

Nailed to the Cross, part 2

Clairemont SDA Church

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Our study today continues from the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians, which speaks of the "handwriting" that was "nailed to the cross." Understood correctly, there is a beautiful message of God's love and mercy in this passage, which doesn't do away with the Ten Commandments but gives sinners like you and me hope that God is willing and able to forgive and cleanse us of sin. Understood incorrectly and it undermines the very foundation of God's government and can be used by the arch-enemy of God, Satan, to mislead souls to destruction.

What was it that brought about the eviction of our first parents from Paradise? It was disobedience to God's Holy Word and His righteous commandment. What will keep people from entering the Paradise that God has planned for the future? It will be disobedience to His Holy Word and His righteous commandments. God can't take rebels to heaven! That's why understanding the message Paul wrote to the Colossians is so vital.

Keep in mind that Paul was battling attitudes in his day having to do with two sets of laws. Both laws had to do with sin. The moral law, the Ten Commandments, points out what sin is; the ceremonial law illustrated God's solution to the sin problem, pre-figuring the divine sacrifice accomplished by Jesus Christ on the cross. But Satan had brought confusion into the picture, resulting in the leaders teaching things concerning both laws which were incorrect. On the one hand, there was a misconception of the *role* of the Ten Commandments. The idea was taught that your own works, your own obedience to the Law earned you salvation. Paul, in his pre-Christian days, thought so himself. No, Paul reasoned in the New Testament, the law can't save us. Its *role* is to point out sin.

On the other hand, there was a misunderstanding of the temporary nature of the ceremonial law, which came to its end at the cross. The sacrificial system contained "shadows of good things to come," fulfilled when Christ died on Calvary. Because both issues had to do with God's laws, it's natural at times for the New Testament to

approach these issues in a "blended way," combining the discussion of the misunderstandings of the two laws in one breath. So it is true that in his letter to the Colossians, Paul is addressing both the moral and the ceremonial laws.

In a classic case of "throwing out the baby with the bathwater," Satan has put forth the idea that along with the ceremonial law coming to its end, since Jesus fulfilled the types and illustrations given in animal sacrifices, the moral law is *also* abolished, and Paul is speaking of the Ten Commandments as being "nailed to the cross." Thus Satan has led people to believe that one of God's holy commandments, identifying the seventh day as His memorial of creation, the Sabbath, is no longer binding on Christians today. But that's not true!

With that background in mind, let's go back to verse 12 of Colossians 2, reading from the KJV. "Buried with Him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with Him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath He quickened (or, "made alive") together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses; 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; and having spoiled principalities and powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of any holyday or of the new moon, of the sabbath days which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ." Colossians 2:12-17.

Last time we reviewed the passage as it applied to the ceremonial law, noting particularly that the term "sabbaths" cannot refer to the seventh-day Sabbath of the Fourth Commandment. We counted 4 reasons why this is so: 1) the term "sabbaths" is used in combination with other things relating to the sanctuary service (meat and drink offerings, holy day or new moon). 2) The term "sabbaths" is in the plural form, relating to those sabbaths or holy convocations associated with the annual festivals, as described in Leviticus 23. If it said, "the Sabbath day," followed by a "period" that would be a different matter. 3) The important word "which" qualifies which "sabbaths" Paul is talking about. It makes it very plain that it's not all sabbaths, but those only which were "shadows" or "types" of Christ's sacrifice. The seventh-day Sabbath is not in that category, for it points back to creation. 4) By comparing the language of Hebrews 8, 9 and 10, it's clear that Colossians is talking about the ceremonial law and the sanctuary service when he says, "Therefore let no man judge you."

So it is true that this passage addresses the temporary nature of the ceremonial law. Remember, it's a "blended" presentation dealing with both laws, the moral and ceremonial law, because there were issues with both. Having said that, we believe that the primary emphasis in verse 14, when he states, "blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us," is on our violations of the *Ten Commandment Law*.

Last time we spent some time on the compound word "handwriting." Do you remember what the Greek word is? Our English word is a good translation of the Greek word *cheirographon*, which also means "handwriting." If you were to convert the Greek word to an English word, I suppose it would be "cheirograph." For comparison, think of the word "chiropractor" and the word "telegraph." But as we saw, sometimes compound words or word combinations take on a special and unique meaning not always evident by just knowing what the individual parts of the words mean, like "firecracker" and "shoehorn." Pity the poor person trying to learn English and trying to figure out why you drive in the "parkway" but park in the "driveway"!

What exactly did the word *cheirographon* mean in Paul's day? The apostle selected a term commonly used in the legal vernacular of his day, which is appropriate since Paul is addressing legal issues. Actually there were two usages, one coming from what we call civil law, as in a situation involving a contract, and the other coming from criminal law, as when someone has committed a crime. In the Bible, both are models used to illustrate salvation, because sin is both a "debt" and a "crime."

God's justice demands that the penalty for sin be administered. What is the wages of sin? It is death, meaning the second death. Romans 6:23. The Gospel declares that the "debt" we owe was paid by Jesus; the punishment we deserve was accepted by Christ for us. "He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His." *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, pp. 208, 209. The Bible says, "Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. The LORD has laid on Him (Christ) the iniquity of us all. For the transgressions of My people He was stricken." Isaiah 53:4-6.

In Matthew 18 there's a story about a man who had gotten himself into a financial fix and couldn't pay his debt. That enormous debt was forgiven him, but then he found someone who owed him a nickel and wanted to take him to court. Matthew 18:21-35. That parable was given to show how kind God is in forgiving our sins, our "debt," and how we should be kind to others who have wronged us. Sin created a debt in our moral ledger which we can't possibly pay. But, as the song says, "Jesus paid it all." We have been "bought at a price." I Corinthians 6:20. The Bible uses the word "redeem," which means to "buy back" over 100 times, in the Old Testament and New to illustrate salvation. "You were not redeemed with corruptible things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." I Peter 1:18, 19.

Most of the evidence concerning "handwriting" points to this first usage, having to do with contractual agreements and dealing with debt. And what exactly did "handwriting" mean in that context? It meant, in simple terms, "evidence of debt," or "I.O.U." In other words, when a transaction was made for which the purchase price was not immediately advanced, the creditor received a note *written by the hand* of the debtor, giving evidence of the debt and promising to pay for it. This promise to pay the debt was a "hand-writing," a *cheirographon*. Some mistakenly think that the "handwriting" refers to the Ten Commandments, and it's true that they were written by God's own hand. But that's not what "handwriting" meant in Paul's day. This is a misunderstanding of the term and doesn't harmonize with the text.

There are numerous Bible translations which reflect the definition of the "handwriting" being "evidence of debt." The New American Standard Bible reads, "Having cancelled out the certificate of debt." The American Standard Version says "Having blotted out the bond." The Good News Bible says, "He cancelled the unfavorable record of our debts." A large array of Bible commentators agree with this also. Wesley's notes on Colossians 2:14 state, "The handwriting against us - Where a debt is contracted, it is usually testified by some handwriting; and when the debt is forgiven, the handwriting is destroyed, either by blotting it out, by taking it away, or by tearing it." What Paul is saying is that when we sinned we created a debt which we can't possibly pay. We don't have the resources to make it good. All of our good works cannot straighten out the balance sheet. But God has taken care of that debt through Christ's victorious death on the cross and wiped it away. That's the beautiful imagery that comes through when we see

the term "handwriting" as it applied to a debt resulting from a contractual default.

The other symbolism embedded in the word "handwriting" has to do with not civil law but with criminal law. Sin is not only a contractual default, a debt we cannot pay; it is also a crime against heaven. It is a violation of His holy law, Ten Commandments which requires punishment. In Paul's day, when a suspected offender was hailed into court, the written list of charges against him was referred to as the "handwriting," and it was read out loud from the center of the court. This list of crimes stood "against him" and was "contrary to him."

In the spiritual sense, this list of crimes (our sins) was what was nailed to Christ's cross as He suffered the punishment for our offenses, our crimes. The Bible speaks about our sins resulting in charges being brought against us, as a criminal would be charged with offense, with appropriate punishment forthcoming. See Jeremiah 2:9; Hosea 2:2. Paul says that Christ "took it away," meaning the list of charges against us. The literal translation of that phrase is "took it from the midst," which can be understood as referring to the list of criminal crimes which had been declared "in the midst" of the court. Now the list of our crimes is taken "from the midst" of court. He didn't take the law away that was broken; He took the list of our crimes away.

Here are a number of translations which reflect the crime/punishment nuance of "handwriting." J. B. Phillips reads, "He has forgiven you all your sins. Christ has utterly wiped out the damning evidence of broken laws and commandments which always hung over our heads, and has completely annulled it by nailing it over His own head on the cross." The Message Bible says, "Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant cancelled and nailed to Christ's cross." The New Living Translation has it, "He cancelled the record of the charges against us and nailed it to the cross."

To review, it's extremely important to note that what was "wiped out" was the *record of our debt* or the *charge of our crimes*, not the law itself! That's what was "against us" and "contrary to us," not the law. The law is "holy, just and good." Romans 7:12. Paul is not saying that the Ten Commandments were done away with at the cross. That cannot be. Here are four reasons to back that up. We'll see that it's impossible scripturally, theologically, symbolically and grammatically.

First, it's impossible that the moral law was nailed to the cross as testified by other Scriptures. The Bible is a harmonious whole, and doesn't contradict itself. The words of Jesus and the rest of the New Testament make it clear that the Ten Commandments are still binding on Christians. In what we call the "Sermon on the Mount," which some compare to a "New Testament Mt. Sinai," Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled." Matthew 5:17, 18. It's clear that Jesus was talking about the Decalogue because He then gave amplifications of the 6th and 7th Commandments. Paul didn't support the idea that the moral law was abolished. He asks, "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law." Romans 3:31. Teaching that the moral law was abolished or that obedience plays no part in a Christian's life is not *scripturally* valid.

Second, the Ten Commandments were not abolished because they are the reference by which sin is identified. They are the divine yardstick by which we are measured. James compares it to a mirror in which we see our impurities. James 1:23-25. Paul said "I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said 'You shall not covet.'" Romans 7:7. There is no question that Paul is speaking of the Ten Commandments in this passage, because he quotes directly from them to make his case, quoting the 10th Commandment.

And by the way, when did these writers make that point? Were the passages just quoted written before or after Calvary? Notice that both of these authors are speaking about the validity of the moral law *after* the cross. The law can't save, but it does point out our character defects. Think about this. If there is no Law, there cannot be a breaking of the law. Sin could not exist. "Sin is not imputed when there is no law." Romans 5:13. If the law was abolished at the cross, we are not accountable for sin and don't need a Savior. Does the Bible teach that? Absolutely not! That's preposterous!

What if someone walked into the CHP one day and complained that there were too many speeders on Interstate 15. "Oh," responds the officer, "we'll have to do something about that." Immediately he dispatches a crew out to the freeway and they begin removing the signs which post the speed limit. By so doing, no one will be cited for speeding because the law has been removed. Would that approach bring about a satisfactory solution? No! The problem of speeding would

be worse, if anything! So it is true also that the solution for the sin problem is not to abolish that which defines sin, God's Holy Decalogue. And it could be argued that because many have taught that His Law has been abolished, the problem of sin has actually grown and not diminished.

There seems to be a strange dichotomy and contradiction among some Christians today. At the one time they vigorously defend the placement of the Ten Commandments in front of courthouses and other places, yet at the same time preach that they were done away with at Calvary, "nailed to the cross." Does that make any sense?

Someone might say, "Well, I obey the law of love. That's all I'm required to do." It's true that love summarizes the law. Romans 13:10. But a *summary doesn't nullify the specific*; it only expresses the essence of it in a more compact way. Don't suppose for one moment that Adam would have been excused from his disobedience to the specific commandment given in Eden if he had told God, "But I did it in love." No, it was the failure to obey the concrete and tangible mandate given by the Lord that resulted in sin. God's solution to the sin problem is not to get rid of the law so that sin can't happen. No, that would be like getting rid of all speed limits and in that way there will be no more speeding. Nonsense! God's answer to the sin problem is not to get rid of the law but to pay for our sins through Christ's death *and* empower us to holy living through His Spirit.

James says that we'll be judged by the Ten Commandments, quoting directly from them, also quoting the 6th and 7th Commandments. James 2:10-12. How unfair would it be for God to teach us through the Word that the law was abolished, and then use it as the Standard in the final judgment! God's Holy Law is still valid. No, we're not saved by law-keeping. We're saved by grace through faith, but the faith that the Bible defines is an active and responsive faith, resulting in the fruitage of godly living and obedience to His law. Teaching that the moral law was abolished is not *theologically* valid.

Third, even the imagery doesn't support that idea. What was "nailed to the cross" cannot be the Ten Commandments. *You can't nail stone to wood!* You can try it if you like, but you'll end up frustrated. A while back I replaced the tile surrounds in the showers of our house. After putting the tiles in place and grouting the joints, I installed the glass shower doors, which are held in place by a frame that is attached to the walls by screws. I carefully marked the places where the holes

needed to be drilled and put my drill motor with a masonry bit to work on it.

I should tell you one that the tiles I installed were not ceramic tiles; they were porcelain tiles. There's a big difference! I drilled and drilled and drilled, with next to no success. Eventually I gave up and put new holes in the shower frames and put the anchor screws between the porcelain tiles, in the grout joint. The Ten Commandments were written on stone for a reason; to impress us that they were given for all time. Those principles are eternal in nature. It wasn't the Decalogue that was nailed to the cross; *you can't nail stone to wood*. The imagery of that interpretation doesn't fit. Teaching that the moral law was abolished is not *symbolically* accurate.

Fourth, the *grammar* doesn't allow for it either. We need to review for just a minute the rules of grammar because in this verse it's vital to see what Paul is saying. The emphasis is on the word "handwriting," which appears in the singular, not on the word in the plural "requirements" or "ordinances." In language, nouns and adjectives must do what we call "agree." For example, if I said, "The piano *are* on my right side of the stage," that would sound funny to you. The noun "piano" is singular and requires that the verb be also singular. What was just said mixed a singular noun with a plural verb. It should have been "The piano *is* on my right side of the stage."

Take a careful look at verse 14 from that perspective. With online tools, you can discover the parts of speech for every word used, whether they are singular or plural. That's an important thing to know, so we can ascertain correctly exactly what was nailed to the cross. Here's what you'll find. "Blotting out the handwriting (singular noun) of ordinances (plural) that (singular pronoun) was (singular verb) against (singular adjective) us, which was (singular) contrary to us, and took (singular verb) it (singular pronoun) out of the way, nailing (singular verb) it (singular pronoun) to His cross." Do you see that the emphasis is on the singular "handwriting" and not on the plural "ordinances"? Teaching that the moral law was abolished is not *grammatically* accurate.

Also, we should ask, To what does the Bible refer to when it uses the verb "blotting out"? Is it the law, the Ten Commandments that are blotted out, or is it the record of our breaking of the law, our sins? On this the Bible is very clear. God's objective is to blot out sin, once and for all. And He will do it everywhere it is found. We have the option of repenting and asking Him to create in us a new heart and blot sin out

of both the record books of heaven and our hearts and minds. He will graciously do this, according to the provisions of the New Covenant. Or, we can choose to cling to sin, in which case the sinner himself will be blotted out with the sin. God doesn't want that to happen, because He loves us so much. But He will not force us to repent and be made new. He hopes we'll let Him blot out sin from our lives and from the record book of heaven.