



CENTER FOR STEWARDSHIP

# *Your Story - Living Submissively:* The Place of the Law in the Christian Life

## INTRODUCTION

A standard axiom typically undergirding most thinking about stewardship is that all giving must be motivated by the gospel alone. This extends to an even more expansive assertion that good works are only those works that are motivated by the gospel. Of course, the attendant assumption, then, is that the law is ruled out of bounds when it comes to doing good works—especially the work of giving. Indeed, when it comes to Christian living, the law is often viewed with mistrust and skepticism.

**What do you think when you hear the word, law? What does law mean in the context of a theological discussion? Why might a Christian be ambivalent about the role of the law in his life?**

Justification. That is the reason that a Christian will frequently experience misgivings about the place of the law in his Christian walk. Martin Luther said that on the doctrine of justification the church either stands or falls, and what is true for the church extends to each believer as well. Nothing is more important than knowing the forgiveness of Christ that justifies, or makes one right before God. The heart of justification is the gift that God gives: we are justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. God does it all. Good works are excluded. From this perspective, the law has nothing to offer. Actually, the law is quite dangerous as it can nourish attitudes of merit and works righteousness that are antithetical to the teaching of justification by grace through faith. It is no wonder, then, that in a church that emphasizes the wonder of justification by grace, the law is frequently regarded with suspicion.

Yet, even in this understanding, the law certainly has its place. It has the task of making clear to each of us just how far short we fall and just how desperately we must have the free grace that the gospel offers. Without the

law's condemning effect, we would not recognize the wonder of the gospel. So, the law is acknowledged as necessary, but a necessary evil, helpful to the extent that it exposes our sinfulness and our need for forgiveness. Then, the gospel delivers precisely that forgiveness. It has been long recognized, though, that the alien, condemning, and killing work of the law is not the only way that the law functions in the lives of God's people. The Formula of Concord teaches that the law is God's will for how his creatures are supposed to live. There is nothing sinister about that. As the explicit expression of God's plan for how his creation is to function, the law is a very good thing.

In addition to the law's condemning function, there are two other functions of the law. It serves to curb or check the wicked deeds of all people. The law with its threats and punishments for violators provides boundaries for human behavior. This is the law's first use. And since the law is the will of God, it provides Christians with a precise articulation of how God wants his people to live. This has usually been termed the law's third use or function. By adding this understanding of the law to the ideas considered in the previous lessons about creation and the joy of living as a creature of God, it is difficult to conceive of the law as something onerous and malicious. As the will of God, it is a wonderful and good gift of God, and an essential component in the disciple's effort to live faithfully in the confession of the Christian faith. To study God's law, honor God's law, and seek to obey God's law is not faith-destroying legalism, nor does it translate into works righteousness. These potential threats must not be ignored or minimized, but neither will a faithful follower of Christ allow the law to be painted only in black and portrayed as a ruthless master that drains life of all joy and fills those who hear it only with foreboding. To gain a better appreciation of the law and the role it plays in a life of discipleship is the objective of the questions that follow.

## Q &amp; A

- 1 In the context of first-century Judaism and tendencies among converts to Christianity to retain some of their works-righteous ways of thinking, Paul specifically addressed questions about the law. One of the most extensive treatments is Romans 7. Read Romans 7:4-6. What contrast is Paul setting up? What does this contrast mean for you?
- 2 Read Romans 7:7-11. Paul's celebration of freedom from the law does not mean disregard or rejection of the law. The law is still vitally important. What function of the law does Paul describe in these verses? How have you seen that the law appears to extend and enhance the reach of sin?
- 3 Finish reading this section, Romans 7:12-13. According to Paul, what is our real problem, the law or sin? How should Paul's view of the law impact our attitude toward the law?
- 4 Turn to Galatians 5 and read verse 1. What thoughts come to mind when you hear the word "freedom"? What sort of slavery does Paul urge the Galatians to resist?
- 5 In the next verses of Galatians 5, Paul discusses the specific legalism of circumcision that was tempting the Galatians, and warns them again not to yield to a legalistic version of Christianity. What are some legalisms that might tempt Christians today? What does Paul mean, in verse 11, that the cross is a stumbling block?
- 6 The crucial verses of Galatians 5 for this study are 13 and 14. What is the usual context for the assertion that believers have been called? What light does this shed on what Paul means by freedom?
- 7 In Galatians 5:13-14, Paul adds to our understanding of Christian freedom. What role does the law play in Paul's concept of freedom? In light of Paul's teaching, what is an accurate definition of Christian freedom?
- 8 Return to Romans 7 and read Paul's famous soliloquy about the struggle between the new man of faith and the old man of sin in verses 14-25. Are these verses encouraging? Can we see them as frustrating and discouraging?
- 9 Recognizing the dual nature of our Christian existence, which of the three uses or functions of God's law do you think should be applied in the life of a Christian?
- 10 In light of the foregoing Scripture and discussion, consider the axiom mentioned at the outset of this lesson. What role does the law legitimately play in a Christian's production of good works?

## PRAYER

*Join the author of Psalm 119 and offer praise to God for giving the law and making known to creatures his will for our lives. Seek God's grace to guide you more zealously to pursue his good will for your living.*