

THE HEART OF THE TORAH

By Dr. Galen Peterson
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One of the notable distinctions between a democracy and a theocracy is the way that the principles governing the people are determined. Instead of the people electing officials who pass laws or voting on propositions that become laws, an unelected King determines them.

The citizens of the kingdom of God have no say in the matter, although I suspect we tend to decide what is right for us. Regardless, Adonai, the ultimate sovereign of the universe, has determined how His subjects should live their lives according to a series of commandments.

The Hebrew word for “commandment” is **מִצְוָה** (*mitzvah*, plural – *mitzvot*). Along with the verb form, “command,” it is consistently used to describe someone with authority telling others what to do in a particular situation.

A number of ancient commentators have attempted to identify all of God’s commandments. The most famous of them was the twelfth century rabbi Maimonides, who listed 613 commandments in the Torah. Others have also set the number at 613, but used a different set of commandments. Still others argue that the number is more or less than 613. So caution is warranted about being dogmatic that there being exactly 613 commandments.

But one thing we can be certain about is that the Word of God separates the commandments into three distinct categories. This is something most people are not aware about, and they tend to lump them all together, ignoring the fact that the terms used have specific implications. But there are numerous passages of Scripture that describe the Torah as having three categories. For example, as Moses was about to give the complete Torah to the people of Israel just before entering the Promised Land, he cited each of these categories:

Now this is the Torah which Moses set before the sons of Israel; these are the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which Moses spoke to the sons of Israel, when they came out from Egypt” (Deut 4:44-45).

Another example of these categories is found in 1 Kings 2:3 when David was about to die and he exhorted his son Solomon by saying:

“Keep the charge of the Adonai your God, to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His ordinances, and His testimonies, according to what is written in the law of Moses, that you may succeed in all that you do and wherever you turn.”

The same is true in Psalm 119 when the Psalmist spent 176 verses esteeming the importance of God’s ordinances, testimonies and statutes. So clearly the Torah is not just a hodgepodge collection of laws, but has categories that have very specific implications. The characteristics of these three categories can be summed up in this way:

Categories of *Torah* commandments – **מִצְוָה** (*mitzvot*)

- **Ordinances** – **מִשְׁפָּטִים** (*mishpatim*)

These are primarily civil ordinances enabling people to exercise justice and to live in

harmony, such as laws prohibiting murder, theft, etc.

- **Testimonies – עֵדוּת (*edot*)**

These commandments relate particularly to sacrificial worship. It is a term used interchangeably with the ark of the covenant (Ex 30:6). It is also translated as “witness,” specifically with the sacrifices on the altar serving as a witness of obedience to God (Josh 22:27-28). Some writers try to put the feasts and other things of a memorial nature in this category, but that is not exegetically correct and is typically promoted by the cut and paste crowd that never looks at the original texts. The feasts are never used in the context of the *edot*. It is all about sacrifice.

- **Statutes – חֻקִּים (*chukkim*)**

These are practices that strengthen the bond between God and people and signify obedience to Him, often without any explanation why the people should do them. The Hebrew word in the singular is *chuk*. It is derived from a root verb *haqaaq*, which comes into English as the word “hack.” It is a picture of hacking or cutting or engraving into an object. Perhaps the best way to think of it is two lovers hacking their initials into a tree somewhere, leaving a permanent mark indicating their relationship. It really has no practical result. It just means marking or signifying something that was important to them.

Chukkim commandments are like that. They include the Sabbath (Ex 31:17) and the feasts, (i.e. Ex 12:14; Lev 23:14,21,31,41), the dietary laws, and not mixing wool and linen in clothing (Deut 22:11). The sprinkling of the ashes of the red heifer for purification is another *chuk*. (Num 19:2). The *chukkim* may seem to be irrational on the surface, but they demonstrate the willingness of people to submit to the Lord rather than exercising our own independent will alone.

Limitations of the commandments

When you look closely, you will notice that not every commandment applies to every person. Some were given to men and others to women. Some were only given to *kohanim* (priests) and some to kings. Some were limited to people dwelling in the land of Israel. Some cannot be observed because they can only take place at the temple.

It is estimated that 343 of the 613 commandments (over half) are now impossible to observe. On the other hand, many of the commandments were given without limitation in terms of time. In such cases, there will be words and phrases like “forever, permanent ordinance, throughout your generations.”

- Regarding Passover, God commanded: “Now this day will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it as a feast to Adonai; throughout your generations you are to celebrate it as a permanent ordinance” (Ex 12:14).
- Likewise, concerning the Sabbath, God commanded: “It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever; for in six days Adonai made heaven and earth, but on the seventh day He ceased from labor, and was refreshed” (Ex 31:17).
- God also gave the command to observe Sukkot—the Feast of Tabernacles as “a perpetual statute throughout your generations” (Lev 23:41).

As a result, we can see that there are many distinctions among God’s commandments. They fall into specific categories that have particular implications. And they range from being impossible to keep or being limited who can keep them, to being commandments that apply to all people in every generation. That is a very different perspective than saying that since you can’t keep all of the commandments, there is no reason to keep any of them.

The expansion of the Torah into Rabbinic Law

On the other hand, ever since the commandments of God were stated in the Torah, men have attempted to codify them into a comprehensive formal law. Rabbinical authorities have attempted to expand the commandments by considering every possible nuance of the literal words stated in Scripture. Thus they established a large body of rulings known as הלכה (halakhah)—“Law,” from the verb *halakh*, meaning “walk.” It has the sense of the rules that guide you through your walk of life. The rabbis built up this Law in three ways:

- **The fence (*gezeirah*)—rules that prevent violation of a commandment.** For example, the Torah commanded that people rest on the Sabbath (Ex 31:15). Rabbinical *halakhah* added a great number of rules that restrained the potential for violating that rest. That included not even picking up a tool that you could use for work. So they prohibited carrying a hammer, saw or even a pencil. As another example, many of the feasts are observed for two days by Jewish communities outside of Israel. That rule originated back in days when it was difficult to know exactly when a particular day was taking place because you did not have calendars hanging on the wall and smartphones telling you what day it was. And if you did not live in Israel where you had plenty of clues occurring around you related to worship activities, you were given extra day, so you did not violate the commandment by missing the biblical timing of the feast. But now, even though it is easy for everyone to know what day it is, the practice of expanding the observance of holy days outside of Israel continues, simply because it had become codified according to *halakhah*. It is just a rabbinic relic, not a biblical principle.
- **Case law (*takkanah*)—ordinances that are determined by applying a commandment to real-life circumstances.** *Takkanah* is derived from a root meaning “to repair or restore.” So these case laws are intended to bring restoration to the well-being of people. For example, the Torah does not command the lighting of candles on the Sabbath and festivals. But the rabbis ruled that lighting candles prior to the beginning of the day of rest restores that sense of resting. So in Judaism, the traditional candle blessing is: “Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us by Your commandments (*Torah*), and has commanded us (according to the case law of *halakhah*) to kindle the Sabbath lights.”
- **Customs (*minhag*)—practices that are not explicitly required but permitted and expected rabbinically.** These customs did not originate from rabbinical rulings, but from people in various Jewish communities, and then the rabbis decided that all Jewish people should be doing them. In that regard, wearing *kippot* on top of one’s head and becoming *bar mitzvah* are not commanded in the Torah, but have become expectations within the community. In the same way, eating apples and honey on Rosh Hashanah is a custom allowed by *halakah* because it has become so commonly practiced, regardless of origin, that it is expected to be observed.

Altogether, in the Talmudic era alone, *halakhah* expanded from 613 or so commandments to over ten thousand. What complicates matters is that a vast number of rabbis added their personal input to these restrictions and applications. So there was no consensus about what is actually binding and many groups do not recognize the authority and rulings of other groups. We see many examples of that between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, such as Sephardim permitting eating rice on Passover, but Ashkenazi Jews do not. So it is not just a customary difference of opinion, but requires compliance based on their particular interpretation of the Law. Or to put it another way, you are simultaneously keeping and breaking the Law if you eat rice on Passover, because the rabbis can't agree on the subject.

So the manner of rabbinic Judaism has been marked by a great expansion of the original commandments of the *Tanakh* (Old Testament). Based on countless protective fences, case laws and customs, the plain way of the Torah has been turned into the convoluted restrictions of the Law. This was done in spite of God's warning: "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of Adonai your God which I command you" (Deut 4:2).

With such an emphasis on precise actions and limitations, it is understandable that a life focused on keeping the Law can become marked by legalism and a judgmental attitude. And that is an essential understanding for us to have, because many people are confused when it comes to understanding the Torah and can only see it as the Law. Moreover it is common for people to come away with the perception that Yeshua stood in direct opposition to the Torah, when in reality, it was the rabbinic transformation of the Torah into the Law that Yeshua opposed. So we are wise to recognize how the concept and expansion of the Law came about.

The distillation of the Torah in the Bible

In contrast, the Word of God has taken a completely opposite approach when it comes to understanding the Torah. Instead of expanding the Torah with additional burdens, the biblical writers and Yeshua (Jesus) have distilled and focused the Torah into more all-encompassing principles. You might call it The Heart of the Torah or the complete Torah summarized in a few words.

In Psalm 15 David summarized God's commandments in six principles.

- Live righteously and with integrity.
- Be truthful and do not slander others.
- Do nothing that is evil to others or listen to derogatory things about them.
- Do not take advantage of another person financially.
- Have an accurate understanding of right and wrong (righteousness and sin).
- Remain true and faithful, even if it means personal loss.

Isaiah reduced the scope of God's commandments to four principles (Is 33:15).

- Live righteously.
- Be truthful.
- Do nothing that is evil to others or listen to derogatory things about them.
- Do not take advantage of another person financially.

Micah condensed it to three principles (Mic 6:8).

- Live righteously by walking humbly with God.

- Do justice.
- Love kindness.

Habakkuk then expressed it as a single principle (Hab 2:4), which was later reconfirmed by Paul (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11) and the writer to the Hebrews (Heb 10:38).

- Live righteously by faith (“The righteous will live by faith”)

Yeshua also summarized the entire Torah with a fundamental principle in Mat 22:37-39

- Love God and your neighbor as yourself

According to Mat 22:40, Yeshua said, “On these two commandments depend the entire Law and the Prophets.” The idea that Yeshua and the other biblical writers were communicating is that if your life is marked by genuine faith and you practice the purest and most demanding commandments of loving God and loving your neighbor, you will be faithful in doing all of the specific commandments, from not stealing and committing murder to worshiping God properly and showing kindness to others. And it can be done without micro-managing every detail of the way that you live. It communicates a priority that reflects the way that God wants us to live—beliefs and actions that come from the heart, meaning our inner self and the will that God has graciously given to us, not from religious and legalistic obligation or being governed from the outside, leaving the heart unchanged. That is why Yeshua emphasized loving God and loving our neighbor, not formality and ritual.

That does not mean abandoning the actual commandments God has given. We need to recognize that Yeshua never abandoned them or taught people to do so. As He declared in Matthew 5:17, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill [literally ‘to fill to the top’].”

When you conclude that God’s commandments are now completely irrelevant, you become susceptible to what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, “cheap grace.” He writes: “The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing.” It is the kind of thinking that God’s commandments no longer matter once you are saved, grace is all that matters. But that kind of thinking disrespects the great price that was paid by Yeshua when He gives us that salvation by grace.

When Yeshua said that loving God and others is what the Torah depends upon, it doesn’t mean that only two commandments are left and everything else has been tossed out. Instead, they are the foundation of the entire set of commandments.

Now Yeshua would have been speaking either Hebrew or Aramaic in the actual conversation, which would have later been translated into Greek in Matthew’s gospel. In Matthew 22:40, the Greek word κρεμάννυμι (*kremanumi*) and the equivalent Hebrew word *talah* and the Aramaic *telah*, all mean “hang or depend.” It is used in Scripture to describe an object or person physically hanging, including Yeshua on the cross (Acts 5:30; 10:39).

And just as someone who is hanging depends on some kind of structure to overcome gravity pulling you down, Yeshua was saying that overcoming all of the judicial pitfalls of the Torah depend on loving God and others. Thus all of the commandments hang or depend on those two ways of loving. So if you love God, not just believe in Him or go through the motions of worshiping Him, you will be inclined to keep all of the commandments concerning our relationship with Him. And if you truly love your neighbor as yourself, it will enable you to be a good neighbor to him or her, by keeping all of the commandments concerning our relationships

with other people.

This is the way that God desires us to follow. It escapes the pitfalls of legalism at one extreme and cheap grace on the other. It is the very thing that the prophet Jeremiah foretold would take place through the New Covenant, when He spoke the word of the Lord:

“I will put My Torah within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jer 31:33).

So the point is that if you believe in Yeshua and have received the gift of salvation through faith in Him, then you have the kind of heart that allows you to love God and other people in a truly Spirit-filled manner. And you have the potential to be faithful to God’s commandments in a way that no humanly derived religious system could ever produce. But you have to apply what is written on your heart, because even though you have the capability of following God’s stated will for our lives, it doesn’t mean you are actually doing it. We have to make a conscious decision to submit to His will.

The way that people regard God’s commandments today tend to fall into three categories:

- A legalistic approach that relies on teachers who may or may not have true biblical authority, including the talmudic rabbis.
- A random approach in which individuals pick and choose which commandments they will obey.
- Ignoring them altogether.

But there is another way that is consistent with the complete Word of God. That way can be guided by asking relevant questions concerning application of the commandments. These questions may be expressed in this manner:

Questions for determining the heart of the Torah

- What category of the Torah does a commandment belong, and what are the implications?
- Are there any limitations to the commandment today?
- Is the commandment given with an everlasting or permanent nature?
- Is the commandment sacrificial or punitive and thus accomplished once for all?
- Did Yeshua bring fulfillment to the commandment by teaching how to live it out?
- How does the commandment help us to love God or other people?
- Are there burdensome additions by religious leaders that can mislead us from keeping it from the heart?

Asking questions such as these can enable us to avoid the extremes of trying to keep the rabbinic Law in a legalistic manner, and the cheap grace of disregarding the commandments altogether, or even the pick and choose method without a consistent reason other than “I like this one and don’t like that one.” In contrast, the Messianic approach means finding meaning throughout the Word of God and exercising some discipline and dedication by applying God’s commandments reasonably and always with loving God and others in mind.

God’s love and the commandments

It is no coincidence that God’s Word links together Yeshua and the Torah in a critical way. As we saw earlier, the entire Torah *hangs* on loving God and others. We also know that Yeshua took upon the curse of the Law by *hanging* on the Cross, for as Scripture declares,

“cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” (Deut 21:22-23; Gal 3:13). That tells us that every punitive aspect of the Law that applies to us according to God’s requirement of justice, was taken by Yeshua in His suffering unto death. He received every last one of commandments with punishments, which are often judged to be capital in nature. And He did it out of love.

But it was not just generic love. It was precisely the kind of love Yeshua was talking about—the love of God and the love of others. For perfect love exists between the three persons of the godhead—the Father, Son and Spirit—and Yeshua demonstrated that love by fulfilling His part of the divine plan. And, at the same time, He demonstrated His incredible love for us. How true it is that Yeshua fulfilled or overflowed the Torah by hanging on that cross because of loving God and loving us.

Living out the heart of the Torah, then, is a reflection of the kind of love that exists in the very heart of God. It is a very humbling understanding that casts a very different light on God’s commandments, and it ought to motivate us to be more faithful to them than mere religious obligation.