

The Christian Life (3): The Three Uses of the Law

Christians have historically suggested three uses or purposes of the law: to restrain evil, to expose sin, and to guide in righteousness. The Lutherans wrote in the Formula of Concord in 1580: "The Law was given to people for three reasons: (1) that by the Law outward discipline might be maintained against wild, disobedient people; (2) that people may be led to the knowledge of their sins by the Law; and (3) that after they are regenerate they might have a fixed rule according to which they are to regulate and direct their whole life."¹

I. The Three Uses of the Law

1. *To restrain evil.* Laws in general bring threats and promises. Threats for disobedience and promises for obedience. This is true of the moral law as it remains in fallen man. This is called natural law as it's in man by nature as image-bearers of God. "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them" (Rom.2:14-15). While Gentiles are "without the law," that is, without written law, they "by nature do the things in the law" proving they have the remains of the law in them by nature. "The heathen are not in possession of the written law, yet their own judgments and actions are an acknowledgment that the moral law has been stamped upon their constitution by the Creator" (Wilson).² "Natural law is a common principle and, therefore, a distinct rule put into the hearts and minds of human beings by God Himself, warning them what they should do and what they should avoid" (Zanchi).³ Put more simply: "Natural law is a light—that underlying spark of reason by which we discern right from wrong" (Zanchi).⁴ It's an innate knowledge of right and wrong that's in men by nature. It's the echoes of Sinia (moral law) in men by nature. It's that which renders man morally accountable.

Thus, conscience is foundational to the law's work of restraint. "Conscience is a part of the understanding in all reasonable creatures, determining of their particular actions either with them or against them" (Perkins).⁵ It's God voice within the soul through natural law. "The spirit of a man is the lamp of the LORD, searching all the inner depths of his heart" (Prov.20:27). Conscience functions as a courtroom in the soul. It either accuses or else excuses. "Conscience is that innate faculty to distinguish between right and wrong which passes its independent judgment on a man's conduct" (Wilson).⁶ "Accusing and excusing are activities which evidence moral consciousness and therefore point to our indestructible moral nature, the only grounds of which is the work of the law of God in the heart" (Murray).⁷ "Then those who heard *it*, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last" (Jn.8:9). "And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and *toward* men" (Acs 24:16). "I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit" (Rom.9:1). This doesn't mean man's conscience always functions rightly. It can be defiled (Tit.1:15), evil (Heb.10:22),

¹ Formula of Concord, VI:1

² Geoffrey Wilson, *New Testament Commentaries*, 1:26

³ Girolamo Zanchi, *On the Law in General*, 13

⁴ Girolamo Zanchi, *On the Law in General*, 13

⁵ William Perkins, *Works*, 8:7

⁶ Geoffrey Wilson, *New Testament Commentaries*, 1:26

⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 75-76

and seared (1Tim.4:2). And yet, all men without exception have a conscience. Although man's conscience may err, it can never be totally silenced.

The law restrains within and without. That is, as it remains (in part) in the hearts of men by nature and as it's taught within society (family, state, and church). These two work together to restrain fallen humanity. This means, external law (as it's found in society) finds a witness within man. In fact, all just societal laws are but concrete applications of natural law. "Political laws are derived from some principle of natural law as a later conclusion. For example, it is a principle of natural law that no one should be affected by injury because one should not do to someone else what one does not want done to oneself. From this, wise lawmakers have deduced the laws about not killing anyone, not lying, not sleeping with someone else's wife, and so forth. These are conclusions derived from principles of natural law" (Zanchi).⁸ "Those who resist (civil law) will bring judgment upon themselves...Therefore you must be subject not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake" (Rom.13:2-5).

Thus, a land that refuses to teach the law of God (in the family, church, and state) will become a lawless and rebellious society. "But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly (1st) and for sinners (2nd), for the unholy (3rd) and profane (4th), for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers (5th), for manslayers (6th), for fornicators, for sodomites (7th), for menstealers (8th), for liars, for perjurers (9th), and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine" (1Tim.1:8-10). Paul elsewhere said, "the law was added because of transgressions" (Gal.3:19), that is, it was codified at Sinai because of man's rebellion. This is what he meant by "the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate." It's given in part to restrain and condemn man's sin. It's given to curb man's depravity. "The apostle seems to have the restraining function of the law in mind when he teaches that "the law is not laid down for the just but for the unjust and disobedient" (1Tim.1:9-10). He shows in this that the law is like a halter to check the raging and otherwise limitlessly ranging lusts of men" (Calvin).⁹

Fear of some form of punishment is a consequence of natural law. "The wicked flee when no one pursues" (Prov.28:1). "Fear of the awful consequences which must come upon guilt, is the prevailing motive which restrains and controls the passions of ungodly men. It holds back in uncounted instances, the arm of murderous revenge, and bridles the accomplishment of covetous and licentious appetite. And it cannot be doubted, that if the secret, dark, and majestic frown with which the law speaks to the consciences of the wicked, could be withdrawn, and the fear which it awakens, could be hushed, the main restraint upon the depravity of man would be broken, and the chief guardian of the peace of human society, would be destroyed" (Tyng).¹⁰ "Blessed be God that there is this fear upon the spirits of wicked men; otherwise we could not well live in the world. One man would be a devil to another. Every man would be a Cain to his brother, an Absalom to his father, a Saul to himself, a Judas to his master; for what one man does, all men would do, were it not for a restraint upon their spirits. Therefore we have cause to bless God that He has given a law to restrain transgression, that if men will not be so good as they should be, yet, being restrained, they become not so bad as they would be. Were it not for this, and for the awe that God has cast upon the spirits of wicked men by means of it, there would be no safety" (Bolton, 79-80).

⁸ Girolamo Zanchi, *On the Law in General*, 29

⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.10

¹⁰ Stephen Tyng, *Lectures on the Law and the Gospel*, 56

The fields, the streets, your houses, your beds, would have been filled with blood, uncleanness, murder, rapes, incests, adulteries, and all manner of mischief. If there were no law, saying, 'Thou shalt do not murder,' men would make every rising of passion a stab. If there were no law saying, 'Thou shalt not steal,' men would think theft, deception, cheating, and oppression good policy, and the best life would be living by robbery, living by other men's sweat. If there were no law saying, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery,' men would defile their neighbor's bed, and commit all manner of wickedness. For these reasons God has given a law to set bounds and banks to defend us against the incursions and breaches that sin would make upon us. He that sets bounds and banks to the raging sea, which otherwise would overflow the land, also sets bounds and banks to men's sins and sinful affections. It is no less wonder that the deluge of lust and corruption in men does not break forth to the overflowing of all banks, than that the sea does not break forth upon us, but He that sets bounds to the one, also binds and restrains the other.¹¹

One use of the law is civil: for God has ordained civil law, yea, all laws to punish transgressions. Every law therefore is given to restrain sin. For in that I do not kill, or commit adultery, or steal, or in that I abstain from other sins, I do it not willingly, or for the love of virtue, but I fear the prison, the sword, and the hangman. These do bridle and restrain me that I sin not, as bonds and chains do restrain a lion, or a bear, that he tear and devour not all that he meets; therefore the restraining from sin is not righteousness, but rather a signification of unrighteousness. This restraint shows plainly enough that they which have need of the law (as all they have which are without Christ) are not righteous, but rather wicked and mad men, whom it is necessary so to bridle, that they sin not" (Luther). The first use of the law is to bridle wickedness. Therefore God has ordained magistrates, parents, ministers, bonds, and all civil ordinances, that if they do no more, yet, at least, they may bind the devil's hands, that he rage not in his bond-slaves, after his own lust.¹²

2. *To expose sin.* "The law was given to uncover and reveal transgression. To open, reveal and convince the soul of sin. And this was with reference to the promise of grace and mercy" (Bolton).¹³ It was given (in its revelatory and codified form at Sinai) to expose man's sin and his need of Christ. "The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal.3:24). "It's the purpose of the law to increase transgressions, that is to say, to reveal unto a man his sin, his blindness, his misery, his iniquity, his ignorance, hatred and contempt of God, death, hell, judgment, and the deserved wrath of God" (Luther).¹⁴

(1) The law reveals the nature of sin. "By the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom.3:20). "The law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression" (Rom.4:15). "Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound (i.e., within our conscience)" (Rom.5:20). "I would not have known sin except through the law...for apart from the law sin was dead" (Rom.7:7-8). "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1Jn.3:4). "The law of God has an enlightening efficacy upon the minds

¹¹ Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, 80

¹² Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, 189

¹³ Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, 80-81

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, 189

of men: it is eye-salve to the blinded eye. A light shining in a dark place. A light shining into the very heart of man. When the word comes in power, all things appear with another face. The sins that were hid from our eyes, and the danger which was concealed by the policy of Satan from our souls, now lie clear and open before us" (Flavel).¹⁵ "Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful" (Rom.7:13). The tenth commandment, "you shall not covet," revealed Paul's sin to himself. It was through the commandment (which functions as a light or mirror), sin "became exceedingly sinful." "The law exposes sin and convicts of it. The law becomes the occasion of sin in that the depravity residing in us is thereby aroused to activity. The law aggravates sin—it is the instrumentality through which sin is aggravated in its expression. But the law is not sinful" (Murray).¹⁶

The law is of special use to convince sinners of their sinfulness and misery, and also of their utter inability by any righteousness and strength of their own, to recover themselves from their state of sin and misery. The precepts of the law serve to convince men of their sins of omission, and the prohibitions of it to convince them of their sins of commission. There are various evils which men would never have known to be sins unless the holy law of God had revealed the sinfulness of them. While the precepts of the law are of use to convince sinners of the reality and sinfulness of their sins, the threatenings of it are employed to discover to them the tremendous wrath and curse of God due to them for their transgressions. And by disclosing to them the deep depravity of their nature, the precepts and threatenings of the law serve, in the hand of the Spirit, to convince them of their utter inability to recover themselves, and so to humble them under a painful sense of their sinfulness and misery.¹⁷

(2) The law reveals the penalty of sin. Man must be crushed under a sense of the weight and burden of sin. "God brings in the power of His law to bear upon man's secret character, that sin may about in his view. This is the hammer with which He breaks the rock in pieces, and makes the proud sinner feel himself, and acknowledge himself, to be worthy of the condemnation and wrath of God. He that was before self-righteous, and alive without the commandment, now feels himself shut up to death, by every precept; without hope, a vessel of wrath fitted to destruction. He looks upon the holiness of the law and is convicted of sin. He looks upon the just authority of the law and is convinced of wrath and judgment for sin" (Tyng).¹⁸ "The faithful cannot profit in the Gospel, until they shall be first humbled, which cannot be, until they come to the knowledge of their sins. It is undoubtedly the peculiar office of the law to summon consciences to the judgment-seat of God, and to strike them with terror" (Calvin).¹⁹ "The right use and end of the law is to accuse and condemn as guilty such as live in security, that they may see themselves to be in danger of sin, wrath, and death, and be brought to trembling and desperation. For the law requires perfect obedience unto God and condemns all those that do not accomplish the same. Now, it is certain, there is no man living who is able to accomplish this obedience, which yet God requires of us" (Luther).²⁰

¹⁵ John Flavel, *Works*, 2:297

¹⁶ John Murray, *Romans*, 254

¹⁷ John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 126-127

¹⁸ Stephen Tyng, *Lectures on the Law and the Gospel*, 58

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary*, 18:140

²⁰ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, 78

The law is the great instrument in the agency of the Holy Spirit, to convince men of sin, and of the wrath which is denounced against sin. In His hands, it is living and powerful, and sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of the soul and spirit, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. In this process of saving conviction, the law is to be considered as the instrument of the Holy Spirit. In itself, it is to the conscience of the sinner, as a mere dead letter. Like a deaf adder, he stops his ears against its commands and its accusations. But this refusal to listen to the voice of God, yields under the power of the Spirit. When He lays hold of this hammer of the word, He wields it with a resistless force, and breaks down all the strongholds of man's pride and self-confidence and crushes his rebellious spirit into the dust of humiliation under conscious guilt and ruin. Without this spiritual application of the law, the sinner may be alive and boastful in himself. But when the commandment comes, with the attendant power of the Holy Ghost, sin revives in all its hideous features, and destructive power, and shows itself without disguise, to the conscience compelled to behold it. Then, the sinner dies. He sinks under the clear apprehension of his guilt, and an undeniable conviction of the judgment which it impends over him. He lies powerless at the Savior's feet: and is made willing in the day of His power to yield himself to the freeness of pardoning love, and to the new-creating power of divine grace.²¹

(3) The law humbles man beneath sin. The law reveals the impossibility of man to find acceptance with God through self-effort. "This is how God humbles a man, that he may acknowledge his misery and damnation, for the law is the hammer of death, the thundering of hell, and the lightning of God's wrath, that beateth to powder, the obstinate and senseless hypocrite" (Luther).²² "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). The law closes the mouth of man. It renders him guilty before God. This happens in one of two ways: in present conversion or else in future judgment. The law brings the latter (judgment) to a present reality. It empties man of self-merit. It drives him outside of himself. It forces him to look elsewhere for salvation. The law must first kill us. "I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me" (Rom.7:9-11). Paul initially looked for life from the law but found only death. He died to his self-righteousness. "The purpose of the law, as a light, is to reveal, not mercy and grace, not righteousness and life, but sin and death, and the wrath and judgment of God. Its immediate effect is, to increase the impatience and rebellion of man until it humbles him and beats him down in desperation. It rushes his pride, annihilates his self-confidence, and shuts his mouth in conscious guilt" (Tyng).²³

"For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God" (Gal.2:19). It was through the ministry of the law Paul died. This refers to his old, self-righteous man. He died to any hope of justification by the law. "The law, by discovering our sinfulness, leads us to despair of justification by our obedience. The knowledge of the spirituality of the law, and of our shortcoming of its requirements,

²¹ Stephen Tyng, *Lectures on the Law and the Gospel*, 69-70

²² Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, 190

²³ Stephen Tyng, *Lectures on the Law and the Gospel*, 60

drives us to despair of deliverance by our own exertions" (Haldane).²⁴ "It is the law which forces us to die to itself; for it threatens our destruction, leaves us nothing but despair, and thus drives us away from trusting to the law" (Calvin).²⁵ "The law must be laid upon those that are to be justified, that they may be shut up in the prison thereof, until the righteousness of faith come—that, when they are cast down and humbled by the law, they should fly to Christ. The Lord humbles them, not to their destruction, but to their salvation. For God wounds, that he may heal again. He kills, that He may quicken again" (Luther).²⁶ "The law urges and compels men to go to Christ. For it shows us our sins, and that without remedy: it shows us the damnation what is due unto us: and by this means, it makes us despair of salvation in respect of ourselves: and thus it enforces us to seek for help out of ourselves in Christ" (Perkins).²⁷ "The cross means nothing apart from the law. Our Lord's suffering must be tragic and senseless in the eyes of any who have no reverent esteem for the perfect commandments. On the cross Jesus was satisfying the just demands of the law against sinners. If sinners are unaware of the decalogue's requirements for themselves, they will see no personal significance in Christ's life or death" (Chantry).²⁸

The end of the law is conviction. And the end of our conviction is that the promise of mercy may be given to them that believe. Here is notable comfort, with encouragement to all good duties. Does the law as it were in the name of God arrest you? Does it accuse and convince you of manifold sins? Does it arraign you at the bar of God's judgment, and fill your soul with terror? Do you by the testimonies of the law and your own conscience see and feel yourself to be a most miserable and wretched sinner? Well, it may be you think that all this is a preparation to your damnation, but it is not. For it is contrariwise a preparation to your salvation. For the law with a loud voice in your heart proclaims you a sinner and threatens you with perdition, but the end of all this is that Jesus Christ may become a Savior unto you, so be it you will come unto Him and believe in Him. For He saves no sheep but "the lost sheep," and "He calls not just men, but sinners to repentance."²⁹

Let no man think to understand the gospel, who knows nothing of the law. God's constitution, and the nature of the things themselves, have given the law importance with respect unto sinners; "for by the law is the knowledge of sin." And gospel faith is the soul's acting according to the mind of God, for deliverance from that state and condition which it is cast under by the law. And all those descriptions of faith which abound in the writings of learned men, which do not at least include in them a virtual respect unto this state and condition, or the work of the law on the consciences of sinners, are all of them vain speculations. There is nothing in this whole doctrine that I will more firmly adhere unto than the necessity of the convictions mentioned previous unto true believing; without which not one line of it can be understood aright, and men do but beat the air in their contentions about it.³⁰

²⁴ James Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Galatians*, 82-83

²⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary*, 21:72

²⁶ Martin Luther, as quoted by Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 232-233

²⁷ William Perkins, *Works*, 2:205

²⁸ Walter Chantry, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* 37-38

²⁹ William Perkins, *Works*, 2:201-202

³⁰ John Owen, *Works*, 5:98-99

3. *To guide saints.*³¹

³¹ 2LBC, 19:6