

## **The Moral Law and its Relation to Believers**

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The controversy about the relation of the moral Law to believers centers in the Law given by God through the ministry of Moses to the people of Israel. What relation have believers to this Law of Moses? To answer this question it is first of all necessary to determine in what sense the word "law" is being used in such an expression as "the Law of Moses". Sometimes it is used in a wide sense and sometimes with a narrower meaning. It may be taken either for the whole dispensation and promulgation of the commandments, moral, judicial and ceremonial; or it may be employed more strictly for that part which is called the moral Law, together with the preface and the promises which are added to it; or it may be understood most strictly of all for that which consists in mere commandments, without any promise whatever. Most of the views which are held about the difference between the Law and the Gospel take the word Law in this last and strictest sense. But it is clear that if all the commandments and threatenings scattered up and down in the Scripture are taken to be properly the Law, and if all the gracious promises, wheresoever they are found, are then taken to be the Gospel, it will not be surprising that many hard things are said about the Law.

It has been customary to divide the body of the Mosaic laws into moral, ceremonial and judicial respectively, and though questions have been raised about this division, they are not of particular consequence, and the grouping may be safely accepted. The portion of the Law of God with which the present study is concerned is the moral Law.

Not all the questions are answered, however, by the elimination of these other aspects of the Law of Moses, for the word "moral" has itself been used in a variety of senses. These different meanings have, in turn, provoked a number of further problems, not only in the exposition of the Law, but also in other aspects of Christian doctrine. The question demanding an answer therefore is what it is that makes a law moral. Although there is nothing in the connotation of the term to imply an obligation that is permanent, yet this is the meaning which belongs to the idea of moral Law; and it is this permanence of obligation which distinguishes that which is moral from those other obligations which are in other categories.

It is widely assumed that the Law of nature and the moral Law are identical; but this is a mistake, for there are at least two important differences between them. First of all, the moral Law given by God brings about a new obligation from the fact that it is formally commanded. Thus, although the substance of the Law of Nature and of the moral Law agree in many things, yet the man who breaks the Ten Commandments in their promulgated form is guilty of sinning more heinously than the man who has never received them. Secondly, although the moral Law requires many things which are also contained in the Law of nature, it also has far more in it than ever could be in that earlier Law. An example of this is to be found in the confession of Paul that he had not known lust to be sin unless the Law had said so, although he had the Law of nature to convince him of sin.

The moral Law was given to the people of Israel when they were in the wilderness at Mount Sinai, and there may perhaps be two reasons why at this time, rather than sooner or later, God gave this Law. The first reason was that the people of Israel had fallen into idolatry, and so the Law was given in order to restrain their idolatry and suppress their rebellion. This would appear to be the meaning of the statement that the law "was added because of transgressions" (Galatians iii. 19). The other, and perhaps the most important, reason why God gave the Law at this time, rather than another, was that the Israelites were now becoming a nation. They were about to enter into Canaan and to develop a settled life, so God made laws for them; for He was their King in a special manner, insomuch that all their laws, even political, were Divine.

It is a mistake to think of the moral Law as something new, for it is as original as the natural Law. The moral Law existed long before the administration of it by Moses. Murder was a sin from the very beginning, as appears by God's words to Cain; indeed, so also was the very anger itself that precedes murder. Men, therefore, were never without the Law, nor ever shall be, and there is a sense in which it may truly be said that the Decalogue belongs to Adam, to Noah, to Abraham, to Christ, to the Apostles, as well as to Moses. As has been noticed above, there was, of course, a historical reason why in the time of Moses there should be a special promulgation and solemn repetition of it, but even so the Law was perpetually heard among men even from the very beginning. This consideration will greatly contribute to a right estimate of the worth of the Law, it being the constant instrument of God for the definition of man's duty, for conviction of sin and for exhortation to holiness. To reject the use of the Law, therefore, is to reject the universal way of God in both the Old and the New Testaments.

The gift of the Law to Israel was an act of God's infinite mercy and grace. In the addresses of Moses to the people (Deuteronomy vii. and ix.), God impresses on the Israelites the greatness of His love in giving them His commandments. He emphasises again and again that it was not for their sakes, or because of any merit in them, but purely because He loved them. The psalmist takes up this goodness of God in the giving of the Law by saying, "He hath not dealt so with any nation" (Psalm cxlvii. 20), and Hosea likewise stresses this mercy in the words, "I have written to him the great things of my law" (Hosea viii. 12). All the benefits that psalmists and prophets regard as coming by the Law of God are thus to be traced back to the grace and mercy of God in

giving the Law, and it is evidence of a deep misconception of God's ways when the Law of God is deprecated in any manner at all.

There is no disputing that, in the Gospel, God has granted greater expressions of His love to man, but this does not mean any diminishing of the grace that is in the Law. The Law belongs to believers in the present for the same evangelical ends as it was originally given to the Israelites. Not one commandment can be read in its spiritual meaning — which is its true meaning — without finding some cause to praise God. It is not enough, therefore, that the believer should not despise or neglect the Law: he must rather thank God that His Law is read and expounded. Well may the godly man delight to have that purity commanded which will make him loathe himself, which will make him prize Christ and grace the more, and which will be a quick goad to all holiness. Besides all this, it is false thinking even to contemplate a severance of the Law from the Gospel, for when taken together they mutually put a fresh relish and taste upon each other.

A consideration of the majestic accompaniments of the promulgation of the moral Law will serve to exhibit its outstanding dignity. These accompaniments reveal that God put great glory on it; and although the New Testament points out that the Gospel ministration of grace is to be esteemed more highly than the Mosaic ministration of it, yet absolutely and in itself, the Law was greatly honoured by God. It would be right to conclude that God gave the Law in this solemn and impressive manner in order that its authority and majesty might be the more readily recognised. This dignity belongs peculiarly to the moral Law, in distinction from the judicial and ceremonial; for although the judicial and ceremonial Laws were given at the same time as the moral Law, there is nevertheless a great difference between them. It is recognised, of course, that these three kinds of laws agree in many particulars. They agree in their common efficient cause, which was God; they agree in the minister or mediator, who was Moses; they agree in the subject, which was the people of Israel; they agree also in their common effects, which were to bind the people to obedience and to punish those who offended. But the moral Law is pre-eminent, and this is seen firstly, in that it is the foundation of the other Laws, and they are reduceable to it; secondly, in that it is to abide always, whereas the others were not; and thirdly, in that the moral Law is distinguished from the others in having been written by God, and in the command that it should be kept in the ark.

Exception is sometimes taken to the relevance of any discussion about the Law given by Moses, and it is asked: Is the Christian a Jew? Does the Law of Moses belong to believers? Has not Christ abolished the Law? Is not Moses, with his ministry, now at an end? These are questions that are often raised, and so it is worth enquiring whether the Ten Commandments as given by Moses belong now to Christians or not.

It is needful, first of all, to investigate the sense in which it is said that the Law binds the believer in its Mosaic form. This is sometimes understood to mean that the Law binds because of Moses, so that whatever belongs to the Mosaic administration belongs also to the Christian. But such a view is false and is quite contrary to the whole current of

Scripture; for then not only the moral Law, but also the ceremonial, would bind the Christian. Another way of understanding the relation to Moses is to say that it is purely on account of his having been the inspired writer. This, of course, cannot well be denied by any who hold that the Old Testament belongs to Christians; for why should not the books of Moses belong to them, as well as the books of the prophets? But there is a further way of understanding this relation of the believer to the Law of Moses. When God gave the Ten Commandments by Moses to the people of Israel, though they were the people to whom He then spoke, yet He intended the obligation to keep these commandments to fall not only upon the Israelites, but also upon all other peoples who in due time would be brought to a knowledge of Himself. The proper state of the question, then, is not whether Moses was a minister to Christians as well as to Israel (for that is clearly incorrect), but whether, when God delivered the Ten Commandments by the hand of Moses, He had in mind only the Israelites, or whether all other true worshippers of God were foreseen as included within their authority. This latter alternative is the true one, and at the same time defines the sense in which the Law binds the believer in its Mosaic form.

That this may be made more clear, it must be observed that the moral Law binds in two ways. It binds, first of all, in respect of its substance. To the extent that much of this substance is found also in the Law of Nature it applies universally, and so was binding on the Israelites even before the promulgation of it on Mount Sinai. Secondly, it binds in respect of the authority and command which are put upon it; for when a Law is promulgated by a proclamation, then an additional obligation comes upon it. Thus when Moses as the servant of God delivered this Law to Israel he thereby brought a further obligation upon them. The main question to be answered, however, is whether this obligation was temporary or perpetual.

The chief problem is that of the perpetuity of the Mosaic Law, and some light is given on this by the fact of the revocation of that part of the Mosaic Law which was purely ceremonial. It is obvious that the obligatoriness of this ceremonial Law would not have ceased unless the Law itself had been revoked; and so, by the same argument, the moral Law given by Moses must still be binding unless it can be shown that it is repealed.

Further, the ceremonial Law ceased, because it contained but the shadows of the real, and when Christ came there was no longer any need for the shadows; similarly, the judicial Law ceased, because when the state of Israel came to an end there was no more reason for the Laws. These Laws became obsolete by their very nature. No such thing can be affirmed about the moral Law, however, for the substance of that is perpetual, and there are no places of Scripture which abrogate it.

The perpetuity of the Mosaic Law can be demonstrated by a number of arguments, the first of which is an answer to an objection raised in connection with the abolition of the ceremonial Law. It was the apostolic opinion that, if the forms of ceremonial worship were necessary for justification, this would, in effect, either exclude Christ altogether, or join Him together with the ceremonial Law. (See Acts xv. 5,10,19,20,24,28,29.) It is true

that when the apostles demolish this error they quite clearly show, not only that the works of the ceremonial Law have no power to justify, but also that the works of the moral Law are equally unable to do this; but in acknowledging this fact, it must be remembered that when the apostles bring the moral Law into the dispute, they do it only in respect of justification, and not in respect of obligation.

The second argument for the perpetuity of the Mosaic Law is from the fact that the Scripture urges the obligation of the moral Law upon converted Gentiles, and that this obligation is said to have come down to them from their fathers, thus looking upon Israelites and believing Gentiles as one people. When Paul writes to the Romans he tells them that, "Love is the fulfilling of the Law" (Romans xiii. 8,9); and thereupon sums up the commandments which were given by Moses. Similarly, when he writes to the Gentile Ephesians, he urges children to honour their father and mother because it is the first commandment with promise: a commandment, of course, which was entirely Mosaic in its source (Ephesians vi. 2). This is further evident from the epistle of James, which is to converted Gentiles as well as to Jews. The words, "If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture" (James ii. 8), are an allusion, of course, to the Law of Moses, where the second table contains love to one's neighbour; and in the words, "He that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill" (James ii. 11), the argument is drawn, not from the substance of the Law, but from its Author, the God who spoke by Moses. The reason why these commandments extend to the believing Gentiles is that the Jews and believing Gentiles are looked upon as one people. (See I Corinthians x. 1-2.)

The third argument is from the obligation upon the Christian to keep the Sabbath day, an argument that seems completely to confirm that the moral Law given by Moses is binding upon Christians. If the Sabbath day is a perpetual ordinance, and it is based upon the fourth commandment, it cannot fail to be seen that the commandments, as given by Moses, are binding upon believers. The distinction sometimes advanced concerning laws that bind "by reason of the matter" and laws that bind "by reason of the ministry" will not hold in this instance; for the seventh day cannot bind from the matter of it, there being nothing in nature why the seventh rather than the fifth should oblige, but only from the mere command of God for that day. If the Law of Moses is disregarded in this respect, then, of course the inference has to be made that Christians keep the Sabbath day on New Testament grounds alone, and not at all from the fourth commandment. This, however, is at variance with the general consensus of Christian thought, for all churches have honoured the moral Law, together with its Preface, and have it in their catechisms. It is not difficult, therefore, to see that the distinction which affirms that the moral Law binds as the Law of Nature, but not as the Law of Moses, is untenable; for the Sabbath Law, as it stands, cannot arise from the Law of Nature, but has its morality and perpetuity from the mere positive commandment of God.

The fourth argument is from reason, namely, that it is incongruous to have a temporary obligation upon a perpetual duty. It is wholly improbable that God, when giving the Law by Moses, should have intended that Law to be only temporary in its obligation, when the subject matter is in itself perpetual. It is not a very reasonable supposition that the

true effect of the commandments should read, “You shall have no other gods until after the time of Moses”, or, “You shall not murder or commit adultery while his ministry lasts, and then that obligation must cease and a new obligation come upon you”. Why should it be thought that, when the substance of the Law is necessary and perpetual, God would alter and change the nature of the obligation? Indeed, it is impossible to give even a remotely probable reason for any such alteration.

The fifth argument for the perpetuity of the authority of the moral Law is that if the Law by the hand of Moses does not bind the believer, then the later books of the Old Testament do not belong to him either, for they are basically — especially in their moral teaching — nothing but expositions of the moral Law. The rejection of the authority of the Mosaic Law would carry with it the rejection of the entire Old Testament.

There can be no flight from the claims of the moral Law. Its demands belong to the very constitution of man as man, and are heightened by the mercy of God that has reiterated His holy Law for the salvation of sinners.

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