

Introduction to the Law of God

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Date: 09 August 2026

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[0:00] So, what do you think of when you hear the term, the law of God? Perhaps you think of the Ten! Commandments or the moral law. Maybe you think of the ceremonial law under the Old Covenant. Maybe you! think of the judicial laws in Israel in the Old Testament, or maybe you think of all three of these combined together. Some might think of the entirety of the Old Testament, or maybe just the Pentateuch, or the books of Moses. Some of us might think of the law of God as that thing that cannot save us.

Or, if your mind is on Psalm 119, you might think of the law of God as something good and precious. So, what is the law of God? Well, the correct answer is all of the above. It's everything I just said and more. But before I show you what I mean, let me provide a simple summary of where I'm going here, and here it is. The law is not an impersonal code standing above or below God. It is the authoritative revelation of the will and character of the God who created us and in Christ redeemed us.

And I believe this statement protects us from several errors. When I say the law does not stand above God, what I mean is that God doesn't have to look or consult some external rule outside of himself to determine what is right or wrong, what is good or evil. And at the same time, the law is not beneath God in the sense that good and evil are some sort of arbitrary inventions. It's not as though God arbitrarily one day decided, I'm going to make these things good, and I'm going to make these things evil. No, the law of God expresses his own holy, righteous, truthful, loving character. In other words, God himself is the standard, and his commandments reveal who he is and what conformity to him looks like in the lives of his creatures. So, God is not adhering to some standard outside of himself, and he's not creating for us a standard apart from his own character. No, God's law flows from who he is. It shows us who he is while simultaneously teaching us how he wants us to behave.

So, with that in mind, let's consider how the Bible talks about the law of God. We need to define our terms, and I think this is one of the reasons why Christians can become very confused about the law.

The word law does not mean the exact same thing in every passage of the Bible. It's sort of like the way we use church. We often say, I'm going to church. Well, that may mean I'm going to attend a worship service. It may mean that I'm going to a specific building. It may mean that we are meeting with specific people, and this is because we may use the word church in different ways.

[3:31] Sometimes we're referring to God's gathered people. Sometimes we're referring to the institution, if you will, that Christ established, or maybe a local congregation or even a building.

And the same is true for how the Bible uses the word law. It's not always referring to the exact same thing. So, let me show you some examples. In John chapter 10, verse 34, Jesus says, is it not written in your law, I said you are God's? Now, in that case, he's quoting from Psalm 82.

So, he's not quoting from the Ten Commandments or the ceremonial law or even the first five books of Moses. And yet, he says that Psalm 82 is part of the law. So, in this case, Jesus seems to be pointing to the entirety of the Old Testament as the law of God. Now, in another case, in Luke 24, verse 44, he speaks of the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms. And there again, he's referring to the Old Testament, but you'll notice that he divides it into three parts. We have the law of Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms. So, in that case, the law of Moses refers to the first great division of the Hebrew Scriptures, which is the books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy. And of course, even that refers to more than the ceremonial or the Ten Commandments. Genesis contains the story of creation, the story of the fall, the flood, the patriarchs, the promises that were made to Abraham.

Exodus contains the Israelites' redemption from their slavery in Egypt and the building of the tabernacle. So, in some cases, when the Bible speaks of the law, it's using this term in a broader sense, sometimes referring to just the five books of Moses or possibly the entirety of the Old Testament.

Now, in other cases, the Bible refers to the law as the covenant God made with Israel through Moses. For example, in Galatians chapter 3, Paul speaks of the law that came 430 years before the, or after, I should say, after the promise was made to Abraham. And that's the law that was given to Moses, which included the moral, the ceremonial, and the judicial aspects. It governed everything from Israel's worship, their morality, to their national life. It contained rules for sacrifices, the purity regulations, the food laws, and so on. And this is probably what most people think about when they think about the law of God. They think about that law that was delivered through Moses. [6:39] But even when we talk about that aspect of the law, we have to make some important distinctions, namely between the moral, the ceremonial, and the judicial aspects of God's law. But we'll come back to that.

Now, in some cases, the word law may not be referring to anything we would think of as God's law, but rather, it's describing a controlling principle or power. And again, this is not what most people are thinking about when they read the word law in the Bible. For example, in Romans 7, Paul says, I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. And then he goes on to speak about another law, waging war against the law of his mind and making him captive to the law of sin. Well, what law is he referring to? What does that mean? Well, he's using the word law in terms of an operating or controlling principle or power. For instance, we use the same word when we talk about gravity. We refer to it as the law of gravity. So this is not a statute that's been passed by a legislature. It's not a command that's given by a king or someone in a place of authority. We're talking about a governing reality that operates very consistently. So when an apple breaks away from the tree, it falls to the ground because gravity is the law, is that controlling power.

Next, sometimes when the Bible uses the term law, it is referring specifically to the moral law or the Ten Commandments. And we see this in the book of Romans, Romans chapter 7, verse 12.

Paul says, the law is holy and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. And then he picks up that theme in chapter 13 to cite the Ten Commandments, the commandments against adultery and murder and stealing and coveting. Other times, the Bible refers to the law of works. In Romans 3, Paul says, then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. So in that case, he's referring to the law as functioning as a covenant that demands perfect obedience.

[9:21] In other words, you can keep the law perfectly and live, or you can disobey and die. Now, in other cases, the law functions as a rule that simply reveals God's will. As a rule of life, the law tells us what pleases God. It exposes sin. It defines love in some respects. It shows us how to live in a way that is pleasing to God. So as we're moving through the Bible and we are reading these references to the law of God, we have to be careful to discern how the Bible is using that term in any given passage, and maybe this will help. Whenever the Bible speaks positively or negatively about the law, we must ask which law is in view, where we are in redemptive history, and what function the law is serving in that passage. Now, if we don't do this, we may be very confused.

There are times when, for example,

Paul makes statements that can sound very contradictory. In Romans 7.12, he says, the law is holy. Then in Romans 6.14, he says, you are not under the law, but under grace.

But then if we back all the way up to Romans 3.31, he says, do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means. On the contrary, we uphold the law. So which is it? Does he admire the law, as he says in chapter 7? Does he abolish it, as he says in chapter 6? And does he somehow restore it all the way back in chapter 3? No, he's considering different aspects of the law. The law is holy because it reveals God. It reveals his righteous will. However, the believer, the Christian, is not under the law in that it cannot condemn those who are united to Christ, because Christ kept the law perfectly. And he suffered the consequences of our breaking the law in our place. And it's in Christ that everything the law demands was satisfied. Furthermore, the law remains God's righteous will, so even in Christ, the law is not overthrown in some sense. Are you confused yet? Well, God will become clear as we continue. But before we move into more clarification regarding these various aspects of the law and how the Bible talks about the law, I want to begin by addressing perhaps the

most important thing we could say about the law. I think the gut response of many people, and I would include many Christians in this camp, when they hear the word law, it's almost like they want to immediately tense up. The law sounds cold. It sounds threatening. It sounds like it's diametrically opposed to grace and joy and spiritual life. And some of that reaction is understandable. If we know nothing else, we know that the law of God exposes our sin. Paul says it stops our mouths before God because we're all guilty of breaking that law. It pronounces a curse upon anyone who does not keep that law perfectly. And anyone who has ever tried to justify himself before God by keeping the law has discovered what a terrible taskmaster it is. It demands nothing less than perfection. And it does not offer any forgiveness if you fail. But let me ask you a seemingly unrelated hypothetical question.

Let's say you were to go to the doctor and he was to scan your body for tumors. And that scan revealed cancer in your body. Would you hate the machine that scanned you?

[13:50] Would you blame the MRI or the CT or the PET scan? I certainly wouldn't think so because that scan did not create the cancer. It merely exposed what was already there. So, to be clear, God's law does not create sin.

It does not create corruption within us. It merely exposes it. It reveals it. Which is why the Bible can speak of God's law in very affectionate terms.

I think we need to recover the Bible's affectionate view of the law. And Pastor John has been helping us with that through his sermon series on Psalm 119. But let's consider a couple of other examples so you can see what I'm talking about.

First of all, if you want, you're welcome to turn with me to Psalm 1. In this, what we might call the doorway to the Psalter, we have a picture of a godly man who is not grudgingly complying with the law, with divine regulations.

No, in fact, he delights in the law of God. He returns to it morning and night. He considers it. He turns it over in his mind over and over again.

[15:07] He allows it to govern his path. And here's what he says. Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on the law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. So notice how his delight in God's law produces stability and fruitfulness.

The result is that he's like a tree planted beside streams of water. How refreshing. His roots sink deep into the truth of God, and he bears fruit in season.

[16:16] His leaf does not wither. On the other hand, the ungodly, they listen to other counsel. Counsel other than the law of God.

And eventually, they become like chaff. There's nothing rooted. There's nothing enduring about them. They are driven away, or wherever the wind carries them. So this psalm presents us with two ways to live.

The first is a life rooted in the instruction of God. And the second is one that's governed by the counsel and desires of sinful men.

One becomes fruitful, while the other becomes worthless. So clearly, the author of Psalm 1 does not think of the law of God as something scary or dreadful.

Instead, he takes delight in it. He loves it. He thinks about it often, and he allows it to govern his life. Next, let's turn over to Psalm 19 and hear what David has to say about it.

[17:27] This psalm begins with creation. Verse 1 says, The heavens declare the glory of God. So creation itself displays the majesty and the wisdom and the power of the Creator.

But, of course, that revelation is limited. So in verse 7, David turns from the revelation of God in creation to the revelation of God in His Word. And I'll begin reading at verse 7.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.

The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever.

The rules of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

[18 : 26] Moreover, by them is your servant warned, and keeping them there is great reward. Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins.

Let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Now, David uses several terms here, law, testimony, precepts, commandment, fear, rules. He's really celebrating the whole body of truth and instruction that God has given His people.

And his conclusion is this. The law of the Lord is perfect. And he can say that because the author of the law is perfect.

And the law is simply what flows from His nature and His character. Nothing needs to be removed from it. Nothing needs to be added to it. It's absolutely perfect.

[19 : 30] It makes wise the simple. It rejoices the heart. It enlightens the eyes. It endures forever. It is righteous altogether, David says. Now, we should also keep in mind that David is a believer.

He's a man after God's own heart. And yet, much of the value he derives from the law is the way in which it guides his steps.

It warns him. It identifies the cliff, you know, before he drives over it. It tells them there are actions and habits and desires that lead toward destruction.

He says, Moreover, by them is your servant warned, and keeping them, there is great reward. And then he turns inward. And he says, Who can discern his errors?

Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins.

Evidently, David is not looking at the law and thinking, I'm keeping the commandments pretty well.

[20 : 37] No matter how well he might have been keeping those commandments, he recognizes that this law shows perfection. And no matter how we appear on the outside, he knows he isn't perfect.

He knows. In fact, he recognizes that he may not even know the full depth of his sin. So what is the law doing for him? Well, it's driving him to God, for one.

Again and again, it produces confession, dependence, a desire for cleansing. And again, this is the testimony of a believer who's rejoicing over the law of God.

Yes, it's exposing my sin. It's revealing what a sinner I am. But I love it. I need it. So in the Christian context, when we talk about being freed from the law, we want to be careful not to take that to an unbiblical extreme.

It's not merely that the law sends the unbeliever to Christ at the beginning of perhaps his Christian life, realizing that he cannot keep the law on his own.

[21 : 49] That much is true, but the law still has value for the Christian. It continues to show us how short we fall. It continues to drive us back to Christ.

In it, we see the perfection of Christ's obedience. We understand better how he was able to make atonement for us by fulfilling the law.

And it's through that law that we understand how then to live in thanksgiving to God and how to follow after our Lord and Savior in happy obedience, even after we've been forgiven and saved.

Now, if I were to turn to any one place in Scripture to prove how we should have a very affectionate view of the law, well, it would be Psalm 119.

Verse 97 says, Oh, how I love your law. It is my meditation all the day. In verses 97 through 104, David says, God's commandments make him wiser than his enemies.

[22 : 56] They give him more understanding than his teachers and greater insight than those who are older than him. He says God's words are sweeter than honey. Clearly, this is not a man who obeys the law with clenched teeth.

Why? Because it reveals God himself, his wisdom, his goodness, his holiness. Even more than that, the law is good for David personally. It keeps him on a wise and good path.

It saves him from destruction. What's not to love about it? So even before we study the finer points of God's law in Scripture or attempt to understand the Christian's relationship to it or make sense of those seemingly contradictory statements in the New Testament about the law, we need to understand this simple point that the law of God is good.

As Martin Luther once said, the law is divine and holy. Let the law have its glory. Yes, we need to understand its proper place in various parts of redemption.

We need to understand what each individual passage is talking about when it refers to the law. But we shouldn't approach this subject with this kind of thinking in the back of our minds that says the law, it's unnecessary.

[24 : 22] Or even, the law is bad. Right? Grace is good. Law is bad. That's a similar mistake to those Christians who want to disregard the Old Testament.

Thinking that Christians don't really need the Old Testament anymore. We have the New. What do we need the Old for? Well, let me ask you this. Does the New Covenant render God's law null and void?

That's a tricky question. Now, you might be tempted to argue, yes, but I would argue that grace under the New Covenant doesn't render God's law null and void, but rather, it changes our relationship to it.

So, the unbeliever who is confronted with God's law stands as a condemned criminal before a judge.

The law of God says to him, you are guilty. But the Christian isn't in the same position. The Christian isn't condemned by the law because Christ was condemned in his place.

[25 : 30] Galatians 3.13, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written, cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree. So, when the Christian is confronted by the law, it's not being handed down to him by a judge who's ready to sentence him.

Instead, the Christian is standing before a loving father like he's instructing his child. Clearly, the Christian's relationship to the law has changed, but the law itself has not changed.

It remains, as I said before, the authoritative revelation of the will and character of the God who created us and in Christ redeemed us.

Now, there are a whole lot of questions I haven't answered yet, but over the course of at least ten more weeks, we were going to study this subject of the law of God.

And once again, we will use the 1689 Baptist Confession as our guide. Chapter 19 of the Confession contains seven paragraphs on this subject, and I would like to read all of them to get a sense of where we're going.

[26 : 47] Now, I'll be reading from the Confession in modern English, the Founder's Version. Some of you have a copy of that, but if you want to follow along and see the original wording, I'll remind you that the Confession is actually in our Trinity hymnals.

Chapter 19 can be found on page 680. Let's read it. God gave Adam a law of comprehensive obedience written in his heart and a specific precept not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

By these, God obligated him and all his descendants to personal, total, exact, and perpetual obedience. God promised life if Adam fulfilled it and threatened death if he broke it, and he gave Adam the power and ability to keep it.

The same law that was first written in the heart of man continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness after the fall. It was delivered by God on Mount Sinai in the Ten Commandments and was written in two tables.

The first four commandments contain our duty to God and the other six our duty to man. In addition to this law, usually called the moral law, God was pleased to give the people of Israel ceremonial laws containing several typological ordinances.

[28 : 20] In some ways, these concerned worship by prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits. In other ways, they revealed various instructions about moral duties.

Since all of these ceremonial laws were appointed only until the new order arrived, they are now abolished and taken away by Jesus Christ. As the true Messiah and the only lawgiver, he was empowered by the Father to do this.

To Israel, he also gave various judicial laws which ceased at the same time their nation ended.

These laws no longer obligate anyone as part of that institution.

only their general principles of justice continue to have moral value. The moral law forever requires obedience of everyone, both those who are justified as well as others.

This obligation arises not only because of its content, but also because of the authority of God the Creator who gave it. Nor does Christ in any way dissolve this obligation in the gospel.

[29 : 30] Instead, he greatly strengthens it. True believers are not under the law as a covenant of works to be justified or condemned by it.

Yet, it is very useful to them and to others as a rule of life that informs them of the will of God and their duty. It directs and obligates them to live according to its precepts.

It also exposes the sinful corruptions of their natures, hearts, and lives. As they examine themselves in light of the law, they come to further conviction of humiliation for and hatred of sin along with a clearer view of their need for Christ and the perfection of His obedience.

The law is also useful to the regenerate to restrain their corruptions because it forbids sin. The punishment threatened by the law shows them that shows them what even their sins deserve and what troubles they may expect in this life due to their sin even though they are freed from the curse and undiminished severity of it.

The promises of the law likewise show them God's approval of obedience and the blessings they may expect when they keep it even though these blessings are not owed to them by the law as a covenant of works.

[30 : 52] If men do good and refrain from evil because the law encourages good and discourages evil that does not indicate that they are under the law and not under grace.

These uses of the law are not contrary to the grace of the gospel but are in sweet harmony with it for the Spirit of Christ subdues and enables the will of man to do freely and cheerfully what the will of God as revealed in the law requires.

So, let me briefly summarize this chapter as a whole and give you a 30,000 foot overview. We might title the first paragraph The Law and Creation.

The chapter of course begins with Adam. God wrote a law of comprehensive obedience upon Adam's heart. Adam was created upright.

He knew God's moral will and furthermore God gave him that particular commandment not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So, Adam and all of his descendants were bound to personal, total, exact, perpetual obedience.

[32 : 13] If they obeyed, life was promised to them. If they disobeyed, death was guaranteed. And to be clear, Adam was created with the ability to obey.

So, a key takeaway from this paragraph is that it wasn't sin that created the law. Adam had the law before he fell.

He fell because of his violation of that law. And this also shows us that the creator-creature relationship has always been a relationship of loving authority on one side and willing obedience on the other.

Now, paragraph two could be titled The Law After the Fall and at Sinai. And what we see in paragraph two is that the fall did not change God's moral standard.

The same law continued as a perfect rule of righteousness. Human nature became increasingly corrupt, but God did not become less holy. We'll actually spend more than one week on this paragraph because we need to consider the law written upon the human heart.

[33 : 32] What is that? The place of consciousness. The existence of the moral law even before Sinai, before those Ten Commandments were inscribed. of course, the giving of the Decalogue then and the Ten Commandments.

Now, we'll title paragraph three the ceremonial law. So, in addition to the moral law, God gave Israel what we typically call the ceremonial law. These laws governed sacrifices, the priesthood, purity, festivals, the worship of Israel, and so on.

many of them, as we'll see, were typological. They pointed beyond themselves to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Now, these were temporary, of course. When Christ came as the true Messiah, He fulfilled what they anticipated. So, they were abolished, but not because they were bad in any sense.

Rather, their purpose was fulfilled. We'll call paragraph four the judicial law. So, these were the civil laws that God gave to Israel to govern them as a nation when they were in the promised land.

[34 : 47] These were laws that addressed property and penalties and courts and wages and public safety and inheritances and so on. Now, these laws expired with the national institution for which they were given.

So, once God's people became the church, rather than old covenant Israel, national Israel, these laws were no longer necessary.

And yet, the general principles, especially related to justice expressed in those laws, are still very useful today. and we'll see how the New Testament draws moral principles from Israel's judicial laws.

We'll call the fifth paragraph the continuing moral law. So, in short, the moral law forever requires obedience of all people and that includes Christians.

In other words, no one becomes exempt from the moral law. according to the confession, Christ did not dissolve that obligation in the gospel. He actually strengthens it.

[36 : 03] And we'll talk about what that means. I've given paragraph six the title of The Usefulness of the Law to Believers. Now, this is the longest paragraph in the chapter, and we'll spend several weeks on this paragraph because it's where the doctrine becomes especially practical.

How does a justified Christian use the law without falling into legalism? How do commands, warnings, and promises function in the life of someone who cannot be condemned?

How does the law expose sin without destroying our assurance? So, we'll spend several weeks answering those questions and more. And I've titled the seventh and final paragraph, The Harmony of Law, Gospel, and Spirit.

The chapter ends by saying that all of these uses of the law are not contrary to the grace of the gospel. It says they sweetly comply with it.

How so? Well, the gospel does not simply forgive lawbreakers and then leave them unchanged. It doesn't come along and say, you're saved, now go about your business, whatever you were doing before is fine.

[37 : 26] The Spirit of Christ subdues and enables the will so that believers can begin to freely and cheerfully do what God's law requires.

So, the chapter altogether really tells the history of the law from Adam to the new covenant. The law is written upon Adam's heart, which remains after the fall.

It's then engraved in stone at Mount Sinai. It is accompanied by temporary ceremonial and judicial laws in the nation of Israel.

It is ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Its curse is borne by Christ, and yet its moral authority remains even under the new covenant. The Spirit writes it upon the born-again heart.

Now, my prayer regarding this series is to accomplish two primary objectives. The first is to gain a better understanding of the law. There are plenty of errors out there that we want to avoid.

[38 : 37] One extreme is legalism. Antinomianism, no law. Don't need the law. The law is virtually meaningless now. That's the other extreme.

And we'll talk about what those mean, but there's also moralism, and there's subjectivism. There's the flattening out of the Mosaic law into one abolished unit that we can just disregard.

Some are even tempted to reimpose Israel's judicial code. So we'll tackle all of these errors as we go along. Now, I don't have time to get into it this morning, but I'm going to give you a homework assignment.

When you have just a few minutes, sit down and read through Matthew chapter 5 verses 17 through at least 20.

In fact, go ahead and read to the end of the chapter, starting at Matthew 5 17. What does Christ say about the law in that chapter? Then I want you to think about how the law is then related to Christ and what he accomplished.

[39 : 47] Then, of course, we'll pick up where we left off in, not next week, but two weeks. Mike Yaney will be visiting with us next Sunday and we'll get to hear a report from Japan during the Sunday school hour.

So that gives you a whole two weeks to complete your homework assignment. I don't think that's too much to ask. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your law.

We thank you that you have revealed to us not only your nature but your will for us. And I pray that we would cherish the law, that we would understand it, that we would have clarity regarding which parts to keep and which parts were completely fulfilled in Christ, but at the same time, we want to delight in your law, we want to meditate on it day and night, we want to let it be a lamp to our feet. So let us, help us to cherish your law, to love it, and to follow after it. We pray this in Christ's name, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.