

The Handwriting of Ordinances

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Colossians 2

¹³ And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, has he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;

¹⁴ Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;

¹⁵ And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it.

¹⁶ Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a holy-day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days;

¹⁷ Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.

The text, like *Ephesians* 2:15-16, is often misapplied; it cannot, however, be applied to those things contained in the ten commandments, unless the texts which show the enduring nature of that law are either forgotten or ignored. The ten commandments were graven on tables of stone, by the finger of God. See *Exodus* 32:15-16; *Deuteronomy* 4:12-13.

Blotted Out

Now the Bible is a consistent book, and has respect to the fitness of things; but it is evident enough that there would be no fitness in speaking of “blotting out” something that was chiseled in the rock. Neither is it an appropriate figure to

speak of nailing tables of stone to a cross. Therefore even if the Bible did not assure us that the commandments of God “stand fast forever and ever,” we should know that the apostle has in this text no reference whatever to the law of God.

The things which God gave through Moses were written in a book, and only in a book; consequently it is perfectly appropriate to speak of blotting them out. If it be objected that the ten commandments were also written by Moses in a book, we reply that it makes no difference; since the ten commandments were engraved in stone, they could not be blotted out even though all the books in the world were destroyed.

Ending at the Cross

The fact that the thing here spoken of came to an end by the cross of Christ, should cause us to conclude that the same thing is here spoken of that is spoken of in *Ephesians* 2:15-16 as having been abolished “in his flesh.” In this text it is said to have been “contrary;” in the other it is called “enmity;” and Peter called it a burdensome yoke. This, Paul says, was “against us.”

But the law of God is holy, and just, and good (*Romans* 7:12) in its requirements. We conclude, therefore, that the “handwriting of ordinances,” which was nailed to the cross of Christ, was the Levitical law. The ceremonies were typical of the sacrifice of Christ, and when that sacrifice was actually made on the cross, the types at the same time ceased.

Ceremonial Sabbaths

We notice that because these ordinances have been blotted out, therefore we are not to be judged concerning certain things. This indicates that those things were part of the ordinances. Paul enumerates them as meats and drinks, feast days, new moons, and sabbaths; “which are a shadow of things to come.” The very enumeration of these things shows us that the law of God is not here under discussion, for none of these

things formed a part of it.

It is true that the fourth commandment is concerning the Sabbath; but the Sabbath of the fourth commandment dates from creation (compare *Exodus* 20:8-11; *Genesis* 2:2-3), before the fall of man made the coming of Christ a necessity; while the sabbaths mentioned in *Colossians* were shadows of things in the work of Christ. These sabbaths are given in *Leviticus* 23, in the ceremonial law. They occurred only once a year, and were:

1. The first and seventh days of unleavened bread (*Leviticus* 23:5-8);
2. The day of Pentecost (verses 15-21);
3. The first day of the seventh month, being the memorial of blowing of trumpets (verses 24-25);
4. The tenth day of the seventh month, or the day of atonement (verses 27-32); and
5. The first and eighth days of the feast of tabernacles. Verses 34-36.

All these days, as is seen at once in the case of the passover and the day of atonement, were feast days typifying certain parts of Christ's mediatorial work for sinners. Of them the Lord said:

Leviticus 23

³⁷ These are the feasts of the Lord, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, to offer an offering made by fire unto the Lord a burnt offering, and a meat offering, a sacrifice, and drink offerings, everything upon his day.

Notice: The Lord said to Moses, "These are the feast days... which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations." These are some of the things which God gave by the hand of Moses (*Nehemiah* 9:14); but the Sabbath of the fourth commandment was proclaimed by God's own voice. This distinction is plainly marked, for after enumerating the ceremonial sabbaths which were to be observed by the people, the Lord added:

Leviticus 23

³⁸ Beside the Sabbaths of the Lord...

This shows beyond all question that the sabbaths which ceased when the “handwriting of ordinances” was blotted out, were the ceremonial sabbaths, and consequently that it was not the moral law, but the ceremonial law, which constituted that “handwriting of ordinances.”

Learned Commentators

In addition to these proofs, it may not be amiss to cite the following statements of learned commentators, to show that the same proofs were conclusive to their minds also. Says Dr. Clark:

The apostle speaks here in reference to some particulars of the handwriting of ordinances, which had been taken away, viz., the distinction of meats and drinks, what was clean and what unclean, according to the law; and the necessity of observing certain holy days or festivals, such as the new moons and particular sabbaths, or those which should be observed with more than ordinary solemnity....

There is no intimation here that the Sabbath was done away, or that its moral use was suspended, by the introduction of Christianity. I have shown elsewhere that, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy,” is a command of perpetual obligation.

Dr. Barnes also says on the same point:

There is no evidence, from this passage, that he would teach that there was no obligation to observe any holy time, for there is not the slightest reason to believe that he meant to declare that one of the ten commandments had ceased to be binding on mankind. If he had used the word in the singular number—“the Sabbath,” it would then, of course, have been clear that he meant to affirm that that commandment ceased to be binding, and that a Sabbath was no longer to be observed.

But the use of the term in the plural number, and the con-

nection, show that he had his eye on the great number of days which were observed by the Hebrews as festivals, as a part of their ceremonial and typical law, and not on the moral law, or the ten commandments. No part of the moral law, no one of the ten commandments, could be spoken of as “a shadow of things to come.” These commandments are, from the nature of moral law, of perpetual and universal obligation.

In Practical Terms

A few words now concerning the different relations which the people sustained toward the moral law and toward the ceremonial law. The moral law was of primary obligation, and it was binding upon all men alike. The Gentile as well as the Jew was under obligation to worship God, to keep his Sabbath, and to abstain from murder, adultery, and theft. It was the moral law which convicted men of sin (*Romans 7:7*), and which showed all the world to be guilty before God. *Romans 3:9*.

The ceremonial law, on the other hand, was not of primary obligation. Having reference only to the mediatorial work of Christ, it had no existence before man fell. Moreover it was not of universal obligation. It would have been thought sacrilegious for an uncircumcised person, an idolator, or an atheist, to attempt to engage in the Jewish ceremonies. Yet whenever a Gentile accepted the true religion, he was, through circumcision, admitted on an equal footing with the Jew. Where, then, in individual experience, did the ceremonial law come in? Read what Paul says of Abraham, in this connection:

Romans 4

⁹ We say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness.

¹⁰ How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision.

¹¹ And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the

righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised.

From this we learn, what none will deny, that circumcision and its kindred ceremonies, while they pointed forward to the real work of Christ, did not precede faith in Christ. They were the means by which the people signified that faith which was necessary before they could participate in them. To the man who had never heard of Christ, those ceremonies were meaningless; but to the one who had faith in Christ and his promised work for man, they were a beautiful means of expressing that faith.

The moral law, being of primary and universal obligation, would be impressed by the Holy Spirit on the heart of a heathen. By it he would see himself to be a sinner. Earnestly seeking freedom from condemnation, he would find that the Messiah for whose coming the pious Jews looked with longing hearts, was the only one who could take away his sin.

Joyfully seizing upon this hope, he would separate himself from his heathen associates; by circumcision he would signify the putting off of his own sinful habits; and henceforth, so long as he retained his faith in Christ, he would gladly manifest that faith, and with each manifestation thereof quicken it into renewed activity, by celebrating the ordinances which prefigured the promised sacrifice and atonement of Christ.

But when the reality came, the types ceased. Not so the moral law, the ten commandments of God. Being the foundation of God's Government, there was nothing in them of a fleeting or shadowy nature. They still remain of primary, universal, and eternal obligation. They still convict of sin; and he who by them is convinced of his need of One who can save from sin, may still come to a Saviour who has suffered for sin, and may obtain pardon.

Through the ordinances of the Lord's house,—baptism and the Lord's Supper,—he may show his faith in a sacrifice al-

ready made, until his promised redemption is consummated by the return of his Lord; and then from Sabbath to Sabbath he may worship before the Lord, and see his face; and the law, which stands fast forever and ever, will witness to his loyalty to the Creator.