

The Law of God | Part II

The Threefold Use of the Law

How we read and understand the many commands of Scripture is arguably one of the greatest areas Christians get tripped up. With the three forms of law in their proper place, we can ask how the law functions in our lives. Theologians thankfully organized Scripture's teaching on the functions of the law through what is called "The Threefold Use of the Law." This will help us stay on the line of Scripture when we apply it to our lives.



1. **DEMANDS CHRIST:** The *first use* of the law perfectly reflects the will and holiness of God in our deprave state of guilt and misery. The law gives knowledge of sin and guilt, renders man inexcusable, and demands the need for pardon and forgiveness revealed only in the gospel of Christ (Rom 3:20; 4:15; Gal 3:19-24). For Christians, the law still rightly demands the gospel as the "only hope in life and death." A Christian's indwelling sin which breaks the law of God is a continual reminder for repentance and faith in Christ's gospel.
 - "...horrible threats hang over us, constraining and entangling not a few of us only, but all of us to a man. They hang over us, I say, and pursue us with inexorable harshness, so that we discern in the law only the most immediate death."¹
 - The fulfillment of the law is impossible for us in light of our sinful state (Ps 143:2; Eccl 7:20).
 - The Covenant of Works, "if you perfectly keep my law, you will live," is held forth before us, convicting us of our guilt and lawlessness.
 - Only Christ fulfilled the perfectly law perfectly. The gracious work of Christ to meet the demand of the law is then imputed to sinners by faith.
2. **RESTRAINS SIN:** The *second function* of the law restrains sin. It holds forth a threat of proper and just judgment for lawlessness not only by way of common grace (the law written on man's heart) but also when properly upheld by civic code (Deut 13:6-11; 19:16-21; Rom 13:3-5). Although humanity is born in sin, and suppresses the truth, the moral law still has its good effect on the human will, binding the conscience, convicting of sin, and demanding equity for breaking it (Rom 2:14-16).
 - Consider Romans 2:12-16 and 3:19-20.
 - Humanity is not as bad as it could be because God sovereignly restrains in the world from one degree to another.

¹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion, Vol 1*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 352.

- 3. SANCTIFIES GOD’S PEOPLE:** The *third function* of the law serves as the perfect rule of righteousness as “the good works” that God prepared beforehand for Christians (Eph 2:10; 1 Thess 4:3,7). The law teaches believers what pleases their heavenly Father. They are the “family rules” that accord with God’s will for his disciples, wherein Christians prove their enduring love for him (Mat 28:20; Jn 14:15). By faith, the moral law serves as the “rule of life” for God’s people as a privilege and joy to possess and obey (1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2; Ps 119:93, 97). It progressively sanctifies God’s people, but it is never a means of salvation (Jn 17:17; Rom 6:17; 7:4; 1 Cor 9:20; Gal 2:15-19, 3:25).
- Consider Romans 6:17-19. The unbeliever is a slave to sin leading to death. In striving for the law, they only incur more lawlessness (v16, 19). Faith, on the other hand, frees one from slavery as judged by the law, and frees one for slavery “to righteousness leading to sanctification” (v19).
 - “First, if the law is a perfect rule of life for us, then learn to understand the law in its comprehensive and spiritual nature: ‘Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law’ (Ps 119:18)...Second, continually hold this law before you as being **the will of God**; approve of it, love it, obediently subject yourself to it, and in your entire conduct behave yourself according to this rule, and keep it in view as a carpenter does his blueprint. Thirdly, examine yourself daily by means of this law, and ascertain which commandment you have transgressed and which commandment you have observed; this will humble you. You will thereby become more careful in the future, it will cause you to pray for the guidance of the Spirit, and Jesus will become all the more precious to you.”²
 - Consider 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8.
 - Example: The keeping of God’s law for the marriage covenant has blessings built in to it that is not just restraining but edifying. Sin and transgression have consequences. If you have a marriage fueled by isolation, anger, mistrust, discord (for instance) then you reap the consequences of it in this life. When spouses love as they should, then they reap the good consequences in marriage.
 - The law of God is his means for flourishing our life as he designed it. Christians are not sinless, and there will be suffering in this life for doing good, but the more we love the law and walk in it, the more we yield what is good through it.

The Forms and Uses of the Law

	MORAL	CIVIL	CEREMONIAL
Demands Christ	X	O	O
Restrains Sin	X	O	O
Sanctifies God’s People	X	O	O

X = Fulfilled in Christ *and* binding today

O = Fulfilled in Christ *but* not binding today, yet, at times, formative for general practice

Staying on the Line: Find the Promise

- The *promises* of Scripture are those benefits, or blessings, that are given to us by way of the electing work of God in Christ. These promises are already ours in Christ by way of the life and work of Christ through

² Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, first pub. 1700, Vol. 3 “The Law, Christian Graces, and the Lord’s Prayer” (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2021), 81.

the Holy Spirit. These gospel promises are passively applied to us by the Spirit. In other words, we've done nothing to earn them, but we reap the daily benefits of them.

- The gospel itself is the ultimate promise of Scripture, and it's overflowing with blessings (justification, adoption, definitive sanctification, glorification, to name a few).
- Consider Philippians 2:12-13.
- Avoid **COMMAND ALONE** | When we teach commands alone, we fall into *moralism* or *legalism*. To do good works does not give life, and God will not grant heavenly status or promises for wicked sinners who decide to do something nice.
- Avoid **PROMISE ALONE** | As we have learned, both antinomianism and licentiousness thrive off of a distorted view of grace which either rejects the third use of the law or finds salvation through the law. Both Paul and James deal with this error (Rom 6; Js 2).
- **PROMISE PRECEDES COMMAND** | The proper handling of the commands of God is that they are always tethered to promises, and the promises of God precede the commands. The only reason we seek to live for God in keeping his commands is because he has already promised himself to us – you can't undo that. He'll never leave you nor forsake you, and God says that keeping the law is for your good.
- In this way, we can say the command of Philippians 2 to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" is *because* God is at work in you, "both to will and to work for his good pleasure!" (Phil 2:12-13) Out of the promises we have in the gospel of Christ will flow good works. Good works never put us in good standing with God, but every day we respond to the gospel with genuine living faith, one that loves the law of God.
- When we come across commands in Scripture, we should locate the promises in context that undergird and establish the reason for the commands that are present.

GROUP PRACTICE TEXT

In your groups have someone read aloud Colossians 2:13-23.

Q: What does God command of us in this passage?

<i>Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of... (16)</i>
<i>Let no one disqualify you insisting... (18)</i>
<i>Hold fast to the Head... (19)</i>
<i>Do not submit to regulations... (20-21)</i>

ASK What promises are we to believe in this passage?

<i>God made you alive together with him, and not us (13b)</i>
<i>God has forgiven of all trespasses in the gospel of Christ (13c-14)</i>
<i>God disarmed all other authority over us in the gospel (15)</i>

ASK What "forms" and "uses" (functions) of the law do you observe in this text?

Forms of Law	
Moral Law	<i>The record of debt with its legal demands (13,14)</i>
	<i>Self-made religion (23)</i>
	<i>Asceticism and worship of angels (Gentile practices) (18)</i>
Ceremonial Law	<i>Food and drink, festival, new moon, a Sabbath (OT “shadows”) (16)</i>
Uses of the Law	
<i>Demands Christ</i>	<i>If we seek after these moral and ceremonial laws, we prove unsuccessful because Christ fulfilled the moral and ceremonial laws so that we would be made alive by God. Appropriate examples of “how” we see this in our lives can be applied here. (17)</i>
<i>Restrains Sin</i>	<i>To not demand practice of these ceremonial laws protects the soul and the church. We avoid self-made religion in many forms. Appropriate examples can be applied here. (16,18,20,22,23)</i>
<i>Sanctifies God’s People</i>	<i>By keeping these biblical commands through the promises given, we protect ourselves and the church. We go after true religion as God has commanded us. Appropriate examples can be applied here. (19)</i>

False teaching and false living go hand in hand. Isaiah said, “And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left” (30:21). When a teacher or leader of the Scripture strays it’s most always because they left the line of Scripture in their thinking and living. In our efforts to understand the word we empty the Scriptures of its power by adding to or subtracting from it. Promise and command are woven together but the promise inevitably precedes it; therefore, let us magnify the gospel promises of Scripture as we walk in those commands that God has graciously given. What God demands; he provides.