

NCC Q #15

Q. Since no one can keep the law, what is its purpose?

A. That we may know the holy nature and will of God, and the sinful nature and disobedience of our hearts; and thus our need of a Savior. The law also teaches and exhorts us to live a life worthy of our Savior.

Text: Romans 3:19-20 (LSB)

“Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are in the Law, so that every mouth may be shut and all the world may be accountable to God; because by works of the Law NO FLESH WILL BE JUSTIFIED IN HIS SIGHT, for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.”

We have already seen from Romans *that* all fallen humanity is “under sin” (3:9-10) because *all* of fallen humanity is “in Adam” (5:12).

Here, in Romans 3:19-20, the apostle is telling us that the Law does not *make* us sinners, but rather graciously *reveals* what we already are by nature and practice: guilty, condemned sinners deserving of God’s just wrath.

- For those who are “in Adam,” the Law is “the law of sin and death” (8:2).¹

In this study, we will see the many facets and “ministries” of the Law, and, hopefully by the end, see what the Puritans would call “the grace of Law.”

First, our catechism tells us that the Law reveals “the holy nature and will of God.” The standard of God’s law is His own perfect and holy character, which Paul elsewhere says we have “all fallen short of.” (3:23)

- **Hebrews 1:1** (ESV) – “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets.

⇒ And one of the primary ways God revealed Himself to His people – and the nations – was through His Law.

¹ The genitive (“of”) can be translated in a variety of ways, one of which can be, “the law *which reveals* sin and death.”

In **Nehemiah 9**, as the priests are retracing Israel's history, they remind the people how God had revealed Himself to His people: in creation (v.6), by election (v.7), through covenant (v.8), deliverance (v.9), signs and wonders (vv.10-12), and finally, the law (vv.13-14).

- **Nehemiah 9:13-14** (LSB) – “Then You came down on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven; You gave them upright judgments and true laws, good statutes and commandments. So You made known to them Your holy sabbath, and commanded to them commandments, statutes and law, by the hand of Your servant Moses.”

Regarding this function of the Law, R.C. Sproul notes,

The law reflects the will of the Lawgiver, and in that regard it is intensely personal. The law reflects to the creature the perfect will of the Creator and at the same time reveals the character of that being whose law it is.²

The Law clearly reveals who God is, and what He is like, for it reveals what He loves, what He hates, and what He expects. As one has so eloquently put it, “By His Testimony, God testifies Himself.”³

Or, as Ligon Duncan writes,

Paul tells us in Romans 1 that everyone knows right and wrong. But the law of God very specifically reveals to us God's character and his own moral qualities. All morality is rooted in God's character. And when we study the law, we see a display of God's character.⁴

Second, our catechism teaches us that God's Law also reveals our sinful nature and disobedient hearts.

Many of the reformers taught that one of the uses of God's law is that of a mirror.

In **Psalms 19:12** (LSB), David's question – “Who can discern his errors?” – is answered by verses 6-9: God exposes our sins and shortcomings by His Law.

² <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/goodness-law> (emphasis mine)

³ In the OT, Yahweh's “testimony” (תִּיּוּן, ‘*edut*’) is a synonym for His Law (see Psalms 19, 119).

⁴ <http://newcitycatechism.com/new-city-catechism/#15>

This is exactly Paul's own testimony in **Romans 7:7** (LSB): "I would not have come to know sin except through the Law."

In fact, this is Paul's consistent testimony in the NT:

- **Romans 7:11-13** (LSB) – "For sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Therefore did that which is good become *a cause of* death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by working out my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful." (emphasis mine)
- **Romans 3:19-20** (see above)
- **Galatians 3:19** (LSB) – "Why the Law then? It was added because of trespasses, having been ordained through angels by the hand of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made...Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be!... But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were held in custody under the Law, being shut up for the coming faith to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor unto Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor."

This idea of the Law functioning as a mirror was also called by the Reformers "the pedagogical use of the Law."⁵

With regards to this, Sproul writes,

The law, by revealing God's character, exposes our fallenness. It is the mirror that reflects our own images—warts and all—and becomes the pedagogue, the schoolmaster that drives us to Christ. The law does not drive us out of the kingdom but it ushers us into the kingdom by directing us to the One who alone is able to fulfill its demands.⁶

⁵ See, for e.g., <https://www.monergism.com/topics/law-and-gospel/three-uses-law>

⁶ *Ibid.*

Acting this way, the Law is meant to “destroy the spiritual narcissist lurking within all of us.”⁷

Calvin links the Law’s ministry of revealing God’s perfect righteousness to its ministry of revealing our own sinful unrighteousness, and thereby certiorates, convicts, and finally condemns him.”⁸

Third, then, the Law by showing us our unrighteousness, reveals our great need of a Savior.

- **Galatians 3:19-26** (LSB) trespasses, having been ordained through angels by the hand of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made. Now a mediator is not for one *person only*, whereas God is one. Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed be by law. But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were held in custody under the Law, being shut up for the coming faith to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor unto Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”

Again, Duncan’s words are helpful:

[The Law] helps us to understand our need. When we know who God is, and we know that we don’t measure up to his morality and character, when we know who we are, and we know the sinful inclinations of our hearts, it presses us to Jesus, because we know that we have need of a Savior. And the Savior has fulfilled that law. He’s obeyed it perfectly, and he’s paid the penalty that is due to us for it. The law presses us to the Savior. It points us to the Savior. It takes us to the Savior.⁹

⁷ <https://thenewgeneva.com/2022/05/24/the-three-uses-of-the-law-in-reformed-theology/>

⁸ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.7.6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Fourth, and lastly, we see that God's Law "teaches and exhorts us to live a life worthy of our Savior."

That is, the Law is a guide for how God would have us to live.

The Reformers further broke this use of the Law into two subcategories:

1. Civil/Moral (society)

On this, Calvin writes:

"The second office of the Law is, by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, to curb those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude and justice."¹⁰

The commandments such as 'do not murder', 'do not steal', and 'do not commit adultery' are also aspects of natural law. These aspects of the law are written in all human hearts (**Rom. 2:14-15**). It is intended to restrain evil and promote a harmonious existence in our world.¹¹

As WLC, Q. 95 puts it, "The moral law is of use to all men, to inform them of the holy nature and will of God, and of their duty, binding them to walk accordingly."

The law, as a guide for morality to all men, thus promotes civil order and protects citizens from those who would cause harm.

2. Normative (the Christian life)

The LBCF (19.6) is extremely helpful:

Although true believers are not under the law as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned, yet it is of great use to them as well as to others, in that as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their natures, hearts, and lives, so as examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of,

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 2.7.10.

¹¹ See https://thenewgeneva.com/2022/05/24/the-three-uses-of-the-law-in-reformed-theology/#_ftn2

humiliation for, and hatred against, sin; together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ and the perfection of his obedience; it is likewise of use to the regenerate to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin; and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve, and what afflictions in this life they may expect for them, although freed from the curse and unallayed rigour thereof. The promises of it likewise show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof, though not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works; so as man's doing good and refraining from evil, because the law encourages to the one and deters from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law and not under grace.

This aspect of the Law for the believer is denied by antinomians, who in their misunderstanding of texts like **Romans 6:4**, believe that the Christian, because they are “under grace,” are thus no longer “under law.”

Rather, as Duncan notes,

When God originally gave his commands to Adam and Eve in the garden, He gave those commands to them as blessings. They weren't things upon which His love was contingent. He loved them and blessed them in the garden. And their obedience to the commands was the very sphere in which they enjoyed that blessedness. And when we are saved by Christ, when we are united to Christ, we are able to walk in a manner that is worthy of the gospel. We are to live in a manner that is like the Lord Jesus Christ. And He delighted in obeying God. And so the law of God shows us what that life of peace and blessedness is like. It shows us what it's like to live a life worthy of the gospel once we've trusted in Jesus Christ.

As Sproul says,

The most wonderful function of the law is that it shows us what is pleasing to God. The godly man is the one who meditates on the law day and night (**Psalm 1:2**), and he does so because he finds his delight therein. By delighting in the precepts of God, he becomes like a tree planted by rivers

of living water, bringing forth its fruit in its season (**1:3**). Our Lord said, “If you love Me keep My commandments” (**John 14:15**), but we cannot show that love for Him unless we know what the commandments are. A knowledge of the law of God gives to us the pattern of loving obedience. If we love the Lord, we must also love His law.¹²

The regenerate heart says,

- “Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counsellors.” (**Psalm 119:24**, LSB)
- “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (**Psalm 119:105**, LSB)
- “Your testimonies are wonderful, therefore my soul observes them.” (**Psalm 119:129**, LSB)
- “The unfolding of Your words gives light.” (**Psalm 119:130**, LSB)
- “Establish my steps in Your word, and do not let any wickedness overpower me.” (**Psalm 119:133**, LSB)
- “Make Your face shine upon Your slave, and teach me Your statutes.” (**Psalm 119:135**, LSB)
- “See how I love Your precepts.” (**Psalm 119:159**, LSB)
- “I hate and abhor lying, *but* I love Your word.” (**Psalm 119:162**, LSB)
- “My soul keeps Your testimonies, and I love them exceedingly.” (**Psalm 119:167**, LSB)

Conclusion:

Though not mentioned in the catechism, many of the Reformers also taught that the Law is a hammer, to be used of the Holy Spirit to destroy the fortresses of self-righteousness naturally resident and defended in our hearts.

In the words of Charles Simeon:

¹² <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/goodness-law>

“These poor men think they can preach the Gospel without preaching the Law. I say, they must preach the Law, unless they do not mean to preach the Gospel. The Law entered that the offence might abound: proclaim it, I say, for this purpose among your ungodly congregations; lift up your voices like trumpets, and tell the people their transgressions, that you may glorify the more your honoured Master, in proclaiming the infinite riches and fulness of His great salvation. Preach the Law to those who believe, as finished, cancelled, dead for their salvation: point them to Immanuel as holding it in His bleeding hand, and saying to them, “If ye love me, keep my Commandments.”¹³

The law in this regard is redemptive—not that we find our redemption by keeping the law, but that the Redeemer is shown to us through the law.

So let us, both in our preaching of, and living out, the gospel, not forget God’s holy Law.

Soli Deo Gloria!!

¹³ Charles Simeon, <http://newcitycatechism.com/new-city-catechism/#15>