Hi,

Good morning! Here are today’s updates:

* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org/). All of this week’s videos and podcasts have been posted.
* Keep sending in those movie and book recommendations.

When Jesus is asked for the greatest commandment, he responds that we are to love God and love others. It is important to remember that both of these commandments come from the Law of Moses. Indeed, they are the essence of the Law. But is there more to the Law?

***Deuteronomy 6:1-9 (NRSV)***

**Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.**

**Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.**

*The Law*

The Law consists of the teachings given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai. God gave these instructions in one big gift-wrapped package. It is as if God is moving in with the Israelites and the Law is the set of house rules. Much of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are devoted to the Law. We refer to this as the “Law” because it is the customary way to translate the Hebrew word, *Torah*. “Law” is a helpful translation, but “instruction” and “teaching” get closer to its meaning.

Today’s passage from Deuteronomy lays out the heart of the Law. Verse 4, “Hear O Israel . . .” begins a prayer, the *Shema*, that all Jewish boys and men recited daily. When Jesus is asked for the greatest of all God’s teachings, it is here that he turns. God’s teachings, God’s Law, begins with our love for God. The first four of the Ten Commandments begin to flesh out this fundamental teaching – no other gods, keep the Sabbath, etc.

The Law also includes many teachings about our relationships with one another, beginning with Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” another verse Jesus went to when asked to summarize the Law. The last six of the Ten Commandments begin to flesh out these teachings about relationships – no stealing or lying, no adultery or coveting, etc.

Finally, the Law also spells out a variety of rituals and practices by which the unholy people are able to approach the Holy God. Much about these rituals is bizarre to us and the meaning is often lost. Still, even here we can see God teaching his people about living with God. They are to bring their very best to God. For example, when they offer God a gift, it is to be from their own possessions, it is to cost them something.

*The purpose of the Law*

In one sense, the underlying purpose of the Law was to restore the people to a right relationship with God so that all the cosmos could be healed and renewed. Humans were originally created to love God and one another every day and in every way. If the people can find their way back to such a love, then what was done in the rebellion in the Garden will be undone. Yet, as we’ll see below, this is a purpose which the Law could not achieve.

The Law had another purpose however. Since only the Israelites were given the Law and taught how to live in a right relationship with God, then the Law marked them out as a special people. They were the ones who knew to keep the Sabbath, to avoid idols, to avoid certain foods, to say the *Shema*, to circumcise their male children, and so on. It was only natural that certain of these practices became important symbols of what it meant to be a Jew. They became boundary markers enabling one to tell a Jew from a Gentile. They served to keep the groups apart. Sabbath-keeping, food laws, and circumcision became the “badges of membership” in the people of God. They became what Paul would refer to as the “works of the law” (see below).

*The dark side of the Law*

In some ways, ignorance is bliss. Everyone has a general idea that they don’t do the things they should and do the things they shouldn’t. But the Law makes the general, specific. The Law turns “sin” into “transgression.” For example, it is wise not to drive too fast. The Law turns that wisdom into a speed limit. Thus, the Hebrews could never plead ignorance of God’s expectations, for “through the law comes the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20).

Further, the Law shined a magnifying glass on the people’s sinfulness. In large ways and small, the Law taught the people how far short they fell of God’s expectations, how unholy they were. The Hebrews came to learn that none of them could truly love God and love neighbor in all things. If we think of the Law as the teacher and the Jews (and ourselves!) as the students, the teacher was unable to shape the students into the people they needed to be. The teacher was not incompetent; rather, the students were burdened with a learning disability that they could not overcome. The problem is not with the Law, it is with us. This may be easier to understand if you remember that, as Jesus said, the Law is summed up in the commandments to love God and to love one another.

Thus, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes, “Is the law therefore opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law” (3:21). But since we, the students, are unable to learn sufficiently because of the power of sin, then we must be put right with God by faith, our faith in Jesus Christ.

When we come to the Law, we cannot remind ourselves too often that it is summed up in God’s teachings that we are to love God and one another in all that we say and do, in things large and small, whether it is our lifelong friend or our most despised enemy. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to nothing less.

*A bit more: The works of the Law*

There is a phrase we sometimes use to express the idea that we can do enough good acts (good works) to make ourselves acceptable to God, to get to “heaven” as it were. The phrase is “works righteousness.” Much of Christian teaching is devoted to showing the fallacy of this notion. We are made right with God by God’s grace, for we are simply unable to love sufficiently on our own. We can never earn our way into God’s presence. We are just not capable of it.

Christians have often mistakenly assumed that the ancient Jews practiced “works righteousness.” If only the Jews could keep the Law in all its many details they would be saved and get to “heaven.” But this is a caricature of ancient Judaism.

Instead, the Jews of Jesus day believed that God had chosen them from among all the peoples on the earth. They, the people of God, would one day be God’s renewed and restored people. Thus, the question for a Jew was whether someone was in the people of God or not. Did they belong or not? Could the person wear the “badge of membership?” If they wore the badge, they would be made right with God.

When Paul speaks of the “works of the law,” as in Galatians 2:16, he is referring to the Jewish external symbols of membership in the people of God: Sabbath-keeping, adherence to the food laws, circumcision, and so on. These “works of the law,” he writes, are no longer the badges of membership in the people of God, now the only badge of membership is faith in Jesus Christ.

*Movie recommendation*

Mike and Patti Cook recommended a second excellent move: *O Brother Where Art Thou*. It loosely retells Homer’s *Odyssey* as only the Coen brothers could do it.

*Book recommendation*

How did the Christmas we celebrate and remember come to be? It was a largely neglected holiday in the U.S. until the first half of the 19th century when it began to be resurrected. *The Battle for Christmas* by Stephen Nissenbaum tells much of this story in Pulitzer Prize winning fashion. Tomorrow, I’ll give you a second title on the same topic. (That’s called a teaser.)

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott