

The Law is Good

The Three Uses of the Eternal Law of God

1Tim 1:8 Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully,
⁹ understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers,
¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine,
¹¹ in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

(1:8-11)

Law and Order, Chaos and Lawlessness

Since the Garden of Eden, the great experiment has been one thing: to see how far we can stretch, poke, gash, rip, disfigure, dismember, and murder God's law.¹ There is no

¹ As I was making my way through this sermon, I noticed that half the time I was capitalizing "Law" and the other half I was not. I went looking to see what the differences might be, and sure enough, it is important. When "Law" is capitalized, it refers to the entire Mosaic Law, as in the Pentateuch or the covenant. When "law" is not capitalized, it refers to laws, like "You shall not murder." This is a law in the Law. I'm tempted to capitalize "law" in this instance, because as we saw last time, it is more than "law" that we tend to destroy. It is also the law. However, my point here is specifically focused on laws. Therefore, it will remain uncapitalized. I will try to maintain this distinction throughout this sermon. For a nice blogpost on the differences as the NAS has them, see [J.C. Rooney](#), "The 'Law' Depends on the 'law,'" The Idol

such thing as a person who hasn't done it and or a government that hasn't engaged in it. At various times and in sundry places, civilizations have been more resolved to care about the law. Generally speaking, except for our very youngest, our lifetimes have been governed by servants who have **maintained the rule of law** in Western Civilization. But this might just be a rare thing in world history. Nevertheless, we in America have been privileged to live under such a paradoxically freeing idea, that the authority over our nation is not an individual or a royal family, but a legal document—a body of laws.

The last handful of years have seen this **change at a pace that is hardly possible to take in**. From governors who refuse to allow the arrests of hundreds of masses of **violent looters, rioters, and murderers** as they attack our cities and small businesses, to our jails inexplicably setting tens of thousands of **violent criminals free** to roam our streets since 2020, to mass calls from our power elites and celebrities to “**defund the police**” across our nation, to the unspeakable crimes being committed by our government at the border to bring in drug, human, and **child traffickers**, to hospitals all around our nation murdering in cold blood their own patients, to

Babbler (April 30, 2015), <https://theidolbabbler.com/2015/04/30/the-law-depends-on-the-law/>.

the fear and intimidation used to **coerce people** to put potentially dangerous things in their bodies that they do not want, to the **arrests of free citizens** in their own houses without reason or warrant, to the calls from sitting president of the European Commission to “**dispense with the Nuremberg Code,**” to the **coverup** of all these things by the press, we are witnessing **the systematic dismantling of law and order** across the globe, and in America, at breakneck speed. It has gotten so bad that a whistle-blower for the EU Parliament said in early December, “**I will do whatever I can to make it known to the world that your once free and liberal democracy has been transformed into a totalitarian regime which tramples on human rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law**” (she specifically had Australia in mind, but it is rapidly spreading throughout the world). But in reality, is this not just as Psalm 2 says of the kings and rulers, “**Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us**” (**Ps 2:3**).

Worse than the world which knows God’s law only from creation and their consciences, are the people of God who have had it given to them directly by the Finger of God. And yet his **visible churches** run around telling the world that the law of God no longer matters under the new

covenant. **That's conservatives!** The more **progressive** in the midst who long ago threw off the shackles of the law now openly support antibiblical sexual lifestyles, the godless communist racist educational indoctrination of our children, the murder of the unborn, the young, and the aged, the virtue-signally, public heretic branding, religious coercing, and communal shaming, of people to go against their consciences with regards to non-approved things they put over and into their bodies, and even the express worship of other gods (and sometimes even no god at all) by their openly atheistic and pagan clergy.

There is **nothing new under the sun**. Jeremiah said of God's people long ago, **"Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth, that I may pardon her. Though they say, 'As the LORD lives,' yet they swear falsely. O LORD, do not your eyes look for truth? You have struck them down, but they felt no anguish; you have consumed them, but they refused to take correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to repent. Then I said, 'These are only the poor; they have no sense; for they do not know the way of the LORD, the justice of their God. I will go to the**

great and will speak to them, for they know the way of the LORD, the justice of their God.’ But they all alike had broken the yoke; they had burst the bonds” (Jer 5:1-5). Indeed, since the Garden of Eden, the great experiment has been one thing: to see how far we can stretch, poke, gash, rip, disfigure, dismember, and murder God’s law.

If this is truly our perennial temptation, then it should come as no surprise that the Apostle Paul writes to the church with the greatest pastoral pedigree of all time, having been pastored by himself, the Apostle John, and Timothy about how he was seeing men and women with “impure hearts,” “guilty consciences,” “insincere faith,” who were “unbelieving,” worm their way into the church to misuse and abuse God’s law to the destruction of the church and those within. If this is truly our perennial temptation, then it should not be surprising that each and every church, from Ephesus to our own, must continually work hard to maintain the doctrinal purity of the law of God within its own midst. I believe, when it does that, God is often pleased to allow this faithfulness by his people to have positive effects in a society at large. We, in fact, are the direct beneficiaries of our Christian father’s doing this very thing. Conversely, if they do not, they can expect that their

civilization, with no light from God's people to lead the way, will collapse into moral decay and what will come upon it and the churches is a spiritual and cultural dark ages.

But how do we do that? **How do we fight to maintain fidelity to God's law?** *We must convince people to love God's law.* But how do we do that? I believe the answer is given in our passage today. Rather than seeing the law as this bitter yoke that people must wear around their necks, you must **see what it truly is** ("good"). You must see **its origin** (in the holy God), and **its purposes** (three uses). Most of all, you must see **its limitations** (you must never use the law to change someone's heart) and the **vital distinction** that is made at the end of the passage, otherwise, loving the law in your heart is truly impossible.

The Goodness and Beauty of the Law

In thinking about the law, too many people **begin in the wrong place**. Some have this idea that the **law is bad**, mean, something that kills their joy. Of course, if what they desire to do is evil, then yes, it goes against those inclinations. But even when Christians are thinking about the relevance of the law under the new covenant, they often seem to

logically default to this belief. For example, the famous Dispensationalist Charles Ryrie turns to **2 Corinthians 3:7-11** and notices that it talks about a “**ministry of death**” (7). A ministry of “death” must be bad, right? So what is it? This ministry of death, Paul says, was “**carved in letters on stone.**” So Ryrie asks, what was carved in stone? “**The Ten Commandments.**” He therefore concludes, “**Thus, this passage says that *the Ten Commandments* are a ministration of death; and furthermore, the same passage declares in no uncertain terms that *they* are done away (vs. 11). Language could not be clearer, and yet there are fewer truths of which it is harder to convince people**” [emphasis mine].²

There’s **so much wrong about this**, it is difficult to know where to begin. But notice that this is precisely the kind of thinking that began the sermon. Now, I don’t think that Ryrie would ever have told you that the law of God is bad. But that seems to be **the logic** behind his and so many others’ misunderstanding that we are “**not under law**” anymore.

So let’s begin by countering this thought with **the first verse** of our passage. “**Now we know that the law is good**” (**1Tim 1:8**). You must have this as your presupposition. **The law is good**. Whatever law God gives, it is, by definition,

² Charles C. Ryrie, “The End of the Law,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124 (1967): 243-44.

good. Whatever law you read about in God's word, it is good. If you read some law that you **do not understand**, it is good. If you read some law that **seems outdated**, it is good. If you read some law that **you do not like**, it is good. It may not apply the same way today as it did in the past, but it is good. As the same Apostle tells us in Romans 7, "**So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good**" (**Rom 7:12**). If there is a problem, it isn't with the Law of God.

Why must we **presuppose** that the law is good? **Because the law comes from God. And God is good.** In fact, as the Lord says, "**No one is good except God alone**" (**Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19**). The law is **holy** because God is holy. As Hannah says, "**There is none holy like the LORD**" (**1Sa 2:2**). The law is **righteous** because God is righteous. Isaiah says, "**There is no other god besides me, a righteous God**" (**Isa 45:21**). The law is **good**, because God is good.

But just **how good** is the law? Look at the beauty and glory of the law. Moses said, "**Keep [the law] and do [it], for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'**" For what great nation is there that has a god so near

to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?” (Dt 4:6-8).

What does the Psalmist say? “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes” (Ps 19:7-8). Therefore, “I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps 119:97). It is his counselor (119:24), his song (54), his delight (92). It gives him great peace (165). He hates and abhors falsehood but loves God’s law (163). He hates the double-minded but loves God’s law (113). Because of this, “He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers” (Ps 1:3). It’s beyond my understanding how a Christian could recognize what the law is like this and yet conclude that the law is a ministry of death that God no longer wants his people under in any sense. How can anyone truly love God’s law when this is their conclusion? No, it doesn’t say that God’s *law* is done away, but that *the ministry of death* is

done away, but that leads to perhaps an even greater confusion that we must now think through.

The Purpose(s) of the Law

In Corinthians, Paul does indeed refer to [the Ten Commandments](#), but not as *themselves* having passed away. Rather, it was *their function* in the temporary theocracy of the nation of Israel that has passed away. They created the formal covenantal arrangement between God and his old covenant people. In the context, it is [the old covenant](#) that was a ministry of death, [not the Ten Commandments](#) (as we have just seen, these, *when used lawfully*, actually produce life—*reviving the soul*). It is the old covenant that has passed away. The old covenant was the problem, not the law.

And yet, I think people realize that there are [a bunch of laws that have in some sense passed away](#), right? We no longer sacrifice animals on an altar at a temple for example. First of all, those are not the Ten Commandments. But even here, it is not that “sacrifice” has passed away. Rather, it has been fulfilled and is being fulfilled *in a new covenant*, rather than old covenant way. What, after all, is [offering your own body as a living sacrifice in the NT temple](#) of your body and

Christ's church, if not the continuation of sacrifices *in some sense*?

Even conservative Christians have often badly messed up this idea of “**fulfilling**” the law. Jesus told us he came not to **abolish** the law, but to fulfill it (**Matt 5:17**). This is in his preface to his Sermon on the Mount. People realize that this must include everything in his sermon. And yet, many strangely still conclude that in his Sermon he has in fact “**abrogated**” or “**contravened**” certain laws, like taking oaths (which deal directly with the Ten Commandments)!³ The opposite of what he said.

This leads us to **the purposes of the law**. With both continuity and discontinuity between the Testaments regarding the law, rather than just throw all law into a huge basket that then goes into the garbage, we are wise to ask if there is **any sense** in which the law may have passed away or not passed away. Why did God give the law to us? Doing this will become foundational to a proper understanding of law in our day.

³ Cf., **D. A. Carson**, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 417; **Fred Zaspel**, “*New Covenant Theology and the Mosaic Law (IV.A.)*,” at: https://gospelpedlar.com/articles/Christian%20Life/Law_Zaspel/NCT_and_mosaic%20law.html, etc. For more, see my sermon on Matthew 5:33-37: I Pledge Allegiance—How the Third and Ninth Commandments Apply Today (Oct 2006).

Notice that **1Tim 1:8** says, “We know that the law is good, *if one uses it lawfully...*” In other words, there are ways of perverting the Law of God so that it is no longer good. Remember our context. The false teachers were perverting the stories and genealogies of the OT, and this was in turn fostering great wickedness in the church at Ephesus. We might call that wickedness, *lawlessness*. As John tells us, “Sin is lawlessness” (**1Jn 3:4**). It makes no sense to even speak about sin if there is no law. So, if the law has in every sense passed away, then sin has become a meaningless word (which is, of course, precisely how too many think today).

The Second Use of the Law (Civil)

The Apostle continues, “...understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient...” (**1Tim 1:9**). Paul is talking about the law in a very specific way here. To understand it, you must know of the different uses of the law as it functions in the hearts and minds of people. Classically, the church has spoken of the three uses of the law. These were especially and clearly

laid out by Calvin in his *Institutes*,⁴ but they were all understood long before him.

The use in mind here is what we call the **second use** of the law or its **civil use** (use in a civil society). In his comments on our passage, he puts it simply. The law is given here “**to restrain the licentiousness of wicked people.**” In the *Institutes* he says this happens because of its “**fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment.**”⁵ I have you ever had a fleeting thought like, “I wonder if I robbed that bank ...” and then said, “better not do that.” Why? Because you would be punished (hopefully you also have not because you know that it is wrong). Who does it do this to? “**Certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats in the law. But they are restrained, not because their inner mind is stirred or affected, but because, being bridled, so to speak, they keep their hands from outward activity, and hold inside the depravity that otherwise they would wantonly have indulged.**”⁶ This is precisely what Paul has said. **The law is not laid down for the**

⁴ See especially **Calvin**, *Institutes* Book 2.7.6-7; 2.7.10; 2.7.12.

⁵ **John Calvin**, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.7.10, trans. Henry Beveridge, Esq (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1997).

⁶ **John Calvin**, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.7.10, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 358.

just but for the lawless and disobedient. In a lawless society that no longer punishes crime, let alone that rewards criminal behavior, this second use of the law is utterly useless, as we are increasingly seeing today.

But **what law?** What Paul says next should be the nail in the coffin to anyone who thinks that the Ten Commandments are obliterated today. For what he does is give example after example of all ten—in order! He does this with a series of **fourteen words**, with a final statement summarizing for the last Commandment.

Let's begin in **the middle of the list**, with the laws over which that few who have noticed this disagree. Notice that he says that the law is laid down ... “**for murderers (androphonois), the sexually immoral (pornois), men who practice homosexuality (arsenokoitais), enslavers (andrapodistais), liars (pseustais), perjurers (epiorkois)...**” (1Tim 1:9-10). Here are the corresponding commandments in order: You shall not **murder**, you shall not commit **adultery**, you shall not **steal**, you shall not **bear false witness** against your neighbor. Notice that Paul's list matches exactly the order of these commandments. The only difference is that he gives only one example of murder, but two of adultery, one of stealing, but two of bearing false witness.

Comparing the Ten Commandments and Paul's List to Timothy (Using Tradition Protestant Numbering)

Ten Commandments		1 Timothy 1:9-10 List	
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6	Murders	murderers	
7	Adultery	Fornicators/se xual immorality	homosexuals
8	Stealing	slave dealers	
9	False Witness	liars	perjurers
10			

It is unknown why he does this, but a good bet is that he **saw some** of the Commandments being broken in the church at Ephesus or in its city **more than others**. Therefore, he comes up with more examples. The words here refer to those who commit **unlawful killing**, that is, things like first degree murder; those who are both basically **sexually immoral** (in many areas), but also are specifically carrying out **homosexual behavior** (lit. “one who sleeps with men”; the ancient world was filled with it, both in adult/adult and child/adult relationships, and especially at the Temple of Artemis). **Slave dealers** is a very specific kind of theft, the

stealing or trafficking of a human being. **Lying** is a broad way of bearing false witness, while perjury is a very specific legal way of doing it in a court of law.

If the Apostle has these four commandments in order, might he also have others here as well? Let's look at the words just prior to "murderers." These are those who **strike fathers** (*patrolōais*) **and mothers** (*mētrolōais*). Clearly, "fathers and mothers" refers to the commandment prior to murder: **Honor your father and your mother**. The reason scholars disagree with where to put this is because it can refer to the murder, not just striking, of parents. Whatever the case, it is clear that we have another match.

The word prior to this is "**profane**" (*bebēlois*).⁷ **Matthew 12:5** uses this word in the context of profaning the Sabbath, as do several passages in the LXX (**Neh 13:17; Ezek 20:13; Isa 56:2**). What's the commandment prior to honor your father and mother? **Remember the Sabbath** and keep it holy. Profaning is the diametrical opposite of keeping something holy. Another match.

The word prior to this is "**the unholy**" (*anosiois*). Here is how one commentator describes the relationship to taking

⁷ The following discussion was aided greatly by **Richard Barcellos**, "An Ethical Manifesto: 1 Timothy 1:8–11 and the Decalogue," *The Founders Journal: The Pope, Indulgences, and Jesus Christ* 36 (Spring 1999): 16. It is also found in **Richard Barcellos**, *In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology* (Enumclaw, WA: Winepress, 2001), 41-57.

the Lord's Name in vain. "Likewise, those who take the Lord's name in vain (Exodus 20:7) might well be designated negatively by a single term as those who are "unholy" ... This understanding is strengthened if the language associated with this command has been influenced by the petition of the Lord's Prayer that the Lord's name be hallowed or regarded as holy (Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:2)."⁸
Still another match!

The word prior to this is "sinners" (*hamartōlois*). While this word is a general term for a sinner of any kind, it is sometimes used more specifically. That is, sometimes it is used in reference to the *idolatry* of Gentiles (Dt 29:16-19; Ps 96:7-10; Isa 1:28-31; Gal 2:15). In fact, the very similar noun *hamartia* is found in this very commandment (Ex 20:5 LXX).

The word found before this is "godless" (*asebesi*). The First Commandment is, *you must have no other gods before me*. It seems obvious that we have yet another match. However, there are two words prior to this. They are "lawless" (*anomois*) and "insubordinate" or "disobedient" (*anupotaktois*). In Greek, these words are alliterated, both beginning with "a" (the first Greek letter), and as such serve

⁸ George W. Knight, III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992, reprint, 1996), 84.

as an **excellent introduction** to the list. They summarize the rest of the words.

All that we have left is **the last commandment**. You shall not **covet** is summarized by the phrase, “**and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.**” As the only commandment dealing with the heart, it is set apart from the Ten. So also, Paul sets his list apart in a way that now encompasses everything. Really, that’s what coveting does to, for all other sins are at their roots, the result of coveting something that doesn’t belong to you.

Three Lists of 1 Tim 1:9-10 Matched to the Ten Commandments		
Luke Timothy Johnson	Unnamed Online Article:	Richard Barcellos
1. & 2. No gods/no idols: godless, sinners	1. No gods: Lawless, disobedient	Introduction: Lawless, insubordinate
3. Name in vain: unholy, profane	2. No idols: godless, sinners	1. No gods: godless
4.	3. Name in vain: profane (out of order)	2. No idols: sinners
5.	4. Sabbath: unholy	3. Name in vain: unholy 54
6. Murders: kills father, mother, murderers	5. Parents: strike fathers, mothers	4. Sabbath: profane 51
7. Adultery: fornicators, sexual perverts	6. Murders: murderers	5. Parents: strike fathers, mothers
8. Stealing: slave dealers	7. Adultery: fornicators, sexual perverts	6. Murders: murderers
9. False Witness: liars, perjurers	8. Stealing: slave dealers	7. Adultery: fornicators, sexual perverts
10. Coveting (assumed): anything else.	9. False Witness: liars, perjurers	8. Stealing: slave dealers
	10. Coveting (assumed): anything else.	9. False Witness: liars, perjurers
		10. Coveting (assumed): anything else.

If these are all contrary to sound doctrine, then how can they have passed away? Thus, Paul shows **the everlasting**

nature of the Ten Commandments here at the beginning of 1 Timothy. He does so in the context of the second use of the law—the restraining of evil in a society through the use of threat and punishment. This use is as much for the protection of the innocent and godly as it is the punishment of the wicked. How can anyone honestly believe that such a use has passed out of existence because Jesus died on the cross and brought in a new covenant? It's **absurd**. Who comes up with this stuff? More, it is **dangerous**, as our current civilization is quickly learning the hard way. When evil is allowed to go unchecked—for whatever reasons—chaos, suffering, and death are never far behind.

The First Use of the Law (Didactic)

But there are **two more uses** of the law in the Scripture. These are sometimes given in different orders from Calvin. What we call the **first use** of the law is its **pedagogical** sense. That is, it **teaches** us something. What does it teach us? First, it is a **mirror** that shows us **our sin**. Paul speaks of this use many times elsewhere. “**Through the law comes the knowledge of sin**” (**Rom 3:20**). Or more personally, “**Sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and**

the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure” (Rom 7:11-13). James specifically talks about the mirror. “If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a *mirror*. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed” (James 1:23-25).

The chief problem we have is *not the Law*. It is sin. *We* are the problem, *not the Ten Commandments*. This function of the law shows the unregenerate, the non-Christian person who hears these laws their sin and how they fall short of the glory of God. That leads to the *second things that the first use teaches* us. The law is a *school-master to lead us to Christ!* Paul gives us this use explicitly in *Galatians 3:24*. “So then, the law was our guardian (KJV: schoolmaster) until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.” Its purpose was to teach us about Christ and about our need for Christ. If we break the commandment, we are to seek grace.

The law teaches us this. But God’s grace how? To merely help us pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps? No, to turn and trust in Christ. Erasmus said of our passage, “The chief purpose of the law was to lead us to Christ. So that they turn the law, which is good, into their own destruction when they, by the law, draw people away from Christ.”⁹

But it also teaches Christians that they continually break God’s law too. This also teaches them to turn back to Christ, so that it is Christ alone, and not some legalistic arrogance that sanctifies them, or some legalistic self-depression that comes upon them because they realize they do not keep it. Augustine said, “The law bids us, as we try to fulfill its requirements, and become wearied in our weakness under it, to know how to ask the help of grace.”¹⁰ This is also implicit in our passage. What is the “lawful” use of the law? To obey it. If you do not obey it, you get punished. But it is not merely brute obedience. It is obedience that comes from a heart humbled by its own sinfulness and needful of God’s grace. How can anyone possibly think that this use of the law passes away in the new covenant?

⁹ Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraphrases*, 17-18. In Lee Gatiss, Bradley G. Green, and Timothy George, eds., *1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon: New Testament*, vol. XII, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 122.

¹⁰ In Calvin, *Institutes* 2.7.9.

The Limitations of the Law

Just here, we need to also speak about the **limitations of the Law**. The law by itself cannot make you love it. Though it is good, *you* are not. **Something else has to be in place and effectual in a person's life** to cause the love the law. I'm going to give you a quote from Martin Luther, because no one says this better than him. However, in the quote, you might become confused, because what he says is “**the third function [use]**” of the law. Earlier I said that there were different orders that people give to the three uses of the law. Though Luther puts this under the third use, we are still dealing here with the Reformed's first use. Nevertheless, the point is the same.

After giving us the first two uses as “**revealing sinners**” and “**restraining them,**” Luther says, “**The third function, however, to remove sin and to justify, is limited to this: The Lamb of God, and not the law, takes away sin. It is Christ who removes sin and justifies. Consequently, we must distinguish between the *function of the law* and that of Christ. It is the law's *function* to show good and evil, because it shows what one must do and reveals sin, which one must not commit. The law therefore is good because it shows not only**

evil but also the good that one must do. But beyond that it does not go. It does not kill Og and King Sihon. It merely reveals good and bad; Joshua [does the rest].”¹¹

Put another way, the Law cannot give life or create a love for it. Too many pastors and parents act like that’s precisely what it does, as they demand, coerce, intimidate, and force others into its conformity (often with laws that aren’t even God’s!). But only Christ does that, and not through coercion—not when you turn to him. He does it through love and grace and forgiveness. The Law’s job here is to show you that through its mirror-like quality, its threats and punishments, *and* its patterns and prophecies of the Messiah. Thomas Cartwright put it this way. “Whereas the law is given to people who are unjust, to lay open sin, with the filth and punishment of it, so that people might by repentance seek the remedy *in the gospel*.”¹²

If it is the inability of the law to give life, if this is where its chief limitation lies, not because it is bad, but because we are, another remedy, another cause of creating love for the law is needed. This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Gospel is news, news about the Messiah that he has come and obeyed the laws demands perfectly so that what it requires

¹¹ Marin Luther, Lectures on 1 Timothy, *Luther’s Works* 28:335 in Gatiss, 123.

¹² Thomas Cartwright, *Confutation of the Rhemists* in Gatiss, 124.

has indeed been met. While the law held out life for anyone who would perfectly obey it, the Gospel tells you that this has happened. Jesus obeyed the law and won for himself as a man—life. But the law also demands punishment for those who disobey it, and the other part of the Gospel is that Jesus died—in your place, having paid its consequences in his death on the cross. He died what you deserve, according to the law. He was raised to life and offers you this life as a gift—utterly free of charge, so that he alone might be glorified in your salvation. Simply look to him, confess your sins, and believe he did this for you, and you will be saved.

This is [directly related to our passage](#) as well. After his list that is rounded off with “[anything else that is contrary to sound doctrine,](#)” he concludes, “[in accordance with *the gospel* of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted](#)” (1Tim 1:11). In other words, Paul [distinguishes here between the law and the gospel](#). He realizes that the law is in accordance with the Gospel, and yet it is not the Gospel. The Gospel is what saves. Believing the Gospel is what gives love for the law. Why? Because the Gospel gives the forgiveness even as you break the law. This forgiveness shows you the love of Christ apart from your law-keeping. And his love that has been given to you then shows you

what a good God he is, and how the law itself is not evil, but for your good. Law is not opposed to the Gospel. They are best friends, but this is understood only by someone who has himself been subdued by the love of God in Christ. Do you see the beauty of the law? If not, then you have not yet understood the beauty of the Gospel or your need for forgiveness and reconciliation from the wrath of God. If so, then you are ready for its third use.

The Third Use of the Law (Moral/Normative)

Even as he says that they are in accordance with one another, the Apostle simultaneously presupposes that the Gospel has done its work and the Ephesian Christians can now desire to obey the law. This is its third use is in Calvin. The [Heidelberg Catechism's](#) second question is, “How many things are necessary for you to know, that in this comfort you may live and die happily?” The answer, “Three things: First, the greatness of my sin and misery. Second, how I am redeemed from all my sins and misery. Third, *how I am to be thankful to God for such redemption*” (For us Baptists, see also *The Orthodox Catechism*, [Hercules Collins](#), Q. 2). The first two answers deal with the first use of the law. The last, [thankfulness](#), is its third use.

In our tradition, the third use of the law is that it serves as a **moral compass** for the **normative life of a Christian** to know how they might please God with their lives out of thankfulness to him for his great salvation and the holiness he has created in them. This third use presupposes that the didactic purpose has been met in the life of a sinner and that they have come to Christ. Hence Calvin begins his discussion of it saying, “**The third and principal use, which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns.**”¹³

Another way of thinking about this is the way the Heidelberg Catechism is divided into three parts: **Guilt, Grace, Gratitude**. We learn of our guilt from the law in its first use. We are then led to Christ and his saving grace. Then we are ready to live lives of gratitude or thankfulness as the answer gave. But this use is also implicit in our passage.

The Apostle is no legalist. Though he gets right to the law in his letter to Timothy, he understands that the Law has limitations. It can't save a person, and this is in my opinion his primary concern with the false teachers. They were, as Erasmus said, **leading people away from Christ** through

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes* 2.7.12 (Battles, 1:360).

their **unlawful use of the Law**. The proper use of the Law is to lead people to the blessed Savior who alone obeys the Law perfectly. But somehow, they were perverting the law of God. Perhaps they were saying it no longer matters—certainly their actions demonstrated that kind of attitude. Perhaps they were eclipsing the need for Christ through a replacement gospel of legalistic ascetism—telling people whom they could marry, forcing certain foods upon them, and so on. This is also clearly present in the letter.

What they were **not doing** is using the law to **drive people to Christ** and then live a life of thankfulness to him through perpetual learning and obeying and repenting and getting back up and obeying again—of the Ten Commandments. This moral use of the law, this normative use of the law in the life of the church was missing. And we know from Revelation that it ended up turning this into “**the dead church**.” It is insightful to read about what ended up happening here. “**I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false**” (**Rev 2:2**). They sound like good Reformed people! “**But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first**” (**4**).

They have forsaken the third use of the law. “Therefore remember from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first” (5). And this is the great warning to the churches today.

Our Response to the Law

One of my favorite comedians is Steven Wright. He’s the king of the dead-pan one-liners. He has a joke, “This morning I woke up and discovered that everything in my house had been stolen in the middle of the night and replaced with an exact replica.” This is how I think a lot of people think about the Ten Commandments in the New Testament. The good about this is that at least it allows them to see the Ten repeated in the New Testament, and so they therefore do in fact have a place for them in their lives today. But this view is dangerous for a couple of reasons. First, it implies that Jesus did not in fact give the Ten to Moses in the OT! This in turn does great harm to people’s view of God, especially between the Testaments. Second, it gives them all kinds of wiggle room as it regards all kinds of laws in the OT (even the moral law, i.e. the Sabbath commandment). Many think they can ignore it altogether if they perceive that it is not replaced with an exact replica in the NT.

In my mind, this puts them right there at the visitor's center and the logbook at the start of the trail the heretics in Ephesus took as it regards the law of God. Going up this trail creates more and more dangers so that at some point, all three uses of the law are abandoned, God's law is replaced with our own legalistic ones, and most of all, Christ is not the end to which it all points.

This percolating hatred of the law ends up becoming an all out fountain of moral disaster in the church, which quickly oozes over into any culture that has been positively impacted by the church's love of the law and gospel in the past. That culture becomes a moral abyss of decadence, hatred, violence, and lawlessness. That's what we are seeing today. The solution does not start out there, with legal reform. It starts here, in Christ's church, in each of our hearts. Make sure that you have understood clearly that your violation of God's law—even one single breaking of it at any point, necessitates that you spend eternity paying for your crime against the infinite God. Then, I implore you, turn to the One who has taken that penalty upon himself, dying in your place, so that you can have a permanent reprieve of your punishment, and much more, eternal life and hope and joy in Christ Jesus. And when you do this, by

God's Spirit in you and your union with the Son, God will create in you a love for his law that will change the world.

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