

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The Evangelist John instructs us that *“the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”* (John 1:17). Again he proclaims, that the Son came not *“into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”* (John 3:17). Yes, God's Son came in the fullness of time, born of the virgin Mary, not to *“to abolish the Law or the Prophets.”* He who is God and Lord of all things, subjected Himself to that which He is Lord over, to the law, not *“to abolish [it] but to fulfill [it]”* (Matt. 5:17), so that He might apply His righteousness, in word and deed and person, to us sinners burdened by our law-breaking— *“to redeem [us] who [are] under the law.”*

This is Christ's purpose for taking on our flesh, as St. Paul explains: the Spirit *“has set [us] free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do”* (Rom. 8:2-3). That is, the law accuses us for our law-breaking, and rightly condemns that sin with the penalty spoken to our parents in Eden: death. For our flesh is weak; we are unable to keep the commands of God, as St. Paul explains a bit later: the fleshly mind *“does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot”* (Rom. 8:7).

But St. Paul asserts that what the law failed to accomplish, God Himself would do, not by overturning the law, but by fulfilling the law in His own Son. Here is St. Paul: *“By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he— God—condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit”* (Rom. 8:3-4).

Here then the great exchange continues that we just sang about—look at stanza 4 of our sermon hymn. There we sang about how Jesus “puts on our human frame, and in return gives us His realm, His glory, and His name.” For the glory of Christ is righteousness — of His person and of His actions—for Jesus neither knew sin nor did He commit any sin of thought, word, or deed. And it is this obedience—in catechism terms we call it His active obedience—that gets placed onto our ledger. Again, as St. Paul teaches, *“by the one man's obedience—that would be Christ's—the many will be made righteous”* (Rom. 5:19).

And this is not simply obedience to the moral law—something we would all agree He did and is good—but also the ceremonial laws. Thus Jesus begins His nascent life, keeping the laws required of Him as a Jew, but surely not required of us. Tonight we'll hear the brief account of Jesus' circumcision, required of Jews at 8 days. And so Jesus was circumcised according to the command given to Abraham (Gen. 17:12), and the word of the Lord given through Moses (Lev. 12:3).

And then today, we hear how everything was being done in compliance with the Law of the Lord, with the Law of Moses, with the custom of the Law. The firstborn Jesus, who had opened the womb of His mother Mary, was by law to be offered up to the Lord — so they went to the temple to do just that. And Mary, having given birth to a son, was required by law to present herself for purification after 40 days. And in their poverty, they offered up, according to the law, the sacrifice of “*a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.*”

Of course, since Jesus was still an infant, none of this could have been done by Him alone. But God chose well in choosing righteous Joseph and the obedient servant Mary as those who would care for His Christ.

But these ceremonial laws that were fulfilled by Jesus are no longer required of us. Circumcision is no longer required to be part of God's family, as St. Paul says, “*in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love*” (Gal. 5:6). We are “*in Christ Jesus,*” when we have been baptized into His name. Baptism is the New Testament counterpart of circumcision: when you were baptized into Christ, “*you were circumcised [by Christ] with a circumcision made without hands*” (Col 2:11), for baptism effects not an external circumcision of the flesh, but an internal circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:28-29), the Spirit giving faith through this sacrament.

Similarly, women today are not considered ceremonially unclean after giving birth, and they are not required today to purify themselves for 40 or 80 days after giving birth. And firstborn sons are not required today to be offered up to the Lord, as Jesus was.

Jesus fulfilled these laws, and they no longer apply to us. Indeed, regarding them, St. Paul encourages us, saying, “*Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ*” (Col. 2:16-17).

I'm sure you have heard as I have many media types try to pass judgment on Christians for these very kinds of things: why do you eat pork; why do you eat shrimp? The Lord called them unclean, detestable. You shouldn't eat them, if you're going to follow the Old Testament laws (they say this to try to undo God's laws on moral issues like homosexuality)! But, of course, Christ taught us that “*whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled*’ (Thus he declared all foods clean.)” (Mark 7:18-19). Similarly, St. Paul taught, “*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*” (Rom. 14:17).

Again, you may have heard some brilliant media type ask, why do you wear clothes that have two different kinds of material in them? God forbade it. Shame on you, Christians! And to be sure, Christians ought not be given to showy displays. Rather, St. Peter says, “*let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious*” (1 Pet. 3:4). In other words, what’s important is not the outward adornment, but the heart—faith in the true substance: Jesus Christ. Therefore, “*let no one disqualify you, insisting on*” various regulations all fulfilled in Christ.

On the other hand, those laws are different than the moral laws, which Jesus also kept. Jesus honored His legal father Joseph and His mother Mary; He “*was submissive to them*” (Luke 2:51). Out of this man’s heart came no “*evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness*” (Mark 7:21-22), all the things that defile us. Though tempted as we are, He never sinned (Heb. 4:15). He kept these moral laws that we are still obligated to keep, but fail.

Thus Jesus’ obedience extends beyond His active obedience; it includes His passive obedience as we teach in the catechism class, whereby He takes our law-breaking into His person, so that He might bear our punishment. Yes, His obedience extended “*to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil. 2:8), bearing not His sins, but ours “*in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed*” (1 Pet. 2:24). In this way would Mary’s soul be pierced as Simeon foretold. In this way would Jesus effect the “*the fall and rising of many in Israel,*” some stumbling over the cornerstone and being crushed by it, others called to be a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation because of it; some who see becoming blind by it, others who are blind given sight; some offended by the foolishness and weakness of the cross, others being saved by this message. For Jesus did this that we might look up to Him, who was lifted up on the tree of the cross, and believe in Him, and have everlasting life.

Dear Saints, we are born in sin, and we sin still. Having been called by baptism unto Christ, we know the right and, I pray, want to do it, but we still do the evil things that we know we should not. Trust not in your obedience, but in Christ’s. He kept the law for you, and He took your punishment all the way to the cross. You are forgiven in Him; He has delivered you from this body of death.

You are Christians; you have been baptized; you are a new creation. Live according to your calling, but trust not in your obedience. Trust in Christ and His obedience for you, for “*Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes*” (Rom. 10:4).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.