

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—

Lesson 65—The Right Understanding of the Law of God, WLC Q.99

Before studying the Commandments themselves, we need to lay down some ground rules for rightly interpreting the Law of God and we need to be sure we understand the difference between the moral law as it's part of the covenant of works—*without a Mediator*, and the moral law as it's part of the covenant of grace—*mediated through our Saviour*.

Distinguishing Law and Gospel, Thomas Watson

- I. What's the difference between the moral law and the gospel?
 - A. The law requires that we worship God as our Creator; the gospel that we worship Him in and through Christ. Out of Christ, we may see God's power, justice, and holiness, but only in Christ do we see God's mercy, i.e., only in Christ is God propitious.
 - B. The moral law requires obedience, but gives no strength (like Pharaoh, who required bricks but gave no straw); but the gospel gives strength for obedience in that it bestows faith on the elect, sweetens the law to them, and makes them serve God with delight.
- II. Of what use is the moral law to men?
 - A. It's a mirror to show us our sins, that, seeing our pollution and misery, we may be forced to flee to Christ to satisfy for former guilt and save from future wrath, Gal 3.24; Rom 3.19-20.
- III. But is the moral law still in force to *believers*; is it not abolished to them (cf. Rom 6.14; 7.1-6)?
 - A. In some sense, it is abolished to believers. Firstly, with respect to their justification. They're not justified by their obedience to the moral law. Believers are to make great use of the moral law, but they must trust only in Christ's righteousness for justification, Gal 2.15-16. And secondly, with respect to its curse. They're freed from its curse and condemning power, Gal 3.13; Rom 8.1-3; 3.19-25.
 - B. But though the moral law is thus far abolished to believers, it *remains* a perpetual rule for them. Though it be not their Saviour, yet it is their guide. Though it be not a covenant of life, yet it is a rule of life. Every Christian is bound to conform his life to it; and to write all his conduct, as exactly as he can, after this copy, Rom 3.28-31; 8.4; 1Jn 2.1; 1Pet 1.15-16.
 - C. Though a Christian is not under the *condemning* power of the law, yet he is under its *commanding* power. To love, reverence, and obey God, is a law that always binds us and will even bind us in heaven. They who will not have the law of God to rule them (i.e. Antinomians), will never have the gospel to save them. To come to Christ by faith for salvation is to come under the yoke of His law for our sanctification. If we're unwilling to have His law rule us, we'll never have His grace to save us, Tit 2.11-14; Eph 2.8-10; 4.22-5.1.
 1. Packer, "Without the law of God, love for God has no eyes; without love for God, the law of God has no heart."
 2. Secker, "As those under the law were not without a gospel to save them; so those who are under the gospel are not without a law to rule them."
 - D. And so, we're neither antinomians nor legalists, but Christ's disciples, to whom He gives His law as a rule and guide for our love and gratitude, Jn 14.15; Gen 39.9.

Rules for Rightly Interpreting the Ten Commandments, Thomas Watson and WLC 99

- I. The commands and prohibitions of the moral law reach the heart. The law of God requires not only outward actions but also inward affections, Dt 6.5. Man's law binds only the hands, but God's law binds the heart. Thus the law of God forbids not only the act of sin, but also the desire and inclination for sin: not only adultery, but lusting, Mt 5.28; not only stealing, but coveting, Rom 7.7.
 - A. WLC 99.2: The law of God is *spiritual*, and so reaches the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures, Rom 7.14; Dt 6.5.

- II. In the commandments, there's a *synecdoche*, in that more is intended than is spoken. So that 1) where any duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden. For example, in the *Fourth Commandment*, when we're commanded to keep the Sabbath, we're forbidden to break it, and when we're commanded to live in a calling, we're forbidden to live idly. 2) where any sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded. For example, in the *Ninth Commandment*, where we're forbidden to lie, we're commanded to speak the truth.
- A. WLC 99.4: That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded: so, where a promise is annexed, the contrary threatening is included; and, where a threatening is annexed, the contrary promise is included, Isa 58.13.
- III. Where any sin is forbidden in the commandment, the *occasion* of it is also forbidden, Pr 5.8. Thus under each sin or duty commanded is included all others of the same class. For example, when the *Ninth Commandment* forbids untruthfulness to one's neighbor, it also forbids all other kinds of untruthfulness.
- A. WLC 99.6: That under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded; together with all the causes, means, occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto, Mt 5.21-22, 27-28; 1Th 5.22; Jude 23.
- IV. The law of God forms a harmonious whole. The first and second tables are knit together as *piety* to God and *equity* to our neighbor. If a man is zealous in the second table but neglects the first, or zealous in the first but neglects the second, his heart's not right with God, who wrote both tables and calls for a *whole* obedience of the *whole* life with a *whole* heart to His *whole* law. Partial conformity is worthless in God's sight, Mk 7.6-7.
- A. WLC 99.1: That the law is perfect, and bindeth everyone to full conformity in the whole man unto the righteousness thereof, and unto entire obedience forever; so as to require the utmost perfection of every duty, and to forbid the least degree of every sin, Js 2.10; Mt 22.37-39.
- V. God's law forbids not only the acting of sin in our own persons, but being accessory to, or having any hand in, the sins of others, 1Sam 3.13-14; 2Sam 12.9; 16.21.
- A. WLC 99.8: That in what is commanded to others, we are bound, according to our places and callings, to be helpful to them; and to take heed of partaking with others in what is forbidden them, 1Tim 5.22; Eph 5.11.
- VI. WLC 99.5: That what God forbids, is at no time to be done; what He commands, is always our duty; and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times.
- A. The principle here is that we're *always* under the moral government of God and responsible to Him for the state of our hearts and for all our thoughts, words, and deeds. We can *never* take a vacation from our duty to God. All our life long and every moment of it, we have a moral obligation to God.
- VII. Though we cannot, by our own strength, fulfill these commandments, yet in doing what we're able to do, the Lord has provided encouragement for us. There's a threefold encouragement here.
- A. Though we have no ability to obey any one command, yet God's promised in the covenant of grace to work in us that which He requires of us, Ezk 36.26-27; Dt 30.6. There's nothing in the commands, but the same thing can be found in the promises. Therefore we're to be encouraged that *God will enable us* to do His will, through faith in Christ, in a manner pleasing to Him, Phil 2.12-13.
- B. Though we cannot perfectly fulfill the law of God, yet God, for Christ's sake, will accept something less than He requires because the gospel abrogates the severity of the moral law. The Law requires an exact obedience. But for Christ's sake, God accepts a sincere obedience. If there's sincerity and truth in our heart, He'll abate something of the degree of what's required. He'll see the faith and pass by the failing. Like a father with his children, He'll see the love and pass by the imperfections.
- C. Wherein our personal obedience comes short, God will be pleased to accept us in our Surety, Eph 1.6. Though our obedience is imperfect, yet through Christ our Surety, God looks on it as perfect and rewards us in grace accordingly. That very service which God's law might condemn, His mercy is pleased to crown, by virtue of the blood of our Mediator.

VIII. Why do we need these rules for a right understanding of the law of God?

- A. Because the Ten Commandments are not a complete application or detailed statement of the moral law, but only *a comprehensive summary*. If we rightly understand how to interpret it within the context of the whole Bible, every duty we owe to God and every sin forbidden by God are included within it.
- B. In fact, the rules provided in WLC 99 are a formulation of the Bible's application of the moral law to particular problems and situations.
 - 1. Udemans, "The commandments should be understood as God has explained them in other places by His prophets, apostles, and in particular, His own Son. Therefore all human speculation should end and God should be left to interpret His own law for us."