

Session 7: The Gospel Centered Church

The Gospel and Salvation: Law/Gospel, Conversion, Sanctification, Assurance

Questions for a Gospel-Centered Church

Salvation by grace through faith alone raises all sorts of questions about our salvation, God's law, holiness, and justice.

- Was the law for a bygone era?
- Was the Old Testament faith based on legalism?
- Should we seek to institute divine law in the civil sphere today?
- Are we saved by grace but sanctified by the law?
- Are we saved by grace but "kept saved" by obedience?
- How do we escape legalism (salvation by works) without falling into antinomianism (complete rejection of God's law, often called "cheap grace")?

How we answer these questions will influence our government of the church and care of individual souls. Key to navigating these questions is understanding God's purpose for the law.

Part One: Law/Gospel Overview

NB: Throughout this section law refers only to Torah, the law of God in the OT. It doesn't refer to a principle of morality or a sense of right and wrong in every human.

Why does it seem that God offers **blessings** and **curses** in return for obedience or disobedience?

- *"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you." Exodus 20:12*
- *Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day" (Dt. 11:26-28).*

How do we answer such a question?

I. Covenant Context

Everyone agrees that all interpretation of scripture should be sensitive to the context in which a given passage of scripture appears. Our point is that every passage of scripture falls into some covenantal context as well as some historical or cultural or linguistic context...The interpreter must always ask, In what ways, if any, are the peculiar features of a given covenant-administration reflected in this particular law? If we ask this of Leviticus 20:11, we answer: the covenant people in the Sinai administration were required to wield the sword, exercising civil/judicial authority to punish certain crimes capitally. The

covenant people in the New Covenant administration are neither required nor permitted (institutional as the people of God-- the church) to wield the sword in such a manner. (John 18) On the other hand, the New Covenant continues to teach that sexual immorality is sin; this is not peculiar to the Sinai administration. Yet we should discipline church members who are sexually immoral, but we should not execute them. T. David Gordon

A. God's original design for humanity (requirements and purpose)

WCF 7.2 The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.

The **Moral Law** is not just a requirement, but a reflection of the moral nature of God. God is holy, just, and good. Man is created in God's image. One can see a form of all of the Ten Commandments prior to sin entering the world.

B. Depth of sin (condemnation and dehumanization)

[22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

[24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

[26] For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; [27] and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

[28] And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. [29] They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, [30] slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, [31] foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. [32] Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (Romans 1:22-32 ESV)

Sin not only deserves our condemnation but also dehumanizes us.

C. God's Promise of Salvation (justification and restoration)

- WCF 7.3 Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and

promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

- WCF 7.5 This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the old testament.

II. The Mosaic Law

The Old Testament is part of the covenant of grace not the covenant of works. Yet, there is a **temporary period under Moses** where Israel, though saved by grace, typologically functioned with a **works principle**.

A. Why the Mosaic Law?

1. When Adam sinned humanity could not fulfill the covenant of works
2. God then made a promise (covenant of grace) that he would save a people.
3. This promise first made to Adam (Gen. 3:15) did not annul the covenant of works, but added to it the promise of substitution. God's grace and justice would meet in this substitution.
4. The Law given to Moses and Israel illustrated the need and God's plan. It did the following:
 - Separated out Israel from other nations (circumcision, purity laws, civil and ceremonial laws)
 - It demonstrated to the world (by separating out Israel) that God would redeem by a representative to stand for humanity and deal with sin
 - Israel's inability to obey illustrated the depth of human sin: the law pointed out the "Adam-ness" of Israel
 - The consequences of temporal "blessing" and "curses" showed the judgment nature of God's relationship with humanity
 - Pointed toward a sacrifice that Christ would provide both the spotless satisfaction of completing the law and the just penalty for breaking the law.
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If it be neither a covenant of works, nor a covenant of grace, then must it of necessity be a third kind of covenant:...It was given by way of subserviency to the Gospel and a fuller revelation of the covenant of grace; it was temporary, and had respect to Canaan and God's blessing there, if and as Israel obeyed. It had no relation to heaven, for that was promised by another covenant which God made before He entered the subservient covenant. This is the opinion which I myself desire modestly to propound, for I have not been convinced that

it is injurious to holiness or disagreeable to the mind of God in Scripture.”
Samuel Bolton, 1645

B. What Changed with Jesus?

1. Fulfillment

[17] “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. [18] For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. (Matthew 5:17-18 ESV)

[4] For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. (Romans 10:4 ESV)

2. Transition Confusion: The New Testament illustrates the difficulty many Jews and Jewish Christians had with the transition

- a. Were Christians still obliged to obey the law of Moses and keep the covenant? Or, were they free from the law and a new people?
- b. Paul wants to argue that they are organically connected to the OT people, they are the new Israel (Rom 11), but they are in a different place in redemptive-history. This changes their identity, mission, and understanding of their future hope.

3. Is the Law bad?

a. Romans 7:7f; 8:3

“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin...sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and righteous and good.”

...For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.”

b. The Law is good, but for anyone “in Adam” it will produce condemnation and death.

C. Justification by Faith Alone

1. Israel could not bear the law (though someone still needed to!) Israel had the same problem as the world, it was “in Adam”.
2. Christ was the true and faithful Israel (and the last Adam, Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15). He lived the full life of righteous obedience to the Law.
3. His death paid the penalty of sin for his people.
4. For those “in Christ” you are now in the “end times.” For those not “in Christ”, you are “in Adam” you still in the “old age”.
5. You are justified by Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. This is received by faith alone.

D. Legalism:

1. What if you continued to observe the Law?
 1. You would be denying Christ’s fulfillment of the Law
 2. You would be continuing to live in the old age.

3. The Law would bring your sin to light and condemn you.
2. The Law in Romans and Galatians
 1. Galatians: Jewish followers of Jesus were infiltrating the Galatian church and telling the Gentiles that they would need to be circumcised (i.e. keep Torah) to be saved. Paul argues that this misunderstands the significance of Christ. We are now saved by faith in Christ's work.
 2. Romans: (The opposite problem) The Jews were kicked out of Rome by Emperor Claudius for a time. Gentiles gained prominence in the church of Rome. When Jews returned they were not welcome back. Paul argues that Christianity DOES INDEED have its organic root in Judaism and gentiles are grafted-in.

III. The Law Now

Three Types of Law: Jesus fulfills all three. All three condemn us in Adam.

- Civil-Israel's government and civil laws
- Ceremonial-Temple sacrifices and purity laws
- Moral-Summarized in the 10 Commandments

Three Uses of the Law: Moral Law remains and functions in the ways.

1. A mirror reflecting the perfect righteousness of God. It exasperates us and shows us our need as sinners for a savior.
2. To restrain evil: It doesn't change our hearts but it can inhibit lawlessness.
3. Moral guide for believers: It tells us what we are being made into.

Richard Gaffin: *"the antithesis between the law and the gospel ends the moment someone becomes a Christian."*

Part Two: Gospel Assurance

Not all believers have assurance, but it is a good thing that all should aspire to and a goal in our shepherding ministry. The key is that assurance must not be found looking inward, but only by reflecting on Christ, his person and his work.

A. Martin Luther: Always repeating the gospel

"There is a righteousness which Paul calls "the righteousness of faith." God imputes it to us apart from our works — in other words, it is passive righteousness... So then, have we nothing to do to obtain this righteousness? No, nothing at all! For this righteousness comes by doing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, but rather in knowing and believing this only — that Christ has gone to the right hand of the Father, not to become our judge, but to become for us our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, our salvation!

Now God sees no sin in us, for in this heavenly righteousness sin has no place. So now we may certainly think, "Although I still sin, I don't despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life." In that righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner

in this life of mine and in my own righteousness, but I have another life, another righteousness above this life, which is in Christ, the Son of God. Christians never completely understand [this] themselves, and thus do not take advantage of it when they are troubled and tempted.

So we have to constantly teach it, repeat it, and work it out in practice.

Anyone who does not understand this righteousness or cherish it in the heart and conscience will continually be buffeted by fears and depression. Nothing gives peace like this passive righteousness. The troubled conscience has no cure for its desperation and feeling of unworthiness unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by grace, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, which is this passive or Christian righteousness."

B. Richard Lovelace: Failing to grasp assurance leads to other sins

"Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives... Many... have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for their justification... drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience.

Much that we have interpreted as a defect of sanctification in church people is really an outgrowth of their loss of bearing with respect to justification. Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons...

Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce, defensive assertion of their own righteousness, and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger." – Richard Lovelace

Part Three: Sanctification

A. Relationship between Justification and Sanctification

Many Christians feel confident in their understanding of grace in salvation, but are confused about their role in sanctification.

Do we do it all? Is it 50/50 cooperation with God? What about humanity's nature apart from God helps us answer this question?

Q. 35. *What is sanctification?*

A. Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.

What is our relation to the law in sanctification?

We are not justified by the gospel and then sanctified by obedience, but the gospel is the way we grow (Gal.3:1-3) and are renewed (Col.1:6).

B. God's Response to a Christian's Behavior: Blessing or Punishment?

Does God punish a Christian when he or she breaks the law?

Richard Gaffin: "Briefly, apart from the gospel and outside of Christ the law is my enemy and condemns me. Why? Because God is my enemy and condemns me. But with the gospel and in Christ, united to him by faith, the law is no longer my enemy but my friend. Why? Because now God is no longer my enemy but my friend, and the law, his will, the law in its moral core, as reflective of his character and of concerns eternally inherent in his own person and so of what pleases him, is now my friendly guide for life in fellowship with God." 54

WCF 20.1. *The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law;*

C. Gospel Response to Antinomianism

If there is no threat of punishment, won't that lead us to antinomianism (lawlessness)?

- "I am more sinful and flawed than I ever dared believe" (vs. antinomianism)
- "I am more accepted and loved than I ever dared hope" (vs. legalism)

C. Godly Motives for Obedience

"many are apt to skip over the lesson concerning the means (that will fill up this whole treatise) as superfluous and useless. When once they know the nature and excellency of the duties of the law, they account nothing wanting but diligent performances; and they rush blindly on immediate practice, making more haste than good speed. They are quick in promising, 'All that the Lord has spoken, we will do,' (Exod. 19:8), without sitting down and counting the cost. They look on holiness as only the means of an end, of eternal salvation: not as an end itself, requiring any great means for attaining the practice of it."
Walter Marshall

Heidelberg Catechism 86

Q. Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why then should we do good works?

A. Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, is also restoring us by his Spirit into his image, so that with our whole lives we may show that we are thankful to God for his benefits, so that he may be praised through us, so that

we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ.

What stands out to you about this Q&A?

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Q. But doesn't this teaching make people indifferent and wicked?

A. No. It is impossible for those grafted into Christ through true faith not to produce fruits of gratitude.

WCF 20

1. The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and willing mind. All which were common also to believers under the law. But, under the New Testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish church was subjected; and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.

How does WCF describe the Christian's motivation?

D. Skepticism:

Will this really work? Are you skeptical?

“Duty compelled by love may sound like an undemanding religion until we recall that there is no more powerful force to motivate the human heart than love. Fear is not more powerful. Guilt is not more powerful. ‘There is nothing more powerful than love,’ writes the seventeenth-century English minister Samuel Bolton. ‘Things impossible to others are easy to them that love. Love knows no difficulties...Love is an affection that refuses to be put off by duties or difficulties which come between it and the person loved.’” Chapell 32