

# **The Gust of Gratitude and the Third Use of the Law**

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## **Obligatory Gratitude**

Thank you. These two profound words never say enough. We often struggle to express our gratitude for the opportunities we cherish, the gifts we receive, and the ones we love. Part of the problem is that we typically view gratitude as merely an obligatory gesture.

As a boy, I remember how frustrated I became when my parents required that I write a “thank you” card to every person who gave me a gift. While I ultimately complied with their demand, my gestures of gratitude were far from sincere. Outwardly, I exclaimed to my aunt, for example, “Thank you for my Tonka truck.” Inwardly, however, the fumes of ingratitude would burn as I was instructed to write what seemed to me a dumb old card. My attitude towards my parents’ request revealed a spirit of thanklessness. Even worse, it exposed my true love. I cared more about my silly truck than I did about my sweet aunt. I loved the gift more than the giver.

Real gratitude is never satisfied with petty expressions of gratefulness. Thanksgiving occurs not when the box of the law is checked but when the requirement of the law fuels a relish of gratitude. Overtime, my parents’ insistence on writing thank you cards not only exposed my ungratefulness but also taught me the value of cultivating an attitude of thanksgiving. As a result, a strange thing occurred. I began to derive more pleasure in expressing my gratitude for the person who gave the gift than I found in the gift itself. The process of heeding my parents’ demand became a means that grew my affection for my aunt, and, as a result, strengthened my relationship with her.

As Christians, we must not settle for petty gestures of gratitude. It is not enough to place a “thank you” card on top of our justification and think that we have settled the demand of the law. The relish of gratitude is experienced when the requirements of the law drive us towards godliness, and as a result, into a sweeter fellowship with God. Through the gust of gratitude we savor the sweetness of God’s grace.

The purpose of this article is to consider the so-called “third use of the law.” In particular, we will examine how the law of God guides us in gratitude and, even more, how gratitude guides us in godliness.

## What Is the Third Use of the Law?

The law has three basic tasks. It serves as a mirror, a mandate, and a map. As a mirror, the law exposes our sin and drives us to Christ, who perfectly obeyed the law and bore its punishment (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:19–24). As a mandate, the law is binding on all people and functions as a restraining influence on society (Rom. 1:20; 2:14–15). As a map, the law serves as a guide for Christian living. It reveals that happiness is paved on the pathway of obedience. As the Psalmist states, “Blessed are those . . . who walk in the law of the LORD” (Ps. 119:1).

As a map for Christian living, the so-called “third use of the law” (*tertius usus legis*) reminds us that the precepts of God are fundamentally good, because they reflect and reveal his character (Rom. 7:12). The logic is straightforward. The law is good because God is good. Conversely, to disparage the law is to disparage God. As God is to be loved, so is his law (Ps. 119:97).

For those who trust in Christ alone by faith alone for their salvation, and who are thus no longer hounded by the law’s demands for absolute perfection, the law becomes a cherished, not to mention divinely inspired, manual for knowing God. It instructs believers in God’s ways as well as orders their steps. This is what our Reformed forebears would sometimes call the didactic or normative use of the law (*usus didacticus sive normativus*).

Before we consider the biblical warrant for the third use of the law, we should listen to how previous Reformed theologians and confessions understood the positive role of the law in the Christian life.

## How Has the Third Use of the Law Been Understood?

While many theologians and pastors expounded on what is now known as the third use of the law before John Calvin, he remains a good entry point into this discussion. His well-known comments in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* crystalized the doctrine for future generations. Calvin states, “The third and principal use (*tertius usus*), which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns.”<sup>1</sup>

For Calvin, the law is the “best instrument” (*optimum organum*) for knowing God’s will. Its primary purpose is to instruct Christians in how we should “press on” (*instare*) towards righteousness. Like eager servants, we must daily and cheerfully conform ourselves to the Master’s plans. As a result, Calvin urges us to meditate frequently on the law in order to be “aroused to obedience, strengthened in [God’s will], and be drawn back from the slippery

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 2.7.12; idem, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, eds. Wilhelm Baum, Edward Cunitz, and Edward Reuss (Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1864), 2:261.

path of transgression.”<sup>2</sup> As a Master’s house rules are binding on his servants, so God’s law is normative for his people.

Following Calvin, the *Heidelberg Catechism* traces the Christian life along the lines of guilt, grace, and gratitude. In particular, the second question and answer probes what we must know to live and die in the joy provided by the gospel of Jesus Christ. It suggests that three grand truths must be comprehended and embraced: “First, how great my sins and misery are; second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery; third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance” (Q&A 2).

Commenting on this section of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Zacharias Ursinus makes four observations about the relationship of the law and gratitude. First, gratitude is the goal of our deliverance. Second, “true gratitude” derives not from our own distorted notions of thanksgiving but from the teaching of God’s word. Third, whatever good works we perform towards God or our neighbors are not meritorious but are “a declaration of our thankfulness.” A life of gratitude to God is an expression of a life we know is undeserved. Fourth, the law instructs us in how we might grow in our ability to please God by increasing our capacity to express our gratitude to him for delivering us from sin. Ursinus argues that in the law, gratitude is “taught particularly, because it distinctly declares . . . what manner of obedience is pleasing to God.”<sup>3</sup> The overall point of Ursinus and the *Heidelberg Catechism* should not be missed: God has given us his law in order to guide us in gratitude.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* focuses on how the law is used in the performance of good works. The confession defines good works as that which is done “in obedience to God’s commandments.” These Spirit-wrought works are not the cause of our salvation but the necessary result of it. They spring from a “true and living faith” (WCF 16.2). While we are justified *sola fide*, the faith that saves is never alone but is always accompanied by spiritual life and loving obedience. In its chapter on the law, the confession outlines no less than four ways in which the law facilitates good works (WCF 19.6). First, when we trust in Christ, and are freed from the demands of the covenant of works, the law becomes a “rule of life” that informs us of God’s will and directs us in how we should walk in a manner that honors him. Second, the law shows us our continual need of the gospel by revealing the pollution of our sin and the perfection of Christ. Third, the law helps restrain the sinful urgings and ungodly behavior of the regenerate by reminding us of the dreadful consequences of sin. Fourth, the law reminds Christians of the blessing of obedience. The Westminster divines, therefore, argue that one of the primary purposes of the law is to promote good works in the life of the Christian and to provoke them to “more thankfulness” (WLC 97).

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.12 (CO, 2:261–262).

<sup>3</sup> Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 22.

## **Is the Third Use of the Law Biblical?**

Much more could be said about the historical development of the third use of the law. However, one point has already emerged as an underlying theme: the law of God guides Christians in a life of gratitude. As we move from the annals of history and turn to the pages of Scripture, we see this same theme emphasized. I would argue that the Bible's insistence on gratitude is evidence of the biblical warrant for the doctrine of the third use of the law. This can be gleaned from two rudimentary arguments: one from ingratitude and the other from gratitude.

Stated negatively, the third use of the law is confirmed in the Bible's condemnation of ingratitude. Isaiah 38:18 states, for example, "For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness." According to King Hezekiah, Sheol is devoid of thankfulness, praise, and hope. Ingratitude epitomizes those under the judgment of God. In other words, if we can allow for a redemptive-historical anachronism, hell is a place of pure selfishness. In a similar fashion, the Apostle Paul argues that unbelief is characterized by ingratitude towards God, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). Furthermore, if the law wasn't binding on all people, including believers, why else would the Psalmist weep over the flagrant disregard of God's law in society? He cries, "My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law" (Ps. 119:135-136). Ingratitude typifies life without God. It is a mark of unbelief. By exposing the unbelieving nature of ingratitude, however, these biblical texts also affirm the requirement of gratitude.

Stated positively, the doctrine of the third use of the law is confirmed by the Bible's commendation of gratitude. By means of both precept and example, the Bible gives hundreds of reasons why the law is both good and useful for guiding us in gratitude. By way of example, in Luke 17:16, we learn that only one of the ten lepers whom Jesus heals returns to Christ, praises God, falls at Jesus's feet, and thanks him for his healing mercy. The leper's thankfulness drove him to the feet of Jesus. This was not a petty gesture of gratitude. His thankfulness motivated him to a deeper and sweeter fellowship with the Savior. By way of precept, Isaiah 12:1-2 states, "You will say in that day, I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation." Biblical gratitude understands that we deserve God's just judgment but instead we enjoy his lavish grace. As a result, the cultivation of gratitude to God for his saving mercies is actually a means of driving us into a deeper love and affection for the God of our salvation.

## How Is Gratitude To Be Expressed?

The goal of gratitude is not simply the articulation of thanks but the enjoyment of the one for whom gratitude is expressed. In the words of the Puritan William Ames, “Thanksgiving is thus a secondary end (*secundarius finis*).”<sup>4</sup> The chief end of gratitude is honoring God.

Ames identifies three key ingredients in thanksgiving. He states, “The right kind of thanksgiving requires, first, a knowledge of God’s blessing; second, an applying them to ourselves through faith and hope; third, a true esteem (*iusta æstimatio*) of them with fitting gratitude (*affectu congruente*).”<sup>5</sup> God-honoring thanksgiving therefore pushes beyond merely articulating formulaic expressions of appreciation to cultivating utmost reverence and genuine affection for God. Thanksgiving that stops short of “true esteem” and “fitting gratitude” is nothing more than an empty gesture. Ames explains, “The proper end of thanksgiving (*finis proprius gratiarum*) is to honor God (*honorem Deo*) for all the things we have received, Ps. 50:14. For if we simply accept the good things we have received, resting in them or glorying in ourselves . . . thanksgiving is spoiled.”<sup>6</sup> Thanksgiving does not simply acknowledge God; it delights in God.

The experience of exulting in God for who he is and what he gives might be called the gust of gratitude—that is, the act of savoring what you appreciate. In this gust of gratitude, we move past hallow sentimentality to discover that the process of giving thanks is actually a means of not only enjoying what was given but also cherishing even more the one who gave the gift. As John Owen states, “In this gust and relish lies the sweetness and satisfaction of spiritual life. . . . In this gust we taste by experience that God is gracious and that the love of Christ is better than wine.”<sup>7</sup> In gratitude, we hone our spiritual taste buds and develop an appetite for God. We taste and see that he is good (Ps. 34:8).

## How Does the Law Guide Us in Gratitude?

The Bible gives a myriad of examples of how the law guides us in gratitude. Here are just ten ways that the law calls us to give thanks to God.

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<sup>4</sup> William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John D. Eusden (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 266; idem, *Medulla theologica* (Amsterdam, 1634), 2.9.91. Ames sees thanksgiving as a form of prayer but makes a distinction between “thanksgiving” (*gratiarum*) and “petition” (*petitione*). He states, “Thanksgiving is more perfect in itself and more excellent than petition, for in petition our good is often sought but in thanksgiving only God’s honor” (2.9.93).

<sup>5</sup> Ames, *Marrow of Theology*, 266; idem, *Medulla theologica*, 2.9.89.

<sup>6</sup> Ames, *Marrow of Theology*, 266; idem, *Medulla theologica*, 2.9.90.

<sup>7</sup> John Owen, *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded* (1681), in *The Works of John Owen*, 24 vols., ed. William H. Goold (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850), 7:270–271; cf. John W. Tweeddale, “Living on Things Above: John Owen on Spiritual Mindedness,” *The Beauty and Glory of Christian Living*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014).

First, we are to give thanks in all of life. Since God is Creator, we should be grateful for all that he has made, including all people (1 Tim. 2:1; 4:4). We are to boast in God for his never-ending provisions (Ps. 44:8). This involves thanking him for our daily bread and recounting to one another his works (Matt. 15:36; Pss. 52:9; 79:13). God's will is that we are to give thanks to him always, in every circumstance (Eph. 5:4, 20; 1 Thess. 5:18).

Second, we are to give thanks in worship. When the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the Tabernacle, David appointed a time of thanksgiving be made to God (1 Chron. 16:8–10). Time and again, we are beckoned to join the throng of God's people in order to "enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise" (Ps. 100:4). Even in our darkest and most vulnerable moments, we must also learn to express, however faintly, gratitude to God in private worship. As Jonah cried in the belly of the great fish, "with the voice of thanksgiving, I will sacrifice to you . . . [for] salvation belongs to the Lord." (Jon. 2:9).

Third, we are to give thanks for God's word. David declares, "I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for . . . you have exalted above all things your name and your word" (Ps. 138:2). When we receive the word of God with the open arms of gratitude, we even provide occasion for others to give thanks to God for his sovereign work of grace in us. As Paul states, "We give thanks to God always for all of you . . . For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess. 1:3–4; cf. 2:13).

Fourth, we are to give thanks for God's character. The Bible is replete with examples. We are to thank him for his righteousness (Pss. 7:17; 118:19); his wonderful deeds (Pss. 9:1; 26:7; 75:1); his holiness (Pss. 30:4; 97:12; 122:4; 140:13); his salvation (Ps. 118:21; Jon. 2:9); his mercy (Isa. 12:1; 51:3); his grace (Matt. 11:25; 1 Cor. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13); and his steadfast love (1 Chr. 16:34, 41; 2 Chr. 5:13; 7:3; Ez. 3:11; Ps. 106:1; 107; 118:1, 29; 136; Jer. 33:11). A grateful heart takes time to relish the manifold flavors of the character of God (Ps. 118:29).

Fifth, we are to give thanks to God for answered prayer. When Daniel looks for divine aid to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he states, "To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and might and have now made known to me what we asked of you, for you have made known to us the king's matter" (Dan. 2:23). We are to bring our supplications before God, thanking him for hearing and answering our prayers (Phil. 4:6).

Sixth, we are to give thanks for God's people. Paul opens his epistle to the Romans with a thanksgiving greeting, "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world" (Rom. 1:8). Far from a formulaic expression or generic platitude, at the end of the letter, he identifies the names of the people he is grateful for (cf. Rom. 16:3ff).

Seventh, we are to give thanks for God's grace in salvation. Notice Paul's logic in his personal statement of faith: "I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord .

.. though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy . . . and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost” (1 Tim. 1:12-15). For Paul, gratitude and confession go hand-in-hand. He confesses Christ, because he is grateful for the salvation he has undeservedly received. But even more, his gratitude then becomes a megaphone to broadcast his Christological creed.

Eighth, we are to give thanks for victory over sin. After struggling with an internal battle between obedience and disobedience, Paul exclaims, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord . . . There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 7:24–8:1). The elation of Romans 8 comes after the anguish of Romans 7. Gratitude propels us out of our despair and into the arms of his Savior, in whom we are more than conquerors (Rom. 8:37). “Thanks be to God who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57).

Ninth, we are to give thanks for spiritual growth. Coming out of a life of paganism and facing a life of persecution, the Thessalonian church grew in faith, hope, and love. Their spiritual progress was the occasion of Paul’s praise: “We ought always to give thanks to God for your brothers, as is right because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing” (2 Thess. 1:3).

Tenth, we are to give thanks for eternal life. Paul tells the Colossian church, I give “thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col. 1:12). In heaven, we will join the host of heaven in everlasting thanksgiving (Rev. 4:9; 7:12; 11:17).

### **The Gust of Gratitude**

Giving thanks to God is a matter of both obedience and love. We cannot love God without his law, and we cannot obey God’s law without love. As Jesus told his disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn. 14:15). Applied to the subject of gratitude, one of the reasons we comply with God’s commands to give him thanks is because through these expressions of gratitude we learn to love him more. The process of fulfilling the Bible’s mandate to give thanks to God not only breaks up the hard soil of our own selfishness and ingratitude but also cultivates a greater affection for God. We cannot stop at gratitude and expect to fulfill the law’s demands. Gratitude is only the means not the end. For Christians, the law is the track that leads us to our final destination. The law guides us in gratitude; gratitude guides us in godliness; and godliness guides us into sweeter fellowship with God—such is the gust of gratitude.