

Law as a Gift

Scott J. Jones

When my oldest child was a freshman in high school, he was testing the limits of his freedom. He complained about our restrictive rules that kept him from doing “what all the other kids are doing.” We had a curfew by which he had to be home. We monitored whom he was with and demanded to know his location and companions at all times. We expected him to be home for dinner every evening and to do his share of the household chores. We limited the amount of television and which programs he could watch. He said to me, “You are so mean.” I agreed with him, and together we decided that I was the meanest father in Hunt County. When we moved to Denton County, I assumed the title of “meanest father” there as well.

Since that time he has come to thank me for how strict his mother and I were in enforcing our rules. The first glimmer of insight actually came to him when one of his more undisciplined friends in high school said, “I wish my parents loved me enough to make me come home on time.”

What is true for high school students is also true for adults. All human beings need rules. We need to remember the law is a gift for forming human character. Without it, we go astray and end up doing things that destroy relationships and lives; thereby, we sometimes lose our souls. The law is good for us and we need it.



“Yea, the very same words, considered in different respects, are parts both of the law and of the gospel. If they are considered as commandments, they are parts of the law: if as promises, of the gospel ... We may yet farther observe that every command in Holy Writ is only a covered promise.”

—John Wesley

It helps to remember that human beings are sinners. The preaching and teaching of original sin is not a popular topic these days, but it is an essential part of Christian teaching. Our anthropology says there is something deeply wrong with human nature, and we stand in need of God's grace to fix that flaw. Our original sin leads inevitably to actual sins. The problems we find in the world can be traced back to greed, lust, anger, pride, idolatry, racism, sexism, and many other sinful actions committed by human beings.

John Wesley taught, along with many others, that the law has three uses in relation to sin. First, it convinces us of sin. Second, it brings the sinner to life. He then says, "The third use of the law is to keep us alive. It is the grand means whereby the blessed Spirit prepares the believer for larger communications of the life of God."¹

Put into a more modern way of speaking, God's law lets us know when we have done something wrong—it sets the standards for our behavior. It also helps us see how to move out of our destructive life patterns and toward a saving relationship with Christ. Finally, even for the most mature Christians, God's law helps guide us in the Christian life toward God's will for each of us.

Two examples might help us to see this progression. Consider young persons who believe that genuine human fulfillment will come by earning a large salary and spending every available dollar on a big house, fancy car, fashionable clothes, and lots of material possessions. They are self-centered and focused on material accumulation. If they succeed at accumulating lots of money and things, will they be truly happy?

If they knew God's law, they might understand the importance of caring for the poor, the hungry, and the imprisoned (Matthew 25:31-46). They might see that material possessions, however great, are no substitute for love of God and neighbor (Matthew 22:34-40). They might understand the deeper lesson that "those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for [Christ's] sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39). Awakening to the deepest meaning of life is to learn that one's happiness comes from giving rather than receiving.

A second example comes from persons raised in a racist environment. The culture teaches them that persons of a different skin color belong to a different, "sub-human" group that may be treated inhumanely. Racist actions might range from derogatory remarks to subtle exclusion to discriminatory business practices to physical violence. God's law that we should love all of our neighbors comes as a correction to such ideas and behaviors. The

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law says no to evil and leads persons toward righteousness.

Why is preaching the law unpopular today? There are a variety of reasons. One is the loss of community—we find more people spending more time alone with the television or Internet rather than interacting with families or congregations or close friends in meaningful ways. Rules that limit an individual's impulses seem intrusive when community is weak and individualism is strong. One aspect of this loss of community is the decline of intergenerational conversation. Our young people spend far more time with electronic media than they do in conversation with parents, grandparents, pastors, teachers, and other adults. We have a culture driven by advertisements urging persons to break rules rather than obey them.

But there is also a deep theological aspect of this problem, at least in mainline denominations like The United Methodist Church. In some quarters there has been an overreaction to legalism. There has been a perception that Christianity has too often been reduced to a set of rules. As a result, many persons chafed under the rules or regarded them as outdated. The answer for many was to avoid speaking of the law altogether. Instead, preachers, teachers, and lay leaders emphasized the affirming love of God that accepted persons no matter what they did. Accountability to the law was seen as too harsh and unloving.

In reality, God's grace (understood as God's self-giving love for an undeserving humanity) holds both law and gospel in

tension. In Wesleyan terminology, grace both convinces us of sin and justifies us through faith. God loves us so much that God demands obedience to God's will. God expects us to live up to our potential. God yearns for us to be holy. God wants the best for our lives, and God knows that the law helps us to become the best that we can be.

The goal of human existence is sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3). God wants us to love God with all of our heart, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Thus, as we move along the way of salvation, the precepts of the law are gradually written upon our hearts. God's grace

shapes our lives in ways that change us so that we want to do what the law requires. The law forms our character.

Again, two examples will suffice. I know of white persons raised to be racists. While the sin of racism runs deep and perhaps none of us leave it behind totally, I have watched these individuals form relationships with black persons, build friendships with them, and come to a deeper appreciation of the contributions that black culture is making to the larger human community. Their language has changed, their worship styles have changed, and their behavior has changed. God is bringing them toward holiness.

On another front, I have known alcoholics to overcome their drinking problem and find sobriety. They believe that God both convicted them of the sin of drunkenness and also led them to realize the many sinful actions they committed while addicted to alcohol. They also believe God's grace healed them and led them to a stable, loving, and more holy life that they call sobriety.

This two-sided nature of God's grace is captured by Wesley in his rule for interpreting Scripture: "Yea, the very same words, considered in different respects, are parts both of the law and of the gospel. If they are considered as commandments, they are parts of the law: if as promises, of the gospel . . . We may yet farther observe that every command in Holy Writ is only a covered promise."² Whatever God commands us to do, God promises to help us

do it. The law gives us what God's expectations are. The Gospel offers us the grace to help us do what we ought to do.

Two clarifications are necessary. First, by "law" United Methodists mean the moral law. There are ceremonial and civil laws in Scripture that we believe are no longer binding on Christians. (See Article of Religion VI). Many of the laws in the Old Testament have been superseded, and the Holy Spirit has led the church to believe that only the moral laws are still binding.

Second, we are not saved by obedience to the law. We are saved by God's grace and our faithful response to it (Ephesians 2:8-10). However, "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17). I have suggested that Christian doctrine, at its best, occupies the extreme center. By that phrase I mean holding many polarities in tension, including both faith and works. It is faith that saves us, but genuine faith, when given time and opportunity, issues in the kinds of works that fulfill God's law.

We live in a day and time when many Christians want to ignore laws as being too restrictive. Other Christians have become legalists who focus solely on the law and not on God's gift of grace that forgives us and helps us grow toward maturity. Other Christians want to pick the laws most agreeable to their inclinations and not focus on all of God's will for our lives. When we understand that the entirety of God's moral law is a great gift to us, then we will embrace it as the aid to our growth that we genuinely need. □

1. John Wesley, Sermon 34, "The Original, Nature, Properties and Use of the Law," vol. 2, IV. 3., *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 16.

2. John Wesley, Sermon 25, "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, V," vol. 1, II. 2-3, *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 554-555.



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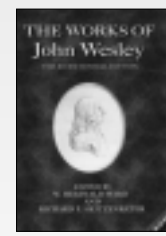
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