

## MAJOR BIBLE DOCTRINES

### Part 39: The Law and Gospel: the Moral Law (2)

The law is a gracious gift from God. It was given to Israel as a redeemed nation, to give them a means to express love to God for redemption. The same is true of God's New Covenant Israel (the Church). The law comes to Christians as liberated from sin, for the purpose of expressing love to God.

Q. 99. *What is the preface to the Ten Commandments?* A. I am Jehovah,. the Lord your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Q. 100. *What do we learn from the preface?* A. Three things: first, He shows to whom the right of all rule belongs, that is, to God Himself, for I am (says He) Jehovah; secondly, He says, He is the God of His people, that through the promise of His bountifulness He might allure them to obey Him; and thirdly, He says, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, as if He should say, I am He who has manifested Myself to you and bestowed all those blessings upon you, therefore you are bound to show thankfulness and obedience to Me.

Q. 101. *Do these things belong to us?* A. They do, because they figuratively comprehend and imply all the deliverances of the Church; and further, this was a type of our wonderful deliverance achieved by Christ—Heidelberg Catechism

#### I. The Law and Gospel

##### A. The interpretation of the Moral Law

1. *The law as summarized in the Ten Commandments, entails the whole of man's duty, both in reference to God and man.*<sup>1</sup> "The first of the two tables of the moral law does teach us what we owe to God, and how he will be worshipped of us: the second table frames the offices of life, and teaches us how to behave ourselves toward our neighbor" (Bullinger). "Every specific command elsewhere recorded may be referred to one of the Ten Commands. So that perfect obedience to the decalogue in its spirit, would be perfect obedience to the law" (Hodge). "There is nothing that God requires but may be reduced to one of these commandments" (Boston). "The ten commandments are but an epitome or an abridgment of the law of God, and the full exposition thereof is to be found in the books of the prophets and apostles, called the Old and New Testament" (Fisher).

The whole moral law, which regulates our love to God and men, and all the actings of it, is contained in the *ten commandments*—the *first four* of which direct our *love to God*, prescribing the object, means, manner, and peculiar season of our worship—and the *last six* direct our *love to man*, answerably to relative connections, life, chastity, property, reputation, and inward disposition—our whole duty to man being thus founded on our relations and duty to God—John Brown [*Systematic Theology*, 455]

There is no duty required nor sin forbidden by God, but it falls under one, at least, of these Ten Words, and sometimes under more than one: and, therefore, to the right and genuine interpretation of this Law, we must take in whatsoever the Prophets, Apostles,

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<sup>1</sup> The law is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments. To be summarily comprehended in a thing, is to be summed up in it or to be abridged. The commandments is exceeding broad, and runs through the whole Bible; but we have a summary or short view of it in the ten commands given by the Lord on Mount Sinai. The ten commandments are the heads of all the duties of the law largely contained in the whole Bible. They are the text which Christ himself, the prophets, and apostles expounded. They comprehend the whole duty of man (Eccl.12:13). There is nothing that God requires but may be reduced to one of these commandments—Thomas Boston [*Works*, vol.2, 69]

or our Lord Christ himself has taught, as comments and expositions upon it; for the Decalogue is a summary of all that they have taught concerning moral worship and justice—Ezekiel Hopkins [*Works*, vol.1, 253]

(1) Matt.22:34-40 [Deut.6:4-6; Lev.19:18]; Rom.13:8-11

2. *The law as summarized in the Ten Commandments, is spiritual and thus regulates both the heart and life.* "For we know that the law is spiritual" (Rom.7:14). "The law may be said to be *spiritual*, because it comes from the Spirit of God; and reaches to the spirit of man; it requires truth in the inward parts; spiritual service and obedience; a serving of it with our minds; a worshipping of God in spirit and truth; a loving of him with all our hearts and souls, as well as a performance of all the outward acts of religion and duty; and because it cannot be truly obeyed and conformed to without the assistance of the Spirit of God" (Gill). The law goes beyond mere external obedience, but regulates the activities and motives of the heart. "The Decalogue is not to be interpreted as the laws of men, which take notice only of external acts, but as the law of God, which extends to the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hodge). "The law is spiritual, and so reaches the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures" (LC). "The sins forbidden and the duties commanded in the Decalogue, extend to every faculty of our humanity" (Martin). "The commands of the moral law reach the heart. The commandments require not only the outward act of obedience, but the inward affection of love. *'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart'*" (Watson).<sup>2</sup>

The law is spiritual, respecting not only the external acts of the body, but the internal motions of the mind. It is evident both from Paul (who in Rom.7:14 testifies that 'the law is spiritual') and from the nature of the lawgiver himself. He is not a human and earthly lawgiver who, since he has fleshly eyes, attends only to the external deeds striking the senses...Rather he is a divine and heavenly lawgiver whose eyes nothing escapes and who regards not so much the external appearance as the purity of the heart. Thus he speaks to the soul no less than to the body and demands an internal no less than an external obedience—Francis Turretin [*Institutes*, vol.2, 34]

(1) Matt.5:21-22, 27-28

3. *The individual commandments of the law include the opposite when either the positive or negative is stated.* Though most commandments are negative ('*you shall not*'), their summary is positive ('*you shall love God and your neighbor*'). "Where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin 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 included" (LC). "When any vice is forbidden the contrary virtue is enjoined, and when any virtue is commanded the contrary vice is condemned. For example, in the Third, God forbids the taking of His name in vain, so by necessary consequence the hallowing of His name is commanded. And as the Eighth forbids stealing, so it requires the contrary duty—earning our living and paying for what we receive" (Pink).<sup>3</sup> "The duties enjoined by the law cannot be performed without shunning the

<sup>2</sup> The commandments are spiritual; therefore, they go to the heart and require internal obedience. They require more than outward conformity; they require inward affection. They forbid not only the acts of sin, but the desire and inclination to sin. The Tenth Commandment shows this—Earnest Reisinger [*Whatever Happened to the Ten Commandments*, 9]

<sup>3</sup> Whatever sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded; and where any duty is commanded, the contrary vice is forbidden. For instance, when God forbids us to have any other gods before him, he at the same time commands us to worship and adore him, the only living and true God. When he forbids the profanation of his name, he requires that esteem and reverence should be given to it. When he forbids to steal, he commands the preservation of our neighbor's goods, by all the means that are lawful and proper for us to use. When he forbids us to kill, he commands love to our neighbor, and the preservation of his life by all lawful means—Thomas Boston [*Works*, vol.2, 71]

vices which it forbids; and the sins forbidden by the law cannot be avoided, unless the contrary virtues enjoined by it are performed. This shows the insufficiency of negative holiness; for we must not only refrain from what the law forbids, but perform what it requires; otherwise no obedience is given to it at all" (Boston).

Negative precepts are contained in affirmative, and affirmative precepts in negative. When any duty is enjoined, the contrary sin is forbidden; and when any sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is enjoined....As the good prescribed by the law cannot be performed unless the opposite evil be guarded against, nor the evil prohibited be avoided unless the opposite good be performed, it follows, that negative precepts include the affirmative, and affirmative precepts include the negative—John Dick [*Lectures on Theology*, vol.4, 425]

(1) Ex.20:8-10; Eph.4:28

4. *The individual commandments contain a synecdoche (a part for the whole) of all other related sins and duties.* "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" (LC). "In each commandment the chief duty or sin is taken as representative of all the lesser duties or sins, and the overt act is taken as representative of all related affections. Whatever specific sin is named, all the sins of the same kind, with all the causes and provocations thereof are forbidden" (Pink). "Under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden and commanded" (Boston). The first table addresses the who (1st), matter (2nd), manner (3rd), and when (4th) of worship, and the second table the sanctity of authority (5th), life (6th), purity (7th), possessions (8th), truth (9th), and desires (10th).<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, in almost all the commandments there are such manifest synecdoches that he who would confine his understanding of the law within the narrowness of the words deserves to be laughed at. Therefore, plainly a sober interpretation of the law goes beyond the words; but just how far remains obscure unless some measure be set. Now, I think this would be the best rule, if attention be directed to the reason of the commandment; that is, in each commandment to ponder why it was given to us. For example, every precept either commands or forbids. The truth of each sort comes to mind at once, if we look into the reason or purpose. The purpose of the Fifth Commandment is that honor ought to be paid to those to whom God has assigned it. This, then, is the substance of the commandment: that it is right and pleasing to God for us to honor those on whom he has bestowed some excellence; and that he abhors contempt and stubbornness against them...Thus in each commandment we must investigate what it is concerned with; then we must seek out its purpose, until we find what the Lawgiver testifies there to be pleasing or displeasing to himself—John Calvin [*Institutes*, 2:8:8]

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<sup>4</sup> The first commandment confers the object of worship, requiring us to know and acknowledge God to be the true God, and our God, and to worship and glorify him as such, in heart and life. The second relates to the means of worship, requiring us to receive, observe, and keep pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God has appointed in his word. The third respects the holy and reverend use of God's names titles, attributes, ordinances, words, and works. The fourth requires us to sanctify the Sabbath, that day which he has set apart for his own worship and service. The fifth relates to the duties we owe to one another in our several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors, or equals. The sixth requires the preservation of our own life and that of others. The seventh respects the preservation of our own and our neighbor's chastity, in heart, speech, and behavior. The eighth relates to the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others. The ninth requires the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, especially in witness-bearing. And the tenth requires us to be contented with our own condition, and to have a right and charitable frame of spirit toward our neighbor and all that is his—Thomas Boston [*Works*, vol.2, 69]

(1) 1Tim.1:5-10 [Matt.5:21-22, 27-28; 1Jn.3:15]

5. *The second table of the law, which describes our duty towards our neighbor, gives way to the duties of the first table.* "No sin is ever to be committed in order to avoid a greater; but some duties required must give place to others. Our natural duties to God must be preferred to our natural duties to men" (Brown).

The precepts of the second table of the law must yield to those of the first, when they cannot be both performed together. For instance our love to our neighbor must be subjected to our love to God: yea, we are commanded to hate father and mother for Christ. When our love to our parents and relations comes in competition with our love to Christ, and is inconsistent with it, then we are not bound unto it: and when the commands of men run cross to the commands of God, then God is to be obeyed rather than men—Thomas Boston [*Works*, vol.2, 72]

(1) Acts 4:18-20; Acts 5:28-29

6. *The law not only forbids the acting of sin in our own persons, but also being partner to, or having any hand in, the sins of others.* "What is forbidden or commanded we are bound to try to prevent or see performed by others, according to our position in society and our relationship to them" (E. Reisinger).

Whatever the law requires us to do, we are bound to endeavor, in our several stations, to make others do. It is their duty to glorify God as well as ours; and zeal for his glory will excite us to use all lawful means that it may be promoted by them. This end is to be gained, not only by our example, but by our instructions, and counsels, and entreaties, and reproofs, and by the proper exercise of our authority over those whom Providence has placed in subjection to us—John Dick [*Lectures on Theology*, vol.4, 428]

(1) Lev.19:17-18; Heb.10:24-25; Eph.5:11

7. *The law is a unified whole, so that transgression of one commandment amounts to transgression of the whole law.* "The bond which runs through all Ten Commandments and knits them together, is the authority and sovereignty of God enjoining their observance: so that whosoever fails in his due obedience to any one, does virtually and in effect transgress them all" (Hopkins).

The transgression of one precept is virtually a breach of all. They are so intimately connected together that if the divine authority is disregarded in any one of them it is slighted in all (Col.3:5; 1Tim.6:10; Jas.2:10; 1Jn.4:20). The first commandment, for example, is so closely connected with all the other precepts that it is obeyed in all our obedience or disobeyed in all our disobedience to any one of them. Obedience or disobedience to it is virtually obedience or disobedience to the whole law—John Colquhoun [*A Treatise on Law and Gospel*, 89-90]

(1) Jas.2:8-13