

THE LAW OF GOD
AND THE CHURCH
PURIFYING THE CONSCIENCE 3

It takes a community to gain the most benefit from the Law of God.



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

The Law of God and the Church
Purifying the Conscience 3
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Welcome to *The Law of God and the Church*

The Law of God serves as the rule book of the soul, the repository of values and default choices to which the conscience appeals in bringing mind and heart together for action in love.

But for the Law to realize its full potential to bless, and to bear witness to the wisdom of God, a community of Law-keepers is required. This is the role of the local church, and of local churches in communities.

The local church is neither ancient Israel nor the civil magistrate; nevertheless, it has an important role to play, both in purifying the consciences of believers and in bearing witness to the holiness, goodness, justice, and love of God. And for this role, teaching and obeying the Law of God is indispensable.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Not a Jot, not a Tittle

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.” Matthew 5.17, 18

An ongoing responsibility

It never fails: I only need to mention, in a sermon, lecture, or essay, something about the Christian’s ongoing responsibility to keep the Law of God, and someone will be there to take me to task. “I’m not under Law, I’m under grace.” “You’re preaching salvation by works.” “This is not a theocracy, you know.”

So go the objections, some more passionate than others, but each along the same lines. This despite the fact, as we have seen, that the Spirit of God is writing the Law on the hearts of the redeemed, and furnishing their minds with its liberating truths (Ezek. 36.26, 27; Rom. 8.5-9), and that Jesus taught that keeping and teaching the Law is the way to greatness in the Kingdom of God (Matt. 5.17-19).

What do Christians have against the Law of God? Why are we so adamant to deny any ongoing responsibility for walking the same path Jesus walked (1 Jn. 2.1-6)?

Of course, not all the Old Testament Law of God continues to have validity. The writer of Hebrews explains, in chapters 7-10, that the laws defining and guiding the work of priests changed, as the Old Covenant was replaced with the New. While we can still learn principles of holiness and right worship by studying the laws of sacrifice, diet, and so forth, these no longer bind us as *ethical* norms (cf. 1 Cor. 9.13, 14). The writer of Hebrews reminds us, “For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law” (Heb. 7.12).

For the Old Testament priestly rights and duties, Jesus has substituted the sacrifice of His own life, the ordinances and sacraments of the Church, and His ongoing intercessory and sanctifying work. We proclaim Jesus as the way to salvation and wholeness in our soul, not the Law of God.

But the Law remains established for believers as holy and righteous and good (Rom. 3.31; 7.12). And, given the current antipathy toward the Law in many Christian circles, we have a way to go in recovering this crucial ingredient for purifying the conscience and growing in the Lord.

The Law and our salvation

The Ten Commandments and the civil laws of ancient Israel remain valid as guides in the way of love. The New Testament – beginning with the Lord Jesus – indicates that these have continuing value, and must not be neglected or set aside. Christians are called to keep the Law of God, not to *be* saved but so that we might *bring our salvation to light* in lives of good works (Phil. 2.12; Eph. 2.10).

At least five reasons explain why Christians today should continue to keep the Law of God.

First, the Law of God encodes the very character of God – holiness, righteousness, and goodness (Rom. 7.12). Since we are God’s children and the Spirit of God is at work within us, transforming us into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18), it makes sense for us to know and follow the Law of God.

Second, the Law of God defines the terms of goodness which must characterize the works for which Christians have been redeemed. When Paul wrote that we are God’s workmanship, redeemed for good works, he clearly had in mind the works outlined in the Law of God (Eph. 2.8-10). Without a fixed standard of goodness like the Law of God, believers will have a difficult time fulfilling their reason for being redeemed.

The Law of God and the Church

Third, obedience to the Law of God proves – not earns – a believer’s discipleship, as the Apostle John explains (1 Jn. 2.1-6).

Fourth, following the teaching of the Law guides us in the way of love. Love is the hallmark of Christian faith, as well as the fulfillment of the Law (Matt. 22.34-40).

Finally, keeping the Law of God appeals to the conscience of the unbeliever. This is because God has written the works of the Law – the basic standards of right and wrong – on the soul of every person (Rom. 2.14, 15). The conscience looks to the Law of God in fulfilling its role as referee in the soul between the sometimes contending impulses of the mind and the heart. Without the Law, we have no fixed standard for the conscience to approve or accuse as it sets the will for action.

Christian action informed by the Law of God can have powerful effects. As unbelievers observe Christians living according to the Law, they will note their wisdom and be attracted to the teaching of Christ, which is the entry point to holiness, righteousness, and goodness (cf. Deut. 4.6; Mic. 4.1-5).

The Law of God must, therefore, have a vital place in the life of every believer. But for that to be the case, the Law must also have a proper place in the whole body of Christ, the local church, and local churches throughout any community. Just what that place is, we will explore in the remainder of this series.

For reflection

1. How can the Law still be important in the life of faith and *not* be the *means* of our salvation?
2. What do we mean by saying that keeping the Law of God *proves* a person’s salvation?
3. Can you think of any examples of how Christian obedience to the Law of God has influenced others?

Next steps – Preparation: How would you describe the place of the Law of God in your life? Do you see any need for improvement in your relationship to the Law?

2 The Church is not Ancient Israel

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. Hebrews 12.22-24

A matter of time and place

Believers who are seeking to purify their consciences by learning and obeying the Law of God need the supportive environment of the local church. Local churches, however, need to understand the place of God's Law in the life of their community, and take up studying and practicing the Law as a community effort.

We have seen that the Ten Commandments and the civil laws of ancient Israel still have binding validity on the followers of Jesus Christ. But there are some qualifying criteria which we must understand before we go out and start building railings around our roofs, stoning our recalcitrant children, or driving an awl through some employee's ear.

Simply put, the local church is not ancient Israel; rather, the church is *new* Israel, a *new* community established on the foundations of the old one – and, thus, having some similarities with it – but identified by new traits and characteristics which guide it in following the Law of God today.

Promoting a Law-keeping community will be essential to helping each member of the community realize a good and clean conscience. But we cannot approach this challenge merely by writing the case laws of ancient Israel into our local church charter. The church is not ancient Israel.

What are the implications of this? Ancient Israel represented a unique combination of priestly and civil rule. It was designed to be, in the purest sense, a theocracy, in which God ruled His people directly through the work of magistrates and priests. Moreover, ancient Israel occupied a unique setting of time and place, which had an influence on the shape of many of its laws. While some of Israel's laws can seem harsh and unyielding, they put pagan laws to shame with their practical concern for justice, righteousness, and neighbor-love.

A heart for the Law?

But, most important of all, ancient Israel lacked the heart – the Spirit, we should say – for obeying God's Law (Deut. 5.29; Jer. 31.31-34; Ezek. 36.26, 27). One important implication of this is that the laws of ancient Israel were especially harsh in exacting certain forms of justice; otherwise, the unbridled hearts of the people would run rampant with passion and destruction – as we see in the Book of Judges.

We may expect that, in this season of grace, in which the Holy Spirit of God dwells within the followers of Christ, some mitigation or modification of the practice of ancient Israel's laws is to be expected. This is precisely what we find, for example, in 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul substitutes excommunication for the death penalty, thus leaving room for grace to work repentance and renewal in the sinner.

Built on the foundations

In the ancient Middle East, many cities were founded on what are called *tells*. A tell is a mound or hill on which a city is located, which has been built and re-built on the ruins of ancient cities that went before. Each time a city was razed and a new one erected, archaeologists expect to find certain similarities – the “footprint” of the city, building materials, and some cultural items – but also new technologies and artifacts at each successive level of construction. Changing times demanded changes in social and cultural life, without sacrificing the identity or continuity of the city with its past.

The Law of God and the Church

So it is with the Law of God and the church. While the church is being erected on the *tell* of Old Testament Israel, it is *not* ancient Israel; therefore, while there are many areas of continuity between the church and ancient Israel, and many similarities of purpose and character, the Law of ancient Israel must be understood in a new light, and according to new spiritual principles and perspectives, and it must be applied in a manner consistent with the age of grace and the Spirit in which the church is being built.

This is a challenge for church leaders, and one they must labor to understand and pursue within the framework of God's more complete revelation in Scripture, as well as from the practice of previous generations of the followers of Christ. The Law of God has abiding validity for the life of faith in our day, and it plays a crucial role in purifying the conscience and, thus, strengthening and nurturing the souls of every believer.

But the Law needs a community to have its maximum impact, both on the members of that community and on the larger surrounding community as well. As local churches take up the task of bringing the Law of God back to its proper place, they need to consider the teaching of the New Testament, as the latest and highest position on the *tell* of the people of God, to see what can be learned there about allowing the liberating Law of God to have its proper place.

For reflection

1. What are some ways that the local church today differs from local communities in ancient Israel?
2. Why, given the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, is it reasonable to expect that we will interpret and apply certain of God's Laws differently in our day?
3. While each believer is responsible for learning and obeying the Law of God, why is it important to have a supportive and instructive community to aid us in this matter?

Next steps – Preparation: What place does the Law of God have in the teaching of your church? What can you do to help the Law have more prominence?

3 The Church is not the Civil Magistrate

I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! 1 Corinthians 6.5, 6

Justice in the civil arena

We're examining some of the criteria which must guide believers and their churches in applying the Law of God today. If our consciences are going to be properly furnished, they'll need to be well versed in the Law of God. And the Law being what it is, a community is essential for its fullest and most fruitful implementation.

We have said that the church is not ancient Israel. Rather, as the *new* Israel, living in the age of grace and the Spirit, church leaders will need to reflect carefully on how the statutes and precepts of ancient Israel are to be obeyed in our own day. We do not keep the Law to *earn* our salvation, but to *realize* our salvation, prove our discipleship, and thus make progress in spreading the love of Jesus Christ to all men.

And we keep the Law so that our community can shine as a beacon of wisdom, holiness, and love in the dark night of our surrounding sinful world (Deut. 4.6-9).

In our day, local churches must assume responsibility for *teaching* and *obeying* the Law of God, but not for *enforcing* its civil obligations. Just as the church is not ancient Israel, it is not the civil magistrate, either. The statutes and precepts of the civil law of Israel are still binding today – as Paul, James, and Jesus indicate, and as the founders of this nation certainly believed. But they must be interpreted into the life of the new Israel, which, while it is built on the *foundation* of ancient Israel, faces altogether different historical and cultural contingencies.

The Law of God includes many penal guidelines for achieving justice and restoring order to a community. But in our day, the ultimate responsibility for ensuring justice in the *civil* arena lies with civil governments – local, state, and federal (Rom. 13.1-4). The church must concentrate on *spiritual* and *moral* enforcement of the Law; it must not presume on the prerogatives of the State in seeking justice between its members.

The church and the civil magistrate

Thus, where an infraction has been committed against the Law of God by a member of the local church, believers will apply the principles of church discipline in seeking to restore justice. We shall have more to say about this in due course.

However, in matters of *civil* infraction, members should expect that the civil government has options for achieving justice which are not available to the church. The courts should be the *final* bar of appeal for believers in civil matters with other believers, not the *first*. Neighbor-love requires that, in the body of Christ, we settle our differences and restore justice by coming together before the Law of God to seek redress or satisfy grievances.

However, those avenues of redress being exhausted, or in cases where a believer has transgressed against the civil law of the community, whether or not another believer was offended, the civil magistrate is authorized by God to act on behalf of His good purposes to achieve justice.

The state, as Paul and Peter remind us, has been established by God to accomplish His good purposes in civil society (Rom. 13.1-4; 1 Pet. 2.13, 14). Believers have a role to play in helping to make sure this occurs. They must work within the civil structures of society to ensure that governments act in accord with the teaching of God's Law. This is part of the local church's witness to its community, that it pursues justice, wisdom, and

neighbor-love through the institutions of government.

But the church may not enact *civil* judgments against its members or others. Rather, because the state also is subject to the righteousness and justice of God's Law (Ps. 9.7, 8; Dan. 4.27; Matt. 14.1-4), believers must work to persuade civil magistrates of the essential wisdom, goodness, and justice of the Law of God, both by their arguments in the public square, and their lives together as law-keeping communities. And this will find them involved in the political process, electing leaders who fear the Lord, and working for laws that reflect the character and purposes of the Law of God.

But even in this arena, believers must remember that, in the age of grace, not even the vilest offender is completely cut off from the reach of God's Spirit and truth. Penalties for violating civil laws must, therefore, leave room for grace to work; they must not be so harsh as to harden hearts, but they must be *sufficiently* harsh as to encourage repentance and behavioral change. And believers and their churches must be involved with the workings of justice, to recover and restore those who have come under the just punishment of the State.

How should churches pursue this calling?

Civil government plays an important role in overseeing a just society, where neighbor-love obtains through submission – even grudging submission (Ps. 81.15; Ps. 66.3) – to the standards and sanctions of the Law of God.

But in the church, no actions may be taken by church leaders against offenders of God's Law, except those disciplinary protocols to which they have willingly and knowingly submitted as members of the local body. This includes the church's authority to excommunicate unrepentant offenders, leaving them to the wiles of the devil and (perhaps) the civil justice of the State, until they repent of their wickedness, make restoration, and return to their proper place in the Body of Christ.

Local churches need the Law to promote wisdom and love between members and in the surrounding community. While their power to enact sanctions for disobedience to God's Law is not inconsiderable, it is restricted to those spiritual and moral sanctions which purify the conscience, restore the soul, and maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4.3)

For reflection

1. What do we mean by saying the local church is not the civil magistrate? What may churches *not* do with respect to applying the Law of God?
2. What is church discipline? What is the role of the Law of God in the exercise of church discipline?
3. Do you agree that Christians should work to bring the laws of civil government into line with the Law of God? Why or why not?

For reflection – Conversation: How many civil laws can you think of that reflect the influence of the Law of God? Would it be a good idea to drop these civil laws, just because they reflect the teaching of Scripture? Talk with a fellow Christian about this.

4 The Church and the Grace of God

For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore “put away from yourselves the evil person.” 1 Corinthians 5.12, 13

Judge righteous judgment

It's not that believers – and the Church as a Body – are *not* to exercise judgment against sinners. They are, as our Lord Jesus explained, but strictly according to the standards of righteousness in the Law of God (Jn. 7.24; cf. Deut. 16.18-20), and, indeed, all His Word. The Law of God, as the foundation for Scripture, provides the framework of wisdom, justice, holiness, and love to guide church members in building a community that reflects the love and oneness that we have in Christ (Jn. 17.21). Unless we judge with righteous judgment, we shall not be able to build one another up in our most holy faith, nor our churches in unity and maturity in the Law.

So churches, as signs and outposts of the Kingdom of God, must learn and keep the Law of God. But since the church is not the State, she may *not* wield the weapons of the state in seeking to achieve justice. Rather, the church applies the methods of church discipline to cleanse the Body of sin, restore relationships among the members, and maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace.

So in the local church, following the Law and Word of God, we practice righteous judgment and exercise discipline to encourage individual and community growth in the Lord.

Church discipline

Jesus outlined the steps of church discipline in Matthew 18.15-20. Most Christians are perhaps familiar with these. If a brother sins against another, the one offended must first go and confront his brother, pointing out his transgression, calling him to repentance, and standing ready to forgive and restore the relationship when repentance is in evidence.

That failing, the one against whom the transgression has been committed must take another church member with him to confront the sinner. Hopefully, the testimony of two witnesses – as per the Law of God (Lev. 19.15) – will be compelling, and repentance and restoration will be achieved.

Suppose that fails, however. In that case, the one offended against must take the sinner to the church – typically, to its rulers, the elders and pastors of the church. There a formal charge may be laid, the leaders of the church can weigh the evidence and claims, and, through prayer and searching the Scriptures, reach a just judgment.

But what if the sinner continues to insist he has done nothing wrong, or refuses to abide by the decision of the church's leadership? At that point, the unrepentant sinner must be put out of the church – excommunicated. This is a formal and public act in which the congregation is informed of the situation and the judgment of church leaders. Members are then expected to abide by that decision and have no fellowship with the unrepentant believer until he recovers his senses, repents of his sins, and sets about to achieve restoration and a changed life (1 Cor. 5.11).

We cannot stress enough that, during the process of church discipline, church members at every level must be careful to encourage and edify one another in love. This makes it clear why we need a *community* of law-keepers to help in purifying *individual* consciences by the Law of God.

Two intermediary steps

Historically, in most churches two steps precede that of excommunication. The first is admonition, in which a

formal judgment is drawn up in writing, together with instructions for corrective behavior, and put in the hands of the offender. Typically, a shepherd is then assigned to help the offending member work through the corrective regimen as prescribed. That failing, the offender can be suspended from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, since to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ in an unworthy manner brings judgment and discipline from the Lord against offenders (1 Cor. 11.27-32).

But if admonition and suspension do not accomplish the righteous judgment determined by church leaders, then excommunication must follow.

Room for grace

It's not hard to see how, at every step of the process of church discipline, ample room for grace is permitted, and the Holy Spirit is given abundant opportunities to convict the guilty and lead him to repentance. Such acts of the local church must be kept within the circle of the sin for as long as possible. Should the final judgment of excommunication be taken, only then should the congregation be apprised of the situation, for then it, too, becomes involved in carrying out the judgment against the sinner, and seeking justice for the one offended.

Not many churches today practice church discipline with any degree of consistency. It seems we have as little taste for this teaching of Jesus as we do for His teaching about the Law of God. Consequently, sins of all kinds ravage the Body of Christ, grace is not provided the necessary space in which to work, the Holy Spirit is quenched, and the holiness, righteousness, and goodness of God's Law are denied.

And the consciences of church members are deprived of an important component of the Lord's purifying work.

It takes a community for the Law of God to accomplish its good, wise, holy, and loving purposes. And that community must not only teach and obey the Law, but be prepared to enforce its teaching against any who transgress.

For reflection

1. Most people don't think very kindly about church discipline. Why is this so? Is church discipline a form of punishment or an act of love? Explain.
2. How can you see that church discipline cannot be practiced effectively where the Law of God is ignored?
3. What is the goal of church discipline? How can you see that this goal is in line with the purpose of God's Law?

Next steps – Preparation: Does your church practice church discipline? See what you can find out.

5 The Church and the Holy Spirit

Do not quench the Spirit. 1 Thessalonians 5:19

The work of the Spirit

That is a curious word, “quench.” It means “to extinguish” or “to put out” or “restrain.” It’s curious to think that human beings somehow possess the ability to restrain or extinguish the work of the Spirit in their lives.

But what is the work of the Spirit?

In simplest terms, we can say that the work of the Spirit, Who dwells within each believer, is to make us willing and able to live in accordance with the good pleasure of God (Phil. 2:13). Notice the dual emphasis: The Spirit must work both on our *desires* and *aspirations* – so that we are, first, *willing* to do God’s pleasure; then He must *empower us for the doing* of whatever it is that pleases God.

Our hearts, we know, are not naturally inclined to seek or obey the Lord (Jer. 17:9); thus, if we are ever going to be, in the first place, *willing* to do what pleases God, we must have some drastic overhaul of our hearts, our affections. This is precisely what the Spirit comes to do in bringing us into the new covenant, as David, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel testify (Ps. 51:10; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:26, 27). By writing the Law of God on our heart, the Spirit prepares our soul to seek and act in line with the good pleasure of the Lord.

Power to be witnesses

From the moment we receive the Spirit of God, through the agency of new birth (Gal. 4:4), we begin to be *willing* to do what pleases our heavenly Father, out of gratitude for the saving mercy He has extended to us in Jesus Christ.

But being willing is not enough. We must also be *able*. Jesus said that, when the Spirit of God comes upon us, He would bring with Him *spiritual power* to enable us to be His witnesses. Apparently, *being* witnesses for Christ pleases the Father, for it is this work that the Spirit is primarily commissioned to accomplish within us.

But *being* witnesses is first, a matter of the *kind of people we are* and only secondarily of *what we do or say in the world*. The Spirit brings power not, in the first instance, so that we might *go* witnessing, but that we might *be* witnesses. The work of the Spirit in enabling us to do what is pleasing to God, is above all a work of character-formation, a work unto *holiness*.

A work which depends supremely on His teaching us the Law of God; which only makes sense; He is, after all, the *Holy* Spirit, and we would expect any power that He exerts within or through us to be expressive of His presence and character.

Unto holiness

The Holy Spirit is working in each believer to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:12-18), and in every church to build it up as a holy temple unto the Lord (Eph. 2:21, 22; 1 Cor. 12:7-11). All other works and manifestations of the Spirit of God in or through the believer are merely incidental or instrumental to the larger end of making him willing and able to do what pleases God, so that holiness may ensue.

And in the local church, the Spirit operates according the Law and Word of God to make the church a holy temple, a house of prayer and worship, unto the Lord.

ppGod's pleasure

So, what is it, precisely, that pleases our heavenly Father? Various things: It pleases Him to give us the Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit (Lk. 12.32; Rom. 14.17, 18). God is pleased with the life of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and hence, that we should walk in His steps and follow in all His ways (Lk. 2.22; Matt. 17.5). And it pleases God that we should not quench the work of His Spirit, Whom He and the Son have sent in order that we might be holy. And this means giving Him full rein and abundant opportunities, throughout the local church, to teach and affirm the Law of God, written on our hearts.

If we as individual believers, and our churches as expressions of the Body of Christ, would realize the full working of the Spirit, we must resign ourselves to His purposes and His means of accomplishing the ends for which God has sent Him to us. And that has little or nothing to do with ecstatic utterances, mystical visions, or signs and wonders. Rather, it has everything to do with being taught the Law of God by the Spirit of God that we might live, by His power, the life of Jesus Christ unto holiness (Ezek. 36.26, 27).

The life of the Spirit will overflow from within us as we submit to Him and the Law and Word of God (Jn. 7.37-39). But if we neglect the Law of God – through indifference or outright rejection – we quench the Spirit, and thus displease our heavenly Father, to such an extent that even our prayers become an abomination to Him (Prov. 28.9).

The Spirit of God is indispensable to health and growth on the part of believers and their churches; and a major resource in His tool kit for granting life and growth is the Law of God.

For reflection

1. How can we know when the Spirit of God is at work in our soul?
2. How can we know when the Spirit of God is at work in our church?
3. What are some ways that we routinely quench the Spirit, and deprive ourselves of His power?

For reflection – Transformation: In which areas of your life would you like to see more evidence of the Spirit working? What steps can you take today?

6 Uses of the Law in the Church

Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law. Romans 3.31

No place for the Law?

We're making the point that the Law of God, which, as we have seen, has continuing validity for believers, and is of crucial importance in purifying the conscience, requires a community of believers who love the Law, for it to have its maximum benefit for each believer. Only as local churches commit to the Law of God – to learn, obey, and teach it – will individual believers know that supportive and sustaining environment of holiness, righteousness, and goodness to encourage them in taking the Law to heart. And only as communities of believers live out the Law in their daily lives will it have the impact of bringing God's wisdom to the larger community, and of piquing others to learn more about it and the God Who gives it (Deut. 4.6-9; Mic. 4.1-8).

In our text, Paul had just completed a summary argument against the idea that people can be saved by keeping the Law of God. This is what certain Jewish sects were teaching in his day, and Paul denied such teaching vigorously. Men cannot, by their own efforts at keeping the Law of God, attain the righteousness necessary for finding acceptance with God. Only Jesus Christ can provide that. We are saved, Paul insisted, by clinging to Jesus and appropriating, by grace through faith, His righteousness as our own.

That being the case, it might seem that there is no place for the Law of God in the life of the believer or his church. Immediately Paul moves to disabuse his readers of any such notion. "Do we then make void the law through faith?" he asks. And then answers emphatically, "Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law." But establish it for what purposes, Paul?

Uses of the Law

Obviously, in Paul's mind, the Law is of much use for believers and their communities. In Romans 7, Paul explains three uses of the law in the life of the church. I know that some will argue that, in Romans 7, Paul is describing his pre-Christian experience. But this argument derives, I believe, from a predisposition against the abiding validity of the Law of God in the life of the believer or the Church. If we let Paul speak for himself, he doesn't appear to be describing *past* experience in this chapter; all the relevant verbs are in the present tense. He's talking about his *ongoing experience* as a believer, and anyone who reads this passage for its plain meaning can certainly identify with what the apostle describes.

What, then, are the uses of the Law of God, as Paul outlines them in Romans 7?

First, the Law of God is useful to *define the nature of sin* and to alert the believer or the congregation to its presence or the presence of temptation (Rom. 7.7). Remember, the Spirit of God is at work within us, to make us willing and able to live within the pleasure of God. A central part of His work is to warn or convict us of sin (Jn. 16.8-11), which He does by shining the pure light of the Law of God on the dark recesses of our souls or paths. Paul says we'll never know what sin is, or be aware of its presence, if we refuse to subject our mind, heart, and conscience to the searchlight of God's Law.

Second, Paul insists that the Law of God *marks out the path of holiness, righteousness and goodness* for the believer. We have been redeemed by grace through faith unto a life of good works (Rom. 7.12; Eph. 2.8-10). Again, the Spirit within us works not only to warn or convict us of sin, but also to teach us the way of righteousness (Jn. 16.8-11; Ezek. 36.26, 27); and the holy and righteous and good Law of God is His instructional aid of choice, the "core curriculum" of our sanctification.

Finally, the Law of God *exposes the law of sin that operates within us* as result of the lingering effects of the fall

(Rom. 7.21-23); thus the Spirit uses the Law to warn us of divine displeasure, should we choose to follow the law of sin instead of the Law of God, and of Fatherly discipline which will surely ensue (Jn. 16.8-11; Heb. 12.10, 11).

Abolish the Law?

The Law of God is thus essential to such elemental aspects of the life of faith as spiritual growth, being equipped for ministry, exercising church discipline, stimulating one another to love and good works, raising our children unto the Lord, admonishing, correcting, and teaching one another, working for justice and righteousness in the larger society, and understanding and learning from the trials and afflictions God brings our way from time to time.

Shall we abolish this holy and righteous and good Law? As Paul would say, “Certainly not!” We need the Law of God, flourishing within communities of faith, for the strengthening of each believer and the purifying of our conscience; and for the peace and wellbeing of the larger community where we pass our exile in this world (Jer. 29.7).

For reflection

1. Apart from the Law of God, how would we be able to recognize temptation, when it arises in our path? How does the Law work to help us resist the devil?
2. Meditate on Psalm 1. Suggest a practical way of following the counsel of this psalm with respect to learning the Law of God.
3. Why do we say that a community committed to God’s Law is essential for each believer to be purified in his conscience by the Law?

Next steps – Conversation: Share your answer to question 2 with a believing friend, and ask your friend to pray for you as you take up this discipline.

7 Teaching the Law of God in the Church

*Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.* Psalm 1.1, 2

The indispensable Law

We have seen that the Law of God is indispensable to a healthy, growing Christian life, as well as to the nurturing of a healthy, growing local church. The Law, written by the Spirit on our hearts and minds, becomes the rule book which the conscience consults in processing thoughts and affections into words and deeds. Without the Law available to our conscience, we will be subject to whim or the pressures of the day regarding our spiritual vitality and moral choices. We need the Law for the purifying of the conscience and the nurture of our souls.

The Law of God is the curriculum of God's Spirit, by which He forms the believer *and* the congregation into the image of Jesus Christ. The fashionable neglect afforded the Law of God by contemporary Christians is an unwise posture and course. Instead, we should seek ways to be more firmly grounded in the Law of God, until we all, as individuals and congregations, delight in that Law and in the use the Spirit of God makes of it in our lives.

The Law will not save us; however, the Law remains as the platform and footprint on which we and our churches grow increasingly into the image of Jesus Christ.

Getting the cornerstone in place

How then shall we set about to restore a proper place for the Law of God in the teaching of the Church? Psalm 1 points us in the direction of a proper course concerning the Law of God.

First, we must *understand the place of the Law* in the canon of sacred Scripture. In one sense, all of Scripture is the Law of God, in that all of Scripture reveals the norms and standards and guidelines whereby God intends His people to know and serve Him. The Law of God, given through Moses, acts rather like a cornerstone for the rest of Scripture, giving shape and direction to the life of faith, and a manifestation of God's glory in love to God and neighbors. The Law of God is the acorn to the oak of all divine revelation. And at the heart of the Law of God – the nucleus of the Law, as it were – as well as its end, is our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is both symbolized and foreshadowed in the Law, and the end toward which obedience to the Law of God carries us.

Without such a settled conviction concerning the role of the Law in *Scripture*, we will have a hard time establishing any place for it in the life of the *believer* or the *church*.

Individuals and the Law

We restore the proper place of the Law of God in the life of the Church by, first of all, encouraging and exhorting every believer to *make meditation on God's Law* part of their daily devotional life. If only to spend time each morning meditating in listening prayer on one of the Ten Commandments, this would be a quantum leap beyond where most congregations and believers are at present.

But then we must also *teach the Law of God* in a thorough and systematic manner – through preaching, in Sunday schools and Bible study groups, and as part of the written communications of our church. It will not do simply to offer a series of messages on the Law from time to time. While that is a good idea, the Law of

The Law of God and the Church

God, as the cornerstone to all of Scripture, should have some place in all our teaching and preaching.

The Law and disciple-making

Then we must begin to *use the Law in the work of disciple-making*, including the work of church discipline.

Elders and other church leaders should devote special attention to reading and discussing the Law of God, so that they may be equipped to deliberate situations that may arise from time to time within the church. Like Ezra, church leaders should set their hearts to study the Law of God, and to do it and teach it in all aspects of the life of the congregation (Ez. 7.10). Parents and church leaders should also acquaint themselves with the Law, so that they may teach it effectively to the children of the church (Ps. 78.1-8).

Witness to the world

Finally, the Law of God must feature in the church's witness to the surrounding community – both to individuals in need of saving grace, and to the powers-that-be concerning their duty to rule according to God's good purposes and plan.

We must be neither afraid nor reluctant to say to the lost or to those in places of power and influence, "This is what the Lord says," and then proceed to explain more carefully what, in their heart of hearts, they know most certainly to be true.

The Law of God must become more central to the lives of believers and their churches, for the purifying of conscience, and to know the fullness of God's blessings in Jesus Christ.

For reflection

1. What is your own practice in becoming more familiar with and obedient to the Law of God?
2. It's not enough that individual believers make this commitment to the Law. Churches must embrace it as their standard of conduct for wisdom, goodness, righteousness, justice, and love. Explain.
3. Why is it important to have the Law of God as part of our witness to the saving work of Jesus Christ?

Next steps – Transformation: Make sure you have a discipline in place for learning and growing in the Law of God. Then, see what you might do to help this become a more central aspect of your church's life and work. Talk with a church leader and see what you can do to help.

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Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Why do we insist that, for the Law of God to have its most beneficial effect in purifying the conscience of believers, it must be part of the life of their local church?
2. How should the church make use of the Law of God for growing in unity and maturity in the Lord Jesus?
3. How should the local church use the Law of God to bring the blessings of His promises and wisdom to the community of which they are a part?
4. How would you counsel a new believer to begin delighting in the Law of God as part of their daily disciplines?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned about the Law of God and the local church? How are you putting that lesson to work in your walk with and work for the Lord?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.