. For this reason Torah is also entirely *christological*, because all of God's purposes for His creation and His plan for accomplishing them are bound up in Jesus the Messiah.

This is the sense in which the Scriptures are *Torah* and therefore also *christological* (Christ-revealing), *christocentric* (Christ-centered) and *christotelic* (having their goal in Christ). The Messiah is the grand subject of all the Scriptures, not because every verse speaks of Him, but because the revelation of Him is woven into the very fabric of the scriptural storyline spanning from the creation to the incarnation to the final consummation. Jesus came to recognize this about Himself as He grew in His messianic self-consciousness and so insisted, in various ways, both direct and indirect, that all of the Scriptures bear witness to Him. He pointed to His person, words and works as affirming His messianic identity and mission (Matthew 11:1-15; John 2:13-22, 3:1-17, 4:19-26, 5:17-24, 7:14-24, 8:12-58, 10:22-38, 14:1-11; etc.), but He also stated directly that He is the One the Scriptures promised (ref. Matthew 22:41-45; Luke 4:16-21, 24:13-27, 44-48; John 5:41-47). Jesus believed that His life and ministry fulfilled the messianic hope held out by Israel's Scriptures; He'd come to fulfill the Law, Prophets and Writings as they together predicted, revealed and explained Yahweh's Messiah.

Yet Christians debate just how it was that Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures, the extent to which that was the case and the implications for the future. (Is there still "unfulfilled prophecy" and, if so, what prophetic content remains unfulfilled and what will its fulfillment look like?) But perhaps the most contentious aspect of this debate involves the *definition* of fulfillment, especially with regard to the subject of scriptural *law*. Virtually every Christian agrees the Jesus "fulfilled the Law," but different traditions and individual Christians understand this differently.

- The first point of difference concerns the definition of *law*. This term is part of the universal Christian vocabulary, but there's no universal agreement about its meaning – especially as it relates to obligation to law and obedience. A common question among Christians is which of God's laws are they required to keep, but any answer is pointless and unprofitable – even misleading or false – without properly defining terms and ideas. For some, *law* means "moral law," for others it means "law of Moses," while for others it means any commandment or directive found in the Bible. Other Christians distinguish between the Old Covenant law and the "law of Christ." Still others associate law-keeping with "being a good person" – conforming to a general moral and ethical standard consistent with scriptural truths. And the less familiar Christians are with the Scriptures, the more they tend to define *law* according to personal and societal norms. In effect, God's "law" becomes a projection of their own sensibilities and standards.

- But, whatever specific definition they may assign to the concept of divine law, Christians generally view it as a code of moral and ethical standards and duties which God rightly requires human beings to comply with. Meeting that obligation constitutes “keeping the law” and the outcome of full compliance is “righteousness,” usually defined as the moral perfection which God demands and which determines every person’s final destiny.

This way of conceiving law is significant in itself, but all the more so because of the impact it has on the idea of *fulfillment*. Where law is understood as a moral and ethical prescription, “fulfilling the law” means fully complying with that prescription. And when this understanding is imposed on the New Testament – especially as it speaks to Jesus’ fulfillment of the law, *the meaning and effect of Jesus’ person and work are radically altered*. His declaration that He came to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17) becomes His affirmation of His commitment to fully comply with all of God’s demands and directives.

Accordingly, Jesus’ success in fulfilling the law is understood as Him meeting the legal standard that no other human being is able to. Substitution, then, involves Jesus’ righteousness – i.e., His full compliance – being “credited” to a sinner’s “account.” Jesus’ perfect “law-keeping” exempts sinners who embrace Him in faith from having to meet that obligation themselves and also delivers them from eternal condemnation. For some Christians, this scheme means that they are freed from the demand of law – they are “under grace,” not “under law.” Others argue that Jesus’ law-keeping frees Christians from condemnation, but also establishes their obligation of obedience; that is, Jesus didn’t abolish the law, but *reaffirmed* it as binding. Sinners are “justified” by grace through faith, but “sanctified” by obedience to law (Calvin’s “third use of the law”).

These considerations only scratch the surface of the issues and debates surrounding law and obedience and Christ’s relationship to them. But they’re sufficient to show that there is a wide diversity of understanding undergirded by all sorts of premises and assumptions. This is why it’s unhelpful to simply affirm biblical concepts and terms; without careful definition, those things come to mean whatever a person thinks they mean. Two Christians agreeing that they’re obligated to live holy and obedient lives doesn’t mean that they actually agree. All of this needs to be sorted out and the place to begin is with the person of Jesus. *Whatever obedience, holiness, righteousness, etc., mean, their meaning is discovered in relation to Him.*

A. Law as Fulfilled in Christ

The Scriptures are abundantly clear that Jesus fulfilled the law. He said Himself that He came for that purpose and He succeeded in that endeavor (cf. Matthew 5:17; Luke 24:44). But what does this mean and what is the consequence for the human world?

1. Again, it’s critically important that *law* be understood biblically as *Torah*. All of the preceding material in this study has focused on this subject and how the Scriptures present and understand Torah. It’s been shown that, in all of its dimensions, Torah has a forward-looking, Christ-centered orientation. But it fundamentally discloses and defines God to men and men to themselves, and so defines and prescribes the divine-human relationship and the human vocation as divine image-bearer.

Torah tells men who God is and what it is to be human. And because man was created to be image-son, Torah instructs men in the human vocation of *sonship* – a vocation that, though entirely human, is radically God-centered. Torah concerns the divine-human relationship first and foremost and this is why Torah takes the form of covenants. It is also why law-keeping (compliance with Torah) involves *covenant (relational) faithfulness* and such faithfulness is termed *righteousness* – whether with respect to men or God (cf. Genesis 15; Deuteronomy 6:1-25 with Psalm 5:8; Isaiah 44:24-45:25, 46:8-13; note also Romans 3:21-26). It is also why *lawlessness* is treated as relational infidelity (Isaiah 1:2-4; Jeremiah 2:1-33, 3:1-11; Ezekiel 16, 23; Hosea 1-2; Micah 1:1-7; etc.). To whatever extent righteousness takes on a personal moral and ethical quality, it does so within the larger connotation of *relational integrity*. Righteousness is *rightness*, and rightness involves conformity to the truth of one’s created nature and function. For human beings, righteousness is human existence – in mind, heart, word and action – that conforms to the truth of man as God’s image-son (with all that entails and implies).

2. This understanding of Torah, then, is fundamental to understanding how it is that Jesus *fulfilled* the law. Again, some theological traditions interpret this as Jesus fully complying with God’s righteous demands, which compliance is said to affirm the same obligation for all human beings; Jesus, the man, did what God justly requires of every man. Jesus, then, fulfilled the law by *obeying* it and thus He *confirmed* and *established* it. (Most often this formulation is used to support the notion of an eternal, unchanging “moral law” to which all human beings are accountable and by which they will be judged.)

But the biblical language and presentation points in another direction. All of the gospel writers indicate that Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures, and thus fulfilled Torah (the law). But they affirm this by demonstrating, in a myriad of ways, that Jesus was the Messiah revealed and promised in all the Scriptures (cf. Matthew 1:18-23, 2:13-23, 3:1-15, 4:12-17, 21:1-5, 26:47-56; Mark 1:14-15, 15:27-28; Luke 4:14-21, 21:12-24, 22:24-37, 24:13-49; John 2:13-22, 5:39-47, 6:22-45, 7:37-39, 10:22-38, 12:37-41, 13:12-18, 14:1-11; etc.). Thus He fulfilled Torah by *being* in every regard (in His person, words and works) that which Torah disclosed concerning God and man and God’s intent for His creation: *Jesus fulfilled Torah by being true God, true Man and true Israel and by embodying in Himself the truth of God’s creational design as the beginning of God’s new creation.*

This idea is confirmed by the meaning of the Greek term, *fulfill*. It carries the sense of making full or complete or bringing something to its intended end; it nowhere expresses the idea of obedience to a directive, as in *keeping* the law. Neither does it have the sense of confirming or establishing something as binding. This is especially noteworthy in relation to Matthew 5:17, which is commonly cited to support the idea that Jesus confirmed the continuing obligation of the law (i.e., “I didn’t come to abrogate the law, but to *confirm it as binding.*”) Certainly, by fulfilling a prophecy Jesus confirmed the truth of that prophecy and its need to be fulfilled, but this is different from arguing that His fulfillment amounted to confirming an enduring obligation regarding that prophecy. Poythress’ observation is helpful: “**Confirm** suggests a static maintenance of an existing rule, whereas **fulfill** suggests an advance toward realization.” Confirmation might, in the sense above, be an implication of fulfillment, but it is not its meaning.

Jesus fulfilled the law by fulfilling in His person, words and works that which God's Torah disclosed. This is the case particularly in four respects:

- a. First and foremost, Jesus was the embodiment of *God's self-revelation*. Torah served to reveal the true and living God to a world that was alienated from Him and cut-off from His life and mind. Torah explained to men who their Creator is, what He is like, what it means for men to know Him and what He's purposed for the world He created. The incarnation gave flesh and blood to this Torah, so that Jesus could insist that observing and knowing Him is observing and knowing the One who sent Him – that is, the God revealed in Israel's Scriptures. Yahweh had promised His covenant people that His departure at the time of the exile was not the final word. He would return to Zion and again take His place in His sanctuary, but He'd fulfilled that promise in the person of Jesus (cf. Isaiah 40:1-11 with Mark 1:1-11; cf. also Zechariah 2 and Malachi 3:1 with John 1:14-18, 4:19-26).
- b. Secondly, Jesus fulfilled Torah's revelation and prescription concerning *man*. He was the true human image-son, and therefore man as truly man. He alone among Adam's race fulfilled the human vocation of sonship: loving the Father with heart, soul, mind and strength and then directing that love toward the world the Father created and loves (Matthew 22:36-40). Thus this sonship is the vocation of *royal priesthood*; it is ruling the Father's creation in His name and authority, administering His wise and loving care in the creation and bearing its praises back to its Creator. Jesus fulfilled this Torah as the Last Adam and Son of David.
- c. Thirdly, Jesus fulfilled Torah as it defined and prescribed *Israel* and its role as the Abrahamic seed. This arena of fulfillment is especially important for those who believe the Law of Moses continues in force. For the Law of Moses *is* the covenant at Sinai and it was this covenant that provided this Torah to Israel. The Sinai covenant ratified the relationship between Abraham's God and Abraham's offspring and it disclosed to them the nature and obligation of their covenant identity and vocation. *The Torah at Sinai showed Israel what it meant to be Israel and this is the Torah which Jesus fulfilled by embodying Israel in Himself and fulfilling its calling* (Isaiah 49:1-7). The gospel writers convey this truth by showing how Jesus' life repeated Israel's life with God, but in all faithfulness. Jesus, then, fulfilled the Law of Moses, not by perfect compliance with a list of commandments, but by fulfilling Israel's identity and calling with the goal of reconstituting Israel – the Abrahamic household – in Himself (Ephesians 2:11ff).
- d. Finally, Jesus fulfilled Torah as the embodiment of God's *covenants* and His *covenantal relationship* with men. Because God embodied His Torah within covenant arrangements, Jesus could not fulfill God's law without fulfilling God's covenants. This is precisely what Torah predicted about the messianic Servant: Yahweh would make *Him* the covenant binding together the Creator God and Father and His image-sons (Isaiah 42:1-7, 49:1-10). And Jesus fulfilled Torah-as-covenant in His person as well as His work; He brought together God and man in His incarnation and reconciled them everlasting in His body on the cross.