

Is God's Law "Bondage" and a "Heavy Burden"?

How do most people today view God's law? They view it as *burdensome* and oppressive. They view it as "bondage" and as a "heavy burden." Yet, why do people have that concept? Is that what God's word, the Bible, teaches?

God's Spiritual Law

Only God, in His supreme wisdom, knows the **way** of life that *leads* to peace, happiness and prosperity (Isa. 55:8-9). The Bible is God's *revelation* of that way of life. In telling us how to live, God gives us **laws** that He commands us to live by.

The law being referred to is God's *spiritual* law (Rom. 7:14)---the law that is summarized by the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments show the basics of **how** to show love to God and to fellowman. It is the way to every good thing in life.

What do people see so "burdensome" about having no other god before the true God? About having no graven images, and not using God's name in vain? About honoring one's parents, and refraining from murder, adultery, and theft? What is "burdensome" or "oppressive" about keeping these commandments?

King David, who God called "a man after My own heart," certainly didn't view God's law as a burden. "Oh, how I **love** Your law!" exclaimed David (Ps. 119:97).

A young man approached Christ and asked, "what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" Christ replied, "If you want to *enter* into life, keep the commandments" (Matt. 19: 16-17). And Christ then went on in verses 18-19 to show that He was referring to the Ten Commandments.

Jesus Christ lived a life of *obedience* to God's law. He said, "I have **kept** My Father's commandments" (John 15:10). Likewise, He said that we too are to strive to live "by **every word** of God" (Luke 4:4). Yes, Christ is our *example* (I Cor. 11:1; I John 2:6).

He said, "Not everyone who to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who **does** the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I *never* knew you; depart from Me, **you who practice lawlessness!**'" (Matt.7: 21-23).

When a person accepts Christ and truly repents, then, upon baptism, the person receives God's Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). If God's Spirit dwells within an individual, then it is actually Christ living *His* life within that person (Gal. 2:20; Rom. 8:9-10). To the *extent* that the person yields his life to Christ's guidance, Christ then lives **in** that person the **same** manner of life that He lived 2,000 years ago---a life of *obedience* to God's law. Yes, "Jesus Christ is the **same** yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

Accordingly, the individual then begins to take on the *mind* of Christ (Phil. 2:5)---a mind of humble *obedience* to God (verse 8)---an attitude of "not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).

As the person matures spiritually, he increasingly has God's **laws** written in his mind and heart. Indeed, that is the very purpose and goal of the New Covenant! "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put **My laws** into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them" (Heb. 10:16).

Rather than a burden, God's law is the "law of **liberty**"! (James 1:25; Ps. 119:44-45). It's the way to every *good* thing in life.

The Apostle John lived longer than Paul and any of the other apostles. Because of the fact that John wrote so much about the subject of love, he is often referred to as "the apostle of love." Yet, notice what

this “apostle of love” said about God’s *law*: “For this **is** the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are **not** burdensome”! (I John 5:3).

Furthermore, that scripture was written by John almost 60 years after Christ was crucified!

WHY People Wrongly View God’s Law as “Burdensome”

Since we’ve plainly seen that the Bible shows that God’s spiritual law is **not** burdensome, then why do people believe that it is? The answer to this can be given as three basic reasons, as we’ll now see.

(1) Human Nature

This *first* reason why man considers God’s law as "burdensome" is clearly stated by Paul. Paul speaks of the “carnal mind”---i.e., the *unconverted* mind---the mind that each one of us is born with. He says that “the carnal mind is enmity *against* God [‘hostile to God’---NIV]; for it is **not subject to the law** of God, nor indeed *can be*” (Rom. 8:7).

Paul continues: “So then, those who are in the flesh [i.e., those who *don’t* have God’s Spirit] *cannot please* God. But you are *not* in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you” (verses 8-9).

God gives His Spirit *only* “to those who **obey** Him” (Acts 5:32; Rev. 14:12). When a person repents and receives God’s Spirit, he then partakes of God’s divine nature (II Peter 1:4)---a nature that *wants* to live in obedience to God’s law. Yet, the person continues to *also* have his own carnal, human nature---a nature which *hates* God’s law. So, he then has *two* natures---which are at constant *war* with one another (Rom. 7: 15-25).

This total *contrast* of the two natures was also spoken of by Ezekiel, as he foretold of the future New Covenant---when man would be given an opportunity to receive God’s Spirit: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the *heart of stone* out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them” (Ezek. 36:26-27).

Yes, people hate God’s law. They want nothing to do with it. Yet, God’s word long ago *predicted* that men would call that which is good “evil.” “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil” (Isa. 5:20). Also, notice the *context* of this passage in Isaiah. Just four verses after Isaiah speaks of people “calling good evil,” he says that such people “have rejected the **law** of the Lord of hosts” (verse 24).

Furthermore, consider this important fact. Not only is one’s natural *mind* not subject to God’s law, we are also influenced by *Satan* to reject God’s law---just as Satan himself does!

(2) A Second Reason

A second reason why people mistakenly view God’s spiritual law as “burdensome,” is due to their erroneously thinking that certain New Testament scriptures refer to God’s spiritual law---when those scriptures *actually* refer to Judaism!

Before citing some of those scriptures, let’s first understand this about Judaism. Judaism (both modern Judaism *and* the Judaism practiced by the Pharisees and scribes of Christ’s day) is a **corruption** of both God’s law and the teachings of the Old Testament. It is a corruption of God’s way of life.

One such corruption is that Judaism adopted a system of pagan penance. Another major corruption came about after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, when the Jewish religious leaders came to deeply realize that God had sent the Israelites into captivity *due* to their flagrant *breaking* of God’s laws. The realization of this fact, led the current religious leaders into the *misguided solution* of trying to “insulate and protect”

the law of God---by building a “fence” *around* the actual law---so that it would never be broken again. In their misguided zeal, they added more than 600 *man-made* laws, commandments, rules, regulations and oral law **to** the laws of God (and, in particular, to the Law of Moses).

Among these more than 600 “fence laws” were some 65 do’s and don’ts concerning Sabbath keeping. When the entire compilation of the law of Judaism was made in the 3rd century A.D. (in a book called the *Misnah*) this book was 800 pages long! What’s more, the Talmud (an authoritative commentary **on** the law) came to 12 printed *volumes*!

The people had come to fear that any act they did, might in some way be contrary to one of these many do’s and don’ts. Jesus Christ saw this “fear of religion” as bondage. He referred to this legalistic adherence to the laws of Moses as “**heavy burdens and grievous to be borne**” (Matt. 23:4 KJV). Christ *condemned* this “straining at a gnat” (verse 24), legalistic attitude of the Pharisees. (Also, see Mark 7:7, 13.) Yes, Christ was very much against this man-made legalistic *corruption* of God’s law. He was definitely **not**, however, against God’s law itself!

In addition to these two verses in Matt. 23 cited above, here are some other scriptures referring to the bondage of Judaism:

“At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, ‘Look, Your disciples are doing what is not *lawful* to do on the Sabbath!’” (Matt.12:1-2).

“And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, ‘Is it *lawful* to heal on the Sabbath?’---that they might accuse Him” (Matt.12:10).

“The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, ‘It is the Sabbath; it is not *lawful* for you to carry your bed’” (John 5:10).

“Even so we, when we were children, were in *bondage* under the elements of the world”(Gal.4:3)

Furthermore, consider this. In addition to these scriptures referring to the heavy burdens of *Judaism*, there are *also* New Testament scriptures that refer to the system of **ritualistic laws** that God **Himself** imposed, *temporarily*, on Old Testament Israel. Such New Testament scriptures are oftentimes mistakenly thought to be referring to God’s *spiritual* law---when those scriptures are *actually* referring to the system of *ritualistic* laws that God temporarily gave Old Testament Israel. A prime *example* of such scriptures is Paul’s use of the phrase “works of the law.”

These New Testament scriptures referring to the *ritualistic* law, are simply addressing the fact that a person never could be justified---or gain salvation---**through** those rituals and animal sacrifices.

This temporary system of rituals and sacrifice **never was** a means to salvation! Judaism, however, came to erroneously view it as such. The fact is, Old Testament Israel was never *offered* salvation---*only* the prophets and patriarchs of the Old Testament were.

The ceremonial *rituals* were added temporarily by God, for the purpose of teaching and instilling within the ancient Israelites *the habit of obedience*. These rituals were things to do repeatedly---morning, noon and night. God intended this system of rituals to be only a *temporary* substitute until, in New Testament times, when the Holy Spirit would be made available. Once God’s Spirit was made available to dwell within the members of the New Testament Church, those physical rituals were no longer needed! (Gal. 3:24)

Likewise, the system of *animal sacrifices* was only a **temporary**, physical substitute. It was a substitute for---and until---the sacrifice of Christ (Heb. 7:27). It served to *remind* people of their sins (Heb. 10:3), and to remind them that the *penalty* of sin is death (Ezek. 18:4).

(3) A Third Reason

The third reason why people view God's spiritual law as "burdensome" is, like the second reason, a misunderstanding of what certain scriptures refer to. Many people think that certain New Testament scriptures refer to "bondage to God's *law*"---when those scriptures actually refer to people being in bondage **to sin and Satan**.

Let's first look at some scriptures that are very *plainly* speaking of bondage to sin and/or Satan. Jesus Christ plainly stated that "whoever commits sin is a **slave** of sin" (John 8:34). Here, Christ was speaking of those who sin as a *way* of life---those who are unrepentant---those who have not surrendered their lives to God---those who are not *striving* to live by every word of God (Luke 4:4).

What does Peter say of such people? He says, "they themselves are **slaves** of corruption; for **BY** what a man is overcome, by this he is *enslaved* ['brought into **bondage**'---NKJV]" (II Peter 2:19, NAS).

Now notice the 6th chapter of Romans, where Paul discusses what happens to a truly repentant person at baptism. Among other things, baptism pictures the "crucifixion" and *burial* of the old self---the *sinning* self. It pictures the coming up *out of* that watery "grave"---symbolic of a *changed* person, who is resurrected to a new, spiritual life in Christ. "...that our old man [our old self] was crucified with Him [Christ], that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should *no longer be slaves of sin*" (verse 6).

"Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves **slaves to obey**, you **ARE** that one's slaves whom you obey, whether **of sin** [leading] to death, or *of obedience* [leading] to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you *were slaves of sin*, yet you [now] *obeyed* from the heart...and having been set **free** from [slavery to] sin, you became *slaves of righteousness*...now having been set free from sin, and having become **slaves of God**..." (verses 16-22).

Yes, sin *enslaves* a person, and brings him into bondage. Yet, as we've seen, one can be set *free* from that bondage. But, such freedom has its price: the price of becoming a "slave of God"---a "slave of righteousness." In other words, at baptism, we unconditionally surrender our lives to God---and, from then on, we become a living *sacrifice* (Rom. 12:1-2).

We are then no longer our own! As Paul said, "do you not know that...you are *not* your own? For you were **bought** at a price" (I Cor. 6: 19-20). And that "price" was the **supreme** price---Christ's shed blood!

So, we then become "Christ's slave" (I Cor. 7:22). And Christ *does* require **obedience** (Matt. 19:16-19; 7:21-23; Luke 8:21). Yet, such obedience *leads* to a life of peace and happiness. Accordingly, Christ said, "Take My yoke upon you...and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is **easy** and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:29-30).

Having examined the above numerous and *plain* scriptures about how one can stop being a "slave of sin," we can now understand the true meaning of certain other scriptures (especially in Galatians) which people tend to misunderstand.

Notice Galatians chapter 5: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled **again** with a yoke of bondage" (verse 1).

Likewise, in chapter 4, verses 6-11, Paul is addressing *Gentiles* who had converted *to* Christianity. Here, Paul said, "you are **no longer** a slave [to sin]" (verse 7). Yet, these Gentile converts were beginning to resume their **former** pagan and sinful practices---including the observance of *pagan* holy days (verse 10). So, Paul warned them to not *return* to such sinful practices. Paul said, "But now after you have known God...how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements ['weak and miserable principles'---NIV], to which you desire *again* to be in **bondage**?" (verse 9).

No, Paul was *not* speaking of bondage to God's law! *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* discusses what *type* of "bondage" that Paul was referring to in Galatians chapter 4: "He [Paul] would be thinking of a *demonic* bondage in which the Galatians had indeed been held *prior* to the proclamation of the gospel...The ultimate contrast to freedom in Christ is **bondage to Satan** and the evil spirits" (Vol. 10, p.472).

God's Law Not Bondage

Let's now summarize. There are basically three reasons why mankind mistakenly views God's spiritual law as "burdensome" and "bondage": (1) Human nature---with a mind which is "**not subject** to the *law* of God" (Rom. 8:7); (2) The *misunderstanding* that certain New Testament scriptures are *actually* speaking of the burdens and **bondage of Judaism**; (3) The *misunderstanding* that certain New Testament scriptures are actually speaking of being in **bondage to sin**.

Rather than being "bondage," God's spiritual law is actually "the perfect law of **LIBERTY**" (James 1:25). It is the way to every *good* thing in life. As the Apostle John stated: "His [God's] commandments are **NOT** burdensome"!