

CHAPTER 1

Setting the Stage

a right understanding of the Law of God

Introduction

The law of God has fallen on hard times these days. People often do not stop to consider its significance in their lives. The wisdom of much of today's modern church reasons that since Christ has fulfilled the laws of the Old Testament, the New Testament believer is no longer bound by them. "We are not under law, but under grace!" Unfortunately, those who put forward this understanding are only partially correct. They are correct in that we must understand the law in light of God's gracious dealing with us. The law does not exist for us to prove our worthiness to God. However, we cannot therefore conclude the law has no more use for us, either individually or in our families.

What I will be doing in this book is trying to convince the church to give the law another chance. More specifically, I will be trying to set before us some applications specifically in the realm of parenting. However, before we can begin our study, there are several foundational principles that

we must understand if we are to properly apply the law. First, we must deal with how we are to use the law evangelically. Second, we have to see which laws we should be drawing from in our families.

Three-fold Use of the Law

Many people view the prohibitions and prescriptions of the Bible as profoundly negative. God's commands in Scripture, but specifically the laws of Moses, are viewed largely, as a force that limits the fun we are able to have. However, we must learn to change our attitude toward the law. Far from being a tool for condemnation, God's righteous laws, his commandments to his people, are used in our lives for freedom as they communicate the mind of God to his people. The best way to recognize the freedom inherent in the law – James 1:25 dubs the law “the law of liberty” – is to study God's purpose for the law. Traditional reformed and Presbyterian theology, which is also shared in the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith, holds to three primary purposes. First, to convict us of our sin and drive us to our knees to plead for mercy; second, to restrain sin in the world; third, to act as our guide as we seek to express our thanks to God for the salvation he purchased for us at the cost of his beloved Son. Let us look at each function in turn.

Conviction of Sin

First, the law exists to convict us of our sin and help us realize we stand in need of a Savior. It does not take a sinner long to see his sinfulness when he looks into the mirror of God's law. We see a picture of that kind of response in the book of 2 Chronicles. Josiah, in the middle of his religious reforms in Judah, is restoring the temple when the priests stumble upon a forgotten book: the Book of the Law. The king says to his officials, “Go, inquire of the LORD for me and for those who are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book that has been found. For great is the wrath of the LORD that is poured out on us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD, to do according to all that is written in this book.” (2 Chronicles 34:21,ESV) Josiah, upon reading the words of the book, immediately recognizes the position he and the nation are in because of their actions. We should have the same response when we read the Bible. It should become apparent that, apart from some kind of intervention outside ourselves we are in deep trouble. Even if we happen to be optimistic about our efforts in keeping the Ten Commandments, thinking we have kept them well, Jesus broadens the scope of the Law.

Our conviction before God's word should become significantly greater when we apply the law in the same way Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount. He does not allow us to become content with simple external compliance, as if that were even possible. Instead, he demonstrates that thoughts and motives can also break of the Law. Anger toward your brother is equated with murder (Matthew

5:22) and lustful thinking is with adultery (Matthew 5:28). But there is yet more to convince us of our bondage.

God, through the apostle Paul, tells us we have all sinned and fall short of his glory (Romans 3:10-18). The Bible leaves us no pretense for thinking we have somehow escaped the corruption that is part of every human being since Adam led mankind into sin. Our condemnation continues to pile on until the burden becomes so heavy we buckle under its weight and cry out with Paul, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24) It is precisely in this question that we find the freedom of the law. When God’s conviction becomes so heavy that your legs begin to shake you are getting close to freedom. Only when you are on your knees joining Paul in his cry for deliverance will you find freedom. Freedom to stand before God and call him “Father.” Freedom to stand before God clothed in the new, white robes given to you by the bridegroom Jesus Christ. Freedom to spend the rest of your days living for him. Coming to the law as our mirror, it is faithful to its title “law of liberty.” If we do not realize our sin, we will never realize our need for a Savior. However, there are two more uses of the law.

Restraining Sin

The second use of the law deals with restraining sin in the culture. It used to be commonplace in the United States to have the Ten Commandments displayed in public places. As recently as 1980 some states required the display of the Decalogue in public school classrooms. Regardless of how you may feel about their display – I hope that you view it positively – the function of displaying the Ten Commandments is to remind all people of their obligation to God and to each other. These displays served as visible reminders that sin, bound up in every person’s heart, must be restrained. For many outside the walls of the church, it may be difficult to see how they need to be reminded of God and have their sinful impulses restrained. It is not within the scope of this book to discuss the place of religion in the public square. Suffice it to say, the non-Christian may work to remove reminders of his accountability before God. In the final analysis, however, they will answer to God for their violations of his law. If that is true for the world, how much more for the Christian.

In the Christian home, we should be grateful to be reminded of God’s law to help restrain sin in our lives. Family circumstances, personalities, strengths and weaknesses are all different. What a relief to have an objective standard to which we can turn for our decisions on what is right and wrong. For all the ages in our children, from little toddlers to teenagers, we have a foundation from which to teach them. Our children should not be subject to the whims of mom and dad, but the law of God. The law arrests us, and our children, in our sin and sets the boundaries for us. It is another evidence of God’s grace in our lives. He restrains and corrects his children in his law. These two uses of the

law are more negative in that they point out failure and tells us what we should not do, however, in God's grace he also provides us with a road map, which is the law's third use.

A Guide for Our Walk in Thankfulness

The third use of the law speaks exclusively to the regenerated Christian. The first and second uses could have application to the non-Christian. However, the third use can only be applied to one who has put his faith for redemption in Jesus Christ alone. The law's third use is to show us how we respond to God's gracious gift of salvation. We see this principle work itself out in Paul's letter to the Colossians. When we read that letter, we will see that the first two chapters establish Christ as the only one who is able to reconcile us to God. For example, in Colossians 1:15-20 Paul sings a great hymn of praise to the only Redeemer who is qualified to reconcile God and man based on his being the creator, sustainer, and ruler of all things. Only through the work of the cross is man able to be reconciled. However, we cannot understand the message of Colossians simply by looking at its first part. We have to include the second part, which deals with the changes demanded of the person who is raised with Christ. The third use of the law simply says, "God bought you with the blood of his own Son. You should love him according to God's definition." Consider the following example.

Suppose your friend would like to celebrate your birthday with you by buying you a birthday present. When he asks you what you would like to receive you tell him you are in need of socks, but that you would especially like to avoid pink polka-dotted socks. In fact, you tell him nothing would make you more miserable than to receive some pink polka-dotted socks. If your friend proceeds to buy them for you because he just loves them, he is expressing love for himself rather than love for you. Yet when we disregard God's law, we are treating God in exactly the same way. 1 John 5:3 tells us that if we wish to express our thanks to God, we will obey his commandments. In fact, we will love him so much that to do what he commands us will not be a burden to us. The motivation of our obedience flows from our love for God, which is why this third use of the law is applied to Christians alone. The biblical order is always God's deliverance first, followed by man's response of thanksgiving and love to his deliverer. That order is, in effect, what the introduction to the Decalogue teaches us also. God first delivers Israel out of Egypt and then places his righteous law on them so they would live righteously as a result of their rescue. I am not saying this change is easy. I am simply trying to help us see that our obedience to God's law is evangelistic in nature. It flows from our understanding of salvation, not from our attempts to earn salvation. However, obedience to God is a requirement of all whom he has bought with a price.

God has given us a tremendous gift. The mountain of guilt that we accumulated has been taken away and nailed to the cross. (Colossians 2:13-14). We are now in Christ, and, according to 2 Corin-

thians 5:17, a new creation. In light of this gift, the law shows us how we are to live. God graciously gives us a blueprint for how we are to serve him in light of our salvation in his law. We are now free to follow it as an expression of our thanksgiving and love. However, it is still before us is to discern which laws found in the Bible we are to follow.

Ceremonial, Judicial, and Moral Laws

There is no question that the New Testament church has a new relationship to the laws of the Moses. For example, Romans 7:6 talks about the believer being released from the law. At the Jerusalem council in Acts 15:1-21 the early church deals with the necessity, or rather the lack thereof, of circumcision for membership in the church. The book of Galatians deals with the same controversy. There is a clear indication that the implications for the law have changed since the death and resurrection of Christ. However, at other times, the New Testament talks to us about the need to continue to abide by the law. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches that he has come to fulfill the law. At the same time he says that anybody who “relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:19). In this verse, Jesus tells us there is a continuation of Law. Paul teaches us the same thing in his epistles. In the book of Romans, he teaches us we do not overthrow the law through our faith, but we uphold it (Rom. 3:31). Later in that same letter, Paul charges us to owe nothing, “except to love each other.” He gives us that command because, if we love each other, we have fulfilled the law. (Galatians 6:2). Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets, and we fulfill the law if we love one another. Rather than leaving us with vague statements to interpret about the shape of our love, Paul defines it for us in Romans: the Ten Commandments. James also, in his letter, urges the Christian to fulfill the royal law, which is summarized as love for your neighbor. (James 2:8). Not only are we urged to obey it, but submission to this law is also seen something that is good. So, whatever it means that Jesus fulfilled the Law, it cannot mean all its uses have ceased for the Christian. In order to help us make sense of which laws from the Old Testament remain and which are abolished, or abrogated, we will be greatly helped if we properly understand how the Law is applied in the Old Testament.

There are three main categories of laws that are given to us in the Bible: ceremonial laws, judicial or civil laws and moral laws. Each category of laws has its own sphere of address, which has implications for its continuing jurisdiction. Let’s look at each category so that sphere will be clear to us.

The Ceremonial Law

The ceremonial laws are those laws that God instituted at Sinai for the people of Israel governing their religious worship and sacrificial system. The purpose of all these ceremonies was to point the people of Israel to a redeemer who was yet to come. For example, the yearly Day of Atonement, to be celebrated on the tenth day of the seventh month of each Jewish calendar year, points to a couple of truths. First, this celebration points forward to a final Redeemer who is still coming. What I mean is that the sacrifices themselves were never thought to be the final solution to Israel's sin problem. This ceremony was to be repeated every year, thereby letting the Israelites know the final removal of sin was not yet accomplished. The sacrifice is proved inadequate, so the reversal of sin promised by God immediately after the fall is still to take place in the future. Second, this celebration teaches us about the substitutionary atonement, that Christ would receive the punishment in the place of his people. Man, having been stained by the original sin of Adam, is unable to pay his own debt. Christ takes our place and dies in our place. The ceremonies of the Old Testament laws serve one purpose: to point forward to Christ, the final sacrifice. Paul, in 2 Corinthians, tells us that Christ is our Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7), yet another instance where we learn that the ceremonial commandments of the Old Testament point forward to the perfect sacrifice in Christ. These all anticipated the arrival of Christ.

Since this arrival has taken place at Christ's incarnation, the ordinances, sacrificial rites, priestly order, and special festival days are all abrogated, meaning their application is complete. The New Testament bears clear witness to the fact that the ceremonial laws are no longer in effect. Their purpose was to point forward to the person and work of Christ. With that purpose complete, their requirements have ended. It is for that reason we do not need to offer sacrifice for our sins or have a Levitical priesthood. Christ has completed, once for all, all that to which they pointed. Therefore the ceremonial laws have been abrogated.

The Judicial Law

The next category of laws involves the judicial, or civil laws, which specifically addressed the way the Jewish nation should be governed. These laws governed things such as restitution, social justice and other aspects in Israel's theocracy. All these laws are canceled since they were applications of God's law for the people of Israel. However, they are not canceled in the same way the ceremonial laws are. There are applications to be made from the principles we learn from these commandments. For example, one of the judicial laws is found in Deuteronomy 25:4, which says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain." Paul twice quotes this verse, in 1 Corinthians 9:9 and 1 Timothy 5:18. He does not quote this law to insist on its literal application in the church. Rather, he

quotes in order that he might establish the principle that those who labor in full time gospel ministry should be paid by the church. The principle behind this law is that we should provide for those who labor among us (1 Cor. 9:10). If that is true for an ox, we should certainly apply that same principle to people made in the image and likeness of God. The law does not need to be applied in the same way as it was issued at Sinai, but the principles are still very much in effect. The principle of loving your neighbor as explained, for example, through the process of restoration of damaged or stolen property (Cf. Exodus 21:33-22:14) still applies today. You and I may not be tempted to steal oxen or sheep. However the principle behind the restitution that these laws demand has a broader application than the nation of Israel. The principles of these laws are still in effect. The challenging part of the judicial, or civil, laws is to know where to draw the line of application. We have to work through whether to enforce these laws more literally or more based on the principle they communicate. For example, God prescribes capital punishment for rape in the Old Testament. Today's church is somewhat divided on how this crime is to be punished in our day. The solution to this dilemma will have to be found in another volume. I simply want to be able to identify those laws that we are bound to follow so we can live properly based on God's Word.

The Moral Law

The final category of laws in the Old Testament continue to make their claim on all people in all times and all places. They are called the moral law of God. In Romans 2:14-15 we read about the Gentiles who live according to the law even though they do not have the law in written form. Their adherence to God's law is possible because his law is written on their hearts. The moral law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments, is applicable to all people, whether Christian or not. The Moral Law is further distinguished from the ceremonial and judicial laws by the fact that these are uniquely written by the finger of God apart from the other laws. Exodus 31:18 talks about the laws written on the two tablets by the finger of God: "And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God." The content of what God wrote is made clear in Deuteronomy 4:12-13: "Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone." The special commandments that were written on the two tablets were, in fact, the Ten Commandments. In fact, these commandments are so closely identified with God's gracious covenant relationship with his people that they are said

to be one and the same thing. Their unique position is carried yet further by its application in the New Testament.

Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-31 and Luke 10:25-28 all record one instance of Jesus' interactions with the religious leaders of his day, where Jesus is asked to give a summary of the law. In each account someone asks him what the most important command is. In the account in Mark, Jesus responds by saying, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31). In these accounts Jesus gives a summary of the law, but what law is not specified. It could be that he is summarizing the ceremonial laws. Perhaps he is summarizing the judicial laws. Perhaps he is summarizing the entirety of the Old Testament. To find a definitive answer as to which laws are in question, we have to turn to other places in the New Testament.

In Romans 13:8-10, God's Word teaches us that we are to fulfill the law through love. There are listed four of the commandments found in the Decalogue along with the caveat, "any other commandment." These commandments are summed up with these words: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Romans 13:9b). The Ten Commandments are singled out among all the other commands to be identified with the summary of the law Jesus gave in response to the experts of the law. A similar description is recorded for us in James 2:8-12. In chapter 2:8 James identifies the royal law as loving your neighbor as yourself, using the same words Jesus used. A few verses later, James uses two of the Ten Commandments to prove that you transgress all the law if you break one commandment. In the gospels also the Decalogue is identified with the summary of the law that Jesus gives. As we have seen above, Matthew 5:19 teaches us this law will never pass away. This law is binding on all people. That is how Pharaoh is held accountable for his rejection of God despite the fact that the Ten Commandments were not given to Egypt. That is how God can judge the iniquity of the Amorites for four generations in the time of Abraham (Cf. Genesis 15:16). These nations did not receive the two tablets, yet they are held responsible for breaking the law. If not, they would not have incurred any guilt. It is these moral laws on which we will be concentrating in this book. These moral laws have formed the foundation of much of western civilization, and they will form the foundation of our examination of the process of parenting too. However, before I begin with the specifics, we have to understand how this moral law is to be used in our lives.

Properly Understanding and Applying the Moral Law

In the confessional statements of the Reformation era, there is universal agreement that the Moral Law is summarized in the two tables of the Ten Commandments. However, particularly helpful in this regard is the Westminster Larger Catechism. In #99, the teaching aid helps us to understand eight helpful rules for the proper understanding of the Decalogue.

Rule #1. That the law is perfect, and bindeth everyone to full conformity in the whole man unto the righteousness thereof, and unto entire obedience for ever; so as to require the utmost perfection of every duty, and to forbid the least degree of every sin.

The authors are saying we are obligated to keep all of the Moral Law perfectly without any transgression. That keeps us from patting ourselves on the back in self-righteousness and saying obedience to the law is not necessary. James warns us of this exact error in his letter: “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.” (James 2:10). That statement levels the playing field. It should arrest any inclination toward self-righteousness. It should prevent the kind of pride that leads the Pharisee to pray, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” (Luke 18:11). We are all sinners, transgressors of the Law in need of forgiveness. When we come to the law we ought to understand that.

Rule #2. That it is spiritual, and so reacheth the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures.

The law is not about external compliance. If external compliance was God’s only concern, he certainly would have praised the Pharisees. They were meticulous in their law keeping. Yet Jesus is constantly confronting them because their obedience is only superficial. It does not flow from a love for God, but rather from a love for self. A lawyer, after asking Jesus how he is to inherit eternal life, is asked by the Messiah to summarize the law. When Jesus tells the man his summary, namely love for God and love for neighbor is correct, the lawyer tries to nuance the commandment by entering into a discussion about the definition of who our neighbor is. The reason he does so is because he was “desiring to justify himself.” (Luke 10:29). The man’s concern was with outward compliance, rather than the command to love God and our neighbor. We cannot properly understand the law by simply focusing on external compliance. Rather, it is the motivations of our soul that are manifested in our actions.

Rule #3. That one and the same thing, in divers respects, is required or forbidden in several commandments.

There will be overlap within the commandments. This truth can be most clearly seen when we respond to the first commandment. This commandment states simply, “You shall have no other God’s before me.” (Deuteronomy 5:7). However, the reason we honor God’s name, honor our

parents, or refrain from adultery is because we want to have no other God's before our Lord. These different commandments represent a variety of ways in which we can love God.

Rule #4. That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded: so where a promise is annexed, the contrary threatening is included; and, where a threatening is annexed, the contrary promise is excluded.

Here we see the principle of positive and negative instruction. We see that we ought not take the commandment so literally as to observe only that which is written in the letter. If a prohibition is given, the opposite prescription is implied. Take parenting, as an example. If we are diligent in our training, there will be lots of opportunity to correct our children. We will have to restrain their sin-natures in many ways. If our children begin to include hitting in their toolbox of conflict resolution, we would be right to say, "Johnny, you may not hit people." However, if that is the only instruction we give to our children, we will have trained them poorly. We also need to give them the opposite positive instruction. We should add, "You must be kind to your sister. You are kind by sharing your toy." So it is with God's law. Not only do we refrain from adultery, but we are pure toward our spouse and others with whom we come into contact.

Rule #5. That what God forbids, is at no time to be done; what He commands, is always our duty; and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times.

Always do what God says, never do what he forbids. However, the catechism recognizes that there are times where we do not do all that God commands. Rather than making this argument sound relativistic, these times arise when there is conflict between two commandments of the Lord. Two examples of what the catechism is describing are given in Matthew 12. In that text, the Pharisees challenge Jesus because of his disciples' behavior on the Sabbath. They claim his disciples are dishonoring the fourth commandment. However, Jesus, in his response, gives examples where God's law is not followed. The first is in David eating the bread of the Presence which was reserved only for the priest. There God's commandment to preserve life, embodied in the sixth commandment, and God's commandment to reserve the bread of the Presence for the priesthood are in apparent conflict. One commandment is not observed, in order that obedience to the other may continue. The second example is the work of the Levitical priesthood in the temple on the Sabbath. God's commandment to rest on the Sabbath is in apparent conflict with the second commandment requiring us to worship God according to his Word. Much can be said on this topic, and there are more capable men than me who can deal with this topic.

Rule #6. That under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded; together with all the causes, means, occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto.

In short, just because the commandment says do not murder does not mean nothing else is meant by it. This rule lays out for us the principle of synecdoche. This literary term says that a word describing only a part can represent a greater whole. For example, when you say to someone, “Nice wheels,” when they pull up in their brand new car you are not complementing them on the tires, but rather on the whole of the car. Or if you say, “Nice threads,” you are not speaking about loose threads that may be hanging off their clothes, but rather the color, style, fit and design of them. When we come to commandments we apply the same understanding. The commandments teach us not to steal, but within that commandment we understand it to be addressing cheating, fraud, kidnapping, greed and other similar offenses.

Rule #7. That what is forbidden or commanded to ourselves, we are bound, according to our places, to endeavour that it may be avoided or performed by others, according to the duty of their places.

If our position allows, we ought to enforce obedience to God’s law. This rule is particularly pertinent for the parent. We do not wait for our children to declare their faith in God before we require them to live according to his law. We are responsible to lead them. If God requires it of us, we ought to require it of our children as well.

Rule #8. That in what is commanded to others, we are bound, according to our places and callings, to be helpful to them; and to take heed of partaking with others in what is forbidden them.

If we are not in a position of authority we should support those around us in doing what is according to God’s Word. That is what I am trying to accomplish in this work: to support parents in the fulfillment of their parental obligations according to the Law of Liberty.

Conclusion

Far from being obsolete, or without application, God’s moral law continues to give us the tremendous blessing of freedom. Freedom to express our undying gratitude to the God who made us, redeemed us, and now also sustains us. Freedom to express our love and thankfulness to God. The beauty of it is that, as we seek to glorify God and enjoy him, the law also gives us a clear picture of how God would have us do that. We need to understand it for ourselves, but also be able to pass it on to our children.

Study Questions

1. What are the three uses of the law. What use should we apply to our study of the law as it applies to parenting? Why?
2. How does the example of the pink polka-dotted socks help us have a proper understanding of our obedience to God's commandments?
3. What are the three kinds of laws recorded for us in the Bible? List each and discuss their continued use or disuse.
4. Discuss rule #6 of the Westminster Larger Catechism #99's explanation of how we are to understand the law of God. Talk about the breadth of the application of God's law.
5. If what is forbidden of us is also to be avoided or performed by others, how do we as parents consider our children in relation to the law of God?