

Discourses on the Law of God

Lesson 1: The Law of God is to be Preached

- I. In the Ten Commandments God has given us “an epitome and abridgment of all morality.” Yet we must understand that there never was, nor ever can be, any statement so exact and particular as to exhaust the whole subject of man’s moral obligations. “Since it comprises the whole duty of man, in ever particular occurrence and action of life; since the variety of circumstances is almost infinite, and yet these circumstances specify our actions and make them morally either good or evil; and since every precept extends its branches so far as to enjoin every man’s duties collaterally, which yet it doesn’t touch directly, and to forbid very many sins by consequence, which it doesn’t immediately prohibit, therefore I cannot but judge it next to an impossibility, minutely to reckon up every sin and every duty methodically; to rank and dispose of every one under that particular Command, to which they do properly pertain.”
 - A. It was of the boundless extent of the Law of God that the psalmist spoke in 119.96, saying, “I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad.” The limits and bounds of all other things might be found; but the Law of God is too comprehensive for any man to reach its limits. “It reaches to every thought of our souls, every action of our lives, and every circumstance of both.”
 - B. It’s critical, therefore, that we don’t entertain any low and debasing thoughts of the Law of God. It’s critical that we don’t think the preaching of it to be unworthy of the freedom of the NT era and consider it as legalistic. “For His Law is the Rule which God has given us to guide all our actions and the Standard by which He Himself will judge them (cf. Mk 7.6-13). Indeed, there’s no other way to obtain salvation but by obedience to it. The Law is the very gate of heaven and the two Tables are the two doors of it.”
 - C. “For although our salvation has been *secured* by Christ and He alone has redeemed us from death and procured for us glory and immortality by His own blood; *yet* it’s by obedience that we come to heaven—not by meritorious obedience but by the obedience of evidence. Our *obedience to the Law* is the only sound evidence that we can have for our right to the *promises of the Gospel*. Without a universal obedience, all our joys, comforts, confidence of heaven, and happiness are but splendid delusions and dreams, by which men of loose principles and practices seek to unite together two things which God has put at an irreconcilable distance: an unholy life here and a happy life hereafter.”
 - D. “If to press this great truth upon conscience; and to insist on the necessity of new obedience and repentance from dead works, as well as faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, be legal preaching...let mine be ever so accounted. But, indeed, this is so far from being a legal doctrine, that it is one of the greatest and most precious truths that the Gospel exhibits. To preach up justification by the Law, as a Covenant of works, is legalism and legal preaching; but to preach obedience to the Law, as a Rule, is evangelical and gospel preaching; and it savors as much of a NT-Spirit to urge the Commands of the Law as to display the Promises of the Gospel” (Phil 2.12-13; Rom 13.8-14).
 - E. And so we must admit these truths to be not only evident, but also reconcilable and harmonious:
 1. No man is saved by his own works, for all that a man can do is either sinful in itself or there is sin mixed with it, Rom 3.10, 20. Man is totally depraved and can neither save himself nor contribute to his saving, Gen 6.5; Jer 17.9
 2. Salvation is therefore a work of free grace and by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, Rom 3.23-25; Gal 2.16; Isa 61.1-3; 59.15-17; 53.6

3. While the occasion of salvation is the unmerited grace of God and the ground of salvation is the imputed righteousness of Christ, the necessary fruit of salvation is a sincere pursuit of obedience to the Law of God, Js 2.8-14; Rom 12.1-2; 13.8-14; Eph 2.8-10; Tit 2.7-8, 11-14; 3.3-8, 14 (especially vv.7-8).
4. So while we're saved by grace, gospel-obedience necessarily follows—on account of God's will and promise to sanctify us, and therefore also on account of our heart's new desires to please God by the pursuit of obedience, cf. Ps 119.32, 97, 163, etc.; Rom 7.18, 22; Phil 2.12. And because gospel-obedience is also a work of grace within us (Phil 2.13; Eph 2.10; Acts 13.48; Rom 16.25-26) whenever we see that we have obeyed God, we can put no confidence in it as the ground of our justification, Phil 3.3
5. Our redemption in Christ is from the *curse* of God's Law, not from our *duty* to obey it. We are justified, not because of our obedience to the Law, but in order that we may become obedient to God's Law. To love Christ is to sincerely strive to keep His commandments and to love God is to sincerely seek to obey His Law.
6. So...faith in Christ *for* salvation and the works pleasing to Christ *after* salvation are inextricably tied together as root and fruit, cause and effect, salvation and evidence. We may separate them and see that our works play *no cause* in the ground of our salvation, but they do have *an important and necessary place* in the evidence and fruit of our salvation. The only approving righteousness by which we stand before God is the imputed righteousness of Christ (Phil 3.7-10), but as God sanctifies those whom He justifies, so our gospel obedience is a sound evidence of our justification. Hence, while the sinner is justified by faith, our justifying faith is justified by the works it produces in our lives (Js 2).
7. *Joseph Caryl* 2.691: "To deny our own righteousness, and to be very active in the ways of righteousness is the due Gospel-temper. The Apostle "counts all things as loss and dung" (Phil 3.8), all duties and humblings, all legal righteousness and obedience; not that he refused righteousness or neglected duties, but he wouldn't mingle them with Christ or bring them in as contributions to the purchase of blessedness. Our righteousness and holy duties are dung and dross in justification, but they are gold and precious things in sanctification; without these, we cannot walk worthy of our holy calling, or, as it becomes the gospel of Christ (Eph 4.1)." "It is a dangerous error, to so lift up the grace of God, as to deny the industry of man through grace, and because he can do nothing by way of satisfaction, therefore he must do nothing." "For there is something to be done [in the way of salvation], but nothing to be paid [for salvation]."

II. There are three great purposes for which the Law of God was given, *conviction, restraint, and reformation*.

- A. First, it was given, and ought to still be preached, *for the conviction of sinners*. In this sense the Law of God is a mirror into which God would have all men look in order to see what they truly are before His eyes: *sinners*. The Law serves to convince us of three things:
 1. Of our guilt, which we got by our transgression of the Law, which can be plainly seen by bringing our thoughts, words, and actions to the Rule of His Law, Rom 3.19-20
 2. Of the wrath of God and eternal death to which we're exposed by reason of our sin and guilt before God, Ezk 18.20; Gal 3.10
 3. Of the utter impossibility under which we lie, in our fallen and sinful condition, of ever obtaining justification by the works of the Law, Rom 3.20; Gal 2.16. For it's impossible to be justified by our obedience to a Law that demonstrates that our obedience is imperfect (no less impossible than to use the mirror to make yourselves clean which only serves to show you your uncleanness). Nor can we be justified by making satisfaction for our disobedience, since the same Law assures us that the divine justice will accept no other satisfaction from us but our undergoing the penalty threatened: which is eternal death.

Which is to say, the only way guilty sinners can satisfy the Law they've broken is by suffering the penalty of it. "So that to hope for life by satisfying and recompensing divine justice for our offenses is altogether as vain and foolish as to hope for salvation by being damned."

4. And when the convincing work of the Law has done its work and brought a man to despair in himself by showing him: his guilt, the wrath to which he's exposed, and the impossibility of saving himself, it leaves him there—until the Spirit of God, who so used the Law in that way in his heart, convinces him further of a righteousness outside of himself, in Jesus Christ, which he may have, by faith, if he will, Jn 16.8
- B. ¹Secondly, the Law was given as a *restraint to sin*. In and of itself the Law can't change human hearts, of course. It can, however, serve to protect the righteous from the unjust. In this sense the Law is a curb on evil. Calvin says it serves this purpose "by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, to curb those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude and justice." The Law therefore serves as a limited measure of justice on this earth, until the last judgment is realized.
- C. The third great end of the Law is *reformation and obedience*. In this sense the Law is a rule for believers. As born-again children of God, the Law enlightens us as to what is pleasing to our Father, whom we seek to serve. The Christian delights in the law as God Himself delights in it. Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). This is the highest function of the law, to serve as an instrument for the people of God to give Him honor and glory. Having our Rule before us, we endeavor to conform our actions to it and to turn from sin in order to walk in the way of it, not in an effort to earn the love of God, but rather because we love Him who already loves us and we want to please Him.

III. And it's because of these uses of the Law of God, that the preaching of the Law is necessary today.

- A. Where the Law has yet to do its *convincing* work, the gospel preaching of Christ as a Saviour from sin and a Saviour for sinners would be in vain. An unconvinced sinner sees no need of looking out for any other righteousness before God than his own. Even if he knows them to be but filthy rags, he deems them better than any other man's and thus will refuse to part with them, Mt 11.12; Mk 2.17
- B. Furthermore, Christ won't save a man without afterwards giving him His Law as the *rule to reform* his obedience, 1Cor 9.21; Jn 14.15; Gal 5.4, 13-14; Heb 5.9
- C. And thus you see of what absolute necessity it is to press the Law of God upon the conscience, to denounce its terrors, and to inculcate its precepts; since the *convincing* work of it prepares us for Christ, and its *reforming* work for the salvation purchased by Christ. Without the one we shall never come to Him; and without the other we shall never come to heaven by Him.

*Lesson 2: The convincing work of the Law, Jn 7.19

¹ This use is not mentioned in Hopkins' sermon but is an important aspect of the Reformed understanding of the Law of God.