



# WHAT IS THE LAW OF GOD?

"To know God Himself would thereby cause man to know His requirements."

**WILLIAMS AMES**

## DISCUSSION:

- Do we need laws to govern us? Why or why not?
- What would it be like to live in a society without laws?

## ITS MEANING: What is meant by the Law of God?

The Greek and Latin words for "**law**," *nomos* and *lex*, express *an authoritative rule of duty*. The Old Testament word *Torah* includes much more and therefore denotes not only *what is to be done*, but also *what is to be known*. God's Law represents divinely revealed instruction, be it doctrine, exhortation, promise, or command.

To put it plainly, God's Law is the whole of His revealed will to man contained in both the Old and New Testaments. The Decalogue, or ten words, is God's perfect moral code suited for all men, in all times and all circumstances. Before God gave man the written Law, He wrote the Law on the heart and in the conscience of every man. Respected theologians refer to it as "the law of creation" or "the law of nature."

- **Romans 1:19**—because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.
- **Romans 2:14-15**—For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves,<sup>15</sup> in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.

The Law written initially on Adam's heart is substantially the same Law written by the finger of God on the two tablets of stone at Mount Sinai. Added to this, the same Law that God first wrote on Adam's heart, then wrote down in the Commandments, is the same standard of righteousness that He writes on every renewed and regenerated man at conversion (*Heb.8:10; 10:16*).

If you turn to Romans 7, you will find that the Apostle Paul describes the Law in verse 12 as "**holy**" and "**righteous and good**." In verse 14, he describes it as "**spiritual**," meaning that the Law deals not only with *words or deeds* but also with *desires and motives of the heart*.

If you had to describe the Law of God in one word, how would you describe it?

David had this opportunity to describe the Law in Psalm 19, and in verse 7, he described it as "*perfect*," which means "*without blemish*," "*upright*," and "*without spot*." This Law is so complete it "*restores the soul*." The psalmist

proclaimed in 119:72, "The law of Thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces." He exclaimed in 119:97, "O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day." He confesses in verse 174, "I long for Thy salvation, O Lord, and Thy law is my delight."

## **ITS CATEGORIES: How should we think of the Law of God as a whole?**

The Law of God, at its widest margins, covers three kinds of Law.

1. **Moral laws**—command personal and community behavior that is always our duty.
2. **Judicial laws**—applied principles of the moral Law to Israel's political and social situation, in which Israel was a church-state. These penal sanctions are both necessary in society and equitable (*1 Tim.1:8-10; Ex.21:23-25*). The agent of punishment which God enlists for executing His just and necessary penalties in society for crimes is the civil magistrate. Here "the key function of civil magistrates, as God Himself presents it in His written word, is that of being the sword as an avenger of wrath against evildoers...Civil rule is a ministry of justice, aiming to punish criminals in accord with the revealed will of God. When we combine this connection with the Biblically based belief that God's law is binding in every detail until and unless the Lawgiver reveals otherwise, we conclude that the civil magistrate today ought to apply the penal sanctions of Old Testament law to criminals in our society, once they have been duly tried and convicted by adequate evidence."<sup>2</sup> (*Cf. Ex.21:23-25; Deut.19:18-21; Ps.101:8; Rom.13:1-4*)
3. **Ceremonial laws**—about purity in worship, diet, rituals, and sacrifice were temporary enactments for instructional purposes. It never made the participants perfect (*Heb.10:1*), and it was an intolerable burden (*Acts 15:10, 28*). The New Testament cancels these ordinances because their symbolic meaning had been fulfilled (*Matt.15:20; Mark 7:15-19; 1 Tim.4:3-5; Heb.10:1-14; 13:9-10*).

The overall template of the Law of God shows us that life under God's rule is not to be seen *compartmentally*, but rather, as *a many-sided, multifaceted unity of living all of life under the authority of God*. The administrative and ceremonial laws were limited in their application, but God's moral Law is universally binding and unchanging (*Matt.5:17-19; Luke 16:16-17*).

Bottom line: God commands the behavior [*thoughts, desires, attitudes, deeds (actions)*], both internally and externally, that He loves to see and forbids that which offends Him. Jesus summarized the moral Law in two great commandments, "*love your God and love your neighbor as yourself, on these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets*" (*Matt.22:36-40*).

## **ITS USES: What are the intended uses of the Law?**

What function does the Law of God serve in our lives?

It may be helpful to approach this point historically. The Reformers struggled much over the real purpose or function of the Law. Martin Luther expressed his conviction in his Lectures on Galatians (1535), when he wrote,

"The Law was given for two uses; the first was political or civil—the Law was a bridle for the restraint of the uncivilized. The second use of the Law was theological or spiritual. It is a mighty hammer to crush the self-righteousness of human beings. For it shows them their sin, so that by the recognition of sin, they may be humbled, frightened and worn down, and so may long for grace and for the Blessed Offspring (namely, Christ)."

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<sup>2</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, *By This Standard*, p.191

John Calvin agreed with these functions of the Law but changed the order of *the first two* and laid his emphasis on a *third*. In Book 11, chapter 7 of the Institutes, he says,

“First, the Law has a **punitive purpose**—for it renders us inexcusable and so drives us to despair. Then naked and empty-handed, we flee to God’s mercy, repose entirely in it, hide within it, and seize upon it alone for righteousness and merit.” Second, the Law is a **deterrent to restrain evildoers**, especially by fright and shame, for daring to do what they want to do, and so protects the community. In this sense, the Law acts as an external deterrent, while leaving the heart unchanged. Third, the Law is **educative**—the Law is the best instrument both to teach us the Lord’s will and to exhort us to do it. For by frequent meditation upon it, believers will be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression. Indeed, Calvin says, “it is in this joyous obedience that authentic Christian freedom is to be found.”

The Reformers would conclude that there was a three-fold use of the Law of God: *punitive*, *restrictive*, and *educative*. Think about how these uses are seen in your home or society today. Discuss.

Here are three metaphorical uses of the Law of God revealed in Scripture.

### 1. The Law is a MIRROR to reveal sin.

- **Romans 3:20**—because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.
- **Romans 7:7**—What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “YOU SHALL NOT COVET.”
- **Romans 7:12, 14**—So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. <sup>14</sup>For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

By reflecting the perfect righteousness of God, we see our own sinfulness and shortcomings.

### 2. The Law is a TUTOR to teach us our need for grace and the necessity of a Mediator.

- **Romans 3:28**—For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.
- **Romans 5:20**—The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,
- **Galatians 3:19-24**—Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made. <sup>20</sup>Now a mediator is not for one *party only*; whereas God is *only* one. <sup>21</sup>Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on Law. <sup>22</sup>But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. <sup>23</sup>But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the Law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. <sup>24</sup>Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith.

By showing us our need for pardon and our danger of damnation, the Law takes us to the doorway of the Gospel and points us to Christ.

### 3. The Law is a GUIDE to point us into the will of God and to show us how to live.

- **Romans 13:8-10**—Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the Law*.<sup>9</sup> For this, “YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,” and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”<sup>10</sup> Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of *the Law*.
- **Galatians 5:14**—For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the *statement*, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”
- **James 2:8**—If, however, you are fulfilling the royal Law according to the Scripture, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,” you are doing well.

On the one hand, the Law *restrains evil* (Rom.13:3-4), and on the other hand, the Law gives light. The Law of God cannot *change the heart*. It cannot change the sinner from *being bad* (Rom.7:14), it cannot *enable the sinner to do good* (Rom.7:15-21), and it cannot *free the sinner from being bound* (Rom.7:22-25). The Law guides the regenerate into the good works that God has planned for them (Eph.2:10). The Law points us *to Christ* that we may be saved by trusting Him alone by faith, and then Christ points us back *to the Law* that we might understand how God’s children please their heavenly Father. The Law mirrors, tutors, and guides us in the will of God (Ps.119:9, 11, 38, 105).

#### APPLICATION:

THE COMMANDMENTS and CHRIST—Identify two ways that Christ perfectly kept and fulfilled the Law.

THE COMMANDMENTS and THE CHRISTIAN

- Since God’s Law is AUTHORITATIVE, ask yourself: *what are You commanding me, Lord, that I need to obey?*
- Since God’s Law is a MIRROR, ask yourself: *what are You showing me, Lord, about myself that needs transformation?*
- Since God’s Law is a TUTOR, ask yourself: *what are You teaching me, Lord, about Christ and His glory?*
- Since God’s Law is a GUIDE, ask yourself: *how are you leading me, Lord? Give me power and help to follow.*

What is your takeaway from this lesson?

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