

The Ceremonial Law Fulfilled in Christ

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Date: 13 September 2026

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[0:00] Last time we looked at the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, and we saw that God did not invent a new morality at Sinai.

He took the same moral law that really emanated from his person and was then written on the human heart at creation and gave it to Israel in a public written expression.

So the same law that was written on hearts but obscured by sin was now written on stone, making it undeniably clear. But it doesn't take long reading through the Old Testament to realize that God's law did not end with the Ten Commandments.

There are more laws, many more laws, contained in the book of Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers, and we find all kinds of laws governing everything from priests to sacrifices to foods to washings to feast days to circumcision to the tabernacle and countless other details concerning specifically Israel's worship and their ceremonial life.

So what do we do with all of that? Now I've made the argument that the moral law continues to bind us. Does that mean we should bring lambs to church on Sunday and prepare to sacrifice them?

[1:27] Should we stop eating pork? Should we still observe the Day of Atonement? Should we rebuild a tabernacle? Now almost every Christian would instinctively answer no to all of these questions.

But why? Surely we need a better answer than some vague statement like, well, that was the Old Testament.

Keep in mind that the Ten Commandments were in the Old Testament as well. So if we throw out a law simply because it's in the Old Testament, we would have to throw out the commandments against idolatry or adultery or murder or theft or lying and so on.

Surely we need a better reason than that. If some of the commandments in the Old Testament remain binding while others do not, then we need a reason from Scripture itself.

And I can think of no better place to find that reason than the book of Hebrews. In fact, if you want to turn there, we'll look at select passages from Hebrews chapter 7 through chapter 10.

[2:36] Now as you're reading through Hebrews, you will quickly notice that the author does not treat the ceremonial law as some outdated embarrassment for the Christian.

In fact, I'll go further than that. He never suggests that the ceremonial law is something that we should just ignore. It's quite the opposite. He gives great attention to everything from the priests to the sacrifices to the tabernacle to the curtain to the blood to the washings to the altars, the holy places, all of it.

And in effect says, look very closely at these things. All of these things meant something really important. Specifically, they were all pointing somewhere.

In other words, these were not random or arbitrary religious regulations. No, God actually built the gospel into Israel's worship centuries before Christ in the form of types and shadows.

For example, those repeated sacrifices under the old covenant eventually gave way to the once-for-all sacrifice made by Christ.

[3:59] And that is essentially what paragraph 3 of chapter 19 of the Confession says. It says, In addition to this law.

Meaning, in addition to the moral law. You see, they are making a careful distinction here between the moral law and the ceremonial law. Why?

It's because God gave some commandments and intended them to bind every human being for all time. But then he gave other commandments that were not intended to bind every human being for all time.

And that distinction is pretty easily demonstrated. So, what was the very first command God gave the very first man after creating him and placing him in the Garden of Eden?

Genesis 2.16 says, Now, was that intended to be a command for all people for all time?

[5:37] Obviously not. Obviously not. At least not after the fall. You and I will never even find this tree. That specific command was not for us.

At least not now. Now, it was a genuine command, for sure. But it was a limited command in that it was not binding on all people for all time.

So, again, we have moral laws rooted in the permanent moral order established by God. Again, emanating from his very person, his very character.

Murder is wrong because human beings bear God's image. Adultery violates God's design for marriage. Lying contradicts the God of truth.

But we also have other commandments whose obligation depends upon God appointing them for a particular purpose. So, for example, there's nothing inherently evil about eating pork.

[6:38] Yet, God commanded Israel not to eat pork. There's nothing inherently righteous about offering a particular animal on a particular altar at a particular hour for a sacrifice.

But it was righteous when God commanded it to be done. You see, God has the authority to establish these ordinances, and he also has the authority to bring their appointed use to an end.

And I believe this distinction prevents us from making two opposite mistakes. The first mistake is in thinking that those laws were only temporary, so they must not have been important.

Well, maybe we should ask Nadab and Abihu whether they were important. They most certainly were. An Israelite could not say, Well, I know God commanded this sacrifice in this way, but it's only ceremonial.

I can skip this one. I can do it different this time, right? This is not the Ten Commandments we're talking about. Well, when Nadab and Abihu, they tried that, fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.

[7:57] The other mistake is in thinking that since God commanded these ceremonial laws, they must bind everyone forever, just like the moral law, just like the Ten Commandments. But as we'll see, that isn't true either.

God as creator has the authority to give what we might call a temporary command for a specific people, maybe for a specific covenant, for a specific purpose within redemptive history.

And that's precisely what we see throughout the book of Hebrews. Hebrews never suggests that the old ceremonial law, that's bad. No, it would be more accurate to say that it was incomplete by design.

Hebrews 8.5, for example, tells us that the Levitical priests served a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. So the priests, they had a purpose, a good purpose, in fact, but they were a shadow of something greater to come.

They weren't the thing itself, if you will, just the shadow. And when you see a shadow, what happens? Your eyes might naturally follow that shadow until you see the thing that's actually casting the shadow.

[9:13] And that was the purpose of the priesthood under the old covenant. Verse 6 of that chapter immediately adds, but as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better.

So it's not as though God made a mistake and then Jesus had to come along and repair it. No, God deliberately established the first arrangement to foreshadow and anticipate the better one that would come in Christ.

Now, anyone who has read the Old Testament knows just how extensive Israel's ceremonial laws were. Of course, at the center of it all was the tabernacle and later the temple.

God gave very, very detailed instructions concerning its construction, its furnishings, the rooms, the altars, the curtains, as well as limiting who could enter certain spaces.

There were laws regarding the priesthood. There were all kinds of offerings, burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings. There were morning and evening sacrifices and all of those elaborate sacrifices on the Day of Atonement once a year.

[10:35] And the start of Hebrews 9 gives us a condensed picture of this. The writer mentions elements within the tabernacle, the lampstand, the table, the bread of presence, the holy place, the most holy place, the Ark of the Covenant, the mercy seat, the priests who regularly entered the first

section of the tabernacle.

Then comes the high priest who alone entered the most holy place and only once a year and never without blood. And according to Hebrews, the whole system is basically a sermon that God was preaching to His people.

And what did that sermon say? Well, it said God is holy. It said sin separates us from this holy God. So access to Him is restricted. It said blood is required because of our sin. And it said, a mediator must stand between those sinful people and the presence of God.

I mean, think about the architecture of the tabernacle itself. An ordinary Israelite could not simply stroll into the Holy of Holies because he wanted to be close to God.

[11:55] No. Even an ordinary priest could not enter the Holy of Holies. Only one man, that high priest, could enter. And again, only one day out of the year and he must carry that sacrificial blood with him.

And what was the point of this? Well, it visibly expressed there is a holy God and there are sinful men and between them stood necessary barriers, including the priesthood and the sacrifices and the blood.

And all of this, according to the latter half of Hebrews 9, was intended to teach people about the Christ to come. That's what the confession means by the phrase typological ordinances.

A type is something real but something God established in history to anticipate something greater to come. So, this is not something we merely see in hindsight as though we're now discovering all of these clever little resemblances between Christ and these elements in the Old Testament.

No, God intended for them to be types and shadows. Perhaps Hebrews 10.1 gives us the clearest statement about this.

[13:15] It says, For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year make perfect those who draw near.

Well, that's the essential relationship here. Shadow, reality. Shadow and reality. So, imagine your spouse goes away on a long trip.

And, of course, you miss him or her so perhaps you keep a photograph of them on your desk or sitting somewhere nearby. And I think you would say that that photograph is precious because the person in the photograph is precious.

You look at it and it reminds you of them and you love them. So, the photo is a wonderful thing. It's a great thing to have. But let's say that person finally comes home and they walk through the door. What are the chances you will say to them, hey, could you get out of the way? I can't see the photograph anymore. No, you'd never say that. Furthermore, the photograph hasn't become less precious, has it?

[14:31] No, but compared to the reality of your spouse standing in front of you in the flesh, well, the photograph no longer compares. You'll take your spouse over the photo any day and if you were to cling to the picture while ignoring the person, that would completely misunderstand why you treasured the photograph in the first place.

It would be absurd and that's really the argument of Hebrews. It's absurd to forsake the substance for the shadow. And let's just consider one example, the example of sacrifices.

Hebrews 10 points to the repetition of those sacrifices offered continually under the old covenant. Why were they offered? Over and over and over again.

It was because none of them finished the work. None of them were sufficient. Look at verse 2 of chapter 10. Actually, let me read verse 1 again with it.

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year make perfect those who draw near.

[15:51] Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins?

Clearly, these sacrifices were incomplete, which is why they continued to be offered time and time again. Every day of atonement was followed by another day of atonement the following year.

Verse 3 says, in these sacrifices, there is a reminder of sins every year. Then verse 4 tells us why those sacrifices could never finish the work.

it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Now, that doesn't mean that a believing Israelite could not actually be forgiven.

Abraham was justified by faith, we know that. David could say blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven. But their forgiveness ultimately rested on the same Christ ours does.

[16:56] So, what Hebrews is denying is that the blood of an animal could itself remove our moral guilt before God. Those sacrifices provided the ceremonial cleansing God appointed under the Old Covenant, but they could not finally cleanse the conscience or pay for sin.

Hebrews 9.15 tells us that Christ's death redeems the transgressions committed under the First Covenant. blood. So, Old Testament believers were not saved by animal blood, they were saved by Christ, promised beforehand, and the sacrifices continually pointed toward him.

And Hebrews 10 now shows us the difference between the sacrifices that pointed to Christ and the sacrifice Christ himself actually made. The contrast is especially clear in the language of repetition versus finality.

Under the old system, sacrifices were offered again and again. Christ, however, offered himself once for all. Verses 10 through 12. We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

[18:34] Next time you're reading through the Old Testament, see whether you can find any reference to a chair being placed in the tabernacle. You won't find it.

And that's because the work of the priests, was never finished. They couldn't sit down and rest.

Here we read every priest stands daily at his service offering repeatedly the same sacrifices.

But when Christ makes the once for all sacrifice of himself, what happens? He takes a seat. The work is finished. Once and for all, forever, it's done.

John Calvin once warned that we should be very careful about becoming too imaginative with these Old Testament types and shadows.

Not every hook, rope, board, color, number in the tabernacle is some kind of secret code, something that we're supposed to understand having spiritual significance.

[19:41] Calvin warned that there's not a hidden mystery in every nail of the tabernacle. But at the same time, we don't want to be too quick to brush aside all of the ceremonial law as though it has no significance whatsoever.

The sacrifices, the priesthood, the Passover, these things point to Christ. The tabernacle points to a heavenly reality. So again, we want to avoid those two mistakes.

The first is in thinking that the ceremonial law was essentially meaningless because it was temporary. That's not true. And the second, which seems to have been the greater temptation for Hebrews' original audience, is in clinging to the shadows when we already have the substance.

So with that, I think we can now appreciate the wording of the confession a little better. It says, in some ways, these typological ordinances concerned worship by prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits.

And basically, what the confession is doing here is summarizing precisely what we are reading in the book of Hebrews. First, we have Christ's graces.

[21:01] We might say that refers to the excellence of his person, his character. Hebrews 7.26 says, it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

You see, the Levitical priest had a fundamental problem. He himself was a sinner. On the day of atonement, for example, the high priest, he had to offer a sacrifice for his own sin before he could offer a sacrifice for the people.

But that wasn't the case for Christ. He did not approach the altar with guilt of his own, so he could actually make a lasting sacrifice for the guilt of others.

He had no guilt of his own. Second, we have Christ's actions. Jumping back a verse to verse 25, we're told that he always lives to make intercession for his people.

The start of Hebrews 8 describes him as our high priest, seated at God's right hand, a minister in the holy places in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.

[22:14] In other words, while the priests of the Old Testament were serving in a tabernacle here on this earth, Christ ministers in the presence of God himself. Third, we have his sufferings.

This is where all of the blood and the sacrifice under the old covenant reaches its fulfillment. look at Hebrews 9, verses 11 and 12.

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent, not made with hands, that is, not of this creation, he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

You see, under the old system, the priest brought someone else's blood, but Christ brought his own. The priest brought the blood of animals, but Christ gave himself.

Hebrews 7, 27 says he offered up himself, so the priest and the sacrifice become one in Christ. And lastly, we have Christ's benefits.

[23:29] What does his sacrifice actually accomplish for us? Hebrews 9, 13 and 14 gives the contrast, for if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Then verse 14 of chapter 10 says, by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And verse 17 goes on to remind us of God's new covenant promise.

I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more. And then verse 18 draws the following conclusion, where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

So you see the entire ceremonial system under the old covenant was leading somewhere. It wasn't supposed to be permanent. It wasn't designed to be permanent. It had a goal all along and that goal was Christ.

With Christ the ceremonial law reaches its goal and therefore is complete in him. And with this in mind, we actually have a useful way to read Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers without getting completely lost or thinking, what is the point of all of this?

[25:05] We can really ask ourselves four questions as we're reading the ceremonial law. First, what did this ordinance actually mean for Israel?

Let's start there because the law did have historical significance. This was not just God giving the people something to do while they waited for the Messiah.

What was the sacrifice? Who offered it? When? Why? What exactly is the rule? What did it mean for Israel at the time? And second, we can ask ourselves, what theological reality did God portray through this?

What are we learning through this? Does it say something about holiness? Or cleansing? Or atonement? Or mediation? Or access to God?

What is being taught through these various aspects of the ceremonial law? And third, we can then ask, how does the New Testament show that reality fulfilled in Christ?

[26:12] And if you want some help answering that question, I recommend you jump straight to Hebrews and start there. And lastly, we might ask, what benefit of Christ's work now belongs to those who trust in him?

And let's just use the Day of Atonement as an example. This was the annual ceremony in which the high priest entered the most holy place, again with blood. Obviously, it portrayed the holiness of God and the guilt of our sin, the necessity of a sacrifice because of that sin, and the need for a mediator.

And Hebrews then shows Christ entering the true sanctuary with his own blood. And what is the benefit of all of this? Well, cleansing, forgiveness, and finally access to God.

Or we might consider Passover. Israel sacrificed a lamb and remembered God's deliverance from Egypt every single year. And with the blood of those lambs, God marked his people as an exemption from his judgment, right?

You'll remember the destroying angel passing over all of the doorways that were marked by the lamb's blood. And then we turn to the New Testament and Paul writes this in 1 Corinthians 5-7, Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

[27:39] Oh, and now we suddenly understand that Passover was again leading us straight to Christ. And what's the benefit of him being our great Passover lamb sacrificed for us?

Well, the lamb's blood at the first Passover spared the people from physical death. But Christ's blood spares us from eternal death.

Now, if we look again at Hebrews 9, the writer tells us explicitly that the ceremonial regulations had an expiration date built into them. Look at verse 6.

These preparations, having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, but into the second, only the high priest goes, and he only but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.

By this, the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing. So this arrangement under the Old Covenant was designed to show that, very plainly, that sinners had restricted access to the presence of God.

[28 : 54] That curtain that divided the second section, the Holy of Holies, essentially said you can't simply waltz into the presence of God. You simply can't.

Most of Israel remained outside, the priest could go a bit farther, and again the high priest could go into that one Holy of Holies, but again only once a year, always with blood, but then he came right back out.

He could not remain in the presence of God. And verse 9 says this was symbolic for the present age. According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifice, are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

So all of that was done on the old system. It wasn't going to satisfy. It would not perfect the conscience of the worshiper. It would not make us right before God or allow us to walk freely into God's presence.

Now notice that word reformation. That word implies a change, of course, but more specifically it refers to the time when God sets things in their proper order.

[30 : 14] In other words, we're talking about the arrival of the new covenant in Christ. So you see, all of these regulations under the ceremonial system had the word until attached to them.

There was an expiration date. God himself imposed these laws, but he imposed them until the appointed fulfillment of them.

And what does verse 11 say? But when Christ appeared, there was the old system where the priest served and the blood flowed and the washings continued and that curtain remained dividing the people from the presence of God.

Year after year after year these things went on, but when Christ appeared, everything toward which these things pointed suddenly came into view.

Christ entered the greater and more perfect tent. Christ entered with his own blood. Christ entered once for all. Christ obtained eternal redemption. And Christ purifies the conscience.

[31 : 24] Listen to what Paul says in Colossians chapter 2. Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.

These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. So to be clear, Paul doesn't say these things were meaningless.

He calls them a shadow of the things to come. They had a purpose. Food laws, festivals, the sacred calendar of Israel, it all had a purpose. But the substance, he says, belongs to Christ.

So for that reason, he can say to Christians under the new covenant, let no one pass judgment on you concerning these various aspects of the ceremonial law.

To the Christian, he says, you're not sinning when you eat a food that was once declared unclean. you're not required to observe Israel's feast days. You don't need a Levitical priest standing between you and God, and you certainly don't need the blood of animals offered for your sin.

[32 : 35] These things had a good God-given purpose, but their purpose was temporary because they were pointing forward to Christ who would ultimately fulfill these things.

Now, Paul gives us another dimension of this in Ephesians 2. There he describes the old division between Jews and Gentiles, and he says, Christ has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.

In verse 15, he speaks of Christ abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. So, under the old covenant, many of these ceremonial ordinances visibly distinguish Israel from all other nations.

Think of circumcision, or the foods they ate, or their particular form of worship. The temple itself contained boundaries concerning who could approach and how far they could go. The Gentiles were required to remain in the outer court of the temple. But under the new covenant, Paul says that Christ has made Jews and Gentiles one body.

[33 : 48] And listen to the result in verse 18. For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father. We can go right into the most holy of holies, Jews and Gentiles together.

And that's really what the confession means when it says the ceremonial laws are now abolished and taken away by Jesus Christ. Christ. Of course, he doesn't mean they should be torn out of our Bibles.

It means they no longer bind our conscience. We're no longer obligated to follow these various regulations, at least not as they were explicitly written for Israel at the time.

So the reason we don't rip the ceremonial law out of our Bibles is that it still serves at least a couple of important functions for the Christian. Now we may think, what do we need it for?

It no longer applies, but it actually becomes even more valuable to us now because it helps us understand what Christ accomplished on our behalf.

[34 : 54] Why was the cross necessary? Why is Christ interceding for us? Why are we no longer standing outside of the sanctuary while one man enters only once a year?

So the first reason we need the ceremonial law is that without it, we really don't have a complete understanding of the wonderful thing we call the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We may not follow the ceremonial law anymore, but let's say you're driving down the highway and you see a sign that says, Indianapolis 30 miles. Now once you arrive in Indianapolis, would your first thought be, you know what, somebody should take that sign down back there?

No, you wouldn't even consider it. The sign did exactly what it was supposed to do. It directed you to the destination and the ceremonial law directed Israel and I would argue directs people even today to Christ.

But there's a second reason we don't throw out the ceremonial law. Notice what the confession says on this point. In other words they, that is the ceremonial ordinances, revealed various instructions about moral duties.

[36 : 15] What does that mean? Isn't there a distinction between the moral and the ceremonial law? Yes, there is.

And the ceremonial law has been fulfilled, but at the same time, the ceremonial law can actually provide moral instruction. And I'll give you one example of this in 1 Corinthians 5.

So Paul is writing to the church at Corinth to address a very serious sin among them, a sin which they have seemed to just ignore.

They didn't condone it necessarily, but they didn't deal with it either. They didn't attempt to discipline the person living in that sin. And listen to what Paul tells them starting at verse 6.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump as you really are unleavened.

[37 : 21] For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

So Paul says, let us celebrate the festival. Now, is he commanding the Corinthian church to return to the Mosaic law and pick up the practice of literally observing the Passover?

No, he immediately explains himself, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

So, do you see what Paul is doing here? Obviously, the Passover feast itself has been fulfilled. Christ, our Passover lamb, has already been sacrificed.

Paul tells us that. And yet, he also shows us that the Passover still teaches us moral truth. So, just as Israel removed the leaven from their houses, the church must remove the leaven of sin and corruption from its midst.

[38 : 31] So, the ceremony is no longer binding, but it still contains moral truth that can still teach us. Now, as we come to the end of this paragraph in the confession, we read, as the true Messiah and the only lawgiver, he was empowered by the Father to do this.

So, what the framers of the confession want us to realize is that Christians did not independently decide that all of these Old Testament laws were inconvenient or outdated and simply stopped

keeping them.

No, it was God. The same God who gave these ordinances and has the authority to bring them to their appointed end did so through the fulfillment of them in Christ.

The ceremonial law was God's will. Their fulfillment was very much part of God's plan. And their removal as binding ordinances on us is God's own act in Christ.

So, we still read them. We still study them. We still learn from them. And we still discover moral truth in them. And we can still have great benefit from them.

[39 : 57] And yet, at the same time, we don't want to return to the shadows. The lawgiver himself has brought us the substance.

So, the shadows can teach us. They can teach us something about Christ. They certainly point us to Christ. But we have the substance. So, the shadows do not have the same, do not carry the same weight as they once did.

They are no longer binding on the Christian. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your law. It is good and righteous and holy.

And I pray that we would continue to look even at those seemingly irrelevant parts of your law in the Old Testament and find great value in them. May we treasure them. But may we ask that you would help us to understand them.

Lord, they ultimately point to Christ and they were ultimately fulfilled in Christ. But there is still much we can glean from them. So, I pray you would help us to that end. Pray that you would bless us as we move into worship here in a few minutes.

[41 : 08] pray that we might glorify you in all that we say and do and that everyone here might be built up and edified. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen.