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2 Timothy 3:16-17

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The **Functions of God's Law**

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Previous studies have explored the subject of God's law in Christian ethics from a variety of perspectives. We have learned that there is every theological reason to affirm that believers continue to have an obligation to obey the law of God today. When we ask what the whole Bible has to say about the goal, motive, and standard of Christian morality, the Scripture's answer consistently points to the validity of God's law in our lives. From the normative perspective the Bible teaches that the entire written word of God is our standard of conduct, that God's covenantal dealings with men (inclusive of His stipulations for His people) are essentially one, that God's unchanging holiness is transcribed for us in His law, that God's Son set an example for us of keeping the law, and that God's Spirit conforms believers to the pattern of righteousness found in the law. From the personal or motivational perspective the Bible shows us that grace, faith, and love all operate to produce compliance with the holy standard of God's commandments. From the teleological or consequential perspective the Bible explains that the law of the Lord was revealed for the good of His people, and thus a promised blessing rests upon individuals and societies which submit to God's stipulations for our attitudes and actions.

The theological conclusion that God's law continues to be a valid rule of life today enjoys the specific support of New Testament texts which bear on the subject as well. We have explored the way in which New Testament authors treat the legal requirements of the Old Testament, only to find that further endorsement is given to the law's validity today. This has been observed in the use of the law found in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, the assumed authority of the law in key New Testament ethical themes, and the application of the law incorporated into New Testament moral judgments. Finally, an extensive comparison of what the Old Testament had to say about the law of God with corresponding concerns in the New Testament revealed that there was a common attitude toward the law and a presupposed continuity between the covenants as to God's moral standards in the law—despite the fact that the New Covenant introduced important elements of discontinuity regarding the believer's relationship to the law. In the

age of the New Covenant the Old Covenant law of the Lord retains its binding authority.

So then, both theological insight and specific New Testament teaching agree in supporting the law of God as a standard of conduct. If one wishes to please the Lord, then one must seek to bring his thoughts, words, and deeds into conformity with the norms laid down in the law of God. Christian ethics is surely concerned with more than the law of God (for instance, it considers issues like ethical enablement, motivation, maturation, discernment, insight, application), but it cannot be concerned with less than the law of God—for the law supplies a pattern and criterion of godly living. Because that pattern and criterion is an unchanging one, the law continues to be a major concern of Christian ethics today. The standard of holiness revealed by the law is not peculiar to Old Testament Jews, nor is it somehow uniquely for those redeemed by God. That standard is universally binding on all created men, being "natural" in the sense that it is appropriate to the Creator-creature relation, and in the sense that it is revealed as binding to all mankind (either through the created realm and conscience, or through special written revelation).

The standard of the law remains unmitigated in its demand on our behavior as God's creatures. Failure to comply with it makes us sinners. Christ came, not to remove the standard which constitutes us sinners, but to atone for the sin which we commit. The Spirit which He supplies to believers works to bring obedience to the previously spurned standard of righteousness in the law. At the final judgment, all men will be judged in the light of that same unchanging standard. In whatever age, state, or circumstance man is found, his norm of godliness remains the revealed law of God. Accordingly in 1774 John Newton wrote: "It is an unlawful use of the law, that is, an abuse of it, an abuse of both law and Gospel, to pretend, that its accomplishment by Christ releases believers from any obligation to it as a rule. Such an assertion is not only wicked, but absurd and impossible in the highest degree: for the law is founded in the relation between the Creator and the creature, and must unavoidably remain in force so long as that relation subsists. While he is God, and we are creatures, in every

possible or supposable change of state or circumstances, he must have an unrivaled claim to our reverence, love, trust, service, and submission" (Letters of John Newton, London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960, p. 46).

One of the commissioners to the Westminster Assembly was Samuel Bolton, a reverent Reformed scholar who was disturbed by the claims being made in his day by those called "antinomians" (those who were against the law of God as a rule of obedience, on the alleged ground of God's free grace in the New Testament). In 1645, while the Westminster Assembly was still at work, Bolton published a treatise entitled, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (reprinted, London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964). In it he laid out argument upon argument from Scripture to prove that we are not free today from the moral obligations of the law of God and that the law was compatible with God's grace. The thrust of Bolton's treatise is summarized in these words from it: "We cry down the law in respect of justification, but we set it up as a rule of sanctification. The law sends us to the Gospel that we maybe justified; and the Gospel sends us to the law again to inquire what is our duty as those who are justified" (p. 71).

Speaking of Matthew 5:17-18, Bolton said, "this seems to be very full and very plain for the continuance of and obligation to the law," and he went on to buttress his observation by appeal to Romans 3:31; 7:12, 22, 25; James 2:8; and 1 John 2:4; 3:4. "Therefore, since Christ, who is the best expounder of the law, so largely strengthens and confirms the law (witness the Sermon on the Mount, and also Mark 10:19); since faith does not supplant, but strengthens the law since the apostle so often presses and urges the duties commanded in the law since Paul acknowledges that he served the law of God in his mind, and that he was under the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21); I may rightly conclude that the law, for the substance of it, still remains a rule of life to the people of God. . . . If Christ and His apostles commanded the same things which the law required, and forbade and condemned the same things which the law forbade and condemned, then they did not abrogate it but strengthened and confirmed it. And this is what they did: see Matt. 5:19 But he that breaks the law does sin, as says the apostle: 'Sin is the transgression of the law' (1 John 3:4), and 'Where no law is

there is no transgression' (Rom. 4:15). Therefore Christians are bound, if they would avoid sin, to obey the law" (pp. 61, 62, 66).

Bolton recognized, of course, that the Old Testament corpus of law was easily categorized into moral, judicial, and ceremonial laws—that is, general principles, illustrative applications, and the way of atonement. Bolton saw the ceremonial law as providing the Jews with a way of worship which both anticipated the saving work of Christ and established a separation between God's people and the world (the Gentiles). The judicial law provided "a rule of common and public equity" in civil matters (p. 56). It is evident from chapter 19 of the Westminster Confession of Faith—especially in light of the Larger Catechism's exposition of God's law—that the authors of the Confession saw eye to eye with Bolton in these matters. The law of God as delivered to Moses expresses the same perfect rule of righteousness which was binding upon man as created, even prior to the fall (1 9.1 -2). The corpus of law contained ceremonial laws typifying the saving work of Christ and certain moral instructions pertaining to the holy separation of God's people from the unbelieving world (19.3). It also contained judicial laws particularly worded for the ancient Jewish civil state, the general equity of which continues to bind men (1 9.4). Although the law is not a way of personal justification, it continues to be a rule of life both for the saved and the unsaved; Christ in the Gospel does not dissolve but rather strengthens this obligation (19.5-7).

We must agree with the Publisher's Introduction to the Banner of Truth reprint of Bolton's work against antinomianism: "The slur of 'legalism' often cast upon those who framed the Westminster Confession of Faith finds no justification in this instructive and edifying work" (p. 12). To maintain the full authority of God's law today—a conclusion to which every line of Biblical study drives us—will be unpopular in some degree with many people today, and it will be maligned as "legalism." To that charge John Murray could simply answer: "It is strange indeed that this kind of antipathy to the notion of keeping commandments should be entertained by any believer who is a serious student of the New Testament" (*Principles of Conduct*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957, p. 182).

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