



Lesson 7

RG and the NT COMMANDS

BASIC IDEAS:

1. The Bible reveals God's person and work for, in, and through His people.
2. The NT Commands are descriptive of the Christ Life lived in and through our earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4).
3. IN ADAM, we were idol makers and law breakers; IN CHRIST, we are commandment keepers.
4. The Holy Spirit lives out the NT Commands in and through His people.
5. Those commands are not burdensome, but easy and light.
6. No Christian will ever be fruitless. God will always complete what He began.

KEY VERSES

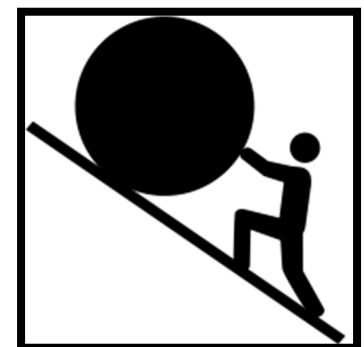
²⁸ "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. ³⁰ For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

¹ "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him. ² By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. ³ For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:1-3).

Q1 - What are these passages telling us about the Christian Life?

THE BIG PICTURE - THE Story

It is important to remember how the energy from the first strike in Newton's Cradle carries over into the next object. The movement from the second ball comes from the movement of the first ball. If one were to remove the gospel, then the commands of the New Testament are empty and nothing more than **Sisyphus'** boulder. "In Greek mythology **Sisyphus** was the king of Corinth. He was punished for his self-aggrandizing craftiness and deceitfulness by being forced to roll an immense boulder up a hill, only to watch it roll back down, repeating this action for eternity. Through the classical influence on modern culture, tasks that are both laborious and futile are therefore described as **Sisyphean**."¹



Within the *Story* there are numerous commands describing what the people of God look like. A significant issue is how to view the commands and what role they play in the life of the individual. This lesson considers those two ideas. If the Christian life is anything other than what is described in Matthew 11:28-30, then something is wrong. The Christian life should not be burdensome or heavy, but rather one of rest for the weary.

Q2 - Why do you think people find a works-based acceptance and favor attractive?

INITIAL TRUTHS TO REMEMBER

Prior to our salvation “experience,” an impossible burden to bear weighed us down. There was nothing we could possibly do to undo what was done. Our **in Adam** condition damned us forever. God, however, stepped in and through His gracious act sent His Son to be our Savior. In grace, He saved His people from their sin. He lifted from us the burden placed on us by Adam’s fall and our own rebellion. Unfortunately, many who have been delivered from one burden [sin and death] are placed under another burden [the NT Moral Imperatives], the burden of a performance-driven acceptance and favor. In this case, salvation becomes a transferring of burdens. Once we worked for our *justification*, now we work for our *sanctification*. Both are wrong and both are bondage forming. This study seeks to free once more the freed. It is to Christ and His work that we are called and invited to partake.

Q3 - How do you think most Christians view the commands of the New Testament? Based on your own experience or observation, is this good or bad?

OVERVIEW OF THE LESSON

In light of what we considered in our previous study concerning “The Christian Life,” (Cf. Lesson 5) it is necessary to continue putting the various pieces together. This present study is a vital part of “connecting the dots.” How does the cross change our present?

New Testament Commands are of great concern for all New Testament believers. The Old Testament said, “Do this, and live.” Yet we must ask ourselves the question as to whether or not this is still true for us. What is the message of the New Testament? The Apostle John says, “Believe this, and live.”

In Mark 3, Jesus identified those who believed in Him as those who were doing the will of God.

³¹ Then His mother and His brothers *arrived, and standing outside they sent word to Him and called Him.

³² A crowd was sitting around Him, and they *said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You." ³³ Answering them, He *said, "Who are My mother and My brothers?" ³⁴ Looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He *said, "Behold My mother and My brothers!" ³⁵ **"For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother."**

The Apostle John echoes this same idea in 1 John 3.

²² and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight. ²³ This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us.

If the Old Testament says, “Do this and live,” then the New Testament says, “Believe this and live.” In the New Testament, believing is doing and from the believing comes the doing. Let us unpack this thought.

Q4 - Why is believing a work?

TODAY’S LESSON

I. The Problem

Many people who are sincerely seeking to please the Lord find themselves in a mental dilemma and spiritual depression when it comes to the commands of the New Testament. Those who are honest with themselves find themselves completely unable to measure up to the New Testament ideal. Like the Mosaic Code [Law; Vassal Treaty] the standard with the New Testament Imperative is perfection. In His “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus tells His audience to be perfect as their Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48). Yet, their obedience falls far short of the mark and thus they will develop one of three reactions to the New Testament command.

- **First**, they will try to keep the command, note their terrible failure, and live with despair and defeat.
- **Second**, they will simply give up, and like the proverbial ostrich, live with their head in the sand and simply deny the command.
- **Finally**, there is the group that has convinced themselves that they are keeping the commands and live in pharisaical self-deception.

“Hearers with a seared conscience may develop an attitude of self-righteousness, judging themselves as adequately living by God’s standards. Genuine believers with tender consciences may despair because they know they constantly fall short of God’s commands. In other words, preaching bare moral truths -- moralisms -- can drive people away from Christ. Such sermons are anti-Christian, even if the bare moral and ethical assertions are true.”²

What is one to do?

Q5 - What has been your experience with the New Testament commands?

II. What are the New Testament Commands Anyway?

Let us consider five statements that help to answer this question.

RG and the New Testament Commands

First, all commands are describing what Christ is like. Much like the entire Bible, they reveal to us who God is and who we are. They reveal Him. As such, we are not to see the command as a standard to be obtained, but rather as a reflection of Him.

“What God requires are descriptions of what we have become by faith. Imperatives or subjunctives are nothing less than the indicatives describing what we already are, what we are capable of doing, what we indeed do and what we must do.”³

“Sanctification is held out not as an abstract ethical code, but as Christ himself. Jesus is our sanctification.”⁴

Second, commands are describing something we work from, not something we are to work for. The admonition to be holy is because we are holy. We do not work to be holy; we work because we are holy. Please note the following passages.

“Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, **just as you are in fact unleavened.** For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).

“Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (**just as you actually do walk**), that you excel still more” (1 Thess. 4:1).

“If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for **the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are**” (1 Cor. 3:17).

“By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; **because as He is, so also are we in this world**” (1 John 4:17)

“I can only workout my sanctification, because God is working in my sanctification.”⁵

Third, the commands or imperatives work in the horizontal, not the vertical. Commands change our relationship to “one another” in the **horizontal**. They do not change our relationship to God in the **vertical**.

“On one level sanctification is about how Christians are to live, but it has a prior reality in what God has always done and specifically his giving himself in Christ for us. In our sanctified lives God extends his mercy to the distressed.”⁶

Fourth, commands are a different way of saying, “Keep, obey, fruit, and good works.” If such a grouping is not valid, then each one of the above describes a distinct act. This idea will be explored further in Lesson 8, “RG² and the Holy Spirit.”

Fifth, positively, adherence to the command does not make us anymore in line with God’s approval. Our obedience does not make us more “bless-able.” Our obedience does not put a smile on His face (if such language is permissible).

Unfortunately, we have defined a lifetime of obedience by individual acts. Nonetheless, such a focus is isolating the pieces from the bigger picture. Life is not defined by the individual pieces but by the larger pattern.

Because of our past instruction, our minds often think we are always working from a position of deficiency, rather than abundance. We have been conditioned to believe we are defeated and thus are trying to become victorious. Such thinking is unfortunate. We are not defeated in any sense of the word. We are always triumphing in Him (Rom. 8:37). Moreover, **we work from victory, not for victory (Cf. Lesson 12).**

Sixth, negatively, non-conformity to the command does not make us any more in line with God's judgment. Our disobedience does not make us more "condemned." Our disobedience does not put a frown on His face (again, if such language is permissible).

Whatever divine penalty rested against sin, it was carried out in full at Calvary (Col. 2:13). In a world that rewards hard work and achievement, God's standard of measurement is far different. **There is nothing we can do to measure up to His expectations. His standard is perfection. God's standard is so high that He had to send His Son to work in our behalf. To think we can do anything to fulfill His expectations is based on a faulty view of our ability and His benchmark. In such thinking, man's ability has been raised and God's benchmark has been lowered. Whether in obedience or in disobedience, our response is to be the same. We are simply to believe that He is enough in this life and in the life to come.**

By way of a summary statement, what can we note?

Q6 - What do you find different in the above section from your previous understanding?

Q7 - Why would the above information cause confusion?

CONCLUSION

First, in the pulpit ministry, calling upon people to change their behavior is to place "the cart before the horse." It is of little spiritual value to draw people's attention to the fruit and branch, when it should be placed on the vine (John 15:5).

Second, a profession of faith cannot be separated from a practice of faith. The two are inseparably linked. What one believes does express itself in how one behaves. "Faith without works is [a] dead [faith]" (James 2:14-26). We believe we do not have to work to bear fruit. We will bear fruit, but the focus should be on Him.

Third, every good tree does bear good fruit (Matt. 7:17, 18). Good soil *always* produces fruit (Mark 4:8). It is impossible for it to be otherwise. This does not mean that fruit or obedience will always be expressed in the same way and in the same quantity by different and diverse people. We do believe, however, that God is always working in His people. When we are not

bearing fruit or are disobedient, we have a tendency to assume that God is not working. Just the opposite is probably true. In these moments of despair, God is working deeply. We base this on 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24, and Philippians 1:6.

Fourth, obedience / good works is the natural outworking of one's pursuit of Christ. When we make the statement, "We do not focus on our obedience," We finish it by saying, "We focus on Him." Thus, our attention and energy is on Him, not on our obedience (Heb. 12:1, 2).

Q8 - If the keeping of God's commandments do not change God's opinion of you, then how do you stay motivated to obey?

Q9 - If what is said is true, then what changes in your life with others and with God?

NEXT LESSON - RG and the Holy Spirit

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sisyphus>

² <https://erlc.com/article/what-god-has-joined-together-indicatives-and-imperatives>

³ David Scaer (2015) "Sanctification," *Concordia Journal*: Vo..41: No. 3, Article 6.

⁴ David Scaer (2015) "Sanctification," *Concordia Journal*: Vo..41: No. 3, Article 6.

⁵ Chris Pofahl, verbal comment 3/17/21

⁶ David Scaer (2015) "Sanctification," *Concordia Journal*: Vo..41: No. 3, Article 6.