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2 Timothy 3:16-17

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The Functions of God's Law

(Part IV)

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Our study of what the law cannot do has found that the law (1) cannot contribute anything to a man's justification, (2) cannot relieve the bondage of sin and enable obedience, and (3) cannot actually accomplish the full salvation foreshadowed by the ceremonial ritual. A thorough study of the literature of the New Testament will show that its depreciatory or negative remarks about the law of God will each and every one be associated with an oversight of the three mentioned inabilities of the law. Failing to see what the law cannot do and was never intended to do, men have tried to use works of the law for personal justification, have vainly sought to obey the law's precepts without God's gracious empowering, and have continued under the outmoded shadows of the Mosaic ritual after the advent of the Savior. To such unlawful uses of the law the New Testament speaks with firm antipathy.

Yet none of the well known New Testament passages which speaks against the abuse of the law goes on to release believers from moral obligation to the pattern of righteous living revealed in the law. The standard of the law remains valid, showing us what is good in the sight of God. Accordingly Paul's evaluation has proven very helpful in resolving the apparent conflict over the status of the law within the pages of the New Testament. Paul explained, "We know that the law is good, if a man uses it lawfully" (1 Tim. 1:8). What are the lawful uses of the law?

What the Law Can and Should Do

Before Adam fell into sin, obedience to the law would bring to him life and well-being. Since the fall, however, the law became to sinners a way of condemnation and death; the law cannot bring about obedience in the sinner and cannot be used as a way of justification. Yet the ceremonial shadows of the Old Testament—the gospel in figures—gave promise that God himself would graciously accomplish full salvation for His people, justify them from sin and break the power of rebellion in their lives. God's righteousness is effective in those who have experienced a transition from wrath to grace in their personal lives, so that grateful obedience to God's good law again becomes a way of life and well-being. No longer is God's law ignored. No

longer is it replaced with the commandments and wisdom of men. No longer is it misused for the purposes of self-righteousness. Within the life of the believer the law receives its proper due; indeed, it is established by faith (Rom. 3:31). By it we can be blessed.

According to Scripture, the law has many legitimate functions. We can try to summarize them in the following list.

(1) The law declares the character of God and so reveals His glory.

The kind of lifestyle and attitudes which the Lord requires of His people tells us, of course, what kind of God He is. If you wish to see the contrast between the pagan deities and the living and true God of the Bible, simply observe the difference between the things which they command. Moloch demanded child sacrifice, while Jehovah commanded the care and nurture of children—to take but one example. The 19th Psalm extensively applies the attributes of God (perfection, purity, righteousness, truth) to the precepts of God. Throughout the law God reinforces the authority of His commands by following them with the declaration, "I am the Lord." In showing the true and radical demand of the law's requirements (Matt. 5:21-47), Christ was showing us the perfection of God which is desired in us (v. 48). John Newton wrote: "When we use the law as a glass to behold the glory of God, we use it lawfully. His glory is eminently revealed in Christ; but much of it is with a special reference to the law, and cannot be otherwise discerned. We see the perfection and excellence of the law in his life. God was glorified by his obedience as a man. What a perfect character did he exhibit! yet it is no other than a transcript of the law" (Letters, p. 47).

(2) The law displays the demand of God upon our lives as men.

By revealing the character of God, the law quite naturally expresses what is required of men if they are going to imitate their Creator. The law's commands show how we are to be like God by propounding the will of God for us. Before delivering the summation of the law in the Decalogue, God spoke to Israel with these words: "Now therefore, if you will

obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own possession from among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5-6). Obedience to the law is obedience to the voice of the King, the Lord of the covenant, and as such it shows us what it means to be His subjects and servants. For us to pray "Thy kingdom come," is likewise to pray "Thy will be done on earth" (Matt. 6:10). And God's will is communicated by His commandments, telling us what His holiness means on a creaturely level (Lev. 20:7-8).

(3) The law pronounces blessing upon adherence to its demands.

God's commandments were laid down for our good (Deut. 10:13), and obedience to them is the pure delight of the righteous man (Ps. 1:1-2). Such obedience brings prosperity (Ps. 1:3-4) and good success (Joshua 1:7). The Lord's lovingkindness is upon those who keep His precepts (Ps. 103:17-18), blessing them and their cultures (cf. Deut. 7, 11, 28, 30). Indeed, Paul taught that "godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Tim. 4:8). Seeking the righteousness of God's kingdom above all will be rewarded by the supply of every need (Matt. 6:33). The law insures that when men are just and righteous, they enjoy the life and blessing which imitation of God constitutes. Thus the commandment was ordained unto life (Rem. 7:10), and the man who does the things of the law enjoys life within their sphere (Gal. 3:12).

(4) The law provides a definition of sin.

By showing us what God is like and what God demands, the law likewise delivers a standard for sin. Sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4). In delineating the righteousness which pleases God, the law simultaneously provides the norm of waywardness and rebellion against God. Where there is no law, there can be no transgression (Rem. 4:15; 5:13). By the law men come to know what sin is (Rem. 3:20; 7:7).

(5) The law exposes infractions and convicts of sin.

The law is more than simply an objective code of right and wrong by which, if one is interested, he can judge his

performance. The law, being Spiritual (Rem. 7:14), is part of that word of God which is living and active—sharper than any two-edged sword, so as to pierce deeply into the recesses of man's heart and bring to the light his darkest character. The law judges the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12) and produces a conviction of our sinfulness (e.g., Rem. 7:9-13).

(6) Even more, the law works to incite rebellion in sinful men.

Not only must we recognize that the law cannot enable us to obey its demands, we must also see that the law actually works in the contrary direction—exciting within the rebel further and further expressions of disobedience. Because the mind of the flesh (sinful nature) is unable to be subject to God's law (Rem. 8:7), that law serves to confirm one's bondage to sin by provoking intensified rebellion. Thus Paul can see in the law the very power of sin (1 Cor. 15:56). To understand this one need only reflect on the sad fact that the best way for an owner of a plate glass window to get it broken is for him to post a sign prohibiting the throwing of rocks at it. The very prohibition incites rebellion in the heart. By means of the commandments, then, man's sinful nature "becomes exceedingly sinful" (Rem. 7:13), working in us all manner of sin (Rem. 7:8), causing the trespass to abound (Rem. 5:20).

(7) Consequently, the law condemns all transgression as deserving God's wrath and curse.

The statement of Galatians 3:10 is blunt and terrifying: "Cursed is every one who does not continue in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them (cf. Deut. 27:26). James intensifies the threat, saying "Whosoever shall keep the whole law and yet stumble in one point has become guilty of all" (2:10). Every infraction of the law brings wrath upon the sinner. All men will be judged for their ungodliness (Jude 6), judged according to their deeds whether good or evil (2 Cor. 5:10), and if found guilty cast into the eternal perdition of second death (Rev. 20:12-15). The wages of sin will be death (Rem. 6:23). Therefore, the law works wrath (Rem. 4:15) upon those who are, by their sinful natures, children of wrath (Eph. 2:3).

(To be continued.)

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