

## A Law to Live By

How to order our steps? What paths do we take? In the Law of his Kingdom, God gives us a rule for living consistently with the salvation to which he has called us. If we believe the Gospel, if we know the grace of God in Christ in truth, this is how we will live.

## *Keeping God's Commandments*

*Question.* You said that your Sponsors did promise for you, that you should keep God's Commandments. Tell me how many there are? *Answer.* Ten. *Question.* Which are they? *Answer.* The same which God spake in the twentieth Chapter of Exodus, saying, I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

I. Thou shalt have none other gods but me.

II. Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth; thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them; for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, and visit the sins of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and show mercy unto thousands in them that love me and keep my commandments.

III. Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless, that taketh his Name in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless, that taketh his name in vain.

IV. Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath-day. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all that thou hast to do; but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God. In it thou shalt do no manner of work; thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, thy man-servant, and thy maid-servant, thy cattle, and the stranger that is within thy gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it.

V. Honour thy father and thy mother; that thy days may be long in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

VI. Thou shalt do no murder.

VII. Thou shalt not commit adultery.

VIII. Thou shalt not steal.

IX. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

X. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his servant, nor his maid, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is his.

### **LIBERATED FOR WHAT?**

There is a lesson to be learned from recent history of western interventions (and non-interventions) in Africa and the Middle East. It is easy enough for the united power of the USA and its allies to oust a dictator - but then comes the next and more challenging task, of building a just, stable, sensible government in its place. They don't appear spontaneously - and they aren't built easily; and too often another dictator takes the place of the old, or the state dissolves in chaos and strife.

Americans have a happier history, but even there it was one thing to achieve independence from Great Britain, quite another to establish a sensible form of government, under the Constitution of 1789. There are two sides to liberation - deliverance *from*, and deliverance *for*. When God set Israel free from bondage in Egypt, he did not turn them loose to invent their own forms of government, or religion and morality. He brought them to Mount Sinai, and formally entered into covenant with them, adopted them as his own people, and gave them a Law to govern their life as a people with him. Likewise in Baptism we are not only delivered and saved from sin and death, but we also enter into the new and eternal covenant with God in Christ. The benefits of this covenant we know by Faith: its obligations are set forth in the Law.

### **THREE KINDS OF LAW**

The Catechism is designed to inculcate a strong sense of the benefits that I receive from the Lord in the Covenant of Baptism – a sense of security and purpose in life - and also obligations which I must render him in return. In the Creed, I learn the great benefits of creation, redemption, and sanctification which I receive from the Triune God. Now turning to the third promise, "to keep God's holy will and commandments, and to walk in the same all the days of my life", the Catechism looks at my obligations as set forth in the Ten Commandments.

The Catechism tacitly privileges the Law given in the 20th chapter of Exodus - and omits any reference to the great body of Old Testament law that follows it, in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In this, the Catechism follows the witness of the New Testament, which distinguishes between the moral law of the Ten Commandments, explicitly endorsed in the New Testament as permanently binding on Christians (e.g. Romans 13) from the ritual or ceremonial law of Israel under the Old Testament, and the civil law of Israel under the Old Testament, which belong to the preparation for Christ, and not the time after his coming (cf. Mark 7:16; Acts 10:1-18; 15:1-33; Galatians 2-3; Hebrews 10:18). The ceremonial and civil law of Moses does not bind Christians to obedience, though it has much value as instruction in the sacrifice and kingdom of Christ

- but (as Article VII puts it), “no Christian man is free from the obedience of those Commandments which are called Moral” (Prayer Book, p. 604). There is of course moral law to be found outside the Ten Commandments (e.g. Deuteronomy 6:4, 5; Leviticus 19:18) but it must be distinguished from the ceremonial and civil law with which it is often mingled (e.g. Deuteronomy 7:16-26; Leviticus 19:19).

### **LAW AS GIFT OF GOD**

The knowledge of the Law, as Saint Paul notes, does not bring with it power to do what the Law requires (a point to which we shall return later), and there, in the rebellious and self-righteous, serves to their condemnation. This not due to any defect of the Law, “for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law” (Galatians 3:21). Indeed, in itself, and for the faithful, the Law is a gift of grace, a sure guide to righteousness, a revelation of the moral order of the creation, as Psalm 19 testifies:

- 7 The law of the LORD is an undefiled law, converting the soul;  
the testimony of the LORD is sure, and giveth wisdom unto the simple.
- 8 The statutes of the LORD are right, and rejoice the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is pure, and giveth light unto the eyes.
- 9 The fear of the LORD is clean, and endureth for ever;  
the judgments of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.
- 10 More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey, and the honeycomb.
- 11 Moreover, by them is thy servant taught;  
and in keeping of them there is great reward.

The law taught in God’s word is “a lantern unto my feet, and a light unto my paths’ (Psalm 119:105). Nor is this merely an Old Testament institution, no longer binding on Christians. Jesus was emphatic about its continuing authority: “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil” (Matthew 5:17).

### **REDEEMED FOR OBEDIENCE**

The Catechism calls attention to the historical setting in which the Law was given: “The same which God spake in the twentieth Chapter of Exodus, saying, I am the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage”. The law is given after an act of redemption, God’s bringing Israel “out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage”, as recounted in the first 15 chapters of Exodus. In that redemption God acknowledged Israel as “my son, even my first-born”: “Let my son go”, he tells Pharaoh, “that he may serve me” (Exodus 4:22, 23). The people he has redeemed, is set apart for his service: “a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (Exodus 19:6); and it is on the basis of the redemption that he claims their allegiance. There is an important

principle here, to which the Ten Commandments testify: that the works done in obedience to the Law are not the cause of our communion with God, but its effect. And where there is true faith, and gratitude for redemption, the law will be done out of love, and not fear. That is what Jesus means when he tells his disciples, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15) – not "if ye commandments, I will love you". That is why Jesus can say, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:29, 30). As Jacob found, when he "served seven years" to win Rachel's hand in marriage, "they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had unto her" (Genesis 29:20).

### LAW AND VIRTUE

Central as the place of the commandments is in Scripture, yet it is not the only approach to moral questions. One approach (common in the ancient and medieval teachers) develops its moral teaching in terms of man's *true happiness* in communion with God, and the *virtues* (especially faith, hope, and love) by which we attain it. The other approach, favoured by early modern theologians, both Protestant and Catholic, develops moral teaching in terms of God's *will*, God's *law*, and - with an emphasis on interiority, reflecting the growing importance of the idea of conscience - man's *duty*. In Scripture, as in theologians like Thomas Aquinas, both approaches are found, sometimes in striking juxtaposition.

One of these is 1 John 4:21, "And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also". Father Crouse comments:

St. John speaks of love in terms of commandment; and that, perhaps, seems a strange way of putting it. How can love be commanded? We're used to thinking of love as something spontaneous, something that somehow just happens: one "falls in love." What sense does it make to command it? But St. John's approach is more realistic than conventional modern notions about the spontaneity of love. Our loves do not "just happen." They belong to a character formed by a long process of training and habit-making. And that process always begins with commandment and obedience. Just as our natural life begins with obedience to parents and teachers, so our life in Christ begins with our obedience to God's word. There is, certainly, a spiritual maturity, when our loves are spontaneously right. That is the

condition we call "sanctity" of holiness. But our beginning and our growth are in obedience to commandment<sup>1</sup>.

It is through obedience to God's holy will and commandments that virtues are formed. Our end is the spontaneity of holiness articulated by Augustine in his celebrated saying, "love, and do what you will": but this comes only after a long purification of the heart, a reordering of loves - and that begins with the curbing of our anarchic self-will and animal passion, through obedience to the commandments.

Although (as Paul argues in Galatians) the Law, taken as a means of justification by sinners, is nothing but a burden and a curse, the Law *in itself* is nothing but the gift of God, a revelation of the moral order of the creation, the parameters of right relation with God and neighbor, guiding the righteous in the ways of holiness unto eternal life. "Thy word is a lantern unto my feet, and a light unto my paths" (Psalm 119:105).

### *For Further Reading*

- Deuteronomy 5-8 – *Moses rehearses the Decalogue, and exhorts Israel to obedience.*
- Psalm 19, 119 – *of meditation on God's law*
- Article VII, Prayer Book p. 604 - *Of the Old Testament*

### *Questions for Review*

- What is the Law which is under consideration here?
- What other kinds of Biblical Law are there, and why are they omitted?
- What is the purpose and value of the Law in itself?
- What is the historical setting in which the Law was given?
- What does that say about its role in our redemption? and the basis of its observance?
- What other way of teaching the moral life is found in the Christian tradition, and how is it related to that of Law?

### *Questions for Discussion*

- Read Leviticus 19 and discern which of these commandments are moral, which ceremonial, and which civil.
- In what sense is Christianity a religion of the Law, and in what sense is it not?

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<sup>1</sup> R. D. Crouse, "Sermon for Trinity I", in *Common Prayer Volume Six: Parochial Homilies for the Eucharist Based on the Lectionary of The Book of Common Prayer*, 1962, Canada, St. Peter Publications, Charlottetown, 1987, pp. 97-99.



## *Duty towards God and my Neighbour*

*Question.* What dost thou chiefly learn by these Commandments?

*Answer.* I learn two things; my duty towards God, and my duty towards my Neighbour.

*Question.* What is thy duty towards God?

*Answer.* My duty towards God is To believe in him, to fear him, And to love him with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul, and with all my strength: To worship him, to give him thanks: To put my whole trust in him, to call upon him: To honour his holy Name and his Word: And to serve him truly all the days of my life.

*Question.* What is thy duty towards thy Neighbour?

*Answer.* My duty towards my Neighbour is To love him as myself, and to do to all men as I would they should do unto me: To love, honour, and succour my father and mother: To honour and obey the civil authority: To submit myself to all my governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters: To order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters: To hurt nobody by word or deed: To be true and just in all my dealings: To bear no malice nor hatred in my heart: To keep my hands from picking and stealing, and my tongue from evil speaking, lying, and slandering: To keep my body in temperance, soberness, and chastity: Not to covet nor desire other men's goods; But to learn and labour truly to get mine own living, And to do my duty in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call me.

### **MORAL EMPOWERMENT**

In the Catechism's treatment of the benefits and obligations of belonging to Christ, the aspect of obligation is most pronounced in the third promise of baptism, "to keep God's holy will and commandments". As one church historian says of a similar 16<sup>th</sup> century catechism's treatment of the Ten Commandments, the "goal is to empower children morally so that they might readily say no to the things that tempt them and serve those around them with true charity of spirit, abilities no one in the sixteenth century believed to be simply inherent in human nature, but gained only through careful



training"<sup>2</sup>. The law with its stern prohibitions and injunctions setting the parameters of life in community with God and neighbor, sets me on the path that leads out of self-will to service, from vice into virtue.

### **INTERPRETING THE LAW**

There is however a difference between the Ten Commandments and the Catechism's explanation of them. All but two commandments (the 4th and 5th) take a negative form: "thou shalt not..."; but the Catechism spells them out their positive as well as negative implications. In only one, the 10th, does the Commandments' scope move explicitly from outward action or word to inward desire: "thou shalt not covet..."; but in the Catechism we learn they *all* govern inward as well as outward life. In both ways the Catechism is dependent upon the interpretation of the Law by Christ and the apostles. It is Jesus who teaches us that the sixth commandment does not just prohibit murder, but anger and hatred, and that it requires reconciliation with one's enemies. Likewise the seventh prohibits not just adultery in deed, but also in thought. This is in accord with the tenth commandment's forbidding us to "covet thy neighbour's wife". And it is St. Paul who shows us what it means to keep the eighth commandment: "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth" (Ephesians 4:28). Not stealing means working productively, and giving generously to those in need. Similarly with the ninth, we bear "false witness against our neighbor", when we do not "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15): "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers" (Ephesians 4:29).

It is also from the New Testament that we learn that commandments are *duties*: things to be done "not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake" (Romans 13:5): "render therefore to all their dues" - their *dues*, our *duties* - "tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour. Owe no man anything to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law" (13:7-8). Finally, it is from the New Testament that the Catechism learns to interpret the Commandments in terms of the law of love for God and neighbour (Matthew 22:35-40). What I "chiefly learn by these Commandments is two things; my duty towards God, and my duty towards my Neighbour".

So beneath the surface of a 16th century Catechism intended for children is a teaching of enduring relevance – a law of charity both positive and negative, inward and outward. The order of the Law and its explanation does not exactly align, but with some small rearrangement it looks like this:

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<sup>2</sup> Steven Ozment, *Protestants: the Birth of a Revolution*, p. 106

- I. "Thou shalt have none other gods but me" means "My duty towards God is To believe in him, to fear him, And to love him with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul, and with all my strength".
- II. "Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth; thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them..." means "My duty toward God is... To worship him, to give him thanks".
- III. "Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain..." means "To put my whole trust in him, to call upon him".
- IV. "Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath-day..." means "To honour his holy Name and his Word: And to serve him truly all the days of my life."

Moving from the first table of the Law to the second, the Catechism sums it up in these terms: "My duty towards my Neighbour is To love him as myself, and to do to all men as I would they should do unto me."

- V. "Honour thy father and thy mother" means "my Duty ... To love, honour, and succour my father and mother: To honour and obey the civil authority: To submit myself to all my governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters: To order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters."
- VI. "Thou shalt do no murder" means "To hurt nobody by word or deed", and "To bear no malice nor hatred in my heart".
- VII. "Thou shalt not commit adultery". means "to keep my body in temperance, soberness, and chastity"
- VIII. "Thou shalt not steal" means "To keep my hands from picking and stealing" and "To be true and just in all my dealings".
- IX. "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" means "to keep... my tongue from evil speaking, lying, and slandering".
- X. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, ... nor any thing that is his" means "Not to covet nor desire other men's goods; But to learn and labour truly to get mine own living, And to do my duty in that state of life unto which it shall please God to call me."

These interpretations are obviously simple and attuned to the needs of young children, but they indicate some trajectories of interpretation and application that begin in the New Testament and must be extended to our own circumstances. Some readers have chafed at the interpretation's emphasis on the stability of the social order and the restraint of selfish passion – but now that we have gone to the opposite extreme in the Baptismal Covenant of the 1979 Prayer Book we may perhaps better appreciate the modest virtues of the old Catechism. The 1979 promise "to strive for peace and justice among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being", was too easily hi-jacked

by moral agendas insufficiently grounded in the New Testament. By contrast there is something appealing about the modest specificity of a promise "To keep my hands from picking and stealing, and my tongue from evil speaking, lying, and slandering".

## **TWO TABLES**

One final note: there are connections between the first and second tables of the Law, duty to God and duty to neighbor. Love of God (I) pairs with love of neighbor (VI). Those who worshipping no idols (II) will not covet either (IX), for "covetousness is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). Those who call on the Name of the Lord in witness to the truth (III) will not bear false witness against their neighbor (VIII). Those who keep the Sabbath holy, do so after working six days (IV) not after stealing, and they will give of their labours to the relief of the needy (VII) – "upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God that prospered him" (1 Corinthians 16:2). Finally, those who honour one family relation, father and mother (V) will honour another, the spouse (VII). What these connections suggest is that the one requires the other. If you don't love God, you won't love your neighbor – and *vice versa*: "he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" (1 John 4:20). James elaborates the point with regard to the misuse of the tongue in speech: "Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, who are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? Either a vine, figs? So can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh" (James 3:9-12). There is no place for a divided or compartmentalized moral response: "a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8). There is an echo here of Jesus' warning in the Sermon on the Mount: "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matthew 6:24). A consistent, and integrated approach is required – the works which demonstrate that our faith is alive, as James puts it, or "faith which worketh by love" as does St. Paul (Galatians 5:6).

### *Further Reading*

- Matthew, Mark, Luke - *Which is the great commandment in the Law?*
- Matthew 5-7 - *Jesus' definitive interpretation of the Law.*
- Luke 10:25-37 - *Who is my neighbour? The parable of the Samaritan.*
- Ephesians 4:1-6:9 *Walk worthy of the calling wherewith ye are called.*
- James 1:19-2:26 *Be doers of the word, for faith without works is dead.*
- Collect for Trinity I, Prayer Book p. 188- *keeping thy commandments*
- Collect for Trinity XI, Prayer Book p. 204- *running the way of thy commandments*
- Collect for Trinity XXII, Prayer Book p. 220 - *serving in good works*

- Collect for Sunday before Advent, Prayer Book p. 225 - *fruit of good works*

### *Questions for Review*

- How does the Catechism interpret the prohibitions of the Law?
- How does it interpret commandments to do with outward works?
- Where does it find the Biblical basis for this interpretation?
- How are the first and second tables of the Law different? How are they related?

### *Questions for Discussion*

- No law ever can provide for all possible circumstances. What reliable resources might a Christian draw upon to discern the will of God and the application of the Law in varied circumstances?