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Section: Commands (Law)

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**HANDOUT NOTES**

**Q39. Biblically, what is *law*?**

Law is the requirements on man often expressed through commands that God has given.

**Q40. Who can perfectly obey God’s law?**

Because of sin, fallen man cannot rightly obey God’s law. Only Christ Jesus obeyed God’s law perfectly and did not sin.

**Q41. If fallen man cannot perfectly obey God’s law, why did God give it?**

God’s law displays His perfections and glory, informs mankind what is required of us, and reveals our sin and our desperate need for Jesus.

* **Introduction**

Context and other factors **are key** in understanding how the concept of “law” is being used in any given passage of the Bible.

The word “law” has several synonyms. These include commandments, statutes, rules, precepts, testimonies, etc.

Let’s consider **just some** of the ways the word “law” (and its synonyms) are used in the text:

* The word “law” can refer to the first five books of the Bible.
* The word “law” can refer to the moral law of God.
* The word “law” can refer to the law system of the Mosaic Covenant.
* The word “law” can refer specifically to ceremonial laws found in the Old Covenant.
* The word “law” can refer to the “penalty” of the law.

**Q39. Biblically, what is *law*?**

Law is the requirements on man often expressed through commands that God has given.

Our main focus tonight is considering “law” as requirements on man, as established and given by God.

One of the most important things to understand in this is that there are two categories of this kind of “law” in Scripture, these two categories are called:

1. **Universal Moral Law (also called Natural Law)**
2. **Positive Law**

* **Universal Moral Law (Natural Law)**

**Universal Moral Law (Natural Law)**: Unchanging law and commands based on the right and character of God, to which man is held accountable for all of life. Universal Moral Law is written in the hearts of all people, leaving them without excuse in disobedience.

This moral law is the eternal, foundational law that has and will always exist. The Universal Moral Law exists at all times, over all of mankind.

Even where it *was not or is not* fully communicated verbally, it exists because it’s based on the authority and character of God…and mankind’s relation to Him.

The Universal Moral Law exists at all times, over all of mankind, *because it is based on the authority and character of God and our relation to Him as created creature*.

God placed this Universal Moral Law on the conscience of all people.

The Bible teaches that Universal Moral Law is written in the hearts of all humans. *And this is why it is sometimes called “Natural Law.”*

We see this taught in **Romans 2:15-16,** where Paul tells us that even those who have never heard about God’s moral requirements of man have “the work of the law written on their hearts,” and their consciences bear witness to this fact.

What that means is that all people, *whether they acknowledge it or not (and whether it impacts their lives significantly or not)*, have this moral law written in their hearts, on their consciences.

Because of the effects of sin, God’s law is ignored, denied, and disobeyed and our conviction of sin is not consistent.

**No person** will be able to stand before God and say, “I did not know your moral expectations of me, so you cannot hold me accountable to breaking moral law.”

The man, for example, in the backwoods tribe that never was *taught* God’s truths verbally, will stand before God guilty of breaking God’s law, the very law that is in that man.

The moral law was summarized and expressed by God in the Ten Commandments.

In the New Testament, we see Jesus and the Apostles teach **this same** moral law that man has always been under.

**Matthew 22:36-40 (ESV)** Jesus was asked:

36“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” 37And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38This is the great and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Jesus is showing us that the moral law has two main themes: vertical-towards God, and horizontal, towards others.

And when he says, “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets,” He is saying all moral law we see in the Old Testament, like the Ten Commandments for example, can also be summarized in these TWO commandments.

**Romans 13:8-10 (ESV)**

8Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 10Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Neither Christ nor the Apostles contradicted or replaced the moral law found summarized in the Ten Commandments…they did **not** contradict or replace Universal Moral Law. It can be expressed in part, summarized, further explained, et cetera, but the moral content of the Universal Moral Law never changes.

* **Positive Law**

**Positive Law**: Law and commands based on the will of God for a particular people, a particular purpose, and a particular time.

What this means is there are commands that God has given throughout human history that do not apply to everyone.

We have Universal Moral Law required of all peoples at all times, and then there are these *additional, specific, commands* that God saw fit to give differently in different times.

Old Covenant Positive Laws are sometimes called ceremonial laws and civil (or judicial) laws.

**Leviticus 11:7-8 7** … the pig … is unclean to you. **8**You shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall not touch their carcasses; they are unclean to you.

**Leviticus 11:10-11 10**… anything in the seas or the rivers that does not have fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and of the living creatures that are in the waters, is detestable to you. **11**You shall regard them as detestable; you shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall detest their carcasses.

**Deuteronomy 22:11 11**You shall not wear cloth of wool and linen mixed together.

Those Positive Laws do not apply any longer because the Old Covenant has been abrogated (or abolished), and Jesus established a New Covenant *with its own Positive Laws for us to follow*.

We need to be very careful in determining Universal Moral Law from Positive Law in the Old Testament.

**We can’t make distinctions of what commands we don’t follow now based on our preferences or feelings**. We must make the distinctions very carefully, using a right understating of Moral Law and Positive Law, and using the teaching of the New Testament, as well as having a solid understanding of Covenant Theology and having other proper hermeneutics.

We must always remember that the Universal Moral Law applies no matter what. So, the moral laws prohibiting idolatry, coveting, sexual immorality, etc. still apply to us, they are not Positive Law.

A New Testament example of Positive Law: baptism.

* **Supplementary Data**

There are often times in the text that we see the moral law of God **intermingled** with Positive Law *or* extra information.

When this is the case, this added Positive Law or extra information can be called **Supplementary Data**.

**Leviticus 20:13** 13If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.

Consider the 10th commandment in **Exodus 20:17.**

The unchanging Moral Law is “You shall not covet.” That's it: “You shall not covet.”

Then the Supplementary Data is communicated; it says “your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey…”

Now, that data helps make practical the moral command of “You shall not covet.” Stating that coveting an ox is prohibited is true and practical…but it’s supplemental. The list of things not to covet is certainly not meant to be all-inclusive.

The Universal Moral Law is “You shall not covet.” The other information is supplemental and informative in this case.

Look at the 5th commandment in **Exodus 20:12.** It says: “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

In the New Testament, in Ephesians, Paul **repeats and reinforces this moral commandment** almost word for word about children needing to obey their parents. But with God inspiring him, Paul changes the Supplementary Data. He says in **Ephesians 6:3,** “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”

Ephesians 6:3: “so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the **earth**.” (NASB)

* **General Equity**

**General Equity** basically means “principle.”

Even though certain Positive Laws are not standing today, there is General Equity, or principles, in the laws that still *help* us today.

Deuteronomy 25:4 is “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.” This original command was requiring people to adequately take care of the livestock.

But when Paul uses that verse in 1 Timothy 5, he uses the principle (the General Equity) in it. He’s saying in essence: *the principle from this old command about livestock for the Old Covenant people has real application and value for us today.*

Therefore, the command is not binding in the same way it was given, but the principle in it is of real use to us today; the principle in it is made binding to us today by Paul in a new way.

The Apostles had God-given authority and inspiration to take old Positive Laws and make a new Positive Law or use the principle from the law to show us something we are required to obey in a new way.

**Deuteronomy 22:8 (ESV)**

**8**“When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet (railing/fence) for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it.”

**2 Timothy 3:16-17 (ESV)**

**16**All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, **17**that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

**Q40. Who can perfectly obey God’s law?**

Because of sin, fallen man cannot rightly obey God’s law. Only Christ Jesus obeyed God’s law perfectly and did not sin.

Understanding our inability to perfectly obey God’s law because of the fall is critical to understanding humanity and the beauty of the gospel, specifically how amazing it is that Jesus obeyed God’s law perfectly, making him our perfect substitute.

**Q41. If fallen man cannot perfectly obey God’s law, why did God give it?**

God’s law displays His perfections and glory, informs mankind what is required of us, and reveals our sin and our desperate need for Jesus.

* **Three Primary Functions**

**First Function**: It reveals both the perfect righteousness of God and man’s own sinfulness and shortcomings.

**1 Peter 1:16 (ESV)**

16…it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

**Matthew 5:48 (ESV)**

48You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

When we think about the Law of God, we should first and foremost think about God’s perfection and glory. Anything that brings us back to God and helps us understand him better should cause thankfulness and delight in us. In this we can say with Paul and the Psalmist, “I delight in the law of God!”

**Romans 7:22 (ESV)** 22For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being

**Psalm 1:1-2 (ESV)** Blessed is the man who…his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

**Psalm 119:14-16 (ESV)** 14In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. 15I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. 16I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.

**Second Function**: It aids in restraining evil throughout mankind. To some degree, it secures civil order and keeps mankind from practicing even more sin than what is done.

Even those who haven’t been taught about God or the moral law expressly, still do some things that outwardly obey the law.

**Romans 2:14** [The] Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires

This is doing what the moral law requires externally, but since it’s not from faith in Christ, it is still not a true God-honoring “good” deed.

**Third Function**: It informs the saved of the good works that God has planned for them; it aids them to learn in truth with greater confidence what the will of the Lord is.

This point is the most practical one for us.

We don't need to guess at what God requires of us. He's written the moral law in our hearts and even more, He's blessed us with the ability to see it in Scripture.

The law informs us how to live; it tells believers what “good works” are.

And this obedience is an important element of the Christian life.

King Jesus said in:

**John 14:15 (ESV)** 15“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

James makes the point this way in:

**James 2:18 (ESV)** 18…I will show you my faith by my works.

Now, we know that we are saved by grace and sanctified by grace. Salvation is not based on our works; rather, it is by grace alone through faith alone. As **Galatians 3:11** says, “…no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”

Then this obedience to the law that this point is focused on—these good works—this keeping of commandments—does not earn or keep our salvation.

No, instead this obedience is the fruit of a real salvation.

God's word tells us that the saved will grow in their understanding and obedience to His moral law. This is about a trajectory.

All the saved will have a real trajectory over time of growing in understanding and obedience.

So that's what the Third Function is getting at. We have God’s law to inform us how to live—how to honor God.

And once again, we can see the blessing that the law is. We're not left to mystery in this. We can delight in knowing God's expectations.

So again, with Paul and the Psalmist, let’s delight in the law, for it tells us how to honor and glorify God!