

## MAJOR BIBLE DOCTRINES

### Part 38: The Law and Gospel: the Moral Law

The NT often uses the word *nomos* (law) to refer to the moral law of God.<sup>1</sup> This is summarized in the TC, and reduced to love God and your neighbor. This law is in man by nature, codified at Mount Sinai, and written in the heart at regeneration.<sup>2</sup> The right understanding of moral law is essential to every aspect of Christianity. "Sin is the transgression of Law, the death of Christ is the satisfaction of Law, justification is the verdict of Law, and sanctification is the believer's fulfillment of the Law" (Kevan).

To unforgiven men law is bondage; but is it so to the forgiven? Do pardoned men hate or love it? Do they dread it or delight in it? Do they disobey it or obey it? Do they dismiss it from their thoughts and consciences, or do they make it their '*meditation all the day*'? Yet there are men who speak of law as abrogated to a believer, who look with no favor on those who listen to it but pity them as ill-taught, ill-informed men, who, if in Christ at all, are only Christians of the lowest grade, the least in the kingdom of heaven. And this is said to be the proper result of a believed gospel! This is called an essential part of higher Christianity; and is reckoned indispensable to the right appreciation of a saint's standing before God. The realizing of it is a proof of true spirituality, and the denial of it an evidence of imperfect knowledge and a cramped theology! We can find no such spirituality, no such Christianity in the Bible. This is license, not liberty; it is freedom *to* sin, not freedom *from* sin. It may be spiritual sentimentalism, but it is not spirituality. It is sickly religionism, which, while professing a higher standard than mere law, is departing from that healthy and authentic conformity to the will of God which results from the love and study of His statutes. It is framing a new and human standard, in supplement, if not in contradiction, of the old and the divine—Horatius Bonar [*God's way of Holiness*, 83-84]

#### I. The Law and Gospel

##### A. The Moral Law

1. *The relationship of the moral law to mankind.* [1] The law binds all men. All men are bound to the law by way of creation and covenant. [a] Creation. The law was written in Adam's heart at creation. "It was a divine obligation impressed upon Adam's conscience from the beginning by the almighty Creator" (E. Reisinger). Because fallen man retains the shadow of this law within his heart as God's creation, he's obligated to obey it. "The moral law does for ever bind all...to the obedience thereof, and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it" (LBC). [b] Covenant. Every man is born under the law as a covenant of works. This results from his union with Adam, with whom this covenant was made. As such the law demands perfect obedience in heart, word, and deed, and threatens eternal death if violated. All men are born "under the law" (Rom.3:19), or, under its obligations and condemnation.<sup>3</sup> [2] The law

<sup>1</sup> The NT uses the Greek word *nomos* (law) in three primary ways: (1) the OT Scriptures, "the law and the prophets" (Jn.1:45), (2) the Mosaic Law, "the law was given through Moses" (Jn.1:17), (3) the Moral law, or the Ten Commandments (Rom.13:8-10).

<sup>2</sup> The law written on Adam's heart, substantially the same law written by the finger of God on the two tables of stone at Mount Sinai, is the same standard of righteousness as God writes on every renewed man at conversion—Ernest Reisinger [*The Law and Gospel*, 16]

<sup>3</sup> The law of creation, or the Ten Commandments, was, in the form of a covenant of works, given to the first Adam after he had been put into the garden of Eden. It was given him as the first parent and the federal representative of all his posterity by ordinary generation. An express threatening of death, and a gracious promise of life, annexed to the law of creation, made it to Adam a covenant of works proposed; and his consent, which he as a sinless creature could not refuse,

restrains sin. Man's conscience is his inward reflection on the penalty and praises of God's law. This restrains him from sin and prods him to outward compliance. "The law is of use to restrain men from much sin. By its authoritative commands and awful threatenings, it serves in some measure to keep them in awe, and to frighten them from committing many external acts of sin in which they otherwise would freely indulge themselves" (Colquhoun). "The law restrains sin. Without the moral law this world would be a field of blood, as is evidenced in places where there is no regard for God's commands" (E. Reisinger). [3] The law convicts of sin.<sup>4</sup> The law reveals or makes our sin known. It is a mirror in which we behold our guilt and filth. "There is no conviction of sin but what consists in an emanation of light and knowledge from the doctrine of the law, with an evidence of its power and sense of its curse" (Owen). The Spirit uses the law to teach us our need for Christ. "But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good [law], so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful" (Rom.7:13). "The precepts of the law serve to convince men of their sins of omission, and the prohibitions of it to convince them of their sins of commission" (Colquhoun). "Paul informs us that *'the law entered, that the offence might abound'* (Rom.5:20)—not in the transgression of *the heart* (as the direct fruit of the law) but in *the conviction of conscience*, awakened by a strong display of the spirituality of the law, and of the denunciations of its righteous curse. If *'sin be the transgression of the law'* (1Jn.3:4, cp.4:15), a just apprehension of the law must be the medium of conviction of sin" (Bridges). "The field is not fit for the seed to be cast into it, till the plough has broken it up; nor is the soul prepared to receive the mercy of the Gospel, till broken with the terrors of the law" (Gurnall). "The law first humbles; then the gospel comforts" (Dedham). "The sharp needle of the law makes way for the scarlet thread of the gospel" (E. Resigned).

(1) Rom.2:12-16; Rom.3:19-20; Rom.7:7-12

2. *The liberation from the law by Christ.* "The gospel has freed the believer in relationship to the law in three essential ways" (Barrett). [1] Freedom from the law as a covenant.<sup>5</sup> "As it was a covenant of works, and as administered under the former dispensation, the law tended to bondage, and induced a servile spirit on those that were under it. It was not only a rigid schoolmaster, but a severe task-master; not only setting hard lessons, but requiring strict and perfect obedience, without giving any strength to perform, or directing where it is to be had" (Gill). Believers are delivered from the law as a covenant, since Christ, as the Last Adam and Second Man, fulfilled it in that form. "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Gal.4:4-5). "The law which believers are under is the law of Christ, and of God in Christ, which has no promise of eternal life to them for their obedience to it. The promise of eternal life to the saints is the promise of the covenant of grace or the gospel, and not of the law, as a rule of duty. Eternal life is promised to them not in consideration of their sincere obedience to the law as a rule of life, but on account of Christ's perfect obedience to it as a covenant of works received by faith and imputed by

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made it a covenant of works accepted. As formed into a covenant of works, it is called by the Apostle Paul 'the law of works' (Rom.3:27), that is, the law as a covenant of works. It requires works or perfect obedience on pain of death, spiritual, temporal, and eternal; and it promises to the man who performs perfect and personal obedience life, spiritual, temporal, and eternal—John Colquhoun [*A Treatise on Law and Gospel*, 10-11]

<sup>4</sup> Q. 96. *What particular use is there of the moral law to unregenerate men?* A. The moral law is of use to unregenerate men, to awaken their consciences to flee from wrath to come, and to drive them to Christ; or, upon their continuance in the estate and way of sin, to leave them inexcusable, and under the curse thereof—Larger Catechism

<sup>5</sup> The law, then, as a covenant of works, demands in the most authoritative manner, from every descendant of Adam who is under it, perfect holiness of nature, perfect righteousness of life, and complete satisfaction for sin. And none of the race of fallen Adam can ever enter heaven unless he either answers these three demands perfectly in his own person, or accepts by faith the consummate righteousness of the second Adam, who 'is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believes' (Rom.10:4)—John Colquhoun [*A Treatise on Law and Gospel*, 15]

God" (Colquhoun). [2] Freedom from the curse of the law. "Believers are free from the penalty and condemnation of the broken law. Christ vicariously paid the debt and suffered the penalty of the sin of His people. That liberates us from the oppression of guilt and fear of ever being condemned by God. We can live in the confidence that Jesus paid it all" (Barrette). The law as a covenant says, "Do or die!" It threatens and condemns all who are under it. "The soul that sins shall die" (Ezek.18:4). "The wages of sin is death" (Rom.6:23). "The law of works has pronounced all the race of Adam guilty, has condemned them to eternal punishment, and has not made the smallest provision for their deliverance" (Colquhoun). Christ rescues us from condemnation by enduring it Himself. "Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ" (Rom.8:1). [3] Freedom from aggravation of the law. Because native man hates God (Rom.8:7), the law arouses within him further hostility and irritation. "For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death" (Rom.7:5). "Evil motions of sin are irritated, provoked, and increased, through the law's prohibition of them; which is not to be charged as a fault on the law, but to be imputed to the depravity and corruption of man; who is like to one in a burning fever, very desirous of drink, who the more it is forbid, the more eager is he of it; or like a mighty torrent of water, which rises, rages, flows, and overflows, the more any methods are taken to stop its current; or like a filthy dunghill, which when the sun strikes powerfully on it, it exhales and draws out its filthy stench; which nauseous smell is not to be imputed to the pure rays of the sun, but to the filthiness of the dunghill" (Gill). Christians are delivered from this irritation by receiving a new heart, in which the law is written (Jer.31:33). The new heart loves and delights in the law, longing to comply with its righteous demands.

(1) Rom.6:11-14; Rom.7:4-6; Gal.2:19-20; Gal.3:10-14; Gal.5:16-18

3. *The relationship of the moral law to Saints.* "If the Law is not abrogated by man's failure, neither is it abrogated by his recovery; God's grace cannot destroy God's Law" (Kevan). "There are manifest uses of the law with the justified and pardoned. It rules and guides them in holiness, it warns and guards them against sin, it makes them grateful for redemption, it binds them in a closer dependence upon the Lord Jesus, and thus is made the means of spiritual benefit to them" (Tyng). [1] The law reveals the purity of God. Christians delight in the law as it reflects the moral character of God. The law is "holy and just and good" (Rom.7:12), just as God is holy, just, and good. "I delight in the law of God according to the inward man" (Rom.7:22). "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Ps.119:97). "Moral law is in the last analysis but the reflection or expression of the moral nature of God...Moral law is the moral expression of God coming to expression for the regulation of life and conduct" (Murray). [2] The law reveals God's perfect will. "One use of the law is, to inform us of the mind and will of God; it is a transcript of his holy nature and unchangeable will; and therefore is itself *holy, just, and good*; as it must needs be, since it comes from him; it teaches us *what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God*" (Gill). [3] The law reveals the path of duty.<sup>6</sup> "The believer is not redeemed from what is right; his relationship to what is right has changed. In particular, what has changed is his power and desire to do right, not his duty to do right" (E. Reisinger). "We acknowledge the law of God, whose abridgment is in the Decalogue, to command the best, the most just and perfect works, and we hold that man is bound to obey the moral precepts of the Decalogue. Neither are those precepts which are contained in the apostle's writings a new law, but are branches of the old law" (Wittenberg Confession). "The law is in the hands of Christ

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<sup>6</sup> The great design of God in giving this law in the hand of Christ to His people is not that by their obedience to it they may procure for themselves a right to eternal life, but that it may direct and oblige them to walk worthy of their union with Christ, of their justification in Him, of their legal title to and begun possession of life eternal, and of God Himself as their God in Him. Their conformity of heart and life to its commands, instead of procuring their title to salvation, is a principal part of their salvation already begun, and a necessary preparative for the consummation of it through eternity (Heb.12:28; 1Pet.2:9)—John Colquhoun [*A Treatise on Law and Gospel*, 32]

as a rule of walk and conversation, directing believers how to conduct and behave themselves under his influence...Christ is king and lawgiver in his house and kingdom, the church; and besides some positive commands which he has delivered out, there is a repetition of the law in the NT; a new edition of it, published under the authority and sanction of Christ; so that we are now under the law to him, and under new obligations to obey it, as held forth by him" (Gill). [4] The law convicts and exposes sin.<sup>7</sup> "The law was given as a reprovener and corrector for sin, even to the saints; I say, to discipline them, and to reprove them for sin. '*All Scripture...is profitable for doctrine and reproof*' (2Tim.3:16)" (Bolton). The law in Christ's hand, is a mirror in which our sins and faults are seen. "The law is of use to believers, as it is a glass in which they may behold the deformity of their nature, the impurity of their hearts, and the imperfection of their obedience" (Gill). [5] The law reveals our need for Christ. The law provides Christians "with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ and the perfection of His obedience" (LBC). The moral law "is of special use to Christians, to show them how much they are bound to Christ for his fulfilling it, and enduring the curse thereof in their stead, and for their good" (LC). "The law is of use to believers to endear the righteousness of Christ unto them, and to make them value it the more; when they see their own righteousness in the account of the law, being neither as to matter nor manner done as that requires....How precious then is the righteousness of Christ, when set before them as revealed in the gospel from faith to faith; a righteousness pure and perfect, well-pleasing in the sight of God, answerable to all the demands of the law and justice" (Gill).

What special use is there of the moral law to Christians? Although Christians are delivered from the law as a way of justification, so that they are not justified or condemned by it, yet it does inform them of their duty as those who have been justified and are growing along the road of sanctification. As the only perfect standard of righteousness, the law tells us the right way to travel, though it gives no strength for the journey—Ernest Reisinger [*The Law and Gospel*, 44]

The law was given, not only as a director of duties, but as a glass to reveal the imperfections in our performance of duties, that so we might be kept humble and vile in our own eyes, and that we might live more out of ourselves and more in Christ. It was given so that we might fly to Christ upon all occasions, as a defiled man flees to the fountain to be washed and cleansed, for in Christ there is mercy to cover, and grace to cure all our infirmities—Samuel Bolton [*The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, 83]

Although true believers be not under the law as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned, yet it is of great use to them as well as to others, in that as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their natures, hearts, and lives, so as examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against, sin; together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ and the perfection of His obedience—LBC [19:6]

- (1) Ps.1:1-3; Ps.19:7-11; Jer.31:33 (Ps.37:30-31; Prov.7:1-3; 2Cor.3:3); Ezek.36:25-27; Matt.5:17-20; Rom.3:31; Rom.7:22-25; Rom.8:1-4; Rom.13:8-10; 1Cor.9:19-23; Jas.1:21-25; Jas.2:8-13; 1Jn.5:2-3

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<sup>7</sup> To the law as a rule in the hand of Christ belongs also a threatening of paternal chastisements. In order to deter believers from disobedience, as well as to promote in them the mortification of sin, the Lord threatens that, although He will not cast them into hell for their sins, yet He will permit hell, as it were, to enter their consciences; that He will visit them with a series of outward afflictions; that He will deprive them of that sensible communion with Him which they sometime enjoyed; and that he will afflict them with bitterness instead of sweetness, and with terror instead of comfort (Ps.89:30-33; 1Cor.11:30-32; Heb.12:6-11)—John Colquhoun [*A Treatise on Law and Gospel*, 37]