
Practical Theology

Holiness and the Law of God

In the last issue (3.2, April-June 2023) we considered the three uses of the Law. Remember, when we speak of “the law,” we are thinking of the Word of God, the Bible. The law promotes holiness in three ways:

1. It restrains sin and promotes righteousness.
2. It disciplines, educates, convicts, and drives us outside of ourselves to Jesus Christ.
3. It becomes the rule of life for the believer.

In the Genevan Catechism (published in December 1545 to teach children) John Calvin asked the question “What is the rule of life which [God] has given us?” The answer Calvin gave was, “His law.”

Later, Calvin says the law

"shows the mark at which we ought to aim, the goal towards which we ought to press, that each of us, according to the measure of grace bestowed upon him, may endeavor to frame his life according to the highest rectitude [i.e. goodness], and, by constant study, continually advance more and more."

Calvin also writes about the third use of the law in the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He speaks of Christians as servants, wanting to do their master's will,

"Believers... profit by the law because from it they learn more thoroughly each day what the Lord's will is like.... It is as if some servant, already prepared with complete earnestness of heart to commend himself to his master, must search out and oversee his master's ways in order to conform and accommodate himself to them."

Also, Calvin speaks of the weakness of Christians and how the law acts as a goad.

"However much they may be prompted by the Spirit and eager to obey God, they are still weak in the flesh and would rather serve sin than God. The law is to this flesh like a whip to

an idle and balky ass, to goad, stir, arouse it to work."

In the last edition of the *Institutes* (published in 1559), Calvin was more forceful about how believers' profit from the law in daily reading and study.

First, he says, "here is the best instrument for them to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it."

Secondly, he says, it causes "frequent meditation upon it to be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression." In this way the saints are encouraged to press on to holiness. Calvin concludes. "For what would be less lovable than the law if, with [persisting] and threatening alone, it troubled souls through fear, and distressed them through fright?"

Notice how Calvin viewed the law primarily as a guide that encourages the believer to cling to God and obey him. This is another instance where Calvin differs from Luther. For Luther, the law is primarily negative. It is closely linked with sin, death, or the devil. Luther's interest is primarily in

the second use of the law (as a discipline to drive us to Christ), even when he considers the law's role in sanctification.

By contrast, Calvin views the law primarily as a positive expression of the will of God. Law and love are not enemies, but friends and relatives. For Calvin, the believer follows God's law, not out of compulsory obedience, but out of grateful obedience.

Under the teaching of the Spirit, the law prompts gratitude in the believer, which leads to loving obedience and turns the believer from sin. In other words, for Luther, the primary purpose of the law is to help the believer recognize and confront sin. For Calvin, the primary purpose of the law is to direct the believer to serve God out of love.

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