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THE BETTER COVENANT

Hebrews 8:7-12

By

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June 6, 2004

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Hebrews Lesson 24

The Better Covenant Hebrews 8:7-12

If you have health insurance, it is helpful to be familiar with the benefits of your policy. If you do not know those benefits, you won't take advantage of them, and you may end up paying for something that the policy covers. About the only thing more tedious for me to read than an insurance policy is the IRS instructions, but I force myself to read them, because I want to know what my benefits are.

Many Christians are ignorant of the great benefits that they enjoy in Jesus Christ and, as a result, the enemy takes advantage of them. They end up "paying" for things that are "covered in the policy"! They are plagued by guilt, when the policy says, "I will remember their sins no more." They feel alienated from God and His people, whereas the contract stipulates, "I will be their God, and they shall be My people." They put themselves under many man-made rules, whereas God says, "I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts." So instead of knowing the glorious privileges of being children of the free woman, they live in slavery as children of the bondwoman (Gal. 4:30-31).

If the Hebrew Christians left the glories of the new covenant and went back to Judaism, they would put themselves under the bondage of the old covenant. So the author is showing them the contrast between the two covenants and the superiority of the new covenant that Christ enacted through His blood. He's arguing that,

The new covenant is better than the old covenant because it is enacted on better promises.

As I mentioned last week, whole theological systems part company over the interpretation of these verses. Covenant theologians argue that the old and new covenants are two different administrations of the one covenant of grace. But since the Bible never uses the title, "covenant of grace," and since there is obviously a great distinction between the old and new covenants (8:7-9), I am not inclined to that system. On the other hand, dispensa-

tional theologians point out that the new covenant is to be made "with the house of Israel and . . . Judah" (8:8), and so many of them insist that the new covenant that Jesus inaugurated at the Last Supper was different than this new covenant. But, plainly, the church today partakes of the *one* new covenant that Jeremiah predicted. The author of Hebrews (and Paul in 2 Cor. 3) obviously views the new covenant of Jeremiah as in effect now.

One problem with the traditional dispensational approach is their view that the church is a parenthesis or intercalation in God's plan for the ages. But as Paul explains in Romans 11:17-32, the disobedient branches (unbelieving Israel) were broken off from the olive tree (believing Israel), and the Gentiles have been grafted in. That doesn't sound like a parenthesis! But we do not replace the entire tree, as some teach, because Paul shows that God will work in the future to graft the Jews back in.

As I understand it, Jesus inaugurated the new covenant with believing Jews at the Last Supper. The Jews that rejected Christ were broken off so that we Gentiles could be grafted in. By God's grace, we now partake of the benefits of the new covenant that were promised to the Jews. Thus Paul could say (in 2 Cor. 3:6, written to the mostly Gentile Corinthians) that we are servants of the new covenant. This is not to say that the new covenant is completely fulfilled. In the future, God will bring a widespread revival among the Jews, who will look on Him whom they pierced and mourn (Zech. 12:10). The partial hardening of the Jews that now exists will be lifted, "and so all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:25-26). But the total fulfillment and the full experience of these promises await the second coming of Christ.

I touched on these five points last week, but let's examine them in more depth:

1. The new covenant is radically different from the old covenant that Israel did not keep (8:7-9).

Clearly, the emphasis here is on discontinuity, not on continuity. God is drawing a sharp distinction between the failure of the old covenant and the certain success of the new covenant. John Owen (*Hebrews: Epistle of Warning* [Kregel], pp. 143-145) outlines 17 distinctions between these two covenants, but I'm going to give 12:

- (1) The Law did not provide a way of justification by faith, but the new covenant does (Gal. 3:10-12; Heb. 7:19).

The Law did not bring acquittal, but condemnation, because no one was able to keep it perfectly. Paul states plainly, "Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, 'The righteous man shall live by faith.' However, the Law is not of faith" (Gal. 3:11-12a). If you want to be justified by the Law, all you have to do is to keep it perfectly, from birth until death, not just outwardly, but in your heart! The problem is, you are defeated before you begin, because we all have broken God's commandments before we even begin to attempt keeping them! It's like stepping up to bat with three strikes against you! Why bother?

- (2) The Law could not impart spiritual life, but the new covenant does (Gal. 3:21; 2 Cor. 3:6).

That was not the purpose of the Law. Without new life from God in our souls, we cannot begin to please God. It would be like trying to prop up a corpse and get it to do certain things! The corpse needs life, and doing things will not give it life. You may ask, "Then why did God give the Law?"

- (3) The purpose of the Law was to define and magnify our sinfulness, so that we would be driven to faith in Christ (Gal. 3:19-24; Rom. 5:20).

The notion of our basic goodness is planted deep within our rebellious hearts. We compare ourselves with others who are worse than we are, and conclude, "I'm not such a bad person after all!" We hear of an atrocious crime and we think, "How can people do things like that? I'm glad that I'm not like that evil person!" We all are prone to justify ourselves before God in this way.

Years ago, someone asked me to visit an acquaintance in the hospital who had suffered a major heart attack. I went to visit him and found out that he was a bartender at one of the most notoriously wicked bars in town. He had no church background and no religious inclinations. I asked about his family and found out that he had been through several divorces. He didn't even know where his children were living or how to contact them. But when I shared the gospel with him, he told me that he would get into heaven because he was a basically good person!

The Bible teaches that a main reason that God introduced the Law was that sin might increase (Rom. 5:20). The Law “shut up everyone under sin” (Gal. 3:22). The Law reveals God’s holy standards, so that we see our guilt. In spite of this, we dodge it and congratulate ourselves in keeping it, while condemning others. The Pharisees did this. They prided themselves in never committing murder. Jesus said that if they had ever been angry with their brother, they were guilty of murder in God’s sight (Matt. 5:21-22). They boasted in never committing adultery. Jesus showed them that to lust after a woman in their hearts made them guilty of adultery in God’s sight (Matt. 5:27-30). The Law defines and magnifies our sinfulness, so that we will be driven to faith in Christ as our only hope of right standing before God.

- (4) The Law led to bondage, not to freedom (Gal. 4:21-5:1; Acts 15:10; 1 John 5:3).

The Law could never free us from sin. Peter calls it “a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10). Paul compares being under the Law to being born of Hagar, the bondwoman. “She is in slavery with her children.” But those who are children of promise are free. He concludes, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 4:25; 5:1).

It is not that those under the new covenant are lawless. As it says, God writes His laws on our hearts. This changes our motivation, so that we desire to obey God out of love. Thus John wrote (1 John 5:3), “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.”

- (5) The Law was external, not internal, and thus did not supply the power to meet its demands (Deut. 5:29; 29:4; Ezek. 36:26-27; Rom. 8:3-4).

In Deuteronomy 5:29, God exclaims, “Oh, that they [Israel] had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always...!” In Deuteronomy 29:4, Moses tells the people, “Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear.” But in the new covenant promises of Ezekiel 36:26-27, God declares, “Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove

the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." Paul applies this to believers in Christ: "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3-4).

- (6) The Law was a conditional covenant with frightening penalties for disobedience, whereas the new covenant is based on God's promises and initiative (Deut. 28:15-68; Heb. 8:8-12).

The Law spelled out the blessings for obedience and the terrible consequences for disobedience (Deut. 28:1-68). If people had the ability to obey God's holy Law, a chapter like this should have motivated them! The blessings for obedience to them and to their children were wonderful (28:1-14). The curses for disobedience were horrific (28:15-68). Their failure to keep the Law in light of these rewards and punishments only shows the stubborn sinfulness of the human heart apart from regeneration! Even though God had taken them gently by the hand to lead them out of bondage in Egypt, they did not continue in His covenant, and so He did not care for them (Heb. 8:9). (Hebrews quotes the LXX; the Hebrew reads, "although I was a husband to them." The difference may be due to a typographical error of one letter. See Appendix E2, *Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], p. 385-386.)

Notice the contrasting emphases in Hebrews 8:8-12 between Israel's disobedience under the old covenant, versus God's initiative under the new covenant. The old covenant failed because God found fault with them. They did not continue in His covenant, in spite of His kindness. But the new covenant will be marked by success because it does not depend on our weak, sinful flesh, but rather on the sure purpose of God. He repeatedly says, "I will, I will, I will," (8:10-12) to emphasize that the new covenant is superior to the old, because it is based on the promises of God, not on the promises of sinful men to try to keep it.

(7) The Law could not provide full and complete forgiveness of sins, but the new covenant does (Heb. 9:9; 10:1-4, 10).

The gifts and sacrifices of the old covenant could not make a worshiper perfect in conscience. "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Heb. 9:9; 10:4). Because of this, they had to keep offering them year by year, as a yearly reminder of sins (10:1-3). But Jesus Christ, by the one offering of Himself, cleanses our conscience and puts away our sins once for all (9:14; 10:10, 14)! Hallelujah!

(8) The Law was based on an inferior priesthood, but the new covenant is based on the superior priesthood of Jesus (Heb. 7:11-8:6).

We saw this in previous messages, and so only mention it here. The Law was connected to the Levitical priests, who were mortal sinners. The new covenant is based on our priest according to the order of Melchizedek, made perfect forever.

(9) The Law did not bring everyone under it to know the Lord personally, but the new covenant does (Heb. 8:11).

All of the Jews were under the old covenant made at Sinai. But most of them were unbelievers who did not know God. By contrast, under the new covenant, "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13). That is clearly a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:34, "For all will know Me, from the least to the greatest."

(10) The Law was limited largely to one physical nation, whereas the new covenant extends to all people (Deut. 5:3-4; 7:7-11; Acts 2:17-18; Rom. 15:8-12).

The old covenant was restricted to the physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. The descendants of Abraham through Ishmael and Esau were excluded. The descendants of Lot (the Moabites and the Ammonites), plus the Canaanites, were cut off from the promises, with the rare exception of a few proselytes, such as Rahab, Ruth, and a few others. Paul describes the Gentiles before Christ as "excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). But now, under the

new covenant, God is calling the nations to salvation. We have been grafted in to the olive tree “until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (Rom. 11:25; see 15:8-12).

(11) The Law kept worshipers at a distance from God because of His holiness and their sinfulness, whereas the new covenant invites us to draw near (Exod. 19:12-13, 21-24; Heb. 4:16; 7:19; 10:22).

When God instituted the Law at Sinai, He instructed Moses to draw boundaries around the mountain, so that no one would come near and die. When Moses went up on the mountain to meet with God, He told him to go back down and warn the people again, so that no one would break through to gaze on the Lord and perish. As we’ve seen, none but the high priest on the Day of Atonement could enter the Holy of Holies, where the shekinah glory of God was displayed. The Law kept sinners at a distance. But the new covenant invites sinners to draw near to the very throne of God through the blood of Christ, to receive grace and mercy!

(12) The Law served a temporary function, whereas the new covenant is eternal (Gal. 3:19-25; Heb. 9:9-12; 13:20).

Paul says that the Law was like a tutor, needed until we grew to adulthood. But now that the promise has come in Christ, the tutor is no longer needed. But the new covenant obtained eternal redemption for us, so that it is called the eternal covenant (13:20).

So there are radical differences between the old and new covenants. You can’t blend Judaism with Christianity. Jesus abolished the old covenant that was the hallmark of the Jewish religion (Eph. 2:15). The author is showing that the Jewish Scriptures themselves predicted this when they spoke of a new covenant. Let’s look briefly at the other features of the new covenant that are listed here. Alas, I’m going to have to skim these points again!

2. The new covenant involves God putting His laws into the minds and hearts of His people (8:10).

Rather than writing His laws on tablets of stone, God now writes them on human hearts (2 Cor. 3:3). It is important to keep in mind that while this represents a fundamental change from the old covenant, it is not perfected until Christ returns. In 2 Corinthians 3, where Paul contrasts the new covenant ministry with the old cove-

nant ministry of Moses, he makes it clear that it is a process. As we behold “as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, [we] are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). Although we are new creations in Christ, and God has shone into our hearts with the knowledge of His glory in Christ, yet we have this treasure in earthen vessels (2 Cor. 5:17; 4:6-7). While we have the gift of the Spirit, who is a part of our new covenant blessings (2 Cor. 3:3, 6), He is only the pledge of our future full new covenant blessings (2 Cor. 5:5; Eph. 1:13-14). While the new covenant promise is to remove our heart of stone and give us a compliant heart of flesh, yet in the present, the flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh (Gal. 5:17). So we must walk by the Spirit, putting to death the deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:16, 25; Rom. 8:13-14).

Much more could be said, but at the very least, God’s writing His law on our hearts means that our affections towards God’s Word are changed. Before, the Bible was a burden or we were indifferent towards it. Now, it is a delight because of our love for God. But even this is a process that requires discipline. As Craig Blaising explains, “This [process] is the condition of living under *inaugurated* new covenant blessings. Only in the future will those blessings be granted in full, and the complete transformation promised by the new covenant will be realized” (*Progressive Dispensationalism*, with Darrell Bock [Baker], p. 209; italics his; the previous paragraph was developed from his treatment).

3. The new covenant involves a close, intimate relationship between God and His people (8:10b).

God is ours personally. As His people, we can go to Him as children go to their father, to receive from Him the things that we need. We are His in a special sense. He bought us with the blood of His dear Son, so that we are not our own. We belong to Him.

4. The new covenant means that every person, from the least to the greatest, knows God personally (8:11).

As I explained last week, this verse does not imply that there is no need for teachers to explain the Word of God (Eph. 4:11). Rather, the emphasis is that there will be no second class citizens under the new covenant. There is no priestly hierarchy, where you

have to approach God through them. In Christ, you are a believer priest, and you may go directly to God through Jesus Christ.

5. The new covenant effects complete forgiveness of sins (8:12).

Forgiveness is the fundamental need of every human being, because we all have sinned against a holy God. It is the basis for all of the other new covenant promises, because until our sins are forgiven, we do not know the Lord and we are not His people. We cannot draw near to Him, and we will not be able to understand His Word, until our sins are forgiven. The basis for God's forgiveness is His mercy as shown at the cross. Jesus, the sinless Son of God, paid the penalty that we deserved. If you know the great cost that He paid so that He could be merciful to your sins, you will not go on happily in your sins! You will hate sin and strive against it, out of love for the Savior who gave Himself for you on the cross.

Conclusion

I hope that this message has been far more interesting to you than reading through the benefits of an insurance policy! I have been describing the great benefits of the new covenant so that you can leave the yoke of the Law behind and move on in the glorious freedom as an heir of the new covenant. While the benefits are not all automatic and finalized, the foretaste of them should motivate you to strive against sin and to follow the Lord with a glad heart.

If you have not asked God to forgive your sins, if you do not know God personally through Christ, and if His laws are not written in your heart, you are outside of His new covenant. To die in such a condition would mean that you would face God's righteous judgment and condemnation. But if you will turn from your sins and trust in Christ's death as payment for your sins, you will begin to enjoy the blessings and benefits of the new covenant.

Discussion Questions

1. If new covenant believers are not under the Law, how can we know which Old Testament commands apply to us today?
2. Why did God put a system (the Mosaic Law) in place for 1,500 years that was imperfect?
3. Why did God think it necessary to increase and magnify sin through the Law (Rom. 5:-21; Gal. 3:19-24)? Isn't increased sin contrary to His purposes?
4. Why is it crucial for believers not to put themselves under the Law? (See Gal. 3-5.)

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