

THE CHRISTIAN'S USE OF THE LAW

I. The Christian does not use the Law for justification

The Westminster Confession makes an important distinction in connection with the Christian's use of the law. It states, 'Although true believers be not under the law as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned: *yet is it of great use to them...*' (Chapter 19.6)

A. We are not to be Pharisees

The name Pharisee is of Hebrew origin and comes from a verb meaning, 'to separate'. In the Greek language it describes a religious separatist, one that stood apart from others and, in the Pharisees' case, that kept himself holy by separation from sinners. We read Jesus' description in Luke 18, 'The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican' (verse 11). The errors of the Pharisee include: *self-confidence* (he thinks himself fit to please God by keeping the law), *pride* (he thinks himself better than others in so doing), and *an external view of sin* (he thinks of the act of adultery but not the evil look. The Pharisees viewed the law as an external code of conduct but failed to apply it to the motions of the heart. The Pharisee seeks to avoid contamination from without but neglects to address sin within. They thus become 'whited sepulchres' which, according to the Saviour, 'indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness' (Matthew 23.27). It is a vivid picture of those who would justify themselves. It is all a sham. There is no acceptance with God or change within. The Pharisee is a grim reminder that the law has no power to justify or sanctify sinners.

B. In Christ we are delivered from the law as a covenant of works

In the opening verses of Romans Chapter 7, Paul uses a marriage

illustration to demonstrate that the believer's union with Christ frees from the bondage of the law as a covenant of works. As the death of the husband leaves the wife free to marry another so the death of Christ has freed believers from works righteousness that being wedded to Christ and justified by faith in his atoning blood we might be set free to serve in newness of life. In verse 4 Paul explains, 'Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God.' It seems strange to the natural man that being set free from the law as a covenant of works actually enables us to fulfil the righteousness of the law. In Romans 8 (verses 3-4) we read, 'For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.' It is thus important to distinguish justification and sanctification. Regarding justification, reliance upon the Law is *destructive*. Regarding sanctification reference to the Law is *instructive*. It follows that:

II. Christians should not neglect the Law in sanctification

The Westminster Confession (Chaper 19.6) gives an extended explanation of the Christian's use of the Law as follows: 'Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it 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 nature, hearts, and lives*; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, 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 thereof threatened in the law. *The promises of it*, in like manner, show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works. So as, a man's doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one, and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law; and, not under grace' (emphasis added). This is an excellent explanation but not easy to remember without some help. Let us take three memorable illustrations.

A. God's Law as a Pedagogue

We each owe a lot to our teachers. They shaped the direction of our lives by their instruction. They taught us skills such as reading and writing. They imparted knowledge of history, science, geography and other disciplines. By word and example they gave us understanding of how to deal with life and respond to others. These days the standards of teachers vary considerably. How are we to know whose standards are right? The Psalmist sings,

'Teach me, O Lord, the perfect way
of thy precepts divine,
And to observe it to the end
I shall my heart incline'.
(Psalm 119.33 Metrical Version)

He recognizes that God's commandments are for us '*a rule of life informing...* of the will of God, and... (our) duty. Consequently 'it directs and binds... (us) to walk accordingly' The Law is thus an absolute objective standard of life outside of our subjective thoughts and feelings. When temper rises and bursts forth with vengeance *the* Teacher says, 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'. In this his example was perfect. Jesus the Saviour fulfilled all righteousness.

B. God's Law as a Policeman

You will have seen the cardboard replicas of policemen in supermarkets. It is enough to remind people of the criminal law and in some cases stop them from shoplifting. Crime involves punishment. God's law acts similarly. When we are lax about right and wrong, the Law speaks into our consciences about God's standards '*discovering... the sinful pollutions of... (our) nature, hearts, and lives*'. If we are serious about going in God's way, as the Lord Jesus was, we will want to know what is right. If you are confused about traffic regulations and have a friend who is a policeman you go to him and ask, what am I supposed to do? We are to approach God's Law as a friendly policeman who will keep us right '*examining... (ourselves by it to) come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need... (we) have of Christ, and the perfection of His obedience*.' We need to remember, however, that the policeman is very serious about his work. He has to arrest criminals and put them in a cell awaiting trial and sentence by the judge. So God's Law '*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 thereof threatened in the law*.' Thus the Law by convincing us of sin and its deserts helps to keep us from sin by the power of the Holy Spirit.

C. God's Law as a Parent

Christian parents spend a lot of time explaining to their children what is good for them physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually because parents want the best for their children. The law is like a father when it encourages by its promises. Indeed, the Law is the word of our heavenly Father. '*The promises of it... show (us)... God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings... (we) may expect upon the performance thereof*'. This is not to return to the covenant of works. When parents delight to see their children's obedience and reward them accordingly it is a manifestation of love not legal contract. So God blesses his obedient children not on the

basis of merit but out of his wondrous compassion bestowed in Christ.

III. Practical Response

What application will *we* make? Three key phrases of Paul guide us.

A. 'Consent to the law' (of God) (Romans 7.16)

Paul acknowledges that 'the law is *holy*' (verse 12), that 'the law is *spiritual*' (verse 14) and that 'the law is *good*' (verse 16). He assents to the status of the Law as a faithful witness to the character of God. Paul repudiated legalism, which maintains the sinner's acceptance with God on the basis of merit. 'By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in... (God's) sight' (Romans 3.20). Paul, however, just as firmly rejected Antinomianism, which affirms that the Law has no place in the Christian life. Paul recognizes that God's Law is holy, spiritual and good fit to guide, restrain and encourage us.

B. 'Delight in the law of God' (Romans 7.22)

The law in view is 'the law of God'. It is God's Word and reveals his character. That Paul is speaking as a Christian is obvious. It is only the *inward man* that delights in God's law. 'The *natural man* receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God' (1 Corinthians 2.14). We can almost feel the empathy with the Psalmist in Psalm 19 (verse 7):

'God's law is perfect, and converts
the soul in sin that lies:
God's testimony is most sure,
and makes the simple wise.'

The longest psalm (Psalm 119) is written in praise of God's Word as embodying law (v.1), statutes (v.2), precepts (v.4), judgements (v.7), commands (v.10), and testimonies (v.14). The psalmist, like

Paul, rejoices in them, celebrates their worth, meditates upon them and attends to them. They are an integral ingredient of the Word of God as the bread of life in making it what it is. We find the same in the Sermon on the Mount. We can distinguish law and grace but we cannot understand grace and holiness independently of law.

C. 'Serving the law of God' (Romans 7.25)

The flesh obeys the law of sin but deliverance in Christ results in serving the law of God. In Chapter 6, verses 17 - 19, Paul writes, 'But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness.' In Chapter 8, verses 1 - 4, he writes, 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.' We do not jettison the law but fulfill it by the enabling of the Holy Spirit.