

Making Biblical Decisions

LESSON
FOUR

THE NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVE:
PARTS AND ASPECTS OF
SCRIPTURE



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Making Biblical Decisions

Lesson Four

The Normative Perspective: Parts and Aspects of Scripture

INTRODUCTION

A friend of mine recently bought a bicycle for his son. The bicycle required some assembly — things like attaching the wheels and pedals. But there weren't any instructions for assembling the bicycle. Now, my friend knew what a bicycle should look like and how it should work, so he was still able to put it together. But imagine what would have happened if he had never seen a bicycle before. In that case, he might not have been able to assemble it properly.

In some ways, the Bible is like a box of bicycle parts without instructions. Just as it is relatively easy to put together things that are familiar, it is also relatively easy to discover some basic things about the Bible's meaning and proper use. On the other hand, just as it is difficult to put together complicated devices without instructions, it is hard to apply the Bible to complicated ethical questions when we do not understand Scripture's finer workings.

This is the fourth lesson in our series *Making Biblical Decisions*, and we have entitled this lesson "The Normative Perspective: Parts and Aspects of Scripture." As we have stated throughout these lessons, ethical judgment always involves the application of God's Word to a situation by a person. And this has led us to speak of three essential considerations in making biblical decisions: the proper standard of God's Word, which we have associated with the normative perspective on ethics; the proper goal, which accords with the situational perspective; and the proper motive, which corresponds to the existential perspective.

In this lesson we will look for a third time at the normative perspective, exploring the process by which we discern ethical standards in the Bible. And we will be focusing our attention on the different ways the various parts and aspects of Scripture communicate God's norms to us.

We will divide our discussion of the parts and aspects of Scripture into three main parts: First, we will look at the variety of materials we find in Scripture. Second, we will look more closely at the books and passages that comprise God's law in Scripture. And third, we will address the unity of Scripture that draws all of the parts and aspects of the Bible together. Let's begin with the variety we find in Scripture.

VARIETY OF SCRIPTURE

Anyone who has read much of the Bible should recognize that Scripture is not uniform. It contains histories, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, correspondence, and all sorts of other writings. And within each of these writings, we find even further variety. After all, each author wrote in his own way, and his writing itself varied throughout his work.

Sometimes he gave commands; sometimes he explained details; sometimes he recalled a personal experience. And this variety is not accidental. God has ordained each portion of the Bible to contribute in its own way to the standards of Christian ethics. Now, because Scripture communicates in so many different ways, it is not sufficient for us simply to know what the Bible says. We also need to know how the Bible communicates so that when we read what it says, we understand what it means.

The variety we find in the Bible can be described in many different ways, and no single way is comprehensive. But to give a sense of this dimension of Scripture and its implications for Christian ethics, we will touch on three matters: First, we will speak of the variety of language employed in the Bible. Secondly, we will speak of the variety of literature in the Bible. And third, we will look at the implications of this variety for modern ethical teaching. We will begin by looking at the smaller and simpler matters related to language and then move on to the larger and more complex issues of literature.

LANGUAGE

In the first place, the Bible displays the full range of language that we find in all human communication. It contains statements, questions, promises, offers, curses, blessings, threats, judgments quotations, summations, commands, advice, requests, exclamations, descriptions, cries of despair, expressions of desire and admiration and love, and much, much more. Biblical language can be emotionally reserved or emotionally charged. Some of it is quite imaginative, using symbolism and other figures of speech, while other language is relatively unimaginative, expressing matters in a more direct manner. The Bible includes both sarcasm and sincere language. It employs innuendos and allusions as freely as it provides explicit comments. It uses hyperboles and understatements and colloquialisms. And many times it doesn't even bother to state the obvious, but instead merely assumes it.

This tremendous variety of language presents us with a number of challenges when we read the Bible. After all, if we do not know how to recognize these different types of language, and if we don't understand how each one communicates, we are very likely to misunderstand the Bible's teachings.

Now, over the ages, Christians have proposed many ways of dealing with the challenges presented by the Bible's variety of language. But it is safe to say that most of these solutions have fallen into one of two groups: those that believe the Bible uses language in extraordinary ways, and those that believe the Bible uses language in ordinary ways.

Extraordinary

Often, those who believe that the Bible speaks in extraordinary ways offer solutions that ignore the different types of language in the Bible. Instead, they oversimplify biblical language in order to develop a system of interpretation that can be applied fairly equally to all of Scripture.

For example, in the Middle Ages many theologians believed that because the Bible is inspired by God, it communicates in extraordinary ways that exceed human comprehension. In their thinking, every biblical text possessed a variety of symbolic meanings that were sometimes hidden even from the authors of Scripture. Under this system, every text was assumed to have at least some metaphoric meaning, regardless of the human author's intentions.

More recently, many Christians who believe that Scripture's language is extraordinary have gone in the opposite direction. Instead of believing that the extraordinary nature of Scripture makes it hard to interpret, they have insisted that Scripture's extraordinary nature makes its language easy to interpret. Some of these have argued that the Holy Spirit directly reveals true interpretations to his people, so that it is unnecessary to know what type of language one is reading, let alone how it normally communicates meaning. Others have argued that Scripture's language should always be interpreted as literally as possible, so that metaphoric meanings are only sought when non-figurative meanings do not make good sense.

For example, it is apparent that in ordinary communication human beings commonly use hyperboles, or overstatements. But many Christians who are committed to biblical authority do not acknowledge that hyperboles appear in the Bible. Instead, they treat every statement in Scripture as if it were straightforward, detached, and precise.

In ordinary speech and writing, we often summarize matters, expecting our audiences to fill in the gaps with other knowledge they have. Yet, some Christians find it difficult to acknowledge that inspired writers did the same thing. Instead, they treat passages as if they were utterly comprehensive, rather than limited in their scope.

Beyond this, we recognize that in ordinary writing and speech, we will often be sarcastic and say just the opposite of what we mean. Yet, many believers find it hard to accept that sarcasm appears in the Bible.

In contrast to these opinions that Scripture's language is extraordinary, is the view that the Bible communicates in ordinary human language, using all the normal conventions of human communication.

Ordinary

You will recall that in a prior lesson, we spoke of the clarity of Scripture by which we meant that the Bible is not obscure, that it is not filled with hidden meanings that can only be discovered through mysterious means, or through special spiritual gifting, or by those who hold special offices in the church. In other words, Scripture is clear only if it speaks in ordinary language and communicates in normal ways.

To demonstrate that the bible communicates in ordinary human language, let's consider a couple passages where an overly literal reading would be terribly misleading. Think about the petition in Matthew 6:11, which is part of the Lord's Prayer:

Give us today our daily bread (Matthew 6:11).

When this verse is read in an artificially literal way apart from the conventions of normal human expressions, it looks like Jesus commanded God to give him bread.

In fact, all the petitions in the Lord's Prayer take the form of imperatives, including not only "Give us today our daily bread," but also "deliver us from the evil one." And it is true that in Greek grammar, imperatives are often commands.

This fact has led some Christians who read the Bible in an overly literal way to conclude that Jesus' words were commands to God. And of course, since the Lord's Prayer is a model that we are to follow in our own prayers, they have also concluded that we have the right to issue commands to God!

But from the rest of Scripture, including Jesus' own words in the Lord's Prayer, we know that imperative verbs are frequently used to express petitions and requests. The same is also true in English. For instance, we say, "Pass the bread, please." Or "Help me, please!" These statements are imperatives. But when we say these words, we are not ordinarily issuing commands. Consider also Amos 4:4, where the prophet said this:

Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more (Amos 4:4).

An overly literal reading of these words has led some interpreters to think that Amos actually wanted his listeners to sin against the Lord at the idolatrous worship centers in Bethel and Gilgal. But this kind of reading is unnatural and does not account for the prophet's intentions revealed in other statements. For example, in Amos 5:5 the prophet said:

Do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal (Amos 5:5).

From this verse and from the rest of the book of Amos, we should conclude that when the prophet ordered the people to sin at Bethel and Gilgal, he spoke sarcastically, meaning just the opposite of what he said. He didn't want them to sin in these places, but to stop sinning in them.

The mechanics of the Bible's language are not unique to Scripture. Instead, the Bible uses the linguistic conventions of its authors and their original audiences. This means that if we are to interpret the Bible responsibly, we have to learn how they ordinarily used language, and we have to understand what each author's intent was when he wrote. If the author designed his words to be understood metaphorically, then we should read them metaphorically, searching the text for the meaning the author intended. On the other hand, if the biblical author crafted his words plainly and directly, then our responsibility is to interpret his words in a non-figurative way.

LITERATURE

Just as there are many varieties of language in Scripture, there are also many varieties of literature. These are larger, more complex forms than language, and they are somewhat more difficult to master. But understanding them is central to handling the various parts and aspects of Scripture responsibly.

There are many different forms or genres of literature in Scripture. To name only a few, biblical literature includes: prose, poetry, song, law, narrative, letter, vow, epistle, prophetic oracle, proverb, parable, and drama. And within these broader forms, there are

often multiple smaller categories. For instance, within the literary form of prophetic oracle, we find oracles of judgment, oracles of blessing, oracles patterned after lawsuits, and so on. These forms are distinguished by their content as well as by their structure, style, and use of language. Moreover, each biblical genre communicates meaning in various ways. So, just as we must be aware of the complexities of language in the Bible, we also need to be aware of the complexities of various literary forms.

Usually when we do ethics, we focus on passages in the Bible that contain laws or that directly teach moral standards and obligations. And these passages are certainly important to our study of ethics. But we should not make the mistake of thinking that the other genres have little or nothing to offer in the way of ethical instruction. For our purposes, we should note that biblical narratives also communicate ethical rules and regulations. Poetry and songs express ethical concerns. Proverbs and other wisdom writings reflect on ethical values. Prophecy expresses God's ethical judgments in the form of pleasure or displeasure toward human actions.

In fact, as we saw in our earlier lessons, every passage in the Bible reveals God's character, and thus every passage contains ethical teaching, whether that passage is a legal code, or a letter, or a poem, or a collection of proverbs, or a historical narrative, or any other type of literature. For this reason, when we do ethics we need to search all types of biblical literature for their revelations of God's ethical standards.

To illustrate the idea that all genres found in Scripture should guide our ethical reflections, let's consider the case of biblical narratives. Certainly the biblical writers were interested in recording historical facts. But they were also interested in using those facts to elicit faith and to teach moral lessons. We will mention five specific ways in which historical narratives contribute to our study and practice of Christian ethics.

First, on a very basic level, biblical narratives obligate us to accept their factual content. We are morally obligated to believe that the details of redemptive history are true. This is especially true when it comes to the central events of the gospel, such as Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, and his sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But it is also true with regard to every other fact Scripture teaches us through historical narratives. The mere presentation of these facts in biblical narratives obligates us to believe them.

The second reason that biblical narratives are important to Christian ethics is that biblical history has the power to transform us ethically. That is to say, knowing the content of biblical history is part of becoming a Christian.

As we saw in our first lesson, only good people are capable of doing good things. And only those who have genuine saving faith in the gospel are good people. Of course, in order for us to have saving faith in Christ, we must know who Christ is and what he has done. And these are facts we learn from the Bible's historical record. So, knowing some Biblical history is necessary if we are to have saving faith in Christ. And therefore it is fair to say that knowing some biblical history is necessary if we are to behave ethically.

Third, biblical narratives provide the historical setting for God's laws. To understand the law of God properly, we must understand the historical context in which the law was given. For example, we must see that biblical narratives emphasize God's grace in order to motivate us to obey his law. Even the Ten Commandments begin in this way. As we read in Exodus 20:2, God began by saying:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery (Exodus 20:2).

This short historical statement introduced the Ten Commandments, and provided a central motivation to obey them. In fact, striving to obey them without the motivation of gratitude will never lead to true obedience to the commandments. After all, as we saw in a prior lesson, all good acts must have good motivations.

So, biblical narratives are important for ethics because we can only understand God's laws properly when we understand biblical history.

Fourth, biblical narratives present God's evaluation of historical events. And because God's evaluations are always correct, they provide us with firm ethical guidance.

You will recall that we have defined "good" as that which God blesses, and "evil" as that which he curses or punishes. Well, in biblical narratives, writers illustrate the kinds of actions, thoughts, and motivations that God blesses and curses. By doing so, they provide their readers with examples to follow and to reject.

Finally, on occasion the writers of biblical history recorded their own ethical comments. Sometimes these comments are subtle, but other times they are quite blatant. For example, in Genesis 13:12-13 Moses made this comment about the people of Sodom:

Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord (Genesis 13:12-13).

Moses' moral evaluation of Sodom not only calls Lot's wisdom into question, but also anticipates the justice that God would soon bring to the city.

As God's inspired spokesmen, the authors of biblical historical records commented on the goodness or evil of many of the characters, attitudes, and events in their stories. Their evaluations represent the outlooks of God himself and therefore provide us with many ethical considerations.

So, what are the implications of using all the Scriptures as our ethical standard? In the first place, what we have seen about historical narratives is also true of other types of biblical literature: every type of literature is normative; every type of literature teaches us something about the way we should think, act and feel. And as a result, every passage in the Bible places moral obligations on us.

For instance, biblical poetry often focuses on appropriate emotional expression, and it frequently describes God's approval and disapproval. Prophecy demonstrates God's satisfaction or anger with human behavior. It also reveals many good things to do to gain God's favor, and warns against sinful things that will incur his wrath. Wisdom literature explains God's character, which is our ultimate ethical norm, and it teaches us how to apply the principles of the law to practical Christian living. Even when ethical considerations are not stressed in a passage, they can always be inferred.

Consider again Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Paul insisted that all Scripture, regardless of literary genre, equips Christians to please God. Moreover, since every passage of Scripture is relevant to ethics, it is legitimate to focus on the moral aspects of any given passage — even if the biblical author did not emphasize the moral aspect himself. In short, if we ignore the ethical implications of any portion of Scripture, we cut ourselves off from the full scope of ethical guidance offered in God’s revelation.

IMPLICATIONS

Now, the fact that Scripture uses so many types of language and literature to teach us about ethics has some interesting implications for the way we teach ethics today. For one thing, Scripture’s variety implies that our own teaching of ethics might benefit from using different genres.

It is true that direct ethical instruction helps us understand many things. But something is also lost when we rely entirely on straightforward instruction. Simple statements often do not touch our emotions in the same way that poetry and narratives do, just as the plain ethical instructions in Scripture are rarely as moving or memorable to us as the Psalms or the stories about Jesus. The situations explored in typical ethics lectures are seldom as subtle as those in narratives. And simple statements rarely move us to ponder moral issues the way proverbs do.

So, at times it may be helpful to teach and preach ethics in the various forms of language used by Scripture itself. In some settings, our teachings on ethical decision making will be more effective if we use our own poetic imagery, stories, proverbs, parables, and other genres that are not usually associated with ethics.

So, as we think specifically about Christian ethics, we need to remember that all the varieties of language and literature in Scripture are normative. And we also need to pay special attention to the different ways in which each type of language and literature communicates ethical instruction. Only by handling each type appropriately can we properly understand its ethical teachings.

Now that we have introduced how the different forms of language and literature in the Bible guide us in our use of Scripture as our moral standard, we should turn our attention to God’s law in Scripture, to those portions of the Bible that address ethics most explicitly.

GOD’S LAW IN SCRIPTURE

In Christian and Jewish traditions, the five books of Moses — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy — are known collectively as “the Law.” But when

we speak of God's law in these lessons, we will not be referring primarily to the books of Moses but to those portions of Scripture that are written in the literary form of a legal code. Those portions are found primarily in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. But those books also contain historical narrative, poetry, lists and other portions that are not part of their legal code. Moreover, some portions of the legal code are found outside the books of Moses.

Now, as we have said, God's law is not the only part of Scripture that contains normative ethical instruction. All Scripture is normative. But the law contains the clearest and most explicit expressions of many of God's ethical requirements, and has traditionally served well as a starting place for ethical investigation.

Our look into God's law will divide into two sections: First, we will explain the importance of the Ten Commandments, which are the foundational commandments in God's law. And second, we will introduce the three different types of God's law that theologians have traditionally recognized. Let's begin by turning our attention to the Ten Commandments.

TEN COMMANDMENTS

The Ten Commandments are listed in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5. Various theological traditions enumerate the commandments differently, but in these lessons we will follow the traditional Protestant numbering. The Ten Commandments may be summarized as follows:

- Commandment 1: You shall have no other gods before me.
- Commandment 2: You shall not make for yourself an idol.
- Commandment 3: You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
- Commandment 4: Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
- Commandment 5: Honor your father and your mother.
- Commandment 6: You shall not murder.
- Commandment 7: You shall not commit adultery.
- Commandment 8: You shall not steal.
- Commandment 9: You shall not give false testimony.
- Commandment 10: You shall not covet.

Although some theologians treat the Ten Commandments as if they were just another portion of the Mosaic Law, the Bible indicates that the Ten Commandments have a special primacy over Scripture's other commandments.

The primacy of the Ten Commandments is both historical and theological. Their historical primacy depends on the fact that, to our knowledge, these laws were the first written legal code that was received by the nation of Israel. Paul called special attention to this fact in Galatians 3:17 where he wrote these words:

The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God (Galatians 3:17).

Paul referred to the giving of the Ten Commandments as the “introduction” of the law, indicating that this was the first time Israel had possessed God’s law in this form. Israel received the Ten Commandments through Moses, who himself received the Ten Commandments directly from God on Mount Sinai. By receiving the Ten Commandments, Israel became the first nation to possess an extensive, supernaturally revealed code of God’s holy requirements.

Of course, God’s people still had many commandments prior to Moses’ time. We see very clearly in the Flood of Noah’s day that God had a number of standards that he expected people to follow. And when the people failed to obey God, he destroyed the whole planet with the floodwaters. Moreover, Abraham was not without laws and stipulations to obey. In Genesis 17:1, God had given him the broad and demanding instruction:

Walk before me and be blameless (Genesis 17:1).

Now, the Ten Commandments were not the only laws given to Israel as they camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. But they served as the preliminary and summary statement for a great number of laws that Israel received immediately afterward while they were still camped at Mount Sinai. These other laws, commonly known as the Book of the Covenant, can be found in Exodus 21–23. Together with the Ten Commandments, the Book of the Covenant formed Israel’s initial written legal code. Later, this code was expanded to include many other laws.

In addition to having a temporal primacy, the Ten Commandments also had theological or ideological primacy. As we read in Exodus 24:12:

The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for their instruction” (Exodus 24:12).

For one thing, unlike the book of the covenant that Moses penned according to the book of instructions, God himself wrote the Ten Commandments on stone tablets. Deuteronomy 9:10 confirms that God himself carved the Ten Commandments in the stone tablets. There Moses claimed:

The Lord gave me two stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God (Deuteronomy 9:10).

By carving the Ten Commandments himself, God demonstrated that the Ten Commandments were special among his laws, that they deserved special attention and notice, and were, in some sense, the most important of his commandments.

The theological primacy of the Ten Commandments is also indicated by the special occasion on which Israel received them. The giving of the law was attended by thunder and lightning, smoke, clouds, and heavenly trumpets. During this time, God allowed himself to be viewed not only by Moses, but also by Joshua, Aaron, and the seventy elders of Israel.

The Ten Commandments' theological primacy is also emphasized in Deuteronomy 4:13 where Moses identified the Ten Commandments as God's very covenant with his people:

[God] declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets (Deuteronomy 4:13).

Beyond this, according to Exodus 40:20, The Ten Commandments were also placed within the Ark of the Covenant, God's footstool, which was the religious object most closely associated with God's presence with Israel. The Book of the Covenant and the rest of the laws did not receive this special recognition. For instance, in Matthew 19:17-19, we read the following discussion between Jesus a man who asked him how to inherit eternal life:

Jesus replied ... "If you want to enter life, obey the commandments." "Which ones?" the man inquired. Jesus replied, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 19:17-19).

The laws that Jesus listed were from the Ten Commandments, except for the instruction on loving neighbors, which is from Leviticus 19:18 and which summarizes the laws Jesus mentioned from Ten Commandments. In short, Jesus indicated that by obeying the Ten Commandments, a person can earn eternal life. Of course, Jesus also taught that no one is good enough to obey these commandments. But the point for our discussion is that Jesus confirmed the importance of the Ten Commandments in a very remarkable way. Even in the New Testament, the Ten Commandments were still spoken of in terms that reflected their theological primacy.

The historical and theological primacy that the Bible gives to the Ten Commandments has also been recognized and reflected in Christian and Jewish traditions throughout history. For example, synagogues commonly display symbols of the Ten Commandments. And the two stone tablets of the Commandments are extremely common in Christian iconography, as well. Beyond this, the commandments have also been a vital part of Christian liturgy. In short, for many centuries Christian and Jewish traditions have agreed that this portion of God's law holds a special primacy over Scripture's other ethical instructions.

Now that we have seen the importance and priority that the Scriptures place on the Ten Commandments, we should turn our attention to the three traditional categories, or types of law, that we find in Scripture.

THREE TYPES OF LAW

In most protestant branches of the church, it has been common to categorize the various laws in the Old Testament Bible into three major groups: moral law, ceremonial

law, and civil law. Moral laws are typically thought to convey God's ethical standards and are usually identified with the Ten Commandments. Civil laws provide for the governing of society, especially during the period of Israel's theocracy. Ceremonial laws, in turn, are those which provide instruction for worshipping God. Frequently, these are most closely associated with the Old Testament sacrificial system, and Tabernacle and Temple administration.

These distinctions have played such an important role in the history of the church that we will look at them more carefully, first addressing some important qualifications of the traditional divisions; second, affirming the value of these divisions; and third, discussing the proper application of the traditional categories of law to the study of ethics. Let's think first about some qualifications of the threefold division of the Old Testament laws.

Qualifications

Although there are many positive things that can be said about the traditional threefold division of the law, categorizing the laws in Scripture is not without its challenges. In the first place, most biblical scholars rightly notice that the three traditional categories are not taught explicitly in the Bible. That is, nowhere in Scripture do we find any definitive statement that there are distinct types of laws known as moral, ceremonial and civil, let alone instructions explaining which laws belong in which categories. Now, these categories have validity in many ways, but we must not think of them as obvious or clear in every respect.

In the second place, Scripture rather plainly presents some laws as belonging to more than one category. For example, in Exodus 20:8-11, the command to observe Sabbath is explicitly set within the Ten Commandments, the moral law. Yet, the Sabbath commandment is also set within a collection of Israel's worship ceremonies in Exodus 31:14-16.

Scripture also rather explicitly identifies the commandment forbidding murder as both moral and civil. This commandment is also one of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:13, marking it as a moral law. But the Old Testament also made it clear that government was to punish murderers, making murder a civil matter too.

So, as we look at Old Testament laws, we must be aware that many laws clearly fall into more than one division. In fact, it is safe to say that all the laws in the Old Testament had moral, civil, and ceremonial aspects.

Think about it this way. No matter what may appear most prominently in a particular text, every law was a standard of morality; every law had a direct or indirect bearing on social relations that were regulated by civil laws; and in one way or another, observances and violations of all laws affected the manner in which the people of Israel participated in the ceremonies of worship. For this reason, it is often better to speak of different "aspects" of laws rather than placing each law into one of the divisions of the law.

Despite these qualifications, we should also be aware that the traditional threefold division has substantial value when it comes to understanding how God intended his law to apply to his people.

Value

In the first place, the traditional threefold division helps us see more clearly that the Law was God's comprehensive standard for his people's lives. The law did not just regulate a small portion of life; it regulated all of life. This is evident because the traditional threefold division of the law reflects a genuine distinction that Scripture draws between the three offices that governed Israel's theocracy, namely, those of prophet, priest and king. Moral law corresponds closely to the prophetic office, which sets forth God's command for righteousness. Ceremonial law fits well with the priestly office since it pertains directly to functions carried out by priests, such as expiation. And civil law is closely related to the office of king, the governing head of the covenant people of God.

In the second place, this threefold distinction helps us interpret laws the Bible does not fully explain. By grouping similar laws together, theologians are better able to determine the original meaning and application of many laws about which the Bible says very little. After all, when the Bible gives us extensive information about applying one law but very little about a similar law, it is reasonable to use the insights from the first to inform our understanding of the second.

Now that we have looked at some qualifications of the traditional division of the law and emphasized its value for understanding Scripture, we should turn our attention to our third concern: the proper application of the traditional threefold division of law to the study of ethics.

Application

Although many theologians agree on the validity of the traditional categories of Old Testament law, they often disagree on how to apply these categories to the study of ethics. Some have said that whole categories of laws don't apply to modern Christians. In their understanding, the existence of these categories, and the proper identification of laws, provides a mechanism by which they can avoid applying God's Word to their lives. Other theologians have said that all the individual laws still apply, but only with regard to some of their aspects. Still others have argued that the traditional categories simply help us to see how each aspect of each law should be applied in the life of every Christian.

Consider, for example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith's* statement in chapter 19, section 3:

All ... ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the new testament.

This statement reflects the fact that since the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Christ, God's people are no longer to perform many of the specific behaviors that were required under the Mosaic sacrificial and temple system. We are no longer to maintain the temple, or to restrict women and Gentiles from access to God's holy presence, or to sacrifice animals for our sin.

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* makes a similar statement with regard to civil law, but allows that the general equity, or basic moral principles, of civil laws continue to apply. It speaks of Israel's civil laws in chapter 19, section 4 where it states:

To them 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.

Again, the basic idea here is that the specific requirements of the civil laws no longer apply; they have “expired.”

Now, it is true that believers no longer have to behave in many of the ways specified in the Old Testament, especially with regard to laws that pertain to Old Testament ceremony and civil government. These behaviors have been superseded by the fuller revelation of the New Testament. The civil and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament really have “expired” in the sense that we are not to return to Old Testament patterns of life.

But it is critical to realize that in another sense the Old Testament civil and ceremonial laws still apply to modern Christians. The civil and ceremonial laws still guide us as God's standard today, just as the moral laws do.

There are at least four reasons that Christians should still look to the civil and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, as well as to its moral laws, for ethical guidance today.

First, God's character requires us to learn from the revelation these laws provide. As we have already seen, God's character is our ultimate standard for ethics. And the Old Testament law reflects God's character; it is a revelation of who God is and what he is like. And God's character has not changed. This means that everything the Law revealed about God in the Old Testament continues to be true today. In short, the Old Testament's civil and ceremonial laws still reveal our moral standard.

Second, Scripture itself teaches the continuing modern application of every Old Testament law, down to the last one. For example, in Matthew 5:18-19 Jesus gave this teaching:

Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:18-19).

According to Jesus, every law will continue to reveal God's standard until “everything is accomplished.” But everything is not accomplished yet — Christ has not yet returned. Until he does, even the least of the commandments is to be taught and observed. So, in one way or another, even the civil and ceremonial laws continue to teach us God's norms for our lives.

Third, the stubborn fact is that the Bible consistently teaches that the law is a unified whole, that it all stands together, without regard to distinctions between ceremonial, civil or moral divisions. For example, in James 2:10-11 we read these words:

Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder” (James 2:10-11).

In the mind of James, the law was indivisible because it all came from the same God.

Fourth, all of Scripture, not just some parts, is for our moral instruction. This means that the ceremonial and civil laws as well as the moral laws have something to teach us about modern ethics. As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16:

All Scripture is ... useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

Note that Paul did not list any exceptions here. On the contrary, he included “all Scripture.” This means that even the ceremonial and civil laws are useful for training us in the ways of righteousness.

Now, realizing that the civil and ceremonial laws are still part of our ethical standard in Christian ethics is an important first step. But it is also important to know how to include these types of law in our ethical evaluations. After all, we have already established that we are not simply to continue Old Testament behaviors with regard to these laws. So, what are we supposed to do with these laws? What process of application should we follow?

Throughout this series of lessons we have emphasized that ethical decisions always involve the application of God’s Word to a situation by a person. As a result, the standard of any law, whether it emphasizes moral, civil, or ceremonial aspects, cannot be properly understood or applied without considering both the situation to which it is applied and the person who applies it. And whenever the details of the situation or the person change, we can expect the application of God’s Word to be at least somewhat different.

For the sake of illustration, it will help to consider a test case from the Old Testament in which a civil law was applied to a historical situation. So, consider the case of Zelophehad’s daughters who are mentioned in Numbers 27. According to the law that God had given earlier regarding the distribution of the Promised Land, allotments were to be distributed to families, and they were to be divided among the sons. Now, Zelophehad was a man who had died in the wilderness leaving five daughters but no sons. According to the law of property distribution that God had commanded, Zelophehad’s daughters could not inherit their father’s land. So, the daughters appealed to Moses. We read their petition in Numbers 27:3-4:

Our father died in the desert... and left no sons. Why should our father’s name disappear from his clan because he had no son? Give us property among our father’s relatives (Numbers 27:3-4).

Now, if the Lord had intended the law to be applied woodenly or mechanically, the case would have been clear-cut. As the law stood, Zelophehad's daughters could not receive an inheritance in the Promised Land. But in the next verse, a very remarkable thing happened. Listen to the words of Numbers 27:5:

So Moses brought their case before the Lord (Numbers 27:5).

Isn't that amazing? Moses had delivered the law about property distribution and was the supreme judge in Israel. Above all others in that nation, he had intimate knowledge of the ways of God and of the details of God's law. If anyone should have known how to judge this case, Moses was the man. So, why didn't he know what decision to render?

Moses understood that the law God had given him was designed to manage a situation where there were sons. And he knew that the goal of this law was to secure each family's place within its tribe and to preserve their allotments of tribal lands. But in the case of Zelophehad's daughters, Moses faced the issue of how to apply the standard revealed by this law to a new situation. He needed help from God because he knew that the new situation would affect how he was to apply the law. And God's response is noteworthy. Listen to what God said in Numbers 27:7-8:

What Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right... Say to the Israelites, "If a man dies and leaves no son, turn his inheritance over to his daughter" (Numbers 27:7-8).

The passage goes on to list a number of other instances in which a man's inheritance might fall to people other than his sons. But the point we are making is this: God indicated that the same aspect of his character was to be applied in different ways in different situations. In many respects, Christians face the same difficulty Moses faced: we have the standard of God's law, but we need to apply it to a new situation. The entire law must be reinterpreted and applied in the light of Christ and his work.

As priest, Christ fulfills the ceremonial aspects of the law. The ceremonial principles of the law are still binding, and we are to follow them by trusting Christ as our sacrifice, and by worshiping in Spirit and in truth.

As king, Christ fulfills the civil aspects of the law. And the church, which is his nation on the earth, is bound to obey these aspects not only by living rightly under our respective earthly governments, which are under Christ's greater lordship, but also by directly honoring Christ as king and by keeping his commandments.

And finally, as prophet, Christ fulfills the moral aspects of the law. We depend on Christ's morality alone as the basis for our acceptance before God. Yet, we must also conform ourselves to Christ's image and example seeking to live as morally as he did during his earthly ministry and as he continues to do in heaven.

In summary, the categories of moral, ceremonial and civil law are helpful in many ways, especially when we think of them as aspects of each law rather than as distinct categories. But these categories should never be used as the basis for ignoring any portion or aspect of God's laws. As we have seen, all of God's law remains our standard for morality, and we are obligated to apply all of God's law to our modern situation. Every bit of God's law still serves as our norm for Christian ethics.

Now that we have established a basic orientation toward the variety of Scripture, and God's law in Scripture, we should explore the unity of Scripture, considering the ways in which the law relates to the other portions of God's written revelation.

UNITY OF SCRIPTURE

It is very common in the modern church to hear Bible teachers say things like, "Christians don't have to obey the law — we just have to believe the gospel," or "The only law that God requires us to obey is the law of love." Now, admittedly, not everything the Bible says about these matters is perfectly clear. But if we rightly analyze all the biblical data, what we discover is that the unity of Scripture is so great that the law is completely compatible with everything else in the Bible.

In this section of our lesson we will look at several ways in which the law interacts with other teachings in Scripture. We will look first at the way the law relates to the commandment of love. Second, we will turn our attention to the relationship between the law and the gospel of grace. Third, we will examine the law in relation to redemptive history and the new covenant. And fourth, we will tackle the issue of the harmony of all divine commands. Let's begin with the law's relationship to the commandment of love.

COMMANDMENT OF LOVE

When we speak of the "love commandment," we are speaking first and foremost of the commandment to love God. And by implication from this commandment, we are also referring to the commandment to love one another. Although neither of these commandments appears in the Ten Commandments, they both have a certain priority that must be acknowledged. As Jesus stated in Matthew 22:37-40:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).

Here, Jesus identified the commandment to love God as the greatest commandment of all. He also indicated that the commandment to love our neighbor is the second most important law. And he taught that every other commandment depends upon these two laws. So, every other commandment is, in some sense, a description of how we are to love both God and our neighbors.

In fact, Paul went so far as to say this in Romans 13:9-10:

The commandments ... are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ... Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:9-10).

And in Galatians 5:14 he wrote:

The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:14).

Now, it is important to read Paul’s words with great care, because many theologians have made the mistake of thinking that in these verses Paul taught that Christians do not have to obey any law except the law to love our neighbor. In truth, however, Paul was saying that the command to love our neighbor is inseparable from every other command because all of Scripture’s commands teach us how to love our neighbor. So, if we genuinely, perfectly love our neighbor, we will keep every law that God has given.

To put it another way, neither Jesus nor Paul intended to replace the many various stipulations of the law with a simpler formula requiring only love for God and neighbor. Rather, they both intended to teach that the requirements to love God and neighbor are an aspect of every law and, therefore, that a person who loves perfectly will keep every commandment of the law. Consider, for example, Deuteronomy 6, from which Jesus quoted in the passage from Matthew that we just read. Deuteronomy 6:1-5 reads:

These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you ... so that you ... may fear the Lord your God ... by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you... Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deuteronomy 6:1-5).

Here we can see that, in its original context, the passage Jesus quoted about loving God was inseparably tied to all the various commandments of the law that God had given through Moses. Love for God was never intended to replace the other requirements.

So, as we seek to understand how to use the law in Christian ethics, we need to keep in mind the primacy and importance of love. Indeed, we need to remember that the entire law of God is summed up in the commands to love God and neighbor. But at the same time, we need to recognize that Scripture’s emphasis on the love commandment does not exempt us from keeping all the other laws in the Bible.

Now that we have examined the interdependence between the love commandment and the rest of the law, we are ready to explore the way the gospel of grace relates to God’s law.

GOSPEL OF GRACE

A common misunderstanding among Christians is that the law is contrary to the gospel of grace. Many believe that because we are saved by grace apart from works of the law, we have absolutely no obligation to obey the law. Others believe that the law is

properly seen only as a threat and terror against sinners, whereas the gospel, by contrast, is what saves us after the law has condemned us. In all actuality, there are so many views about the relationship between the law and the gospel of grace that we cannot possibly mention them all. So, to counter an entire host of false notions, we will describe the biblical perspective on this relationship by focusing on what have traditionally been called the “three uses of the law.”

Since the Protestant Reformation, theologians have frequently spoken of three different ways the law is used in Scripture. Although much agreement exists about the validity of several different uses, theologians have not always been consistent in numbering these uses. So, to avoid confusion, in these lessons we will refer to the three uses of the law in the following order:

The first use of the law is the pedagogical use, or the use of the law as a teacher. When used pedagogically, the law drives men to Christ by inciting and exposing their sin, and threatening punishment against it.

The second use of the law is the civil use. When we use the law for a civil end, we use it to restrain sin in society. This use is sometimes associated with external discipline.

The third use of the law is the normative use. This is the use of the law as a guide or rule for faithful Christians.

The pedagogical or first use of the law speaks of the way God’s law enlivens sin within unbelievers and shows them their need for Christ. We all know the experience of learning that something is forbidden and being drawn all the more to do it. Paul wrote about his own experience with the pedagogical use of the law in Romans 7:7-8, where he wrote these words:

I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire (Romans 7:7-8).

This use of the law is commonly associated with the biblical teaching that believers were once under law, but are now under grace. When unbelievers are confronted by the law’s standards and penalties, they are incited to sin even more, and they recognize the punishment or curse that the law threatens against them because of their sin. This threat drives some unbelievers to Christ, who graciously saves them from the law’s curse. This is the idea behind Paul’s words in Romans 6:14:

Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace (Romans 6:14).

In this sense, the pedagogical use of the law does not apply directly to believers. Once a person has been driven to Christ, the law has finished its work in this regard. So, with regard to the pedagogical use, we are no longer under the law.

The civil or second use of the law involves the way the law restrains sin by threatening punishment against those who violate it. We can think of ways we restrain our own behavior for fear of punishment by those who hold civil authority over us. This use of the law is for believers and unbelievers alike, and it focuses especially on God’s

place for civil government as an instrument for restraining evil. In future lessons we will address many subjects related to this use of the law, so for now we will simply mention it and note that it is not incompatible with the gospel of grace.

The third or normative use of the law, however, is very helpful to study when we think about the law in terms of the gospel and Christian ethics. The normative use applies the law in the way that we have been using it in these lectures, namely, as a revelation of God's will for Christian living. We might compare it to the household rules that our parents made to keep us safe and that we obeyed because we loved and trusted our parents. For example, listen to the words of 1 John 3:4:

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

John wrote these words long after Christ had ascended into heaven. Nevertheless, he asserted that the law remains the standard for our behavior. He even went so far as to define all sin in terms of breaking the law. To put it simply, the law is still the standard by which Christian behavior is judged to be righteous or sinful. And many passages indicate that when the law is used as a standard for Christian behavior, it is perfectly compatible with the gospel.

Before we were saved, we were all sinners, incapable of keeping the law. We were under the law's curse because we were lawbreakers. But now that we are saved, we are counted as perfect law-keepers in Christ, so that we receive the law's promised blessings of salvation and life. Paul referred to this state as being "under grace" to contrast it with being under the law's curse.

In short, while believers are not "under law" in the sense that we suffer its curse when we sin, we are "under law" in the sense that we receive its blessings, and in the sense that we are obligated to obey it. In James 1:25 James puts the matter this way:

The man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does (James 1:25).

Now that we have seen how God's law complements both the love commandment and the gospel of grace, we should look at the law in relation to the new covenant and the developments of redemptive history.

NEW COVENANT

When we speak of redemptive history and the new covenant, we are referring to the changes that took place between the Old and New Testament eras as a result of the work of Jesus Christ. And at this point, we are most interested in the way these changes affect our use of the law in Christian ethics. In the Old Testament, the new covenant is mentioned by name only once, and that is in Jeremiah 31:31. The New Testament, on the other hand, refers to it several times. The most helpful mention for our purposes,

however, can be found in Hebrews 8, where the author quotes extensively from Jeremiah 31 and applies it to the church. In Hebrews 8:8-10 we read these words:

I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah... I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people (Hebrews 8:8-10).

Notice that in this passage the new covenant is not something that frees us from the law. Rather, in the new covenant, the law is still central. In fact, the law is written in our minds and hearts as the rules of the new covenant.

The image of the law being written in our hearts and minds indicates that we know and love the law. Far from leaving the law behind us as a thing of the past, in the new covenant we internalize the law and keep it earnestly. In truth, this is precisely how the law was to be observed even in the old covenant. As the Lord spoke in Deuteronomy 6:6:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts (Deuteronomy 6:6).

And as the psalmist testified in Psalm 119:11:

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you (Psalm 119:11).

God's word was always supposed to be in the hearts and minds of his people, and it really was in the hearts and minds of many, even in the old covenant. The writing of the law on our hearts and minds is not something new or different in the new covenant; it is a point of continuity with the old covenant.

We might even say that the new covenant gives us even greater reasons to obey the law. After all, in the Old Testament believers looked back to the exodus from Egypt and toward life in the Promised Land as the grounds for their obedience to the law. But today Christians look back on the much greater work of salvation in Christ and forward to the even greater work of Christ in his second coming as the grounds for our obedience to the law.

But again, it is important that as Christians we reapply the law in light of the changes that have taken place between the old and new covenants. As the author of Hebrews wrote in 10:1 of his book:

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves (Hebrews 10:1).

In the new covenant, Christ has been revealed as the one whom the law prefigured. And as a result, many laws that obligated old covenant believers to do such things as perform sacrifices are now fulfilled by the reality that they foreshadowed, namely, the sacrifice of

Christ. As a result, we rightly keep these laws by relying on Jesus as our sacrifice, not by sacrificing bulls and goats.

In future lessons, we will look more closely at the kinds of adjustments we must make as we apply the law to the New Testament age. But for now, it should be clear that in principle the law applies during the new covenant age.

Now that we have explored the law in relation to love, the gospel, and the new covenant, we are ready to address our final topic: the harmony of all God's commands with one another.

HARMONY

In the legal system of the Bible there are a great number of laws and requirements. These are so numerous and touch on so many matters that these laws sometimes appear to conflict with one another. Conflict between rules is a problem that every deontological or rule-oriented ethical system faces. But in the case of biblical law, there are no real contradictions; God's laws never actually conflict with one another, just as God's character never conflicts with itself. Instead, all the moral teachings of Scripture are in perfect harmony with each other.

As we saw in James 2:10, the law is a unified whole:

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it (James 2:10).

Because the law is unified, its various commands collectively require our obedience. That is to say, whenever our actions are in true agreement with any particular stipulation of the law, they are in agreement with the whole.

So, whenever it appears that particular laws in Scripture contradict each other, it simply means that we have not yet come to understand the law correctly. The fact is, we will never understand the entire law perfectly, so from time to time we will feel torn between God's various laws. How do we resolve these tensions, practically speaking? Well, there are many things that could be said about such situations, but we will mention just two.

In the first place, God's laws are given with the implicit understanding that at times some laws take priority over others. For example, in Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus gives the following instruction:

If you are offering your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:23-24).

Jesus taught that reconciliation between God's people takes precedence even over certain offerings made to God — so much so that even if a believer is at the altar and ready to present his gift, he should delay his offering until he has made things right with his brother.

Whenever certain sins are said to be worse than others, or certain laws are said to be more important than others, we should realize that the Bible is assigning different levels of priority to its various commands. Thus, giving priority to one law over another is actually in accordance with the whole of the law, and therefore it is not a conflict between particular laws at all.

In the second place, biblical laws are also given with the implicit understanding that there are exceptions to rules. That is to say, in the Bible's legal system, it is assumed that in emergencies and other unusual circumstances, normal regulations may be transcended by more important principles.

Consider, for instance, the confrontation between the apostles and the Sanhedrin in Acts 5. In this situation, the Sanhedrin had commanded the apostles to stop preaching about Jesus, but the apostles had ignored their command. The apostles' defense of their action is recorded in Acts 5:29:

We must obey God rather than men! (Acts 5:29).

In this case, as the governing body of the Jewish people, the Sanhedrin did have some legitimate authority over the apostles. And as a general rule, the Bible requires us to obey human authorities. However, when the Sanhedrin contradicted God's commands, this created an exception to the general rule that we are to obey our human leaders. Because of this exception, the righteous and good thing for the apostles to do was to disobey the Sanhedrin and to obey God.

But again, this was not a case where one law conflicted with another. After all, the law is a unified whole revealing God's character, and God's character is not at odds with itself. Rather, the law anticipates that general principles will sometimes indicate contrary courses of action. In these cases, the right thing to do must be discovered by looking at every command and principle, and measuring the situation and motivations in light of every obligation. The best course of action will be obedient to the entire body of the law in its full meaning, even if it does not resemble the way we usually apply some principles.

Of course, we have to be cautious when we assign priorities to various commands in Scripture. And because we are limited, fallen human beings, there will no doubt be some times when we can't figure out the right thing to do and even some times when we make the wrong decisions. Nevertheless, we must always remember that the Scriptures are unified, and therefore we must work hard to find the ways that the laws of God harmonize with each other.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have looked at the ways the many parts and aspects of Scripture work together as God's standard for Christian ethics. We have seen that the varieties of language and literature in Scripture must each be handled somewhat differently and that each has something special to tell us about ethics. We have also explored the divisions

and functions of God's law in Scripture. And we have seen how the law is unified with itself and with all other portions of Scripture.

As we continue our study of biblical ethics, it is important to remember that there are many different parts and aspects of Scripture and that each one communicates ethical information to us in different ways. By keeping these ideas in mind as we continue to study and to live our lives before God, we will be able to handle each part and aspect of Scripture more responsibly and to match our lives more closely to the standards that God has revealed to us.

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