

Of the Law of God.

by John Gill

John Gill's sermon explores the nature, purpose, and application of God's Law in relation to the Gospel of grace through Christ.

Scripture: Exodus 20:3, Luke 24:44, John 1:17, Romans 3:27

Topics: "Law and Gospel", "The Moral Law"

Description

John Gill expounds on the Law of God, emphasizing the interplay between law and gospel throughout biblical history. He explains the distinctions between the ceremonial, judicial, and moral laws, noting that while the ceremonial and some judicial laws have ceased with the coming of Christ, the moral law remains binding and eternal. Gill highlights that the moral law, encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, is perfect, spiritual, holy, just, and good, serving both to convict sinners and guide believers in their conduct. He asserts that believers are not under the law as a covenant of works but are called to live under grace, fulfilling the law through love and the Spirit. Ultimately, the law continues to serve as a rule of life for Christians, reflecting God's will and character.

Transcript

A Body of Doctrinal Divinity

Book 4--Chapter 6

OF THE LAW OF GOD

It appears by what has been observed, that there was an intermixture of law and gospel under the former dispensation, as there also is in the present one; they are interspersed in both testaments; though the law was more largely held forth than the gospel, under the former dispensation; and therefore we commonly call it the legal dispensation; and there is more of the gospel than of the law under the present dispensation; for which reason we call it the gospel dispensation; yet there are of each in both; and here will be a proper place to treat of law and gospel distinctly, which will connect what has been already said to what is yet to be said; and by the latter I shall be naturally led to the great and glorious truths of the gospel, I intend to treat distinctly of.

And shall begin with the law. The word law is variously used, sometimes for a part of the Scriptures only, the Pentateuch, or five books of Moses; as when it is mentioned in the division of the Scripture by Christ

(Luke 24:44), and along with the prophets, and as distinct from them (John 1:45; 8:5). Sometimes for all the books of the Old Testament, which in general go by the name of the Law, as does the book of Psalms on that account, as the places quoted out of it, or referred to in it, show (John 10:34; 12:34; 15:25).

Sometimes it signifies the doctrine of the Scriptures in general, both legal and evangelical (Ps. 19:7), and the doctrine of the gospel in particular, even the doctrine of the Messiah (Isa. 2:3; 42:4), called in the New Testament "the law," or doctrine "of faith" (Rom. 3:27), and sometimes it signifies the whole body of laws given from God by Moses to the children of Israel, as distinct from the gospel of the grace of God (John 1:17 and which may be distinguished into the laws ceremonial, judicial, and moral. 1.

The ceremonial law, of which little need be said, since much has been observed concerning it already; this concerns the ecclesiastical state of the Jews, their priests, sacrifices, feasts, fasts, washings, &c. and though some of these rites were before the times of Moses, as sacrifices, the distinction of clean and unclean creatures, circumcision, &c. yet these were renewed and confirmed, and others added to them; and the whole digested into a body of laws by Moses, and given by him under a divine direction to the people of Israel.

This law was a shadow of good things to come by Christ, of evangelical things, and indeed was no other than the gospel veiled in types and figures; the priests served to the example and shadow of heavenly things; the sacrifices were typical of the sacrifice of Christ; the festivals were shadows, of which Christ was the body and substance; the ablutions typified cleansing by the blood of Christ; and the whole was a schoolmaster to the Jews, until he came; but when faith came, that is, Christ, the object of faith, they were no longer under a schoolmaster, nor had they need of the law as such; there was a disannulling of it, because of its weakness and unprofitableness; for it became useless and unnecessary, having its accomplishment in Christ. 2.

The judicial law, which respects the political state or civil government of the Jews, and consists of statutes and judgments, according to which the judges in Israel determined all causes brought before them, and passed sentence; in which sentence the people were to acquiesce (Deut. 17:8-11). Such as related to any injuries done to their persons or property, and to the punishment of offences, both of a greater and of a lesser kind; these were given by Moses, but not made by him; they were made by God himself.

The government of the Jews was a very particular form of government; it was a theocracy, a government immediately under God; though he is King of the whole world, and Governor among and over the nations of it, yet he was in a special and peculiar manner King over Israel; and he made laws for them, by which they were to be ruled and governed: nor had the commonwealth of Israel a power to make any new laws; nor any of their judges and rulers, not even Moses, their lawgiver under God: and therefore, when any matter came before him, not clearly determined by any law given by God, he suspended the determination of it until he knew the mind of God about it; see (Lev. 24:12; Num. 15:34).

And when the people of Israel were desirous of a king, after the manner of neighboring nations, it was resented by the Lord, and reckoned by him as a rejection of him from being their King; and though he gave them a king, or suffered them to have one, it was in anger; and so far he still kept the peculiar government of them in his hands, that their kings never had any power to make new laws; nor did their best and wisest of kings make any, as David and Solomon; and when a reformation was made among them, as by Hezekiah and Josiah, it was not by making any new regulations, but by putting the old laws into execution; and by directing and requiring of the judges, and other officers, to act according to them.

It may be inquired, whether the judicial laws, or the laws respecting the Jewish polity, are now in force or not, and to be observed or not; which may be resolved by distinguishing between them; there were some that were peculiar to the state of the Jews, their continuance in the land of Canaan, and while their polity lasted, and until the coming of the Messiah, when they were to cease, as is clear from (Gen. 49:10), such as related to inheritances, and the alienation of them by marriage or otherwise; the restoration of them when sold at the year of jubilee; the marrying of a brother's wife when he died without issue, &c. the design of which was, to keep the tribes distinct until the Messiah came, that it might be clearly known from what tribe he sprung.

And there were others that were peculiarly suited to the natural temper and disposition of that people, who were covetous, cruel, and oppressive of the poor, froward and perverse, jealous and revengeful; hence the laws concerning the manumission of servants sold, at the end of the sixth year; the release of debts, and letting the land rest from tillage every seventh year; concerning lending on interest; leaving a corner in the field for the poor, and the forgotten sheaf;--and others concerning divorces, and the trial of a suspected wife, and the cities of refuge to flee to from the avenger of blood: these, with others, ceased when the Jewish polity did, and are not binding on other nations.

But then there were other judicial laws, which were founded on the light of nature, on reason, and on justice and equity, and these remain in full force; and they must be wise as well as righteous laws, which were made by God himself, their King and Legislator, as they are said to be (Deut. 4:6,8). And they are, certainly, the best constituted and regulated governments that come nearest to the commonwealth of Israel, and the civil laws of it, which are of the kind last described; and where they are acted up unto, there what is said by Wisdom is most truly verified, "By me kings reign, and princes decree judgment;" and if these laws were more strictly attended to, which respect the punishment of offences, especially capital ones, things would be put upon a better footing than they are in some governments; and judges, in passing sentences, would be able to do that part of their office with more certainty and safety, and with a better conscience.

And whereas the commonwealth of Israel was governed by these laws for many hundreds of years, and needed no other in their civil polity, when, in such a course of time, every case that ordinarily happens, must arise, and be brought into a court of judicature; I cannot but be of opinion, that a digest of civil laws might be made out of the Bible, the law of the Lord that is perfect, either as lying in express words in it, or to be deduced by the analogy of things and cases, and by just consequence, as would be sufficient for the government of any nation: and then there would be no need of so many law books, nor of so many lawyers; and perhaps there would be fewer law suits.

However, we Christians, under whatsoever government we are, are directed to submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, and for conscience sake; even to everyone that is not contrary to common sense and reason, and to religion and conscience; (see Rom. 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13,14). 3. The moral law, which lies chiefly in the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments (Ex 20:3-17), and which our Lord has reduced, even both tables of the law, to two capital ones, love to God, and love to our neighbor (Matthew 22:36-40), as the apostle has reduced the commands of the second table to one, that is, love, which he calls the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 13:9,10).

And this law, to love God and our neighbour, is binding on every man, and is eternal, and remains invariable and unalterable; and concerning which I shall treat more largely. And shall consider, 3a. First, The author and giver of this law; God was the author and maker of it; Moses the giver and minister of it

from God; it was God that first spoke the ten words, or commands, to the children of Israel; and it was he that wrote and engraved them on tables of stone; the writing was the writing of God, and the engraving was by the finger of God; it was from his right hand this fiery law went: the ministry of angels was made use of in it; it is called, the word spoken by angels; it was given by the disposition of them; it was ordained by them in the hands of a mediator, who was Moses, who stood between God and the people, received the lively oracles from him, and delivered them to them.

There was a law in being before the times of Moses; or otherwise there would have been no transgression, no imputation of sin, no charge of guilt, nor any punishment inflicted; whereas death, the just demerit of sin, reigned from Adam to Moses; and besides the positive law, which forbid the eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; and was given as a trial of man's obedience to the whole moral law, and in the form of a covenant, in which Adam stood as a federal head, to all his posterity; and which covenant he broke, and involved himself and his in misery and ruin.

Besides this, there was the law of nature, inscribed on his heart by his Maker, as the rule of his obedience to him; and by which he knew much of God, and of the nature of moral good and evil; and which, though much obliterated by the fall, some remains of it are to be discerned in Adam's posterity; and even in the Gentiles (Rom. 1:19,20; 2:14,15), and which is reinscribed in the hearts of God's people in regeneration, according to the tenor of the covenant of grace (Jer. 31:33).

Now the law of Moses, for matter and substance, is the same with the law of nature, though differing in the form of administration; and this was renewed in the times of Moses, that it might be confirmed, and that it might not be forgotten, and be wholly lost out of the minds of men; of which there was great danger, through the great prevalence of corruption in the world: and it was written, that it might remain, "littera scripta manet;" and it was written on tables of stone, that it might be the more durable; the apostle says, "it was added because of transgressions," to forbid them, restrain them, and punish for them; and it "entered that the offence might abound," the sin of Adam; that the heinousness of it might appear, and the justness of its imputation to all his posterity might be manifest; as well as all other offences might be seen by it to be exceeding sinful, and righteously punishable: (see Gal. 3:19; Rom. 5:20; Rom. 7:13).

It was not delivered as a pure covenant of works, though the self-righteous Jews turned it into one, and sought for life and righteousness by it: and so it engendered to bondage, and became a killing letter; nor a pure covenant of grace, though it was given as a distinguishing favour to the people of Israel (Deut. 4:6,8; Ps. 147:19,20; Rom. 9:4) and much mercy and kindness are expressed in it; and it is prefaced with a declaration of the Lord being the God of Israel, who had, of his great goodness, brought them out of the land of Egypt (Ex 20:2,6,12).

But it was a part and branch of the typical covenant, under which the covenant of grace was administered under the former dispensation; and of what it was typical, has been observed before; and a principal end of its being renewed was, that Christ, who was to come of the Jews, might appear to be made under the law, as the surety of his people, the righteousness of which he was to fulfil, and, indeed, all righteousness; being the end of the law, the scope at which it aimed, as well as the fulfiller of it. 3b.

Secondly, The epithets of this law, or the properties of it, may be next considered; such as the scriptures expressly give to it; and which will lead into the nature and quality of it. As, 3b1. That it is perfect. "The law of the Lord is perfect" (Ps. 19:7), which is true of the moral law, by which men come to know "what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2), what it is his will should be done, and what not

be done; it takes in the whole duty of men, both to God and man; for to fear God, and keep his commandments, is the whole duty of man; it includes love to God, and love to our neighbour; and which are comprehensive of every duty to both: it is very large and capacious; it is the commandment which is exceeding broad; it is so complete and perfect, that as nothing is to be detracted from it, so nothing is to be added to it, nor can be added to it, to make it more perfect: the papists talk of counsels, exhortations, &c. as additions; but these belong either to law or gospel.

And the Socinians say, that Christ came to make the law more perfect; which they infer from some passages in (Matthew 5:1-48), where Christ observes, that it had been said by some of the ancients of old, thus and thus; but he said, so and so; which is not to be understood of any new laws made by him, but as giving the true sense of the old laws, and vindicating them from the false glosses and interpretations of the Scribes and Pharisees: and when the apostle John speaks of a new commandment, he means the old commandment to love one another, as he himself explains it (1 John 2:7,8), and which he calls new, because enforced by a new instance and example of Christ's love in dying for his people, and by new motives and arguments taken from the same.-- 3b2.

It is spiritual; We know that the law is spiritual, says the apostle (Rom. 7:14), which is to be understood of the moral law; for as for the ceremonial law, that is called, "The law of a carnal commandment;" and is said to stand in "carnal ordinances" (Heb 7:16 9:10), which only reached the flesh, and the sanctifying of that: but the moral law is so spiritual in its nature and requirements, that so holy and spiritual a man as the apostle Paul when he compared himself with it, and viewed himself in the glass of it, thought himself "carnal, and sold under sin".

The law reaches to the thoughts and intents of the heart, and the affections of the mind, and forbids and checks all irregular and inordinate motions in it, and the lusts of it. Thus, for instance, the sixth command not only forbids actual murder, but all undue heat, passion, anger, wrath, malice, resentment and revenge, conceived in the mind, and expressed by words. So the seventh command not only prohibits the outward acts of uncleanness, as fornication, adultery, &c. but all unclean thoughts, impure desires, and unchaste affections, as well as looks and words.

The law directs, not only to an external worship of God, but to an internal, spiritual one; as to love the Lord, to fear him, and put trust and confidence in him, suitable to his nature as a Spirit; it requires of a man to serve it with his own mind and spirit, with his whole heart, as the apostle did (Rom. 7:25), and the assistance of the Spirit of God is necessary to the observance of it; and God in covenant has promised his people, that he "will put his Spirit within them, and cause them to walk in his statutes," and "keep his judgments, and do them" (Ezek. 36:27). 3b3.

The law is "holy;" so it is said to be (Rom. 7:12), and the commandment holy; it comes from an holy God, from whom nothing unholy can proceed; for holiness is his nature, and he is holy in all his works; and the law is a transcript of his holy will; the matter of it, or what it requires, is holy; even sanctification of heart and life; and it directs to live holily, soberly, righteously, and godly, in this evil world. 3b4. It is also "just," as well as holy and good (Rom. 7:12).

There are no laws so righteous as the laws of God; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether (Deut. 4:8; Ps. 19:9). It is impartial unto all, and requires the same of one as of another, and renders to every man according to his works; it is just in condemning wicked men for sin, and in justifying those that have a righteousness answerable to its demands; for God is just, according to his law, while he

is the justifier of those that believe in Jesus. 3b5. The law is good; the author of it is good only, essentially, originally good; from whom every good and perfect gift comes, and nothing that is evil and bad.

The law is materially good, it is morally good; as God by the light of nature, so much more by the law of Moses, does he show to men that which is good; in it he sets before them the good they are to do; and the evil they are to avoid: it is pleasantly good; not to an unregenerate man, whose carnal mind is enmity to all that is good, and so to the law of God; but to a regenerate man, who, as the apostle, delights in the law of God after the inner man, and loves it, as David did, and meditates on it, as every good man does (Rom. 7:22; Ps. 119:97; 1:2).

And it is also profitably good; not to God, for when men have done all they can, they are, with respect to God, unprofitable servants (Luke 17:10), but to men, their fellow creatures, and fellow Christians, to whom they are serviceable, by their good works (Titus 3:8), and also to themselves; for though not "for," yet "in" keeping the commands there is great reward, as peace of conscience (Ps. 19:11; 119:165). The law is good, "if a man use it lawfully" (1 Tim. 1:8). There is a lawful and an unlawful use of the law; it is used unlawfully when men seek to obtain life and righteousness by it; for the law cannot give life, nor is righteousness by it; nor can then be justified by the works of it, in the sight of God; for no man can perfectly keep it; there is not a just man that does good and sins not: but it is lawfully used when obeyed in faith, from a principle of love, with a view to the glory of God, without any selfish and sinister ends.

Which leads me to consider more particularly, 3c. Thirdly, The uses of the law both to sinners and saints. 3c1. To sinners. 3c1a. To convince of sin. Sin is a transgression of the law, by which it is known that it is sin, being forbidden by the law; "By the law is the knowledge of sin;" not only of gross actual sins; but of the inward lusts of the mind; "I had not known lust," says the apostle, "except the law had said, Thou shall not covet" (Rom. 3:20 7:7). Yet only as it is used by the Spirit of God, who holds it up to a mind enlightened by him, whereby it sees the sinfulness of it; for it is the Spirit's work savingly to convince of sin; which he does by means of the law. 3c1b.

To restrain from sin; of this use are the laws of men; hence civil magistrates are terrors to evildoers: so the law, by its menaces, deters men from sin, when they are not truly convinced of the evil of it, nor humbled for it; though by such restraints, it does but rise and swell, and rage the more within, like a flood of water stopped in its course. 3b1c. To condemn and punish for sin; for sinners it is made, and against them it lies, to their condemnation, unless justified in Christ (1 Tim. 1:9,10).

It accuses of sin, charges with it; brings evidence of it; stops the sinner's mouth from pleading in his own cause; pronounces guilty before God; and curses and condemns: it is the ministration of condemnation and death; and its sentence takes place where the righteousness of Christ is not imputed. 3c2. It is of use to saints and true believers in Christ. 3c2a. To point out the will of God unto them; what is to be done by them, and what to be avoided; to inform them of, and urge them to their duty, both towards God and man; for in that the whole of it lies. 3c2b.

To be a rule of life and conversation to them; not a rule to obtain life by; but to live according to; to guide their feet, to direct their steps, and preserve them from going into bye and crooked paths. The wise man says, "The commandment is a lamp, and the law is light" (Prov. 6:23). And the wise man's father says, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105). 3c2c. It is as a glass, in which a believer, by the light of the Spirit of God, may see his own face, what manner of man he is; how deformed, how carnal and corrupt, when compared with this law; and how far short of perfection he is in himself; "I

have seen an end of all perfection," says David; "Thy commandment is exceeding broad;" to which the imperfect works of men are not commensurate; hence good men are sensible that their own righteousness is insufficient to justify them before God, it being but as rags, and those filthy ones.

Hence, 3c2d. They are led to prize and value the righteousness of Christ, since that is perfectly agreeable to the holy and righteous law of God; yea, by it the law is magnified and made honorable; wherefore they desire to be found in Christ, not having on their own righteousness, but his; who is the end of the law for righteousness, to everyone that believes. Now, 3d. Fourthly, The law of God continues under the present dispensation for the said uses; Christ came not to destroy it, and loosen mens obligations to it; but to fulfil it: nor is the law made null and void by faith; by the doctrine of justification by faith in the righteousness of Christ; so far from it, that it is established by it [See a Sermon of mine called, "The Law established by the Gospel."]: there is a sense in which the law is "done away," and saints are "delivered" from it; "that being dead wherein they were held," as in a prison; and they "become dead to it by the body of Christ," by his obedience and sufferings in it (2 Cor. 3:11; Rom. 7:4,6). 3d1.

It does not continue as a covenant of works; and, indeed, it was not delivered to the children of Israel as such strictly and properly sneaking, only in a typical sense; though the Jews turned it to such a purpose, and sought righteousness and life by it: but God never made a covenant of works with men since the fall, in order to their obtaining life and salvation by it; for it never was in the power of man since to perform the conditions of such a covenant; however, it is certain, believers are not under the law as a covenant of works; but under grace as a covenant of grace. 3d2.

Nor does it continue as to the form of administration of it by Moses; it is now no longer in his hands, nor to be considered as such; the whole Mosaic economy is broke to pieces, and at an end, which was prefigured by Moses casting the two tables of stone out of his hands, and breaking them, when he came down from the mount: the law, especially as it lies in the Decalogue; and as to the form of the administration of that by Moses, was peculiar to the Jews; as appears by the preface to it, which can agree with none but them; by the time of worship prescribed them in the fourth command, which was temporary and typical; and by the promise of long life in the land of Canaan, annexed to the fifth command. 3d3.

It continues not as a terrifying law to believers, who are not come to mount Sinai, and are not under that stormy and terrible dispensation; but they are come to mount Sion, and to all the privileges of a gospel church state: nor are they brought into bondage by its rigorous exactions; on a strict compliance to which, or perfect obedience thereunto, their peace and comfort do not depend: nor are they awed and urged by its menaces and curses, to an observance of it; but are constrained, by the love of God and Christ, to run with cheerfulness the way of its commandments; they are made willing to serve it with their mind and spirit, through the power and efficacy of divine grace upon them; and they do serve it, not in the oldness of the letter but in the newness of the spirit; or, as they are renewed by the free Spirit of God. 3d4.

Nor is it a cursing and condemning law to the saints. As sinners and transgressors of it, they are subject to its curses; but Christ has redeemed them from the curse of the law, being made a curse for them; and so there is no more curse to them here or hereafter; they are out of the reach of its curses, and of condemnation by it; there is none to them that are in Christ: Who shall condemn? it is Christ that died; and who by dying has bore their sentence of condemnation, and freed them from it; and having passed from death to life, they shall never enter into condemnation (Gal. 3:10,13; Rom. 8:1,33; John 5:24). 3d5.

Yet it continues as a rule of walk and conversation to them, as before observed; and is to be regarded by them as in the hands of Christ [See another Sermon of mine, called, "The Law in the hand of Christ."]; by whom it is held forth as King and Lawgiver, in his church; and who, and not Moses, is to be heard, and his voice hearkened to, as the Son and Master, in his own house. Believers, though freed from the law, in the sense before declared, yet are "not without law to God, but under the law to Christ," and obliged to regard it; and the rather, as it was in his heart, and he was made under it, and has fulfilled it; and therefore may be viewed and served with pleasure (1 Cor. 9:21).

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