

# The Law of God

By Todd Pruitt

*Very great mistakes have been made about the law... We are not under the law as the method of salvation, but we delight to see the law in the hand of Christ, and desire to obey the Lord in all things.*

*- Charles Spurgeon*

God cares about the obedience of His people. In fact, He demands it. A common misunderstanding is that in the New Covenant in Christ God is not as interested in obedience as He was under the Old Covenant. But God never lowers the bar of His holiness to suit man's sinfulness.

In our day God's law has been diminished by preachers who have turned its unreachable demands into a "gentle moralism" (Here We Stand, 111). This all too common self-help type of preaching has transformed the terrifying commandments of God into helpful tips for a happier life. Instead of declaring the law as it is clearly revealed in Scripture the modern preacher divines principles for success. Law and Gospel get distorted and combined into a sort of theological Frankenstein. The law is no longer there to convict of sin and therefore the Gospel is no longer sought. When an easy, "doable" law replaces the impossibly hard moral law of God then ultimately the Gospel is lost and Jesus the Savior is replaced by Jesus the life coach and salvation is replaced by life skills. In this way, the new user-friendly law masquerades as good news and no one cries out, "What must we do to be saved?"

Before man's fall the law of God was not a burdensome chore. Indeed, God designed man in such a way that obedience to his Maker would be a source of great joy and satisfaction (Psalm 119:14, 16, 47-48, 97-113, 127-128, 163-167). Outside of Christ, however, mankind is dead in sins which has the practical effect of making him unwilling and unable to be obedient to God of his own free will (Rom 3:9-18; 8:7-8; Eph 2:1-3). In regeneration, God resurrects fallen man, giving him a new heart with a growing ability and willingness to obey the God he now loves (Eph 2:4-10; Heb 10:16). This is called sanctification. Obedience, far from being an attempt at self-justification, becomes a free expression of gratitude for God's unmerited grace.

There are three categories of law in the Old Testament: Civil, Ceremonial, and Moral. The civil laws were applications of the moral law which governed Israel. These were the days when God's people were known in part through national and ethnic boundaries. Of all the peoples on earth God chose Israel as His own. However, God's promise to Abraham (Gen 12) is that through him *all* the nations of the world would be blessed. In other words, a day was coming when God's people would not be known by ethnicity or geographic boundaries. The New Covenant in Christ canceled those boundaries and with them the nation-state status of God's people and any need for the civil laws.

The ceremonial laws governed the religious festivals and sacrificial practices of Israel. The purpose of these laws was instructional in that they pointed forward to the coming Messiah. They were signs pointing to Christ. As a result, these laws are no longer binding because they were fulfilled in Christ (Matt 15:20; Mark 7:15-19; Heb 10:1-14). To insist on adherence to the symbols and shadows of the Old Covenant would be to diminish the significance of Christ.

The moral law of God is spelled out clearly in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). God's moral law can also be found in the preaching of the prophets, the teachings of Jesus (Matt 5-7), and some of the teachings found in the New Testament epistles. Unlike the civil and ceremonial laws, the moral law of God is eternal because it reflects His character which never changes. In contrast, the Old Covenant dietary prohibitions are no longer in force because they have served their temporary purpose. But the prohibitions against idolatry, murder, adultery, etc will never pass away because they are tied to God's moral perfections. Jesus summed up the moral law of God by declaring the two greatest commandments: Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:37-40). Upon these two commands, Jesus said, hang the entire law of God.

The uses of the moral law of God are primarily twofold. First, God's law is a tutor teaching men and women that they are indeed sinners. The law, rightly understood, serves to bring sinners to despair over their sin so that they will come to know their need for a Savior. D. Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote in his Exposition of Romans, "It is the law of God alone that really gives us a right conception of the true character and nature of sin. This is a tremendous proposition. The real trouble with the unregenerate is that they do not know and understand the truth about sin." God's moral law stands as a mighty witness against any notion that we are righteous in and of ourselves.

The second use of God's moral law is to teach the people of God how to live in such a way that they may bring Him glory. Derek Thomas has written, "God's law is the rule by which Christians re-shape their lives after the image of Jesus Christ. The law which functions ceremonially, anticipating the coming of Jesus Christ, has been rendered obsolete by the death and resurrection of the Savior. The civil laws have been overturned as Israel's theocracy ceases under the New Testament administration. But God's law as a rule for Christians remains" (*Banner of Truth*, July 2005, 5). John Calvin called God's moral law His "eternal rule of righteousness." God is glorified in the fidelity of His people. The moral law of God must not be understood as a means for being justified before God (Rom 3:20). We can never be saved by observing the law. However, for the believer, gratitude for grace received gladly looks to Christ-centered obedience as the only proper and ultimately joyous way to live.