

Law in the Letters

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When we read the New Testament epistles it is obvious they are written in a completely different style than the Law of Moses as revealed in Exodus through Deuteronomy. For example, I know of no New Testament letter that can compare in style to Leviticus 18-20, but that doesn't mean they don't contain law and commandments. As Paul was addressing some things corrupting the assemblies at Corinth, he challenged all to see the authority behind the message.

“If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things I write to you are the commandments of the Lord.” 1 Cor. 14:37

It is essential we understand that while they are not written as books of law, the discerning reader is expected to see the authoritative words of his King as he reads. Let's use Ephesians 4 and 5 as an example and notice that in this letter, law is to be found.

- Live as God expects you to live. 4:1
- Have a gentle, forbearing, loving attitude toward others. 4:2
- Strive to maintain unity among brethren. 4:3
- Know that there is but one way. 4:4-6
- Do your part in building up the body. 4:16
- Turn away from lewdness, uncleanness, and greediness. 4:17-19
- Reject the old ways of sin and become a new man. 4:20-24
- Be honest. 4:25
- Control your temper and don't allow anger to cause you to sin. 4:26-27
- Don't be a thief, but be a worker. 4:28
- Help those in need. 4:28
- Don't use bad language. 4:29; cf. 5:4.
- Use your words to build others up. 4:29
- Don't allow your life to cause grief to God's Spirit. 4:30
- Eliminate bitterness, wrath, and anger from your life. 4:31
- Avoid the kind of arguments that reflect malice. 4:31
- Be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving. 4:32
- Seek to become more like the Father. 5:1
- Develop the type of love Christ manifested toward us. 5:2

- Be sexually pure. Avoid immoral acts and the uncleanness associated with them. 5:3-5
- Reject the love of money. 5:5
- Do not share in any way with sinful things. 5:11
- Be careful how you live. 5:15
- Make good use of your time in these evil days. 5:16
- Listen to God and learn His will. 5:17
- Instead of alcohol, allow God's Spirit to influence you. 5:18
- Sing praises to God from the heart. 5:19
- Give thanks to God always. 5:20
- Deal with others with a spirit of submission. 5:21
- Wives:
 - Submit to your husbands. 5:22
 - Show respect to your husbands. 5:33
- Husbands:
 - Love your wives in the way that Christ loved the church and as your own bodies. 5:25, 28, 33
 - Nourish and cherish your wives. 5:29

I hope the point of this article is not misunderstood, for it would be a grievous mistake to attempt to reduce the New Testament to a simple listing of requirements and prohibitions. The gospel is the story of God's love in sending His Son and so many of the teachings I have highlighted from these two chapters speak of the grace of God. We need to read the Scriptures in light of the cross and see that many of the commandments make their appeal through the cross (e.g. 5:2). Not only that, but many of the teachings appeal to our awareness that we have escaped condemnation only by His mercy, others share in our same hope, etc. Don't merely read to see the bullet point, but with that being said, we do need to see these points of "law." It's not legalism to acknowledge that the God who created us and the Savior who gave His life for us claims all authority over our lives (Matt. 28:18-20) and sometimes issues commandments.

"Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is." Eph. 5:17

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