

The Goodness of the Law

"The law is good, if a man use it lawfully."

– 1 Timothy 1:8

Summary:

God's law is inherently holy, just, and good, because it arises from God's nature and expresses what is reasonable and helpful to human happiness. Yet the benefit we receive from it depends upon using it lawfully. The law cannot justify guilty people or produce the love required for true obedience; those blessings come only through Christ and his pardoning grace. Used rightly, however, the law exposes sin, destroys self-righteous confidence, directs sinners to the Saviour, and provides believers with a rule of life. The Christian does not seek freedom from God's commands, but longs for fuller conformity to them, using the law to cultivate humility, prayer, holiness, and hope for heaven.

Outline:

1. **The law is inherently good**

- It reflects God's nature and requires only what is reasonable, holy, and beneficial.

2. **The law cannot justify the guilty**

- A law that has been broken can only condemn; acceptance with God must come through Christ.

3. **The law cannot produce holiness**

- Commands and threats may restrain outward conduct, but only pardoning love creates willing obedience.

4. **The law leads sinners to Christ**

- It exposes the heart, awakens the conscience, and ends confidence in personal righteousness.

5. **The law guides the believer's life**

- It humbles, encourages prayer, defines loving duty, and deepens the desire for perfect holiness.

Text

Does the law's goodness depend on our conduct? No. It is good in itself, despite our ignorance or wickedness, even when irritation increases our wickedness. Like a dam that makes water rise, spread, and rush faster, "the strength of sin is the law."

The apostle admits, "When we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, worked in our members to bring forth fruit unto death." Is the law sin? God forbid. "But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead."

Yet he concludes that "the law is holy, and just, and good." Grounded in God's and human nature and our relationships, it requires only what is reasonable and promotes happiness. God could give no other moral law; it can never be abolished or changed.

The apostle means the law's effect depends on how we use it. An unlawful use is treating it as a covenant of works, seeking acceptance before God and peace of conscience. The law cannot provide these for the fallen and guilty: obedience justifies, but transgression condemns. The law was never given to justify fallen people. Such use is vain and sinful: it defies God, opposes his revealed will, robs him of glory, frustrates his grace, and makes Christ's death seem needless. Yet it comes naturally to us, and we abandon it only with difficulty, unwilling to submit to God's righteousness.

The law cannot sanctify any more than it can justify. We may look to Sinai for rules and requirements, but must look to Calvary for encouragement, motive, and strength. A sinless person can love God by seeing him in the law; a guilty person cannot until they know God forgives.

Terror and authority cannot produce love; only love can, and without it there is no true obedience. The law can no more renew us than pardon us. Its threats and commands may compel outward service, but cannot bring us willingly to God, asking, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" They may make hypocrites or slaves.

First, we use the law lawfully when it convinces us of sin. Since sin is transgression of the law, we judge one another by it. As a straight rule reveals crooked workmanship, "by the law is the knowledge of sin." Paul says, "I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet."

Secondly, we use it lawfully when it urges us to the Saviour. Nothing else can destroy the self-righteous confidence that keeps people alive to a vain hope except an acquaintance with the law's spirituality. It extends beyond outward conduct to the state of the heart and our very motives.

The law demands obedience perfect in its principle, extent, and duration: "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them." How, then, can any living person be justified? The apostle therefore says, "I through the law am dead to the law."

The law exposes sinners' danger, strips away claims to personal goodness and righteousness, awakens their sense of wrath, and drives them to refuge. "For I was alive without the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." Though preaching that replaces the Gospel with law is wrong, preaching the law is necessary: it reveals its absolute importance and leads us to trust in him who justifies the ungodly and counts faith as righteousness.

Thirdly, we use the law lawfully when we regard it as a rule of life. The apostle presents the moral law as believers' rule, teaching that love fulfills "the law," which commands, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." He also urges children to obey their parents in the Lord, for this is "the first commandment with promise."

If this is not life's rule, what is? A less perfect rule could not come from him who is "the same yesterday, today, and forever"; a more perfect one would imply God once gave a defective law. What rule could surpass this, binding us to God and others through love? Why, then, do some regard freedom from loving God wholeheartedly and their neighbours as themselves as a privilege? A true Christian sees such exemption as the vilest bondage. He blames himself, not the law, and seeks not to lower it to his depravity but to rise into full obedience.

The more God does for a believer, the more he feels bound to serve Him. This perfect rule humbles him by exposing his deficiencies, drives him to seek grace in prayer, and makes him long for heaven, where complete holiness brings perfect happiness. There, the law written fully in his heart will expel every opposing principle and fill him with all the fullness of God.

This sermon is taken from William Jay's devotional, *Morning and Evening Exercises* (January 20, Evening), first published in 1854.