

Leviticus 18:5

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/lev/lev-18/leviticus-185/>

God's law presents to us an ideal way to live in harmony with God and our fellow humans by defining what is right and wrong. As our creator, God knows this better than any human. In pronouncing His ways, He is making clear the path to our ultimate best interest.

The nature of God's covenant was to lay out behaviors that would lead to blessings for the people of Israel. A community where each person loves others as they love themselves will flourish much more than a community where the strong exploit the weak. But God has left it to the choice of Israel, whether or not to believe God and seek His ways. God makes it clear: *So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD.*"

Leviticus 18:5 is quoted several times in the New Testament (Matthew 19:17; Luke 10:28; Romans 10:5; Galatians 3:12). Jewish tradition interprets *by which a man may live* as speaking of a completely fulfilled life, often translated to English in scripture as "eternal life." Verse 5 might then be rendered, *So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may have life if he does them.*

In his commentary on the Torah the Jewish sage Rashi says the following regarding this verse,

"'by which a man may live' - in the world to come. For if you say it means that he may live in this world, is it not a fact that in the end he must die."

In saying this, Rashi indicates that the *live* in Leviticus 18:5 cannot be speaking of physical life, since it is appointed unto man to die once (Hebrews 9:27). Therefore, Rashi reasons, this verse must be speaking of a quality or fulfillment of life.

Jesus seems to invoke this quality-of-life application of Leviticus 18:5 when the rich young ruler asked him, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" Jesus replies in Matthew 19:17b, "if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." This is similar to the phrase in Leviticus 18: *So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live (have life) if he does them.*

The context of Matthew 19 indicates that Jesus is speaking to the young ruler about a quality or fulfillment of life that is rooted in spiritual vibrancy. The young ruler missed an opportunity to follow Jesus while He lived on earth, because he did not want to sell his possessions and follow Jesus. This meant he missed out on a greater level of fulfillment in life that he could have had, but chose against. This was a spiritual benefit that was available through what the world would consider a substantially reduced level of material prosperity, given that Jesus invited the young ruler to sell his possessions.

In Luke 10, Jesus answered a lawyer who asked about inheriting “eternal life,” who asserted he had obeyed the two greatest commandments already, to love God with everything, and to love his neighbor as he loves himself. Jesus told him, “You have answered correctly; do this and you will *live*” (Luke 10:28). This also sounds similar to Leviticus 18:5.

The New Testament teaches that when believers live by faith, obeying the Spirit, we can perform His *judgments* and *keep* His *statutes* (Romans 8:4; Galatians 5:22). Conversely, when believers live by the flesh, we end up acting like the Egyptians and Canaanites, choosing to exploit others to satisfy our evil desires (Galatians 5:13-15). Observing God’s instructions from the heart can only be done by faith (Romans 1:17).

The law (*My judgments and My statutes*) presents to us an ideal way to live in harmony with *God* and our fellow humans by defining what is right and wrong. Which is to say what is good for the human community (right) and what is harmful to it (wrong). As our creator, *God* of course knows this better than any human. In pronouncing His ways, He is making clear the path to our ultimate best interest. However, trying to keep God’s instructions without a heart change, and in our own power rather than the power of the Holy Spirit, will ultimately produce hypocrisy and rebellion (Romans 9:30-32).

Through Christ’s sacrifice and the power of the Holy Spirit we now have a new and living way to approach God in righteousness apart from using an external list of rules and ceremonies to obey. This new and living way consists of a new heart on which God’s instructions are written (Romans 2:14-15). This law then becomes like a reflection into which we can peer and becomes a law of liberty (James 1:25).

Jesus is the only person to ever live a sinless life (i.e. did not disobey God’s instructions). He was our example of how to live a righteous life by faith. It is clear from the New Testament that only the righteous inherit eternal life as a reward (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Matthew 7:21, 19:17b, Romans 6:22, 1 John 3:15). This reward occurs in this life, as Jesus indicated in His answer to the rich young ruler, as well as in the next life (Colossians 3:23). Eternal life is a gift (Romans 6:23) as well as a reward (Romans 2:7).

The New Testament speaks of eternal life as both a gift based on faith alone as well as a reward for obedience. Believers gain the gift of eternal life by believing on Jesus, having enough faith to look upon Him and hope to be delivered from the deadly venom of sin (John 3:14-15). The reward of eternal life is to experience the gift of God. That occurs in this life through walking by faith, seeking praise from God rather than being self-seeking (Romans 2:5-8). When we walk by faith in this life, we also lay up treasures in heaven as rewards in the next life.

New Testament believers have a covenant written on their hearts, that is sealed by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13; Hebrews 8:10; Jeremiah 31:33). *Israel* has a written covenant, with specific, tangible blessings connected with dwelling in the Promised Land. The tangible benefits received by *Israel* are clearly spelled out, as here in Leviticus. In this manner, *Israel* might be represented by the first workers hired to work the vineyard in Jesus’s parable of the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). They were given a contract with a specific benefit for a specific obedience. New Testament believers might represent the last workers to enter the vineyard, who agree to

work and trust the beneficence of the vineyard owner, who represents God. Much like the rewards God has promised to Israel for obedience to His covenant, God has also promised great rewards to New Testament believers, rewards that will be experienced in this life as well as in the next (Revelation 22:12).

When New Testament believers *live* by faith, obeying the Spirit, we gain strength to *perform* His *judgments and keep* His *statutes*. Through walking in obedience, we fulfill the law (Romans 8:4). When we *live* by the flesh, we end up acting like the Egyptians and Canaanites choosing to exploit others to satisfy our evil desires (Galatians 5:19-21). Observing God's instructions from the heart can only be done by faith.

In Romans 10, the apostle Paul summarizes two methods that people attempt to use to walk in righteousness that they may inherit eternal life, both now as well as in the age to come. He calls these two methods:

1. Righteousness by the Law (which does not work)
2. Righteousness by Faith (which does work)

The Jewish people, Paul's brethren, focused on Leviticus 18:5, seeking righteousness by the law, and Paul observes:

"What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works."
(Romans 9:30-32a)

Attempting to obtain righteousness by works is not just a Jewish issue but a human problem. Any time we point to a specific thing and say, "Because I control this, God must bless or approve me" we are missing the point. This is what Paul would call seeking our own righteousness (Philippians 3:8).

True righteousness comes through seeking obedience, trusting God's ways are for our best. It is in this way that we gain the true heart of righteousness. It has always been this way.

The dictionary defines the word "righteousness" as, "A conduct that is morally right or justifiable; virtuous." Biblically speaking, righteousness means to align our ways with God's ways. The Bible also speaks of righteousness being imputed or gifted by God to unrighteous or sinful individuals (which includes every human being, Romans 3:23) whose conduct is not morally right or justifiable. Because of their belief that God can heal them of the poison of sin in their life, God grants righteousness to that person. God's ability and desire to take sinful people and transform them into righteous people is one of the overarching themes of the Bible.

Trying to generate righteousness by keeping a list of rules in our own power is essentially filthy rags to *God*. True righteousness (white robes as opposed to filthy rags) can only be obtained through living by faith (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:16-17). Rules can be manipulated to justify a

corrupt motive. For example, Jesus chastised the Pharisees for making rules that turned the Sabbath from a blessing into a burden (Mark 2:27). It seems clear from the way the Pharisees sought to use their Sabbath rules to oppose Jesus that their perversion of the Sabbath command was self-seeking and intended to give them political power. A heart of faith seeking God's heart is the path where righteousness can be obtained, where God's commands can instruct us into life.

Paul uses Leviticus 18:5 as the example of righteousness by the law (which does not succeed in generating true righteousness) in Romans 10:5, "For *Moses* writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law *shall live* (or "shall have life") by that righteousness."

Then, in Romans 10:6-8, Paul uses Deuteronomy 30:14 as the example of righteousness by faith (which does succeed in generating righteousness) that he is promoting to the Gentiles.

"But what does it say? 'The Word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart'—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching."

(Romans 10:8)

In writing this, Paul is not saying we should ignore Leviticus 18. Paul repeats the essence of Leviticus 18's emphasis on abstaining from sexual immorality in this statement from the New Testament:

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor."

(1 Thessalonians 4:3-4)

Why then does Paul use Leviticus 18:5 to illustrate an approach that will fail? It seems likely that Paul is contrasting a "follow the rules" focus in Leviticus 18:5 with "obey from the heart" focus in Deuteronomy 30:14. As we will see, Leviticus 18 spends much time "closing loopholes" in the rules. A heart seeking *God* and seeking to abstain from sexual immorality would not need loopholes to be closed. As an example, Leviticus 18:9 will tell us to avoid having sexual intercourse with "your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether born at home or born outside." This is "closing loopholes" of someone who would say "Well, I can have sexual relations with her because she is not really my sister for purposes of this rule, because she has another mother, and she was born in different home."

Paul's point is that if the heart doesn't change, the rules can always be twisted. Righteousness means aligning our ways with God's ways, which brings harmony to ourselves and one another. That is the result of loving one another rather than exploiting one another. Paul says this overtly in his letter to the Romans, making clear that the human inability to follow the law is not the fault of the law:

"So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."

(Romans 7:12)

The problem is our sinful flesh, and its desire to follow our own, self-destructive ways.

When we have God's instructions written in our heart by faith, then through the power of the Spirit we gain the ability to observe God's will as we walk in the Spirit and reject our flesh (Romans 7:22; 8:4). In order to walk in the Spirit, we must believe what is true, and think what is true, and then we will act according to what is true. Jesus says in Matthew 12:34b, "For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart." Paul summarizes Deuteronomy 30:11-20 in Romans 10:9-10:

"...that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."
(Romans 10:9-10)

This is a chiasm that emphasizes the central importance of faith (belief). A chiasm is a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order with the center of the chiasm being the main point. Below is the chiastic structure of Romans 10:9-10:

A) Confess (Jesus as Lord)

B) Believe (in His resurrection)

B') Believe (His ways are for our best)

A') Confess (His ways are for our best)

The inference in Romans 10 is that if we believe God, and think and speak these beliefs, then we will naturally act out these beliefs. This is the path of gaining righteousness. It is rooted in a heart seeking obedience to *God* through faith, rather than in trusting our human willpower to self-reform according to a list of rules or standards. To walk in faith requires choice but relies on God's power and seeks His ways. This contrasts to the "righteousness of the law" approach that Paul illustrates using Leviticus 18:5.

Again, the lack is not God's law. As Paul says in Romans 3:31, "Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law." When we *live* in righteousness by faith, we fulfill Deuteronomy 30:14 establishing that the Law is true (Romans 8:4). But when we try to *live* in righteousness by the law from our own willpower, apart from *God* it only ends up producing lawlessness. In that state we end up with the inevitable result of exploiting others rather than loving others.

It is important to remember that even while believers can *live* and walk by faith, having God's instructions in our heart and mouth, there is still another law at work in us, the law of sin and death that we inherited from Adam, our earthly father (Romans 7:23). To walk in righteousness and enter kingdom life requires that we reject and crucify that fleshly law each day, and instead walk by faith (Romans 7:17; 8:1). Our deepest desire as humans is to walk in harmony with *God* and others, and to please *God* our heavenly Father. When we walk in the Spirit, we sow into that desire, and when we sow to the flesh we sow into death (Galatians 6:7-9).

By concluding with the statement *I am the LORD*, or literally, *I am Yahweh* (the “Existent One”), *God* is telling His people:

1. I am the One who will correct you when you go astray as a father chastises his son (Hebrews 12:6), and if you rebelliously continue to *live* in sin, I will give you over to your sin nature (Romans 1:24).
2. I am the One who will reward you greatly for your obedience to My instructions. In this life and in the world to come (Hebrews 11:6).

Biblical Text

⁵So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD.