

Study Guide and Commentary

ACIM® Text, Chapter 23

The Escape from Conflict

Section III — Part 2 (III.4-8), Laws 2 & 3

The Laws of Chaos

Explanation of underlining, italics and footnote formats can be found at the end of the commentary.

Overview of Section III

This section was labelled “Introduction” in the FIP edition; the CE has given it its own section number. The paragraph breaks are all the same.

This short section, following on the extended discussion in Chapter 21 about seeing a world without sin, and seeing one another as sinless, shows now the importance of the holy relationship as a powerful force in undoing all differences, first within the relationship, and then—inevitably—extending out from the relationship to embrace the world. The benefits of a holy relationship are expanded on throughout all of Chapter 22.

The Section So Far

The First Law

These are the laws that rule the world we have made:

1. The truth is different for everyone.
2. Each one *must* sin, and therefore deserves attack and death.
3. God, Who cannot be mistaken, must accept His Son's belief in what he is, and *hate* him for it.
4. The belief that you have what you have taken; another's loss is your gain.
5. There is a *substitute* for love.

The purpose of these laws is to attack truth and render it meaningless. They are meaningless in themselves, since chaos has no laws, so it is not necessary to understand the laws, although it is essential for us to understand their purpose. We need only to look at them, and then to simply go beyond them.

The first law is a denial that Truth is absolute, and the same for everyone. The Course asserts that only Truth is true, and nothing else is true. The first law assumes that we are all separate and different from one another, and leads to the competition of egos trying to

validate their own reality by attacking the values of others. It also violates the first principle of miracles, that there is no order of difficulty in miracles; it makes it seem that some illusions are more real, or more persistent, than others. We must realize that all illusions are equally untrue, and when we do, they will merely disappear.

The Second Law

Paragraph 4

4 The second law of chaos, dear indeed to every worshipper of sin, is that each one *must* sin, and therefore deserves attack and death. ²This principle, closely related to the first, is the demand that errors call for punishment and not correction, for the destruction of the one who makes the error places him *beyond* correction and beyond forgiveness.¹ ³What he has done is thus interpreted as an irrevocable sentence on himself, which God Himself is powerless to overlook. ⁴Sin cannot be remitted, being the belief the Son of God can make mistakes for which his own destruction becomes inevitable.

• Study Question •

1. *Paragraph 4* presents the second law of chaos. If you made a terrible mistake that resulted in seeming destruction, who, based on this second law, could you appeal to in order to be released from the awful effects of what you had done?
 - A. *The Holy Spirit.*
 - B. *God.*
 - C. *Your holy relationship partner.*
 - D. *Those who have gone before us and already reached salvation.*
 - E. *All of the above.*
 - F. *None of the above.*

The first law leads us right into the second law, that “each one *must* sin, and therefore deserves attack and death” (4:1). The connection between the two laws isn’t stated openly, but it is implied. Because the truth is different for everyone, we all end up in conflict with and attacking one another, competing to prove our reality by showing that we are more true, and therefore more real. We try to prove that we are right by proving that others are wrong. For me to “win” someone else must “lose.” You are a sinner because you have the wrong value system (different from mine), and I am a sinner because I attack you to validate myself. It says we “*must* sin,” and I think that means that

¹. The latter part of the sentence seems to mean that errors do not call for correction because they instead call for the punishment/destruction of the one who makes the error, and once he is destroyed, correction of his error becomes impossible.

we believe we are somehow *forced* to validate ourselves by invalidating others. After all, if we don't, they'll just attack us first! Thus, the first law makes us all into sinners, deserving to be attacked and ultimately to die (4:1). Attack is bad, and because we believe the principle that "errors call for punishment and *not* correction," we end up believing we deserve to be punished. If you think about it, this 2nd law is implied when we think something like, "What did I do to deserve this?" It assumes that there *are* things for which punishment is inevitable. The only question we have is whether or not we've done anything that bad. And while we may have that question consciously, unconsciously we all know we deserve to be punished, which is why we create suffering for ourselves.

Punishment, ultimately, is death, as the Bible says: "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 3:23). Death makes correction and forgiveness impossible (4:3). God, we believe, is always just, and justice demands death: It is "an irrevocable sentence... which God Himself is powerless to overcome" (4:4). I've often thought about the Christian doctrine of original sin and substitutionary atonement (Jesus dying in our place, taking our punishment) as being illogical at the core. Even assuming that we have *actually sinned* (which the Course says we have not), if God *wants* to forgive us, what is stopping Him? Why does He have to make Jesus suffer a horrible, lingering death, in order to feel comfortable forgiving us? But in the ego's twisted thought system, punishment is inevitable. Not even God can avoid it. God *has to punish us*. There can be no remission of sin, because sin *is* "the belief the Son of God can make mistakes for which his own destruction becomes inevitable" (4:5).

Paragraph 5

5 Think what this seems to do to the relationship between the Father and the Son. ²Now it appears that They can never be one again, for one must always be condemned, and by the other. ³Now are They different, and enemies. ⁴And Their relationship is one of opposition, just as the separate aspects of the Son meet only to conflict, but not to join. ⁵One becomes weak, the other strong by his defeat. ⁶And fear of God and of each other now appears as sensible, made real by what the Son of God has done both to himself and his Creator.

• **Study Question** •

2. **Paragraph 5** elaborates on the effects of the second law. What does the second law do to your relationship with your Father?
- A. It brings you together in common cause against the evil of sin.
 - B. It makes you fear God, for He is different from you.
 - C. It makes you enemies, for now you are a sinner and God must punish you for your sin.
 - D. It makes you turn to Him for help out of your terrible predicament.
 - E. A and D
 - F. B and C.

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So, if we believe (at some level of mind) that we cannot avoid sinning, and sin merits death as a punishment that even God is forced to administer, how do you suppose that leaves you *feeling about God*? (5:1) God has become something to fear, a terrible Presence that will hurt us, badly, if we allow ourselves to get too close. This is pictured vividly in the Hebrew Scriptures in the stipulation about the “holy of holies” in the tabernacle and temple. God is depicted as knowing that if anyone approaches His Presence, they will die, and warning them to stay away; even Aaron Moses’ brother is forbidden: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat.’” (Leviticus 16:2 ESV)

Putting it bluntly, our belief that sin and punishment is inevitable really messes up our relationship with God! The history of the Christian Church, with its belief in original sin, fairly screams this message. How could anyone *possibly* avoid fearing God if they are born already corrupt, guilty, and deserving of hell? God has become utterly different from us. “Holy” is a scary word, unattainable by all but a blessed few. For the bulk of humanity, oneness with God is unthinkable (5:2), the very thought almost blasphemous (which is why when Jesus declared his oneness with God he was accused of blasphemy) (5:2–3).

Our relationship with God becomes “one of opposition,” comparable only to the way we humans (“the separate aspects of the Son”) “meet only to conflict, but not to join” (5:4). When we come together with another person, so often the result is some kind of conflict, and rarely is there any real, deep joining together. Our relationship with God mirrors our human relationships: We find ourselves in competition or conflict with God! Just as, in our ego minds, we think that the way to strengthen ourselves is to defeat someone else (5:5), so we come to believe that we become stronger by resisting and opposing God’s Will.

With that kind of relationship with other people and with God, “fear...now appears as sensible” (5:6). Isn’t this a description of our chaotic world? People are endlessly battling with each other, both on the small scale such as competition in the work place, or the macro scale of political parties or nations; we live in fear of one another, and much of the human race lives in terror of divine judgment. We seem completely unaware that we are

doing this to ourselves, *and* to God (5:6). By “doing it to God,” I think it means that we are projecting anger and judgment onto God, and making a false image of God. There is no reason to *fear* God! “God does not judge His guiltless Son. Having given Himself to him, how could it be otherwise” (T-11.VI.7:6-7 (FIP)).

Paragraph 6

6 The arrogance on which the laws of chaos stand could not be more apparent than emerges here. ²Here is a principle which would define what the Creator of reality must be; what He must think and what He must believe, and how He must respond, believing it. ³It is not seen as even necessary that He be *asked* about the truth of what has been established for His belief. ⁴His Son can *tell* Him this, and He has but the choice whether to take his word for it or be mistaken.

• Study Question •

3. *Paragraphs 6 & 7 connect the second law to the third. The second law is that each Son of God must sin and therefore deserves punishment. The third law is that God must accept His Son's belief in what he is and hate him (see 7:1–2). In your own words and based on this paragraph, please explain how the second law leads to the third.*

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Arrogance (6:1)? Calling myself a sinner whom God must judge is *arrogant*? Yes, indeed! It becomes pretty darn obvious, doesn't it? Who am I, who are you, to flat out *tell God* what He must be thinking and believing? When you or I tell ourselves that we are sinners, really awful (or at least not very nice) people, and that God, being just and holy and all that, *must be out to punish us*, we are taking it upon ourselves to *define God* (6:2)! We don't even bother to *ask* Him what He thinks and believes (6:3); if we did, He would tell us His final judgment:

“This is God's Final Judgment: ‘You are still My holy Son, forever innocent, forever loving and forever loved, as limitless as your Creator, and completely changeless and forever pure. Therefore awaken and return to Me. I am your Father and you are My Son.’” (W-pI.pII.10.5:1-3).

How unutterably arrogant to tell God (6:4) that He can't mean it, that He is wrong about us, that He must be mistaken! But this is exactly what we do every time we imagine that we are guilty.

Paragraph 7

7 This leads directly to the third preposterous belief that seems to make chaos eternal. ²For if God cannot be mistaken, then He must accept His Son's belief in what he is, and *hate* him for it. ³See how the fear of God is reinforced by this third principle. ⁴Now it becomes impossible to turn to Him for help in misery, for now He has become the "enemy" Who "caused" it, and to Whom appeal is useless. ⁵Nor can salvation lie within the Son, whose every aspect seems to be at war with Him, and justified in its attack.

• Study Question •

4. *Paragraph 7 elaborates on the third principle. Which of the following statements do you think best summarizes this paragraph?*
- A. *Because of the third principle, salvation is nowhere to be found, not from God and not in any part of the Son, for all these become your enemies.*
 - B. *The fear of God is reinforced by the third principle of chaos because it makes guilt forever real, demanding death and punishment.*
 - C. *Now you cannot turn to God for help in misery because the holy instant, the way to turn to Him, has been denied you due to your fixation on the past.*

Talk about *chaos*! We've convinced ourselves that God must *hate* us because we are guilty sinners. The chaos of the world must extend into eternity (7:1–2). God can't be mistaken, and it's plain to see that we are unworthy, guilty worms, so He *must* hate us. This third law cements the fear of God into our awareness (7:3). Remember how, in the Obstacles to Peace section (T-19.IV), the Fourth Obstacle was "The Fear of God" (T-19.IV(D))? We are digging down through the same layers of consciousness here, exposing what fuels our stubbornly lingering fear of God. If God hates sin, and is out to punish sinners, He has become an enemy to be feared instead of a source of hope and salvation. How can God rescue us from our misery when He is the One who has *caused* our misery by the threat of divine judgment? It's *useless* to call on God for help! (7:4) So the ego, sometimes subtly, sometimes not so subtly, argues.

And as for any hope of salvation from the Son of God—whether within us, or the human race, or as a separate being of some kind—forget it! Look around you. "Every aspect [of the Sonship] seems to be at war with God" (7:5). Not only at war with God but *justifiably* at war with Him! Who else got us into all this chaos? Who else created this world? The human race and the world we live in is a total mess. There's no hope there.

That's the ego perspective. That's the conclusion the laws of chaos would lead us to.

Paragraph 8

8 And now is conflict made inevitable, and beyond the help of God.
²And now salvation must remain impossible, because the Savior has become the enemy. ³There can be no release and no escape. ⁴Atonement thus becomes a myth, and vengeance, not forgiveness, is the will of God. ⁵From where all this begins, there is no sight of help that can succeed. ⁶Only destruction can be the outcome, and God Himself seems to be siding with it to overcome His Son. ⁷Think not the ego will enable you to find escape from what it wants. ⁸*That* is the function of this course, which does not value what the ego cherishes.

• Study Question •

5. *Paragraph 8 continues with the theme of paragraph 7, emphasizing that there is no release and no escape from within this system. How, then, do we get out, according to this paragraph?*
- A. *The ego will not allow us to find any escape, as sentence 6 says.*
 - B. *We do the Course.*
 - C. *We accept Atonement.*
 - D. *This paragraph gives no way out.*

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So here we are, locked in endless battle with one another, living examples of “The Game of Thrones²,” and “beyond the help of God” (8:1). With God as enemy, there *is* no Savior (8:2). “There can be no release and no escape” (8:3). This is exactly where the ego wants to have us.

Atonement? A myth. God’s will is *vengeance* (8:4). This is the level of consciousness of much of the human race, in what Spiral Dynamics calls the Red Meme, where power and domination are the highest values.

If you stand on the starting point of the ego, as these laws do, and proceed logically, this is where you arrive. Hell. There appears to be no way out; even God wants to destroy us. Scenarios of the end of the world often feature a vengeful God coming in and slaughtering vast percentages of the human race. This seems to be what God *wants*. (8:5–6). The ego isn’t going to be any help in finding any way out (8:7).

What *is* the way out? “*That* is the function of this course, which does not value what the ego cherishes” (8:8). I’m afraid that this is a teaser. A welcome, much-needed teaser, but no more than that for now. The description of the laws of chaos isn’t over; there are two more to come. We are only about half done. Jesus wants to paint the awful picture in stark detail so that, as he said, after looking *on* it we can be willing and able to look *beyond* it, being forewarned that if we start down this slippery slope, buying into the

² *The Game of Thrones* is the title of an award-winning HBO TV series begun in 2011 and ending (probably) in 2017, 2018, or 2019. Still going at the moment I write. Wikipedia says it “follows a web of alliances and conflicts among the dynastic noble families either vying to claim the throne or fighting for independence from the throne,” and to me the story is a perfect depiction of the ego’s endless battleground.

ideas of separateness, attack, sin, and guilt, all the horrible rest of it will inevitably follow.

So, hang in there. There *is* light at the end of the tunnel. The Course is the way out, and we are going to see that clearly. But not just yet. There's more of the tunnel we need to explore first.

Legend:

Light underscoring indicates emphasis that appears in the Urtext or shorthand notes.

Text is taken from the Circle of Atonement's Complete and Annotated Edition (which I refer to as the "CE" for "Complete Edition" or "Circle Edition"). Please be aware that, even when the wording is exactly the same as the FIP version, the division into paragraphs is often quite different in the CE, which restores the paragraph breaks found in the original notes. This results in different reference numbering as well. I will indicate for each paragraph the corresponding sentences in the FIP edition. You should be able to locate specific sentences in that edition if you need to, with a minimum of visual clutter in the commentary. Passages that lie outside the current section will continue to have footnoted references. References to quotations are from the CE unless another version is being quoted, in which case that version is indicated.

Footnotes by the commentary author are shown in this font and size. Other footnotes come from the Complete Edition itself.

Answer Key

1. F
2. F
3. The second law says that the Son must sin and must be condemned and punished. This law is a belief of the Son's and means that the Son believes that sin is his nature. The Son, then, does not have to consult God about what he is. He knows what he is—he is a rotten sinner. So either God believes him or is mistaken. And since God cannot be mistaken, God must accept his Son's belief and hate him because he is a sinner.
4. A
5. B