

The Law and the Gospel Part II

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(1748-1827)

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John Colquhoun was one of the greatest of Scottish preachers and writers. His works, including this present title, are: *A Treatise on the Covenant of Grace*, *A Catechism for the Instruction and Direction of Young Communicants*, *A View of Saving Faith*, *A Collection of the Promises of the Gospel*, *A View of Evangelical Repentance*, *Spiritual Comfort*, and a collection of sermons entitled *Sermons Chiefly on Doctrinal Subjects*.

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The Law of God, or the Moral Law in General

Section 2. The law as given under the form of the covenant of works to Adam

The law of creation, or the Ten Commandments, was, in the form of a covenant of works, given to the first Adam after he had been put into the garden of Eden. It was given him as the first parent and the federal representative of all his posterity by ordinary generation. An express threatening of death, and a gracious promise of life, annexed to the law of creation, made it to Adam a covenant of works proposed; and his consent, which he as a sinless creature could not refuse, made it a covenant of works accepted. As formed into a covenant of works, it is called by the Apostle Paul “the law of works” (Romans 3:27), that is, the law as a covenant of works. It requires works or perfect obedience on pain of death, spiritual, temporal, and eternal; and it promises to the man who performs perfect and personal obedience life, spiritual, temporal, and eternal. In the law, under the form of a covenant of works, then, three things are presented to our consideration: a precept, a promise, and a penal sanction.

1. A precept requiring perfect, personal, and perpetual obedience as the condition of eternal life. The law of creation requires man to perform perfect obedience, and says, “Do.” But the law as a covenant of works requires him to “do and live” — to do, as the condition of life; to do, in order to acquire by his obedience a title to life eternal. The command to perform perfect obedience merely is not the covenant of works; for man was and is immutably and eternally bound to yield perfect obedience to the law of

creation, though a covenant of works had never been made with him. But the form of the command in the covenant of works is perfect obedience as the condition of life. The law in this form comprised not only all the commandments peculiar to it as the law of nature, but also a positive precept which depended entirely on the will of God. "The Lord God commanded the man, saying, `Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17). This positive precept was, in effect, a summary of all the commands of the natural or moral law: obedience to it included obedience to them all, and disobedience to it was a transgression of them all at once. The covenant of works, accordingly, could not have been broken otherwise than by transgressing that positive precept. The command requiring perfect obedience as the condition of life bound Adam, and all his natural posterity in him, not only by the authority of God his sovereign Lord and Creator, but by his own voluntary consent, to perform that obedience.

The natural law, given in the form of a covenant of works, to Adam and all his natural descendants, required them to believe whatever the Lord should reveal or promise, and to do whatever He should command. All divine precepts, therefore, are virtually and really comprehended in it. "The law of the Lord is perfect" (Psalm 19:7). But if any instance of duty owed by man to God, in any age of the church, were not either directly or indirectly commanded in it, it would not be a perfect law. But since it is perfect, all duties and, among others, the duties of believing and repenting of sin are virtually commanded in it; they are required in its first commandment (see the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question 104). Adam, it is true, was not actually obliged by it to believe in a Redeemer till, after he had sinned, a Redeemer was revealed to him. But the same command that required him to believe and trust the promise of God his Creator required him also to believe in God his Redeemer as soon as He should be revealed and offered to him. Nor was Adam required to repent of sin before sin was committed. But the same law that obliged him to abhor, watch against, and abstain from all appearance of evil bound him also to bewail and forsake sin whenever he found that he was guilty of it. Since the holy law is a perfect rule of all internal as well as external obedience, it cannot but require faith and repentance as well as all other duties. Without them, no other performances can please God (Hebrews 11:6). Our blessed Lord informs us that faith is one of "the weightier matters of the law" (Matthew 23:23), and the Apostle Paul says that "whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). Unbelief, which is a departing from the living God, is evidently forbidden in the first commandment of the law. Faith, then, as I said already, is required in the same command (Isaiah 26:4 and 1 John 3:23). And with regard to repentance, though neither the covenant of works nor of grace admits of it as any atonement for sin or any ground of title to life, yet on the supposition that sin has been committed it is a duty enjoined in the first and, indeed, in every other precept of the moral law.

Although the law in its covenant form requires of all who are under it since the fall perfect obedience as the condition of life, and full satisfaction for sin in their own persons; and at the same time, upon the revelation and offer of Christ in the gospel as Jehovah our Righteousness, commands them to believe in Him as such; yet, as is the

case in various other instances of duty, it requires the one of these only on supposition that the other is not performed. The law as a covenant of works requires that all who are under it present to it, as the conditions of eternal life, perfect obedience and complete satisfaction for sin, either in their own persons or in that of a responsible surety. So long then as a sinner, unwilling to be convinced of his sin and his want of righteousness, cleaves to the law as a covenant, and refuses to accept and present in the hand of faith the spotless righteousness of the adorable Surety, that sinner continues “a debtor to do the whole law” (Galatians 5:3). He keeps himself under an obligation to do, in his own person, all that the law in that form requires, and also to suffer all that it threatens. The righteous law, accordingly, goes on to use him as he deserves. It continues to proceed against him without the smallest abatement of its high demands, requiring of him the complete payment of his debt both of perfect obedience and of infinite satisfaction for his disobedience. As it accepts no obedience but that which is absolutely perfect or fully answerable to all its demands (Galatians 3:10-11), so the acceptance of a man’s person as righteous according to it will depend on the acceptance of his obedience (Matthew 5:18; Romans 10:5).

In consequence of God’s having proposed the law in its covenant form to Adam, and of Adam’s having, as the representative of all his natural descendants, consented to it, all the children of men, while they continue in their natural state, remain firmly, in the sight of God, under the whole original obligation of it — even those who, as members of the visible church, are under an external dispensation of the covenant of grace remain under all its obligation (Romans 9:31-32). For though the law in its covenant form is broken, yet it is far from being repealed or set aside. The obligation of this covenant continues in all its force, in time and through eternity, upon every sinner who is not released from it by God, the other party. The awful consequence is that every unregenerate sinner is bound at once to perform perfect obedience, and also to endure the full execution of the penal sanction. The preceptive part of that divine contract continues to bind, both by its original authority and by man’s consent to it; which consent is no more his to recall, unless he is freed from his obligation by the other contracting party. And now that the curse of the covenant has, in consequence of transgression, become absolute, it binds as strongly as even the precept.

The law, then, as a covenant of works, demands in the most authoritative manner, from every descendant of Adam who is under it, perfect holiness of nature, perfect righteousness of life, and complete satisfaction for sin. And none of the race of fallen Adam can ever enter heaven unless he either answers these three demands perfectly in his own person, or accepts by faith the consummate righteousness of the second Adam, who “is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth” (Romans 10:4).

2. In the law as a covenant of works there is also a promise, a gracious promise of the continuance of spiritual and temporal life and, in due time, of eternal life. This promise, which flowed solely from infinite benignity and condescension in God, was made, and was to have been fulfilled, to Adam and all his natural posterity, on condition that he as their representative perfectly obeyed the precept. That a promise of life was made to the

first Adam, and to all his natural descendants in him, on condition of his perfect obedience during the time of his probation is evident; for the Lord Jesus said, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:17). Again, "This do and thou shalt live" (Luke 10:28). The Apostle Paul also says, "Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, that the man which doeth those things shall live by them" (Romans 10:5). The promise of life to Adam as the representative of his posterity was implied in the threatening of death. When the Lord said to him, "In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17), it implied, "If thou eat not of it, thou shalt surely live." Besides, the tree of life, which was one of the seals of that covenant, serves to evince the same thing. It sealed the promise of life to Adam as long as he continued to perform perfect obedience.

It is evident that the infinitely great and sovereign Creator could be under no obligations to man, the creature of His power, but such as arose from the wisdom, goodness, and faithfulness of His own nature. It was therefore free to Him whether He would still, by absolute authority, command man to obey Him, or enter into a covenant with man for that purpose; whether after perfect obedience to His law He would give man eternal life or annihilate him; and whether, if it should please Him to give it, He would bestow it on condition of man's obedience, or make a free grant of it to him, and confirm him in the eternal enjoyment of it, as He has done elect angels. It depended solely upon the will of God whether there would be a covenant at all containing a promise of eternal life to man, and, if a promise of it, whether that promise would be absolute or conditional. The promise of eternal life upon man's perfect obedience, then, flowed entirely from the good pleasure and free grace of God. Had Adam fulfilled the condition of life in the first covenant, the Lord, instead of having been a debtor to him for his obedience, would have been a debtor only to His own grace and faithfulness in the promise. It is manifest, then, that there could have been no real merit in the perfect obedience of man, nor so much as the smallest proportion between it and the promised reward. If Adam had performed the condition of that covenant, he could not have expected eternal life upon any ground except this: that God had graciously promised it on that condition.

The peculiar form of the covenant of works, or that which distinguishes it from every other contract, does not consist in the connection between the precept and the promise; but, in the manner of that connection. Obedience to the precept is made to give a contractual title to the life promised. Eternal life is made so to depend on personal and perfect obedience, that without this obedience, that life cannot be obtained; it cannot be claimed on any other ground. But if the obedience be performed, the life promised becomes due, in virtue of the covenant. This being the manner of the connection, between the precept and the promise, of the first covenant; when this covenant was broken, that connection was as far as ever, from being dissolved. Eternal life, according to the covenant, will still follow upon perfect, personal, and continual obedience. It still continues true, "That the man who doeth those things shall live by them." But since no such thing as perfect obedience, is to be found now, among any of the sons of men; no man can have a title to life, according to the promise of that covenant. Thus, the law has become weak, not by any change in itself; but be-cause men have not yielded perfect

obedience to it. The reason why it cannot now justify a man in the sight of God or satisfy him with eternal life is because he cannot satisfy it with personal and perfect obedience.

Although eternal life was, in the covenant of works, promised to Adam and his posterity on condition of his perfect obedience, and that only, yet a man is to be counted a legalist or self-righteous if, while he does not pretend that his obedience is perfect, he yet relies on it for a title to life. Self-righteous men have, in all ages, set aside as impossible to be fulfilled by them that condition of the covenant of works which God had imposed on Adam, and have framed for themselves various models of that covenant which, though they are far from being institutions of God, and stand upon terms lower than perfect obedience, yet are of the nature of the covenant of works. The unbelieving Jews who sought righteousness by the works of the law were not so very ignorant or presumptuous as to pretend to perfect obedience. Neither did those professed Christians in Galatia who desired to be under the law, and to be justified by the law, of whom the apostle therefore testified that they had “fallen from grace” (Galatians 5:4), presume to plead that they could yield perfect obedience. On the contrary, their public profession of Christianity showed that they had some sense of their need of Christ’s righteousness. But their great error was that they did not believe that the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone was sufficient to entitle them to the justification of life; and therefore they depended for justification partly on their own obedience to the moral and ceremonial law. It was this, and not their pretensions to perfect obedience, that the apostle had in view when he blamed them for cleaving to the law of works, and for expecting justification by the works of the law. By relying for justification partly on their own works of obedience to the moral and ceremonial laws, they, as the apostle informed them, were fallen from grace; Christ had become of no effect to them. And they were “debtors to do the whole law” (Galatians 5:3-4). By depending for justification partly on their imperfect obedience to the law, they framed the law into a covenant of works, and such a covenant of works as would allow for imperfect instead of perfect works; and by relying partly on the righteousness of Christ, they mingled the law with the gospel and works with faith in the affair of justification. Thus they perverted both the law and the gospel, and formed them for themselves into a motley covenant of works.

The great design of our apostle, then, was to draw them off from their false views of the law; to direct them to right conceptions of it in its covenant form in which it can admit of no personal obedience as a condition of life, but such as is perfect — and so to destroy their legal hope as well as to confute their wrong notions. By the reasonings of the apostle upon this subject, it is manifest that every evangelical, as well as every legal, work of ours is excluded from forming even the smallest part of a man’s righteousness for justification in the sight of God. It is evident that even faith itself as a man’s act or work, and so comprised in the works of the law, is thereby excluded from being any part of his justifying righteousness (see the *Confession of Faith* XI:1). It is one thing to be justified by faith merely as an instrument by which a man receives the righteousness of Christ, and another to be justified for faith as an act or work of the law. If a sinner, then, relies on his actings of faith or works of obedience to any of the commands of the law for a title to eternal life, he seeks to be justified by the works of the law as much as if his works were perfect. If he depends, either in whole or in part, on his faith and repentance

for a right to any promised blessing, he thereby so annexes that promise to the commands to believe and repent as to form them for himself into a covenant of works. Building his confidence before God upon his faith, repentance, and other acts of obedience to the law, he places them in Christ's stead as his grounds of right to the promise; and so he demonstrates himself to be of the works of the law, and so to be under the curse (Galatians 3:10).

3. Last, in the law as a covenant of works, there is moreover a penal sanction, an express threatening of death: spiritual, temporal and eternal. This dreadful threatening was annexed to the positive precept not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as comprehending all the precepts of the natural or moral law. "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of that: for in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17). "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4). Seeing the natural law was promulgated to Adam — who though a holy creature was yet a mutable creature, and liable to fall away from God — not only was a promise of eternal life in case of obedience, but a threatening of eternal death in case of disobedience, added to it. Thus it was turned into a covenant or law of works, of which the law of the Ten Commandments was, and is still, the matter. Accordingly, in its covenant form, it not only says to every man who is under it, "Do this and live," but, "Do this or die; do this on pain of death in all its dreadful extent." This law of works has a twofold power: a power to justify persons if they yield perfect obedience, and a power to condemn them if in the smallest instance they disobey. It said to Adam, and it says to every descendant of Adam, "If you offend but in one instance, dying you shall die." It is to every sinner the ministration of condemnation and of death. That awful sanction is founded in the justice of God, and is as much according to His mind and will as the precept of the law itself. His mind and will are unchangeable; consequently, no sooner did man become a sinner than he became subject to the first and the second death which divine justice and faithfulness were bound to see inflicted upon him. One single transgression has forever cut him off from all possibility of attaining life by the law. And since all have sinned, consequently, "by the works of the law shall no flesh living be justified." The law of works has pronounced all the race of Adam guilty, has condemned them to eternal punishment, and has not made the smallest provision for their deliverance.

That penal sanction annexed to the law of the covenant was most reasonable. There were indeed many other motives which might have induced Adam to continue obedient, but as he was naturally a mutable creature, and as yet was only in a state of probation, his Creator had sufficient reason to be jealous of him. The Lord, therefore, in order to guard His grace and condescension from being despised and trampled on, annexed such a penalty to His righteous law as, if duly considered, should serve to terrify man from violating His gracious covenant. Death, especially spiritual and eternal death, could not but appear to Adam, whose knowledge and holiness were perfect, to be of all objects the most horrible. Nothing could appear better calculated to deter him from transgressing the covenant than the awful consideration that, as he was already bound by the precept to perform perfect obedience, so he should, if he disobeyed, be as firmly bound by the curse to suffer endless punishment. Besides, the punishment of death in

all its dreadful extent and duration is no more than the smallest sin against the infinite Majesty of heaven justly deserves. It is due to the sinner; and immutable justice requires that every man should have all that is due to him. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

It is evident, then, that the promise of life in case of obedience, and the denunciation of death in the event of disobedience, annexed to the law of creation, made it to Adam a covenant of works proposed. Nothing further was necessary to complete this covenant with him, as the head and representative of his natural posterity, than his consent to each of those articles. Since he was created in the image of God, he could not but discern clearly the equity and advantage of that divine covenant, and so approve and consent to it. His consenting to it, accordingly, is hinted in these words of Eve to the serpent: "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, `Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die'" (Genesis 3:2-3). Adam then consented to the precept, promise, and threatening of the first covenant. And in his consent to it, as well as in God's approbation of the tenor of it, the formal obligation of it consisted; so far as that was added to the previous obligations under which he lay, by the law of creation. In consenting to the precept, he bound himself to perfect obedience as the condition of eternal life to himself and his posterity, as well as to believe whatever God should afterwards reveal, and to do whatever He should command. By consenting to the promise, he agreed that he would have eternal life on no other condition than that of personal and perfect obedience; and that he would never have eternal life unless he performed and persevered in such obedience. In consenting to the threatening in case of disobedience, he bound himself to renounce, in that event, all his pretensions to life by that covenant; and he obliged himself to suffer the full execution of the penalty denounced. By thus approving of and consenting to that proposed contract, the form of it was completed; and the obligations of it became so firm that the one contracting party could not retract without the consent of the other.

Since Adam, in consenting to the penal sanction of the first covenant, bound himself and his natural posterity never to have eternal life but on condition of his perfect obedience; and since he failed in this obedience, and so fell with all his natural descendants under the begun execution of the penalty, no sinner under that broken covenant is bound by it to seek eternal life by his own performances. The penalty of the covenant to which Adam, as the representative of his posterity, consented is by his transgression now become absolute; the penalty binds the unregenerate sinner as firmly as does the precept itself. Instead, then, of obliging him to seek eternal life for his obedience, it binds him to suffer eternal death for his disobedience. His consent in the first Adam to the penalty, he is not at liberty to recall unless he is released by God, the other contracting party. He is therefore as firmly bound, according to the constitution of the covenant, to endure the full execution of the penalty, unless God Himself delivers him from it, as to yield perfect obedience to the command. The curse of the law is so bound upon him that it would be a second breach of the covenant, to seek to elude the execution of it, so long as he desires to continue under that covenant. But to seek eternal life by his own righteousness is to try to elude that execution. No obligation

therefore lies on a sinner under the covenant of works to seek eternal life for his own obedience: on the contrary, it is utterly unlawful for him to attempt this. That very contract which afforded man, while innocent, a prospect of life, now that he is guilty debars him from all expectation of it. The covenant of works left innocent man at liberty to expect life upon his perfect obedience, but did not oblige him to seek it on that ground, but only on the ground of the faithfulness of God in the promise in which He graciously annexed eternal life to perfect obedience (Matthew 19:16-17). And if it did not oblige innocent man to seek life on the ground even of perfect obedience, how can it bind guilty man to seek it on the account of imperfect obedience? The law as a covenant, indeed, leaves the sinner at liberty, nay, it commands him to receive the righteousness of the second Adam offered to him in the gospel, and to seek as well as to expect eternal life on the ground of this consummate righteousness. But so long as he continues to reject this righteousness the law continues its obligation on him, both to perform perfect obedience and to suffer the infinite execution of the curse. The connection established by the covenant between perfect obedience and life, and between the smallest instance of disobedience and death, is immutable and eternal. And therefore no sinner can otherwise be delivered from the bond of that covenant than by receiving and presenting to the law of it the perfect and glorious righteousness of the second Adam, which answers fully all its high demands (Romans 10:4 and 7:6). If he labors to escape the death threatened, and to procure the life promised in it, by his own righteousness, his labor is to no purpose but to increase his guilt and aggravate his condemnation (Romans 9:30-32).

Before I conclude this section, it may be proper to remark that the moral law, in the revelation which is given of it in Scripture, is almost constantly set forth to us in its covenant form as proposed to the first Adam. And it appears that the infinitely wise and holy Lord God has left it on record in that form in order that sinners of mankind might be convinced by it not only of their sinfulness and misery under the dominion of it, but of the utter impossibility of their ever obtaining justification and eternal life by any righteousness of their own (Romans 3:20).

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