



MORAL LAW AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

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Once I was given a private tour of the United States House of Representatives. Our tour guide, the chief of staff for a congressman, had us go up and sit in the Speaker's chair, look straight ahead, and tell him what we saw. Directly in front of us was a representation of Moses, whose writings were a primary basis for our rule of law. Although we might acknowledge the moral foundations of our nation's laws, many believers are unclear about the place of biblical law in our personal and public life.

The place of law in general, the influence of the Ten Commandments in particular, and the application of law to public life are all topics that provide an important framework for making wise decisions in our work and in economics. With this framework of uprightness and honesty, Christians and non-Christians alike are best equipped to love their neighbor and serve others through their work and business transactions.

THE THREEFOLD USE OF THE LAW

In theology, there is much discussion of the threefold use of the law. The first is the political use, in which moral law is used as a solid basis for deciding what makes good or bad law in the political arena. The second use of the law is the pedagogical use of the law, in which the law is a teacher.¹ In ancient times, the teacher would make sure the student was focused on his studies, disciplining him if he was not. In the same way, the law convicts people of their sin, exposing them and helping them to see their sin more clearly through the mirror of the law.

When the law has served this function, the sinner is driven to God's grace in Christ. Since sinners are saved by grace alone, by faith alone, and through Christ alone, those who have trusted in Christ are in a sense not under the law. Paul says in Romans 6:14, "you are not under law, but under grace" with respect to salvation. At the same time, that does not mean that people are now free to sin.ⁱⁱ It is the law that continually reminds sinners of their need for Christ and their inability to attain salvation in their own strength.

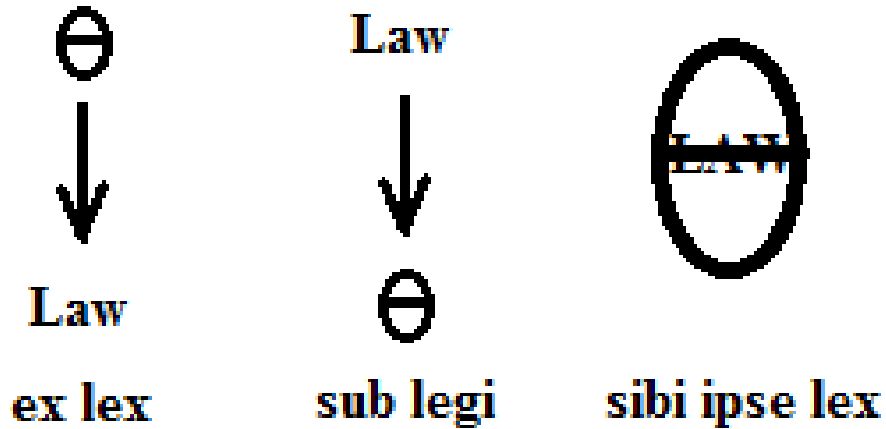
The law has a third use as a principle or as a guide. It shows us what is right, helping us to be discerning in the tangled jungle of moral decisions that we have to face. Because of the church's focus on the second use of the law, this third use has often been forgotten.

Old Testament professor and author Dr. Bruce Waltke speaks of a time in his life when he had an inadequate view of the law. Someone came to his house and gave him a gift of a cup inscribed with the Ten Commandments. When his guest left, Waltke went out on his back deck and smashed the cup on the stone. He did this because he was free from the constraints of the law due to his saving faith in Christ. However, he realized later in life how he had neglected the biblical teaching in Romans that the law is "holy and righteous and good," and even "spiritual."ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, the problem is not with the law, but with those who violate the law. Though Christ's grace has absolved his people from the consequences of violating his mandates, the law still condemns and then guides. The purpose of the second, condemning, use of law is to drive us to Christ, and the third use drives us to live faithfully thereafter.

THE LAW IS NOT ARBITRARY

In some secular schools, a dilemma will be posed to Christians in basic philosophy classes: is law good because God commands it, or does God command it because it is good? Either choice causes problems. If law is good because God commands it, then the command seems arbitrary. He could perhaps make what we think right into wrong, or what we think wrong into right. In the Middle Ages, some held this position by maintaining that God is *ex lex*, or "outside the law."

On the other hand, if God commands a law because it is good or right, that suggests a standard above God that he must observe. To scholars in the Middle Ages, this position meant that God was *sub legi*, or under the law. This dilemma would thus conclude that God's law is either arbitrary or higher than God himself. Fortunately, there is a third option. God is *sibi ipse ex*, a law unto himself. One could represent the three positions thus, with Θ representing God:



In the third position, the law is a reflection of God’s character and an expression of who he is. And just as the law corresponds to God’s nature, those made in his image also correspond to his nature.

LAW FITS GOD’S NATURE AND OURS

If the law is a reflection of God’s character and humans are made in God’s image, then the law fits human nature as well as that of God. It follows that humans are structured to follow certain laws and operate in certain ways. For instance, a car that is not made for diesel fuel will not be able to run well on diesel. The car might stop altogether with water or sugar in the gas tank. Likewise, if one runs full speed into a brick wall, chances are that one will do more damage to himself than to the wall because the wall is stronger. If a person jumps from a plane, he may feel as free as a bird for a moment, but unless he has a parachute, the law of gravity will bring him crashing to the ground.

God’s law is like a manufacturer’s manual showing human beings how to act according to their nature. There are consequences to each action. People will experience brokenness or disintegration if they violate how God has made them. Breaking God’s law is just like running into the wall or jumping from the plane without a parachute. Unless individuals pursue an intimate relationship with God and with other people and come to know and employ their gifts, they will not experience wholeness. If we either neglect or violate our nature, we will experience brokenness. God’s law is meant to help his people avoid mistakes which lead to brokenness, not hurt them. It is intended to show the way to life and joy, not just to restrict.

JESUS CAME NOT TO ABOLISH BUT TO FULFILL

Jesus said in Matthew 5:17, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill.” Does this mean that all of the Old Testament Law applies to us? Most evangelical

theologians would say that there are three aspects to the Old Testament Law: ceremonial, civil or judicial, and moral. The ceremonial law is clearly fulfilled in Christ. God's people no longer sacrifice in the Temple because Christ's sacrifice has been offered once for all of us.^{iv} Old Testament dietary restrictions such as clean or unclean foods no longer apply to us because Jesus has "declared all foods clean."^v Note also the vision of the sheets given to Peter, where God repeatedly says to Peter's objection about eating unclean animals "what God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy."^{vi} These and other ceremonial laws are fulfilled in Christ. Secondly, most theologians agree that civil or judicial law is fulfilled in Christ. Christians can learn principles of justice from God's provisions there, but do not need to directly apply it today. Calvin argued that the judicial law was God's application of the principles of justice—for that time and place.^{vii} However, the moral laws such as the Ten Commandments are normally held to be fully in effect now. Jesus said that to neglect even the least of the commands has serious consequences.^{viii}

LAW AND LOVE

Jesus argued that if someone wanted to know what it was to love, he needed to look at the law. When the Pharisees asked Jesus to identify the greatest commandment, he responded that it was to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind.^{ix} He continued that the second one was to "love your neighbor as yourself."^x He concluded by saying that "on these commandments depend the whole law and the Prophets."^{xi} The law is summed up in loving God and one's neighbor, and particular requirements of the law help the believer to achieve the broad objectives. The Apostle Paul in Romans 13:8 says, "He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law."^{xii} It follows that it is wrong to commit adultery, steal, lie, or murder, etc., because those things are the opposite of love.

NEGATIVE IMPLIES POSITIVE

With regard to the Ten Commandments in particular, we can say that a negative prohibition such as "Thou shalt not steal" means more than just staying away from that crime. "The Westminster Larger Catechism" says, "Where sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded."^{xiii} The prohibition against stealing arises out of God's larger concern with private property and how we use it. Likewise, the commandment against adultery assumes a larger perspective on the nature of sexuality and marriage. Condemning murder assumes a position on the dignity of life. In the same way, Jesus taught that the spirit of the law is included in the letter of the law. One secular writer argued that Jesus was a bad ethicist because he said that anger was as bad as murder and lust was as bad as adultery. This, however, is a misunderstanding of what Jesus said.

In Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus maintained that the command "you shall not commit murder" was violated when a person was unjustly angry at someone else. Despising one's "brother" by saying "Raca," which

meant good for nothing—or empty-headed—or calling him a “fool,” also broke the prohibition against murder. Jesus’ teaching indicates that there are serious consequences for violating the “spirit” of the law. The sixth commandment prohibits not only killing but all of the steps that lead up to that act. Murder starts in anger, thoughts of revenge, disregard for someone’s dignity, and hatred. The process proceeds to plotting the act and then finally to committing the deed. Certainly, murder has more massive consequences on the community than anger because it destroys someone who might have been a father, mother, son, daughter, brother, or sister. Yet anger is the root that can produce murder, and the law prohibits the root as well as the fruit of the deed. Thus, while anger is not as bad as murder, it still is a violation of the spirit of the law and so God prohibits it.

Similarly, the commandment “you shall not commit adultery” prohibits the act as well as the beginnings of considering the act.^{xiv} Adultery also has massive consequences on marriages, families, and on the fabric of the community. Jesus proscribes the thought of the act as well as the act itself. He does not say that lust is as bad as adultery; this is a false implication of what Jesus actually said. While it is easy to condemn those who murder and commit adultery, Jesus’ teaching shows need to admit that the root of the matter is in the hearts of individuals. People need to maintain humility saying, “There but for the grace of God, go I.” G.K. Chesterton, in his *Father Brown* detective series, has his hero give his method of detection:

You see, it was I who killed all those people...no man’s really good till he knows how bad he is, or might be; till he’s realized exactly how much right he has to all this snobbery and sneering, and talking about criminals, as if they were apes in a forest, ten thousand miles away...till he’s squeezed out of his soul the last drop of the oil of the Pharisees; till his only hope is somehow or other to have captured one criminal and kept him safe and sane under his own hat.^{xv}

FIRST TABLET AND SECOND TABLET

When Moses received the Ten Commandments, he received two tablets of stone.^{xvi} This probably included two complete lists of the commandments and not the first and second half of the list. However, throughout church history, believers have thought of the first tablet as referring to our responsibilities to God and the second tablet as referring to our neighbor. To put it graphically:

First Tablet		Second Tablet
Love God	→	Love Neighbor
1. Being	no injury in	5. Parents
2. Worship	Deed	6. Person
3. Name	Word	7. Wife-husband
		8. Property

4. Day

Thought

9. Reputation

10. Spouse + Property

We are always to worship God's ultimate being, worship him alone, guard his reputation, and set apart time for him. Loving God is the foundation for love of neighbor. We are not to violate our neighbor's person, property, marriage, and reputation in thought, word, or deed.

APPLICATION TO PUBLIC LIFE

Throughout history, the Ten Commandments have been used as a framework for expounding all of our ethical responsibilities. For instance, John Calvin develops a substantial section of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by using this outline. While a full exposition of the Ten Commandments is impossible in a short article, a thought or two on each mandate may help readers as they face their personal and public lives:

1. Placing Priority—"no other gods," provides prophetic resistance to anything that would make itself into a god, such as the totalitarian state.

2. Saying No—"no idols." Christians must have no physical or mental images that we worship; they must resist idols and uphold the truth. At the same time, tolerance is a Christian invention. It follows that we must defend both legal and social tolerance.

With regard to legal tolerance, leaders cannot and should not coerce religious belief. Freedom of religion is America's first freedom. Christians should defend the rights of people to believe and practice any religion, regardless of whether that belief system teaches the truth.

Social tolerance is just as important. Jesus calls us to love not only our neighbors but everyone—up to and including our enemies. Christ's love has a centrifugal force that thrusts us over the deepest divides of race, ethnicity, religion, and moral beliefs.

Tolerating others' beliefs both legally and socially does not mean that we agree with those beliefs, or that differences do not matter. There are times we must take a stand. There are times when Christians must say "no" to the world and proclaim Christ's truth to a fallen culture.

3. Complete Conviction—"not in vain." We should not take God's name in vain with respect to his worship, in language, in oaths, or in promises. Perhaps the worst sin is not profanity, but lip service. Luther once said that God is sometimes more pleased with the curses of the wicked than the "hallelujahs" of the pious.

4. Time—"remember the Sabbath." We must set aside time for our Lord for worship, fellowship, and devotion. When one's output exceeds his input, it leads to his downfall. Christians must take the time to

renew themselves and invest in the church, weak as it may be. There will be no rebuilding of the culture without the church.

5. Respect for Inheritance, Heritage and Succession—“honor your father and mother.” Let those who come behind us find us faithful. C.S. Lewis argued we need to let the breezes of the centuries blow through our minds, specifically by reading one old book for every new one, lest we become captive to the latest fashion of our time. That which is most relevant is that which is most timeless and eternal.

6. Dignity—“you shall not murder.” The image of God is the only adequate basis on which murder can be condemned. C.S. Lewis held that there are no ordinary people—“you have never met a mere mortal.” People dare not get used to the taking of life lightly. With this in mind, Christians must help the poor not only because God commands it, but because people are made in the image of God. We want to give the poor an opportunity to flourish.

7. Fidelity—“you shall not commit adultery.” Sexual beauty comes not by repression, nor by unlimited expression, but by discipline. Marriage and family are at the core of society. If they fail, society will become poorer economically and spiritually.

8. Ownership—“you shall not steal.” Stealing is evil because private property and ownership are good. God wants everyone to have the joy of sitting under their own vine and fig tree.^{xvii} The best protection for our economy is the rule of law which guards private property and character that allows trust to form between people.

9. Veracity—“you shall not bear false witness.” In today’s culture, “truth has fallen in the street.”^{xviii} Truth is replaced by rhetoric and “spin.” Individuals are to be truthful because God is truthful. Above all, Christians must uphold the veracity of God’s Word.

10. Desire Versus Greed—“you shall not covet.” One can condemn greed and envy without prohibiting a healthy desire for relationships and things. “An argument against abuse is not an argument against use,” says an ancient proverb. Justly decrying greed does not negate the value of serving people through business and free markets. You can have one without the other. One can distinguish the Fall from Creation.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

All of our ethical responsibilities come down to duty and desire. While one can teach duty—what we ought to do it is much more difficult to instill a desire to do one’s duty. This is why lists of the Ten Commandments are not enough. Lists of rules are rarely inspiring. Once a believer is established in God’s grace, knowing that he or she is truly forgiven and regenerated by God’s spirit, then he or she will develop a desire to do his duty.

One way to cultivate desire is to do so indirectly by stories which portray the true, the good, and the beautiful together. The moral life is the most daring, noble, and adventurous one. It is the last rebellion left, as all the other uprisings have been tried and have failed.

The law must be taught with love and intimacy. Many young people are repelled by the truth because they have grown up in a strict Christian home with no love and intimacy. If one teaches the law without the grace, love, and truth of the gospel, they should be strongly warned. The law defines the way of love and should never contradict it in theory or in practice.

One can learn a great deal from studying biblical law. The moral law still applies to us today and provides a basis for formulating and evaluating political laws. The judicial law, while no longer binding, can at least supply principles that can be guidelines for thinking through issues in today's society. Biblical law also provides us with guidance for our work and for our business transactions, exhorting us to seek success without greed and to treat others with dignity and honesty.

People certainly are not saved by obedience to the law; rather, Christ extends grace to those who believe on him. Yet though the law is not a means of salvation, it can still establish principles for each individual's conscience, enabling him to make wise ethical decisions in personal and public life. Biblical law can help Christians in their daily work and as they engage the world around them.

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ⁱ Gal. 3:24.

ⁱⁱ Rom. 6:15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rom. 7:12; 7:14.

^{iv} Heb 10:10.

^v Mark 7:19.

^{vi} Acts 10:15.

^{vii} There are some reconstructionists or theologians that would want to retain aspects of the civil law such as the penalties of the law today.

^{viii} Matt. 5:19.

^{ix} Matt. 22:37.

^x Matt. 22:39.

^{xi} See also Luke 10:25-28.

^{xii} Rom. 13:8.

^{xiii} "Westminster Larger Catechism," Question 99, <http://www.opc.org/lc.html>.

^{xiv} Matt. 5:27-28.

^{xv} G.K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, ed. John Peterson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 3:219.

^{xvi} Deut. 4:13.

^{xvii} Mic. 4:4.

^{xviii} Isa. 59:14.