

What the Law Demands

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on October 24, 2021.

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For 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 (Romans 7:7–13).¹

What is Paul’s opinion of the law of God? On the one hand, he says the law incites transgression (5:20), constrains liberty (7:1), arouses sin (7:5), and promises life but proves death (7:10). But on the other hand, he says, “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (7:12). How can this be? Is Paul confused?

Clearly, Paul is not saying that the law is sin, a false charge he rejects. In fact, Paul confesses, “if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin” (7:7). Nor is Paul saying that the law produces death; he is quite clear: “It was sin, producing death in me” (7:13), not the law.

How then are we to understand Paul’s teaching on the law of God? Is he confused about what the law is? Is he confused about what the law does? Or, is Paul using God’s law, what it is and what it does, to confront the human proclivity to seek God through performance rather than by God’s grace through faith?

What the Law Is

The law is, as the Larger Catechism puts it, “the declaration of the will of God to mankind.”² God is neither absent from his creation nor silent in it but has declared his will to be heard and obeyed. In writing, he declared it to the children of Israel, assembled at the base of Mount Sinai. It was a special revelation from God’s hand, written upon tablets of stone, Ten Commandments, revealing God’s holiness, righteousness, and goodness.

Yet, even before God’s special revelation to Israel, he placed his law upon the human heart, as a rule of obedience.³ This is witnessed throughout the world throughout the ages, sometimes

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² “The Larger Catechism Q. 93,” in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 229.

³ *Ibid.* Q. 92, 228.

expressed through so-called cultural mores, but as Paul explains, “when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them” (Rom. 2:14-15). What the human conscience bears witness to, the written law of God confirms: There is a God; he is not silent, and his law is holy, righteous, and good.

As the law of God is “the declaration of the will of God,” and not a human invention, it is a revelation of God. When God’s law commands, “You shall not covet” (Ex. 20:17), for example, it is a revelation of the one true God, who is needy of nothing, all-sufficient in and of himself, and who commands that we look to him for our needs and are satisfied in him. When God’s law commands, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8), it is a revelation of the one true God who is worthy of worship as he has revealed himself, to be worshiped how and when he specifies, who commands that we do precisely what we need, to find our rest and fulfillment in him. And when God’s law commands, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3), it is a revelation of the one true God, as all other so-called gods are merely demons in disguise (1 Cor. 10:20). He alone is God—there is no other (Isa. 45:5) and commands that we know him who is truth and walk in it. Therefore, God’s law is not an arbitrary list of rules but revelations of who God is in his holiness, righteousness, and goodness, and what he desires and therefore commands for his glory and our good.

To obey God’s law then is to obey God but also to align and accord with his character. To disobey God’s law is to disobey God which is an affront to him personally. As God is holy and we are not, it is no wonder why Paul says that the law “proved to be death to me” and “killed me” (7:10-11). So, if the law proves to be death to every child of Adam, is there any benefit to God’s law? What good does the law do?

What the Law Does

God’s law functions in at least three ways: It *reflects*, *restrains*, and *reveals*. First, the law *reflects* our sinfulness: When we look into the mirror of God’s perfect law, we see our sinfulness. Through this reflection comes knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20). As Paul confesses, “if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’” (7:7). But, it is also through this reflection that, by God’s grace through the work of the Holy Spirit, we realize our need for forgiveness leading to repentance and faith. So, God’s law reflects our sinfulness in the mirror of his holiness, showing us our need for a savior.

Second, the law *restrains* evil. This Paul explains to Timothy when he writes, “Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient” (1 Tim. 1:8-9). Therefore, this use of the law has nothing to do with conversion or even a change of mind but, as Calvin clarifies, “because, being bridled, so to speak, [the unjust] keep their hands from outward activity, and hold inside the depravity that otherwise they would wantonly have indulged.”⁴ As a result, there is a societal

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1:358.

benefit in which the righteous are protected from the unjust, as they are restrained by the law. One of the ways this is effective is through the Christian ethic. As Christians live lives in conformity and obedience to God's law, it has an impact on the culture in which we live. The opposite, of course, is truth too, as we are witnessing in our culture today. When Christians disregard God's law and live like the world, there is no restraining witness. Putting up a courthouse monument that says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," has virtually no effect if you are committing adultery.

Third, the law *reveals* what pleases God. For this reason, the psalmist could rejoice, "Oh how I love your law!" and confess, "It is my meditation all the day" (Ps. 119:97). A love for God will inevitably lead to a love for his law, because God's law is a revelation of what pleases him. As Jesus taught, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). God uses his law through the love of Christ to encourage our obedience, to strengthen us in our walk, and to keep us from what Calvin called, "the slippery path of transgression."⁵

What the law does not do is save us from our sin. Paul would not have known what sin is without the law, but the law could not save him from his sin or its consequences. The law cannot save us or give us life, and when confronted by the law of God, apart from saving grace, the unconverted rebels in disobedience, if only in the heart, hating the law and cursing the Lawgiver.

This is what leads to the false allegation that the law is sin. In reality, it is not the law but sin that "seizes an opportunity through the commandment, whether it be Paul's example of "all kinds of covetousness" (7:8) or any of the other nine commandments and their derivatives. Ever the opportunist, sin will use that which is of God and good to produce disobedience and death. And the law can do nothing to change this, because the law can only condemn never convert.

As Christians we must heed this distinction, notably in the day in which we live. For example, God's law clearly states, "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13), a command to protect the living from unjust death. As a restraint, the law should protect us and our children from the murderer. And it is right that we stand for the sanctity of human life. But it will not change the human heart. It will not save a life from eternity in hell. It will not lead anyone to repentance and faith in Jesus. Only the gospel will. So, let us use God's law wisely but not deceive ourselves into thinking that the law is the gospel. It is not.

What the Law Demands

Ultimately, as the revelation of God, the law demands personal and perpetual perfection in conformity and obedience to God's law. While we may deceive ourselves, like the rich young ruler, in believing we have kept the law (Matt. 10:16-22), unless our personal righteousness is perfect, today and tomorrow, then we are hopelessly dead in our sins and trespasses (Eph. 2:1), at unresolvable enmity with God. God's law is perfect, it demands perfection, and perfection is not relative, yet you may look to God's perfect law and say, "I have never murdered" (Ex. 20:13)! But have you been angry with or insulted your brother? Have you attacked the character of your neighbor (Matt. 5:22)? You may say, "But I have never committed adultery" (Ex. 20:14)! But have you looked at your neighbor with lustful desire? Have you looked at your neighbor as an

⁵ Ibid., 360-61.

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object to fulfill your passions rather than one made in the image of God? There are eight more commands, with countless applications. Shall we continue?

Jesus said, “You... must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48), and the revelation of his perfection is stated in his law. Paul once thought he could live such perfection, but when confronted with the perfection of God’s law, his sin came alive, springing into action, confirming the death of his self-righteousness and self-confidence. He was not perfect; the law’s demand was too great, and so, he admits defeat: “The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me” (7:10). Eyes wide open, he saw his sin as “sinful beyond measure” (7:13).

The only hope for Paul, and for you and me, is that God act on our behalf, not lessening his standard of perfection, not relativizing righteousness, but by punishing our sin and giving us righteousness. And so he has! He who came in fulfillment of God’s promise, keeping his Covenant of Grace, was born of a virgin, raised as a child of Israel, and obedient to the law of God—perfectly. He never sinned, yet God made him who knew no sin to be sin (2 Cor. 5:21) upon the altar of a Roman crucifix, and there the punishment for our sin (past, present, and future) was born by our sin-bearer, the Lord Jesus Christ. And then, it was finished: our sin atoned for and in its place the perfect righteousness of God.

The law demands perfection of us all, and God gives it by his grace through faith in Christ. And it is in Christ that the law is no longer death to us. In fact, we love it, because it reveals the holiness, righteousness, and goodness of our God. As it reflects, restrains, and reveals, we can rejoice. And so, we too can sing along with the psalmist,

O how I love Thy law; it is
My study all the day.
It makes me wiser than my foes;
Its precepts with me stay.
More than my teachers or the old
Thy servant understands;
Thy testimonies I consult
And follow Thy commands.⁶

⁶ Ps. 119:97-100, *Trinity Psalter* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publications, 2014), 105.