



Group 1 | Jewish Law

When Jesus refers to the Old Testament, he describes it as “the Law and the Prophets.” For example, when he is asked which commandment is the greatest (Matthew 22:36), he responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18. He then says, “All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands” (Matthew 22:40). The third section of the Jewish Bible, called the Writings, did not take definitive shape as a category of Scripture until a century or so after Jesus’ death and resurrection. The description of “the Law and the Prophets” shows the importance that the first five books of the Bible, the Law, held for the Jews at that time.

Jewish tradition holds that there are 613 commandments in the Law. Some are more important than others, which led to the question posed to Jesus in Matthew 22. Among the body of commandments, the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20:1-17 held a special place. Yet, the rabbis sought to pay attention to all of the commandments so they would form a way of life for God’s people. They became teachers and legal scholars, and they often disagreed with each other about how best to interpret the text of the Law.

These laws offered the Jewish people a way of salvation in the midst of a dangerous and chaotic world. There were multiple gods and religions among all of the peoples surrounding them, and following the law was a way for Jews to worship and to please the one true God. At the same time, the Lord was asking them to be God’s people and to love God. At every point in the law, there was provision made for how to restore one’s relationship to God when the laws are broken. The Book of Leviticus specifies a number of steps, including sacrifices and making restitution, that can be taken to obtain God’s forgiveness and to restore the sinner back to a right relationship with the Lord. Just as rules for good conduct are specified so are the methods of grace given as well.

Group 2 | The Prophets

An important part of Jewish history came with the prophets who were inspired by God to deliver messages to the people. While their messages sometimes addressed current events, other times they focused on the behavior of the people in light of God’s will. Inevitably they interpreted the law by giving higher priority to some commandments over others. Some of them were very critical of the rituals that followed the law but neglected the more important matters. Consider Isaiah’s words from his first chapter, verses 11-20.

What should I think about all your sacrifices?

says the LORD.

I'm fed up with the entirely burned offerings of rams
and the fat of well-fed beasts.

I don't want the blood of bulls, lambs, and goats.

When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from you,
this trampling of my temple's courts?

Stop bringing worthless offerings.

Your incense repulses me.

New moon, sabbath, and the calling of an assembly—

I can't stand wickedness with celebration!

I hate your new moons and your festivals.

They've become a burden that I'm tired of bearing.

When you extend your hands,

I'll hide my eyes from you.

Even when you pray for a long time,

I won't listen.

Your hands are stained with blood.

Wash! Be clean!

Remove your ugly deeds from my sight.

Put an end to such evil;

learn to do good.

Seek justice:

help the oppressed;

defend the orphan;

plead for the widow.

Come now, and let's settle this,

says the LORD.

Though your sins are like scarlet,

they will be white as snow.

If they are red as crimson,

they will become like wool.

If you agree and obey,

you will eat the best food of the land.

But if you refuse and rebel,

you will be devoured by the sword.

The LORD has said this.

Isaiah is appealing from one part of the law to another, more important part. He exaggerates God's dislike of ritual in favor of behaviors that address injustice and poverty. While demanding changed behavior, Isaiah also offers forgiveness for the people's sins.

Group 3 | Jesus

Jesus' preaching about the kingdom of God had strong similarities with the messages of the prophets. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Don't even begin to think that I have come to do away with the Law and the Prophets. I haven't come to do away with them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). Over the course of three chapters (Matthew 5-7), he then reinterprets the law saying that God expects us to meet a higher standard. For example, he says in 5:21-22, "You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, Don't commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgement. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgement." Note that Jesus is quoting of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13) but then focusing on the interior character of the person in addition to the outward behavior. He does the same thing with adultery and lust in Matthew 5:27-28. When Jesus confronted the Pharisees, he accused them of paying too much attention to the least important parts of the law. But that did not mean they could forget about obeying even the smallest parts. He said:

"How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You give to God a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, but you forget about the more important matters of the Law: justice, peace, and faith. You ought to give a tenth but without forgetting about those more important matters. You blind guides! You filter out an ant but swallow a camel."

(Matthew 23:23-24)

At the same time, the Gospels record that Jesus offered grace and forgiveness to people. He healed people on the Sabbath. He ate dinner at the home of Zacchaeus, a notorious sinner. He spoke to the woman at the well breaking multiple rules in order to offer her living water. One of the best examples of him offering grace comes in the narrative in John 8:1-11. The legal experts brought to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery. They suggested stoning her to death. Jesus suggested that the first stone be thrown by the person who had not sinned. One by one the experts left. Jesus said to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, don't sin anymore" (verse 11).

Group 4 | Paul and James

Paul's emphasis on salvation by grace continued Jesus' emphasis on forgiveness and including sinners and Gentiles. Paul was convinced that Christ's death and resurrection opened a way for Gentiles to be saved. Given his training as a rabbi, Paul originally thought that obedience to the law was required for salvation. His conversion and then the conversion of so many Gentiles led him to believe that salvation did not come from works of the law, but by faith. The Book of Romans contains an extended argument to prove that point. In chapter 2 above, we showed how Paul appeals to the example of Abraham. He says, "The promise to Abraham and to his descendants, that he would inherit the world, didn't come through the Law but through the righteousness that comes from faith" (Romans 4:13). This argument led Martin Luther and other Protestants to argue that we are saved by faith alone to emphasize our inability to earn salvation by doing good works. This clearly seems to be the message of Romans 5:1: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (NRSV).

The complexity of Scripture, however, is clearly illustrated by contrasting the message of James 2 with those verses in Romans. James also appeals to Abraham, but says that Abraham was justified because he offered his son Isaac on the altar. James concludes, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24 NRSV).