

LAW IN SCRIPTURE: Principles for living

In the consideration of law in Scripture, several areas of consideration are important. We must understand the kinds of laws and their purposes, the forms these laws take and their application. We must also understand how the Lord and the New Testament view the laws of the Old Testament, and find principles for living by the "spirit", rather than the "letter" of the law.

There are basically three kinds of law in the Bible: **The moral law**, which is the declaration of what God requires of man; **the ceremonial or ritual law**, which God used to portray the salvation to come in Christ to the Old Testament people and **the civil law** by which order and the restraint of sin was accomplished in the nation or commonwealth of Israel. God was crafting a nation out of a people that was not a people - and their life revolved around their deliverance. "*When God created a nation out of a family of slaves it took a unique methodology to achieve his purposes. It is fascinating to read Exodus from the perspective of crafting a nation and see how the declaration of law and the enforcement of the laws amalgamated the people into a great force by the second generation.*" (Steve Laug, Stepping Stones, pp 5-6) Because Israel was a people called out by God, a theocracy, there is some over-lap between the civil and ceremonial laws - there is not always a sharp distinction between religious and civil duties, and the moral law (or perhaps we ought to say "covenant") which under girds them both.

The statements of these laws take two basic forms: "**Apodictic**" or absolute laws - "do's and do not's" paradigms; and "**Causuistic**" (Case) where principles are spelled out in the conditional terms of specific applications. "*...the major portion of the law is Case law, i. e., the illustration of the basic principle in terms of specific cases. these specific cases are often illustrations of the extent of the application of the law; that is, by citing a minimal type of case, the necessary jurisdictions of the law are revealed.*" (Rushdoony, The Institutes of Biblical Law, p. 11) There are about 613 laws in the Pentateuch according to Rabbinical tradition. Some these laws were designed as means of blessing, rather than being restrictive or punitive.

The basic principles of the **Moral Law** are set forth in the Ten Commandments (Exo 20:1-17, Deut. 5:6-21) given in a covenant form, and summarized by the Lord in Mark 12:29-31(cf. Matt 22:37-40, Luke 10:26-28) Other summaries of God's moral Law include: Psalm 15, Isa 33:15, Micah 6:8, Isa 56:1, Amos 5:4, Hab 2:4 and Lev 19:2. The applications of these covenanted principles are spelled out in many specific examples in the Old and New Testaments. The Moral law binds all mankind to "*personal, entire, exact and perpetual obedience*" (WCF XIX.1) The moral law has four basic purposes:

1. It reveals and reflects the holiness of God
2. It sets forth God's standard of righteousness for mankind.
3. It reveals man's short-fall of the Law and his need of a savior, condemning man for his sin.
4. It serves as means of grace and sanctification for the believer.

(See Rom 2:11f, 3:10f., Gal 3:10-24, Rom 7 and 8; also WCF XIX 5,6,7)

In Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, there are numerous examples of the application of these principles. It is important to distinguish between absolute universal principles, and the more conditional, cultural and time-bound examples of much of the case laws. The former remain in effect, the latter may not, though the principles behind them do. A careful consideration of context and historio-cultural factors is very important to application.

The **civil laws** pertain to the ordering of the community and society in the Old Testament times. Examples would be found in Exo, 21-23 and Deut 16-21. The principles of the moral law often lie behind these specific applications. The Confession says: "*To them (Israel) 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.*" (XIX-4) The laws concerning stoning, etc. are a part of this judicial law.

The **ceremonial laws** cover the religious life of the people and include the instructions for the Tabernacle (Temple), the sacrifices and feasts, the priesthood and laws concerning ceremonial purity, etc. The dietary laws of the Old Testament are a part of this. We find the ceremonial law in Exo. 25f, Leviticus and Deut. 19-16. The confession says of these: *"God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a Church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings and benefits; and partly-holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament."* (WCF XIX .3)

It is important here to recognize the application of principles set forth already - namely, that the *New Testament interprets the Old* and *Didactic (instruction) interprets narrative*. An example is the passing of the Old Testament Ceremonial laws. The dietary laws of Lev. 11 are brought to an end in Acts 0 and 11, while the principles they taught, namely holiness and being set apart unto God are spelled out clearly in the Epistles: I Cor 8, 10:23ff, Col. 2:16, 17f. The Sacrificial system which typified Christ's saving work is spelled out in the Old, summarized in Lev. 17:11; then fulfilled in the Gospels in the giving of God's son on the Cross. Hebrews 9 and 10 makes it clear that with the completion of His work, the "shadows" pass. (Even in the O.T. it appears an understanding of this "typical" nature of the Ceremonial law was there - see Psa 51:16,17, 1 Sam 15:22, Jere 7:22, 23.)

The New Testament interprets the Moral law for us as well. It makes it clear that we are not to be legalists, bound to the "letter" rather than the "spirit" of the law, nor antinomians, casting ourselves free from it. Jesus taught this in Matt 5f in the Sermon on the Mount. The law encompasses more than the limits of the statement, those who hate their brother or call him a fool are guilty under the commandment "Thou shalt not murder", those who lust in their minds and hearts are guilty of adultery, the divorce laws granted under Moses are shown to be concessions of God in dealing with sin, etc. Recognizing the differing "weights" of the laws (Matt 23:23), Jesus came not to abolish the Law (5:17) but to change it and us that we might keep it, We must learn to make use of and apply the Old Testament laws in the light of New Testament revelation to our own different cultural forms and practices.

A good example of the use of case law as used by Paul; the Moral law says: "Thou shalt not steal." Exo 20:15. One Old Testament case was the Ox treading grain. (Deut 25:4) Paul comments on it in I Cor 9:9,10f and in I Tim 5:18. The case law is stated in Lev 19:13-15. Jesus cited the principle in Luke 10:1: "A laborer is worthy of his hire." A part of keeping the moral law is paying just wages to those who serve us. Or compare: Lev 19:15-18 and James 2:1-8.

There are many valuable principles and much guidance in the laws given in Scripture. While many are examples of applications not binding in letter to us, yet they are in spirit, sources of much guidance and sanctification, Lev. 19 has many examples: vs. 9 concern for the poor, vs. 13 fair dealings with employees vs. 17,18, 27, etc. The New Testament does not set us free from the principles set forth in the Old, rather it interprets and applies them for us. We should be encouraged to study and search out the Truth God has for us in this part of His Word.

The purpose of Christ's atoning work was to restore man to a position of covenant-keeping instead of covenant-breaking, to enable man to keep the law by freeing man "from the law of sin and death" (Rom 8:2) "that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us" (Rom 8:4). Man is restored to a position of law-keeping. The law thus has a position of centrality in man's indictment (as a sentence of death against man the sinner), in man's redemption (in that Christ died, Who although the perfect law keeper as the new Adam, died as man's substitute), and in man's sanctification (in that man grows in grace as he grows in law-keeping, for the law is the way of sanctification. (Rousas Rushdoony, Institutes of Biblical Law, p. 3)