

MAJOR BIBLE DOCTRINES

Part 37: The Law and Gospel: Mosaic Law

The Mosaic Law, which was given through Moses and associated with the Old Covenant, consisted of ceremonial, civil (judicial), and moral law. The first two were national and temporal, the latter one is universal and eternal.

The divine law is ordinarily divided, or considered as consisting of three parts; the moral, the ceremonial and the judicial—Zacharias Ursinus [*Commentary on Heidelberg Catechism*, 490]

We must bear in mind that common division of the whole law of God published by Moses, into the moral, the ceremonial, and the judicial law—John Calvin [*Institutes*, 4:20:14]

The law given by Moses is usually distinguished into three species: moral (treating of morals or of perpetual duties towards God and our neighbor); ceremonial (of the ceremonies or rites about the sacred things to be observed under the OT); and civil (constituting the civil government of the Israelite people)—Francis Turretin [*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol.2, 145]

This law is divided into the moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws: all which parts, and every point whereof, Moses has very delicately written, and diligently expounded. The moral law is that which teaches men manners, and lays down before us the shape of virtue...The ceremonial law was the tutelage of the Jews, with which it seemed good to the Lord to train this people, as it were, in their childhood, until the fulness of time should come...The judicial law, given to them for civil government, imparted certain formulas of equity and justice, by which they might live together blamelessly and peaceably—Henry Bullinger [*Decades*, vol.1, 209-210]

I. The Law and Gospel

A. The Mosaic Law

1. *The Mosaic Law includes ceremonial, civil, and moral law.*¹ The moral law was the foundation for ceremonial and civil law. "The moral law is the foundation upon which rests the obligation of the others. Ceremonial has respect to the first table determining its circumstances, especially as to external worship. Civil has respect to the second table in judicial things, although it lays down punishments for crimes committed against the first table" (Turretin). The moral law is a reflection of God's moral character, in man by nature, and is universally and eternally binding. Ceremonial and judicial laws were temporary applications of moral law. Thus it may be best to distinguish between *moral law* which is eternal and universal, and *positive law* which is limited and temporal. Although the elect within the OC, were regenerated and given grace to love and obey the Mosaic Law, the apostle Paul describes it as a "yoke of bondage" from which the NC delivers (Gal.4:3, 9; 5:1).

While distinctions between moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws are of the utmost importance, a caution is necessary. It would be wrong to imagine that any of God's statutes given to Moses were arbitrary or that the three kinds of law were unrelated. Both ceremonial and judicial statutes of the OT were firmly anchored in the moral law.

¹ The NT at times speaks of law as the Mosaic Law which includes moral, ceremonial, and civil law. "For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn.1:17).

For this reason a special reverence was given to the pure moral law—the Ten Commandments. The whole of the Mosaic system was built upon the 'ten words'—Ernest Reisinger [*The Law and Gospel*, 56-57]

When we speak of things moral, we are to distinguish between things *naturally moral*, that is, such (as love to God and our neighbor, and such like) which have an innate rectitude and holiness in them, which cannot be separate from them; and things *positively moral*, that have their obligation by a special, positive, super-added sanction; so that their rectitude flows not from the nature of the things themselves, as in the former—James Durham [*Practical Exposition of Ten Commandments*, 56]

(1) Deut.4:12-14²

2. *The ceremonial law was typical and temporal.* The ceremonial law provided religious rites that largely concerned man's relationship to God. It was foremostly a specific application of the first table of the moral law. [1] It was typical. The tabernacle/temple, priesthood, sacrifices, feast days, cleansings, and dietary restrictions, all pointed to the person and work of Christ. Every aspect finds its fulfillment in the NC. "This law was a shadow of good things to come by Christ, of evangelical things, and indeed was no other than the gospel veiled in types and figures" (Gill). "The ceremonial law was the tutelage of the Jews, with which it seemed good to the Lord to train this people, as it were, in their childhood, until the fullness of time should come, in order that he might fully manifest his wisdom to the nations, and show the truth of those things which then were foreshadowed in figures" (Calvin). [2] It was ineffectual. "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins" (Heb.10:4). The ceremonial law provided only a shell of religious worship, it contained "weak and beggarly elements" (Gal.4:9), which were "weak and unprofitable" (Heb.7:18-19). Saving and sanctifying grace was ministered through the ceremonies, by virtue of Christ's blood. "Although the price of redemption was not actually paid by Christ until after His incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefit thereof were communicated to the elect in all ages successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices where He was revealed" (LBC). [3] It was temporary. The typical nature of the ceremonial law, necessarily suggests it was also temporal. When Christ, its fulfillment came, the external rites and ceremonies are no longer needed. "The Messiah shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and seal up prophecy" (Dan.9:27). In the coming of the NC, the temple with its types and shadows was fulfilled and/or abolished. The OC with its "food restrictions, washings, and fleshly ordinances" was "imposed until the time of reformation" (Heb.9:10).

Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth divers instructions of moral duties, all which ceremonial laws being appointed only to the time of reformation, are, by Jesus Christ the true Messiah and only law-giver, who was furnished with power from the Father for that end, abrogated and taken away—LBC [19:3]

(1) Gal.3:24-25; Gal.4:3-4; Col.2:16-17; Col.2:20-22; Heb.10:1-4

3. *The civil law was restricted to Israel as a nation.* The civil law was a judicial application of the second table of the moral law to specific cases. "The judicial law, given to them for civil

² When the Lord Himself had made known to the people in the ten words the covenant which He commanded them to do, He directed Moses to teach them laws and rights which they were to observe in Canaan, viz., the rights and statutes of the Sinaitic legislation, from Ex 21 onwards—Keil and Delitzsch [*Comments on Deut.4:14*]

government, imparted certain formulas of equity and justice, by which they might live together blamelessly and peaceably" (Calvin). This includes specific laws about restitution, social justice, marriage, and grooming restrictions. [1] It was limited to the nation of Israel. The civil law was limited to Israel and closely tied to the land of Canaan. Gentile nations were never judged for violations of ceremonial and civil laws, but only transgressions of the moral law. "Civil laws respected the Israelites merely as a civil community. They were temporary institutions, that is, being intended for this nation alone, they were to last no longer than it continued as a political body" (Dick). "The government of the Jews was a very particular form of government; it was a theocracy, a government immediately under God; though he is King of the whole world, and Governor among and over the nations of it, yet he was in a special and peculiar manner King over Israel; and he made laws for them, by which they were to be ruled and governed" (Gill). The church is not a theocracy in the same way Israel was. She is viewed as a small remnant in the midst of enemy territory. "On three occasions in the epistles, Christians are urged to submit themselves to ruling authorities...Submission to rulers and authorities means obedience to their statutes and laws (Tit.3:1), including acceptance of their penal doctrines (Rom.13:4)...Rather than campaigning for Moses-inspired judicial reform, the epistles called upon Christians to submit themselves to national laws that were not patterned on the judicial laws of Israel" (Ross). [2] It typified and shadowed Christ. Like the ceremonial law, the primary intent of the civil law was to point to Christ. This was true in two ways, first it pointed to His spiritual reign within the church, true Israel. Secondly, the moral law pointed to Christ in the death penalty, wherein the curse of the law was made known. "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')" (Gal.3:13).³ [3] It provides abiding principles for NC believers. "Though the judicial law has expired, yet as an inspired application of the moral law to the civil circumstances of Israel it reveals many timeless principles of general equity, justice, goodness and righteousness. As such it remains relevant not only to modern states, but also to modern churches and Christians" (Waldron). "The apostolic demand that Christians obey the laws of their land cannot coexist with the idea that the judicial laws of Israel remain binding. Nonetheless the penalties of the judicial laws still warn of the consequences of disobedience and still bear testimony to the fundamental principles upon which they are based" (Ross).

To them [the people of Israel] He also gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging now by virtue of that institution; their general equity [justice] only being of moral use—LBC [19:4]

(1) 1Cor.5:9-13 [Deut.17:7]

4. *The moral law is universally binding and eternal.* The Scripture affirms the unique nature of the moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments. [1] The evidence of moral law pre-Old Covenant. Before the law was codified at Mount Sinai (put into ten commands), it was in man at creation and served as the standard for righteousness after the fall. "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" (E. Reisinger). "The same law that was first written in the heart of man continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness after the fall, and was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables of stone" (LBC).⁴ That the Ten Commandments were enforced between Adam

³ Under Mosaic Law, the death penalty was enforced for violating commandments 1-3 (Lev.24:16), 4 (Ex.31:14-15; 35:2; Deut.15:32-36; 5 (Ex.21:17), 6 (Lev.24:17), 7 (Lev.20:10), 8 (Ex.21:16), and 9 (Deut.19:15-21).

⁴ Let no man think, that before Moses' time there was no law, and that the law as by Moses first of all published. For the self-same especial points of the moral law, which Moses sets down in the ten commandments, were very well known to the patriarchs, even from the beginning of the world...Thus the patriarchs ever, from the beginning of the world even until

and Moses is evident: 1st - 3rd (Gen.35:2), 4th (Ex.16:27-29), 5th (Gen.9:18-29), 6th (Gen.4:13), 7th (Gen.19:24-25), 8th (Gen.2:16-17), 9th (Gen.4:9,12), and 10th (Gen.20:3,18). [2] The evidence of moral law in mankind by nature. The moral law of God is the reflection of God's image in man. This image, though distorted by the fall, remains in part in all men (Rom.2:14-16). Man knows by nature he must love God and his neighbor. Only the moral law, not the civil or ceremonial, is in man by nature. "The law of God which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of natural law and of that conscience which God has engraved upon the minds of men" (Calvin). "The law of the *decalogue*, which, as to its substance, is one and the same with the *law of nature*, and binds men as such" (Witsius). "The law of nature remains in force and puts all men under obligation (Rom.2:14-15). The law of the ten commandments is, however, identical to the law of nature as far as contents are concerned (not in the manner in which it was given), and thus the law of the ten commandments also remains in force and is binding in the days of the New Testament" (Brakel). Thus, while the ceremonial and civil law had specific reference to Israel, the moral law is universally applicable to all men. "The moral law, as a rule, can no more be abolished or change than the nature of good and evil can be abolished or changed. The substance of the law is the sum of doctrine concerning piety toward God, charity toward our neighbors, and temperance and sobriety toward ourselves" (E. Reisinger). [3] The unique giving of moral law. The Ten Commandments were written by the finger of God and spoken by the mouth of God (Ex.32:15-16; Ex.20:1-19). "These words the LORD spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly, at the mountain, from the midst of the fire, the cloud and the thick darkness; and He added nothing more. And He wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me" (Deut.5:22). "He revealed the ceremonial and civil laws to Moses, who wrote them on parchment. But God Himself wrote the Ten Commandments, and not on perishable skins, but on tables of stone – a symbol of the permanence of the Ten Commandments" (E. Reisinger). Furthermore, the moral law was given first, with the ceremonial and judicial laws following it, as specific expressions or applications of it (Ex.20-25). [4] The unique relation of moral law to the Old and New Covenants. The Ten Commandments are expressly called the OC (Deut.5:3), and were alone placed in the Ark of the Covenant (1Ki.8:9). "He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone" (Deut.4:13). Furthermore, these same commands are written upon the flesh, not stone, of every New Covenant member (Jer.31:33). [5] The evidence of moral law in NT. Our Savior summarized the abiding moral ethic of the OT in two great commands, "You shall love the LORD your God" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt.22:34-39). He then said, "On these two commandments hand all the Law and the Prophets" (v40). The entire OC ethic is reduced to two great commands, corresponding to the two tables of the moral law. Furthermore, the epistles are filled with exhortations to obey, do, keep, fulfill, and establish the law and commandments of God (Rom.3:31; Gal.5:13-14; 6:1; Jas.2:8-13).

No other people on earth were necessarily obliged to the observation of the Ceremonial Law, much less of the Judicial, but the Jews alone...But the Moral Law, although it was given to them immediately, yet not only to them: but its obligation is as universal as human nature itself; for, indeed, it is the very law of nature and right reason, reduced into precepts: and, therefore, although Moses gave this Law unto them as the Minister and Mediator of the Old Covenant; yet it is likewise given to us by God, as the Cause and author of our Nature, and the commands of it are as binding unto us, as them—
Ezekiel Hopkins [*Works*, vol.1, 541]

(1) 1Sam.15:22; Prov.21:3; Hos.6:6; Jer.7:21-26; Rom.3:9, 19-20; Rom.13:8-10; 1Cor.7:19

Moses' time, were not without the precepts of the ten commandments, although they had them not grave in tables or written in parchments. For the Lord with his finer writ them in their hearts—Henry Bullinger [*Decades*, vol.1, 210-211]