

SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-07-23—HEAPING COALS OF FIRE

Paul wrote, “[W]e know that **the law is spiritual**” (Heb. 7:11). What exactly does that mean? Actually, it means several things. From a physical perspective, it means that no man or woman can keep it without God’s Holy Spirit IN them:

JEREMIAH 31:33-34 “But this *shall be* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: After those days,” says the LORD, “**I will put My law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts**; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34 And **they shall no more teach each man** his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD;’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” says the LORD. “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sins no more.”

This is a simple enough concept because we all know that it is impossible to fully understand God’s Law, much less keep it, without His Holy Spirit. That is why, in verse 34, no one will teach the Law to others—the Holy Spirit will be IN them. No one will *have* to teach it because it will be a desire in their hearts.

But there is another reason that the Law¹ is spiritual and it is one of the two main reasons for the ministry of Jesus Christ (the other was to preach the gospel of the kingdom):

MATTHEW 5:17-20 Do not think that **I [Jesus Christ] have come** to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but **to fulfill [the Law]**. 18 For truly I say to you, until the heaven and the earth shall pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no way pass from the Law until everything has been fulfilled. 19 Therefore, whoever shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever shall practice and teach *them*, this one shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I say to you, **unless your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees**, there is no way *that* you shall enter into the kingdom of heaven.

How did Jesus fulfill the Law? By teaching that keeping the Law spiritually was not a matter of strength of will in the mind, but something WITHIN the heart. The scribes and Pharisees kept the Law to the letter but Jesus condemned them because their hearts were still evil. God’s Law is a way of agape love rather than strict adherence without mercy. He gave several examples in Mat. 5:21-44 but the one that really makes my point is:

¹ In this context, Law with a capital “L” refers to all of God’s commandments, statutes, judgments, testimonies, and precepts.

MATTHEW 5:27-28 You have heard that it was said to those *in ancient times*, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you, everyone who looks upon a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her **in his heart**.

Fulfilling the Law *spiritually* changed how the Law ruled over a person. For anyone to perfectly obey God, the Law had to come from the heart of a person. Why?

COLOSSIANS 3:15 And let the peace of God **rule in your hearts**, to which you were called into one body, and be thankful.

Rule means to govern. Interestingly, it also means to *prevail*. The problem with keeping the Law is that the heart rules over the mind. Why does someone murder? Because feelings of anger in the heart overcome the mind that knows it is wrong. Many times the heart **prevails** over the mind. This was the fault with the Old Covenant:

HEBREWS 8:7-8 For if **the first covenant had been faultless**, *then* no provision for a second *covenant* would have been made. 8 But since **He found fault with them**, He says, " 'Behold, *the days are coming*,' says *the Lord*, 'when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah;

The first covenant was faulty because the people did not have the Holy Spirit. After writing this, Paul also said:

HEBREWS 8:9-10 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in *the day* that I took hold of their hand to lead them out of *the land* of Egypt because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them,' says *the Lord*. 10 'For **this is the covenant that I will establish** with the house of Israel after those days,' says *the Lord*: 'I will give my laws into their minds, and **I will inscribe them upon their hearts**; and I will be their God, and they will be My people.

Obviously, Paul was quoting Jeremiah 31:33-34. Under the New Covenant, God not only writes His Law in our minds but also our hearts. How? By the Holy Spirit that imparts God's agape love to us—"For **the one who loves** another **has fulfilled the law**" (Rom. 13:8). That is why Jesus said:

MARK 12:30-31 And **you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart**, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This *is the first commandment*. 31 And *the second is* like this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

It comes down this: knowing and understanding God's Law are not enough. Yes, it must be written in our minds, but unless our hearts DESIRE to keep it no one can perfectly obey the Law. Our hearts prevail over our minds all too often. Are our hearts filled with fear, anger, and jealousy or are they filled with agape love? Whichever it is, that will

prevail. In fact, if true agape love reigns in our hearts then we will even be capable of loving our **enemies**. This is a great example of the Law being spiritual:

MATTHEW 5:43-44 You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, **love your enemies**, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,

It is easy to love those who love us, but loving an enemy is only possible with God's agape love. God proved this is possible because He had agape love toward His enemies. Who were His enemies? **Us**—when we were sinners². But there is a Scripture that seemingly contradicts everything that has been discussed so far:

ROMANS 12:19-20 19 Beloved, do not avenge yourselves; rather, leave *this* to God's wrath; for it is written, " 'Vengeance is Mine! I will recompense,' says the Lord." 20 Therefore, **if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for in doing this you will be heaping coals of fire on his head.**

It is almost saying that we should do good for our enemies *because* God's vengeance will be upon them. Is it agape love to hope that God punishes someone? Is our motive for doing good to our enemies that they receive a harsh punishment? Is that what Jesus preached? Notice Paul's conclusion:

ROMANS 12:21 **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

How do we overcome evil with good if our motivation is that God's wrath comes upon them? To figure this out requires looking at the Greek. Just like there are several Greek words (*agape, eros, storge, and phileo*) that can be translated *love*, there are a couple of Greek words that are translated *evil*. You might be familiar with *poneros*, which means *evil* in the way that Satan is evil. It is the opposite of God's goodness and righteousness. However, the word Paul used is *kakos*, meaning *bad* or the opposite of good in the sense of **works**.

Paul might be saying to overcome the evil of others by doing good to them. But I think he is emphasizing that we must overcome our OWN desires to do evil to our enemies with good. What is "good?" It is good intentions or works. It is the motivation of a heart filled with agape love. So, Paul is not contradicting the commandment of Jesus to love our enemies. But, still, there is the question of why he talks about heaping judgment upon them. Paul was actually quoting Solomon:

PROVERBS 25:21-22 If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, 22 For you shall heap coals of fire upon his head, **and the LORD shall reward you.**

² 1 John 4:19.

Notice that last phrase that Paul omitted—“the LORD shall reward you.” God will reward us how? By heaping coals of fire on the head of our enemy? No, for the agape love IN OUR HEARTS:

LUKE 6:35 But **love your enemies**, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; **and your reward [in the kingdom] shall be great**, and **you shall be the children of the Highest; for He is good** to the unthankful and *the* wicked.

Those who have agape love for their enemies will be in the kingdom and rewarded. Why? Because they overcame their carnal desire to repay evil with evil. Instead, they had agape love to do good even to their enemies. We do this because agape love in our hearts prevails over our minds. If our hearts are filled with anger, then we will desire to see our enemies suffer. If they are filled with agape love, then we are like our Father in heaven whereby we love our enemies and show them mercy.

The fact is that all who practice evil (Gk. *poneros*) face the coming vengeance of God unless they repent³. THIS WILL HAPPEN REGARDLESS OF WHETHER WE DO EVIL OR GOOD TO THEM. But doing good to our enemies should NOT be motivated by vengeance. Regardless of what our enemies do, God will reward us in the kingdom for showing them agape love. But repaying evil with evil brings God’s vengeance upon US as well as them. The bottom line is that doing good to our enemies breaks the chain of evil. God’s people must be willing to endure the evil works of our enemies with agape love in return.

LUKE 6:45 **The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth that which is good**; and the wicked man out of the wicked treasure of his heart brings forth that which *is* wicked; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

The Law is spiritual because it has to be. No matter how hard we try to obey the Law, if our hearts are filled with fear, anger, and jealousy then those things will prevail over our minds. Only with hearts of agape love can the Law of God be perfected in us.

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

Steven Greene

<https://sabbathreflections.org>

³ John 3:20-21.