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WHAT IS THE LAW?

Before we can defend the need to recover the civil use of God's moral law, we must first understand what the law is. Part 1 of this book will lay the essential foundations for everything that follows. As we begin, we must define some key concepts. A failure to distinguish what is meant by terms like *the law* and *the moral law* will undoubtedly lead to unnecessary confusion and misapplication.

In this chapter, we will seek to understand the character of God's law and how that law is expressed in redemptive history. To that end, we will begin by exploring the relationship between God's law and God's character, showing that the law is not arbitrary but is rooted in God Himself. From there, we will examine the classic tripartite division of the law—moral, civil, and ceremonial—explaining what each category entails and what is particularly unique about the moral law. Then, we will trace the moral law across redemptive history. In doing so, we hope to establish a clear and confessional definition of God's moral law as a necessary first step toward recovering its proper use and application.

God and God's Law

When we speak of God's law, we refer not merely to a random set of rules and ethical guidelines but rather to divine revelation that flows directly from the character of God Himself. To fully grasp the concept of God's law, we must first understand that God's law is an expression of His perfect character.

God is perfectly holy; that is, He is absolutely perfect in His moral purity and separateness from sin. Because God is infinitely holy, His law

is inherently holy and pure, establishing a standard that is absolutely perfect. God's commands do not simply stipulate right and wrong—they reveal His own perfect moral nature, reflecting His holiness in every principle and precept.

God is also perfectly just and righteous. His law is not arbitrary. In setting forth His commands, God reveals what justice should look like in human relationships and society, ensuring that His creation understands and reflects His perfect justice.

Likewise, the law of God embodies His perfect goodness and wisdom. Rather than being a burden, God's law promotes human flourishing. Because God is infinitely wise and benevolent, His law directs humanity away from destructive behaviors and toward character, acts, and goals that reflect what is best for mankind.

Finally, God's law underscores His perfect sovereignty, demonstrating that God alone has the ultimate authority to define morality. We as creatures are not authorized to invent or determine morality based on personal preference, cultural tastes, or pragmatic outcomes. Rather, morality is rooted in the sovereign decree of the creator and ruler of all creation.

It is essential to recognize that God's law does not just teach us what God requires of us. It also teaches us what God is like. His law is not arbitrary but rather is a reflection of His perfect character and His unchanging attributes.

At its core, God's law represents His will communicated to humanity, implicitly through the created order and human conscience and explicitly through Scripture. It is a comprehensive rule of righteousness by which all human conduct should be measured.

The Tripartite Division of the Law

Discussions about God's law can get confusing, in part because Scripture includes three distinct categories of law that must be understood and applied differently. Historically, theologians have recognized and utilized

a threefold division of God's law, known as the tripartite division of the law, to understand how different aspects of biblical law apply.¹

The tripartite division, as its name suggests, divides the law into three parts—into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories. Each of these three categories serves a distinct theological and practical function, and it is important for us to understand the role of each of these divisions of the law.

The Civil Law

Civil law refers specifically to the judicial regulations God gave to govern ancient Israel as a nation. These laws include various instructions about criminal justice, property rights, penalties for wrongdoing, societal structures, and other obligations that ensured order and justice within the unique nation of Old Testament Israel.

The civil laws were rooted in the moral law, providing specific applications of the moral law within a particular context that was unique within redemptive history. The civil law provided concrete expressions of God's justice; yet, unlike the moral law, these civil codes were intentionally temporary and unique to the institution of Old Testament Israel.

With the coming of Christ, the civil laws of Israel ceased to be binding as specific legal obligations for believers. The Second London Baptist Confession states that these judicial laws expired with the statehood of ancient Israel.² However, the Confession acknowledges that the general equity—the underlying principles of justice and righteousness found in these laws—remains instructive and beneficial to believers.

In essence, the civil law served its primary purpose in guiding the national life of Israel prior to the incarnation of Christ yet continues to offer timeless insights into God's character.

1. For an excellent and more exhaustive treatment of the tripartite division of the law, see Philip S. Ross, *From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Threefold Division of the Law* (Mentor, 2010).

2. Stan Reeves, *The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith in Modern English* (Founders Press, 2017), 19.4.

The Ceremonial Law

The ceremonial law consists of those commandments explicitly given to Israel concerning worship, rituals, sacrifices, dietary regulations, and purity codes. These laws dealt with the religious and ceremonial aspects of Old Testament Israel's covenant relationship with God.

Unlike the moral law, the various ceremonial laws served as temporary, symbolic rituals intended to point forward to Christ and His redemptive work. These rituals, which included animal sacrifices, dietary restrictions, and purification rites, highlighted man's need for purification and reconciliation with God. They foreshadowed the full and final fulfillment accomplished in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

With the completed work of Christ—His incarnation, His perfect obedience, His sacrificial death, His resurrection, and His ascension—the ceremonial law had fulfilled its intended purpose. Christ fully and finally accomplished what these ceremonial laws symbolized. As such, these ceremonial laws are no longer binding on believers, having found their completion in the lawgiver Himself.

The Moral Law

The moral law refers specifically to the eternal and unchanging standards of righteousness that God has revealed to humanity. Unlike the civil and ceremonial laws, the moral law remains authoritative for all people, in all places, and at all times. This moral law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments, is central to this book's focus.³

The Moral Law was Given to Adam

The moral law was first explicitly given to Adam in Eden. From the very beginning, God established moral obligations for humanity. Adam was commanded to obey God's directives, and these initial commands established humanity's fundamental responsibility to honor and obey their Creator.

3. As such, any reference to "the law" from this point forward can safely be assumed to be referring to the moral law and not the civil or ceremonial law.

Even before the fall, Adam was obligated to obey God's law.⁴ His obedience was an expression of submission to his Creator and a path to creation's flourishing. The law given to Adam thus laid the foundational principle that man's chief end of glorifying God and enjoying Him forever included living in harmony with God's law.

The failure of Adam to keep this original moral law did not diminish its eternal validity; rather, it underscored humanity's need for redemption. Adam's disobedience introduced sin into the world, but the moral standard established by God remained unchanged, continuing to hold all humanity accountable.

The Moral Law is Written on Our Hearts

God's moral law is also written upon every human heart—yours and mine. This innate moral awareness exists within every person, regardless of whether they know the Lawgiver who gave them this law. It testifies to the existence of an objective moral standard inherent in creation itself.

This universal moral consciousness demonstrates God's good design that all people possess an innate understanding of right and wrong. Yes, this understanding is affected by sin. Yet, despite this distortion, the human conscience continues to bear witness to God's moral requirements.

The Moral Law is Revealed through Nature and Reason

God's moral law is also discernible through the natural order and reason. Observing creation itself, humanity can perceive certain principles of moral truth and human flourishing established by the Creator. Human reason, though fallen and imperfect, remains capable of recognizing fundamental moral truths present in the created world to the extent that no one can plead ignorance for transgressing God's law.

4. Chapter 19 of the Second London Baptist Confession explains that God gave Adam a law of comprehensive obedience written in his heart, and a specific precept of that law, which is that Adam was not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Confession goes on to explain the connectivity between the law of comprehensive obedience given to Adam and the moral law that forever requires obedience of everyone.

Throughout history, societies have acknowledged certain ethical standards and behaviors as right and wrong. Consider, for example, the pagan mariners in the book of Jonah who knew that it would be wrong to shed innocent blood despite not knowing Jonah's God. The fact that even unbelievers can discern moral truths through speculative and practical reason reflects the fact that God's law is revealed through nature and reason.

The moral law's revelation through nature and reason highlights the consistency and coherence of God's ethical standards. God's laws are not only right—they can also be understood as reasonable, good, and true. The accessibility and relevance of God's law, even apart from explicit scriptural revelation, reinforces the universal responsibility of all of mankind to acknowledge and adhere to these foundational moral principles.

The Moral Law is Fully Revealed in Scripture

The revelation of God's moral law reached its clearest expression in Scripture and is summarized in the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai. These commandments succinctly summarize God's eternal moral standards, explicitly articulating man's obligation toward God and neighbor.

By explicitly revealing these commands, God codified the moral principles that He had already revealed within creation and conscience. The Ten Commandments provide humanity with a summary of what God requires of them, removing any ambiguity about God's expectations and standards.

In this chapter, we have seen that God's moral law is a reflection of His perfect character. We have distinguished the moral law from the civil and ceremonial law, and we have traced the revelation of the moral law through redemptive history. Having defined the law, we are now ready to ask a vital question: What does the law do?