

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE MORAL LIFE

Session I

I. Law in the Old Covenant

1. Creation culminates in the Sabbath in Genesis 2:1-3 and the Sabbath expresses the inner meaning of creation. Order culminates in blessing, peace and rest. Hebrews 4:9 uses this rest as a way of speaking about salvation.

2. The original sin in Genesis 3:6-7 is not the mere violation of a rule but a deliberate act which involves the denial of God as God. Sin gives rise not merely to immoral behavior but to an assault on the order of creation. Note the contrast between Genesis 1:31 and Genesis 6:5-6.

3. Abraham appears as a pattern of redemption because of his obedience (Genesis 12:4). Note Paul's take on Abraham in Romans 4: In Abraham we see what God is aiming at (Romans 4:20-21).

4. The Exodus is explicitly seen as the consequence of God acting out of covenant loyalty (Exodus 2:23-25). The Law is seen as instrumental to God's purpose for Israel and for creation (Exodus 19:5-6). The first commandment provides a context for the whole law (Exodus 20:2-3); the whole law aims at restoring loyalty to God. The alternative to God is not the gods but lies.

5. While the Decalogue is given on Mt. Sinai in Exodus 20:1-21 and repeated in Deuteronomy 5, it is also present in an abbreviated form in Leviticus. In Leviticus, where the dominant theme is the holiness that befits Israel's God, the Law clearly appears as part of God's plan to restore human beings to their original dignity, a dignity which consists not in the possession of rights but in reflecting the character of God (Leviticus 19:2; 20:7, 26). Leviticus 19 repeats eight of the Decalogue's commandments:

19:3a: "revere father and mother" = Exodus 20:12

19:3b: "you shall keep my Sabbaths" = Exodus 20:8

19:4: "do not turn to idols" = Exodus 20:3-5

19:11a: "you shall not steal" = Exodus 20:15

19:12: "you shall not swear by my name falsely" = Exodus 20:7

19:16a: "you shall not go around as a slanderer" = Exodus 20:16

19:16b: "you shall not stand forth against the life of your neighbor" = Exodus 20:13

19:20: adultery = Exodus 20:14

This chapter also sets the Decalogue in its proper context: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:36b = Exodus 20:2).

6. There are strong indications that the Law is understood to presuppose creation as a norm and is not an arbitrary set of commandments. Among these indications are:

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- a. The seven day pattern of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3 explicitly invoked to justify the holiness of the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11). The Sabbath is not simply a day of the week but part of the structure of creation.
- b. The Sabbath applies not simply to Israelites but also to animals and Gentiles living among Israel (Exodus 20:8-11; 23:12; 31:12-18).
- c. The Sabbath also applies to the land. Every seven years there is to be “a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord” (Leviticus 25:1-7).
- d. Priestly ordination takes seven days to complete: “it will take seven days to ordain you” (Leviticus 8:33). The priesthood is an instrument in God’s design to re-sanctify creation and is thus patterned after the act of creation.
- e. The code of holiness for human sexuality in Leviticus 18 clearly presupposes Genesis 1:27 and 2:4 as foundational. It is also clear that sexual impurity is not merely the violation of a set of rules but a violation of the order of creation. Thus, Israel is not to follow the sexual practices of the Canaanites “lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean” (Leviticus 18:28). Sexual impurity is understood to be not merely an immoral act but a *pollutant*.
- f. The provision for the poor from the harvest in Leviticus 19:9-18 is not understood to be a matter of “social justice” but presupposes the idea of creation being given to supply the needs of *all people*. In Matthew 26:11 when Jesus says “For you always have the poor with you...” he is referring to Deuteronomy 15:11 which is an explicit command to be generous “For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’”

7. There are various attempts to summarize the whole Law, to express its ultimate intentions: Leviticus 19:18; Leviticus 20:26; Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

8. The Law is not simply about specific actions but aims at a certain disposition: Deuteronomy 10:12-22; Psalm 51.

II. Law in the New Covenant

1. The Law is still seen as integral to God’s purposes
 - a. Matthew 5:17-20: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”
 - b. Matthew 5:48 as a paraphrase of Leviticus 19:2
 - c. Matthew 19:16-22 (= Mark 10:17-30 = Luke 18:18-30): Five commandments from the “second tablet” of the Law + Leviticus 19:18 added; fulfilling the first tablet is kept by following Jesus.
 - d. Criticism of the Pharisees: not for keeping the Law but for neglecting its “weightier matters” (Matthew 23:23 = Luke 11:42) which are “justice and mercy and faithfulness” (= Micah 6:8 = Zechariah 7:9).
 - e. The Sermon on the Mount and “messianic Torah”:
 1. Matthew 5:21 = Exodus 20:13 (murder/anger)

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2. Matthew 5:27 = Exodus 20:14 (adultery/ lust)
3. Matthew 5:31 = Deuteronomy 20:14 (divorce allowed/ divorce forbidden)
4. Matthew 5:33 = Deuteronomy 23:21; Leviticus 19:12 (do not swear falsely/ do not swear at all)
5. Matthew 5:38 = Exodus 21:24 (proportional retaliation/ no retaliation)
6. Matthew 5:43 = Leviticus 19:18 (love your neighbor/ love your enemy)
- f. The Law as a demand of obedience summarized and made possible in Christ
 1. Romans 8:1-8
 2. Philippians 2:1-11
2. Law and creation
 - a. Marriage: Matthew 19:3-6 = Mark 10:1-12
 - b. Sin as rebellion against the created order: Romans 1:18-32
3. Summaries of the Law
 - a. Matthew 22:34-40 (= Deuteronomy 6:4 + Leviticus 19:18)
 - b. Romans 13:8-11
 - c. Galatians 5:14
 - d. Ephesians 5:1
 - e. Acts 15:20 (= Leviticus 18:1-30 ["sexual immorality"] + Leviticus 19:26 [no consumption of animal blood])

III. The Christian Appropriation of the Law

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, Qq 98-108
2. Human law and divine law: Human law aims at temporal tranquility and controls external actions. Divine law aims at bringing us to our ultimate end which is happiness in God. Divine law has in view both external actions and internal dispositions.
3. Divine law can be kept only through the grace of the Holy Spirit. The Old Covenant law did not confer grace; it was reserved to Christ and the New Covenant. The Old Covenant law was, thus, good but imperfect.
4. The law of the Old Covenant was not an end in itself but was given to ordain people to Christ in two ways: (1) by bearing witness to Christ and (2) by enclosing Israel within the worship of God and withdrawing her from idolatry.
5. While the precepts of the Old Covenant were diverse, they had a single end. The whole of the Law is summarized in one commandment, Leviticus 19:18 "as expressing the end of all the commandments: because love of one's neighbor includes love of God, when we love our neighbor for God's sake" (ST 1a2ae, Q99 a1).
6. The Old Covenant law was also necessary because human reason has been "habituated to sin" and thus requires correction and direction.
7. The law of the New Covenant is implicit in the law of the Old Covenant, the latter being related to the former as the imperfect to the perfect.

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8. "...the New Covenant consists chiefly in the grace of the Holy Ghost, which is shown forth by faith that worketh through love. Now men become receivers of this grace through God's Son made man, Whose humanity grace filled first, and then flowed forth to us" (ST 1a2ae, Q108 a1).

IV. Reflection

1. "On Sinai the people receive not only instructions about worship, but also an all-embracing rule of law and life. Only thus can it become a people. A people without a common rule of law cannot live. It destroys itself in anarchy, which is a parody of freedom, its exaltation to the point of abolition. When every man lives without law, every man lives without freedom...In the ordering of the covenant on Sinai, the three aspects of worship, law and ethics are inseparably interwoven...When morality and law do not originate in a God-ward perspective, they degrade man, because they rob him of his highest measure and his highest capacity, deprive him of any vision of the infinite and eternal. This seeming liberation subjects him to the dictatorship of the ruling majority, to shifting human standards, which inevitably end up doing him violence." (Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*)