

Believe: Why Jesus Came

Better than Moses

John 1:17

Mark Vroegop

“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

You could summarize our entire time in John 1:17 with three words: Jesus is better.

And this idea applies to everyone who hears this message. If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, this concept means that Jesus is better than whatever it is that you are trusting in order to make you pleasing to God. If you are a follower of Jesus, it will be good to be reminded that you believe Jesus is better. My job today is not to convince you. It is to remind you of what you already know.

I was reading a book this week that said something so true:

“The problem with the human race is that we remember what we should forget (“this one thing I do; forgetting what is behind and pressing on toward what is ahead”), and we forget what we should remember. People today who have more information at the fingertips than all previous generations combined cannot remember who they are, why they are here, or what they are to do.”¹

Today, as you listen to this message, you may be really discouraged. I want to remind you that Jesus is better. You may be listening and feel like you are “the bomb.” Brother or sister, Jesus is better. You may feel terrible because of your sinfulness. Jesus is better.

The Christian life hinges on your understanding of Jesus and how he is better than anything you have ever believed, trusted in, or placed your confidence in. And eternity will be an experience where we continually say, “Jesus is better.”

The Fullness of Jesus

Over the last two weeks, we’ve learned about the importance of the fullness of Jesus. In verse fourteen we saw the connection between the glory of God as seen in Jesus and his being full of grace and truth. When John described the deity of Jesus—God-in-the-flesh—he called it out as full of “grace and truth.”

¹ Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching as Reminding: Stirring the Memory in an Age of Forgetfulness*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), x.

Last week, we looked at more aspects of what Jesus is like, including the way that Jesus's fullness is not only what he is like but also the source from which we receive. In other words, those who are followers of Jesus benefit from his fullness. Believers receive in, through, and because of who Jesus is and what he is like. Trace every grace-gift back, and you will find Jesus as the source.

But we learned even more. We discovered that John described what we have all received as "grace upon grace." And I told you that this is referring to the distinction between the grace of the law and the grace that came through Jesus Christ. That's why many translations render verse 16 as "grace in place of grace."

John is saying that Jesus is better.

He's better than any worldly philosophy about how the world works. He's better than the created world and those who rejected him. He's better than Moses. He's even better than the Old Testament law. Jesus is the fulfillment of the law.

Now I want to show you not only why this is important biblically and historically. I want you to know what John is saying here so that you can build off this foundational truth and apply "Jesus is better" to other areas of your life as well. You see, Jesus being better than the Law is just the start. So, let's look at this in two ways: (1) the gift of the law and, (2) the provision of Jesus.

The Gift of the Law

Remember that as John introduces this amazing gospel, he wants to highlight the supremacy of Jesus. Everything in this book will attempt to show us the reasons that we should believe that he really is the Son of God. John is an evangelist. He's trying to convince people from a variety of backgrounds to believe. The gospel of Matthew had a Jewish audience. Mark wrote with Romans in mind. Luke was targeting Greeks. But John is writing to a much broader audience.

John needed to bring the law into the discussion because he was trying to evangelize Jewish religious people. But he probably also knew that most people would understand the importance of the law and how it was revered. If "the Word" connected with the cultural and philosophical world, the concept of "the law" would connect with the religious world.

Keep this in mind as we study John because it is instructive as you think about how to have conversations with people who are not Christians. You need to know the gospel really well, but you also need to understand how to communicate it based on the cultural background of the person you are engaging. Karl Barth (1886-1968), a Swiss Reformed theologian used to say: "Take your Bible and take your newspaper and read both." How true. How important.

Verse 17 introduces the subject of the law into the discussion about Jesus. The verse serves as an explanation of what John means by “grace upon grace.” And he starts by identifying the law as a gift. The verse says, “For the law was given through Moses.”

Now, we don’t feel this statement the way it would land on a Jewish person. Their reverence for the law was extremely high. I remember attending a Bar Mitzvah in high school. As a part of the ceremony, the young man had to recite a text in Hebrew. But I remember when the Rabbi pulled a huge scroll out of a case on the wall, the first thing he did was kiss the scroll. Everything about how the scroll was handled communicated their deep affection for it. They loved it.

Let me help you understand the significance of what this means and why the law was a gift.

Definitions

First, let me start by being sure we all know what we’re talking about when I say “the law.” The word and concept of “law” can have a number of different meanings. Sometimes it can refer to any and all commands of God. For example, Adam and Eve were given commands in the Garden of Eden. They were told there was a tree from which they could not eat (Gen. 2:16-17). The created order, from the beginning, involved instructions from God.

But in verse 17, it says that the law was given through Moses. So, John has something more specific in mind. The first five books of the Bible were called “the Law” or the Torah by the Jews. However, John is referring to the official Old Testament law that God gave Israel after he delivered them from Egypt. This is sometimes called the Mosaic Law because of its connection to Moses as the mediator. The specifics of the Law are found mostly in the book of Leviticus but also in all of the first five books of the Bible.

What about the Ten Commandments? They serve as a summary of the entire law. They were given as a distillation of what obedience to God looks like. When John writes about the Law given through Moses, he has the Ten Commandments and all of the Old Testament law in mind.

1. History

It’s important for you to know that the Law was part of God’s covenant with his people. The book of Exodus records the story. After the ten plagues and the offering of the Passover lamb, God rescued his people from their bondage in Egypt. Then he parted the Red Sea and killed Pharaoh and his army. God brought the people to Mt. Sinai, and it was at this location that God came down. He resided on the mountain for forty days. And it is from this location that God gives his people the law.

As their gracious and powerful deliverer, he revealed himself to them. He gave instructions for the building of a tabernacle and for sacrifices. God defined the boundaries of their lives in order to both show them what he is like and to point them in the right direction for living. The law, in this sense, was a gift.

2. Divisions

The law was all-encompassing for the life of Israel. The people's lives revolved around the commands of the law, but not every aspect of the law was the same. There are traditionally three divisions when it comes to the law: moral, civil, and ceremonial. Moral laws defined what constituted ethical decisions as they relate to the Ten Commandments. Civil laws determined how the nation of Israel should be governed. Ceremonial laws gave instruction as to how they should worship.

This becomes important later as it relates to what it means for Christ to "fulfill the law" and what laws are still binding. In general, it is safe to say that the moral law as the foundation is still binding, but the civil and ceremonial laws are no longer required in the new covenant.

3. Role

But what is the role of the law? Why would it be called a gift? There are three roles of the law that are typically identified:²

- Bridle: the law serves to retrain sin by clearly identifying it
- Mirror: the law serves to show us ourselves so that we can be led to the gospel
- Flashlight: the law serves as a model for what obedience looks like³

Each of these aspects is a gift. However, in themselves, there are enormous limitations. You can't fully restrain sin. The more we see ourselves in the law, the guiltier we feel. We will always fail when it comes to obedience.

The law is a gift because of where it leads us and what it shows us. This is why Paul said the following: "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." (Rom. 7:12)

The law is a gift because it reveals the truth about what God is like. It shows us who we really are in light of who he is. And it shows us what obedience and righteousness look like practically. So, it is a very helpful and good gift.

I hope that you can see the law and every law that way. Some people have a bit of anti-law bent in them. For any number of reasons, their first reaction toward a rule or regulation is "prove why I should do this." And what they don't realize is that they actually have laws that they live by. For instance, "every law has to make sense to me" is their law. The law serves to reveal their law which actually reveals their heart. And this is a good thing.

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/ryan-reeves/how-should-christians-use-gods-law/>

³ I don't mean that every aspect of the OT law is binding for obedience today. Rather, one can use the law to learn about obedience (i.e., How was the first commandment applied in Israel before Christ?), and that one should obey the 10 Commandments because they serve as the moral foundation for living in light of who God is. Obedience, however, is not the same in the Old Testament as it is in the New. The 10 Commandments are still useful but now as a means of expressing our love for God because of Christ and by the Spirit.

But the law was never meant to be an end in itself. The law is helpful but not complete. The law shows us what God is like but doesn't provide permanent reconciliation. The law shows us what we are like, but it doesn't solve the problem of our disobedience. That's why there is a need for another kind of grace, or better—a person of grace.

The Provision of Jesus

Remember our theme in this text is to see the way that Jesus is better. John helps us to see this by what he says next in verse 17: “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” The passage is designed to show us the meaning of “grace upon grace” from verse 16.

Jesus was the provision that the law could never provide. He was what the law was pointing toward. Jesus, as the Messiah, was what the people desperately needed. The law was a gift, and it was glorious, but it paled in comparison to Jesus.

Now, there are a number of important things to know about this text. All of them are designed to help us understand the significance of what John is saying here.

First, this is the first time that the name “Jesus Christ” appears in John's gospel. Previously he has used words like “the Word,” “the light,” “the life of men,” and “Son.” But now John makes it explicit. The solution to the law wasn't another law, but a person who revealed what God is like even more than the law could. Jesus Christ means Jesus-the-Messiah. This title is only used two other places: in John 17, when Jesus prays, and in the passage that summarizes the entire book—John 20:31.

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that **Jesus is the Christ**, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30–31).

Second, take note that the verse is divided by a semi-colon. There is no “but.” John is not offering a dramatic contrast. He is not setting up the law against the gospel or Jesus. He's laying them side by side with the idea of Jesus fulfilling the law. This fits with what Jesus says in Matthew 5:17—“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). If we look a little further in John's gospel, we'll find the same thing in the testimony of Philip when he says, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (John 1:45).

As we read through John, you'll find other examples where Jesus talks about how he is the new temple (2:19), the new water (4:13), and the new manna (6:33).

“Jesus then said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world’” (John 6:32–33).

The provision of Jesus is better than anything they had known before. Everything in the Old Testament points to him.

Third, the law was cherished because it was the way the people beheld the glory of God. It was through the law that they saw God's righteousness. Just read Psalm 119 through this lens, and you'll start to better understand verses like 119:18—"Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things from out of your law." But the ultimate manifestation of glory—"grace and truth"—came through Jesus. He not only obeyed the law; he not only revealed what God is like, but he embodied the law. He was Word-in-the-flesh.

Fourth, the word "grace" doesn't appear again in the entire gospel. Having introduced Jesus as the embodiment of grace and truth, there is no need to talk about grace again. To see what Jesus does, says, and how he acts is the full display of grace. Moses could not see the face of God in Exodus 33; he could only hear the voice of God as he passed by. But Jesus is the full display of the glory of God. To see Jesus is to see the Father (John 14:9).

Fifth, the text says that grace and truth **came** through Jesus. This is the tenth time that the word "came" or a form of it is used in John.⁴ This is a major theme for John in the first eighteen verses. The word can mean *created, became, sent, or movement*. It starts in verse three with "made" or "came into being." It is used of John the Baptist in verse six. It is the word behind verse 12 where those who receive Jesus "become" children of God. It is in verse 14 when the Word "becomes" flesh. And in verse 17 it reaches the apex with grace and truth "coming" through Jesus Christ.

Do you see the significance of this? The provision of grace is only possible because Jesus comes into the world. And his coming creates your becoming. That's the model: Jesus comes, and we become. You will see this throughout the gospel of John. As Jesus enters the picture, he changes everything. He enters our mess, but he does so for the purpose of changing us.

Jesus didn't come just to fulfill the law; he came to fulfill you by fulfilling the law. You see the personal provision of Jesus was to provide for you personally. And when you get that, it changes everything!

Here's what Tim Keller said: "The sacrificial, costly love of Jesus changes us. When we see the beauty of what he has done for us, it attracts our hearts to him. We realize that the love, the greatness, the consolation, and the honor we have been seeking in other things is here."⁵

Jesus is better than Moses. He's better than the law. He's better than anything you could put your trust in because he is the only one who through whom grace and truth have come.

Why This Matters

I started this message by simply telling you that Jesus is better. But why does that matter? What difference does this make?

⁴ Edward Klink, *John - Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 114-116.

⁵ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/the-beauty-of-jesus-love/>

1. Jesus's sacrifice is better than your works

The bad news in the Bible is that we cannot be righteous on our own. We are all dead in our sins. And our best attempts to be righteous will fail every single time. The good news of the Bible is that forgiveness came through Jesus. We are called to believe in him because he's better.

2. Jesus's forgiveness is better than your sins

While the devil would condemn you for what you've done, Jesus offers forgiveness. Your sins have a debt to them, and the law only made it more obvious. But forgiveness is possible for those who trust in Christ. Your sins may be great, but Jesus is greater.

3. Jesus's perfection is better than your perfectionism

If you are a follower of Jesus, your identity doesn't come from what you do or don't do. It comes from what Jesus did. You don't have to be perfect. Grace and truth came through Jesus—not your hard work. I wrote a blog post recently on the subject of perfectionism, and here's what I said:

Perfectionism grows in gospel-lite soil. To combat this precarious problem, we need to see our shame and desire for control as what they are: another attempt to live by our works.

So, preach the gospel to your perfectionistic heart. Failure isn't fatal when your sins are already forgiven.⁶

4. Jesus's love is better motivation than guilt

Jesus creates a new motivation to go obey and follow him. Jesus radically changes our hearts such that we can see temptations as a lesser and poorer choice in comparison to Jesus. Remind your heart this week, "Jesus is better." He is better than everything. And in this transformation, he changes the motivation for why we follow him.

Kevin DeYoung said it this way:

We need to hear it again: salvation is not the reward for obedience; salvation is the reason for obedience. Jesus does not say, "If you obey my commandments, I will love you." Instead, he first washes the feet of the disciples and then says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). All of our doing is only because of what he has first done for us.⁷

Jesus is better. Better than Moses. Better than the law. Better than your worst moment. Better than your best moment. Why is he better? Because grace and truth came through him!

⁶ <http://markvroegop.com/the-perils-of-perfectionism/>

⁷ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/five-reasons-obey-ten-commandments/>

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