

The Law of God

Questions to consider:

- What is the Law?
- What is natural law vs positive law?
- What is the “threefold division of the law”?
- What are the “three uses of the law”?
- Why do Christians follow some laws and not others?
- How/why should we read the law?

What is the law?

- Law can refer to several different things in scripture or theology:
 - Natural law – right and wrong principles rooted in God’s character; inherent to creation
 - Positive law – added laws for a specific context
 - Mosaic Law – Commands given to Moses at Mount Sinai
 - Moral, civil/judicial, ceremonial
 - 10 commandments – a subset of the Mosaic law; summary of moral law
 - Pentateuch – first 5 books written by Moses
 - Sometimes a shorthand for “law and prophets”, i.e. Old Testament

Natural Law

- There are certain things that everyone understands are right and wrong, even if they aren't written down or spoken audibly
- Think about in the garden – would it have been wrong for Adam to hurt or kill his wife Eve? Yes, of course
- Another example: Genesis 4:8-12
 - God asks Cain “where is your brother Abel”
 - He doesn't say “you never said murder was wrong”
 - He tries to cover it up. He knows it is wrong.
 - Notice: God punishes him. How could he be punished unless it was a law?
- Romans 2:12-15

Positive Law

- Laws that are added commands
- Given for a particular time, place, and/or people
- Not inherently sinful but pertain to a specific situation/purpose
- Modern example: speed limits
- Biblical example: Genesis 1: “do not eat of the tree.”
- May draw from natural law but apply it in a way that is not universal

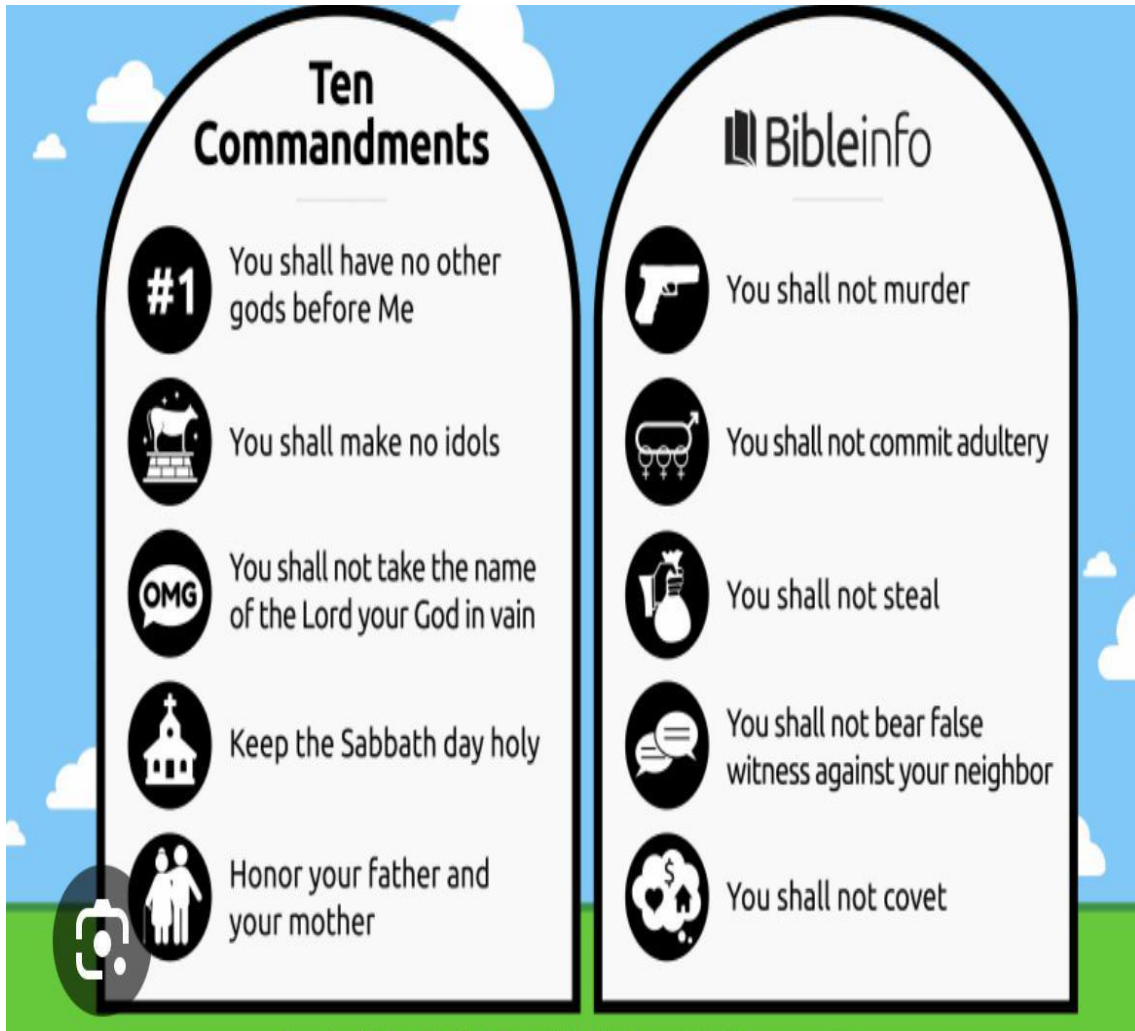
Mosaic Law

- The law given to Moses at Mount Sinai – begins in Exodus 20
- Contains elements of both natural and positive law
- Threefold division of the law:
 - Moral law: Synonymous with natural law and 10 commandments
 - Ceremonial law: deals with worship/religious practices of the old covenant people.
 - Civil/judicial law: deals with the political/governmental practices of the old covenant people.

The Moral Law Distinguished

- There is clearly something different about the 10 commandments compared to the rest of the Mosaic Law
- Exodus 20:1-21 – vv. 18-21 separate 10 commandments from the rest of the law
- Only the 10 Commandments were written on stone tablets (Ex 34:28, Deut 4:12-13, Deut 10:4)
- 10 Commandments were given a special place in the ark of the covenant

10 Commandments are a summary of the Moral Law



- They are binding to every person for all of time
- Jesus demonstrated that the moral law is meant to be extrapolated: Matthew 5:21-30
- Every single sin can be tied to one of the 10 commandments
- Catechisms like the Westminster catechism can help you learn the various applications of each commandment

The three uses of the (moral) law

1. Civil Use: to guide the civil magistrate and to restrain evil
 - It is good for lawmakers in any society to create laws rooted in the moral law
 - Different nations or states may come to varying conclusions about what exactly that looks like in their place (and to some extent that is OK)
2. Evangelical Use: to show the sinner his sin and point him to the savior
 - Romans 7
3. Normative/directive/didactive use: as a rule of life for the believer
 - It shows us how God wants us to live

Ceremonial Law

- Worship/religious practices of Old Testament Israel
- Examples:
 - Levitical priest system
 - Sacrifices
 - Feasts and holy days
 - Directions for the tabernacle/temple
 - Holiness code – dress, diet, things that make a person unclean such as blood, skin diseases, touching a dead body, etc.

What should Christians do with the ceremonial Law?

- See how seriously God takes sin
- See how it points to Christ and his work.
 - Christ is the ultimate high priest and sacrificial lamb
 - The temple in the OT where God dwelled pre-figures God dwelling in his people in the NT – see 1 Peter 2:5
 - Holiness code symbolically separated Israel from the pagan nations; The church is separate from the world by its love, good works, etc

The civil/judicial law

- Deals with the geopolitical and governmental life of the old covenant people of Israel
- Examples:
 - Punishments for crimes
 - Protections for accidental manslaughter
 - Laws regulating slavery
 - Marriage laws
 - Building codes
 - Protections and expectations of sojourners/immigrants
 - Protections for the poor

What should Christians do with the civil/judicial law?

- Look for the general equity – the moral law found in the judicial
 - “If this is how the 9th commandment applied in Israel, how might we apply it in America?”
- Theonomy reverses the order – it treats a judicial law as if it were moral *in and of itself* and tries to adapt it to modern times
- To find general equity:
 - What elements cut across all cultures?
 - What elements are explicitly taught in the 10 commandments or further explain them?
 - Is there repetition in the NT?
- The NT often applies general equity to the local church
- Examples: Deut 22:8, 25:4

Deuteronomy 22:8, 25:4

- 22:8 “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it.”
 - The commandment to “not murder” goes deeper than not actively killing – it teaches us that we should do whatever we can to protect life on our property
- 4 “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.”
 - Paul applies this passage to churches paying their pastors in the NT. If even creatures are worthy of their wages, so are ministers.

Answering some common
questions / objections

Why do we follow some laws and not others?

- We follow the moral law because we are bound to it just like everyone for all of time is bound to it. It represents the right way to live as creatures of our creator.
We walk in the righteous way in order to please God.
- We are not bound to the ceremonial law because these things were types and shadows of the work Christ was going to do in the new covenant. It is fulfilled in Christ.
- We are not bound to the civil/judicial law because these dealt with the particulars of life in the Jewish nation prior to the coming of the Messiah

Objection: “the threefold division isn’t scriptural”

- While there is sometimes a seemingly arbitrary arrangement to some laws, as we have seen the moral law **is** clearly set apart.
- Different laws clearly have different purposes
- Israel was a theocracy, so sometimes the line between civil/ceremonial may be blurry... but it is rooted in moral law
- Doctrines like the trinity are also not neatly spelled out in scripture but we still draw them out based on biblical data.

What about the sabbath?

- A pattern of rest one day out of the week for rest and worship is clearly moral law... it is contained in the 10 commandments and was also instituted at creation.
- The civil/ceremonial law dictated specifics of how this would be practiced for OT Israel
- The NT implies that the Christian Sabbath or Lord's Day is Sunday. This is what protestants have historically believed and it is in our church confession.
- We should think about how we can honor the sabbath...
 - Organize our work/chores to have as little as possible to do on Sunday
 - Should we go out to eat where people have to work for us? Or invite each other to our homes?

Objection: The NT says we are not under the law!

- We are not under the law as slaves... or not as a path to earn righteousness. We only receive righteousness by faith.
- The moral law is still reflective of God's character and nature and we are duty-bound to walk in it.
 - "Can we continue to sin that grace may abound? By no means!" Romans 6:1-2
 - How do we know what sin is? The moral law.

Why did the Jerusalem council tell gentile believers to “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and what has been strangled...” – isn’t that ceremonial? (Acts 15)

- The early church lived in an interesting overlapping period between the old and new covenant
 - Hebrews 8:13 - “By saying a new covenant, he has declared that the first is obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old is about to pass away.”
 - Jesus had established the new covenant in his blood, yet the temple was still standing. Sacrifices are still being made.
 - Peter had already had the vision telling him to eat unclean animals
 - Paul later tells the gentile believers that it’s OK to eat food sacrificed to idols – but don’t offend your brother (1 Corinthians 8)
 - The destruction of the temple in 70AD would be the marquee sign of the end of the old covenant.
- The command in Acts 15 seems, therefore, to be temporary guidelines for keeping the peace in the newborn, mixed, Jewish-gentile church in the intra-covenantal age.

Key Takeaways

- We are not bound to the ceremonial and civil law, BUT “the former things were written for our instruction.” (Romans 15:4)
 - We can and should still read them and learn from them.
- We are bound to the moral law, summarized in the 10 commandments.
- The 10 commandments are meant to be expounded on – we should think about the various ways they apply to our hearts and thoughts, not only our actions.
- The 10 commandments / moral law has 3 uses:
 - To restrain evil in society
 - To push us to Christ
 - To teach us how to live in God’s will.
- We should learn them, meditate on them, and teach them to our children.

Primary sources consulted:

- Covenant Conference 2025:
<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLN-CfeDuojiTH-ZFNGzCLL1EtARXOeALm>
- Ligonier, The Threefold Use of the Law:
<https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/threefold-use-law>
- TableTalk Magazine, The Three Uses of the Law:
<https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2023/07/the-three-uses-of-the-law/>