

CHAPTER TWO: THE MORAL LAW AND THE GOSPEL

UNDERSTANDING what the moral law teaches us is central to the Christian Faith. When we talk about the moral law we mean the teachings given by God in the Bible, which are the standard of conduct for God's people. The moral law is rooted in the "decalogue," "ten words" or Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28) that God gave to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 20:1-17).

Jesus did not cancel out the Law of Moses. He brought out its full meaning. Jesus said:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. (Matthew 5:17-18, KJV).

To understand how the law is fulfilled, we can look at what Jesus said about the sixth commandment.:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift (Matthew 5:21-24, KJV).

The point in this passage is that obeying the moral law is not just a matter of outward behavior. It is a matter of inner motive and intention. It is not enough to avoid the act of killing someone. Genuine obedience will also avoid the angry thoughts that are at the root of murder. Jesus said the same thing about the seventh commandment (Matthew 5:27-28). It is not enough to avoid the act of being unfaithful. Genuine obedience will also avoid the lustful thoughts that are at the root of adultery (Read all of Matthew 5:17-48 for additional examples).

Jesus emphasized that the moral law is not just about not doing what is wrong. The moral law is about doing what is right, from the heart. This is highlighted by "The Summary of the Law," which Jesus recited in response to a question from a man who was an expert in the Jewish law:

Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matthew 22:35-40, KJV).

This "summary" is a combination of two Old Testament Bible verses, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. These verses express the true meaning of all the "Thou shalt not's" by giving two positive things that "Thou shalt" do. Thou shalt love God and thou shalt love thy neighbor.

Now, when the word “love” is used in our time, the tendency is for people to think about feelings or sentiments. Thus, to say that loving God and one’s neighbor fulfills all the commandments sounds to many like an easing of the law. “I don’t have to obey all those rules. All I need to do is love.” However, when the Bible speaks of love, it speaks primarily of actions, not emotions. To love, in biblical terms, is to seek the good of others; to do what is best for others, whether I feel like it or not. There is no biblical sense in which we can fulfill the commandments by having love in our hearts that does not lead to obedient and righteous action. Biblically, it is not merely “the thought that counts.” Thought and action must be in complete harmony to fulfill the law of love.

In other words, all we have to do to fulfill the moral law is to honor God in action and motive at all times and always desire and do what is best for others, even our enemies (Matthew 5:44-45). When we understand the full intent of the moral law we realize that we fall short of perfectly obeying it. This is the primary point of the moral law. It reveals that we naturally fall short of divine perfection. We are sinners who need to be forgiven and saved.

Jesus, the Son of God, became man precisely to deal with this problem of sin. Jesus did for us what we are unable to do for ourselves. Jesus is without sin. Thus, he was able to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law through his obedient life and death. On the cross, Jesus offered the “full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice” that takes away our sins.

In the Old Testament, God commanded that various sacrifices be offered to atone for sin. Chief among these were the sacrifices offered on the Day of Atonement (cf. Leviticus 16 & 23:26-32). These sacrifices were meant to point forward to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (Read Hebrews 8:1-10:18 for an extended discussion of how the life and death of Jesus fulfilled all that was foreshadowed by the Old Testament temple and its sacrifices). The Law confronts us with our sin and leads us to Jesus Christ, whose death saves us from our sins. We are forgiven and reconciled to God when we turn away from our sins and put our faith in Jesus.

There are significant discussions of this topic in Romans 1:16-5:19 and Galatians 3:1-25. The main point can be summed up in the following verses:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24).

The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith (Galatians 3:24).

All have sinned because all inherit sin from the first humans. Original Sin is a defect of human nature by which our wills and desires are naturally inclined towards disobedience. The doctrine of Original Sin does not teach that we can never do anything that is good. Rather, it teaches us that the best of human effort falls short of divine perfection.

There are three ways to deal with the problem of sin. The first is to deny that our actions and motives are flawed—a hard argument to sustain! The second is to develop some lesser standard of behavior by which we can attempt to justify ourselves before God; i.e., “I may not be perfect but I am better than most.” The third is to acknowledge the truth of the human condition and repent.

The call to repent is sounded at every significant starting point in the New Testament. John the Baptist began his ministry by saying, “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Jesus began his ministry by saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). St. Peter concluded his sermon on Pentecost by saying, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38). The moral law highlights our sin in order to lead us to repentance.

To repent in the New Testament means, “To have a change of mind.” It means to think about life in a new way, in the light of Christ. To repent means to change our behavior and begin to live in a new way. We used to follow the impulses of our fallen nature. Now, we begin to follow Jesus.

When we repent and put our faith in Jesus Christ, God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was given to the church on Pentecost (Acts 2). The Holy Spirit is given to us in baptism. The water of baptism is the outward sign of the inward gift of the Spirit (We will discuss this more fully in the next section on the Sacraments). The Holy Spirit enables us to do by God’s grace what we are unable to do by nature.

The gift of the Holy Spirit fulfills the prophesy of Jeremiah:

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34, RSV)

And the prophesy of Ezekiel:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. (Ezekiel 36:25-27, RSV).

The Holy Spirit changes us so that we are able, more and more, to do the will of God. We do not believe that the Holy Spirit makes us instantly perfect so that we will never again be tempted or commit sin. Rather, sanctification, or the process by which we are made holy, is a gradual work of the Holy Spirit over time. It begins when we turn to Christ in faith and receive the gift of the Spirit. It will be completed on the day of resurrection when we are fully and finally changed (Philippians 3:21, 1 Corinthians 15:52). It is a work we participate in by seeking the grace of God in prayer, in the sacraments and in the fellowship of the church.

The Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1). This was the day on which the Jewish people celebrated the giving of the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The law of Moses was written on stone tablets. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God writes his law on our hearts (2 Corinthians 3:3).

Turning away from sin and putting our faith in Jesus Christ is the Christian way of life. This is not a one-time event that happens only at conversion and baptism. We make progress in the spiritual life as we identify areas of sin in our lives, make good confessions, and replace the sin with new virtues and holy patterns of behavior—the fruits of the Spirit (cf. Galatians 5:22-3, 2 Peter 1:3-8).

God uses the moral law to make us aware of our sin and lead us to repentance. But once we have come to repentance and faith, and have been given the gift of the Spirit, God uses the moral law to teach us how he wants us to live. However, even as we grow in virtue and obedience by God's grace, our virtue and obedience do not justify us before God. Holiness is the consequence, not the cause of our salvation.

Nonetheless, we are called to grow in holiness. There was a bumper sticker in circulation some time back that said, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven." This is an inadequate vision for the Christian life. To be sure, we need to be continually forgiven. In our liturgies, we continually ask God to forgive us. However, we should not be content with less than what God requires. As Hebrews says, "Pursue... holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (12:14).

To grow in holiness, it is necessary to develop a vocabulary of sin and virtue. This will enable us to identify the things that are wrong within us, make good confessions and change our attitudes and behavior, by grace. The vocabulary of sin begins with the Ten Commandments. We should memorize these and have a sense of what each one teaches concerning the will of God.

The Ten Commandments state our duty towards God, followed by our duty towards our neighbor. This highlights that love for God is "the first and great commandment." Since man is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), love for neighbor is integrally connected with love for God.

The Ten Commandments or The Decalogue

1. God spake these words, and said: I am the LORD thy God; Thou shalt have none other gods but me.
2. 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.

Comment: Other gods are idols. The commandment against graven images is a commandment against idolatry. Idolatry is, by definition, to worship the creation rather than the creator (Romans 1:25). While we do not tend to carve wooden statues and bow down before them, we do make idols out of created things. What are our possible idols? Money, various possessions and pleasures, or whatever things cause us to neglect our duty to God and our neighbor.

3. 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.

Comment: The commandment against taking God's name in vain was originally aimed at swearing false oaths in God's name. If you said you were going to do something in the name of the LORD, and did not do it, you took God's name in vain. This relates to the oaths and promises we make in the name of Christ. If we bear the name "Christian" (one who belongs to Christ) but are not faithful in our discipleship, this is a vain use of God's name. We should also do what we say we will do, As Jesus said "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No', 'No'" (Matthew 5:37). We also should avoid the use of "God" or "Jesus" or "Jesus Christ" in ways that do not honor God's name.

4. 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.

Comment: In the Bible, Saturday is the Sabbath. From the beginning of the church, Christians worshiped on Sunday because Sunday is the Day of Resurrection. In the course of Christian history, the church transferred much of the Sabbath Day observance from Saturday to Sunday, although Sundays never became literal Old Testament Sabbaths. The main thrust of the Sabbath Day commandment is that Christians should take a day off a week. It is a sin to work seven days a week without rest—or to require it of others over whom we have authority.

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

Comment: Honoring father and mother deals with respect for authority. Legitimate authority is God-given. When we honor authority, we honor God. When we dishonor authority, we dishonor God (cf. Romans 13:1-2). This commandment has a promise and, thus, an implied threat.

6. Thou shalt do no murder.

Comment: Murder is the willful and unlawful taking of another life. It is distinct from killing in general. There are four kinds of killing that are not biblical murder: killing that takes place in battle, killing in self-defense when the force is a reasonable response to the threat, capital punishment enacted by the duly appointed authority and accidental killing. (See also the deadly sin of anger: Matthew 5:21-26).

7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Comment: The New Testament adds the word “fornication” to the word “adultery.” Adultery is sex outside of marriage when one of the parties is married to someone else. Fornication is sex between unmarried persons. Biblically, sexual relations are reserved for marriage (cf. Hebrews 13:4). It should be noted that in the Bible the sexual act itself creates the union (1 Corinthians 6:16). So, technically, promiscuity is serial adultery, each successive act being adulterous on the last union (See also the deadly sin of lust: Matthew 5:27-30).

8. Thou shalt not steal.

Comment: Christians should be conscious of subtle forms of theft such as theft of software by unlicensed use and theft of another person’s time by being habitually late for appointments.

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

Comment: By extension this applies to honesty in sins of speech in general. Gossip may be, strictly speaking, true, but it is not charitable. See Ephesians 4:29 and James 3:1-12.

10. 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.

Comment: A strong, ungovernable desire for what belongs to another. It implies more than merely, “I like his car.” It is sinful because it says to God, “You have not given me enough to be happy.” It erroneously connects happiness with possessions.

The Seven Deadly Sins

Another way to categorize sin is the Seven Deadly Sins. These definitions developed in the course of Christian history. It is also helpful to talk about the virtues that correspond to the Deadly Sins. As we have said, it is not enough to not sin. The goal is to grow in virtue (cf. 2 Peter 1:4-9). Sin not replaced with virtue will come back in some form. Thus, confession of sin should be accompanied by prayer for the corresponding virtue, which, when practiced, will lead to the absence of the sin. What follows is an introductory discussion of the deadly sins and some corresponding virtues.

Deadly Sin

Corresponding Virtues

1. Pride

Humility

All sin is rooted in pride, which is a falsely exalted sense of self-thinking we are more than we are. Pride fills us with the need to be the center of everything. We combat pride with humility, which is a willingness to take a lower place in order to serve others after the pattern of Christ (cf. 2:3f.). Humility gives us an accurate sense of self. Humility understands that we stand before God as sinners, in need of forgiveness. Humility honors, and is not threatened by, the gifts of others. Pride is essentially competitive. It views the self as being in competition with others selves for recognition and honor. Humility is essentially cooperative. It views the self as being in mutually beneficial relationships with other people in the Body of Christ. Pride is the root cause of other sins. Envy, anger and covetousness are fueled by pride. Sin in any form is prideful, for it arrogantly claims the right to disobey God.

2. Envy

Kindness, thankfulness and contentment

Envy is jealousy of another's gifts and place in life-wanting to be who they are. It is combated by the practice of being thankful for the life and the gifts God has given us. Envy is also combated by the practice of being thankful for the gifts of others, even when they seem to be greater than our gifts. Envy leads to malicious intent towards others and, thus, is also combated by the practice of kindness.

3. Covetousness

Generosity and contentment

Covetousness is greed for gain. It is to believe the lie that having more will make us happy. It is combated by generosity. Rather than seeking continually to get more, generosity seeks to give. We begin with the tithe. We give the first part to God rather than spend the first part on more stuff. Then we look for other ways to give to those in need. We also combat covetousness by learning to be content (see 1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19).

4. Anger

Patience, charity

Anger is often fueled by the hectic pace of life and by pride-how dare he get in my way! Habitual prayer is essential to combating anger. We have to stay conscious of God's presence and, so, not let our emotions overcome us. We also need to forgive. The refusal to forgive another who has wronged us can result in continued anger. If we are struggling with anger towards another person, we need to practice charity. We can begin to get rid of the desire to harm by actively doing good. We can begin to look at the other person as one for whom Christ died, as one who also has sins that need to be forgiven. We can also begin by praying for the other person. We can pray for some good from God for them (Matthew 5:44).

5. Lust

Chastity, self-control

Lust involves the divorce of sexuality from responsibility. Lust desires to use another person as an object for our own ends. We need to learn to treat others as people and not merely as objects of our desires. When we think about what is entailed in loving our neighbor, we will recognize that lust does not serve the good of the other. Lust is combated by prayer for self-control and the virtue chastity (faithfulness within marriage, abstinence without). We must also be careful about what we watch, read and listen to. Provocative material, which is available everywhere in our culture, fuels the sin of lust. Thus, discipline of eyes and ears is a necessary part of this battle.

6. Gluttony

Abstinence, moderation

The excessive indulgence in things is combated by the practice of fasting and moderation. We cannot really enjoy the good things that God has given us unless we have the ability to say no to them. The alcoholic does not enjoy his drink and the person who habitually eats to excess does not enjoy his food. Overindulgence leads to more overindulgence. The practice of fasting or periodically abstaining from certain things helps us to develop self control and moderation. A good rule is that every good thing you enjoy you should do without for defined periods of time. The discussion about gluttony should extend to overindulgence in media such as TV, internet and radio. Many a soul has been harmed by TVs, radios and computers that are never turned off. Few have been harmed by creating time for reflection and prayer.

7. Sloth

Diligence

Sloth is laziness with regard to one's duties. Spiritual sloth is called accidie. It refers to a spiritual listlessness. It is combated by diligence, by faithful attention to one's duties—especially during the times when we do not feel like doing what we ought. Spiritually, it is combated by rule of life, and by praying faithfully through the dry periods.

A Closing Note on True Happiness

The biggest barrier to the pursuit of holiness is the lie that there is more “happiness” to be found in following our natural desires than in obeying God’s law. The testing that takes place in the Christian life involves a choice between the short term and the long term. Often, a temptation will promise, and actually deliver, some form of immediate satisfaction. The commandment of God calls us to forego some immediate gratification for a future reward. The short-term benefits of unfaithfulness give way in the long term to greater misery. And the short-term suffering that is required for obedience leads in the long term to life and peace (cf. Romans 8:18f.).

Deuteronomy says, “The LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always” (6:24). One cannot sustain the pursuit of holiness unless one actually believes this to be so. This means seeing through the silly notion that God is a sort of spoilsport who gives commandments to keep us from enjoying ourselves. God gave us the commandments to save us from all manner of evil and misery.

We also must be careful about the word “happiness.” Happiness in our culture is associated with the satisfaction of our desires in the present. Conversely, holiness requires that we forego the satisfaction of some desires in the present in order to obtain the future reward. The perspective of faith understands that our desires are wrongly ordered because of sin and, hence, must sometimes be denied and redirected towards ends that honor God. For those who are diligent in the life of prayer, faith will produce, increasingly, joy and peace. But faith will not always produce happiness as it is understood in our culture.

Additional Concepts and Definitions

The Theological Virtues

(1 Corinthians 13:13)

The teaching of the church is that the theological virtues are infused in us in baptism and developed in us by grace in the life of prayer.

Faith - An attitude of trust that accepts and obeys the word of God

Hope - Confidence, assurance and conviction of our future reward

Charity or Love - The divine energy and motive that fuels our love for God and neighbor

The Cardinal Virtues

The Cardinal Virtues were brought into the church from classical thought. Each takes on a new character in the light of Christ, but each has obvious application to the spiritual battle.

Prudence - practical wisdom, discretion

Temperance - moderation, self-mastery, restraint

Courage - strength, endurance, resoluteness

Justice - impartiality, fairness, equity, dispassion, giving to each his due

The Enemies of the Soul
Renounced in Baptism - BCP 276

Temptation to sin comes from three distinct sources: the world, the flesh and the devil. The foundational spiritual disciplines of prayer, almsgiving and fasting (Matthew 6:1-18) match up with each of these. We combat worldly temptation through almsgiving. We combat the temptations of the flesh through fasting. We combat demonic temptation through prayer.

The world - Fallen mankind in communal rebellion against God. The lure of wealth, power and status that this fallen community offers us is a substitute for God. (cf. 1 John 2:15-17).

The flesh - Not the body per se. We do not believe the body is inherently evil. In the Bible the word “flesh” refers to the desires of fallen human nature. God made mankind with certain desires, which are meant to be fulfilled through communion with God and through God-given means of fulfilment. Sin corrupts our God-given desires away from God and towards perverted and disobedient means which never really fulfill us (cf. Galatians 5:19-21).

The devil - An angel, created by God, who led a rebellion against God in heaven. The devil and his fallen angels attempt to undermine God’s work of redemption in Christ. They tempt believers to disobedience (1 Peter 5:8-9). They cause spiritual blindness so that people cannot see the truth about God as it is revealed in Christ (2 Corinthians 4:3-4). See also Matthew 4:1-11; Revelation 12: 7-9; Genesis 3; Job chs. 1, 2; Isaiah 14:12-15.

Questions for Review

1. List the Ten Commandments in order and discuss how each applies to life today.

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- 3.
- 4.
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- 6.
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- 10.

2. What is the Summary of the Law? (BCP 69). Where does it come from? (Look at Matthew 27:37-40, Luke 10:25-28). How is this related to the Ten Commandments?

3. List the Seven Deadly Sins and corresponding virtues. Discuss how each sin is best combated and how the practice of virtue does away with sin.

1.

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4. What is the primary thing the moral law teaches us about ourselves?

5. How does Jesus Christ solve the problem of sin?