

From Lecture 7

Moses on the Top of Sinai.
Darkness Above
the Mountain
And Inaccessible Light

Chapter 23 commences the enumeration of the Lord's precepts, rules, "judgements", ordinances, regulations which serve to adjust the Ten Commandments to all situations of human life. These rules, in their turn, are also called commandments – מִצְוֹת <mitz'vot>, from the verb צוה <tzy'va> – "to order", "to rule", "to command". They are stated not only in the Book of Exodus, but also in the Leviticus and Numbers, and then are elaborated and completed in Deuteronomy. Traditionally, the number of these commandments is 613; they are divided into "positive" – prescribing certain actions in certain circumstances – and "negative" ones, which prohibit to perform certain actions in any circumstances or those specially stipulated. "Positive" commandments (from the Hebrew word עשה <a'se> – "do") amount to 248, which is also the number of main parts, organs and ligaments of the human body, whereas "negative" commandments (from Hebrew לא תעשה <lo taa'se> – "do not do") number 365, which coincides with the number of days in the solar year. Such an abundance of regulations does not expose "the rigour" of God, who gave the Law which "cannot be obeyed", but rather, it shows His mercy to people, manifested in the variety of granted commandments, with a reward for the obedience to each of them... For the very idea that the Almighty and Gracious Lord cares for all

the tribulations of humanity and guides us in every situation as a thoughtful father teaches his beloved children, – this single thought could fill us with divine awe of His infinite mercifulness! The Ten Commandments are stated too briefly and succinctly to serve a clear instruction in all cases of human life, therefore they require broad commentary, which is provided in 613 particular regulations. One finds oneself in diverse situations in the course of a lifetime. Naturally, the best is to know and follow the will of God in every case. This is the only way of behavior which can be blessed from on high.

From what has been said, it is clear that each regulation of the Law becomes a source of blessing if fulfilled. That is why a whole chapter (the 28th) in the Book of Deuteronomy is devoted to the blessings that await those who follow the commandments, and to the curse that comes upon those who ignore them:

...All these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the Lord your God. (Deuteronomy 28, 2)

In his numerous psalms King David is ineffably joyous about the Law with its commandments as an inexhaustible source of blessings for all those who follow it. Let

us focus on some of the definitions that David gives to those who obey the commandments of God's Law and to the Law itself. Firstly, the one who obeys the Law of God is called by David blessed (or, in other words, happy):

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;

but their delight is in the Law of the Lord, and on His Law they meditate day and night. (Psalms 1, 1-2)

In another psalm David names those who obey the Law of God not only blessed, but also “undefiled in the way”, or directing their steps towards eternal felicity:

Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the Law of the Lord. (Psalms 119, 1)

David's definition assumes a special meaning when compared to Jesus Christ's direction to the way one can obtain eternal life:

“...If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” (Matthew 19,17)

Secondly, David calls the Law of God “perfect”, or without any fault (Hebrew תורה תמימה <Torah temi'ma> – “perfect Teaching”, or “flawless Law”), and His commandment – clear.

The Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;

the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;

the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;

the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is Your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (Psalms 19, 7-11)

There could hardly be any doubt that the words “the decrees”, “the precepts”, “the ordinances” used in this psalm refer to the Law of God (see also Exodus 31, 18;

Leviticus 18, 30; 24, 22 etc.). This is further confirmed by the content of the 119th psalm, where each of such definitions is explicitly repeated in reference to the Law of God:

The Law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. (Psalms 119, 72)

This verse is parallel to those stated before: “More to be desired are they than gold”;

All Your commandments are enduring; I am persecuted without cause; help me! (Psalms 119, 86)

– a verse correspondent to: “...the ordinances of the Lord are true...”;

How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! (Psalms 119, 103)

– compare with “are they... sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb”;

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (Psalms 119, 105)

– a corresponding image is: “the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes”;

Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies... (Psalms 119, 98)

– resembles the verse quoted above: “the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple”, etc. We can see how eloquently the commandments are described in the Book of Psalms. Definitions and comparisons given by David as well as by many other prophets and righteous men (Proverbs 28, 7; 29, 18; Isaiah 42, 12; Malachi 2, 6, etc.) abundantly reveal love for the Law of God, which is accepted as absolutely true by all devout people:

Oh, how I love Your Law! It is my meditation all day long.

<...>

Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and Your Law is the truth.

<...>

I hate and abhor falsehood, but I love Your Law. (Psalms 119, 97–163)

However, there are exegetes who assume that the whole Law of God was cancelled and abolished in the age of the New Testament because of its alleged “faults”. Let us focus on Jesus and his disciples’ attitude to the commandments of the Lord. Firstly, let us mention the fundamental definition of Jesus’s attitude to God’s Law given in his sermon on the Mount:

Think not that I am come to destroy the Law, or the Prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.

For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the Law, till all be fulfilled.

Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. (Matthew 5, 17–19)

It is evident from the context that the words about “the least commandment” refer to the Law delivered by Moses, but not to the teaching of Jesus Christ, if only because ‘jot’ and ‘tittle’ denote particular Hebrew let-

ters: י <yod> and ו <vav>, – and consequently, this refers to a written text, that is, the scroll of the Torah.

Let us recall Jesus’s teaching that eternal life is gained by obeying the commandments (Matthew 19, 17) and his warning:

On that day many will say to me, ‘lord, lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers. (Matthew 7, 22–23)

Jesus left to his apostles the same instruction about following the Law of God, which is reflected in their writings. For instance, apostle Paul claims that if you commit sin, then you

...are convicted by the Law as transgressors.

For whoever keeps the whole Law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

...Now if you do not commit adultery but if you murder, you have become a transgressor of the Law. (James 2, 9–11)

He calls the Law royal, i.e. granted by God – the King of the universe (James 2, 8).

Apostle Peter warns the disciples:

...beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. (2 Peter 3, 17)

These words make it obvious that as early as in the 1st century AD some trend, probably gnostic, which the apostle calls “the error of the lawless” (for it denied the need of keeping the commandments) threatened to lead away those Christians who were not established in the faith (see 2 Peter 3, 16).

Apostle John teaches that

...sin is lawlessness. (1 John 3, 4)

and that obeying God’s commandments “pleases Him” (1 John 3, 22). He teaches his followers that the love for God and neighbour is in obeying God’s commandments (1 John 5, 2–3), by the way, not only “the new commandment”, proclaimed by Jesus (John 13, 34; 1 John 2, 8), but also “the old” ones, i.e. obviously, the Law granted by God through Moses (1 John 2, 7).

Apostle Paul teaches us that

For it is not the hearers of the Law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the Law who will be justified. (Romans 2, 13)

He also warns that the one who breaks the Law “dishonours God” (Romans 2, 23). Besides, Paul declares that

...the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. (Romans 7, 12)

and that “in his inmost self” he finds “delight in the Law of God” (Romans 7, 22).

The original Christian church in Jerusalem is described in the following words:

...You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the Law. (Acts 21, 20)

There are, however, several passages in Paul’s letters which which, if read inattentively, can lead to the conclu-

sion that the apostle announced the “abolition”, “abrogation” of the Law of God given through Moses. It was apostle Peter who called these extracts of Paul’s letters “hard to understand” and cautioned the Christians against misinterpretation in the spirit of “the error of the lawless” (2 Peter 3, 15–17). To make the picture complete, let us turn to some concepts of this sort in Paul’s letters.

Firstly, let us focus on the well-known sentence from the Letter to the Romans:

...My friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. (Romans 7, 4)

A primary, superficial perception of these words seems to indicate that they concern “the abrogation” of the Law given on Mount Sinai, to which the Christians have allegedly “died”. However, a careful study of the context leads us to the conclusion that apostle Paul’s approach includes the opposition of the two laws – the Law of God, which attracts his spirit, and “the law of sin that dwells in the members” of a person, the law of passion and pursuits of his material nature.

For I delight in the Law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. (Romans 7, 22)

Developing the idea of two opposite laws, which both attempt to have complete dominion over man, the apostle calls the former “the Law of the Spirit of life”, whereas the latter “the law of sin and of death”, stating that

...The Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. (Romans 8, 2)

According to the words of the apostle, it happened only after he accepted Jesus by faith as the Messiah, who had been promised by the prophets.

And later, explaining the intent of the sacrifice made by Jesus on Calvary, the apostle relates it to the former disability of man burdened by sin to keep God’s commandments. New force is given to him through Christ’s sacrifice:

For God has done what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending His own Son in the

likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, He condemned sin in the flesh,

so that the just requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8, 3–4)

So, the thought delivered by the apostle is that due to the Calvary sacrifice believers have received new force, new support from above to obey the Law and commandments of God in the Holy Spirit. If in view of all this we return to Paul's expression

...my friends, you have died to the law... (Romans 7, 4)

it must be confessed that its idea is that believers have died for “the law of sin that dwells in the members” of the body in order to keep the commandments of God's Law without any obstacles. Such is apostle Paul's dialectics, rather complicated, but clarified through close reading.

Let us turn to another example of Paul's words, which are “hard to understand”, i.e. not quite clear when read

casually. In his Letter to Colossians he writes that God has forgiven people their sins:

...Erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross... (Colossians 2, 14)

Why is a certain “record” mentioned here? Let us turn our attention to the fact that this “record” is characterized with the words “that stood against us”. What was there in the Law of God, recorded by Moses, “against” people? Surely, the commandments, as we know, contributed to the welfare and prosperity of the person and society that kept them! Whereas “against” people and hostile to them were the curses that came upon those who opposed God's Law. The whole list of these curses can be found in the Book of Deuteronomy (28, 15–68); they are also touched upon in the Book of Leviticus (26, 14–41) and some other episodes of the Pentateuch (Deuteronomy 4, 25–30; 27, 13–26 etc.). It was from the curses – “the record that stood against us” – that Christ released believers through his sacrifice on the Calvary. Such interpretation of the words of Paul

can be supported by another contemplation to the same topic, stated in the Letter to the Galatians:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” –

in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3, 13–14)

The word translated here as “the curse” literally means “damnation” – the Old Greek *καταρα* <ka’tara>. So, the apostle claims that believers are not “redeemed” from God’s Law itself, but from the damnation that had threatened them for their sins – for the breaking of the Law. But now the sins are forgiven and they have been admitted to the blessing of God. This text fully affirms the argumentation about “the record that stood against us” stated above.

One more example of Paul’s statements that could be interpreted in the spirit of “antinomism” (denial of the Law and commandments) can be found in the Letter to Colossians:

Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths.

These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col 2, 16–17)

On the basis of these words, a large number of exegetes of Paul’s letters claim that the apostle announced everything related to the Lord’s festivals (Leviticus 23) unrequired for the Christians: the seventh day rest, celebrating the Passover with its ritual meal – “food and drink” (Exodus 12, 8 and 14–18; Matthew 26, 17–23) etc. However, the context of the circumstances that the Christian community in the city of Colossae found itself at the moment the letter was received sets the record straight. For the pagan Greek environment in Asia Minor, where Colossian Christians were situated, were alien to “Jewish customs”, directed by the Law of God (Sabbath, Passover meal, other statements concerning the festivals), and perceived them at best indifferently, and sometimes even with hostility (see Acts 17, 18). Consequently, the pagans surrounding those Colossians who believed in Christ could condemn their former fellow believers only for keeping the traditions

that had once been alien to them (celebrating Sabbath and annual Biblical festivals, participation in the ritual Passover meal – I Corinthians 5, 8, etc). This is the right way to regard Paul's address to Colossians: "...do not let anyone condemn you..." – for obeying the regulations of God's Law, which serve as antitypes of the events of Christ's life (Matthew 26, 26–28). So, this has nothing to do with an appeal to break the regulations of the Law. (see also "The Introduction to the Old Testament. The Pentateuch", The Book of Leviticus, Chapter 2).

There are also some other statements that apostle Paul expressed in a way "hard to understand", for example:

...no one will be justified by the works of the Law.
(Galatians 2, 16)

Such expressions can be found in Paul's letters several times in different variations (see Galatians 2, 21; 3, 11; Romans 3, 20). And each time he speaks not about "salvation" or "deliverance", but exactly about "justification": the Old Greek δικαιοσύνη <dikajō'sune>, which stands for "justice", "lawfulness", "righteousness". Consequently, it is referred to "the restoration of justice", "observance of lawfulness", "absolution

from the judgement". Naturally, "the judgement" here denotes the Justice of Heaven, and the absolution is meant for those who commit crimes breaking, offending the commandments of God's Law. Such a person cannot hope for redemption only for observing the Law afterwards. This would be similar to a murderer who hopes for an act of grace and redemption only because he hasn't killed anyone since he committed his first crime. This is what is meant by an attempt to "be justified by the Law". The real "passing over the sins (i.e. lawless actions) previously committed" is obtained through repentance and faith in the propitiation of Jesus Christ (Romans 2, 23–25; Galatians 2, 16). Such an understanding of Paul's words based on the text tears to bits all the interpretations referring to their "antinomy".

And lastly, it is alleged that by his reproach to the Christians of Galatia for turning back "to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits" Paul meant their "turning back again" to obeying the Law of Moses. However, before their conversion, the great majority of the Christians of Galatia had been pagans, but not Jews (see Galatians 4, 8). Consequently, it was impossible for them to "turn back again" (here the Old Greek verb

ἐπιστρέφω <epist'rapho> –“to turn”, “to resume” is used with the proverb παλιν <‘palin> – “back”, “round”, “again”, which supports the idea of a repeated return) to the Law of Moses, which they had never kept before. And therefore, “turning back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits” (the Old Greek στοιχειον <stoj'hejon> imparted here as “elemental spirit” could be more precisely translated as “element”) implies former pagan beliefs of Galatians related to worshipping nature elements and astrology (see also “You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years.” – Galatians 4, 10).

In summary, we can make an important conclusion: the apostles of the early Christian church, the spiritual teachers, believed obedience to the Law of God to be absolutely essential. It is quite a different thing that recent converts were supposed to turn from their former pagan way of life to keeping the commandments step by step, starting only from general regulations, compulsory for everybody – “the laws for the children of Noah” (see also “The Introduction to the Old Testament. The Pentateuch”, The Book of Genesis, Chapter 5), gradually studying the Law in its entirety (Acts 15, 19–21, cf. Genesis 9, 1–9).

What is the essence of Jesus Christ’s approach to the Law of God? Briefly, it is the fact that he made the spiritual side of keeping the commandments the key pillar of the Law, placed love to God and neighbour at the top of all, explaining that it is the foundation for all commandments, their sense and essence (Matthew 5, 17–48; 19, 16–21; John 13, 34–35; 15, 9–13).