

## **The Law Leads Us to Christ: The Law and Its First Use**

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*“The law must be laid upon those who are to be justified,  
that when they are cast down and humbled by the law, they should fly to Christ.”*

*Martin Luther, Commentary on Galatians*

As the quote from Luther above indicates, if we are to see men and women come to Christ, then we must first lay the law upon them so that they might see their need. The use of the law to show lost souls their need for Christ historically has been called the first use of the law.

Before we look at how to use the law in this manner, we need to make some working assumptions that will help us do so in a pastoral manner.

### **Seven Working Assumptions**

- 1) We accept Paul’s declaration that “the law became our tutor to lead us to Christ” (Galatians 3:24). Few Christians argue this point, making this first use then the easiest to defend! Whether Reformed or Lutheran, two kingdoms or one kingdom, or covenantal or dispensational, most evangelicals will use the law in one way or another, to one degree or another, to seek conviction of sin.
- 2) When we speak of the law, our primary reference is to the moral law. This law is “summarily comprehended” in the Ten Commandments (Westminster Shorter Catechism 41), but also further revealed by “good and necessary consequence” (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.4) and in the “general equity” (WCF 19.4), or the undergirding moral principles found in the case laws, ceremonial laws, and civil laws.
- 3) The law of God is not a set of arbitrary rules, but issues forth from the heart and mouth of God Himself. “The law of the Lord is perfect” because God is perfect. “The commandment of the Lord is pure” because the Lord is pure. Hodge says in his commentary on *The Westminster Confession of Faith* that the law “has its ground in the all-perfect and unchangeable moral nature of God. When we affirm that God is holy, we do not mean that he makes right to be right by simply willing it, but that he wills it because it is right.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A.A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 2004), 337.

- 4) The law was expressed in the Covenant of Works, which was re-emphasized (though not republished!) at Mt. Sinai. Thus, it bound Adam “and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it” (WCF 19.1). “The moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof” (WCF 19.5).
- 5) Since the law can justify no one (Gal. 2:16), justification comes to the elect “not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous, not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone...by imputing the obedience (to the law) and satisfaction (of its demands) of Christ unto them...” (WCF 11.1, parenthetical statements by author).
- 6) The evangelist must then skillfully use the law to bring sinners to repentance and faith. “A sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.” (WCF 15.2).
- 7) Thus, we will focus on how practically to use the law in our witnessing.

In using the law practically in witnessing, we can follow the uses of the Apostle Paul as seen in Romans 3.

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. (Rom. 3:9-20)

### **Drape “Black” Rabbinical Pearls upon Others in Witnessing**

One thing you will notice in this passage from Romans 3 it consists primarily of quotations from the Old Testament. Paul, a rabbi before he became an apostle, is employing a teaching technique of the Jews. He took several related Old Testament Scriptures and placed them one after another to establish his point. Quotations from the Old Testament placed together in this manner by

Jewish teachers were called “rabbinical pearls.” Just as a jeweler strings one pearl after another to form a necklace, so they would use these related quotations to form their arguments.

As Paul forms this “pearl necklace,” we see that he is placing it around the neck of mankind, both Jew and Gentile, not as a way of enhancing our beauty but to emphasize the wickedness of all (Rom. 3:9). It is for this reason that we refer to them as black pearls. Paul is bringing to a close the opening argument of his letter: namely, the fallen nature of all mankind. Through these first three chapters he has shown how men, whether they Jews or Gentiles, are all condemned. Whether by the outright immorality of the Gentile or the hypocrisy of the Jew, all fall far short of God’s glory and are under the wrath of God.

Like Paul, we are to use the law to show every person that they too are under God’s wrath. One might object that it is cruel to use the law to make people feel guilty for sin, in essence weighing them down and oppressing them with the law. Yet we would respond that a temporary God-given necklace in this age is better than an eternal self-imposed millstone around an unbeliever’s neck in the age to come. The law is given to reveal the reality of the sinner’s situation and to help them see their true standing before God.

Here are practical means to accomplish this.

**Use the Scripture to Interpret Hearts.** We are those who believe in the Reformation cry *Sola Scriptura*. We believe the Bible is its own best interpreter, and use Biblical texts to interpret other texts. Remember that Scriptures are given to help people interpret their own hearts as well. They cannot understand them on their own. As the prophet Jeremiah says, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I, the Lord, search the heart...” (Jer. 17:9-10). He searches it through his law. His Word is “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

Every sinner needs this! Because all men are sinners, in every other religion from liberalism to secular humanism, from Islam to atheism, all men seek to justify themselves. They point to some piece of morality, some aspect of the law, and believe that it renders them just. Anyone who does not believe in his heart that he is justified by faith in Christ will constantly seek to justify himself by his works. He needs the Law of God in its fullness to show him the impossibility of this self-justification. Thus, the church must be faithful to bring this knowledge to sinners.

**Overcome Belief in Justification by Works by Revealing True Demands of Law.** As difficult as it may be to bring people to the knowledge of sin with the law, to show them no works of theirs can justify them, to hold the whole world accountable, and to stop every mouth, as Paul says, we must speak the law to those under it. We are doing them no favors if, like Mr. Worldly Wiseman in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, we point them toward the village of Morality and tell them Mr. Legality and his son Civility can rid them of their burden. Instead, we must press upon them how great this burden is. When Evangelist rescued Christian, he said, “Legality, therefore, is not able to set thee free from thy burden. No man was as yet ever rid of his burden by him; no, nor ever is like to be: ye cannot be justified by the works of the law; for by the deeds of the law

no man living can be rid of his burden.”<sup>2</sup> Evangelist called aloud to the heavens for confirmation of what he had said; and with that there came words and fire out of the mountain under which poor Christian stood, which made the hair of his flesh stand up. The words were pronounced: “As many as are of the works of the law, are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.’” Gal. 3:10. To do this work is our duty as gospel ministers.

**Recognize That People Must See Sin Before They Will See a Savior.** When Jesus interacted with individuals, why did he so often engage in holy pauses? Why did the Lord make a blind man go across town with mud made from dirt and Jesus’ spit on his eyes to wash so he could see? Why did he speak at length with the Samaritan woman at the well until her serial relationships were exposed before he told her who he was? Why did he give the rich young ruler, eager to know how to obtain eternal life, a Ten Commandment quiz and then watch the young man walk away when he applied it strongly to his life? Why did he not just say “Believe in Me. I’m the Christ. Be saved!”? Because Jesus practiced what Paul is teaching here, that “through the law comes knowledge of sin.” Through knowledge of sin comes the need for a Savior.

Now think about our culture. It is lawless! Every day we wake up and the media tells us of yet another new definition of what constitutes marriage. You cannot have the law of adultery if marriage is not defined. For another example, people upload videos to YouTube containing all types of violence for people’s viewing enjoyment, and people watch others engage in such things as “playing” the Knockdown Game, gang beatings, and even Islamic beheadings. You cannot have the law of murder if violence is your pleasure. Lawless people are not gospel-prepared people. If they do not see their sin, they have no need of a Savior.

### **Have an Extensive Knowledge of the Old Testament for Evangelizing**

How do we obtain knowledge of the Law? There are four means to acquiring such knowledge.

**Read the Law of God Regularly.** Too many people who have been Christians for years – even seminary students - have told me they have never read the whole Old Testament. There are many other reasons to read the Old Testament, but one would be this: How can we expect the knowledge of the law of God around us if it is not in our own minds and hearts? How can we witness to sinners of their sin if we do not even understand its depths ourselves? We cannot even understand the New Testament truly without the Old Testament, since it is quoted in it repeatedly. You must gain the knowledge of the law that reading it will give to you.

**Meditate on the Law by Singing It.** We are to be singing the law, though I am not necessarily advocating putting the words of the Pentateuch to music. Yet, in a manner of speaking, the law has already been placed in song form. For the Psalms, in one very real sense, are God’s Law in song form. You cannot sing a psalm without being confronted with God distinguishing between the righteous and the wicked, without him declaring the nature of fallen mankind, without him

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<sup>2</sup> John Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress: One Man’s Search for Eternal Life – An Allegory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1999), 27.

speaking of his holiness, without hearing echoes of the moral law, or without the need for salvation and deliverance being proclaimed.

I raise this for Paul's quotes of the law here are not strictly from the Pentateuch. Verses 10-12 are from Psalm 14 (or 53). Verse 13 is taken Psalm 5:9 and Psalm 140:3. Verse 14 is Psalm 10:7. In verses 15-17 Paul deviates by quoting from Proverbs and Isaiah. But then in verse 18 he gets another black pearl from the treasure trove of the Psalms from Psalm 36:1.

How did Paul write this section? He may have pulled out a scroll and looked up these references. Yet the text has the sense that he is quoting them from memory. Perhaps he could do this readily because he was singing the Psalms and knew them readily and handily? Consider then what the robust singing of God's Word would mean for our evangelism. If we sing them like we should, not only to God but teaching and admonishing each other with all wisdom as we sing (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19), then we are plowing hearts with his law where gospel seeds can be planted.

**Memorize Important Portions of the Law.** As Paul shows here with the doctrine of reprobation, or in Romans 4 regarding the doctrine of justification, or Romans 9 with the doctrine of election, he knew the Old Testament thoroughly and had much of it committed to memory. How vital this is to our witness! After several years of being a believer, I was in a meeting of men where an older minister asked us how many of us knew the Ten Commandments. Few of us could raise hands, and I went home to make sure that I cooperated with the Spirit's work in writing them on my heart. As a pastor, I worked to make sure the children and families of the congregation had them memorized.

We would then use the law in evangelism. Our congregation did door-to-door surveys based on the Ten Commandments, and it incredible the experiences we had. One day I came up to the home of a man sitting on his porch who was reading a book from the *Left Behind* series. He was friendly and agreed to take the survey. He could only name two or three of the commandments, and thought one of the Ten Commandments was actually "love your neighbor as yourself." He started smiling at his failure, and then said to me, "What makes this embarrassing is that I am the pastor of the church behind you," as across the street was a mainline church. Sadly, this incident was commonplace. Some young people did an apologetic project which consisted of videotaping people trying to list the commandments, and they even went to a number of the churches in town and talked to the pastors. The amount of pastoral stumbling over listing the commandments on those videos bore a tragic testimony to the lack of knowledge of God's basic rules in our land.

Think of the impact of this deplorable lack of knowledge has on preaching. Those given the duty to preach are under holy obligation to preach the whole counsel of God with its warning and judgments.

**Declare the Judgments of the Law.** Paul does not shrink back from saying some unpleasant things – no one is good, man's works are worthless, lips speak lies, feet run to evil, and none fears God. Preachers, when is the last time people heard judgments and warnings coming to them from your pulpit? In order to have true gospel backbone we must have the bittersweet fire

of the law in our bellies. You are not a true watchman on walls of Jerusalem if you do not warn people of their sin.

Yet as we bring the law to bear on people we must do it skillfully.

### **Learn in Tutoring to Apply the Law of God Skillfully to Your Hearers**

We are called, preacher and layperson alike, to tutor others in the Law of God. Yet you would not be a good tutor in the subject of math, science, or English if you know very little about the subject. So it is with God's Law. We must learn to be effective tutors.

I want to return here to the terms the Westminster Confession of Faith uses when it describes the obligation all people have to "personal, entire, exact, and perpetual" obedience of the law. As we have established, people cannot achieve this obedience, but we must press this duty upon them so they will see their need for Christ. Calvin spoke of the law in this manner regarding its impact on people: "Their attention would be aroused by its menaces."<sup>3</sup> The Law should capture people's attention. How can we develop this?

**Use the Law *Personally*.** Our knowledge of the law must be extensive so that we can minister to the individuals God puts before us who come to us with differing life stories. We need to use it personally to speak to the one before us. Later in Romans, in the early part of Chapter 7, Paul relates that "if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin" (Rom. 7:7). Then he goes on to describe how he learned that coveting was a sin through the tenth commandment. He personalized the law, and we need to do the same in guiding people toward Christ.

This does not always require a reference or quote. A strong familiarity with the stories of the Old Testament is a tremendous way to help people. I love using the story of Joseph in working with people, because it has so many of the experiences people go through: jealousy over favoritism, betrayal by family, estrangement, unfair circumstances, problems going back over years and years, the need for forgiveness and reconciliation. Find personal application from the Law as you work with people you know.

**Use the Law *Comprehensively*.** Our Lord Jesus did not come into this world merely to help rescue people from a singular problem that at any given time is bothering them. He came to save people whose sin has so ruined their souls that Paul here in Romans classifies them as "worthless." Though a word we do not like to use in speaking about people, here it is being used only in a certain way. Paul's use of this term is in reference to the economy of righteousness or the economy of heaven.

In his commentary on Romans, James Boice uses the illustration of Monopoly money. In the game of Monopoly, a five hundred dollar bill will buy you the Boardwalk property. But if you take that same Monopoly five hundred dollar bill down to the local hardware store and try to purchase something, it will not even buy you a board. That bill is worthless in that economy.

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, Vol. IV (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 375.

Similarly, our righteousness is worthless in God's economy where only perfection has true value. As we established earlier, people want to point to one aspect of their lives and declare its righteousness. We have to show people that if they have broken the law at one point they have, as James states in his epistle, broken the entirety of God's Law. If people think they have sinned just a little bit, then they will believe they need just a little Savior. But we want them to be brought to the point where they express what John Newton did. "I have come to realize two things: I am a great sinner, and I have a great Savior."

**Use the Law Precisely.** If you are a pastor, it is inevitable that you will have to deal with conflict and reconciliation issues between two brothers who have offended each other. It is amazing how people fight reconciliation. People in the church do not want to come into the same room to discuss and come to terms of peace over the matters that have been dividing them. Conflict resolution where specific issues and sins are being addressed is very difficult work.

How much more difficult it is to speak specifically to sinners regarding their lives and the sin in which they are involved. We need grace to do this difficult work. To those who are bruised reeds, we must speak gently to their souls so as not to crush them or send them off in despair. To the proud and rebellious, we have to speak of the seriousness of the sin of which we are calling them to repent.

**Use the Law Persistently.** The Westminster Confession states there is a "perpetual obedience" all people must render unto God. So often as we interact with sinners and tell them of their need for Christ, and they simply walk away from us. They think by walking away they are also walking away from the demands that God's Law places upon them. We know that is not true. We have to keep pursuing them with the Law.

Psalm 119:126 says, "It is time for the Lord to act, for your law has been broken." We could grow despairing when we see God's Law set aside. When we see people rejecting His Word, this is then when we need to cry out to God to work and pursue people. We need then to pray that the Church would learn to love His Law once again as part of that pursuit. We must cry out and ask God to reestablish the knowledge of His Law in the land once again. We must plead that His Spirit would be given to us once again so that, in the words of Isaiah, our voices would be raised up like a trumpet in declaring to people their rebellion. We must be faithful to use His commandments and His statutes, His warnings and His judgments, to awaken people to see the awfulness of their sin against the Holy God.

As we do so, may the results be what Samuel Bolton reminds us of in *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*: "The law sends us to the gospel that we may be justified; the gospel sends us to the law again to inquire what is our duty as those who are justified."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Bolton, *True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (London: Banner of Truth, 1964), 80.