

LAW AND CONSCIENCE

THE GOOD CONSCIENCE 2



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A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Strong Souls 19
Law and Conscience
The Good Conscience 2
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Welcome to *Law and Conscience*

The conscience is the keeper of values and priorities in the soul, which it employs to bring heart and mind together for sound judgments.

Which means that, in every conscience, some set of rules – some rule book – is in place to maintain order and equilibrium in the soul. For the Christian, that rule book can only be the Law of God. And in this part of our study in “Strong Souls” we will see how and why that is so.

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 Which Rule Book?

So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. James 2.12

Saved for good works

Martin Luther, the great 16th century apologist for the doctrine of justification by faith, had some trouble with the Epistle of James, especially chapter 2. Here James labors to point out that true faith – saving faith – must be validated in good works. Luther scratched his head over this and concluded that James was a “right strawy epistle.” He didn’t reject it; he simply struggled to put together James’ insistence on good works with Paul’s explanation that justification is by grace through faith alone.

But the apostle Paul reconciled the two ideas in Ephesians 2.10, where he explained that those who have been saved by grace through faith are saved unto good works, specifically, those good works which God has before ordained for us to walk in.

Well, which good works might *those* be?

Back to James, and to his straightforward explanation: “So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty.” There is a standard for Christian conduct, a rule book to guide the conscience as it brings heart and mind together for good words and good works. And that standard has very little to do with what *we* think is right for us. The standard by which God will judge our behavior is the “law of liberty”, or, as James calls it in verse 8, “the royal law.” Thus, Christians should make sure that all our speaking and living are in line with this divine standard.

Which Law?

But which law is the “royal law”, the “law of liberty”?

In the context of his statement – James 2 – the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ quotes from the Ten Commandments (v. 11) and a supporting statute (v. 8, cf. Lev. 19.18). In that same chapter, he warns Christians against acting like “judges with evil thoughts” (v. 4) by showing partiality to rich people over the poor – a precept he appears to have derived from Leviticus 19.15. In chapter 5 of his epistle, James condemns those who do not pay wages in a timely manner – a standard of justice based on the eighth commandment and drawn from the civil law of Israel in Deuteronomy 24.14, 15.

James undoubtedly means by *the law of liberty* the Law of God as expressed in the Ten Commandments, elaborated, illustrated, and explained by the civil laws of ancient Israel. Can this possibly be? Does James mean to say that the good works God has redeemed us for, those which should be the default values and priorities of our consciences, are the very ones set forth in the Law of God, and that this Law is the standard for divine well-doing?

I see no other alternative. The Law of God, contrary to the views of the many contemporary Christians, including a good many preachers, is the law of liberty and the standard of goodness by which we are to live unto the Lord. We have no hope of establishing a good conscience in our soul without the Law of God being established there (Rom. 3.31).

Mind, heart, conscience

This only makes sense. Our heavenly Father has sent His Spirit into our *hearts*, where He has opened a school of instruction which has as its core curriculum the Law of God (Ezek. 36.26, 27). God intends that we should delight in the Law in our hearts, and desire to know and live within its guidelines and teaching, for the Law of God shows us the path of love and leads to greatness in the Kingdom of God (1 Jn. 5.1-3; Matt. 5.17-19).

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Further, the Law of God represents the *mind* of the Spirit (Rom. 8.5-9). If we would think like Jesus, as well as desire what He desires, we must be rooted and grounded in the Law of God, and in all the Scriptures for which that Law is the acorn to the oak.

In the soul, the conscience houses our values, priorities, and default choices. It is the locus of the will, that final impulse of the soul that moves us to action. The conscience reads the rule book of God's Law, the works of which the Spirit writes on our hearts (Rom. 2.14, 15), and then commends action in line with the Law of liberty, the royal Law, the holy and righteous and good Law of God (Rom. 7.12).

To reiterate, we cannot expect to have a good or clean conscience unless that referee, that deciding component of our soul, has regular and deep access to the Law of God, embedded in our minds and written on our hearts. This is no doubt why the psalmist insisted that the truly happy person, the one who is living in the righteousness of God's Kingdom, meditates on the Law of God continuously, so as to avoid the ways of sin and pursue with gladness his daily journey in the Lord (Ps. 1).

But in what sense can this Law, which many of us have been taught is a burden from which Jesus freed us, serve to liberate us? As we shall see in this part of our study on *Strong Souls*, in many wondrous and glorious ways, indeed.

For reflection

1. What has been your understanding of the role of God's Law in the life of faith?
2. What place does the Law of God have in your walk with and work for the Lord?
3. What would you suggest as a starting-point for beginning to become better acquainted with the Law of God?

Next steps – Preparation: Review the Ten Commandments, as these are revealed in Exodus 20.1-17 and Deuteronomy 5.6-21. Set aside some time each day to read through these, and to wait in silence as the Lord begins to settle them in your soul.

2 Liberty? Really?

“Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5.19

Salvation and works

The Law of God – the Ten Commandments and the precepts, rules, and civil codes that accompany them – are the Law of liberty, the royal Law which God intends should guide us in doing good works of love to God and neighbors, for His praise and glory (Matt. 22.34-40; Matt. 5.16). These constitute the foundational chapters of the rule book which the conscience consults in preparing us to act in good words and good works.

Make no mistake: Everyone has a rule book for life. You do. I do. Everyone does. So the question is not *whether* but *which*. And the Bible clearly teaches that the Law of God marks out the path of liberty, the broad place for us to flourish in loving God and our neighbors (Ps. 119.45). If we’re not walking that path and following those rules, we’re not in the path God intends for us, and we’re not basking in the freedom of the Spirit and Word of God (Jn. 8.32; 2 Cor. 3.12-18).

The Law of God provides the *footprint* for all of God’s revelation in Scripture. All the Bible unfolds according to and as elaboration of what Moses recorded in the first five books. The Law contains those good works which God has before ordained that we should walk in them (Eph. 5.10). Ignorance of the Law of God is certainly no excuse for incompetence in Christian living. Indeed, it’s a formula for utter and complete failure.

I am not unaware that some readers are saying, “No, no!” even as they read these words. Some will want to say, “I’m not under Law! I’m under grace!” Some will even go so far as one evangelical theologian who wrote, “For the Christian, the Law is a dead and a useless thing.”

But your argument is not with me: it’s with the apostles James, Paul, and John, and the writer of Psalm 119, as we shall see. More than that, it’s with the Lord Jesus Himself, Who taught us that you cannot attain to greatness in His Kingdom without obedience to the Law of God and faithful urging of that Law on all the followers of Christ. That is, you cannot serve God and others as fully as Jesus intends apart from the Law of God (Mk. 10.42-45).

This is not salvation *by* works, but salvation *unto* them. But which works? The good works prescribed in the holy, righteous, and good Law of God (Rom. 7.12). Paul insisted that just because we cannot be *saved* by God’s Law, does not mean we do not *establish* the Law as the holy and righteous and good standard of righteousness for our lives (Rom. 3.31).

Called to keep the Law

Believers in Christ are called to confirm, work out, express, and enjoy the full power of their salvation by keeping the Law of God. Those who refuse, fail, or neglect to do so must consider that, despite having confessed Jesus as Savior and Lord, they may not have come to saving faith at all (Matt. 7.20; 1 Jn. 2.1-6; Jms. 2.14-26). Indeed, to the extent they continue to neglect the Law of God, they not only “praise the wicked” but even their prayers may become an abomination in God’s sight (Prov. 28.4, 9).

The reason is simple, as James explained. The Law of God is a *liberating* moral code. It does not encumber us with man-made obligations and traditions, like the Pharisees in Jesus’ day tried to do. Nor does it leave us enslaved to personal whim or fashionable notions of truth, justice, goodness, and love. Rather, the Law liberates us from merely human protocols and priorities into the clear light of divinely-revealed truth. It sets us free from the confusion and uncertainty of our own best guesses or unchecked lusts into the unchanging

reliability of God-given standards. It frees us from relativism and pragmatism into the light of life and truth. The Law of liberty helps us navigate the shoals of mere sentiment or passing fancy. It shatters the bonds of guilt and the allure of sin, bringing us to the forgiveness of Christ and the sweet attractiveness of the divine presence.

The Law of God liberates us from folly into glory; all who live and teach the Law of God discover the course of Christ's Kingdom and walk the path of good works that Jesus Himself did (1 Jn. 2.1-6). To neglect reading, meditating, and obeying the Law of God is to play hooky from the school of the Spirit and to consign mind and heart to whim and self-interest, leaving the conscience to languish, tethered only to fleeting notions of goodness and truth. And when the conscience is not free to serve the Lord, the heart and mind will strive and quarrel over which should rule the soul, making not for a strong soul, but a feeble and fickle one.

I am not here considering the laws of sacrifice, diet, and cleansing, all of which pertained to the ancient priesthood of Israel. Those laws ceased when Jesus assumed the eternal priesthood from the tribe of Judah, rather than Levi (Heb. 7-10). They have some abiding value even now, as Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 9, but we look to them only for *principles* and not specific *practices*.

And we're not auguring for believers to take each statute of the civil code of Old Testament Israel and carry it out on their own authority. As we shall see, right use of the Law of God is a *community* endeavor, beginning with each individual, but coming to fullest expression within the Body of Christ as a whole.

What we are saying, echoing the apostles and the Lord, is that the Law of God is of enduring value for those who believe in Jesus – indeed, for all people – in learning to walk the path of holiness, righteousness, goodness, and love – the path of Christian discipleship (Rom. 7.12; 1 Jn. 5.1-3). We are unable to walk that path on our own strength, as we shall see; and we cannot walk that path to *earn* our salvation.

However, if we have come to know Jesus as Savior and Lord, and have been born again into the light of His truth, then taking up the Law of God, to obey and teach it, will lead us into the freedom of the sons and daughters of God, and liberate our consciences to guide us into every good work.

Perhaps you have a choice to make right now: Will you commit to learning, delighting in, obeying, and sharing the holy and righteous and good Law of God? Or will you leave your conscience to twist in the winds of mere sentiment, passing fancy, or wishful thinking?

For reflection

1. We're not saved *by* good works, but we're not saved *without* them. Explain.
2. From what does the Law of liberty liberate us? How does it do that?
3. Why do you think many Christians are wary of the Law of God? What would you say to those who deny we have any continuing obligation to the Law?

Next steps – Transformation: Think about the people in your Personal Mission Field – the people you see in the places you go each day. How would they benefit from your knowing and obeying the Law of God more consistently?

3 Freedom in the Spirit

*And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit...*Ephesians 5.18

Good and necessary

I don't know a single Christian who doesn't believe that being filled with the Spirit of God is a good and necessary thing.

But I know lots of believers who don't have a clue as to what that means.

For some, the filling of the Spirit is a simple formula: breathe out your sins through confession, breathe in the Spirit by prayer. As if we could manipulate the Holy Spirit of God by incantation!

Others insist that the filling of the Spirit is realized through the manifestation of extraordinary gifts. In some churches, you can even find instruction in how to "prime the pump" of your speech by uttering mindless, repetitious phrases until the Spirit takes over and, *voilà*, you're filled with Him. That, too, seems rather manipulative to me – not to mention, nowhere taught in Scripture.

Still others will insist that being filled with the Spirit means don't drink, don't smoke, and don't hang with those that do. Lots of people who don't believe in Jesus would fall into this category, but I doubt we would consider them filled with the Spirit.

For most Christians, I suspect, being "filled with the Spirit" is something you agree to with reservations. I mean, sure, we want to be filled with the Spirit, but, like, what might that get me into?

Pleasing God

With such divergent views of the filling of the Spirit, we do well to see if Scripture has any clear and complementary instruction to help us understand what Paul means. The Spirit of God, we know, teaches us the things of God by comparing passages of Scripture with one another so that, in their harmonizing tones, we can hear and delight in the truth of God (1 Cor. 2.12, 13). So the *filling* of the Spirit definitely will require us following Him around in Scripture a bit.

The Spirit actively works to shape our mind and heart with the Law of God (Ezek. 36.26, 27; Psalm 119), so that our conscience can clearly discern the course of good works for walking in the Spirit (Rom. 8.5-9). The better we understand what it means to be filled with the Spirit, the more of His liberty we will experience, living in the glory of God's Law and being transformed into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I want us to look briefly at three passages of Scripture that relate to the work and filling of the Spirit of God. In the light of these texts, we can gain a better understanding of what God has liberated us unto in His holy and righteous and good Law. We will see that living in the Spirit, and being filled with Him, takes place within the framework of obedience to God's Law. To put that another way, we have no Biblical hope for the filling of the Spirit apart from delighting in and obeying the Law of God. Period.

The first passage is Philippians 2.13. Here Paul says God is at work within us to make us willing and able to do whatever is in line with His pleasure. Now we know that the Spirit of God, sent to dwell in the heart of all who believe in Jesus, is the power of God Who works within us to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ (Acts 1.8; 2 Cor. 3.12-18; Eph. 3.20).

But in what does God take pleasure? What is the Spirit working within us to make us willing and able to do?

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Could it be those good works for which we have been redeemed, and which God has prepared for us beforehand in His Law (Eph. 2.10)? God is good, and He takes pleasure in His own goodness. His Law expresses that goodness (Rom. 7.12), as a guide for our conscience to lead us into the pleasure of God. The Spirit is at work within us, therefore, teaching us the Law of God, so that He might empower us for good works according to the Law of liberty and bring us into the pleasure of the Lord.

Convicted of sin

Second, Jesus taught that the Spirit of God will convict and instruct us when He comes to dwell within us (Jn. 16.8-11). This is how He begins to make us willing and able to do the good works of God. He convicts us of our sins – which Paul says He does by pointing us to the Law of God (Rom. 7.7) – and He teaches us the way of righteousness, which is the way of Christ’s Kingdom (Rom. 14.17, 18) and the way of God’s Law (Ps. 1).

By exposing us to the light of God’s Law, the Spirit of God convicts us of sin and points us down the path of right living and good works, thus liberating us from our own foolish notions about good and evil or right and wrong.

Obedience to God’s Law

Finally, as we have seen, through the prophet Ezekiel, God specifically told us that, when He gives His Spirit to His people it will be so that the Spirit will teach us His Law and enable us to walk in obedience to it (Ezek. 36.26, 27).

The Spirit of God – Who is, we should recall, the *Holy Spirit* – is working within us through conviction and instruction to make us willing and able to understand and obey the Law of God, the Law of liberty. As we take up the *holy* Law of God we are liberated from the life of the flesh into the life of the *Holy Spirit* of God. And the more we take up that Law, the more we will be *filled with the Spirit* according to the teaching of God’s Word. Our *mind* will be filled with God’s truth; our *heart* will delight in it; and our *conscience* will bring heart and mind together into good words and good works, empowered by the Holy Spirit of God, overflowing from within our souls (Jn. 7.37-39).

If we want to be filled with the Spirit – if we want to know the *true freedom* that is ours in the Spirit – then we will station ourselves squarely within the path marked out by the Law of God, and all God’s Word, for the Spirit works *in* the Law and *by* the Law to liberate us from folly, and to fill and transform us into the Law-keeping image of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18).

For reflection

1. How your understanding of the “filling of the Spirit” changed?
2. Meditate on Philippians 2.13 and Ephesians 3.20. What kind of outlook on life should these passages foster in a believer?
3. Meditate on 2 Corinthians 3.12-18. Explain the relationship between the Law of God, the image of Jesus Christ, the glory of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit (Phil. 2.13; Eph. 3.20). In what way is this true liberty?

Next steps - Transformation: The psalmist says that those who are righteous in the Lord’s sight make a practice of meditating regularly on His holy and righteous and good Law (Ps. 1). Have you adopted this practice?

4 Get in Touch with Your Heart

...for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them... Romans 2.14, 15

Self-actualized?

Self-actualization – discovering their true identity – is these days an item of concern for many people. The US Army exhorted us some years back to “Be all that you can be.” An old Sammy Davis, Jr. song insisted, “I gotta be me.” The frustration of achieving a sense of self-actualization was echoed by U2’s song, “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.” Films, literature, television programs, and all kinds of social media provide abundant examples of people who are trying to get in touch with themselves, discover who they really are, establish their true identity, and actualize what’s inside them trying to get out.

This is a very human activity, of course, a striving to know who we are in our heart of hearts. We know of no animals that fret and fuss and carry on about getting in touch with their heart.

But discovering an identity does seem to be an elusive objective. Psychologists and psychiatrists, as well as drug companies, make a living trying to help people sort through the confusion and uncertainty of life so that they can get in touch with their inner persons.

I think it’s probably the case that we all experience some *cri de coeur*, some anguished longing, angry protest, or other heart-felt sentiment, which we feel to be the real *me*, the person I’m meant to be; and we struggle to discover what it is that’s trying to break out of our heart into our authentic self.

“I gotta be me,” we cry, but learning who “me” is can be a frustrating challenge.

Willing to listen?

But it doesn’t have to be that big a struggle. Listening to our heart to discover why we’re here and who we’re meant to be isn’t a bad idea. The problem is that too many people are not really interested in knowing what’s in their heart; they’re interested in having in their heart, as well as in their lives, whatever it is they think will make them happy. Rather than let their heart *speak* to them, they spend their lives *trying to tell their heart* what it ought to feel, desire, aspire to, and finally come to love. They become jerked around by fleeting trends of identity-seeking as they work to shape their heart rather than listen to it.

If people truly listened to their heart, they would conclude as Augustine did in the opening chapter of his *Confessions*: “You have made us for Yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You.” The image of God is stamped on every human soul, but many people have denied or ignored that fact, and have buried the knowledge of God under the detritus of a materialistic and sensual age (Rom. 1.18-32). They have seared their consciences to the truth of God and corrupted their hearts in a vain search for an identity other than that which God has created in them.

And here is yet another way in which the Law of God shows itself to be the Law of liberty, to which James refers in his epistle, which guides us into the true path of how we must live.

The Bible teaches that, in our heart of hearts, people are created to know and do the works of God’s Law. I know that seems unlikely. Just look around: Where’s the evidence that people are interested in knowing and doing the works of God’s Law?

But many people are deceived. They have denied or ignored that revelation of truth from God which could

set them on a true path of self-knowledge. Or perhaps some spiritual power has led them to believe that true freedom, and thus true identity, is to be found in their own ideas or some passing fancy of the times, rather than in the deep but unheard inclination of their heart.

The Bible teaches that it is written on the spiritual fabric of every person's soul to carry out the commandments of God (Rom. 2.14, 15). Only when we refuse to do so do we begin to run into trouble, for then we're trying to be something we aren't. We're trying to be a law unto ourselves, rather than to follow what God has written on our heart, and our accusing conscience leaves us confused, uncertain, and burdened with guilt – at least, until our conscience becomes seared and hardened against the truth of who we really are.

We are made in the image of God, and not our own image, or that of the passing interests of the age. We will never be all that we can be, or ever discover what we're looking for, until we let our heart do the speaking and tell us what God intends.

Made for the Law

The Law of God can help us to be what God has created us to be, because it teaches us plainly how we ought to live. Indeed, one of the primary features of the New Covenant is that God writes the Law – not just the *works* of the Law, but the Law itself – on the hearts of those who believe (Jer. 31.33; Ezek. 36.26, 27). Once a person comes to saving faith, what he “knew” instinctively, but probably suppressed and ignored, now comes stunningly to light – he is made, and has been redeemed, to live out the good works of the Law of God (Eph. 2.8-10).

As we take up the Law of God, under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit, we begin to sense, “Yes, this is what I was made for. This is right and true and good. This is God.” The saved heart resonates with the Law of God. The saved mind – the mind of Christ – gladly embraces it. And the saved conscience values the Law as the foundation and guide for loving God and men.

In the Law of God we find what we've been looking for, so that we can be all we're meant to be. As we meditate on the Law of God we discover the “me” we've gotta be – made in God's image, redeemed by His grace, called to His Kingdom and glory, and set on a course of glad obedience to His Law. We are liberated from the confusion, doubt, and anxiety of our own or the world's best ideas, into the glorious light and liberty of the sons and daughters of God.

This is the work of God's Spirit, as He restores the conscience and fills, sculpts, and transforms us into the image of Jesus Christ, according the teaching of God's Law (2 Cor. 3.12-18).

For reflection

1. Paul says God has written the works of the Law on the heart of every person. What evidence do you see that this is so? How is God *re-writing* His Law on hearts today? Whose?
2. Paul says that people can allow their consciences to become *seared*, so that they no longer pay attention to the works of the Law written on their hearts (1 Tim. 4.1, 2). How does this happen? Do you think the Church today contributes to this problem in any way? Explain.
3. Paul says in 1 Timothy 1.5 that love flows from a clean heart and a good conscience. What role does the Law of God have in this?

Next steps – Conversation: What are you learning about the work of the conscience that is new or helpful? Share something with a believing friend today.

5 Like Jesus

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. 2 Corinthians 3.18

The glory of the Law

In its setting, our text is speaking about looking into the Law of God, and encountering in that Law the very Presence of God Himself, His glory – just like Moses did on Mt. Sinai. The Law of God reflects the glory of God, and, under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, we learn to *see* that glory, even more powerfully than Moses did, and to be *transformed* by that glory.

One would think that would be reason enough to hold the Law of God in high regard.

Again, Paul is saying that, as we look into the Law of God, the Spirit of God works to transform our souls. Taking the raw material – which is our old life, now redeemed – He uses the glory of God in the Law (and, indeed, in all His Word) to shape, sculpt, and transform us into the very image of Jesus Christ. We begin to be more like Jesus as the Law and Word of God, in the strong hands of the Holy Spirit, does its work in our soul – mind, heart, and conscience.

Thus, we are liberated by the Law of God from the old person we used to be – with all our foolish, selfish, and corrupt notions and sentiments, and all our wayward priorities and practices – into someone who begins to refract the character, values, habits, and works of Jesus Christ (Eph. 4.17-24).

Put another way, the Law of God, as the Spirit writes it on our hearts and embeds it in our minds, becomes the *rule book of the conscience* whereby we can become what we're looking for, all we *can* be, by being made increasingly like Jesus.

What would Jesus do?

Back in the late 19th century Charles Sheldon made a large impact inviting readers to ask, “What would Jesus do?” in any situation, as a way of following Him more consistently. In our own generation, we have seen that slogan and passion revived. The idea of doing what Jesus would do, of being like Jesus, appeals to believers in every walk of life.

And well it should.

In their heart of hearts, Christians want to be like Jesus. This is a very good thing, of course. We're tired of the old sinful person we were. We chafe against the continuing presence of the law of sin in our hearts. We want some relief from the daily barrage of temptations that so often lead us astray. We want to see more of the love of Christ coming through us to the world.

If only we could be liberated from all this sin and sadness, to become more like Jesus!

Well, we can. Paul tells us that the answer to the cry of our heart, our longing to be like Jesus, lies in the glory of God which He has encoded in His Word, including His Law. The Law of God is the law of liberty because it frees us from self and the world to be like Jesus.

Conditions of this freedom

There are some conditions, of course.

First, Paul says, we must *hope* that this glory and transformation can occur within us (2 Cor. 3.12). That is, we

must *believe* that we can meet God in His Law, that is, that we can encounter His glory in the holy, righteous, and good teachings of His commandments, precepts, statutes, and rules. For many of us, this will mean a serious change of mind, since looking into the Law of God is not something we've ever taken very seriously. We must ask God to increase such hope within us, for without that hope and expectation, we will never see in Scripture what God intends, and we will be content with only the surface teachings of His Word.

Then, second, we must be *very bold* to come before God in His Law and linger there, waiting in patient meditation for the Spirit of God to do His work. Recall the importunate widow who kept knocking and calling on the reluctant judge to do his job (Lk. 18.1-8). We must wait patiently and prayerfully for the Law to reveal the glory God has hidden within it (Prov. 25.2), expecting that we will experience the very face of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4.6)!

Then linger in the Presence of God's glory. Study the contours of Jesus' face, as the Law radiates His love and shapes your soul to refract that love and glory to others. Look into His eyes as He looks into yours. The Puritan theologian John Owen reminded us that every Christian has some vision of Jesus in mind. Say the name, Jesus, and every Christian will think of something, will see something in their mind. Our desire, as Owen writes in *Christologia*, should be ever to improve that vision or image, so that we may see Jesus more clearly with the eye of faith and thus be transformed more into His likeness. In his *Treatise on Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards wrote, "By the sight of the transcendent glory of Christ, true Christians see Him worthy to be followed; and so are powerfully drawn after Him; they see Him worthy that they should forsake all for Him. By the sight of that superlative amiableness, they are thoroughly disposed to be subject to Him, and engaged to labour with earnestness and activity in His service, and made willing to go through all difficulties for His sake."

That glory of Jesus awaits us in His Word, beginning with His Law.

From the Presence of Jesus and His glory we must go forth for and unto God's glory. We must come away from our encounter with God's glory in His Law, fully determined to be like Jesus, think and feel like Jesus, and do what Jesus would do, to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10.31-11.1). As we thus go forward in faith, the Lord meets us in His Spirit, fills us with His Presence and power, works out our salvation in us, and makes us able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we could ever ask or think (Phil. 2.13; Eph. 3.20).

And so, in the daily course of our lives, we are liberated from our old selves into the new selves which are being made according to the righteousness of Jesus Christ. This is why God wrote His Law on our hearts when He sent His Spirit to dwell in us, so that, by His inward power and working, we might *become* more like Jesus, and, in every situation in our lives, we might *do* what Jesus would do.

This focus on seeking Jesus in God's Word, beginning with His Law, is a powerful determinant of a good conscience. The more we see Jesus and do what Jesus would do, the more we firm up the convictions and priorities of our soul to know, love, and serve Him always.

For reflection

1. Meditate on Ephesians 4.17-24. How can the Law of God help us in this process? Why?
2. How would you counsel a new believer to be *very bold* in coming to the Word and Law of God? Bold for what?
3. We are transformed into the image of Christ "*from glory to glory.*" What does that mean?

Next steps – Transformation: Meditate on 2 Corinthians 3.12-18. How do you experience this in your life? How would you encourage a believing friend to experience this transforming glory?

6 The Pursuit of Greatness

“Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5.19

Our highest priority

A popular business book of a few years ago carries the title, *Good to Great*, by Jim Collins. Its purpose is to guide good companies to become great ones – more productive and profitable, better products and services, more revenue, a richer culture and happier staff, and a better standing in the world.

Moving from good to great: what business wouldn’t want that?

The book, of course, was a huge best-seller, because anyone who has a good business has had a taste of how exhilarating that can be. Naturally, therefore, such a person would like to get from good to great, and this book evidently has helped many businesses to fulfill that desire.

Jesus said that the highest priority of every Christian is to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6.33). Whatever else we do – make a living, raise a family, play sports, take care of the lawn, love our wives, vote in the next election, be active in church, listen to some Bach – all this and everything else besides must be accomplished within the overall framework of seeking the Kingdom of God.

God Himself has called us to His Kingdom and transferred us into it via His Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 2.12; Col. 1.13; Gal. 4.6). Kingdom-seeking thus becomes a full-time calling that embraces and transforms every aspect of our lives. Once a believer starts to do that, and begins to realize how good, how truly good it is to live in the Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit, he will understand that this is what life is all about (Rom. 14.17, 18). This is the *good* life, as God intends it.

It’s so good, in fact, that anyone who has tasted of it will want to move on from good to great.

From good to great

Living in God’s Kingdom is good, to be sure; but if it is possible to go from good to great in the Kingdom of God, most of us, I think, would want to move on to that higher plateau. Something in our soul, whetted with the notion of *greatness*, longs to realize it. The mind strives to conceive it; the heart greatly desires it; and the conscience makes it a priority in everything. Becoming great in the Kingdom of God means great right where you are, constant in knowing and loving Jesus, faithful in all things to serve and glorify Him, fruitful and edifying and encouraging and “lovely” (Hopkins) in Jesus. Yeah – *great!*

Jesus said it is possible to go from good to great in the Kingdom. If we don’t want that, we should ask ourselves, Why not? If we’ve tasted the good rule of King Jesus and are offered greatness, yet we demur, what does that say about the nature of our faith?

Greatness in the Kingdom is available for everyone who has tasted and seen that the Lord is good. All that’s necessary is to keep the Law of God and teach others to do so as well.

How does that work? How does keeping and teaching the Law of God lead to greatness in the Kingdom?

It’s simple. The more we keep and teach the Law of God, the more we see Jesus there (Jn. 5.39). The more we see Jesus, the more we will become like Him (2 Cor. 3.12-18), and the more we will grow in love for God and our neighbors (Matt. 22.34-40), inclining us to serve them by whatever means may be at hand. Thus, whatever we have done that is *good* we will want to ratchet up to *greatness* as Jesus is formed in us by His Spirit.

Law and Conscience

As we go from good to great, the reality of the Kingdom and the hope it conveys will become more evident in us, creating more opportunities to tell others about our good and great Savior (1 Pet. 3.15).

Is it a priority of your conscience to referee your soul for greatness in the Kingdom of God?

The Law teaches the way of love, and by keeping the Law, love becomes the highest value and priority of the conscience. Keep the Law, and you will learn the priorities, protocols, and practices of love, fortifying your conscience to guide your heart and mind into loving action. And as you love, you will serve like Jesus did. He promised that those who would be greatest of all must be servants of all (Mk. 10.43). The Law equips us for loving service, so it empowers us for Kingdom greatness.

Further, keeping the Law allows us to know the filling of the Spirit, to escape the clutches of the lie – in all its forms – and to refract the glory of God into every arena of our lives, all our relationships, roles, and responsibilities. Thus we become great for Jesus right where we are.

Ticket to greatness

The Law of God is thus the ticket from the bleachers to the box seats, from the nose bleed section of the Kingdom to the orchestra row, from good to great as a citizen and ambassador of the Lord. It can set us free from the morass of a “good enough” faith into the glory and joy of greatness in the Kingdom of God.

On the mount of transfiguration, Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here.” But he wasn’t satisfied with *good*. Peter wanted *great*. He wanted to stay there permanently, basking in the glory of God as it radiated through the person of the Law-keeping Christ. It was *good* to be there with Jesus in His glory. But it would have been *great* to abide there permanently, in the fullness of joy and pleasures forever more of our glorious Lord and King (Ps. 16.11).

Once you have truly tasted the goodness of God’s Kingdom, you won’t be content with anything other than greatness. Any businessman who is content for his company to be merely good when the way to greatness is clearly explained, is probably setting his company up, not for continuing goodness, but for inevitable mediocrity. Striving for greatness in the Kingdom of God will define the way we seek the Kingdom, as the Law of God becomes embedded in our mind, etched into our heart, and established in our conscience.

Believers who say, “My faith is good enough for me,” and who do not desire to be great in the Kingdom, are thinking only about themselves, and not about the needs of their neighbors, or the expectations of our Lord. Jesus challenges us to go from good to great in the Kingdom of God. Their consciences have gone into a state of arrested development, which will ultimately end up in their consciences being seared.

Greatness is offered. Greatness is our destiny. Kingdom greatness is available now.

And the way to greatness is defined along the path marked out by the Law of God.

For reflection

1. In your own life as a Christian, what would it mean for you to go from “good to great”?
2. “The Law equips us for loving service, so it empowers us for Kingdom greatness.” How does the Law of God equip us for serving others?
3. If “the way to greatness is defined along the path marked out by the Law of God”, what are the implications of this for you? How can Kingdom greatness become a defining priority of your conscience?

Next steps – Transformation: What’s one thing you can do to begin moving from “good to great” in your Christian life?

7 Law and Judgment

So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. James 2.12

Surviving the judgment

James says that we should expect to be judged by the Law of liberty – the Law of God. So we'd better live in such a way as to keep that fact in mind. One day all our works will be reviewed in the light of God's holy and righteous and good Law. Since we know this, should we not live in the light of this inevitability, rather than in denial of it?

The Law of God sets a very high standard, to be sure, and none of us can keep it perfectly. Jesus fulfilled the Law of God in two senses. First, through His *active* obedience, He carried out faithfully all the requirements of holiness in God's Law. He completely fulfilled the Law of God for us, and all the righteousness we may ever expect to achieve will only be His, not ours.

Then, in His *passive* obedience, Jesus bore all the judgments of God's Law against all sinners, that is, every human being. Thus, the righteousness we need to satisfy the requirements of God's Law, and to escape its sanctions and judgment, that righteousness is to be found in Jesus Christ. His righteousness is *imputed* to us by grace through faith. And we *pursue* that righteousness as we respond to His call to follow Him and to walk as He did (1 Jn. 2.1-6).

When the guiding priority of our conscience is thus to follow Jesus, we will increase in Him, and in His Kingdom and righteousness, with every passing day.

The judgment of God

We will not be judged by the Law with respect to our salvation. We who believe in Jesus have in Him all the righteousness and satisfaction of judgment we require. We don't keep the Law to be saved, and we don't fear the judgment of the Law because we are saved. Jesus has covered these bases for us.

There are, however, two senses in which God will judge the world by the Law of liberty. First is in the Day of Judgment to come. In that day, every person's works will be examined, and those whose works do not measure up to the standard of God's Law – and who have no one to advocate for them, because they have not known Jesus – will be cast into eternal condemnation.

On the other hand, those who have embraced God's Redeemer as their Advocate, will have their unseemly works burned away as in a fire, though their salvation will remain (1 Cor. 3.12-15). At the Day of Judgment, our works will be judged by the Law of liberty; but we who follow Jesus according to His Law expect to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant," not because of our obedience or righteousness, but because of His.

But the fact that Jesus will get us through the Day of Judgment must not make us complacent. Paul says we must all strive to bring holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1). Bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God must be a very high priority of our conscience. This we do, as we have seen, by learning and obeying God's Law. If we refuse to do this, if we refuse to take up the Law of God as the path indicating how we shall live, God doesn't simply shrug from on high and say, "Oh well." He is our Father. He knows what we need. He has given us the rules governing His house.

And if we will not obey, He will discipline us, and discipline is not pleasant. But its purpose is to yield the fruit of righteousness in our lives – that is, to get us back on track with obeying and encouraging others to obey the Law of God (Heb. 12.7-11).

Law and Conscience

Because that's when we're following Jesus, that's when we're filled with the Spirit, that's when we're being transformed, that's when we're learning to love and to serve, that's when our consciences are good and operating cleanly, and that's when we're moving toward the Kingdom greatness our Father in heaven desires for us.

Serious about God's Law

God is very serious about this. He tells us that those who neglect His Law are out of sync with His plan for them. They do not have the mind of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8.5-8). They're susceptible to being blind-sided by temptation and sin (Rom. 7.7). They're trying to build their "house of faith" on some foundation other than that which He has established in His Law (Rom. 3.31). And they will flounder in their attempts to love God and their neighbors as He commands (Matt. 22.34-40). Even their prayers are an abomination if they will not study and obey His Law (Prov. 28.9).

God is judging the sinful world even now because of its refusal to acknowledge and worship Him (Rom. 1.18-32). This is the second sense of divine judgment. We may certainly expect that we are not exempt from His judgment when we neglect the Law He has written on our hearts, and which He gave His Spirit to teach us. Daily reading and meditation in God's Law is the way of the righteous person (Ps. 1). Hiding the Law in our hearts will help us to walk more fully and joyously in His way (Ps. 119.9-11). Reading, meditating in, and following the Law of God, and all of God's Word, can be a delight for us, so that we learn to say with the psalmist, "Oh, how I love Your Law!" (Ps. 119.97).

Far from being a chain to confine us, or a burden to crush us, the Law of God is the law of liberty, the rule book of the soul, so that we can really live in Jesus Christ. God judges us daily by His Law, so that He may form us more completely into the image of Jesus Christ, fit us for Kingdom greatness, and guide us more fully into the path of love. Let's make sure our priorities are lined up well with His.

For reflection

1. Should Christians be preparing for God's judgment? Why or why not?
2. What does it mean to get serious about God's Law? Do you agree that Christians need to give more attention to this? Why or why not?
3. What is your personal plan for beginning to get serious about the Law of God?

Next steps – Transformation: How will you begin incorporating more reading and meditation in God's Law in your walk with and work for the Lord?

Law and Conscience

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Why should we expect to know God's Law as the "rule book" of our lives?
2. What do we mean by referring to the Law of God as the "Law of liberty"?
3. What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit? How does that relate to keeping God's Law?
4. In what sense are we as believers free from judgment? In what sense are we not?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you incorporating that lesson into your walk with and work for the Lord?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.