

Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson 4

The Normative Perspective:
Parts & Aspects of Scripture

Manuscript



thirdmill

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INTRODUCTION

A friend of mine recently bought a bicycle for his son. The bicycle required some assembly — things like attaching the wheels and pedals. But there weren't any instructions for assembling the bicycle. Now, my friend knew what a bicycle should look like and how it should work, so he was still able to put it together. But imagine what would have happened if he had never seen a bicycle before. In that case, he might not have been able to assemble it properly.

In some ways, the Bible is like a box of bicycle parts without instructions. Just as it is relatively easy to put together things that are familiar, it is also relatively easy to discover some basic things about the Bible's meaning and proper use. On the other hand, just as it is difficult to put together complicated devices without instructions, it is hard to apply the Bible to complicated ethical questions when we do not understand Scripture's finer workings.

This is the fourth lesson in our series, *Making Biblical Decisions*, and we've entitled it "The Normative Perspective: Parts and Aspects of Scripture." As we've stated throughout these lessons, ethical judgment always involves:

the application of God's Word to a situation by a person

This definition has led us to speak of three essential considerations in making biblical decisions: the proper standard of God's word, which we've associated with the normative perspective on ethics; the proper goal, which accords with the situational perspective; and the proper motive, which corresponds to the existential perspective.

In this lesson, we'll look again at the normative perspective, exploring the process by which we discern ethical standards in the Bible. We'll focus our attention on the different ways the various parts and aspects of Scripture communicate God's norms to us.

As we discuss the parts and aspects of Scripture, we'll consider first the variety of materials we find in Scripture. Second, we'll look more closely at the books and passages that comprise God's law in Scripture. And third, we'll address the unity of Scripture that draws all of the parts and aspects of the Bible together. Let's begin with the variety we find in Scripture.

VARIETY

Anyone who has read much of the Bible should recognize that Scripture is not uniform. It contains histories, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, correspondence, and all sorts of other writings. And within each of these writings, we find even further variety. After all,

each author wrote in his own way, and his writing itself varied throughout his work. Sometimes he gave commands; sometimes he explained details; sometimes he recalled a personal experience. And this variety is not accidental — God has ordained each portion of the Bible to contribute in its own way to the standards of Christian ethics. Now, because Scripture communicates in so many different ways, it is not sufficient for us simply to know what the Bible says. We also need to know how the Bible communicates, so that when we read what it says, we understand what it means.

The variety we find in Scripture can be described in many different ways, and no single way is comprehensive. But for our purposes in this lesson, we'll touch on three matters: First, we'll speak of the variety of language employed in the Bible. Second, we'll speak of the variety of literature in the Bible. And third, we'll look at the implications of this variety for modern ethical teaching. We'll begin by looking at matters related to the Bible's language.

LANGUAGE

In the first place, the Bible displays the full range of language that we find in all human communication. It contains statements, questions, promises, offers, curses, blessings, threats, judgments, quotations, summations, commands, advice, requests, exclamations, descriptions, cries of despair, expressions of desire and admiration and love, and much, much more. Biblical language can be emotionally reserved or emotionally charged. Some of it is quite imaginative, using symbolism and other figures of speech, while other language is relatively unimaginative, expressing matters in a more direct manner. The Bible includes both sarcasm and sincere language. It employs innuendos and allusions as freely as it provides explicit comments. It uses hyperboles and understatements and colloquialisms. And many times, it doesn't even bother to state the obvious, but instead merely assumes it.

This tremendous variety of language presents us with a number of challenges when we read the Bible. After all, if we don't know how to recognize these different types of language, and if we don't understand how each one communicates, we are very likely to misunderstand the Bible's teachings.

Over the ages, Christians have proposed many ways to deal with the challenges of the Bible's variety of language. Most of these solutions have fallen into one of two categories: the belief that the Bible uses language in extraordinary ways that are unlike normal human communication; and a more accurate understanding that the Bible uses language in ordinary ways. Let's start with the belief that the Bible uses language in extraordinary ways.

Extraordinary

Many Christians assume that Scripture communicates in ways that are radically different from the ways language normally works. Often, these people offer solutions that ignore the different types of language in the Bible. Instead, they oversimplify biblical

language in order to develop a system of interpretation that can be applied relatively equally to all of Scripture.

For example, in the Middle Ages, many theologians believed that because the Bible was inspired by God, it communicated in ways that exceeded human comprehension. In their thinking, every biblical text possessed a variety of symbolic meanings that were sometimes hidden, even from the authors of Scripture. Further, it was thought that these symbolic meanings could only be rightly interpreted by the church. Under this system, every text had at least some metaphoric meaning, regardless of the human authors' intentions.

In the medieval church ... Scripture was to be kept from the commoners because the commoners could only see the superficial meaning. They didn't have the ability, the training, the skill to be able to see the deeper meaning. And if you go back and you look at medieval theology, it had gone a long way into these deep allegorical readings, and there were multiple meanings in every text. But most people couldn't get to the deep ones, and so Scripture was to be kept from everybody else.

— Dr. Tim Sansbury

It was understood there was an original authorial historical meaning, then there was a spiritualized or allegorized meaning, then there was a moral level of interpretation, and then there was an eschatological or heavenly level of interpretation. And interpreters saw it as more skilled for them to develop those other levels of interpretation. They had certain safeguards. They had to be within the bounds of orthodoxy according to their understanding. But what resulted was often — from our perspective — you would read it and you'd say, well, some of your conclusions there on the nature of Christ are right on, but that text doesn't really say anything about that... So even with the Reformation and return to the author's original meaning, they were struggling with these long histories of these texts being used in other ways.

— Dr. Robert L. Plummer

More recently, many who believe that Scripture's language is extraordinary have gone in the opposite direction. Instead of believing that Scripture's extraordinary nature makes it hard to interpret, they insist that this nature makes it *easy* to interpret. Some of these Christians have argued that the Holy Spirit directly reveals true interpretations to his people. And for this reason, it's unnecessary to know what type of language they're reading, let alone how it ordinarily communicates meaning. Others have argued that because Scripture's language doesn't follow the ordinary rules of communication, it should always be interpreted as literally as possible. In this view, metaphoric meanings

are only sought when non-figurative meanings do not make good sense. For example, in ordinary communication, human beings commonly use hyperboles or understatements. But many Christians, even those who are committed to biblical authority, don't acknowledge that these variations appear in the Bible. Instead, they treat every statement in Scripture as if it were straightforward, detached, and precise.

One of the things I will often hear certain Christians say is, "I take the Bible seriously; I take the Bible literally." I think that's good and I understand what's behind that. But the problem is there are certain texts of the Bible that are figurative, and to take Scripture that's figurative seriously, you need to take it figuratively... In John 4, Jesus is speaking to the woman at the well, the Samaritan women, and he says, "I will give you living water." And this woman is confused. "Living water? What are you talking about? You don't have a bucket; the well is deep." It doesn't make sense to her... The audience, is interpreting Jesus literally when he is speaking figuratively. So that's, I think, a classic example of what we're talking about.

— Dr. David T. Lamb

Similarly, in ordinary speech and writing, we often summarize matters, expecting our audiences to fill in the gaps with other knowledge they have. Yet, some Christians find it difficult to acknowledge that inspired writers did the same thing. Instead, they treat passages as if they were utterly comprehensive rather than limited in their scope. Beyond this, in ordinary writing and speech, we're often sarcastic and say just the opposite of what we mean. Yet, many believers find it hard to accept that sarcasm appears in the Bible.

In contrast to the opinion that Scripture's language is extraordinary is the view that the Bible communicates in ordinary language, using all the normal conventions of human communication.

Ordinary

Scripture never states or demonstrates that biblical language is governed by different conventions from normal language. Instead, it demonstrates time and again that it functions according to the conventions of language shared by its authors and their original audiences.

You'll recall that, in a prior lesson, we spoke of the clarity of Scripture. By this, we meant that the Bible is not obscure. It isn't filled with hidden meanings that can only be discovered through mysterious means, or through special spiritual gifting, or by those who hold special offices in the church. In other words, Scripture conveys the message of the gospel by speaking in ordinary language and communicating in normal ways.

To demonstrate that the Bible communicates in ordinary human language, let's

consider a couple of passages where an overly literal reading would be terribly misleading. Think about the petition in Matthew 6:11, which is part of the Lord's Prayer:

Give us this day our daily bread (Matthew 6:11).

When this verse is read in an artificially literal way, apart from the conventions of normal human expressions, it looks like Jesus commanded God to give him bread.

In fact, all the petitions in the Lord's Prayer take the form of imperatives, including "Give us this day our daily bread," "forgive us our debts," and "deliver us from evil." And it's true that in Greek grammar, imperatives are often commands. This fact has led some Christians who read the Bible in an overly literal way to conclude that Jesus' words were commands to God. And since the Lord's Prayer is a model that we are to follow in our own prayers, they've also concluded that we have the right to issue commands to God!

But from the rest of Scripture, including Jesus' own words in the Lord's Prayer, we know that imperative verbs are frequently used to express petitions and requests. The same is often true in other languages. For instance, in English we say, "Pass the bread," or "Help me." These statements are imperatives. But when we say these words, we are not ordinarily issuing commands. Consider also Amos 4:4, where the prophet said this:

Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression (Amos 4:4).

An overly literal reading of these words has led some interpreters to think that Amos actually wanted his listeners to sin against the Lord at the idolatrous worship centers in Bethel and Gilgal. But this kind of reading is unnatural and doesn't account for the prophet's intentions revealed in other statements. For example, in Amos 5:5, the prophet said:

Do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal (Amos 5:5).

From this verse and from the rest of the book of Amos, we should conclude that when the prophet ordered the people to sin at Bethel and Gilgal, he spoke sarcastically. He meant just the opposite of what he said. He didn't want them to sin in these places, but to *stop* sinning in them.

The mechanics of the Bible's language are not unique to Scripture. Instead, the Bible uses the linguistic conventions of its authors and their original audiences. This means that if we're to interpret the Bible responsibly, we have to learn how the authors ordinarily used language, and we have to understand what their intent was when they wrote. If the author designed the words to be understood metaphorically, then we should read them metaphorically and search the text for the meaning the author intended. On the other hand, if the biblical author crafted the words plainly and directly, then our responsibility is to interpret these words in a non-figurative way.

Just as there are many varieties of language in Scripture, there are also many varieties of literature. These are larger, more complex forms than language, and they are somewhat more difficult to master. But understanding them is central to handling the various parts and aspects of Scripture responsibly.

LITERATURE

There are many different forms or genres of literature in Scripture. To name only a few, biblical literature includes: prose, poetry, song, law, narrative, letter, vow, epistle, prophetic oracle, proverb, parable and drama. And within these broader forms, there are often multiple smaller categories. For instance, within the literary form of prophetic oracle, we find oracles of judgment, oracles of blessing, oracles patterned after lawsuits, and so on. These forms are distinguished by their content as well as by their structure, style, and use of language. Moreover, each biblical genre communicates meaning in various ways. So, just as we must be aware of the complexities of language in the Bible, we also need to be aware of the complexities of various literary forms.

Usually when we do ethics, we focus on passages in the Bible that contain laws, or that directly teach moral standards and obligations. And these passages are certainly important to our study of ethics. But we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that the other genres have little or nothing to offer in the way of ethical instruction. For instance, biblical narratives not only describe historical events, but they also communicate ethical rules and regulations. Poetry and songs express ethical concerns. Proverbs and other wisdom writings reflect on ethical values. Prophecy expresses God's ethical judgments in the form of pleasure or displeasure toward human actions. In fact, as we saw in our earlier lessons, every passage in the Bible reveals God's character.

In all of God's Word, we can find God's character behind everything... If we believe that it is from God and see God behind everything, that also reveals God's character, and God's character is revealed in context, in his laws, in his commandments, in his ordinances, in his guidance throughout the Holy Bible. Consequently, when someone reads the Holy Bible from front to back, he is, in reality, engaged in relating, attaching, connecting with God's Word, wherein, certainly he can know God's character.

— Rev. Agus G. Satyaputra translation

So, every passage contains ethical teaching, whether that passage is a legal code, a letter, a poem, a collection of proverbs, a historical narrative, or any other type of literature. For this reason, when we do ethics we need to search all types of biblical literature for their revelations of God's ethical standards.

To illustrate the idea that all genres found in Scripture should guide our ethical reflections, let's consider the case of biblical narratives. Certainly, the biblical writers were interested in recording historical facts. But they were also interested in using those facts to elicit faith and to teach moral lessons.

We'll mention five specific ways in which biblical narratives contribute to our study and practice of Christian ethics.

Factual Content

First, on a very basic level, biblical narratives obligate us to accept their factual content. When we read biblical narratives, we're morally obligated to believe that the details of redemptive history are true. This is especially true when it comes to the central events of the gospel, such as Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, and his sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But it's also true with regard to every other fact Scripture teaches us through historical narratives. The mere presentation of these facts in biblical narratives obligates us to believe them.

Transforming Power

The second reason that biblical narratives are important to Christian ethics is that biblical history has the power to transform us ethically. That is to say, knowing the content of biblical history is part of becoming a Christian. As we saw in an earlier lesson, only good people are capable of doing genuinely good things. And only those who have genuine saving faith in the gospel are good people. Of course, for us to have saving faith in Christ, we must know who Christ is and what he's done. And these are facts we learn from the Bible's historical record. So, knowing some biblical history is necessary if we're to have saving faith in Christ. Therefore, it's fair to say that knowing some biblical history is necessary if we're to behave ethically.

Historical Setting

Third, biblical narratives provide the historical setting for God's laws. To understand the law of God properly, we must understand the historical context in which the law was given. For example, biblical narratives emphasize God's grace as a way to motivate us to obey his law. Even the Ten Commandments begin this way. As we read in Exodus 20:2, God began by saying:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery (Exodus 20:2).

This short historical statement introduced the Ten Commandments and provided a central motivation to obey them — gratitude for God's grace to us. In fact, striving to obey the Ten Commandments without the motivation of gratitude will never lead to true obedience. After all, as we saw in a prior lesson, all good acts must have good motivations.

Whenever you read about the law in the Old Testament, it's already being given in the context of God's gracious condescension to his people. And, in fact, if you read Deuteronomy 6, when the fathers are asked by their children, "What is the meaning of the statutes and the rules that God had given them?" The way the fathers are to respond is to begin by reminding the children of God's gracious and powerful

deliverance of them from Egypt, and after he delivered them, then he brought them and gave them his laws in order that they might be preserved alive. And so, the law is a gracious condescension of God to show us who he is, to reveal his character, and to guide us in the way of blessing.

— Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

Divine Evaluations

Fourth, biblical narratives present divine evaluations of historical events. And because God’s evaluations are always correct, they provide us with firm ethical guidance. In earlier lessons we defined Christian ethics as:

theology viewed as a means of determining which persons, acts and attitudes receive God’s blessing and which do not

So, “good” is that which God blesses, and “evil” is that which he curses or punishes. In biblical narratives, writers illustrated the kinds of actions, thoughts and motivations that God blesses and curses. By doing so, these divine evaluations provided their readers with examples to follow and to reject.

Authorial Comments

Finally, on occasion the authors of biblical history recorded their own ethical comments. Sometimes these comments are subtle, but other times they are quite blatant. For example, in Genesis 13:12-13, Moses made a comment about the people of Sodom in the midst of his narrative:

Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord (Genesis 13:12-13).

Moses’ moral evaluation of Sodom not only called Lot’s wisdom into question, but also anticipated the justice that God would soon bring to the city.

As God’s inspired spokesmen, the authors of biblical historical records commented on the goodness or evil of many of the characters, attitudes, and events in their stories. And because these comments represent the outlooks of God himself, they provide us with many ethical considerations.

What we’ve seen about historical narratives is also true of other types of biblical literature. Every type of biblical literature is normative; every genre teaches us something about the way we should think, act and feel.

Of course, in each type of literature, certain kinds of norms are easier to see than

others. For instance, most people recognize that biblical poetry tells us how we should feel, and describes God's approval and disapproval of our emotional expressions. Biblical prophecy explicitly talks about God's satisfaction or anger with human behavior, revealing good things we can do to gain God's favor and warning against sins that incur his wrath. Wisdom literature clearly calls us to conform our thinking to God's own understandings, emphasizing the blessings that accompany God's viewpoints and the dangers of foolishly disregarding them.

These norms are easy to find in these genres. But with careful study, we can see that every other type of norm can be found in them, too, just as they can be found in every passage in the Bible. Consider Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NIV).

Here, Paul insisted that all Scripture, regardless of literary genre, equips Christians to please God.

Because every passage of Scripture is relevant to ethics, it's legitimate to focus on the moral aspects of any given passage. This is true even if the biblical author didn't specifically emphasize the moral aspects. In short, if we ignore the ethical implications of any portion of Scripture, we cut ourselves off from the full scope of ethical guidance offered in God's revelation.

Now, the fact that Scripture uses so many types of language and literature to teach us about ethics has some interesting implications for the way we teach ethics today. For one thing, Scripture's variety implies that our own teaching of ethics might benefit from using different genres.

IMPLICATIONS

Genres, largely poetry, narrative, law sections — these big-category genres — help us to understand what should we be expecting. It helps us to ask questions of the text. If it's a poetic text we're going to ask different questions than if it's a narrative text. Poetry is often not trying to describe in detail the specifics of how a historical event came to pass. They're often describing in much more figurative language; they use metaphors. So, you interpret these different types of genres in different ways.

— Dr. Jim Jordan

It's true that direct ethical instruction helps us understand many things. But something is also lost when we rely entirely on straightforward instruction. Simple statements often don't touch our emotions in the same way that poetry and narratives do. Plain ethical instructions in Scripture are rarely as moving or memorable to us as the Psalms or the stories about Jesus. The situations explored in typical ethics lectures are

seldom as subtle as those in narratives. And simple statements rarely move us to ponder moral issues the way proverbs do. So, at times, it may be helpful to teach and preach ethics in the various forms of language used by Scripture itself. In some settings, our teachings on ethical decision making will be more effective if we use poetic imagery, stories, proverbs, parables, and other genres that are not usually associated with ethics.

As we think specifically about Christian ethics, we need to remember that all the varieties of language and literature in Scripture are normative. And we also need to pay special attention to the different ways in which each type of language and literature communicates ethical instruction. Only by handling each type appropriately can we properly understand its ethical teachings.

Now that we've introduced how the variety of language and literature in Scripture guides us in our use of the Bible as our moral standard, we should turn our attention to God's law in Scripture — those portions of the Bible that address ethics most explicitly.

GOD'S LAW

In Christian and Jewish traditions, the five books of Moses — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy — are known collectively as “the Law.” But when we speak of God's law in these lessons, we won't be referring primarily to the collective books of Moses, but to those portions of Scripture that are written in the literary form of a legal code. Those portions are found primarily in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, but those books also contain historical narrative, poetry, lists and other portions that are not part of their legal code. Moreover, some portions of the legal code are found outside the books of Moses.

Now, as we've said, God's law is not the only part of Scripture that contains normative ethical instruction. All Scripture is normative. But the law contains the clearest and most explicit expressions of many of God's ethical requirements. So, it has traditionally served well as a starting place for ethical investigation.

Our look into God's law will divide into two sections. First, we'll explain the importance of the Ten Commandments, which are the foundational commandments in God's law. And second, we'll introduce the three different types of God's law that theologians have traditionally recognized. Let's begin by turning our attention to the Ten Commandments.

TEN COMMANDMENTS

The Ten Commandments are listed in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5. Various theological traditions enumerate the commandments differently, but in these lessons, we'll follow the traditional Protestant numbering. The Ten Commandments may be summarized as follows:

- Commandment 1: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

- Commandment 2: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image” or idol.
- Commandment 3: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.”
- Commandment 4: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”
- Commandment 5: “Honor your father and your mother.”
- Commandment 6: “You shall not murder.”
- Commandment 7: “You shall not commit adultery.”
- Commandment 8: “You shall not steal.”
- Commandment 9: “You shall not bear false witness.”
- Commandment 10: “You shall not covet.”

Although some theologians treat the Ten Commandments as if they were just another portion of the Mosaic law, the Bible indicates that the Ten Commandments have a special primacy over Scripture’s other commandments.

The primacy of the Ten Commandments is both historical and theological. Their historical primacy depends on the fact that, to our knowledge, these laws were the first written legal code that was received by the nation of Israel. Paul called special attention to this fact in Galatians 3:17, where he wrote these words:

The law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God (Galatians 3:17).

God’s covenant with Abraham included many explicit and implicit laws. But it wasn’t until Moses that Israel possessed God’s fully codified, written law. Israel received the Ten Commandments through Moses, who himself received the Ten Commandments directly from God on Mount Sinai. By receiving the Ten Commandments, Israel became the first nation to possess an extensive, supernaturally revealed code of God’s holy requirements. Of course, God’s people had many commandments prior to Moses’ time. We see very clearly in the flood of Noah’s day that God had a number of standards that he expected people to follow. And when the people failed to obey, he destroyed the planet with the floodwaters. Moreover, Abraham was not without laws and stipulations to obey. In Genesis 17:1, God gave Abraham the broad and demanding instruction:

Walk before me, and be blameless (Genesis 17:1).

Now, the Ten Commandments were not the only laws God gave to Israel as they camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. But they did serve as the preliminary and summary statement for the other laws that Israel received at that time. These other laws, commonly known as the Book of the Covenant, can be found in Exodus 21–23.

The Book of the Covenant ... comes within the context of the covenant-making of the Lord with the people Israel through Moses as mediator in the whole section of Exodus 19–24. The Book of the Covenant has many parallels to other legal codes that we have in the ancient Near East from the late third millennium down into the second millennium B.C. It differs in the sense that it’s in a covenant

context. Hammurabi’s Code is the most famous of these, the most extensive of these law codes... The way the laws are formulated in the if-then pattern, with the “then” usually giving the civil sanction for the situation, is very similar to how the laws are formulated in Exodus 21:1 through, I think, about 22:16... But in the Book of the Covenant there is no human king, there is only the divine king Yahweh.

— Dr. Douglas Gropp

Together with the Ten Commandments, the Book of the Covenant formed Israel’s initial written legal code. Later, this code was expanded to include many other laws.

In addition to having a historical primacy, the Ten Commandments also had theological or ideological primacy. As we read in Exodus 24:12:

The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction” (Exodus 24:12).

For one thing, unlike the Book of the Covenant that Moses penned according to God’s instructions, God himself wrote the Ten Commandments on stone tablets. Deuteronomy 9:10 confirms that God himself carved the Ten Commandments in the stone tablets. There, Moses stated:

The Lord gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God (Deuteronomy 9:10).

By carving the Ten Commandments himself, God demonstrated that the Ten Commandments were special among his laws, that they deserved special attention and notice. They were, in some sense, the most important of his commandments.

The theological primacy of the Ten Commandments is also indicated by the special occasion on which Israel received them. Thunder and lightning, smoke, clouds and heavenly trumpets attended the giving of the Law. And during this time, God allowed himself to be viewed not only by Moses, but also by Joshua, Aaron, and the seventy elders of Israel.

We also see the Ten Commandments’ theological primacy in Deuteronomy 4:13. Here, Moses identified the Ten Commandments as God’s very covenant with his people:

[God] declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone (Deuteronomy 4:13).

Beyond this, according to Exodus 40:20, The Ten Commandments were also placed within the ark of the covenant, God’s footstool. The ark was the object most closely associated with God’s presence with ancient Israel. The Book of the Covenant and the rest of the laws did not receive this special recognition. And, in Matthew 19:17-19, we read the following discussion between Jesus and a man who asked him how to inherit eternal life:

[Jesus] said ... “If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:17-19).

The laws that Jesus listed were all from the Ten Commandments, except for the instruction on loving neighbors. This last instruction is from Leviticus 19:18. And, as Jesus explained in Matthew 22:40, it summarizes the laws Jesus mentioned from the Ten Commandments.

In short, Jesus indicated that by obeying the Ten Commandments, a person can earn eternal life. Of course, Jesus also taught that no one is good enough to obey these commandments fully. But the point for our discussion is that Jesus confirmed the importance of the Ten Commandments in a very remarkable way. Even in the New Testament, the Ten Commandments were still spoken of in terms that reflected their theological primacy.

The historical and theological primacy that the Bible gives to the Ten Commandments has also been recognized and reflected in Christian and Jewish traditions throughout history. For example, synagogues commonly display symbols of the Ten Commandments. And the two stone tablets of the commandments are extremely common in Christian iconography, as well. Beyond this, the commandments have also been a vital part of Christian liturgy. In short, for many centuries Christian and Jewish traditions have agreed that this portion of God’s law holds a special primacy over Scripture’s other ethical instructions.

Now that we’ve seen the importance and priority that the Scriptures place on the Ten Commandments, we should turn our attention to the three traditional categories or types of law that we find in Scripture.

THREE TYPES

In most Protestant branches of the church, it has been common to categorize the various laws in the Old Testament Bible into three major groups: moral law, ceremonial law, and civil law. Moral laws are typically thought to convey God’s ethical standards. These are usually identified with the Ten Commandments. Ceremonial laws are those which provide instruction for worshiping God. Frequently, these are most closely associated with the Old Testament sacrificial system, and tabernacle and temple administration. And civil laws provide for the governing of society. This was especially true during the period of Israel’s theocracy.

When God gave his law to his covenant people, Israel, he gave a single body of legislation. But when you look at that body of legislation... You have the moral law — the Ten Commandments; you have the ceremonial laws — the laws governing the worship that God called Israel to give to him; and you have what are called the civil laws that address the life of Israel as a body politic, as a commonwealth, and

these address property and theft and murder; the whole range of things that states have to deal with. And God wanted to order the life of his people in a way that would reflect his glory, so he gave them these laws.

— Dr. Guy Waters

These distinctions between the three types of law have played such an important role in the history of the church that we'll look at them more carefully. First, we'll address some important qualifications of the traditional divisions. Second, we'll affirm the value of these divisions. And third, we'll discuss their proper application to the study of ethics. Let's think first about some qualifications of this threefold division.

Qualifications

Although there are many positive things that can be said about the traditional threefold division of the law, categorizing the laws in Scripture isn't without its challenges. In the first place, most biblical scholars rightly note that the three traditional categories are not taught explicitly in the Bible. Nowhere in Scripture do we find any definitive statement that there are distinct types of laws known as moral, ceremonial and civil, let alone instructions explaining which laws belong in which categories. Now, these categories have validity in many ways, but we mustn't think of them as obvious or clear in every respect.

In the second place, Scripture rather plainly presents some laws as belonging to more than one category. For example, in Exodus 20:8-11, the command to observe the Sabbath is explicitly set within the Ten Commandments — the moral law. Yet, the Sabbath commandment can also be categorized as ceremonial law because in Exodus 31:14-16, it's set within a collection of Israel's worship ceremonies.

As another example, the commandment forbidding murder in Exodus 20:13 is one of the Ten Commandments, marking it as a moral law. But the Old Testament also makes it clear that government is to punish murderers, making it a civil matter. So, as we look at the Old Testament laws, we have to recognize that many laws clearly fall into more than one division. In fact, it's safe to say that *all* Old Testament laws had moral, ceremonial and civil aspects.

Think about it this way: No matter what may appear most prominently in a particular text, every law was a standard of morality. And, in one way or another, observances and violations of all laws affected the manner in which the people of Israel participated in the ceremonies of worship. Moreover, every law had a direct or indirect bearing on social relations that were regulated by civil laws. For this reason, it's often better to speak of different "aspects" of laws rather than placing each law into one division of the law.

Despite these qualifications of the three types of law, we should also be aware that the traditional threefold division has substantial value when it comes to understanding how God intended his law to apply to his people.

Value

In the first place, the traditional threefold division helps us see more clearly that the law was God's comprehensive standard for his people's lives. All of life has moral, ceremonial and civil aspects. In ancient Israel, prophets, priests and kings governed these aspects by administering God's law. When we look at the correspondence between the traditional divisions of the law and these offices, we can see that God intended his law to apply to all of life. Moral law corresponds closely to the prophetic office because prophets were primarily concerned with covenant righteousness. Ceremonial law fits well with the priestly office since it pertains directly to functions carried out or supervised by priests. And civil law is closely related to the office of king because the king oversaw the government and public order.

In the second place, this threefold distinction helps us interpret laws the Bible does not fully explain. By grouping similar laws together, theologians are better able to determine the original meaning and application of many laws about which the Bible says very little. After all, when the Bible gives us extensive information about applying one law, but very little about a similar law, it's reasonable to use the insights from the first to inform our understanding of the second.

Now that we've looked at some qualifications of the three types of law, and emphasized their value for understanding Scripture, we should turn our attention to our third concern: the proper application of this traditional threefold division to the study of ethics.

Application

Although many theologians agree on the validity of the traditional categories of Old Testament law, they often disagree on how to apply these categories to the study of ethics. Some have said that whole categories of laws don't apply to modern Christians. In their understanding, the existence of these categories, and the proper identification of laws, provides a mechanism by which they can avoid applying God's Word to their lives. Other theologians have said that all the individual laws still apply, but only with regard to some of their aspects. Still others have argued that the traditional categories simply help us to see how each aspect of each law should be applied in the life of every Christian.

Consider, for example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith's* statement in Chapter 19, section 3:

All ... ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament.

This statement reflects the fact that Christ's death, burial, resurrection and ascension freed us from the specific requirements of the Old Testament ceremonial law.

This means that God's people are no longer to perform many of the behaviors required under the Mosaic sacrificial and temple system. For instance, we are no longer to maintain the temple, or to restrict women and Gentiles from access to God's holy

presence, or to sacrifice animals for our sin.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* makes a similar statement with regard to civil law in Chapter 19, section 4, where it states:

To them also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other, now, further than the general equity thereof may require.

Again, the basic idea here is that the specific requirements of the civil laws no longer apply. They have “expired.” However, unlike ceremonial laws, the Confession allows that the “general equity,” or basic moral principles, of civil laws continue to apply.

We are not, as Christians, to act as if we live in Old Testament days, but we’re never to forget the principles of the ethical instructions of the Old Testament. I mean, think about it this way. When you deal with young children you teach them lessons like, “Don’t go into the road” or “Don’t touch the stove.” But when children become young adults, parents don’t expect their adult children never to go into the road and never to touch a stove. So, we don’t want adult children to go back like they’re little children and act as if they should not touch the stove. In fact, we’ll ask them to cook for us; we’ll ask them to go across the street and to get something for us. But at the same time, we never want our adult children to forget the lessons we taught them when we insisted that they never go in the road and never touch a stove. And something like this is true when it comes to applying Old Testament laws in positive ways to our lives in Christ in the new covenant. Don’t go back to serving God as if you lived before Jesus’ day, but don’t forget the ethical wisdom that God revealed in his law even to his people before Christ came into this world.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Now, it’s true that believers no longer have to behave in many of the ways specified in the Old Testament. And this is especially true with regard to laws that pertain to Old Testament ceremony and civil government. These behaviors have been superseded by the fuller revelation of the New Testament. The civil and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament really have “expired” in the sense that we are not to return to Old Testament patterns of life.

But it’s critical to realize that, in another sense, the Old Testament civil and ceremonial laws still apply to modern Christians, just as the moral laws do. Like the moral laws, the civil and ceremonial laws still guide us as God’s standard today.

In regard to so much of the Mosaic law, it applies inasmuch as it teaches us about the will of God in handling many of the daily life situations and how we are to make decisions. Even the ceremonial law, while we do not practice it anymore, as it looks forward to the

coming of Christ who completes the meaning of the ceremonies, we learn the significance of what is holy and how we are to approach things and how we are to be separate in so many ways and distinct in this world filled with sin... We are not beholden to the civil law. Obviously, the church is not a civil government, but it does teach us how we are to make proper church decisions, how the law was applied even in ancient Israel, that it was a guide in many senses, and was not so strict that there was not room for a certain sense of humanity in its application... So, the law has application for Christians today. We are not subject to it in the way that those under the old covenant were. We've been freed by grace, but we are still taught by it. It is still a rule and guide. And it also regulates all of humanity. We are able to judge civil government by how it operates within the structure of the moral law that has been given by God.

— Dr. John Norwood

There are at least four reasons that Christians should still look to the civil and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, as well as to its moral laws, for ethical guidance today.

God's character. First, God's character requires us to learn from the revelation these laws provide. As we've already seen, God's character is our ultimate standard for ethics. And the Old Testament law reflects God's character. It is a revelation of who God is and what he's like. And God's character has not changed. This means that everything the law revealed about God in the Old Testament continues to be true today. In short, the Old Testament's civil and ceremonial laws still reveal our moral standard.

Teaching of Scripture. Second, the teaching of Scripture affirms the continuing modern application of every Old Testament law, down to the last one. For example, in Matthew 5:18-19, Jesus gave this teaching:

Until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:18-19).

According to Jesus, every law will continue to reveal God's standard until "all is accomplished." But all is not accomplished yet. Christ has not yet returned. Until he does, even the least of the commandments is to be taught and observed. So, in one way or another, even the civil and ceremonial laws continue to teach us God's norms for our lives.

Unity of law. Third, the Bible consistently teaches the unity of the law. It is a unified whole that stands together without regard to distinctions between ceremonial, civil or

moral divisions. For example, in James 2:10-11 we read these words:

Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder” (James 2:10-11).

According to James, the law was indivisible because it all came from the same God.

All of Scripture. Fourth, all of Scripture, not just some parts, is for our moral instruction. This means that the ceremonial and civil laws as well as the moral laws have something to teach us about modern ethics. As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16:

All Scripture is ... useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16, NIV).

Note that Paul did not list any exceptions here. On the contrary, he included “all Scripture.” This means that even the ceremonial and civil laws are useful for training us in the ways of righteousness.

Now, realizing that the civil and ceremonial laws are still part of our ethical standard in Christian ethics is an important first step. But it is also important to know how to include these types of law in our ethical evaluations. After all, we have already established that we are not simply to continue Old Testament behaviors with regard to these laws. So, what are we supposed to do with these laws? What process of application should we follow?

Throughout this series of lessons, we’ve emphasized that ethical decisions always involve:

the application of God’s Word to a situation by a person

The standard of any law — whether it emphasizes moral, ceremonial or civil aspects — cannot be properly understood or applied without considering both the situation to which it is applied and the person who applies it. And whenever the details of the situation or the person change, we can expect the application of God’s word to be at least somewhat different.

For the sake of illustration, let’s consider a case from the Old Testament in which a civil law was applied to a historical situation. In Numbers 27 we read about Zelophehad’s daughters. Earlier, God had given laws regarding the distribution of the Promised Land. The laws stated that allotments were to be distributed to families, and that they were to be divided among the sons. Zelophehad was a man who had died in the wilderness, leaving five daughters but no sons. According to the law of property distribution, Zelophehad’s daughters could not inherit their father’s land. So, the daughters appealed to Moses. We read their petition in Numbers 27:3-4:

Our father died in the wilderness... And he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son?

Give to us a possession among our father's brothers (Numbers 27:3-4).

Now, if the Lord had intended the law to be applied woodenly or mechanically, the case would have been clear cut. As the law stood, Zelophehad's daughters could not receive an inheritance in the Promised Land. But in verse 5, a remarkable thing happened:

Moses brought their case before the Lord (Numbers 27:5).

Isn't that amazing? Moses had delivered the law about property distribution, and was the supreme judge in Israel. Above all others in that nation, he had intimate knowledge of the ways of God and of the details of God's law. If anyone should have known how to judge this case, Moses was the man. So, why didn't he know what decision to render?

Moses understood that the law God had given him was designed to manage a situation where there were sons. And he knew that the goal of this law was to secure each family's place within its tribe and to preserve their allotments of tribal lands. But in the case of Zelophehad's daughters, Moses faced the issue of how to apply the standard revealed by the law to a new situation. He needed help from God because he knew that the new situation would affect how he was to apply the law. And God's response is noteworthy. Listen to what God said in Numbers 27:7-8:

The daughters of Zelophehad are right... speak to the people of Israel, saying, "If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter" (Numbers 27:7-8).

The passage goes on to list a number of other instances in which a man's inheritance might fall to people other than his sons.

In the story of Zelophehad's daughters, God indicated that the same aspect of his character was to be applied in different ways in different situations. In many respects, Christians face the same difficulty Moses faced. We have the standard of God's law, but we need to apply it to a new situation. The entire law must be reinterpreted and applied in the light of Christ and his work.

As prophet, Christ fulfills the moral aspects of the law. We depend on Christ's morality alone as the basis for our acceptance before God. Yet, we must also conform ourselves to Christ's image and example. We must seek to live as morally as he did during his earthly ministry, and as he continues to do in heaven. As priest, Christ fulfills the ceremonial aspects of the law. The ceremonial principles of the law are still binding, and we are to follow them by trusting Christ as our sacrifice, and by worshiping in Spirit and in truth. Finally, as king, Christ fulfills the civil aspects of the law, and the church, which is his nation on the earth, is bound to obey these aspects. We are to live rightly under our respective earthly governments, which are under Christ's greater lordship. And we are to honor Christ as king by keeping his commandments.

In summary, the categories of moral, ceremonial and civil law are helpful in many ways, especially when we think of them as aspects of each biblical law. But as useful as these categories are, they should never be used as a basis for ignoring any portion or

aspect of God's laws. As we've seen, all of God's law remains our standard for morality, and we are obligated to apply all of God's law to our modern situation in the light of the work of Christ. Every bit of God's law still serves as our norm for Christian ethics.

Now that we've established a basic orientation toward the variety of Scripture, and God's law in Scripture, we should explore the unity of Scripture. Let's look at ways the law relates to the other portions of God's written revelation.

UNITY

It is very common in the modern church to hear Bible teachers say things like, "Christians don't have to obey the law; we just have to believe the gospel" or "The only law that God requires us to obey is the law of love." Now, admittedly, not everything the Bible says about these matters is perfectly clear. But if we rightly analyze all the biblical data, what we discover is that the unity of Scripture is so great that the law is completely compatible with everything else in the Bible.

In this section of our lesson, we'll look at the unity of the law with several other teachings in Scripture. We'll look first at the way the law relates to the commandment of love. Second, we'll turn our attention to the relationship between the law and the gospel of grace. Third, we'll examine the law in relation to redemptive history and the new covenant. And fourth, we'll tackle the issue of the harmony of all divine commands. Let's begin with the law's relationship to the commandment of love.

COMMANDMENT OF LOVE

When we speak of the "love commandment," we are speaking first and foremost of the commandment to love God. And by implication from this commandment, we are also referring to the commandment to love one another. Although neither of these commandments appears in the Ten Commandments, they both have a certain priority that must be acknowledged. As Jesus stated in Matthew 22:37-40:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

Here, Jesus identified the commandment to love God as the greatest commandment of all. He also indicated that the commandment to love our neighbor is the second most important law. And he taught that every other commandment depends upon these two laws. So, every other commandment is, in some sense, a description of how we are to love both God and our neighbors.

When Jesus was asked to summarize the Old Testament law, he said it

is to love God with your whole heart, mind, being, and your neighbor as yourself. When he said that, he is speaking of two sides of the coin of the Old Testament law, which was in the context of a covenant. God was saying to his people, “I want you to be in this committed relationship with me, and you will demonstrate this relationship by your attitude toward me”... What does how I treat other people have to do with my relationship to God? It’s because of who this God is. This God values people. This God values relationships. And that means that over and over again throughout the Old Testament, the prophets would say to the people, “You don’t love God.” And they would say, “Well, yes we do. We’re doing all this religious stuff.” They would say, “No you don’t, because you’re treating other people as objects for your own strength, for your own position, for your own power. If you really loved God, you would show that by the way you treated other people.

— Dr. John Oswalt

We have documents from the ancient Near East that indicate that great kings commanded the people of their kingdoms to love them as their king. These kings expected their people to be grateful to them and to be loyal to them as their benevolent kings. And this was very, very important for the strength of the kingdom, for the honor of the kingdom, and for the future of these kingdoms. But these documents also reveal that ancient kings wanted and expected the people of their kingdoms to love each other also. Kings understood that the strength of their kingdoms not only required loyalty to them as the king but also bonds of loyal love among the people of their kingdoms. If the people of their kingdoms were at odds with each other, then their kingdom would be weak, not strong. And this is the reality of the Christian faith as well. In fact, the New Testament clearly indicates that love for our brothers and sisters in Christ is the evidence that we actually love God himself. You can’t have one without the other. Or as we learn from 1 John 4:20, if anyone says, “I love God,” and hates or neglects his brother, he’s a liar, because you can’t love God without also being the kind of person that loves his brother.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Paul went so far as to say this in Romans 13:9-10:

The commandments ... are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ... therefore love is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:9-10).

And in Galatians 5:14 he wrote:

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:14).

Now, it’s important to read Paul’s words here with great care. Many theologians have made the mistake of thinking that Paul taught that Christians do not have to obey any law except the law to love our neighbor. In truth, however, Paul was saying that the command to love our neighbor is inseparable from every other command. All of Scripture’s commands teach us how to love our neighbor. So, if we genuinely, perfectly love our neighbor, we’ll keep every law God has given.

Neither Jesus nor Paul intended to replace the many various stipulations of the law with a simpler formula requiring only love for God and neighbor. Rather, they both intended to teach that the requirements to love God and neighbor are an aspect of every law. Therefore, a person who loves perfectly will keep every commandment of the law. Consider, for example, Deuteronomy 6:1-5, the passage from which Jesus quoted in Matthew:

This is the commandment — the statutes and the rules — that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may ... fear the Lord your God ... by keeping all his statutes and his commandments ... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:1-5).

Here we can see that, in its original context, the passage Jesus quoted about loving God was inseparably tied to all the various commandments of the law given through Moses. Love for God was never intended to replace the other requirements.

As we seek to understand how to use the law in Christian ethics, we need to keep in mind the primacy and importance of love. Indeed, we need to remember that the entire law of God is summed up in the commands to love God and neighbor. But at the same time, we need to recognize that Scripture’s emphasis on the love commandment does not exempt us from keeping all the other laws in the Bible.

Now that we’ve examined the unity of the love commandment with the rest of the law, we’re ready to explore the way the gospel of grace relates to God’s law.

GOSPEL OF GRACE

A common misunderstanding among Christians is that the law is contrary to the gospel of grace. Many people believe that because we are saved by grace apart from works of the law, we have absolutely no obligation to obey the law. Others believe that the law is properly seen only as a threat and terror against sinners. The gospel, by contrast, is what saves us after the law has condemned us. In actuality, there are so many different views about the relationship between the law and the gospel of grace that we can’t possibly mention them all. So, to counter a host of false notions, we’ll describe the biblical perspective on this relationship by focusing on what theologians have traditionally called the “three uses of the law.”

Since the Protestant Reformation, theologians have frequently spoken of three different ways the law is used in Scripture. Although much agreement exists about the validity of several different uses, theologians have not always been consistent in numbering these uses. So, to avoid confusion, in these lessons, we'll refer to the three uses of the law in the following order:

- The first use of the law is the pedagogical use, or the use of the law as a teacher. In this use, the law shows us our sin and teaches us of the absolute danger we're in without Christ's saving grace. In this way, it drives us to repentance and faith in Christ.
- The second use of the law is the civil use. This use doesn't change our hearts, but it changes our behavior and restrains sin in society by threatening specific punishments for our offenses. Its purpose is to maintain civil order.
- The third use of the law is the normative use, sometimes called the moral use. This is the use of the law as a guide for faithful Christians to know what God expects of us, so that we, as grateful children can obey him.

The pedagogical or first use of the law speaks of the way God's law enlivens sin within unbelievers and shows them their need for Christ. We all know the experience of learning that something is forbidden and being drawn all the more to do it. Paul wrote about his own experience with the pedagogical use of the law in Romans 7:7-8, when he wrote these words:

I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness (Romans 7:7-8).

This use of the law is commonly associated with the biblical teaching that believers were once under law, but are now under grace. When unbelievers are confronted with the law's standards and penalties, they are incited to sin even more. And they recognize the punishment or curse that the law threatens against them because of their sin. This threat drives some unbelievers to Christ, who graciously saves them from the law's curse. This is the idea behind Paul's words in Romans 6:14:

Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Romans 6:14).

In this sense, the pedagogical use of the law does not apply directly to believers. Once a person has been driven to Christ, the law has finished its work in this regard. So, with regard to the pedagogical use, we are no longer under the law.

The civil or second use of the law involves the way the law restrains sin by threatening punishment against those who violate it. We can think of ways we restrain our own behavior for fear of punishment by those who hold civil authority over us. This use of the law is for believers and unbelievers alike. God has designed the law in civil societies as an instrument for restraining evil. According to God's plan, we are to obey our civil authorities. We should note, however, that when our governments defy the law of God, we are always bound to follow God's law. In future lessons we'll address this use of the law more, so for now we'll simply mention it, and say that it is not incompatible

with the gospel of grace.

The normative or third use of the law is very helpful to study when we think about the law in terms of the gospel and Christian ethics. The normative use applies the law in a way that we've been using it in these lessons, namely as a revelation of God's will for Christian living. We might compare it to the household rules that parents make to keep their children safe — rules children obey because they love and trust their parents. For example, listen to the words of 1 John 3:4:

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

John wrote these words long after Christ had ascended into heaven. Nevertheless, he asserted that the law remains the standard for our behavior. He even went so far as to define all sin in terms of breaking the law.

To put it simply, the law is still the standard by which Christian behavior is judged to be righteous or sinful. And many passages indicate that when the law is used as a standard for Christian behavior, it is perfectly compatible with the gospel. Before we were saved, we were all sinners, incapable of keeping the law. We were under the law's curse because we were lawbreakers. But now that we are saved, we are counted as perfect law-keepers in Christ, so that we receive the law's promised blessings of salvation and life. Paul referred to this state as being "under grace" to contrast it with being under the law's curse. In short, while believers are not "under law" in the sense that we suffer its curse when we sin, we are "under law" in the sense that we receive its blessings, and in the sense that we are obligated to obey it. In James 1:25, James put the matter this way:

The one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing (James 1:25).

When you look at the law in the Bible, it's clear that the people who read it didn't simply believe that they were reading a list of rules and regulations. It was a life orientation. And so, they could read it knowing that, if they kept the law, they would be blessed in the keeping of it, and I think there are several reasons for that. One is that the law is God's revelation. The law tells us how God wants us to live. And the psalmist in 40:8 says, "I delight to do thy will, O God." So, when we align ourselves with the will of God, when we understand what the will of God is, then we find great joy and blessing in doing whatever it is that we are supposed to do, or not doing what we're told to not to do.

— Dr. Steve Harper

Now that we've seen how God's law complements both the commandment of love and the gospel of grace, we should look at the law in relation to the new covenant and the developments of redemptive history.

NEW COVENANT

When we speak of redemptive history and the new covenant, we are referring to the changes that took place between the Old and New Testament eras as a result of the work of Jesus Christ. And at this point, we are most interested in the way these changes affect our use of the law in Christian ethics. In the Old Testament, the new covenant is mentioned by name only once, and that is in Jeremiah 31:31. The New Testament, on the other hand, refers to it several times. The most helpful mention for our purposes, however, can be found in Hebrews 8, where the author quotes extensively from Jeremiah 31 and applies it to the church.

In Hebrews 8:8-10, we read these words:

I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah ... I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Hebrews 8:8-10).

Notice that in this passage, the new covenant is not something that frees us from the law. Rather, in the new covenant, the law is still central. In fact, the law is put into our minds and written on our hearts as the rules of the new covenant. The image of the law being put into our hearts and minds indicates that we know and love the law. Far from leaving the law behind us as a thing of the past, in the new covenant, we internalize the law and keep it earnestly. In truth, this is precisely how the law was to be observed even in the old covenant. As the Lord spoke in Deuteronomy 6:6:

These words that I command you today shall be on your heart (Deuteronomy 6:6).

And as the psalmist testified in Psalm 119:11:

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you (Psalm 119:11).

God's Word was always supposed to be in the hearts and minds of his people, and it really was in the hearts and minds of many, even in the old covenant.

The writing of the law on our hearts and minds is not something new or different in the new covenant. Instead, it is a point of continuity with the old covenant. We might even say that the new covenant gives us even greater reasons to obey the law. After all, in the Old Testament, believers looked back to the exodus from Egypt and toward life in the Promised Land as the grounds for their obedience to the law. But today, Christians look back to the much greater work of salvation in Christ and toward the even greater work of Christ's second coming, as the grounds for our obedience. But again, it is important that as Christians we reapply the law in light of the changes that have taken place between the old and new covenants. As the author of Hebrews wrote in 10:1 of his book:

The law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true

form of these realities (Hebrews 10:1).

In the new covenant, Christ has been revealed as the one whom the law prefigured. And as a result, many laws that obligated old covenant believers to do such things as perform sacrifices are now fulfilled by the reality that they foreshadowed. They are fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ. As a result, we rightly keep these laws by relying on Jesus as our sacrifice, not by sacrificing bulls and goats.

One of the main points that the writer of Hebrews makes is that the sacrifice of sin was superior to the sacrifices made in the old covenant. If you'll allow me to read from my text of Scripture here, 10:1-4. It says,

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect — or complete — those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin (Hebrews 10:1-4).

So, we see first of all in 10:4 that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin. So, their sacrifices were inferior in that way. Though they did point to the fact that sin brings death, the blood must be shed, life is taken away because sin is that serious. Secondly, we can see that the Old Testament sacrifices from this text and other places that they were offered over and over. They were repeated in contrast to Christ's sacrifice which is simply offered once. Why? Because it is superior, it needn't be repeated.

— Dr. Barry Joslin

In future lessons, we'll look more closely at the kinds of adjustments we must make as we apply the law to the New Testament age. But for now, it should be clear that, in principle, the law applies during the new covenant age.

Now that we've explored the law in relation to love, the gospel, and the new covenant, we're ready to address our final topic: the harmony of all of God's commands with one another.

HARMONY

In the legal system of the Bible there are a great number of laws and requirements. These are so numerous and touch on so many matters that these laws sometimes appear to conflict with one another. Conflict between rules is a problem that every deontological or rule-oriented ethical system faces. But in the case of biblical law,

there are no real contradictions. God's laws never actually conflict with one another, just as God's character never conflicts with itself. Instead, all the moral teachings of Scripture are in perfect harmony with each other.

As we saw in James 2:10, the law is a unified whole:

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it (James 2:10).

Because the law is unified, its various commands collectively require our obedience. That is to say, whenever our actions are in true agreement with any particular stipulation of the law, they are in agreement with the whole. So, whenever it appears that particular laws in Scripture contradict each other, it simply means that we have not yet come to the law correctly.

The fact is, we can't understand the entire law perfectly. So, from time to time, we feel torn between God's various laws. How do we resolve these tensions, practically speaking? Well, there are many things that can be said about such situations, but we'll mention just two. In the first place, God's laws are given with the implicit understanding that, at times, some laws take priority over others. For example, in Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus gives the following instruction:

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:23-24).

Jesus taught that reconciliation between God's people takes precedence, even over certain offerings made to God. In this case, even if a believer is at the altar and ready to present his gift, he should delay his offering until he has made things right with his brother.

When certain sins are said to be worse than others, or certain laws more important than others, we should realize that the Bible is assigning different levels of *priority* to its various commands. In this way, giving priority to one law over another is actually in accordance with the whole of the law. It's not a conflict between particular laws at all.

In the second place, biblical laws are also given with the implicit understanding that there are exceptions to rules. That is to say, in the Bible's legal system, it's assumed that in emergencies and other unusual circumstances, more important principles may transcend normal regulations. Consider, for instance, the confrontation between the apostles and the Sanhedrin in Acts 5. In this situation, the Sanhedrin had commanded the apostles to stop preaching about Jesus, but the apostles ignored their command. The apostles' defense of their action is recorded in Acts 5:29:

We must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

As the governing body of the Jewish people, the Sanhedrin did have some legitimate authority over the apostles. And as a general rule, the Bible requires us to obey human authorities. However, when the Sanhedrin contradicted God's commands, this

created an exception to the general rule about obeying human leaders. Because of this exception, the righteous and good thing for the apostles to do was to disobey the Sanhedrin and to obey God.

But again, this was not a case where one law conflicted with another. After all, the law is a unified whole revealing God's character, and God's character is not at odds with itself. Rather, the law anticipates that general principles will sometimes indicate contrary courses of action. In these cases, the right thing to do must be discovered by looking at every command and principle, and by measuring the situation and motivations in light of every obligation. The best course of action will always be obedient to the entire body of the law in its full meaning, even if it doesn't resemble the way we usually apply some principles.

Of course, we have to be cautious when we assign priorities and make exceptions to various commands in Scripture. And because we are limited, fallen human beings, there will no doubt be times when we can't figure out the right thing to do. There will even be times when we make the wrong decisions. Nevertheless, we must always remember that the Scriptures are unified. And therefore, we must work hard to find the ways that the laws of God harmonize with each other.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've looked at the ways the many parts and aspects of Scripture work together as God's standard for Christian ethics. We've seen that each variety of language and literature in Scripture must be handled somewhat differently, and that each has something special to tell us about ethics. We've also explored the divisions and functions of God's law in Scripture. And we've seen the unity of Scripture within the law itself and with all other portions of Scripture.

As we continue our study of biblical ethics, it is important to remember that there are many different parts and aspects of Scripture, and that each one communicates ethical information to us in different ways. By keeping these ideas in mind as we continue to study and to live our lives before God, we'll be able to handle each part and aspect of Scripture more responsibly, and to match our lives more closely to the standards that God has revealed to us.

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GLOSSARY

abrogate – To repeal or do away with a law or agreement

Book of the Covenant – A collection of laws found in Exodus 20:18–23:33 that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai

ceremonial law – Aspect of the Old Testament law that gives instructions for worship and the sacrificial system

Christian ethics – Theology viewed as a means of determining which human persons, acts and attitudes receive God’s blessing and which do not

civil law – Aspect of the Old Testament law that gives principles for governing society

covenant – A binding legal agreement made between two people or groups of people, or between God and a person or group of people

deontological – Rule-based or duty-oriented; concerned with moral obligation regardless of outcome

ethical judgment – The application of God’s Word to a situation by a person

ethics – The study of moral right and wrong; the study of what is good and what is evil

existential perspective – Ethical perspective that considers the person, the motives, and the inner leading of the Holy Spirit; one of the three perspectives on human knowledge used by theologian John Frame in his Tri-Perspectivalism; concerned with the response of the believing heart through emotion and feeling

first use of the law – Use of the law as a teacher to expose sin and drive an unbeliever to Christ; also called "pedagogical use"

moral law – Aspect of God's Old Testament law that gives general ethical principles, often identified with the Ten Commandments

normative perspective – Ethical perspective that looks to God's Word as the norm or standard for making ethical decisions

pedagogical – Of or related to teaching

Protestant Reformation – A sixteenth-century religious movement that attempted to reform the Roman Catholic Church, but eventually broke away, forming the Protestant church

revelation – God's communication of truth to man

second use of the law – Use of the law to restrain sin in society; also called "civil use"

situational perspective – Approach to ethics with an emphasis on the situation and how the details of our circumstances relate to our ethical decisions

third use of the law – Use of the law as a guide or rule to show faithful Christians how to live a more ethical life; also called the "normative use"

Westminster Confession of Faith – An ecumenical doctrinal summary composed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and published in 1647