

“Woe to you, teachers of the law”

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Jesus Christ said, “Do **not** think that I came to destroy the Law...” (Matt. 5:17). He said, “...depart from Me, you who practice **lawlessness!**” (Matt. 7:23). One of the very purposes of Christ coming to this earth was to magnify the law (Isa. 42:21 *KJV*)—to enlarge it, and make it even *more* binding! In fact, the very *goal* of the New Covenant is to have God’s *laws* placed in our minds and written on our hearts! (Heb. 8:10).

Jesus Christ was *obedient* to God’s law, and He requires that *we too* strive to obey God’s spiritual law! Furthermore, *all of Christ’s apostles* taught the importance of keeping God’s law.

Despite all that, many people teach *against* God’s spiritual law. Notice a scripture which is used by some in an attempt to give a negative connotation to God’s law: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!...” (Matt. 23:25).

How does that scripture give a negative connotation to God’s law? We will see the answer shortly, but let’s first ask this question: Why did Christ condemn the scribes and Pharisees? Was it because they taught God’s law? No! Notice that in the following verses in Matthew chapter 23, where Christ excoriated the scribes and Pharisees, He *in no way* criticized them for teaching God’s law:

¹ Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, ² saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. ³ Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. ⁴ For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men’s shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers. ...

²³ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier *matters* of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. ²⁴ Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

²⁵ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. ²⁶ Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also.

²⁷ “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead *men’s* bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸ Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

²⁹“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous,³⁰ and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’

³¹“Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³²Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers’ *guilt*.
³³Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?”

No, Christ did *not* condemn them for teaching God’s law. Rather, He condemned them because of their hypocrisy and their *perverted* teaching of the law—and their adding of many *man-made* restrictions to God’s law. (See “Is God’s Law ‘Bondage’ and a ‘Heavy Burden’?”)

Seven times in Matthew chapter 23, Christ says, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees...” (NKJV, 1982). (The KJV and AKJV say “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees...”) In every case, the word “scribe” is translated from the original Greek word *grammateus*. Yet, **the NIV** translates this Greek word—**not** as “scribes”—but as “teachers of the law”: “Woe to you, **teachers of the law** and Pharisees...” (NIV, 2011 edition).

Now, it is true that the scribes were “teachers of the law.” Yet, by the NIV’s rendering of this repeated condemnation as being directed at “teachers of the law,” one might think that Christ is condemning “the teaching of God’s law”—**rather than** condemning these *specific* teachers. Also, by saying, “Woe to you, **teachers of the law** and Pharisees...” one might think that Christ is implying that it is *bad* to teach God’s law—just as it is *bad* to be Pharisaical!

However, in verse 28, Christ shows that He fully **advocates** God’s law—as He *condemns* these scribes and Pharisees for being full of “lawlessness”!

Furthermore, the fact that Christ Himself *endorsed* God’s law, is likewise evidenced a few verses later, when Christ said that He Himself **would send** *grammateus*: “Therefore, indeed, **I send** you prophets, wise men, and **scribes**: some of them you will kill and crucify...” (verse 34, NKJV). Yes, Christ would send men into the world who would be *true* “teachers of the law.”

So, the NKJV renders *grammateus* as “scribes” in verse 34—*just as it does* in the seven verses of the chapter where Christ condemns the scribes. Yet, the NIV—**due to its prejudice against God’s law**, renders it as “teachers” when Christ is speaking *positively* of “grammateus” (verse 34)—while rendering it as “teachers **of the law**” everywhere else in the chapter (where Christ is *condemning* them).

Additionally, in verse 28, when Christ condemns them for being full of “lawlessness,” the NIV uses the term “*wickedness*” instead of “lawlessness.”

I Timothy 1:6-7

Let’s now look at one scripture where the NKJV speaks **condemningly** of “teachers of the law.” In I Timothy chapter one, we read the following: “...some, having **strayed**, have turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be **teachers of the law**...” (verses 6-7).

Notice what *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible* says about the phrase “teachers of the law” *in this particular passage*: “To be esteemed or celebrated as rabbins [rabbis]; to be reputed cunning in solving knotty questions and enigmas...” (p. 1218, Nov. 1983).

Therefore, this scripture is *not* condemning anyone for wanting the law of God to be taught. Rather, it is condemning those who wanted a *reputation* of being “cunning in solving knotty questions and enigmas”!

Accordingly, notice how that passage is rendered in *Phillips*: “They want a **reputation** as teachers of the Law...” (I Tim. 1:7, *Phillips*).

Conclusion

God’s spiritual law always has been, and always will be, in effect. God’s spiritual law is simply the expression of God’s *way of life*. The very *goal* of the New Covenant is to come to have God’s *laws* placed in our minds and written on our hearts! (Heb. 8:10).