

The Law—Its Essence vs. Its Implications

—Charles Leiter

The Law—Its Essence

Any discussion of “law” must take as its starting point the being and attributes of the sovereign and self-existent God of the Bible. Apart from God, there *is* no “law,” no “right” or “wrong,” no “good” or “evil.” Specifically, there is no standard of right—no “law”—back of God that He must submit to in order to be “good.” *God Himself*, in the perfect freedom of His will and being, is the standard by which all goodness is defined. That which is like God is “good”; that which is not like God is “evil.”

This means that, in its essence, “law” is not an arbitrary enactment, but *is a necessity grounded in the very character and being of God*. Law is an expression of God’s character as that character relates to the created order. Men are *necessarily* obligated to love God supremely and to love their fellowmen as themselves, *simply because of who God is*—a transcendent and infinitely glorious Creator who “is” love. (1 Jn 4:8,16) “Sin” in the final analysis is therefore “sinful” simply because it contradicts the absolutes of God’s being. And *as a contradiction of God’s being*, sin *necessarily* involves *separation from God*. But God is the fountain of all that constitutes “life.” Sin therefore *necessarily* involves “death” because it involves separation from God. “The soul that sins shall—*of necessity*—die.”

Because “law” is, in its essence, an expression of God’s character, it should be very clear to us that, *since God can never change, the essence of the law can never change*. The essence or summary of the law is, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt 22:40; 7:12) *This is the unchanging duty resting upon all men in all places throughout all time and eternity.*

As a necessary expression of God’s very character, law is both wonderful and terrifying. It is *wonderful* in that it describes all that is lovely, desirable, and Godlike—the pathway of righteousness, peace, and life. It is *terrifying* in that it spells certain doom and destruction—separation from God—for all whose lives are a contradiction of the God that law describes. The existence of God is therefore both the best news imaginable and the worst news imaginable for fallen humanity. Just as certainly as there is an all-glorious and all-righteous self-existent God, so certainly must all the sinful sons of Adam be consigned to eternal separation from Him.

The unspeakable glory of the gospel is that God, by and through the cross of Christ, has satisfied the justice demanded by His own being so that sinful men can be restored to His smile and favor. Through the cross of Christ, we die to the law—not the wonderful aspect of the law, but the terrifying aspect of the law. We move from the realm of condemnation and curse to the realm of justification and blessing, from the realm of sin and death to the realm of righteousness and life, from the realm of requirement to the realm of provision.

The Law—Its Implications

As noted above, the *essential duty* of all men at all times is unchanging. It is important to understand, however, that the *specific implications* of this duty have *not* been made equally clear to all men at all times. In fact, the *implications* of what it means—in terms of concrete actions—to love God supremely and to love one’s neighbor as oneself *have been revealed progressively over time and have varied under varied circumstances*:

- For the *Gentile*—the man without the Bible—they have been revealed only by way of *nature and conscience*—“the work of the law written on the heart.”
- For the *Jew*, they were spelled out in terms of the *Mosaic covenant*. Because of the special circumstances of that covenant, *love to God and man in the setting of the Mosaic covenant necessarily involved obedience to commandments that were typical, ceremonial, and civil*, as well as those that were “weightier” and related directly to the essence of law. For example, “love to God” under the theocracy

meant strictly keeping the Jewish Sabbath and offering the prescribed sacrifices in their appointed times, whereas “love to man” meant literally stoning to death the dearest loved one who counseled departure from the Lord. (Dt. 13:6-11)

- For the *Christian*, the concrete implications of what it means to “love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves” have been revealed in the clearest and highest terms imaginable—the *very character, conduct, life and Person of our Lord Jesus Christ*. They are summarized by the “Law of Christ”: “*as I have loved you.*” (Gal 6:1-2; 1 Cor 9:20-21; John 13:34-35; 15:12-13,17)

When Gentiles “show the work of the Law written in their hearts” (Rom 2:14-15), it is the *essence* of the law that is being manifested. Men know by nature that they should not deceive, steal from, and murder their neighbors—i.e. they know that they should *love* them. (Rom 13:9-10) This is why some form of the “Golden Rule” is found in all of the major world religions. By the same token, men know by nature that they should love and obey God. Eloquent testimony is borne to this inescapable knowledge every time the blood of a chicken (or the blood of a child) is offered on a heathen altar to propitiate an angry “god.”

When the Law of Moses was given, it did *not* set forth any “new law” as to *essence* (an impossibility). It *did* set forth new laws as to *implications*, spelling out in concrete terms what love to God under the theocracy meant, both morally and civilly. (Rom 5:20)

Precisely the same thing could be said regarding the “Law of Christ”—as to *essence* it is one with the Law of Moses and the Law of Conscience, but as to *implications* it is higher and clearer than either of these, and in that sense is called by the Lord “a new commandment.” (John 13:34)

It should be noted that it is not the Law of Moses as such, but the *essence* of that law (and of all law) that is “written on the heart” in the New Covenant—“you yourselves are *taught by God to love* one another.” (Heb 8; 1 Thes 4:9; 1 Jn 3:14, etc.) The Christian *by nature* finds himself filled with *love to God and to his fellowmen*, through the miracle of regeneration and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. *Christ Himself*—the ultimate expression of God’s character—has taken up residency in his heart, and the “righteousness of the law” is thus “fulfilled” in him, as he walks “not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” (Rom 8:1-4; 13:10; Gal 5:13-14, 22-23; 6:1-2)