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How Does God's Law Apply to Me?

R. C. SPROUL

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Chapter One

Oh, How I Love Your Law!

Where should a study of God’s law and its role in the Christian life begin? Some might consider the Ten Commandments the place to start, while others would turn to the book of Deuteronomy. Perhaps very few people might think of starting in the Psalms, but that is precisely where our journey begins.

Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the Psalter, is a magnificent celebration of the law of God. It is an acrostic, meaning that it is divided into twenty-two stanzas, one

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for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, with each line of a given stanza beginning with the same letter. The idea is that of an exhaustive celebration of the law—from A to Z, we might say. This notion of celebrating God’s law may seem completely archaic in our day because we are familiar with the teachings of the New Testament. We rejoice in being redeemed from the law. As Scripture says, “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

As a result, we tend to consider the Old Testament law completely irrelevant to our Christian lives today. Against this modern-day backdrop of rampant disregard for the Old Testament law, we do well to consider the words of the psalmist:

Oh how I love your law!

It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.

Oh, How I Love Your Law!

I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word. I do not turn aside from your rules,
for you have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way. (Ps. 119:97–104)

This section of Psalm 119 does not begin by imparting information but by voicing an exclamation. The word “Oh!” expresses a sigh of profoundly deep feeling, and in this case, the feeling is one of affection.

Do we often hear Christians say, “The thing I love the most about my Christian experience is the law of God”? Do we hear people in the church today celebrate the depth of their affection for the law of God? The obvious answer is no. But as we explore the law of God in these pages, we should begin to ask why Christians don’t have a greater appreciation for God’s law.

What is it about Christ and His work that would cause us now to despise or ignore what was the focal point of

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delight in the lives of Old Testament saints? Perhaps it’s the assumption that the Old Testament law is no longer relevant to New Testament Christians and has no bearing upon our Christian growth. We reason that the law was for Old Testament believers, not for us today. To us, the Christian life is Christ, not Moses; it’s gospel, not law.

We are much more likely to hear Christians voice depths of passion with exclamations such as “Oh, how I love You, Jesus!” or “Oh, how I love You, Lord!” But how might the Lord Jesus respond to these sentiments? His words to the nascent church are likely the same words He would speak to us today: “If you love me, you will keep my command- ments” (John 14:15).

For a Christian to say, “I once loved the law, but now I love Christ and ignore the law,” is simply not to love Christ, because Christ loved the law. His meat and His drink, the Scriptures tell us, was to do the will of the Father (John 4:34). Jesus viewed His entire life as a mission to fulfill every single point of the law and to achieve perfect obedience to the commandments of God. His motive was not to keep a list of rules but to do the will of the Father. And the Father clearly expresses His will through His law.

Throughout Psalm 119, there is a constant interchange

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between the words “law” and “word.” Christians today may speak in glowing terms of their affection for the Word of God, but we have a tendency to divorce the Word of God from the law of God. However, that dichotomy is not evident in this psalm, where throughout we see the psalm- ist reciting his affection repeatedly both for the law and for the Word of God. Why did the psalmist love the law of God so much?

The first thing to note is that the law expressed God's commandments, that which He wanted His people to do. When kings, presidents, leaders, or others who sit in seats of authority utter a directive, their word is not to be challenged. They are the final court of appeals, so there is no room for discussion. Their word is law.

Has anything changed about God that we would disregard His directives? Is His word still law? Is He still as sovereign as He was in the Old Testament? Is the God of Israel and of the New Testament church a commandment-giving God? His word is law, and His law is His word, because His law expresses His will. And that will, that law, is sweeter than honey (Ps. 119:103).

The book of Psalms begins with this benediction from on high: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel

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of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers" (Ps. 1:1). This verse refers to a person who does not live according to the patterns, customs, and general wisdom of ungodly people. Translated into modern-day language, it might read like this: "Blessed is the man who is not a conformist to the cultural customs and patterns of our own society, who doesn't follow the popular wisdom of our day." Here in Psalm 1, a blessing is pronounced upon people who don't do certain things. And what is the positive side? "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night" (v. 2).

We might be tempted to rewrite this today and say, "Foolish is the man who delights in the law of the Lord and wastes his time meditating on it day and night." We might think that only a legalist takes delight in the law and spends more than five minutes a year meditating upon it. But God says, "Blessed is the man. . . ."

The psalmist goes on to say, "He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season" (v. 3). Imagine the Judean wilderness that the psalmist and his original readers would have been familiar with. Think of the dry shoot that comes out of the ground in that barren wasteland, where any foliage that lives must fight to survive

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against the beating sun and the parched earth every hour of every day. And in the distance, picture an oasis where the trees are lush, full, and heavy with fruit because they are planted by the stream. Or picture the mouth of the Jordan River and the trees that grow right next to it, whose roots go deep into the ground, absorbing the moisture and the nutrients. These trees are robust and plentiful in the fruit that they produce. So in effect, God says, "Blessed is the man who meditates on My law day and night. He won't be like a tree that's planted in the middle of the desert with one tiny little root struggling to survive. He will be like the tree planted by the rivers of living water, bringing forth fruit in its season."

If there is a secret that lies hidden from the view of the modern Christian, that secret is found in the books of the Old Testament—not just in the Law, but also in the Prophets and the Wisdom Literature—all of which together reveal the character of God. If we wonder why God seems foreign to us, like an alien or an intruder into our lives; if we stumble and grope in darkness trying to understand how to live in a relativistic age; and if we feel like pieces of chaff that the wind drives away with the slightest breeze; then we need to go back and consider the law of God.

In the pages to come, we will explore the nature of the law in the Bible, and particularly, in the Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue. How did it function in the life of Israel in the Old Testament? And what is the relevance of the old covenant law now that we are in the new covenant? Is there any application of the Old Testament law to our day?

Against the Law?

Some have suggested that we are living in perhaps the most antinomian era in the history of the church. This word

antinomian comes from the Greek *anti*, which means “against,” and *nomos*, which means “law.” Antinomian-ism is the belief that the law of God—or at least the Old Testament law—is in no way binding or relevant to the Christian life today.

We frequently read in New Testament passages, such as those written by the Apostle Paul, that we are no longer under

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law but under grace. That is routinely taken to mean that we are no longer responsible in any way to conform to the law of the Old Testament because, it is argued, the Old Testament law was relevant only to people in the theocratic system of Israel, wherein the state was governed by God through the priesthood. All of that was supposedly done away with when Christ signaled the start of the new covenant and the establishment of the Christian church. After all, John says in his gospel, “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

There are many people who believe that the New Testament has its own set of commandments, and that as Christians, we are obligated to obey the rule of Jesus Christ and the law that He gives to His people. But where does that leave the Old Testament law in terms of our Christian lives today?

Scripture itself reveals that certain elements of the Old Testament law have been abrogated. Take, for example, the ceremonial law of the Old Testament, which consists of the rites and rituals performed by Israel in the worship of God. The offering of sacrifices was not simply a suggestion that God gave to Israel. By His command, the Israelites were obligated to celebrate the Day of Atonement, prepare

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burnt offerings, and remain faithful to the ceremonies. These rituals, the New Testament tells us, were shadows or types of the final sacrifice that was to be offered once for all in the death of Jesus.

In fact, we see the struggle in the New Testament against those who were trying to influence the church to continue these ceremonies. These Judaizers insisted that the Old Testament rituals be continued in perpetuity in the New Testament church. That view was hotly contested, and it was fiercely resisted by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians as well as by the author of Hebrews. The rationale was this: once Christ offered the perfect sacrifice once and for all, reverting back to the types and the shadows would be to deny the fullness of light and the total fulfillment that had come in that perfect sacrifice. Therefore, the Christian church has made it clear that we are not to continue these cultic, ceremonial practices of the Old Testament.

We also see a segment of Old Testament law that consists of dietary laws. In these laws, God prescribed which foods the Israelites were allowed to eat and which foods were considered unclean. They were not allowed to eat pork, for example. But in the New Testament, when the

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church expanded to include gentiles who followed a different diet, the question of dietary laws became important. The Council of Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, addressed this issue. God had given Peter a vision in which Christ told him not to declare unclean things that He had made clean. As a result, the list of prohibited foods was greatly reduced by the Council of Jerusalem. The dietary restrictions established in the Old Testament were lifted in the economy of the New Testament. Therefore, Scripture clearly reveals two ways in which the laws of the Old Testament are no longer absolutely binding upon the lives of Christians today.

Historically, the church has sought to answer the question of whether Old Testament laws are still binding today by drawing a distinction between the different types of Old Testament law. According to this view, the law is divided into three categories: the dietary laws, the ceremonial laws, and the moral laws. As helpful as those distinctions may be, we must keep in mind that for the Jew in the Old Testament period, all of the law was moral. It was a moral issue to Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego whether they obeyed the dietary laws of God while they were in exile. It was a moral issue for Israel whether it obeyed the

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ceremonial law. Yet the purpose in our day of distinguishing between the three is to communicate that there is still a substantive stratum of law in the Old Testament that seems to continue into the life of the New Testament church.

One of the most important texts on this topic appears in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). Similarly, the Apostle Paul, when he speaks in glorious terms of how we have been redeemed from the curse of the law and are no longer under the law, is careful to warn us against jumping to the very conclusion that antinomians do—that the law has been completely removed from any consideration in the life of the Christian.

In Romans 7, Paul says, “So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (v. 12). This attitude characterizes the whole tenor of the New Testament’s teaching on the law. In the book of James, for example, James speaks about the royal law of obedience in the teachings of Jesus Himself. In this epistle, where many of the Old Testament laws are reiterated for the benefit of the Christian church, we see that the substantive content of the moral law of the Old Testament still plays a vitally

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important role in the New Testament community. But again, the question is, What exactly is that role?

As we consider these questions about the law, we must remember that the fundamental problem in all of creation is the problem of evil. The fundamental problem in our lives is the problem of sin, and sin and evil are both defined in light of the law. The fall of Adam and Eve was a transgression against the law of God. Absolute wickedness in the Scriptures is associated with lawlessness (1 John 3:4). And the supreme manifestation of evil incarnate is the man of lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:8–10). So when we deal with questions about the law of God, we are not dealing with peripheral matters or tangential questions, but something that goes to the very core of our lives as human beings who are called to live *coram Deo*—before the face of God.

Chapter Three

The Law as a Mirror

There was a fierce debate in the Middle Ages over God's relationship to the law. Is God outside of the law, or is there some law above God to which He owes obedience and allegiance? This controversy was known as the *ex lex* controversy—*ex* meaning “outside of” or “apart from” and *lex* meaning “law.” Theologians strongly rejected the idea that God functions *sublego*—under law. If God is under some law outside of Himself, then that law would be higher than God, and God would no longer be God—the

law would. Therefore, there is no law outside of God that imposes obligations upon Him.

But if that's the case, is God lawless? Can He do whatever He wants? If He is not *sublego*, then must He be *ex lex*—outside of all law and able to act in an arbitrary or capricious manner without any sense of order? The theologians of the Middle Ages rejected this idea as well. They offered instead a third alternative, namely, that God is a law unto Himself. This differs from the idea that God is *ex lex* in that the behavior of God is never lawless. The actions of God are always in conformity to the law of God's own nature and character, which is inherently righteous and eternally holy. All of His actions come forth according to who He is.

This is significant because when we are called to obey the law of God, that means that we are called to obey *Him*. We are not simply trying to conform to an abstract set of principles or a disembodied list of rules; we are trying to live in relationship to our God. We are trying to please Him. We are trying to do what He wants us to do. Part of the nature of God is that He has within Himself supreme and absolute authority, by which He can issue commands to His creatures. But this authority is not exercised arbitrarily.

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It reflects His eternal, holy character. God can command only what reflects His nature, and since He is wholly good, He can command only what is good. And good is defined by His nature; He is not bound to a standard of goodness outside Himself.

The law we are called to obey is a law that comes from Him. It is *His* law. It is a law that defines a relationship—the relationship between the Creator and the creature, between the sovereign and the vassal, between the King and His subjects. Not only is it His law in the sense that it comes from Him, but most significantly, it is a law that comes from and reflects His own character. It reveals and displays His righteousness, and therefore, it makes known what righteousness is. Notice that order. It is not that we first have a sense of righteousness and then we see that God conforms to it. Rather, first there is God in His perfect character, who is the standard of righteousness, and all righteousness is the revelation of who He is.

Anytime we deal with an ethical issue in society, people debate the pros and cons on both sides. It seems there is no form of human behavior that someone hasn't risen up to defend. We have various arguments and rationalizations to defend all kinds of disobedience, ungodliness, and evil, and

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we argue constantly about what is right and what is wrong. Christianity and Judaism assert that there is an absolute standard. What is right and what is wrong is not a matter of relativity. Instead, the ultimate standard is the character of God, and this character is manifested in His law.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines sin as “any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (Q&A 14). Here the word “want” refers to lack. Sometimes this dual definition of sin is simplified by reducing it to two kinds of sins: sins of commission and sins of omission. A sin of commission occurs when we commit an action that transgresses the law of God. If God says, “You shall not,” and we do it, we have violated the commandment and transgressed His law. A sin of omission is when God says, “You shall,” and we fail to do what is required.

With both kinds of sin, we are dealing with a lack of conformity to a standard. We fail to live up to the standard. The New Testament says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). We fall short or fail to hit the mark we are required to reach. We miss that requirement when we transgress God's law or fail to keep it perfectly.

What if there were no laws at all? The catechism defines

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sin in terms of a relationship to law. But what if there were no laws? Would that mean that we would not be guilty of sin if there were no law to transgress? The Apostle Paul says, “If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin” (Rom. 7:7). However, elsewhere in Romans, Paul asks whether law existed before Moses. His answer? Yes, there was a law in effect. He says, “Death reigned from Adam to Moses” (5:14), and there wouldn’t have been death had there not been sin. He argues that in addition to being engraved on tablets of stone at Sinai, God’s law is revealed in nature and inscribed on the hearts of all (even pagans), so that everyone has some knowledge of the law of God, some awareness of what is right and what is wrong. Paul means in Romans 7:7 that knowing and breaking the written law of God renders one more culpable for sin because it means breaking additional, special revelation that the Lord gave to clarify His standards. He does not mean that people who do not have the Scriptures have no law at all or that knowledge of God’s standards did not exist until He gave the law to Moses.

Therefore, when people argue over whether adultery, theft, and murder are wrong, they know in their hearts that such things are wrong. They are simply trying to

quell their own consciences in order to live according to their passions. According to Romans, “Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them” (1:32). That only underscores the sinfulness of sin.

The idea of the sinfulness of sin was addressed during the Reformation when the Reformers address the usefulness of the Old Testament law for New Testament Christians. One of the most helpful contributions in this regard was made by John Calvin. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin provided an exposition of what he called “the threefold use of the law.” In other words, Calvin said that the Old Testament law is useful to the New Testament Christian in three distinct ways. First, the law functions as a mirror; second, it functions as a restraint; and third, which Calvin saw as the most important, the law functions as a revealer.

The first use of the law is as a mirror. A mirror allows us to see ourselves as others see us. It shows us what we look like. Sometimes it allows us to see that we look good, but sometimes looking in a mirror is dreadful—when it reveals to us our blemishes.

Calvin observed that we can use a mirror to tell us whether there’s dirt on our faces, but how can we tell if there’s a stain upon our souls? There is no mirror bright enough to penetrate to the core of our character. If we want to see an accurate reflection of our moral character, we need a mirror far more powerful than the ones we usually look into, and that mirror is the law of God. Otherwise, we can all too easily deceive ourselves into thinking that we are righteous people. We compare ourselves to others, look at human laws, and give ourselves a high score. But once we look into the perfect mirror, once we examine the law of God, we are devastated, because we see the darkness of our sin against the standard of perfect righteousness. We see the sinfulness of our sin.

We don’t always enjoy looking in mirrors. We often don’t like what we see as it relates to our physical appear-

ance. Perhaps that's one reason we avoid the law of God: we don't want to look in that mirror. But we must look in that mirror, because what we see in it alerts us to our desperate need and drives us to the gospel. The mirror of the law of God is bad news, but until we look at ourselves in it, we will never understand the goodness of the good news.

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Chapter Four

The Law as a Restrainer

Most of us have heard the idea that you can't legislate morality. But this is actually a nonsensical statement. If we mean to say that the government shouldn't be involved in passing legislation that curbs, restrains, or restricts human behavior or morality, there would be nothing left for Congress to do except assign names to government buildings.

Think about it. Are we suggesting that there shouldn't be laws against murder? Or is theft not a moral issue?

What

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does government do if not legislate morality (or, at least, its concept of morality)? In fact, the basic purpose of legislation is to enact laws that are heavily weighted with moral concern. For example, it is a moral issue how we drive our cars on the road because how we drive can hurt or harm others. The law puts restraints on our desires; otherwise, we might pose a danger to the safety and livelihood of those around us. The law takes away some of our freedom and establishes a speed limit to protect us and others from serious injury or death. Flouting these laws makes us culpable to a fine or imprisonment. In this and countless other ways, it is clearly the business of government to legislate morality.

Perhaps this idea originally came into vogue because we know that passing a law to prohibit a certain form of behavior is no guarantee that the behavior will be eliminated. For example, it is illegal in the United States to use or sell certain drugs, but we know that those laws have not stopped the rampant sale and use of illegal drugs. Yet the presence of laws that legislate morality does restrain evil in some measure. Without laws restricting certain behaviors, evil would abound more.

Most of us can think of movies or shows depicting life

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on the American frontier before the establishment of law and order. This anarchic and chaotic frontier society was colloquially called “the Wild West.” It was a dangerous place to live before the arrival of law enforcement. So, even in our own country’s history, we see that the law comes in for the purpose of restraining evil.

The New Testament speaks of earthly governments as fulfilling this very function. God gives the power of the sword to human governments to restrain evil, for if evil is unbridled and unrestrained, society is impossible, and civilization becomes barbarian.

God’s law serves as a restraint, but of course, it doesn’t do so absolutely. Humans can disregard the law of God in the same way that we disregard earthly governments. Calvin said this about the law as a restrainer:

The second function of the law is this: at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats in the law. But they are restrained, not because their inner mind is stirred or affected, but because, being bridled, so to speak, they keep their hands from

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outward activity, and hold inside the depravity that otherwise they would wantonly have indulged. Consequently, they are neither better nor more righteous before God. (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.7.10)

This is an important point. If the only reason we obey the law is out of fear of punishment or dread of the consequences, and not because our hearts are inclined to please God, we are no better in the sight of God than the person who, with reckless abandon, violates His standards and His law.

The benefit of this restraint is part of what we call in theology God’s common grace. Winston Churchill said that with all of its weaknesses, democracy is still the best form of government. He even went so far as to say that tyranny is better than anarchy. The worst form of government is no government at all, where there is no restraint and the common grace of God is obscured.

Common grace does not include the special or salvific grace of God by which people are brought into a saving relationship with Christ. Rather, common grace refers to the common welfare that God provides for His people. It

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is the sunshine and the rain that falls on the just and the unjust—the general, universal benefits that we receive from the hand of God. One of the benefits of common grace is the benefit of His law, which makes it possible for sinful people to live together without completely destroying one another. This is one benefit of the restraint of the law.

Ironically, as the Apostle Paul observes in the New Testament, even though the law restrains us from sin, because of the wickedness of our hearts, it sometimes also has the opposite effect. Sometimes, knowledge of the law actually inflames us to sin. We've heard the expression "Rules are made to be broken." We've seen children who have no desire to engage in certain behaviors until those behaviors are declared off limits. And suddenly, that's exactly what they want to do. There's something inherent in our depraved natures such that we take delight in breaking laws just for our own pleasure and amusement.

With respect to the first two uses of the law—as a mirror and as a restrainer—Calvin said that both fulfill the metaphor used in Scripture about the law as a schoolmaster that leads us to Christ (Gal. 3:24). When we look at the language the New Testament uses in this regard, we can easily be misled because the educational system today

functions in a way that is much different from the way that it did in the ancient world. We are familiar with the concept of only one teacher in the classroom, but in the ancient educational system, there were two adult officials in the classroom. There was the teacher and there was the pedagogue, or the schoolmaster. The function of the schoolmaster was not to impart information but to be the disciplinarian. He was responsible to discipline the wayward students and cause them to give their attention to the teacher. This lies at the heart of the biblical analogy.

God speaks to us of the free remission of sins in the gospel, but like wayward students, we don't pay attention. If we had the tiniest understanding of the character of God and an understanding of our own character, we would realize how desperately we need a Savior. But we don't think we need a Redeemer. We think we're doing just fine. We think that God grades on a curve, that our works are adequate, and that our righteousness is lofty enough to satisfy the demands of a holy God. It is as though we're falling asleep while the gospel is being preached until the schoolmaster awakens us to our peril and demands that we give our attention to the teacher. The schoolmaster doesn't just nod in our direction. The schoolmaster, in this case the

law, drives us to Christ. The more we look in the mirror, the more we look at the restraining aspect of the law, the more desperately we understand our need for the gospel.

The cavalier attitude we have toward the gospel today, as well as our willingness to compromise it, negotiate it, or ignore it, is inseparably bound up with our ignorance of the law of God. There is no schoolmaster in our classroom anymore.

Chapter Five

The Law as a Revealer

Of Calvin's three uses of the law, the third is perhaps the most important: the revelatory use of the law. Of course, the first use of the law as a mirror involves the revelatory use of the law as well, in that it reveals to us the righteous character of God. This third use, however, relates to another dimension of revelation that comes to us by the law of God.

The psalmist called God's law a lamp to his feet and a light to his path, in that it sheds light on how to live a

life that is pleasing to Him (Ps. 119:105). Christians often grapple with the question of what God wants us to do, how He wants us to serve Him. We are constantly bombarded by Christian subcultural norms and standards that some- times

have little or nothing to do with the will of God. And as individuals, we all have our pet rules and regulations that define the Christian experience. But the bottom line for the Christian is not, What does my church want me to do? or, What does my fellowship group want me to do? Instead, it is, What does God require of me? What is it that I am called to do to be pleasing to God?

In the new covenant, those who are in Christ have been redeemed from the curse of the law. We know that we cannot be redeemed by counting on our good works or our obedience. But we also know that we have been redeemed unto righteousness, and that the goal of the Christian life is righteousness. How do we know what righteousness looks like? We must look at the brightest and clearest revelation of righteousness, which is found in the law of God.

The psalmist said, “Oh how I love your law!” (Ps. 119:97). He delighted in the law of the Lord because he delighted in the Lord, and he wanted to learn how he could please God. If a Christian today says, “I don’t care about

the Old Testament law,” that is tantamount to saying, “I don’t care about pleasing God.” Is it even possible for a person to truly be in Christ and yet have no concern for doing what is pleasing to God?

Jesus made clear the abiding significance of the law in terms of pleasing God when He said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). At the end of His exposition of the Ten Commandments and the deeper meaning of the law of God in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus closed with a terrifying warning: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” (Matt. 7:21–23).

The people about whom Jesus was talking claim an intimate relationship with Christ, but Jesus replies that He does not know them, and He calls them “workers of lawlessness.” That is a dreadful commentary on antinomianism of any form. For Jesus, obeying God was His life. It was His meat and His drink. Zeal for His Father’s house

consumed Him. So why would He delight in those who despise the things that He loves?

The New Testament calls us to grow up into maturity in Christ, to be conformed to the image of Christ, and to seek the mind of Christ. To have the mind of Christ means that we think like Christ so that we act like Christ. The New Testament calls us to the *imitatio Christi*—the imitation of Christ—and the Apostle Paul sets forth the idea that we are to imitate Christ as Christ imitated the Father. How did Jesus do that? By His perfect obedience. We as believers are to imitate Jesus’ zeal for pleasing the Father. And there is no better place to learn what is pleasing to God and what He wants His people to do than by looking in His law.

The Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, is like the Magna Carta of the Old Testament law. In regard to forms of law, there are two basic types: apodictic and casuistic. Casuistic law is case law. Case law is drawn from precedents, wherein similar prior incidents and their judgments are used to inform the case at hand. In the Old

Testament, laws of this type are usually written in an “if-then” style: for example, if an ox tramples his neighbor’s wheat field, then the owner of the ox must pay certain damages to the neighbor. Case law spells out the implications of the apodictic law.

Apodictic law is the foundational, fundamental law that governs the people. It is communicated as personal commands or prohibition, and it carries the force of the moral absolute. The apodictic law of Old Testament Israel is found in the Ten Commandments. They were the foundational precepts that governed the land of Israel. They were Israel’s constitution.

In addition to being apodictic, the form of the Ten Commandments are also *elliptical*, meaning that they contain something that is not stated in addition to that which is stated. The unstated content is assumed and can legitimately be inserted. The primary elliptical character of the law of God—which we can see by seeing how Jesus expounds the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount—is that when the law of God prohibits one thing, it at the same time silently, tacitly enjoins or requires its opposite. And conversely, when it enjoins something, it at the same time prohibits its opposite.

For example, when the first commandment says, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3), it is stated negatively—“You shall not.” We are not allowed to have any gods before the true God, and the opposite would be to have gods before Him. The commandment tacitly

commands us to give our entire devotion singularly and consistently to God and to God alone.

This gets a little more complex and subtle when the law states something such as, “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13). What does this require of us? Jesus explained in the Sermon on the Mount that it does not simply mean that we are not permitted to murder. Rather, it means everything from “Do not murder” to “Do promote life.” He clarified the wider implications by saying that the prohibition against murder also means that we must not be angry with others without just cause. We are not to hate others. But on the positive side, it also includes a tacit commandment to work for the well-being of all human life. It isn’t just a negation of murder; it’s a pro-life statement.

As we have seen, God’s law in the Ten Commandments comes in the form of apodictic literary structure. It comes in the form of an absolute personal obligation—“you shall” and “you shall not.” And it comes with elliptical character. These components are important to understand as we begin to look at the individual commands.

No Other Gods

Having established that Old Testament law is still relevant to New Testament Christians, we can now begin to look at the Ten Commandments in detail, study their meaning, and consider how they apply to our daily lives. In Exodus 20, we read: “And God spoke all these words, saying, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me’” (vv. 1–3). The

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opening statements of this verse include the preamble and prologue to the law, whereby God identifies Himself as the Lawgiver: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” Traditionally, the final portion of the verse is seen as the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Some scholars say that this commandment affirms that the Israelites acknowledged other deities, but that they were to direct their supreme allegiance and devotion to Yahweh. The surrounding cultures operated this way—there were many gods, and each nation was seen as having its own tribal god to whom they were primarily devoted. Yahweh, these scholars say, was simply the tribal God of the Israelites. However, classical orthodox Christianity rejects this view and teaches instead that the concept of monotheism—belief in one true God—is found right at the beginning of the Ten Commandments. Here, we see a God who is not simply Lord over a given people or particular nation, but a God who is the Creator of heaven and earth and all that is within them.

The commandment does not simply prohibit polytheism or idolatry; it prohibits even the acknowledgment of other gods, even if the Lord God is given pride of place.

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“Before” does not mean “ahead of in rank.” It means that we are not to have any gods before God’s face or in His presence. When we consider that God’s presence is universal and that He is omnipresent, we see that there is nowhere we could go where we would be allowed to worship other gods. The first commandment says that God will not allow His glory and His name to be shared with anything in the created order. God and God alone is to be Lord of the nations, and

He alone is to be worshiped.

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin noted four elements of this prohibition against having any other gods in the presence of the true God. The basic principle of the first commandment is that nothing that belongs to God is to be ascribed or attributed to any other thing, and the four elements that belong to God exclusively, according to Calvin, are adoration, trust, invocation, and thanksgiving.

All of Scripture emphasizes the need to come before God in a spirit of reverence, praise, honor, and above all, worship. It is the duty of every person to worship the God who is, and worship means ascribing to Him the honor and glory due His name. To ascribe that honor and glory to any other thing is idolatry.

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If we look at the Old Testament, we see that the root problem of Israelite religion was the constant flirtation with idols. Yet, the Israelites have not been the only people to seek after idols. In the first chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul teaches that the fundamental, primordial sin—not just of Israel but of all mankind—is the sin of idolatry, in which the glory that belongs exclusively to God is exchanged for a lie, and people worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator. Creature worship lies at the heart of idolatry. We must be careful with this definition, however, for we have a tendency to think of idolatry simply in crass and primitive terms of bowing down before an idol, such as the golden calf or a totem pole. In reality, idolatry takes place when any attribute of God is stripped from His glory, and we replace the biblical God with a god that we create in our own image.

For example, the Bible reveals that God is altogether holy. He is a God of pure righteousness, justice, mercy, wrath, and love. If we begin to play fast and loose with these attributes and concoct a God who is stripped of His sovereignty, holiness, omnipotence, or immutability, we are in essence exchanging the glory and truth of God for a lie. We fail to honor God as God, and that is precisely Paul's

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indictment in Romans 1. The wrath of God is revealed against all those who take away from the true glory of His character and refuse to adore Him as the God who truly is. All of us, to a greater or lesser degree, allow elements of idolatry to intrude into our faith and religion. If we don't like certain aspects of who God is and we blot out those attributes from our understanding of His character, then the God we're worshiping is not the true God. We cannot pick and choose the attributes of God that we happen to like and discard the ones we don't, for then we are constructing a false god. The true God is the God who reveals Himself in sacred Scripture.

Second, Calvin noted that not only is worship to be ascribed to God and God alone, but so also is trust. What Calvin meant by this is not that we can't trust people on a human level. Rather, he meant that the ultimate trust we cling to for our salvation must be in God. We may be tempted to trust in many things that are not God: ourselves, the church, our friends, or our labors. But our trust must rest ultimately in God, who alone is trustworthy in the ultimate sense.

The third element that Calvin said belongs to God alone is invocation. The word *invocation* refers to calling

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upon. On whom do we call for comfort, rescue, and fulfillment as human beings? Do we say we believe in, trust, and worship God, but then appeal to the stars, our ancestors, or to something else to redeem us? Our reliance must ultimately be on God and the help we receive from Him.

The fourth aspect of worship that belongs to God alone, according to Calvin, is thanksgiving. Returning to Romans 1, Paul says that while God reveals Himself through creation, men suppress this truth in unrighteousness and fall into idolatry. He convicts mankind of two particular evils: the refusal to honor God as God and the failure to give thanks to God. In other words, there is another sin that accompanies the primary sin of the fallen human race: in addition to refusing to adore, honor, and worship God, we also refuse to be thankful to God.

One way this lack of gratitude manifests itself is when we murmur and complain about our situation in this world. Sometimes we harbor within our hearts the idea that God is not being fair, that we deserve a better lot than we currently enjoy, and that the problem lies ultimately with God. We focus on our problems and troubles and begin to think that God has been unfair to us, rather than understanding that every good and perfect gift we enjoy

in this life comes from Him. For every benefit that we receive from His hand, we should be quick to respond with thanksgiving, praise, and honor. If we are ungrateful, we violate the first commandment because we are not keeping God, who is rich in mercy and goodness, before our eyes. We are not worshipping Him with the praise of our thanksgiving and gratitude.

We weren't created simply for our work, health, happiness, marriages, or relationships. All of those are part of the riches of life as we know it, but the ultimate end for which we were created is to glorify God. That's why the very first commandment calls us to that very task. God is jealous for His name, and we have been created for His glory.

No Idols

In the last chapter, we saw that the first commandment excludes all forms of idolatry. But lest we think that a prohibition against idolatry is merely an implication of the first commandment, the second commandment speaks explicitly and directly to the issue of idolatry.

The second commandment states:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to

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them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Ex. 20:4–6)

At first glance, this command may seem like a universal prohibition against forming any images whatsoever. In fact, some have taken the commandment to mean that God repudiates art. Interpreting the command in this way extends the question beyond restrictions on art in the worship of God to whether art itself is a legitimate endeavor. The commandment does say “any likeness of anything” in the heaven above, the earth beneath, or the water under the earth.

When we face this type of question of interpretation, it is important to recognize that any given text of Scripture must be understood in light of the whole counsel of God. When we look at what the rest of Scripture teaches regarding this command, we see that it cannot be a blanket prohibition of art, for then God would be contradicting Himself. When God commissioned the construction of

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the Old Testament tabernacle, and later the temple in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit ordained, instituted, commanded, and enabled the people to create valuable pieces of art. Therefore, based on other passages of Scripture, we may not conclude

that this commandment prohibits all art. In fact, if we consider the Most Holy Place (the innermost chamber of the temple), we see that the mercy seat on the top of the ark of the covenant, which was considered God's throne on earth, is capped off with images of angelic beings who stretch their wings out over the ark. That fact alone should give us pause when rushing to conclude that all art is prohibited by God.

However, what is clearly involved in this commandment is a prohibition against making images that are meant to be replica manifestations of God Himself. A prime example is the golden calf that the Israelites prevailed upon Aaron to make (at the very time, ironically, that God was delivering the commandments to Moses). In crass forms of idolatry such as this, people begin to worship and venerate the images themselves, not the God they are meant to represent.

To prevent this worship of earthly things, God prohibits man from making any images of Him, because He, by

nature, is invisible. He is a spirit, and He is to be worshiped in spirit and in truth. And the essence of idolatry, as we saw in Romans 1, is the exchanging of the truth of God's glory for a lie by serving and worshiping creatures. These creatures include not only the creatures of nature but also the objects that we make with our own hands.

Even a cursory reading of the Old Testament prophets reveals God's extreme denunciation of the practice. Pagan nations were judged, as were the children of Israel. God's people, in disobedience, used the high places in the worship of sacred images and statues. Isaiah and Jeremiah, for example, ridiculed the practice of idolatry by saying, in effect: "You people make and forge objects with your own hands out of deaf and dumb objects of wood or of stone, and then after you have shaped them, you begin to talk to them as if they could hear, you begin to pray to them as if they could answer your prayers. This is madness; you are behaving in a manner toward the images that is appropriate only in the presence of God Himself" (see Isa. 44:9–20; Jer. 10).

Calvin said that fallen man, by nature, is a *fabricum idolarum*, meaning "idol factory." We're not prone to occasionally and accidentally getting involved in the making of

idols—we are idol factories. We continually manufacture rivals to God for our devotion.

One of the great disputes during the Reformation in the sixteenth century centered on the use and function of images and statues in worship. In the sixteenth century, images, icons, and idols were an integral part of the worship of the Roman Catholic Church. The churches were filled with statues of Mary and the saints, and people came into the church and said prayers in front of the statues. The Roman Catholic Church asserted that icons were not to be worshiped, for they understood that the Bible prohibits idolatry. The word *idolatry* is a combination of two Latin words: *idolum* and *latria*. *Latria* means worship, so the church prohibited overt worship of idols. However, Rome argued that it is acceptable to engage in *idola dulia*. *Dulia* means "slavery" or "service." The Roman Catholic Church distinguished between what it saw as two different acts: *idola dulia* is appropriate, but *idola latria* is prohibited. That is, people can render service to—that is, venerate—the statues but not worship them.

The Reformers, however, protested against this understanding, arguing that it is a distinction without a difference. When people prostrate themselves and venerate statues of

stone or wood, what is the difference between doing that and worshiping them? In addition, Rome claimed that the Virgin Mary should receive not only *dulia*, but *hyperdulia*. Not only is service to be rendered to Mary, but an extreme form of service is to be given to her. That was part of the protest of the Reformation.

In response to the perceived idolatry of Rome, some of the Reformers went to great lengths to remove all statues, stained-glass windows, and almost every form of art from their churches. Their motive was to place the attention in worship back on the true character of God. They reasoned that if they were to err in this matter, it was better to err in the direction of too little art rather than too much, since the propensity of the flesh is to confuse the image with what it represents. Some churches even went so far as to remove crosses from their sanctuaries, lest the people begin to worship the symbol rather than what it points to.

Calvin, on the other hand, argued that art depicting real historical events is legitimate. What the church has to guard against, according to the commandment, is any attempt to render God in any concrete form. For example, consider Michelangelo's painting of creation in the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Most of us are familiar with that

magnificent fresco of a muscular deity reaching from the heavens with His outstretched index finger, touching the finger of Adam. The Reformers would have considered this work of art a violation of the second commandment, because it depicts God in human form. That is an image of the invisible God.

The heart of the matter of the second commandment is basically the same as that of the first commandment: we are to honor God as He is, not making any substitute that would direct or deflect our attention and worship away from Him. By implication, the second commandment is also a prohibition against superstition. Idolatry and superstition often go hand in hand because people begin to impart the power of magic to elements of the created order. The Old Testament law clearly shows how important it is to God that His people not be involved in superstition.

In every age, in every generation, and in every religious denomination, there is a pervasive and perennial danger that faith will become infused with superstitious elements. This problem of mixing religion with superstition has been present since the fall of man, and no religion in the world is completely free of superstition. As man has a propensity toward idolatry, he also has a certain fascination toward magic.

We should remember Luther's statement: "Let God be God." This simply means that we must keep the character of God in front of our eyes at all times, not seeking to alter it or trying to appropriate the powers of God to ourselves. We are not God. Our pastors are not God. Our church is not God. Let God be God, and let us worship Him and live in His presence according to His Word.

Chapter Eight

Don't Misuse the Name of God

The third commandment issues this prohibition: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain” (Ex. 20:7). In this sober warning, God reminds His people that violators will be held accountable: He will not regard as guiltless those who use His name in vain. This fact is worth emphasizing, for the violation of the third commandment is one of the most

common sins in our culture today—not only in the secular arena but in the religious sphere as well.

What does it mean to take the name of the Lord in vain? In the English language, the word *vanity* is used as a synonym for pride or narcissism, but when the Old Testament speaks of vanity, it is a synonym for *futility*. Therefore, the command means that God's name is sacred and not to be treated in a cavalier or trivial manner, but rather in a careful and guarded way.

Lest we think that the third commandment doesn't have any significance to New Testament Christians, we need only look at the Lord's Prayer to be disabused of that notion. The very first petition that Jesus instructed people to pray was that God's name be regarded as holy— "Hallowed be your name" (Matt. 6:9). We are to treat God's name as holy because it is *His* name, and we are to regard Him as holy. A cavalier attitude toward God's name reveals more about us than any of our creeds do, for it shows the deepest attitudes of our hearts toward Him. The most obvious violation of this command, of course, is a blasphemous use of God's name, and God takes blasphemy very seriously. In Old Testament Israel,

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blaspheming the name of God was a capital offense. Even in our own country's history, blasphemy was once punishable by law. But we are no longer living in a time when the state regards us as guilty if we blaspheme the name of God. What was a capital offense in Israel is no offense at all in the American judicial system today. While there is still a modicum of censorship on public broadcast television, those restrictions do not apply to the name of God. We can watch television and hear the name of God blasphemed thirty times in thirty minutes. The civil magistrate in our day may hold guiltless the person who blasphemes the name of God, but God will not hold guiltless one who does.

The third commandment also extends beyond these obvious violations to ones that would be less apparent to us today (but which would have been clear to the Old Testament Jews). God's name can also be taken in vain in the use of vows and oaths. Because of the propensity of human beings to break promises and violate each other's trust, promise-making was elevated to a higher degree of seriousness in ancient Israel, where the promise was sanctified by an oath or a vow. A promise was not just a casual statement of intent but a solemn declaration.

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Many of our relationships in this world are defined in terms of promises, agreements, and covenants. Our relationships with our employers are industrial contracts. The relationships we enter into in sales agreements with merchants, in which we promise to pay in a certain period of time, are covenants. Marriages are based upon promises certified by sacred vows and oaths.

When these promises were made in Israel, the people swore a vow or took a sacred oath by appealing to God as the witness between the parties. A modern-day comparison would be the question we hear in a court of law: "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" In saying, "So help me God," we are appealing to God to be the final judge of our truthfulness.

Jesus took the swearing of vows and oaths very seriously and gave instruction on how to take—and how not to take—vows and oaths (Matt. 5:33–37). The book of James tells us that the word of Christians should be trustworthy and that people should be able to take us at our word (5:12).

The third commandment does not, however, preclude all vows. More than once in the New Testament, the

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Apostle Paul gives testimony and swears to his truthfulness by taking an oath in the name of God. Oaths such as these are legitimate, but swearing by the earth, by the heavens, or on our mothers' graves is not, because when we swear by such things, we are slipping into a form of idolatry. If a person swears on his mother's grave to verify his words, his mother's grave has no power to enforce that promise. It is an empty promise. And when we swear by things that are less than God, we attribute to those things the very power of God Himself. We act as though the grave can do what only God can do, and therefore we commit an act of idolatry.

Oaths are to be taken in the name of God if they are to be legitimate because the swearing of lawful vows and oaths is in itself an act of worship. We are bearing witness to our faith that God can hear all things and see all things—that He is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. He has the power to judge between us, and He has the authority to be the final arbiter among people.

When we swear by God, we are acknowledging Him to be God; thus even in this commandment, we see a reinforcement of the same concern present in the first and second commandments—namely, the prohibition

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against all forms of idolatry. If we have a true faith and an accurate understanding of what it means to honor, glorify, and worship God, not only will we treat Him as God directly, but also in how we use His name, both privately and publicly. And this is not simply a religious thing; it has to do with all of life being lived under the recognition of the transcendent majesty and excellency of God.

A final way in which this prohibition is violated is in attributing to the name of God impulses and direction that don't come from Him at all. People say, "The Lord led me to do this," or, "The Lord spoke to me and told me to do this." This has become acceptable spiritual behavior in the Christian community to the point that it would be considered impolite for someone to respond, "How do you know that God has spoken to you?"

If by saying this people meant that they were reading the Scripture, and as they read they came under conviction from a certain text, that would be fine. But if they mean to say that while driving their cars down the street they had an intuition, and now they have a plan that supposedly came from God, that's another story. That's exactly what the false prophets of Israel did in the Old Testament, preaching their own dreams instead of the

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words of God. If we ever say to another person that God told us to do or say something, we had better have sound reason

for doing so. Otherwise, we're violating the third commandment.

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Chapter Nine

Rest

As a boy growing up in Pennsylvania, I never heard the sound of a lawn mower on Sundays. Every store in our town was closed except one—the drugstore. Even then, the only part of the drugstore that was open was the pharmacy, which operated for a short period of time on Sundays to accommodate medical emergencies. In those days, the only restaurants open on Sundays were associated with hotels, where people had to be able to eat while away from home. This was a normal way of life not so very long ago. However, today this notion seems almost humorous. Sunday is now regarded almost the same as any other day of the week.

Despite this clear cultural shift in America, an important question remains for believers: What is our duty in regard to keeping the Sabbath? This is the concern of the fourth commandment. The commandment reads:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex. 20:8–11)

There are disputes not only between Christians and secular people on the topic of Sabbath observance but also within the Christian community itself. Nor is this question restricted to the modern age—it has been grappled with throughout centuries of church history.

Augustine of Hippo said that nine out of the Ten Commandments were reiterated in the New Testament law of

Christ. The fourth commandment, he thought, had been abrogated—or at least certain elements of it—since the New Testament community shifted its corporate worship from the seventh to the first day of the week to commemorate the resurrection of Christ. Though the church still met on a cyclical basis of one day in seven, Augustine argued that the association of that to the seventh day of the week had changed. Along the same lines, the Apostle Paul's statements about not being bound by new moons and Sabbaths (Col. 2:16) have led many of the great teachers of the church to believe that with the coming of Christ, the whole institution of the Sabbath was set aside.

However, for the most part, the church has embraced the belief that the essential elements of Sabbath observation are still in effect. One of the arguments supporting this view is the belief that Sabbath observance was not first instituted at Mount Sinai with the giving of the commandments to the people of Israel through Moses. Instead, it was a commandment established in creation when God hallowed the seventh day. Therefore, as a creation ordinance, it is not limited to the history of Israel—the whole creation is expected to observe this day in a twofold manner: ceasing from ordinary labor and worshipping, praising, and honoring the Creator.

The fourth commandment reads, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8). Note that it does not say, “From this point on, the Sabbath should be regarded as holy.” Instead, it says to remember that it is already holy; the command is simply to keep it that way. In the most elementary sense, to be holy means to be different. God is saying:

“Remember to keep this day different. This is the one day that I have consecrated and set apart.”

The first thing that makes the Sabbath different, unusual, or extraordinary is seen in Scripture’s emphasis on the Sabbath as a day of rest. This does not mean that we are to sleep all day or spend twenty-four hours in total inactivity. Instead, it denotes a rest from normal labor, and as such, the Sabbath is an imitation of God’s actions in creation, wherein He labored over six successive days and rested on the seventh. One of the reasons we rest is to reflect the image of God and to remember our Creator and His labor of creation—we’re honoring God, not indulging ourselves.

There are obvious practical benefits to rest as well. The Israelites experienced greater physical and emotional well-being when they took a day away from difficult labor and toil. As human beings, we need rest. In fact, we were

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Rest

constituted in such a way that every day we must lie down and sleep in order to survive and function.

God appoints not only this daily period of time for sleep in the cycle of life but also a weekly pattern of rest from our normal labors. God was concerned that His people not be exploited or reduced to slaves who never had any opportunity for recreation, refreshment, and rest from their toil, so He appointed one day every week where people were not supposed to work. This applied not only to businessmen, merchants, and farmers but also to servants and slaves.

Further, the command applied not only to people but to beasts of burden as well. It even extended beyond living creatures to the land itself. God instituted a sabbath for the land so that it would not become despoiled through exhaustion. Every seven years, there was to be a sabbatical year on the land so that the fields could lie fallow and recover.

The second thing that is different about the Sabbath is that it was set aside for corporate worship and giving special attention to the things of God. This does not mean that for six days people should go about their business and not give God a second thought. We are not to ignore His existence for six days and then tip our hats to Him one day a week. The life of faith is to be lived every day, and all

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days are conducive to the worship of God. But for ancient Israel, the Sabbath was a special time of corporate worship.

We tend to be very individualistic in America, but the Christian faith is very much corporate in its orientation. We are part of a group that comes together on the Sabbath day for a solemn assembly. We gather to celebrate not only creation but also our redemption—to celebrate the resurrection of Christ and the gift of salvation that God has given to His people—and to honor God and enjoy His presence.

The third thing that is different about the Sabbath, and one that the New Testament frequently mentions, is that the Sabbath day is in itself a kind of sacrament. It’s an outward sign that points to an aspect of our redemption. In the New Testament, particularly in the book of Hebrews, the Sabbath points to the final goal of our redemption: our entrance into heaven. When we enter into heaven, we are entering into our rest.

We long for the peace of heaven—not a rest of unconsciousness or oblivion, but rest from all of the cares and troubles and pains that besiege us in this mortal flesh. Every time we come together to worship on the Sabbath day, we not only remember God’s work of creation but we involve ourselves in the sacramental sign of His promise

of redemption. The Sabbath is to be a taste of heaven, the place where there will be no tears, no death, and no darkness. Heaven will be full of activity, but it will be the end of restlessness and anxiety, a place where we will enter a peace that transcends all human understanding. The Sabbath is meant to point to all of these realities.

The fourth commandment says not to do any work, and the Pharisees, of course, took that to an absolute degree. In response, Jesus had to instruct them about the work that may be done on the Sabbath day. It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath day. If someone's animal falls into a pit, it shouldn't be left there to die. If a person becomes sick on the Sabbath day, we don't refuse to give him medical care until the Sabbath is over. It is not only lawful but necessary to do these works of mercy and to seek to preserve life. The church has always understood that some kinds of labor are necessary on the Sabbath day. God judged Israel for working on the Sabbath only with respect to unnecessary labor and commerce where the motive for the labor was strictly economic rather than humanitarian. That's why we believe hospitals can be open on the Sabbath day, and it's certainly legitimate for the minister to work on the Sabbath day because corporate worship is part of his responsibility.

Perennial questions abound over what is considered proper and improper behavior on the Sabbath day. Arguments are endless about whether it's OK to go on a picnic or engage in various other forms of recreation on the Sabbath. Such questions will never go away, so we must be careful not to fall into the trap of the Pharisees with their legalistic approach to the Sabbath day.

The fundamental question we must stay focused on is this: Do we honor God with the Sabbath day? Are we in tune with the original purpose of the Sabbath day? Is the Sabbath any different for us than the other six days of the week? Do we look forward to Sunday not because it's the day we can sleep in and go to the beach, but rather because we get a time of refreshment from normal commerce and can have our souls refreshed by corporate worship and can be in the special presence of our Creator and Redeemer?

Respect Your Parents

Imagine if the United States government somehow collapsed without warning, and you were given the critical task of writing a new constitution. There's only one catch: you can only choose ten laws on which to base the foundation of a new society. What laws would you choose?

Perhaps you'd have a law protecting the sanctity of life and prohibiting murder. Or, maybe you would protect private property by prohibiting theft. But who would include in his top ten laws prohibitions against coveting or abusing

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the name of God? And how many people would find it important to include a law that commands giving honor to parents?

The fifth commandment says this: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12). As we've already noted, the Ten Commandments were the constitution for God's people. When we look at these commandments from the vantage point of twenty-first-century culture and society, there are clearly some surprises to our modern sensibilities.

Even from a secular sociological perspective, the most fundamental of all organizational units that make up a society is the family. The family unit is not unique to Western civilization; it is part of the fabric of humanity throughout the ages. But today, this foundational unit of organized living is in jeopardy. More and more people are abandoning marriage and paternal and maternal responsibilities, and we're seeing a profound sense of alienation within the family—not only between husbands and wives but also between parents and children. Given the ramifications of the loss of family cohesion, it really shouldn't surprise us that when God established the foundation for

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a holy nation, He included a mandate about relationships within the family.

The fifth commandment includes a word that today might be seen as archaic: *honor*. This word is fast disappearing

from our vocabulary, but previous generations rightly understood the importance of honor to a well-functioning society.

God understood that to maintain the structure of society, there must be a sense of honor at its core, and this is why the concept of honor is central throughout Scripture. We are called to honor the king and those who exercise civil authority over us. We are called to honor pastors and elders who exercise spiritual leadership and authority over us. We are even called to honor one another—not only our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, but all people (1 Peter 2:17). At the very heart of honor is the dimension of respect—recognizing the dignity of a person and treating him accordingly. The respect established in the Decalogue began with children’s responsibilities toward their parents. This is where the whole concept of showing respect to divinely constituted levels of authority begins. This honor is, first, an acknowledgement that God has delegated to parents a certain authority by which the home is to be governed. That’s why in the New Testament, the mandate

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is given to children again: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Eph. 6:1). It is part of the structure of authority that God has built into His universe. Children are not to rule the home; children are to be in submission to their parents. And not only are they to give submission and obedience to their parents, they are to give it respectfully. In other words, they are to give honor to their parents.

It is the duty of children, before God, to honor their parents. It is the duty of parents to teach the children what honor and respect mean, and if the children grow up to behave in a disrespectful manner, it is possible that the parents haven’t instructed them and demanded honor and respect in the home. Of course, there comes a time when the children are no longer living under the roof of their parents and are no longer called upon to obey them in the same way that they did while they were young. But the mandate to honor our father and mother never ends. If you look at the customs in Israel, you’ll see how families showed respect to the matriarch or patriarch. When the father walked into a room, it was the custom of all the children, even the adult children, to rise to show their respect and honor.

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What is your gut reaction when you hear the word *honor*? People may laugh at us for even considering this a virtue anymore, but one need not be religious to understand the value of human dignity and the value of showing respect to each other, to those who are in authority over us, and particularly within the bounds of the family. As parents, do we not want the respect of our children? Don’t we feel embarrassed for the ways in which we have failed to honor our own parents?

We may say, “But my father was not an honorable man,” or “My mother was not an honorable woman,” but God doesn’t say, “Honor your father or mother only when they’re honorable.” They hold a position, an office, and even if they’re unworthy of that office, the office itself is still to be honored. As Christians, we should be scrupulous in demonstrating honor, dignity, and respect to our parents, and by doing so, we obey God by obeying the fifth commandment.

