

The Law of God & the Christian

–Lesson 2–

- I. The moral law (the Ten Commandments) as given under the form of a covenant of works to Adam, WLC 17, 20.
 - A. While the Ten Commandments were naturally inscribed on man's heart as the natural rule for his being, they were also given to Adam in Eden in the form of a *covenant of works*. They were given to him as the first parent and federal representative of all his posterity before God.
 - B. Though this law was the same to which he was subject by nature, it was made a covenant of works when God annexed to it an express threatening of death and a promise of life. Three things are to be considered in this covenant of works made with Adam for all mankind:
 1. The covenant contained a *precept* requiring perfect, personal, and perpetual obedience as the condition of eternal life.
 - a) The law of creation said "Do." But in its presentation as a covenant of works, the same law said, "Do and live" (Gen 2.16-17). The obedience already commanded by nature was made a condition for eternal life.
 - b) This positive precept (in Gen 2.17) was, in effect, a summary of all the commands of the moral law already written on man's heart. To obey this positive law was to obey all the Commandments and to disobey it was to break all the Commandments.
 - c) In consequence of God's having given the Ten Commandments to Adam as a covenant of works, and of Adam's having consented to it, as the federal representative of all his posterity, all men, *as long as they continue in their natural state in Adam*, remain firmly, in the sight of God, under the obligation of it.
 - (1) For though the law in its covenant form is broken, yet it is not, it cannot be, repealed or set aside. The obligation of the covenant of works continues in all its force, in time and through eternity, upon every sinner who is not released from it by God. *The sobering reality is this*: every unregenerate sinner (still in Adam) is bound at once to perform the perfect obedience demanded by God in the covenant made with him in Adam and yet also to endure the full execution of the penalty of his breaking the covenant in Adam.
 - (2) The Ten Commandments, then, as a covenant of works, demands from every descendant of Adam who is under it, perfect holiness of nature, perfect righteousness of life, and complete satisfaction for sin. And none of the race of fallen Adam can ever enter heaven unless he either answers these three demands perfectly in his own person, or accepts by faith the consummate righteousness of the second Adam, who is "the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom 10.4).
 2. The covenant contained a gracious *promise* of the continuance of spiritual and temporal life and, in due time, eternal life. This promise was to have been fulfilled to Adam and all his natural posterity on condition that he as their representative perfectly obeyed the precept. This promise was implied in the threatening of death in Gen 2.17 and was sacramentally signified by the tree of life.
 - a) This promise was freely and sovereignly made by God according to His good pleasure and free grace. He was under no obligation to make it, but having made it, He bound Himself to be faithful to it. Had Adam obeyed, instead of being a debtor to Adam, God would have been a debtor to His own grace and faithfulness in the promise, Num 23.19.

- b) In other words, there would have been no merit in the obedience of Adam before God. Life could have been expected by Adam upon obedience, but only on the ground of God's promise, not on the ground of Adam's obedience, which was his duty already.
 - c) **The covenant of works is still in force for all Adam's sons. It is still true that "the person who does the commandments shall live by them" (Rom 10.5; Mt 19.17). But since no such thing as perfect obedience can be found among the sons of Adam, no man can have a title to life according to the promise of that covenant. Thus, the law of works has become weak to yield life to men because men are now incapable of yielding obedience to the law.
 - d) Man's only hope for life now is to be found in the provision of God in Christ, the Second Adam, the Saviour of covenant-breakers.
 - e) Anyone who seeks life in the covenant of works (e.g., by obedience to the Ten Commandments) is a self-righteous legalist who dishonors both God and the law by, on the one hand, presumptuously offering to God and His law a paltry and polluted obedience as if it were perfect and, on the other hand, refusing the righteousness of Christ by faith provided by God for the salvation of those condemned in Adam.
3. The covenant contained a *penal sanction*, threatening spiritual, temporal, and eternal death upon disobedience, Gen 2.17; cf. Ezk 18.4.
- a) Thus the Ten Commandments as a covenant or law of works not only said, "Do this and live," but "Do this or die." The covenant of works therefore bore the power not only to justify persons if they obey, but also to condemn them if they disobey. This is what makes the Ten Commandments as a law of works to be a "ministry of condemnation and death" to every descendant of Adam (2Cor 3.7-9). Since every descendant of Adam "sinned in him and fell with him" under the curse and penalty of the covenant of works, all the race of Adam are born guilty before God and condemned to eternal punishment.

II. *Think about this:* since Adam consented to the penal sanction of the covenant of works, he bound himself and all his posterity never to have eternal life in any other way than on the condition of his perfect obedience to it. Since he broke the covenant, no sinner in Adam is to seek eternal life by his own works. Instead of obliging the sinner to seek eternal life upon any obedience, the covenant of works now obliges every sinner to suffer eternal death for his disobedience. Indeed, it is utterly unlawful for any man to seek life by the covenant of works now.

- A. *Rather*, the covenant of works now stands before man as a *witness against him* that life *cannot* be had upon his own obedience and must now be sought in the Second Adam—whose righteousness is to be received by faith and whose righteousness alone can satisfy the covenant of works on the sinner's behalf and so bring to man the life he seeks.
 - 1. And as long as man rejects the righteousness of the Second Adam, the law of works continues to bind the son of Adam over to suffer the full penalty for his transgression.
 - 2. Therefore no sinner in Adam can otherwise be delivered from the bond of the covenant of works than by receiving and presenting to it the perfect and glorious righteousness of the Second Adam, which answers it fully and perfectly (Rom 10.4; 7.6).
- B. *Thus* the Ten Commandments are often set forth in the Scriptures in the form of the covenant of works, not because any man can still attain life by it, but in order that sinners might be convinced by it not only of their sinfulness and misery under the dominion of it in Adam, but also of the utter impossibility of their ever obtaining justification and eternal life by any righteousness of their own (Rom 3.20; Gal 2.16; 3; WLC 94, 95).

**Next week: we will consider the moral law (the Ten Commandments) in the hand of Christ the blessed Mediator as a rule of life to all true believers.