

The Law and the Gospel Part III

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(1748-1827)

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The Law of God, or the Moral Law in General

Section 3. The law in the hand of Christ the blessed Mediator as a rule of life to all true believers.

The authority and obligation of the law of nature, which is the same as the law of the Ten Commandments, being founded in the nature of God, the Almighty Creator and sovereign Ruler of men, are necessary, immutable, and eternal. They were the same before the law received the form of a covenant of works; that they are, after it has received this form; and that they are, and will continue to be, after it has dropped this form. It is divested of its covenant form to all who are vitally united to the last Adam, who have communion with Him in His righteousness, and who are instated in the covenant of grace. But though it is to them wholly denuded of its covenant form, yet it has lost nothing of its original authority and obligation. Now that it is taken in under the covenant of grace, and made the instrument of government in the spiritual kingdom of Christ, it retains all the authority over believers that, as a covenant of works, it has over unregenerate sinners. It is given to believers as a rule to direct them to holy obedience. It has the sovereign and infinite authority of Jehovah as a Creator as well as a Redeemer to afford it binding force. His nature is infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably holy; and therefore His law, which is a transcript of His holiness, must retain invariably and eternally all its original authority (Leviticus 11:44; 1 Peter 1:15-16). The law as a

rule, then, is not a new preceptive law, but the old law, which was from the beginning, issued to believers under a new form.

This law issues to true Christians from Christ, the glorious Mediator of the New Covenant, and from God as their Creator, Proprietor, Benefactor, and covenant God. It proceeds immediately from Jesus Christ, the blessed Mediator between God and men. It is taken in under the covenant of grace, and, in the hand of Christ, the Mediator of that covenant, it is given to all who believe in Him, and who are justified by faith, as the only rule of their obedience. The Apostle Paul accordingly calls it “the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). It 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 His redemption of 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, in comparison to the law of works, is a light and easy yoke (Matthew 11:29-30).

While the law as a rule of life to believers is issued forth immediately from Christ to them, it proceeds at the same time from God as their sovereign Lord, their Creator, Proprietor, and covenant God. God the Father said concerning Messiah, “Behold I have given Him for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people” (Isaiah 55:4). All the sovereign authority of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is, according to the everlasting covenant, vested in Him as God-man, Mediator, and King of Zion. In Exodus 23:21, Jehovah gives this solemn charge to the Israelites, in reference to Messiah, the uncreated Angel of the covenant: “Beware of Him and obey His voice, provoke Him not; for My name is in Him.” It is as if He had said, “My essence, My sovereignty, My authority, My law, are in Him, yea, all the fullness of the Godhead is in Him; and in Him only will obedience to My law be acceptable to Me.” The name of the Father is so in Him that His voice in the law is the Father’s voice, for it follows in verse 22, “But if thou shalt indeed obey His voice, and do all that I speak.” To the same purpose the Apostle Paul said of himself that he was “not without law to God, but under the law to Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:21). To be “not without law to God” can mean no less than to be under the law of God. Therefore, to be under the law of Christ is the same as to be under the law of God. Believers, by being under the law as a rule in the hand of Christ, or, which is the same thing, by being under the law to Christ are under the law of God. When they are under the law of the Ten Commandments as the law of Christ, they are under it as enforced by all the sovereign authority of God. The original authority of the moral law is not in the smallest degree lessened by the believer’s reception of it not as the law or covenant of works, but as the law of Christ standing in the covenant of grace. Its original obligation proceeding from the infinite authority of the adorable Trinity is inseparable from it, and cannot possibly be in the least impaired, by its being conveyed to believers by and from the Lord Jesus. For He, equally with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is, in His divine nature, the eternal Jehovah, “the Most High over all the earth.” He is God over all, and the Creator of “all things . . . that are in heaven, and that are on earth, visible and invisible” (Colossians 1:16). He is also in the Father, and the

Father is in Him (John 14:11). As God's authority to judge is not lessened by His having committed all judgment to the Son, so His authority to command is not, and cannot be, in the least diminished by His having given Christ for a commander to the people.

That the holy law of God should be given to believers in and through the Mediator, and not immediately by God Himself, is necessary. When the divine law was at first given to man, he was the friend of God, and so he could receive the law immediately from Him in a manner consistent both with the honor of God and the safety of his own soul. But now that man has sinned against the Lord and has become an object of His infinite wrath, and that God has assumed the character of an offended Sovereign and an avenging Judge; now that the law as a covenant of works has become the dreadful instrument of divine indignation on account of sin, the guilty sinner cannot regard either God or His righteous law but as an object of the greatest terror to him. It was requisite, then, that a Mediator should interpose both between the offended Lawgiver and the sinner, and also between the violated law and the sinner who, by satisfying the justice of the one, and by answering the demands of the other, might obtain free access for the guilty criminal to both.

Outside of Christ the blessed Mediator, a holy God cannot, with the safety of His honor, have any dealing with a sinful creature; but in and by Christ He can, consistent with His own infinite honor, and that of His holy law, issue forth His commandments to believers and receive their sincere obedience. Accordingly, the great Mediator, having admitted believers to communion with Himself in His surety-righteousness, writes by His Spirit the law on their hearts, and in His Father's name makes it the instrument of His government of them and the rule of their duty to Him. And as the same law is called "the law of nature," because in His creation it was inlaid in the nature of the first man, so it may be called "the law of renewed nature" because in the hand of Christ, and as standing under the covenant of grace, it is interwoven with the new nature of all who are "created again in Him to good works." Since it is only in Christ, then, that the offended Majesty of heaven can give His holy law to a sinner, and since it is only in Christ that a sinner can with safety receive and obey such a law, it may well be called "the law of Christ." Considered as the law of Christ's justified, sanctified, and peculiar people, it is not the law of an absolute God, or of God out of Christ, but the law of God in Christ. Were believers to keep the moral law only as the law of nature, and without any relation to the Mediator, their obedience would be but natural religion; were they to obey it merely as a covenant of works their obedience would be but legal righteousness; but when they obey it in its relation to Christ and the covenant of grace, their conformity of heart and life to it is true holiness, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5).

The precepts of the law as a rule of life to true Christians are the same with those of the law as a covenant of works, and they require the same perfection of obedience. The Ten Commandments are the precepts of the divine law, both as a covenant of works to the unregenerate and as a rule of duty to the saints. But while they are issued to believers with all the sovereign authority that originally belonged to them, the obligations under which believers lie to yield obedience to them are greatly increased by the grace of the Redeemer and the mercies of redemption. If the saints are obliged as creatures,

they are still more firmly bound as new creatures to keep those commandments. If they were formerly under firm obligations to obey them in their covenant form as the precepts of God out of Christ, they are now under additional obligations to yield obedience to them as the commands of God as their own God and Father in Christ. Does the grace displayed in the first covenant oblige all who are under that covenant to perform perfect obedience? The exceeding riches of grace in the second covenant lay all who are instated in it under additional ties to give perfect obedience. If sinners under the covenant of works are bound to yield perfect obedience for life; believers within the bond of the covenant of grace are under still higher obligations to perform perfect obedience from life, and for the glory of Him who, by fulfilling all the righteousness of the law in its covenant form, has merited eternal life for them. The law as a rule, then, enforced by all the sovereign authority of God, both as Creator and Redeemer, requires believers to perform not sincere obedience only, but perfect and perpetual obedience. The great Redeemer gives this high command to all His redeemed: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Accordingly, real believers, instead of resting satisfied with sincere obedience to that law, consider their want of absolute perfection in obedience as their sin, and bewail it as such.

True Christians, and none else, are under the law as a rule in the hand of Christ. The Apostle Paul exhorted the brethren in the churches of Galatia thus: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). The endearing relations in which believers stand to Christ, and to God in Him, as well as the inestimable blessings of salvation conferred on them, and the exceeding great and precious promises given them, all require and enforce their obligation to abound in holy obedience to the law as a rule (1 Peter 2:4 and 5:9; Titus 2:11-14; 2 Corinthians 7:1). Believers, before the incarnation of Christ, were as much under the binding force of it as believers now are (Luke 1:73-75).

The great design of God in giving this law in the hand of Christ to His people is not that by their obedience to it they may procure for themselves a right to eternal life, but that it may direct and oblige them to walk worthy of their union with Christ, of their justification in Him, of their legal title to and begun possession of life eternal, and of God Himself as their God in Him. Their conformity of heart and life to its commands, instead of procuring their title to salvation, is a principal part of their salvation already begun, and a necessary preparative for the consummation of it through eternity (Hebrews 12:28; 1 Peter 2:9).

The law as a rule of life to believers, especially in this view of it, is very different from the law as a covenant of works. The precept of the law as a covenant is "Do and live," but the command of the law as a rule is "live and do"; the law of works says, "Do or you shall be condemned to die," but the law in the hand of Christ says, "You are delivered from condemnation; therefore do." The command of the former is "Do perfectly that you may have a right to eternal life," but that of the latter is, "You already have begun possession of eternal life, as well as the promise of the complete possession of it, therefore do in such a manner as to advance daily toward perfection." By the former, a man is commanded to do in his own strength; but by the latter he is required to do in the

strength that is in Christ Jesus. The Lord Jesus says to every believer, "My grace is sufficient for you; My strength is made perfect in weakness; therefore do." The commandments of the law, both as a covenant and as a rule, are materially, but are not formally, the same.

Although the law as a rule of duty to believers requires perfect obedience from them; yet it admits of God's accepting their sincere obedience performed in faith, though it is imperfect. It admits of His accepting this obedience, not indeed as any part of their justifying righteousness, not as the foundation of His acceptance of their persons as righteous, but as the fruit and evidence of their being vitally united to His beloved Son as Jehovah, their Righteousness, and of their being already accepted in Him (Ephesians 1:6; Hebrews 13:16).

Since true believers are already irrevocably interested in the covenant of grace, in the righteousness of Christ, and in the favor of God; and since they have in Christ, and on the ground of His righteousness imputed to them, a complete security against eternal death and a full title to eternal life; the law as the law of Christ has no sanction of judicial rewards or punishments. It has no promise of eternal life or threatening of eternal death annexed to it. The form of the covenant of works, indeed, is eternally binding on all who live and die under that violated covenant, but because Christ, as last Adam, has answered all the demands of it for believers, they are delivered from the law in that form (Romans 7:4-6).

The law, which believers are under, is the law of Christ, and of God in Christ, which has no promise of eternal life to them for their obedience to it. The promise of eternal life to the saints is the promise of the covenant of grace or the gospel, and not of the law, as a rule of duty. Eternal life is promised to them not in consideration of their sincere obedience to the law as a rule of life, but on account of Christ's perfect obedience to it as a covenant of works received by faith and imputed by God. It is promised to them not as a reward of debt for their sincere obedience, but as "the gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). The righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to them gives them a perfect title to life; they are already heirs of it, "and joint heirs with Christ." They have begun possession of it, and have the gracious promise of the gospel that they shall, in due time, attain the perfect and everlasting possession.

There is therefore no need that a promise of eternal life should be annexed to the law as a rule of duty, to be fulfilled to believers on the ground of their obedience to that law. And, indeed, it cannot be annexed to it; for since the law as a rule cannot require less than perfect obedience, and since believers cannot in this life yield perfect obedience to its precepts, it cannot justify them or promise life to them for their obedience. Neither can they begin to perform even sincere obedience to it until, in union with Christ, they are already justified and fully entitled to life eternal. Accordingly, we are informed in Scripture that believers are justified by grace, and by no law or work of a law, whether it is of the law as a covenant or the law as a rule. "That no man is justified by a law in the sight of God, it is evident" (Galatians 3:11), and "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by a law" (Galatians 5:4). "Therefore we conclude that a

man is justified by faith, without the deeds of a law” (Romans 3:28 — the original word used for “law” in these passages, I have taken liberty to translate literally so that the apostle’s meaning may appear more clearly). No promise of life, then, is made to the sincere obedience of believers to the law of Christ; otherwise their title to life would be founded not entirely on the righteousness of Christ imputed to them, but partly, if not wholly, on works done by themselves.

As no promise of eternal life belongs to the law as a rule of duty to believers, so no threatening of eternal death belongs to it. Not that the law considered as a covenant of works is stripped of its sanction; the penal sanction of it in that form, is eternal and must be eternally endured by all who die under it. But because the whole penal sanction of it was wholly endured by Christ — the Surety of those who believe on Him, and because His infinite satisfaction for all their sins is placed to their account — that law, being satisfied, cannot now condemn them. And as the law in its covenant form cannot condemn them, or require from them a double payment for the same debt; neither can the law, in the hand of Christ, as a rule. No divine law can condemn them. “There is now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). Believers are perfectly and irreversibly justified; and therefore, though their iniquities deserve eternal wrath, yet they can no more make them actually liable to that wrath. It is the peculiar privilege of believers only, who are already justified, and so set forever beyond the reach of condemnation, to be under the law in the hand of Christ. But were a threatening of eternal death annexed to the law as a rule in His hand, every time that the believer transgressed this law it would lay him anew under condemnation; and as he every moment falls short of perfection in his obedience, he must inevitably be every moment under condemnation to eternal wrath. But, instead of this, he always continues in a state of justification and “never comes into condemnation.” “Whom God did predestinate, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified; and whom He justified, them He also glorified. . . . Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth?” (Romans 8:29-30, 34). “Their sins and their iniquities, will I remember no more” (Hebrews 8:12). Though the law as a rule of duty, then, standing under the covenant of grace as the instrument by which the Lord Jesus rules the subjects of His spiritual kingdom, has lost nothing of its original authority to direct and bind them, even to perfect obedience, yet it has no promise of eternal life to them for their obedience, and no threatening of eternal death for their disobedience. Therefore, as the law in its covenant form can neither justify nor condemn believers, so neither can the law as a rule of life (*Larger Catechism*, Question 97).

But though the law as a rule of duty to believers has no sanction of judicial rewards and punishments, yet it has a sanction of gracious rewards and paternal chastisements. A promise of gracious rewards, or rewards of grace, to believers in the way of their obedience is annexed to the law in the hand of Christ. In order to dispose and encourage them to obedience, God promises, on Christ’s account, gracious rewards to them, such as the light of His gracious countenance, sensible and comfortable communion with Him, peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, the assurance of their personal interest in Christ, freedom from trouble of mind, hope in their death, and degrees of

glory in eternity, corresponding probably to the degree of their holy activity in time (Psalms 19:11; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 2 Timothy 4:7-8).

To the law as a rule in the hand of Christ belongs also a threatening of paternal chastisements. In order to deter believers from disobedience, as well as to promote in them the mortification of sin, the Lord threatens that, although He will not cast them into hell for their sins, yet He will permit hell, as it were, to enter their consciences; that He will visit them with a series of outward afflictions; that He will deprive them of that sensible communion with Him which they sometime enjoyed; and that He will afflict them with bitterness instead of sweetness, and with terror instead of comfort (Psalms 89:30-33; 1 Corinthians 11:30-32; Hebrews 12:6-11). These chastisements are, to a believer, no less awful, and much more forcible restraints from sin than even the prospect of vindictive wrath would be. A filial fear of them will do more to influence him to the practice of holiness than all the slavish fears of hell can do. A fear, lest he should be deprived of that sweetness of communion with God with which he is favored, will constrain him to say to his lusts, as the fig-tree in Jotham's parable, "Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over you? Shall I leave the spiritual delight which I have had in communion with my God and Savior, and have fellowship with you?" Or if, for his iniquities, he is already under the dreadful frowns of his heavenly Father, his recollection of the comfort which he formerly enjoyed, and of which he is now deprived, will make him say, "I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now" (Hosea 2:7).

It is plain that no sanction but this is suitable to the happy state of believers. They, in union and communion with the blessed Redeemer, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and instated in the covenant of grace, in which they "shall never perish, but have everlasting life." So long, indeed, as they are imperfect in holiness, and their temper and practice subject in change, such promises and threatenings are necessary. But it is manifest that their necessity is occasioned by the remainders of sin in the saints, who require to be treated as children under age. It is necessary in their state of imperfection that they be influenced to obedience by the promises and threatenings of the law of Christ; for though their being excited to obedience by these promises and threatenings is neither servile nor slavish, yet it is childish. It is not suitable to the state of one who has "come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." When believers become perfect, they will perform obedience as freely as the angels in heaven do, without being in the least influenced to it by promises or threatenings. And the nearer they come to perfection in holiness, the more free and disinterested will their obedience be. But as long as they are in a state of imperfection, it is their duty, in order to advance in holiness, to have respect in their obedience to what the law of Christ promises and threatens to them. Promises of gracious rewards, and threats of paternal chastisements, properly belong to the covenant of grace, which has no proper penalty rather than to the law as a rule. They are implied in the blessings promised in that covenant, or at least are means of accomplishing the promises of it. But, seeing the law as a rule is received into the covenant of grace as the instrument of Christ's government of His spiritual subjects, those promises and threats may be said, though not with strict propriety, to belong or be annexed to the law in that form.

It appears evident from what has been said that though the Ten Commandments are the substance of the law of nature, yet they do not contain the whole of this law. The law of nature, inscribed on the heart of man in his creation, had a penal sanction. Although a penal sanction, as is evident from the case of glorified saints and confirmed angels, who are and who will remain eternally under the law of nature, is not inseparable from that law, yet such a sanction belongs to it.

The devout and attentive reader may hence discern the difference between heathen morality, pharisaic righteousness, and true holiness. Heathen morality is external obedience to the law of nature, and may be termed “natural religion.” Pharisaic righteousness is hypocritical obedience to the law as a covenant of works, and is usually called “legal righteousness,” or “the works of the law.” True holiness is spiritual and sincere obedience to the law as a rule of life in the hand of the blessed Mediator, and is commonly called “evangelical holiness,” or “true godliness.” True believers are the only persons who obey the law in its relation to Christ and to the covenant of grace; and their acts of obedience are the only spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5). The holy Lord God does not account Himself glorified by any obedience from the sons of men unless that which they perform to Him is in Christ. For it is the will of the Father, the Almighty Creator and sovereign Ruler of the world, that all men should honor the Son, even as they honor Himself; and that “every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

It may be justly inferred from the preceding doctrine that the distinction of the divine law, especially into the law as a covenant of works and as a rule of life, is a very important distinction. It is, as the attentive reader has seen, a scriptural distinction; and it is necessary in the hand of the Spirit to qualify believers for understanding clearly the grace and glory of the gospel, as well as the acceptable manner of performing every duty required in the law. To distinguish truly and clearly between the law as a covenant and the law as a rule is, as Luther expressed it, “the key which opens the hidden treasure of the gospel.” No sooner had the Spirit of truth given Luther a glimpse of that distinction than he declared that he seemed to be admitted into Paradise, and that the whole face of the Scripture was changed for him. Indeed, without a spiritual and true knowledge of that distinction, a man can neither discern, nor love, nor obey acceptably the truth as it is in Jesus. Nay, if the law as a covenant were not to be distinguished from the law as a rule in the hand of the Mediator, it would inevitably follow that believers are still under the law as a covenant of works; that they ought still to regard God not as their gracious God and Father, but as their angry and avenging Judge; and that their sins are still to be considered as transgressions only of the covenant of works, and as rendering them, notwithstanding their justification, actually subject to the curse and revenging wrath of God — contrary to Scripture (Romans 6:14, 7:1-6, and 8:1-2) and to our *Confession of Faith* (XIX:1, 6).

As an evidence that all unregenerate persons are under the dominion of the law as a covenant of works, the natural bent of their hearts in all their views respecting the means of salvation is to the way of that covenant. They all desire to be under the law of works. All who have embraced either one or another of the false religions that are in the

world agree at least in this principle: It is by doing that men are to live. Hence, when the Lord opens the eyes of a man to see that horrible gulf of sin and misery into which the first Adam plunged him, he is strongly inclined to exert himself for deliverance in the way of the covenant of works. He struggles hard to forsake his sins and to perform his duties, hoping that by his own performances he will become so righteous as to pacify the wrath of God and to procure for himself eternal life. Ah, ignorant, proud, vain attempt! This, however, he resolutely persists in doing until he is made to despair of ever being able to procure salvation for himself in the way of that covenant. Indeed, this natural bent of the depraved heart toward the way of the law as a covenant, together with deep ignorance of the high demands of the law in that form, is the source of all the self-righteousness that is in the world. To take sinners off from this to a cordial reliance only on the righteousness of the second Adam for all their title to salvation, is a special part of the Holy Spirit's work in conviction and conversion; and to do it requires a greater exertion of His almighty power than even to create a world.

From what has been said, we may also see that there are two sorts of sinners who offend more especially against the law in its covenant form, namely legalists and antinomians. Legalists, on the one hand, transgress against it by seeking to be justified by their own pretended obedience to it. Antinomians, on the other hand, offend against it by despising the divine authority and obligation of it. The former transgress against the form of the law as a covenant by depending on their own obedience for justification; the latter offend against the matter of it, or the Ten Commandments, as vested with all the infinite authority which belongs to it, by disregarding that high authority. Legalists contend that believers are under the law even as it is the covenant of works; antinomians, on the contrary, assert that believers are not only not under it as a covenant, but not under it even as a rule of duty. These two assertions are not more contrary to one another than they both are to the truth as it is in Jesus. In the Scriptures, we are informed that, believers are delivered from the law as a covenant of works, but that they are under it, and delight to be under it, as a rule of life. Indeed, to affirm that they are freed from it in its covenant form implies that they are under it in another form.

Does the law in its covenant form command every sinner under it who hears the gospel to believe and repent? Then it is of inexpressible importance to every sinner to believe that it does. If the law as a covenant of works does not require of every sinner under it who hears the gospel faith and repentance, it will follow that faith and repentance, as acts or works, cannot be excluded from being grounds of a sinner's justification in the sight of God, since on that supposition they cannot be denominated works of the law. Under this character, all the sinner's works of obedience are, in Scripture, excluded from being causes of his justification before God (Galatians 2:16). Doubtless, if the moral law, or law as a covenant, taken into the administration of the covenant of grace, does not require faith and repentance, then there must be a new law to command them. Besides, if faith and repentance, which, as some have said, contain all that is necessary to salvation, are commanded only by a new and gospel law, then the moral law is unnecessary — and so a wide door will be opened to gross antinomianism. Sinners, then, are commanded by the moral law as a covenant, and by no other law, to believe

and repent; and saints are commanded by the moral law as a rule of life, and by no other, to advance in the exercise of faith and repentance.

To conclude, is it so that the moral law has lost nothing of its original authority and obligation by being, to believers, divested of its covenant form? Then the supposition that the sovereign authority of God in it is laid aside, or that the original obligation of it is, in the least degree, weakened by its being issued to believers as the law of Christ is utterly groundless. Such a supposition reflects great dishonor on the glorious Mediator; for is not our Lord Jesus, equally with the Father and the Holy Spirit, “Jehovah, the Most High over all the earth?” Does not all the fullness of the Godhead dwell in Him bodily? Is not the name or infinite authority of God in Him? Is it not by Him that all things were created, and that they all consist? How then is it possible that the original and infinite authority of the divine law can, in the smallest degree, be lessened by its issuing to true believers from Him who is God over all, the great God our Savior?

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