

# 12

## *The Christian and the Law*

In this chapter we reflect on the Bible's teaching concerning the Law—and in particular, what our attitude to it should be as Christians. We will discover that our motive for law-keeping has changed, and understand both our freedom from the Law and our proper subjection to it (and the tension between these two realities).

We first met the concept of law at Point 2 (the Fall) and Point 3 (the Mosaic Law). There we saw that God introduced emergency laws to deal with Man's rebellion. These laws were given to a people who had experienced the gift of being rescued from slavery in Egypt and from God's wrath. They were not a way to establish access to God's grace, but the way of relating to God once His grace had been experienced. In Jesus' clashes with the Pharisees, we saw that these laws were to be read in the light of the Rebellion at Point 2 (Mt 19:4), and not confused with the way God intended the world to be at Point 1 (before the Fall).

In the last three chapters, we have been examining the 'mixed' situation at Point 5 and have seen that the Law is still addressed to the fallen world. When rebels encounter the

Law, it teaches them they are 'sinners' by identifying the specific areas of their rebellion. It is the means by which all rebellious creatures can learn of their disturbed relation to the King.

The question now arises: What is the relevance of the Law to the children of God, who are no longer rebels against the King but beloved members of His family, and how are they to relate to it?

### FREE FROM THE LAW'S CONDEMNATION

The first thing to realize is that Christians no longer come under the Law's *condemnation* (Rom 8:1). We have been justified in God's sight on the basis that our 'Federal Man' has died for us and God sees us as having died in Him. This releases us, in His estimation, from the condemnation of the Law.

This is something God states, and we trust His Word about it. As we trust, we have the true experience of being right with God on His terms. Consequently, when Satan accuses us with the lie that we are still under God's wrath, we do not accept it. God has said we are not. And when the Law points up our faults, we acknowledge them but also understand that our relation to the Lord does not find its basis in our faultless performance. Its strength is in Christ's freely given, gracious act of dying for us. In this way, the Law can no longer be used, as it once was, as a tool to condemn us.

These accusations of Satan, which use the Law as their basis, can be easily distinguished from the conviction of the Holy Spirit, who also often uses the Law to show us our sin. The Holy Spirit points to particular deeds we have done or failed to do, but Satan condemns us generally. Also, the Holy Spirit leads us to repent and trust the blood of Jesus to cleanse us; but the accusations of Satan depress us and have the effect of making us doubt our place as God's children.

## FREE FROM THE LAW'S CONSTANT PRESSURE

Paul sums up the gospel as a revelation of the righteousness of God which is available to a person *apart* from the Law (Rom 1:16–17; 3:21–26). That is, the gospel is distinct from the Law, though both the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament Scriptures) witness to it. In fact, the Law is unable to impart life or righteousness; it was never designed to do so (Gal 3:11–12, 21–25). We are no longer seeking to be right with God on the basis of the Law (Phil 3:3–8).

Nonetheless, the Law still has an application, as Jesus makes clear in Matthew 5:18: 'not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law.' But He adds, 'until everything is accomplished'—that is, until Point 6. The Law is for a definite time; it has a terminus. When the Rebellion is over, it will no longer be necessary.

In Romans 7:1–3, Paul uses the analogy of marriage to make a similar point about the Law's limitation. A married woman, he points out, is bound to her husband for the duration of his lifetime; but if he dies, she is released from the law of marriage and can count herself free to marry again. In the same way, an individual is personally bound by the Law during his life—but *only* during his life.

To be free from the Law, then, we must die—and that is just what Paul says has happened (Rom 7:4–6)! He sees us as having died to the law through the body of Christ. We are no longer serving under 'the old way of the written code' but in the new life of the Spirit. In 2 Corinthians 3:6 he can describe himself as a minister of a new covenant 'of the Spirit', which he contrasts with the written code which 'kills'.

The Law does not bring us to death because it is ungodly itself but because of the weakness of our own flesh (Rom 7:7–13; 8:3). Sin, understood again as an active power, takes advantage of this weakness and uses the good and holy Law to produce death in us. Paul's example of how this happened to himself concerns the commandment 'Do not covet.' Once this

law taught him what covetousness was, he says, sin took the opportunity to multiply his covetous desires.

It was for this reason that Martin Luther, following the teaching of Paul, called the Law a 'wolf' which devours the rebellious man. It brings a ferocious threat of death to him. But we have been set free from the wolf by the death of Jesus on our behalf.

## NOT LEGALISTS

Christ's work for us and our decision to trust it means that we come into personal relationship with God. This fellowship is intimate and has its source in the union of our spirit with the Spirit of Christ (1 Cor 6:17). The Spirit is to us an 'anointing' resident in us to teach us all we need to know of life (1 Jn 2:27; Jn 16:13–15). So we do not live by looking up the rule book as the legalist does; we expect to hear the voice of our Shepherd personally in the complexities of life. A book of rules can never be adapted to life and its different and constantly changing circumstances. We do not rejoice in 'getting guidance' but in the presence of a Guide who has been given to us to be with us for ever.

In view of this freedom brought by Jesus' death, we are not to live as legalists. There are five powerful reasons why we cannot live this way.

*To live as a legalist is to live as if Christ had never come and died.* This is why Paul pleads desperately with the Christians in Galatia not to submit to Jewish law. They are under pressure to be circumcized and follow the dietary laws of the Old Testament, but Paul tells them that if they do they will be acting as if Christ had never come (Gal 2:21). Christ has set them free, and they must not go back to a 'yoke of slavery'—for that is what going back to these laws would mean (Gal 5:1).

Similarly, he instructs the Colossians not to bow to the legalistic restrictions of Gnostic teachers (Col 2:20–22). They

tried to bind people up with religion by insisting they 'don't touch this and don't taste that'.

*The law was never the meaning of life.* Failure to see this led the Pharisees to make the mistake of not applying the corrective of Point 1 to the Law. They had forgotten that the restrictions of the Law showed what would *break* the covenant, not what would *establish* it. The Law never establishes relation with God—only His initiating grace does that.

Consequently, our starting place for life is the grace of God. It is here that the meaning of life is found. And our attitude to the Law must reflect that. We are rescued people, as the Israelites were (Ex 20:2)—rescued *before* being called to live obediently. The obedient life is not the basis for being rescued; it is the proper result.

*To live by the Law commits you to being a judge.* If we live by the Law, we become by nature supercritical of our neighbours and ourselves.

This is one of the great themes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethics. In his treatment of the Pharisees, Bonhoeffer sees them as typical post-Fall men who have become centred in their self-knowledge. He points out how they can never approach Jesus (or any neighbour for that matter) without asking the judgemental question: Is this person 'right'?—that is, is he a law-breaker or a law-keeper?

As forgiven sinners, we refuse to judge our neighbour in this evaluative way. This does not mean we cannot assess our neighbour's work (otherwise we could never separate a good tradesman from a poor one). But we are careful to distinguish the work from the person.

When the work is the Law of the Lord, however, the legalist inevitably ends up judging the person—and condemning.

*Living as a legalist quenches the Spirit.* To live by rules as the main business of life quenches the free reign of the Holy Spirit within us. It prevents us walking by faith in God's Spirit, and destroys our relationship with the Lord. It constantly opens us up to the accusation of Satan. Living by rules leads to a burdensome, joyless life which dries up our spirit.

*Legalists end by substituting religion for the life of the kingdom of God.* Legalists have a great difficulty. By refusing to live out of the union of their spirit with the Holy Spirit, they cut themselves off from hearing the Word of the Lord personally.

But in order to live in a changing world, they must make the written, static, past words of God 'relevant' to their day. This means they have to interpret them and bring them up to date. In doing this, legalists *add* to the written code and thus develop a tradition of men which runs alongside and interprets the Law of God.

In Jesus' estimation, such traditions of men come to displace the Law of God (Mt 15:1-20). These traditions are expressed as religion. They are evident in God's people today, in both the Jewish stream and the church. Wherever there is a refusal to live by faith in listening to the Holy Spirit moment-by-moment, what emerges is an inflexible, ossified religion.

## NOT LAWLESS

The Law, as we saw at Points 2 and 3, is addressed to the rebel: it 'is made not for good men but for lawbreakers and rebels' (1 Tim 1:9). Nonetheless, it does apply to Christians. The Christian life is lived in an unredeemed body, under the sway of a hostile environment. The law of the fallen world applies to Christians because the fallen world is where they live.

Yet the plain fact is that certain changes in the Christian's attitude to the Law have taken place.

First, there is the difference of *being in the family*. Open

access to the Father's family has been won for us by Christ. This means we are able to deal with the Father *person-to-person*, which is how He really wants to relate with us (not 'at a distance' as is the case under His martial legislation). It is like having Father with us privately around the table at home.

Yet, at the same time, we recognize He is also a public figure. A helpful picture is that of a father who is the headmaster of his son's school. He is the same person in both spheres, yet we can distinguish between a 'familial' and a 'public' aspect in his relationship with his son. So it is with our Father and us. We are simultaneously reconciled and rebellious, both deeply loving children and antagonistic creatures. And we experience the tension of this, because the child lives to obey the Father whereas the rebel lives to manipulate and escape the Law.

Second, being in the family leads to *a different motive for obedience*. Because of our deep love for Father, we are obedient in our public life to His martial law. Because of the salvation we have received by His grace, we would never desire to break it or use grace as an excuse for breaking it. Our freedom from the Law's condemnation does not imply lawlessness.

Yet our obedience has a certain external ambiguity about it. Viewed publicly, it is impossible to distinguish between the rebel who submits to the Law out of fear of punishment and the son who embraces the Law as part of his beloved Father's public programme. The difference lies in the son's motive for obedience, and his desire to obey, and the joy he has in his spirit when he does. Actions are ambiguous; they do not indicate motive. That is something only God sees, for He looks on the heart.

## ACTION

This challenges us practically about our hidden motives for being law-abiding. Do you keep Father's Law because you are afraid of its penalty or because you love Him? Remember that

the power of the law issues from the authority of the One behind it, by whom you are known and loved.

Living at Point 5 means living constantly with this public ambiguity. Even at the best of times, our actions (viewed externally by men) suffer from looking ambiguous. This leads to two temptations for the public life of the Christian.

The first is to try to impress the world. In Matthew 6:1–6 and 16–18, Jesus teaches His disciples not to be hypocrites by doing their actions (alms-giving, praying, fasting) in public. This is religion, not life. It does things to be seen by men who are judges of their fellows. This points to one of the obvious temptations of living 'in the world': the temptation to live *to* the world in an attempt to receive man's ovation. Jesus says the reward in such a case is that men will think you important but God will not be impressed. Instead, we should deal with God secretly, as an attitude of the heart. Then, Jesus promises, God will reward us (though this is not to be the motive for acting either). If Christians wish to play to an audience, it should be a secret show. It is to an audience of One—but what an audience!

A second temptation arising from the ambiguity of our public actions is to continually explain Christian things to the world in order to affect its image of Christians. I do not mean we should not refrain from ungodly living before the world—that is commanded in Scripture (1 Pet 3:2; 1 Tim 3:7). What we must guard against is the desire to resolve the tension God asks us to walk in by trying to explain our ambiguity away.

When we sin (and we do), let us honestly admit it to the world with shame. Where we do things stupidly, with complete disregard for how it looks to the outsider, let us resolve to be more careful (Col 4:5). But where we must endure the hardship of being misunderstood because of the ambiguity of our situation, let us, with realistic hearts and practical theological application, understand that hardship for what it is.

## ACTION

1 Trying to resolve the tension we are called to live in is effectively trying to have heaven now. This is not promised before Point 6. Refuse to look for it.

2 Remember there are matters of the Spirit which the world can neither know nor understand (1 Cor 1:26—2:16). In its view, such spiritual realities are weak and foolish, and those who espouse and act on them often suffer judgements made by the world in its ignorance. The only way to deal with this tension is to work in and through it. It cannot be resolved.

The third factor determining the Christian's attitude to God's Law is that it *preserves the fallen world from chaos*.

Here we return to the analogy we used at Point 2 of the school teacher who imposes limits on her class to restore order (Chapter 4). God has granted the gift of government to a rebellious world to restore order to it. Without God's Law the world would collapse into chaos.

The Christian, deeply in sympathy with the Creator, understands that lawlessness is the chaos-bringing work of the enemy of Christ. This is seen in the 'man of lawlessness', described by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–12 as the son of perdition (destruction).

This 'man of lawlessness' claims to be God (v 4). Here is a desire to dis-order the universe from the top down. The attempt to displace God, apart from its effrontery and rebellion, is an attempt to impose a different order. Of course, when compared with God's good will for the world, this alternative 'order' can only be described as chaos.

Paul tells us that lawlessness, although already at work in the world, is currently restrained (v 6) until a time of great rebellion which will come to a head before the Day of the Lord (vv 2–3). The 'man of lawlessness' will appear by the activity of Satan to deceive those who refuse to love the truth

(vv 9–10). The Lord Jesus will slay him by the breath of His mouth at His coming (Point 6 in our diagram) (v 8).

This is very strong language from Paul. Behind it is the understanding that when we speak of God ‘ordering’ the universe—be it at creation (Point 1) or at the giving of His emergency martial law (Point 2)—we are not referring to impersonal instructions left by an absentee God to help us get the best out of the universe. Rather, God’s order is a constant manifestation of his presence and love; it is His continual engagement with the world. This engagement is so profound He is even prepared to come into the hostile environment to save it from the enemy’s chaotic impact.

Lawlessness, then, is not seen in the New Testament as some minor peccadillo committed against a nameless, absent divine bureaucracy. Lawlessness is disregard for law—and more, it is thumbing our noses at the personal God who is present and hovering over His creation to guard and preserve it. This is why 1 John 3:4–9 equates lawlessness with sin and typifies the devil as sinning from the beginning. Small wonder that the reason the Son of God appeared was ‘to destroy the devil’s work’ (v 8). As the demons asked Jesus, ‘Have you come to destroy us?’ The answer is, ‘yes’.

## ACTION

Be very careful here. The enemy delights to sell us the idea that a parking infringement is no offence to God, just the local council; that tax avoidance is just beating the bureaucracy at its own game; that the company you work for exploits you, so cheating a little on your expense account is all right. This is a lie, because fundamentally behind *all* law is a person. This does not mean God approves of every rule and regulation devised by man; but it does mean you cannot cheat in God’s world without being lawless to the King (Ps 51:4).

## GOD'S PUBLIC STRUCTURES

Using this idea of law as preserving creation and holding back the chaos, Paul instructs the Christians in Rome to submit to the governing authorities because they have been instituted by God and have their authority from Him (Rom 13:1-7). We are back with our ever-present, hovering God who is the Source of all authority. We are to think of this authority in personalistic terms, and the governing authorities as agents of the Author of the universe. Paul actually calls them God's 'servants' (v 4).

We are to understand that resisting such authorities brings punishment and judgement. They do not 'bear the sword' for no reason and they have power to execute God's wrath on wrongdoers (vv 2-4). Indeed, it is *God's* wrath which they execute, because in upholding law and order they are His agents. Even in our dealings with governmental authorities we deal with the Author. The authorities are a 'terror' to bad conduct because God Himself is.

But we should not only submit to them to avoid God's wrath, though that is the obvious 'public' deterrent. We should also submit 'because of conscience' (v 5). There are inner reasons which motivate us now we are Christians. Obedience is a secret affair of the spirit.

The authorities, too, have a personal charge laid on them: they are not to exercise their power outside the relations in which the Author has set them. They are related to God as His servants; they are related to us 'to do you good' (v 4). Their governing activities are to mirror the good will of God for their subjects. In this sense, they too are 'subject servants'. The state does not exist or have authority of itself. Its authority is derived from God.

When governing authorities step outside these proper relations, His public order is subverted. In Revelation 13, the Roman Empire, blaspheming against God and persecuting the saints, is pictured as 'the Beast'. Here is the epitome of public disorder, where the state has blatantly ignored the fact that it

stands under God's authority and is effectively acting as a counterfeit church (v 4). This pattern is seen time and again in totalitarian regimes. What Christians should do in such circumstances is complex; but we need to be clear about God's *intentions* for the ordering of public structures so we can understand that situations in which governmental authority is abused are abnormal and therefore (not surprisingly) difficult.

The fact that God has provided these anti-chaos measures for the preservation of the world is important for the Christian. Though we are citizens of heaven, as long as we remain in the world we do not work against the purpose of these provisions. We deeply respect God's measures for upholding His rebellious creation—and we pray for them (1 Tim 2:2–3).

## ACTION

1 People often find praying for their government difficult. You may need to repent of a wrong view here. Resolve to see your government as God's gift and consider its authority as based on God.

2 Then, even if it is wicked in the way it exercises its authority, you can pray for it in accordance with God's will, for you will not be despising its function and place. If we despise it, we have become anti-authority ourselves, and this attitude of rebellion negates our prayer.

## STRUCTURES AND PERSONAL LIVING

Hand-in-hand with the new life of the Christian goes a refusal to be lawless by failing to maintain God's structures for the world. Paul's letter to Philemon shows an intertwining of these themes.

Onesimus was a slave who had run away from Philemon. Under Roman law, this meant his life was technically forfeit to his master. Paul, however, returned Onesimus with the plea to Philemon to receive him 'no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother' (v 16).

Some think Paul meant to return Onesimus in such a way that this new personal relation between the slave and his owner as brothers in Christ would somehow undermine the whole meaning of slavery. Thus, it is claimed, Paul was teaching a Christian 'subversion' of slavery—a view which later Christians brought to fruition.

The abolition of slavery notwithstanding, such an understanding misses the mark at two levels.

First, the reason Paul returned Onesimus was because Roman law demanded it. As a Roman citizen Paul upheld the government. He says nothing about slavery except to acknowledge its legality; and as long as it was legal, he would return Onesimus.

Second, the point to be emphasized about the later Christian abolition of slavery is that it was done legally. William Wilberforce was able to take action against it because, as a politician, he was in the centre of the law-making body of a nation with a legislature—quite unlike the government of Rome in the first century.

Now, it is true Paul asked Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother; in fact, he really leaned on Philemon to go gently on the runaway! But this simply illustrates our basic contention: that the *structures* are preserved while the *person-to-person living* within those structures is conducted under God's grace.

So although the Law is upheld by Paul, it is not the prime motivation for his actions. He does not live by law, in the sense that it is not the sole motivation for what he does. He acts legally, yes—but in a way that revolutionizes the purely legal approach to life.

The example of Onesimus illustrates an early Christian attempt to walk legally (that is, without being lawless) but not legalistically. The early Christians understood a definite difference between, on the one hand, personal relations which were grounded in the heart and took their drive from a secret commitment to God, and, on the other hand, public structures which reflected God's ordering of the fallen world. They

realized that their personal relations with their neighbours were deeply intertwined with the structures of the world and that this produced a tension. They lived in faith for the wisdom to act within that tension; they never tried to resolve it. They always lived in the world and always believed it was God's world. This is why their teaching cannot be codified into neat sections for working life out in advance. Their approach was quite different: they were clear on the *principles* of living in the last days, and then applied their spirits moment-by-moment to discerning how best to live in each situation.

We have already noted Paul's saying that 'law is made not for good men but for lawbreakers and rebels' (1 Tim 1:9). This is a truism. Yet in practice we have learned that the Law still has relevance for Christians, who are simultaneously justified and sinners. Although it may no longer be the wolf that devours us, it is still the sheepdog that snaps at our heels to bring us into line when we need it. This was how Luther characterized the continuing usefulness of the Law to the child of God.

Consequently, Christians can read the Law with profit. It expresses the justice and character of our God, and it instructs us how to be godly. Our motive for following it is different from the world's, but our following is still required, and is helpful to our obedience.

## **ACTION**

It is vital to realize that our approach to caring about God's Law is based on our understanding of how we are 'free' from it. Only when we are sure we are liberated from the Law's condemnation are we free to understand how we are subject to it.

Understand your freedom first. You must be sure of your secure place in God's family (through Christ's finished work alone) before you read the signposts of the Law in the external world, where you must live alongside others who read it out

of fear. Only then can you walk out of freedom, because you understand that perfect love, which you have received, casts out fear (1 Jn 4:18).

*Before the next chapter:* Read Luke 12:35–40 and James 4:13–17.