

CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE LAW OF GOD

The Biblical teaching on the Law needs careful examination. Some go as far as to say there is no law for the Christian because we are under grace. Others go to the opposite extreme and make their relationship with God dependent upon keeping the commandments. The specific questions for which we must have a clear answer is: What is the relevance of the 10 commandments for Christians today, if any? Is keeping law the same as legalism?

The Moral Law

1. *God gave Adam a law, written in his heart, that required his full obedience; also one command in particular, namely, that he must not eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Thereby Adam and all his posterity were bound to personal, complete, exact and perpetual obedience. God promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of the law, and endued Adam with power and ability to keep His law.*
2. *The same law that was first written in man's heart continued to be perfect rule of righteousness after Adam fell into sin, and was given by God upon Mount Sinai in the form of ten commandments, written in two tables. The first four commandments constitute our duty towards God and the remaining six our duty to man. The ten are known as the moral law.*

(a) The law given to **Adam** (section 1).

1. The law written in his heart – This is taught in Romans 2:14-15. Paul is answering the problem posed by verse 12, “all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law”. How is it possible that those who do not have the written law can sin and perish, as they did from Adam to Moses (see 5:13-14)? The answer is “they are a law to themselves”, it is man’s “by nature ... written on their hearts”. If non-Jews have the law of God, it can only be because it was written on Adam’s heart at creation and this has not been totally erased by the Fall.
2. The particular command – ‘Do not eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil’ (Genesis 2:16-17). We believe that this one command was a test for Adam’s obedience. If he would keep this one command over a given period of probation then we would have been given life. This is not stated in the text but is opposite of the death to be visited upon disobedience, and is symbolized by the tree of life (see Genesis 2:9, 3:24). Note that Christ, the second Adam, did attain life by obedience (Romans 5:17-21). See chapter 6 of the Confession on the Fall.

(b) The law given on **Sinai** (section 2). This is specifically stated to be the 10 commandments and the very same law written in Adam’s heart at creation. The moral law is divided into 2 parts, that which deals with our duty to God, and that which deals with our duty to our fellow man (see Matthew 22:36-40). Note the following evidence that the law was authoritative before Sinai:

- 4th. commandment – Genesis 2:2-3, Exodus 16:22-30
- 5th. commandment – Genesis 37:10
- 6th. commandment – Genesis 4:3-15
- 7th. commandment – Genesis 12:11-20
- 8th. commandment – Genesis 31:30, 44:8
- 9th. commandment – Genesis 27:8-25
- 10th. commandment – Genesis 6:2, 13:10-11

The Ceremonial Law

3. *Besides the moral law God also gave to the people of Israel ceremonial laws which served as types of things to come. They fell into two main groups. In one group were rites, partly relating to worship, which pre-figured Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and the blessings He procured for us. The other group contained a variety of instructions about moral duties. By divine appointment all these ceremonial laws were to be observed, but only until they were abrogated in New Testament days by Jesus Christ, the true Messiah and only law-giver, who was empowered by the Father to terminate them.*

The Confession states that the ceremonial law is in two groups:

- ‘Rites, partly relating to worship’ – e.g. sacrifices, special days, which point forward to Christ. For example, Christ is our Passover lamb. See Colossians 2:17, Hebrews 9:23-24, 10:1 which call the Old Testament rites ‘shadow’ and ‘copy’.
- ‘Instructions about moral duties’ – e.g. sabbath keeping, sexual immorality, foods, tithing, which were only to be observed until Christ came. Hebrews 9:10 shows that these were only until the “time of reformation” = new covenant. One great purpose of Hebrews is to show that the new covenant has replaced the old covenant.

The Judicial Law

4. *To the people of Israel God also gave sundry judicial laws which applied as long as they remained a nation. The principles of equity which appear in them are still valid, not because they are found in Moses’ laws but in virtue of their unchanging character.*

Judicial laws apply to Israel as a nation, explaining what kind of actions would be punished and the various types of punishments exercised. For example, Exodus 21-22. When Israel ceased to be a nation, the laws were set aside. No other nation has ever occupied the position of being the covenant people of God, so these laws have no direct application today.

But the Confession states that “the principles of equity which appear in them are still valid”. For example, note how the New Testament uses Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:9 and 1 Timothy 5:18.

Question: Is it Biblically correct to distinguish between the moral, ceremonial and judicial in the laws of Moses? It is said that Scripture does not obviously so divide the laws.

Answers:

- (i) The Bible does clearly distinguish between the 10 commandments as the moral law and the rest of the laws of Moses. Only the ‘10 words’ were spoken by God, written by His finger, and deposited in the ark (Deuteronomy 4:12-13, 10:5)
- (ii) The structure of Exodus supports this 3 fold division. Exodus 20 records the moral law; Exodus 21-23 records judicial (civil) laws; and Exodus 25 and following record ceremonial laws regarding the tabernacle and priesthood.
- (iii) Old Testament believers did distinguish between the moral law and other laws. When the moral and ceremonial are compared, the moral is made the more important (see 1 Samuel 15:22, Psalm 40:6-8, 51:16-17, Isaiah 1:11-17, Jeremiah 7:22-23, Hosea 6:6, Micah 6:6-8).

The Moral Law is Binding

5. *Obedience to the moral law remains for ever binding upon both justified persons and all others, and that in respect of the actual content of the law, and also of the authority of God, the creator, who is its author. In the gospel Christ in no way cancels the necessity for this obedience; on the contrary He greatly stresses our obligation to obey the moral law.*

(a) The Confession is against **Antinomianism** that teaches because the Christian is not justified by the law, the Christian also has no duty to keep the law. If there is a necessity to keep the law as a Christian, it is so taught, then Christians are slaves to the law; but we have been freed from the law. They might try to use verses like Romans 6:14b.

(b) The Christian has a duty to obey the moral law of God (as summarized in the Ten Commandments). Two reasons are given:

1. All creatures owe obedience to their Creator – Christians are creatures and have the obligation of obedience to the One who created them. Note the following passages where some of the Ten Commandments are binding on Christians: Romans 13:8-10, Ephesians 4:25-29, James 2:11-12.
2. The gospel stresses our obligation to obedience –
 - Jeremiah promises that the same law that was written on stone will be written in the heart in the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34)
 - Jesus teaches that He did not come to abolish the Law of the Prophets, emphasizes we must have a greater righteousness than that of the scribes and Pharisees, and then explains exactly what some of the commandments teach (Matthew 5:17-48).
 - Paul teaches that the gospel of free justification by grace ‘upholds the law’ (Romans 3:31). By the death of Christ the demands of the law have been fully met (3:25-26) and we are justified in order to keep the law (8:3-8).

The Uses of the Moral Law

6. *So far as the law is a covenant of works under which justification or condemnation is awarded, it has no application to true believers.*

Yet in certain other ways it is of great use to them as well as to others, for as a rule of life it informs them of the will of God and instructs them in their duty. This done, it directs and binds them to obey it.

It also reveals to them the sinful defilement of their natures, their hearts and their lives, so that as they examine themselves by the light of the law, they may be convicted more deeply of sin, and caused to humble themselves on account of it and to hate it the more.

At the same time the law also gives them a clearer sight of their need of Christ, and the perfection of Christ’s own obedience to the law.

Similarly, as the law forbids sin, it causes the regenerate to fight against the evil inclinations to sin that they find in themselves.

Furthermore, the threatenings of the law are of value in showing the regenerate what their sins deserve, and what afflictions their own disobedience may cause them in this life, even while they stand delivered from the curse and the unrestricted rigour of the law.

In similar manner the promises attached to the law intimate God’s approbation of obedience and set forth the blessings which flow from the fulfilment of the law, but with the proviso that those blessings do not accrue to men from the law viewed as a covenant of works. The fact that a man does good and refrains from evil because the law encourages the former and deters the latter is no evidence that the man is under the law and not under grace.

(a) Christians are under the law as ‘**a rule of life**’ not as ‘a covenant of works’ (lines 1-2). We are not to keep the law as a way of earning salvation (Romans 6:14, 10:4), for “through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20) and so condemnation. It is rather a rule of life as a law in which the Christian delights because it is the law of His God and Saviour (Romans 7:22, James 2:12).

(b) The **uses of the law** to the Christian:

1. Informs of the will of God and instructs in duty (lines 3-5) – The law clearly tells us what God wants us to do (Romans 7:12, 1 Corinthians 7:19)
2. Reveals sin (lines 6-8) – As we consider what God requires in His law we see how far short we fall, for it requires obedience from the heart and not just external conduct (e.g. Matthew 5:27-28, Romans 7:7).
3. Shows the need for Christ (lines 9-10) – Christ alone has rendered perfect obedience, His blood cleanses from all sin, and His Spirit gives us strength and wisdom to obey.
4. Arouses the fight against sin (lines 11-12) – We love God and therefore we hate sin, so that when the law shows us what sin is we want to fight against it. For example, you see an attractive coloured liquid but if it is labelled ‘poison’ you hate it.
5. Shows what sin deserves (lines 13-15) – The threatenings for disobedience to the law show how awful sin is before God.
6. Emphasizes that God loves obedience (lines 16-20) – It is not unspiritual to obey God to avoid the threat of punishment and to receive the promised blessings (Matthew 3:7, Hebrews 11:26, 1 Peter 3:8-13).

Law and Grace

7. The aforementioned uses of the law of God do not run contrary to the grace of the gospel, but are most happily in line with it, for the Spirit of Christ subdues the will of man and enables it to do freely and with cheerfulness that which the will of God, as revealed in the law, requires to be done.

Law and grace are not in conflict!

- What grace saves us from – a rebellious will that refuses to submit to the law of God (Romans 8:7).
- What grace produces in us – a submissive will that “freely” and “cheerfully” obeys what the law of God requires (Ezekiel 36:27, Romans 8:4, Titus 2:14).

The law demands obedience, but cannot produce it. The grace of God in the gospel of Christ alone produces genuine obedience to the law of God. Grace is a powerful king reigning “through righteousness” (Romans 5:20-21).