

The Christian Life (2): Christians and the Moral Law

The NT uses the term "law" in a few ways. Sometimes it refers to the entire Mosaic Law (Jn.1:17), which includes ceremonial, judicial, and moral law, when used as "the law of Moses" (1Cor.9:9), it refers to the Pentateuch, and when used as "the Law and the Prophets" (Matt.22:40), it refers to the entire OT Scriptures. Most often, especially in the Epistles, it refers to the moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments (Rom.2:25-29; 3:31; 7:7-25; 8:3-4; 13:8-10; 1Cor.9:19-22; Gal.5:13-14; Eph.6:1-3; 1Tim.1:7-9; Heb.8:8-10; Jas.2:8-13).

I. Christians and the Moral Law

1. *Christians are not under the law as a broken covenant.* "God, in creating the first man, made him after His own moral image (Gen.1:27). This image, as the Apostle Paul informs us, consists of knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness (Col.3:10; Eph.4:24). God, then, created man in His own moral image by inscribing His law, the transcript of His own righteousness and holiness, on man's mind and heart" (Colquhoun).¹ This moral law was formed into a covenant with Adam on behalf of the human race. "The law of the ten commandments, being the natural law, was written on Adam's heart on his creation. But after man was put into the garden, this natural law, had a threat of eternal death and promise of eternal life annexed to it. Thus it became the law of works, whereof the ten commandments were, and are still the matter" (Boston).² This means, Adam was created *for* but not *in* covenant with God. The law put into man at his creation, was then formed into a covenant by the positive command not to eat of a specific tree. "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" (Colquhoun).³

No sooner was the first man formed that the moral law was written in his heart as a perpetual rule of righteousness to him. This law was afterward incorporated into the covenant of works, and under that form was proposed to Adam as the head and representative of his posterity. The law as written in his heart had no promise of life. It does not appear that the infinite Majesty of heaven was under any previous obligation to reward the obedience of a creature so mean, in comparison of Him, with the eternal enjoyment of Himself. But when He annexed to that law a promise of life upon condition of obedience to it, and an express threatening of death as the wages of disobedience, He thereby turned it into a covenant of works, and under that form proposed it to him.⁴

All men are born under the penalty of the covenant God made with mankind in Adam, "for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die (spiritually, physically, and eternally)" (Gen.2:17). This is true of every person from Adam onward regardless of where or when they lived. "For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin" (Rom.3:9). To be "under sin" is to be under its penalty and power as a broken covenant. "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God" (Rom.3:19). All men, the entire world by nature, are born under the law. The law in its

¹ John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 3

² Thomas Boston, *Complete Works*, 7:169, b

³ John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 10-11

⁴ John Colquhoun, *The Covenant of Works*, 40-41

covenant form demands perfect and perpetual obedience to its commands and threatens death for a single transgression. "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them'" (Gal.3:10). Believers are delivered from the curse of the law when they come to Christ. "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). "For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (Rom.6:14). "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Gal.5:18). "Against such there is no law" (Gal.5:23). That is, the law no longer condemns those who are in Christ, who live by the grace of Christ, walk by the Spirit, and bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit. "Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God" (Rom.7:4).

There are two errors respecting the deliverance of believers from the law which are equally contrary to the Oracles of Truth. The one is that of the legalist who maintains that believers are still under the moral law as a covenant of works; the other is that of the antinomian who affirms that believers are not under it even as a rule of life. These errors are as contrary to the Scriptures of truth as they are to each other; and they are equally against that evangelical holiness which is a principal part of eternal life, and which is so necessary that without it no man shall see the Lord (Heb.12:14). The plain doctrine of Scripture is this: while true believers are dead to or delivered from the law as a law or covenant of works, they are under it, and account it their high privilege to be under the infinite obligation of it, as a rule of life. Indeed, to be freed from the law in its federal form is nothing more than to be delivered from the covenant of works, and from an inclination to cleave to that covenant; and our affirming according to the Scriptures that believers are delivered from the law as a covenant of works necessarily implies that they are under the law in some other respect. Accordingly, the Apostle Paul informs us that we "are not without law to God, but under the law to Christ" (1Cor.9:21), that is, we are under the law of the Ten Commandments as the law of Christ, or as the law in the hand of Christ the Mediator.⁵

2. *Christians are now under the law as the law of Christ.* To be under the law of Christ is to have the law rewritten in the heart as a forgiven, accepted, and beloved child of God (Jer.31:31-34). It comes to those who are in union with Christ and in a gracious covenant with God. Such people are indwelt by the Spirit who empowers them to "walk in" "keep" and "do" the commandments (Ezek.36:27). Furthermore, they have the perfect life and dying love of Christ to instruct and motivate them (Jn.13:34; 2Cor.5:14). Thus, the substance of the law of Christ is one with the law that was in Adam by creation and codified at Sinai in Ten Words. "The law of Christ is a law which Christ has clearly explained, and which He has vindicated from the false glosses of the scribes and Pharisees; His new commandment which He has given and enforced by His own example, and whose obligation on the subjects of His spiritual kingdom He has increased by redeeming them from their bondage to sin and Satan. It is a law which He, according to the promise of His gracious covenant inscribes by His Holy Spirit on their hearts; a law too which He calls His yoke, and which is a light and easy yoke (Matt.11:29-30)" (Colquhoun).⁶ "Do not think that I came to destroy the law, or the prophets. I did

⁵ John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 205

⁶ John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 27

not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Matt.5:17). "While this is spoken of the whole law, it has a special reference to the moral law, which Christ has fulfilled in three respects: 1) by His own sinless life and sacrificial death (Rom.10:4); 2) by teaching it and restoring its true meaning and sense, which He did by freeing it from the corruptions and glosses of the Pharisees (Matt.5:19-20); 3) by His Spirit in the hearts and lives of His own people who fulfill the law by love (Rom.13:8-10)" (Ursinus).⁷

(1) The moral law reveals the will of God and the duty of every Christian. "The law is of great use to show believers what duty they owe to their God and Redeemer, and to direct them how to perform it. Christ, whom the father has given for a leader and commander to the people, gives to believers that law to be the rule of their obedience, to inform them what grateful service, what holy obedience, they owe to Him, and to God in Him, and to direct them in the course of their obedience" (Colquhoun).⁸ And thus, while the law no longer comes to believers as a covenant of works, it nevertheless still comes as a royal law. "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."⁹ The law of God as a rule of life has lost none of its authority or demands. While it no longer condemns it still commands. "The law as a rule of life to believers comes invested with infinite authority, and therefore lays them under infinite obligations, even to perfect obedience. Seeing they do not cease to be creatures by becoming new creatures, they are, and ever will be, obliged to yield personal obedience to the moral law as a rule of life, and that by the sovereign authority of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, their Creator"¹⁰ And yet, it must be remembered, while this law comes from God as our Creator, it comes through the mediation of Christ. "For the LORD is our Judge, the LORD is our Lawgiver, the LORD is our King; He will save us" (Isa.33:22)."Though God in Christ does not require of believers, any obedience to the law at all by way of satisfaction to His justice, for that Christ has fully done already; yet does He require, that every true believer do purpose, desire, and endeavor to do their best to keep all the ten commandments perfectly; witness the saying of Christ Himself, 'Be ye therefore perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect' (Matt.5:48)" (Fisher).¹¹

The Law is and remains—both in the penitent and impenitent, both to regenerate and unregenerate people—one and the same Law. It is God's unchangeable will. The difference, as far as obedience is concerned, is only in the person. For one who is not yet regenerate follows the Law out of constraint and unwillingly does what it requires of him (as also the regenerate do according to the flesh). But the believer, so far as he is regenerate, acts without constraint and with a willing spirit to do what no threat of the Law however severe could ever force him to do.¹²

It is through the law that believers learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it. It is as if some servant, already prepared with all earnestness of heart to commend himself to his master, must search out and observe his master's ways more carefully in order to

⁷ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 496

⁸ John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 132-133

⁹ 2LBC, 19:6

¹⁰ John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 133-134

¹¹ Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 7:453-454

¹² Formula of Concord, VI:8

conform and accommodate himself to them. And not one of us may escape from this necessity. For no man has heretofore attained to such wisdom as to be unable, from the daily instruction of the law, to make fresh progress toward a purer knowledge of the divine will.¹³

(2) The moral law provides a means to express love and gratitude to God. "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (Jn.14:15). "The law as a rule directs saints how to express their gratitude to the Lord Jesus for fulfilling it for them in its covenant form. It enjoins them to show their love and thankfulness to Him by a growing conformity of heart and life to it as the rule of their obedience. No sooner does the law as a covenant urge men to Christ for deliverance from the dominion of it in that form than Christ leads them back to the law as a rule for the regulation of their heart and conduct, in order that they may express their gratitude to Him for His perfect obedience to it as a covenant in their stead, by their sincere obedience to it as a rule" (Colquhoun).¹⁴ In short, law reveals to us the true nature of love: love to God and to our neighbor. "Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'You shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law'" (Rom.13:8-10).

When the Bible speaks of the "law of love," it cannot mean that love stands by itself as a definition of righteousness. Love is a principle of action, and as a principle of action, law directs us in the true expression of love. Love does not spontaneously follow its own way. It is the fulfilling of the law. The law is love's eyes, without which love is blind. Realizing this proper connection between law and love will drive us to all of Scripture to discover the behavior that God clearly defines as loving obedience. Nowhere in the Scriptures will we find that love dictates its own standard of conduct. We hear our Lord say, "If you love Me, keep My commandments," not, "If you love Me, love Me in any way you feel." Biblical love is never an autonomous, self-directing force capable of defining its own norms or standards of behavior. It is the fulfilling of God's commandments. And so, the true Christian does not let his own heart—even though it is a renewed heart—spontaneously decide what is right. That heart must be directed by God's law. Indeed, the Spirit writes the law on the hearts and minds of all who are born again (Heb.8:10; 10:16).¹⁵

The law is subservient to the Gospel. Its purpose is to convince and humble us, and the Gospel is to enable us to fulfil the obedience of the law. The law sends us to the Gospel for our justification: the Gospel sends us to the law to frame our way of life. Our obedience to the law is nothing else but the expression of our thankfulness to God who has freely justified us, that "being redeemed, we might serve Him without fear" (Lk.1:74). Though our service is not the motive or impelling cause of God's redeeming of us, yet it is the purpose of our redemption. The apostle shows this at length in the sixth chapter of Romans; it is the application he makes of the doctrine of free justifica-

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.12

¹⁴ John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 133

¹⁵ Ernest Reisinger, *The Law and the Gospel*, 95-96

tion. He continues: "Therefore, brethren, we are debtors" (Rom.8:12). If Christ has freed us from the penalties, how ought we to subject ourselves to the precepts! If He has delivered us from the curses, how ought we to study the commands! If He paid our debt of sin, certainly we owe a debt of service.¹⁶

(3) The moral law serves as a mirror whereby saints can behold their sin. As sin is a violation of the law (1Jn.3:4), the law functions as a mirror to reveal to us our remaining sin and humble us. "The law shows believers their inexpressible deficiency in holiness, in order to humble them, cause them to renounce their own righteousness, and rely wholly on Christ, and to make them long for heaven" (Brown).¹⁷ "If no one in this life can obey the ten commandments perfectly, then why does God want them preached so pointedly? First, so that the longer we live the more we may come to know our sinfulness and the more eagerly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and righteousness."¹⁸ "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" (Bolton).¹⁹ Thus while the law no longer threatens eternal death nor promises eternal life, it still threatens paternal punishment (chastisement) and promises temporal rewards (blessing). God chastens those who break His law and blesses those who obey it. "Moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward" (Ps.19:11). "The law was also given as a reprover 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), and this part of Scripture, is to be like scourge, to correct and chastise wantonness and correct a believer for sin" (Bolton).²⁰ "The law by teaching, warning, admonishing, correcting, prepares us for every good work" (Calvin).²¹

It must always be remembered that, although Christ has borne the punishment of sin, and although God has forgiven the saints for their sins, yet God may Fatherly correct His people for sin. Christ endured the great shower of wrath, the black and dismal hours of displeasure for sin. That which falls upon us is a sunshine shower, warmth with wet, wet with the warmth of His love to make us fruitful and humble. That which the believer suffers for sin is not penal, arising from vindictive justice, but medicinal, arising from a Fatherly love. It is His medicine, not His punishment; His chastisement, not His sentence; His correction, not His condemnation.²²

(4) The moral law reveals or manifests the righteous and holy character of God. "The law reveals the character of God. It's a reflection of His nature. The nature of God determines what is right, and the will of God imposes that standard upon all His creatures as a moral obligation. Since His will flows from His nature, and the law is perfect (Ps.19:7), the law reflects the perfection of His nature"

¹⁶ Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, 72

¹⁷ John Brown, *The Systematic Theology of John Brown of Haddington*, 499-500

¹⁸ The Heidelberg Catechism, Q.115

¹⁹ Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, 83

²⁰ Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, 83

²¹ John Calvin, as quoted by Samuel Bolton, *True Bounds*, 83

²² Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, 122-123

(Reisinger).²³ And so, just as God is holy, just and good, so "the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Rom.7:12).

God is holy and therefore cannot but demand holiness from man. Some ordinances which God has prescribed to man have proceeded from *the sovereign will of God*, so that He would have been free not to have given them. Having given them, they are thus good, and man is under obligation to observe them solely because it pleases the sovereign Lawgiver. Such was the command given to Adam not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; and the ceremonial laws were of this nature. However, as it is commensurate with the nature of God and of the reasonable creature that there be an obligation to be obedient to God and to have commandments by which the creature obey God, it likewise issues forth from *the character of God* that man have such commandments, as comprehended in the ten commandments, to be the measure of man's holiness.

This holiness is the image of God; that is, the harmony with the communicable attributes of God. It was therefore not possible for God, having thus created man in harmony with His holy nature, to either gift or command man contrary to His nature, so that man, created in His image, would hate Him, not serve Him or only serve Him in a physical sense, dishonor Him, and not publicly and corporately call upon and glorify Him. He could not have created the bearer of His image to be disobedient to authorities and parents, evil, immoral, and impure; either publicly or secretly rob his neighbor, harm the reputation of his neighbor, lie, and have a dissatisfied heart which seeks its fulfillment in that which is tangible. For all of this is contrary to the holy character of God, whose image the perfect nature of man bore. If man were still perfect he would understand all this clearly; that is, that the ten commandments in their entirety, as well as individually, are not only law merely because God willed it to be so, but because the will to give such a law issued forth out of His holy character.²⁴

(5) The moral law renders the righteousness of Christ more lovely to saints. Our Confession teaches that the law "discovers unto us the sinful pollutions of our natures, hearts, and lives, so as examining ourselves thereby, we may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against, sin, and provide a clearer sight of the need we have of Christ and the perfection of His obedience" (19:6).

The law is occasionally of further 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; that being the righteousness of God and not of a creature; a righteousness pure and perfect, well-pleasing in the sight of God, answerable to all the demands of law and justice; an everlasting righteousness, and which will answer for them in a time to come! Hence they love it, prize it, praise it, lay hold upon it, and desire to be found in it, living and dying, and not in their own.²⁵

²³ Ernest Reisinger, *Lord and Christ*, 162

²⁴ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 3:84

²⁵ John Gill, *Sermons and Tracts*, 2:185-186