

Sermon Series on Hebrews

By John Atkinson (May 2000)

Sermon 6

Outline

In the first address I dealt with the key theme of the sermon recorded in the book of Hebrews - Jesus is incomparably better than all that went before Him. In the second address in this series we looked at the issue of rest in God as a fundamental aspect of true spirituality

We saw how the preacher to the Hebrews stressed that two things keep us from this Sabbath-rest

A Unbelief – the refusal to believe and

A A Hardened Heart – a heart used to refusing God.

In the third address the preacher to the Hebrews looked at Jesus our High Priest in terms of Jesus' submission to His Father, even to death. He called us to enter into God's presence with confidence, because of Jesus our High Priest.

In the fourth section the preacher paused to deal with the problems of stagnation and apostasy.

In the fifth address we looked at Jesus our high Priest in the priestly order of Melchizedek.

A. Jesus the Messiah's "More Excellent" Ministry (8:1-7)

B. The Old Covenant Superseded (8:8-13)

1. A New and Better Covenant (8:1-10:39)

CHAPTER 9

C. The Old Sanctuary and Its Ritual (9:1-10)

D. The Blood of Christ (9:11-14)

E. The Mediator of the New Covenant (9:15-22)

F. The Perfect Sacrifice (9:23-28)

CHAPTER 10

G. The Law a Shadow (10:1-4)

H. One Sacrifice for Sins (10:5-18)

I. The Sequel--the Right Way (10:19-25)

J. The Sequel--the Wrong Way (10:26-31)

K. Choose the Right (10:32-39)

Introduction

We now come to the part of the sermon to the Jewish believers which is most critical of all. Has the Old Testament replaced by the New? The preacher says,

(Heb 8:13) *"By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear."*

How do we square this with Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:17-19, and more disturbingly, with the fact that we don't even keep the Sabbath which is one of the Ten Commandments?

Mat 5:17 *"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill."*

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Mat 5:18 "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Mat 5:19 "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Now you know that I, of all people, am not going to say that the Old Testament is obsolete and completely replaced by the New Testament! But how do I, arrive at that conclusion and to what extent do we take the instructions in the Old Testament as personal obligations?

Confusion in Christian circles

The truth is that most Christians don't take the Old Testament instructions as personal obligations but few can tell you why. This is one of the most confused and neglected areas of Church teaching. The Church hardly knows what to make of the Torah (The Law) or how to fit it with the New Testament. So if you cannot answer these questions you're not alone. You are not necessarily in good company - but the crowd is big!

Christianity usually organises its theology or beliefs, by subjects it considers most important – one of the expressions of this process is called Systematic Theology.

Thus topics like the Attributes of God, the Holy Spirit, the Person and work of Jesus take a healthy amount of space in any Christian book on theology.

Judaism too organises its theological thinking into categories reflecting its concerns. Its three main topics are; God, the People of Israel and Torah (the Law or instruction).

What is most striking about the comparison between the two is how much attention is given to the Torah by Jewish theologians and how little Christian theology addresses the issue of the Torah

Only three pages out of 735 (less than 1/2%) in Louise Berkhof's Sytematic Theology and Augustus Strong's book did little better by devoting 28 pages out of 1 056 (less than 3%). This accounts for the fact that many Christians have an overly simplistic understanding of what the Law is all about, and even those who have been to theological seminary would, more often than not, be unable to give an informed answer to these questions. The question must be faced - if the issue of Torah (Law or instruction) has always been so central to Judaism when did it lose its importance among Christians and why?

Let me answer this last question first . . .

If the issue of Torah (Law or instruction) has always been so central to Judaism when did it lose its importance among Christians and why?

The short answer is that Christian theology, with the anti-Jewish bias it incorporated in its early centuries, misunderstood Rabbi Sha'ul (the Apostle Paul) and concluded that the Torah was no longer in force.

*Rom 10:4 Christ is the **end** of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.*

The word translated "end" is telos which means goal, purpose, consummation and not "termination".

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This view is not the Jewish Gospel, nor is it the true Gospel.

To quote Louis Berkhof from one of his three pages on the subject,

"It is [equally] contrary to Scripture to say that there is no law in the New Testament, or that the law does not apply in the New Testament dispensation." (1976:613)

The Sermon to the Hebrews, in fact, says as much.

Heb 8:6 *But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is **founded** on better promises.*

*...which has **been enacted** through better promises. (NRSV)*

*...which has **been enacted** on better promises. (NASB)*

What do you associate the word enacted with? That's right, with the founding or establishment of Law. This is reflected by the Greek. *Ne-nomo-thetetai*

So this verse could read without losing or adding meaning

*But now the work Yeshua has been given to do is far superior to theirs, just as the covenant He mediates is better. For this covenant has been **given as Torah** on the basis of better promises.*

So Torah exists in the New Testament and there is no contradiction between Jesus, Paul and the Preacher to the Hebrews.

Now let me deal with the first question...

How do we arrive at the conclusion about the significance of the Old Testament and to what extent do we take the instructions in the Old Testament as personal obligations?

As we have seen the New Testament is the fulfillment or consummation of the Old Testament. It is the product of the covenants that preceded it. And it cannot truly be understood without understanding the Noahic, Abramic, and Sinaitic covenants that form the foundation of the new Covenant.

This then, is the significance of the Old Testament and the Law.

There are many Laws that we would not question.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. Deut 6:5

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Lev 19:18

You shall not murder. Exo 20:13

You shall not commit adultery. Exo 20:14

You shall not steal. Exo 20:15

These are laws/instructions which govern our relationship with God and our fellow human beings. But there are other laws which serve purposes related particularly to the covenant they are associated with. For instance;

Gen 17:11 *"And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.*

Gen 17:12 *"And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants.*

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This covenant differentiated the Jewish People as the children of the promise given to their forefather Abraham. When Jesus enacted His New Covenant He gave it to the family of “*whosoever believes in Me.*” Jewish People the blood descendants of Abraham who entered Jesus’ covenant continued to circumcise as a matter of identity, but it was not appropriate for Gentiles to adopt this Abrahamic Covenant practice.

This brings me to the final question...

How do we square Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:17-19 with the fact that we don’t even keep the Sabbath which is one of the Ten Commandments?

The question of the Sabbath is a complex one and it is not simply answered by spending an hour or two in church on Sundays.

To find the answer we must go to the Council in Jerusalem and their instructions to Gentile believers in Jesus

Acts 15:4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

Acts 15:5 Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

Acts 15:6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question

...

Acts 15:28 It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:

Acts 15:29 You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.

You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

They did not advocate lawlessness but a lifestyle that reflected the moral code of the Old Testament without the ritual and covenantal emphasis. So, according to the New Testament, the sexual prohibitions for instance, are just as binding on Gentiles as they were on Jewish believers.

This then is an overview. The argument is more detailed than I have had time to do in this sermon.

We have a superior covenant given as Torah on the basis of better promises – lets live as those who have received this covenant with gratitude.