

The Teachings of the Law

by Lewis Sperry Chafer

The law is a covenant of works that reveals humanity's sinfulness and helplessness, but it cannot save us. It drives us to Christ for salvation.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 4:8, John 18:31, Romans 2:14, Romans 5:12, Galatians 3:19, Galatians 3:22

Topics: "Law And Grace", "Covenant Theology"

Description

Lewis Sperry Chafer delves into the teachings of grace and the law, emphasizing the opposition between the two principles according to the Scriptures. The sermon explores the threefold consideration of the law: its meaning in the Bible, its relation to time, and its application. It highlights how the law, as a covenant of works, was given to Israel, its temporary nature until the coming of Christ, and its termination with the death of Christ, offering a contrast between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Transcript

In seeking an understanding of the teachings of grace, it is necessary to give due consideration to the teachings of the law; for, according to the Scriptures the latter, with its covenant of works, is the one principle which is opposed to the teachings of grace.

The law may be considered in a threefold way:

- (1) As to the meaning of the word law as used in the Bible;
- (2) As to the relation the law sustains to the time of its reign; and,
- (3) As to the application of the law.

I. As to the Meaning of the Word Law As Used in the Scriptures

The foundation of all divine law is the person of God. What He requires is only the expression of what He is. Since He is holy, just, and good, His ideals, standards, and requirements must be holy, just, and good.

The ideals and ways of fallen people are, of necessity, far removed from these divine standards which reflect the character of God.

Comparison of these two standards has ever demonstrated the measure of human failure. Throughout the history of God's dealings with the world this comparison has brought into bold relief the unmeasured gulf which exists between God and humanity, between holiness and sin, and the complementary revelation of the divine compassion which led God to bridge that gulf.

The word law, as commonly used, means "a rule which regulates conduct." It naturally implies the adequate authority and power on the part of the Lawgiver for its enforcement, and the proper penalty to be inflicted in case of its violation. The use of the word in the Bible is, however, much wider than its common usage.

At least a sevenfold use of the word law is found in the Word of God.

A. The Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments have the peculiar distinction of having been written by the finger of God on tables of stone. They are therefore the direct writings of God. They are themselves a crystallization of the entire law given to Moses. They are summarized by Christ when He said to the Jewish lawyer:

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:36-40).

The apostle Paul summarized the law in two great statements: "Love is the fulfilling of the law"; and, "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Rom. 13:10; Gal. 5:14).

So, also, James has written:

"If ye fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ye do well" (Jas. 2:8). In no sense is the law applied to the believer by these Scriptures; they merely imply that the law is fulfilled by the exercise of that love which is most vitally the duty of every child of God.

That this limited declaration of commandments from God is termed "the law", is proven beyond question in Rom. 7:7-14. In this passage the apostle records: "I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet."

The same precept is also called a commandment; for he goes on to say:

"But sin, taking occasion by the commandments wrought in me all manner of concupiscence."

Further, it is evident that the Decalogue is the heart of the law as the law is stated in the Old Testament. Particular emphasis is given to the fact that the Commandments are a part of the law, because there are those who teach that the whole law might be set aside, without affecting the Ten Commandments. They claim that these commandments were never any part of the law, and though the reign of the law ceased with the death of Christ, the binding authority of the Ten Commandments did not cease.

The Bible teaches that the Commandments are a part of the law, and though their principles are restated under grace, they ceased to be the rule of conduct when Christ fulfilled the law, and it came to its end in Him.

B. The Whole System of Government for Israel in the Land

The law in this larger aspect was divided into three major parts:

1. The Commandments, which were the revealed law of God relative to His righteous will; of this revelation, the Decalogue was the center (Ex. 20:1-17).
2. The Judgments, which were the revealed law of God relative to the social life of Israel (Ex. 21:1-24:11).
3. The Ordinances, which were the revealed will of God relative to the religious life of Israel (Ex. 24:12-31:18).

This threefold governing system of law covered all divine requirements which were imposed on an Israelite in the land.

The three divisions of the system were both interrelated and interdependent.

This threefold system provided its own instruction as to what was good, and its own prohibitions against that which was evil.

In the prescribed sacrifices its own divine remedy was provided for the wrong committed. No other provision for a broken law has ever been disclosed to anyone than that of the animal sacrifices, and the final, and fulfilling sacrifice of the cross where every demand of the law was met forever.

The projection of the Commandments into this dispensation disassociated from the ritual and sacrifices to which they are interrelated is done with seeming plausibility only at the expense of one of the most vital dispensational distinctions in the Word of God.

C. The Kingdom Rule of Messiah

The still future dispensation of the reign of Messiah, which will be the fulfillment of all God's covenants with Israel, is to be a reign of pure law.

This, it will be seen at a later point of the discussion, is proven both by the precise statements of Scripture, and by a careful study of the character of those injunctions which constitute the laws of the kingdom, and which find their application in the yet future dispensation of the kingdom.

D. The Whole Revealed Will of God for Any Individual, or Nation, When Contemplated As a Covenant of Works Which Is to Be Wrought in the Energy of the Flesh

The essential principle of the law was embodied in the covenant of works. The divine blessing was conditioned on the performance of the entire law of God. Under the new covenant of grace, the undivided, undiminished, divine blessing is first bestowed by God's favor, and by this bestowal, an obligation is created for a life corresponding to the divine blessing. When any work is undertaken for God by which it is hoped thereby to gain divine favor, that work is wrought of necessity on the basis of pure law. On the other hand, when any work is undertaken for God because it is recognized that divine favor and blessing already have been received, it is wrought in harmony with pure grace. Thus the highest ideal of grace if prostituted by the motive of securing divine favor, takes on the character of law.

Moreover, the will of God for the daily life of the one who is perfectly saved in grace has been clearly revealed by extended and explicit injunctions, or beseechings. These injunctions and beseechings, being gracious and heavenly in character, anticipate the imparted and inwrought enabling power of the indwelling Spirit for their fulfillment. The covenant of grace is a covenant of faith. Thus when the injunctions or teachings of grace are attempted in the strength of the flesh, the very teachings of grace thereby become, in principle, a covenant of works. Therefore any revelation of the righteous will of God for any individual or company of individuals is, apart from the one exception of a personal reliance of faith on the power of the Spirit, a covenant of works, or a law of God.

One illustration may suffice:

In Romans 8:4 the statement is made that the "righteousness of the law" is to be fulfilled in us, rather than by us. To this end Christ has died, and to this end the energizing Spirit has been sent into the world (Romans 8:2-3). The phrase, "the righteousness of the law," which is here said to be fulfilled in us, proposes more than a fulfillment of the limited demands found in the Mosaic system; it proposes nothing less than the divine energy of the Spirit realizing continuously every aspect of the revealed and unrevealed will of God in the believer. It is conditioned on one thing only: "Who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

No better example of a man-made, self-imposed law can be found than the experiences of every unsaved person who is trying, even in the slightest degree, to live the Christian life. He is doing what he does with a view to being accepted of God, not because he is accepted; and he is doing what he does in the energy of the flesh, not in the power of the Spirit. To such a one, the Christian's manner of life in grace is only a yoke of bondage.

Likewise, there is reference to the whole will of God in the following Scriptures wherein that revelation is termed the law: "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Rom. 7:22). There is the possibility of a wide difference between what is indicated by the two terms, "The law of Moses", and "The law of God". The law of Moses is the law of God, but the law of God may be much more than the law of Moses. "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4).

Since the Decalogue contained no reference to the great issues of Christian service and prayer, or the details of the character of the believer's walk in the world, no one, upon serious thought, will be willing to limit this great definition of sin as merely the transgression of the law of Moses. "The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law" (1 Cor. 15:56).

Sin, again, is nothing less than failure in any aspect of the will of God. When this fuller requirement of the will of God is considered in its present application under grace, it is termed "the perfect law of liberty" (Jas. 1:25; Cf. Rom. 8:21; 1 Cor. 8:9; 10:29; 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 2:4; 5:1-13; Jas. 2:12).

E. Any Rule of Conduct Prescribed by Human Beings

Here the use of the word law is extended to the regulations people may make among themselves.

We read: "But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners" (1 Tim. 1:8-9). "And if a man also strive for masteries, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully" (2 Tim. 2:5; Cf. Matt. 20:15; Luke 20:22).

Again, to this classification of law as being man-made may be added any self-imposed law.

Thus the law of Moses or the law of the kingdom when assumed as a rule of life by Jews, Gentiles, or Christians, becomes a man-made and self-imposed law. It is written: "For when the Gentiles [the same is equally true now of Jews or Christians], which have not the law, do by nature [usage] the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves" (Rom. 2:14). The law, though not addressed to them is self-imposed and becomes to that extent a mere man-made obligation.

F. Any Recognized Principle in Operation

In this aspect of the meaning of the word law it is seen to be used as the equivalent of "power."

In common usage, reference is made to the law of gravitation, which is likewise the power of gravitation. Thus it is used in the Word of God: "For the law [power] of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law [power] of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2).

G. The Necessary Sequence Between a Cause and Its Effect

This particular aspect of the use of the word law is seen in Rom. 7:21: "I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me."

Discrimination of these widely different meanings of the word law is imperative for a right understanding of this great theme in the Scriptures.

II. As to the Relation the Law Sustains to the Time of Its Reign

The Scriptures teach that the law given by Moses, which was a covenant of works, was given from God to people at a particular time. The human family had walked before God upon the earth for upwards of twenty-five hundred years prior to the imposition of the law. Thus it had been demonstrated that God is able to deal with people in the earth without reference to the law of Moses.

In the Word of God the period between Adam and Moses is particularly contrasted with the dispensation of the law. The revelation is final: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed where there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression)" (Rom. 5:12-14).

Physical death, the unavoidable penalty for sin, antedates the giving of the law, and death reigned from Adam to Moses; but sin was not "imputed" where there was no law. As it does now, death reigned over sinless infants, good people, and bad people alike. Sin, in this connection, is evidently the inbred fallen nature which all have received from Adam, and not the transgressions personally committed.

Thus the penalty--death--is due to the fallen nature which all have received and is not due to individual transgressions. Since the sin nature from Adam is universal, its penalty is universal. Should one member of the human family be delivered from the possession of the sin nature, the fact would be proven by a like deliverance from its penalty--death. None are delivered from physical death so long as Christ tarries. It is "by the offense of one" that "judgment came upon all men to condemnation" (Rom. 5:18).

The all important distinction between the sin nature of humanity, which is the universal possession, and the personal wrongdoing of the individual, is maintained throughout the Scriptures, including the revelation

of the cross.

There are two aspects of the death of Christ as that death is related to sin:

He died "for our sins." which fact is the basis of the divine cure for personal sin by justification (Rom. 3:21-5:11); and

He died "unto sin," which fact is the basis of the divine cure for the reigning power of the sin nature (Rom. 6:1-8:4).

Sin and death reigned from Adam to Moses because sin, in its essence, is the fallen nature itself, and death is its penalty; but sin, which is the personal wrongdoing of the individual, "is not imputed where there is no law." Thus is the relation of humanity and God described covering the great period between Adam and Moses.

The pertinent question--"Wherefore then serveth the law?"--is both propounded and answered in the Scriptures (Gal. 3:19).

We read, the law "was added because of transgressions."

That is, it was "added" to give to sin the augmented character of transgression. Sin had always been evil in itself and in the sight of God; but it became disobedience after that the holy commandments were disclosed. The fact of the sin nature is not changed by the introduction of the law; it was the character of personal wrongdoing which was changed. It was changed from sin, which is not imputed where there is no law, to sin, which is the rebellion against the command of God, and which must reap all the punishment attendant upon broken law. Israel, to whom the commandments were given, being a chosen, exalted people, were, by the imposition of the law, constituted a more responsible people before God; but they were wholly unable to keep the law. The giving of the law to Israel did not result in an obedient people; it rather proved their utter sinfulness and helplessness. The law became a ministry of condemnation to every one who failed to keep it.

Nor did the giving of the law really tend to their betterment at heart, or retard the power of sin; it provoked them to sin. As the apostle says: "But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence" (Rom. 7:8).

There can be no question as to the righteous character of the law; for it is written: "Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful" (Rom. 7:12-13).

Thus the purpose of the giving of the law is stated: "That sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful."

Apart from the Man Christ Jesus, there was universal failure in the keeping of the law.

This is not to say that the law was imperfect in itself. The universal failure in keeping the law is the revelation of the helplessness of anyone under the power of "sin in the flesh."

Two passages give evidence as to the failure of the law through the weakness of the flesh to which it made its appeal: "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh" (Rom. 8:3); and,

"But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly [poverty-stricken] elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?" (Gal. 4:9). The appeal is strong:

Why, after having come to know the power of God through the Spirit, do you turn to a relationship to God which as a means of victory and blessing has always been, and must always be, "weak" and "poverty-stricken"?

The law was never given as a means of salvation or justification:

"Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20. Cf. Gal. 3:11, 24).

Though given as a rule of conduct for Israel in the land, it, because of the universal failure in its observance, became a curse (Gal. 3:10), condemnation (2 Cor. 3:9), and death (Rom. 7:10-11). The law was effective only as it drove the transgressor to Christ. It became a means of turning the people to God for His mercy as that mercy is provided in Christ. The law was a "schoolmaster," or child trainer, to bring the offender to Christ. This was immediately accomplished in his turning to the sin-offerings which were provided, and which were the type of Christ in His death; but more fully was this accomplished when the dispensation itself came to its end in the death of Christ. "The law made nothing perfect,... but the bringing in of a better hope," and the law was a "shadow of good things to come" (Heb. 7:19; 10:1).

The reign of the law is limited to a period of about 1500 years, or from Sinai to Calvary--from Moses to Christ. These boundaries are fixed beyond question in the Word of God.

A. The Law Began Its Reign at Mount Sinai

The law was never imposed upon any people or generation before it was given to Israel at the hand of Moses. "And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them. The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. The Lord made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day" (Deut. 5:1-3).

When the law was proposed, the children of Israel deliberately forsook their position under the grace of God which had been their relationship to God until that day, and placed themselves under the law.

The record is given thus:

And Moses went up unto God, and the Lord called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel; Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel. And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the Lord commanded him. And all the people answered together, and said, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do. And Moses returned the words of the people unto the Lord (Ex. 19:3-8).

While it is certain that Jehovah knew the choice the people would make, it is equally certain that their choice was in no way required by Him. His description of the relation they had sustained to Him until that moment is most tender and pleading: "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself."

Such is the character of pure grace.

By it the sinner is carried on eagles' wings and brought to God. It is all of God. Until that hour they had been sustained in the faithfulness of Jehovah and without the slightest reference to their wickedness; but His plan and purpose for them had remained unchanged. He had dealt with them according to the unconditional covenant of grace made with Abraham.

The marvelous blessedness of that grace-relationship should have appealed to them as the priceless riches of the unfailing mercy of God, which it was. The surrender of the blessings of grace should have been allowed by these people on no condition whatever.

Had they said at the hearing of the impossible law, "None of these things can we do. We crave only to remain in that boundless mercy of God, who has loved us, and sought us, and saved us from all our enemies, and who will bring us to Himself," it is evident that such an appeal would have reached the very heart of God. And the surpassing glory of His grace would have been extended to them without bounds; for grace above all else is the delight of the heart of God. In place of the eagles' wings by which they were carried unto God, they confidently chose a covenant of works when they said: "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do."

They were called upon to face a concrete choice between the mercy of God which had followed them, and a new and hopeless covenant of works. They fell from grace. The experience of the nation is true of every individual who falls from grace at the present time. Every blessing from God that has ever been experienced came only from the loving mercy of God; yet with that same blasting self-trust, people are now turning to a dependence upon their works.

It is far more reasonable and honoring to God to fall helpless into His everlasting arms, and to acknowledge that we rely on His grace alone.

Upon the determined choice of the law, the mountain where God was revealed became a terrible spectacle of the unapproachable, holy character of God.

"And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly.... And the Lord said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the Lord to gaze, and many of them perish" (Ex. 19:18-21).

He who had brought them to Himself under the unconditional blessings of His grace, must now warn them lest they break through unto the Lord and perish.

That the burning mountain was a sign of the unapproachableness of God under the new covenant of works is again declared in Heb. 12:18-21. Speaking there of the glory and liberty of grace, it is said: "For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burnt with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (For they could not endure that which was

commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: and so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:). But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel."

By this passage, the great contrast between the relationship to God under the law's covenant of works, and the relationship to God under grace, is set forth clearly. Under their works, Israel could not come to God lest they die; but under grace they were carried on eagles' wings to God, and so, under grace, all come unto God, and to Jesus, and to the blessed association and glory of heaven itself.

The children of Israel definitely chose the covenant of works, which is law, as their relationship to God.

In like manner, every individual who is now under the law is self-placed, and that law under which he stands is self-imposed. In every case such relationship is clung to in spite of the appeal of pure grace. Had the legalists minds to understand and hearts to feel, they would realize that there is no access to God by a covenant of works and merit. To such as seek to come to Him by the law, God is as unapproachable as flaming Sinai.

B. The Reign of Law Was Terminated with the Death of Christ

The truthfulness of the statement that the reign of the law was terminated with the death of Christ is to be determined by the Word of God, rather than by the traditions and suppositions of men.

The law, when given, was only a temporary, or ad interim, dealing "until the seed should come" (Gal. 3:19), and the "seed" is Christ (Gal. 3:16).

This conclusive passage (Gal. 3:22-25) continues:

"But the Scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe."

The distinction between Jew and Gentile is broken down and all are "under sin."

There is provided and offered in Christ a new access and relationship to God.

It is "through Christ" and "in Christ."

It is gained upon a principle of faith alone.

Christ is the object of faith.

It is nothing less than the "promise by faith of Jesus Christ," and

it is given to them who "believe."

Thus the new covenant of grace through faith in Christ is placed in contrast to the old covenant of works. The passage goes on to state: "But before faith [the new principle in grace] came, we [Paul is here speaking as a Jew of his own time] were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster [child leader] to bring us unto Christ, that

we might be justified by faith [the new principle in grace]. But after that faith [the new principle in grace] is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster [the law]."

As a standard of holy living, the law presented the precise quality of life which was becoming a people who were chosen of God and redeemed out of the bondage of Egypt.

At the Cross, a new and perfect redemption from sin was accomplished for Jew and Gentile alike. The redemption from Egypt was a type of the redemption from sin. As the redemption from Egypt created a demand for a corresponding holy life, so the redemption from sin creates a demand for a corresponding heavenly walk with God. One is adapted to the limitations of the natural person; the other is adapted to the infinite resources of the spiritual person. One is the teaching of the law; the other is the teaching of grace.

III. As to the Application of the Law

The law was given only to the children of Israel.

This statement admits of no discussion when the Scriptures are considered.

A very few passages from the many are here given:

"And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart" (Mark 12:29-30)

"And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I have set before you this day?" (Deut. 4:8)

"And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them. The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. The Lord made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day" (Deut. 5:1-3)

The message given from the mount was that great covenant of works of the law contained in the Ten Commandments, which is here included in the "statutes and judgments."

This covenant was never made with any other nation or people; for God made no covenants with people other than Israel. "The Lord gave me the two tables of stone, even the tables of the covenant" (Deut. 9:11).

Speaking of the covenants in relation to Israel, it is said: "Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed forever" (Rom. 9:4-5).

Speaking of the Gentiles it is said: "Wherefore remember, that ye being in times past Gentiles in the flesh,... that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:11-12).

It is expressly declared that the Gentiles have not the law: "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature [usage] the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves" (Rom. 2:14).

In harmony with this, Pontius Pilate, a Gentile ruler, denied any responsibility to Israel's law: "Then said Pilate unto them, Take ye him, and judge him according to your law" (John 18:31).

We conclude, therefore,

that the law which was given by Moses was a covenant of works,

that it was "added" after centuries of human history,

that its reign was terminated by the death of Christ,

that it was given to Israel only, and

that, since it was never given to Gentiles, the only relation that Gentiles can sustain to it is, without any divine authority, to impose it upon themselves.

Additional proof of these facts concerning the law are yet to be presented.

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