
VIDEO LECTURE MODULE: TEN COMMANDMENTS

LECTURE 5: THE LAW AND THE SINNER

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The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module

TEN COMMANDMENTS

18 LECTURES

REV. A.T. VERGUNST

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Lecture 5

THE LAW AND THE SINNER

Since our fall, we have lost every ability in ourselves to obey the law of God. But not all people are seeing that reality. As a matter of fact, none of us see this reality until grace awakens. Only then we learn to see that we are all included in Paul's statement, There is none righteous, no not one. In this module we hope to consider how God brings sinners to this awareness of ourselves and the need for the Lord Jesus Christ and His salvation. As we do, we discover that His law plays an indispensable role in that learning journey.

TRANSCRIPT LECTURE 5

Welcome to our fifth lecture about the law of God. Today's lecture is entitled The Law and the Sinner, and our Scripture verse that we'll take as our goal to expound and to think about is from Romans 3:20 where it says, "For by the law is the knowledge of sin." Although we have studied in our previous lectures that the law is good and holy and just because it reflects our lawgiver, yet it is common knowledge to most of us that the law causes unease. It causes distress in us, even resistance, pushback. Why is that? That has to do, of course, with the condition that we're in today as sinners.

Since the fall in Paradise, our relationship to the law has changed. There is now no [friendly] relationship anymore between us and the law because we broke the law. So, we're in a conflict with God and with God's reflection as He's given us in His holy law. And yes, the law can do only one thing to us sinners at this point. It can only accuse us and prosecute us and demand condemnation, and that is intuitively felt by all of us as we think about the law of God. So yes, in consequence of our condition, we now have a hatred against God and His holy law.

That's very pointedly spoken of in Romans chapter 8. We will consider that verse, and Paul speaks about [us being] at enmity with God and [how] we cannot be subject to the law of God in the condition that we are today (Romans 8:7). Let's be clear that this is no reflection on the law of God itself. There's no fault in the law. The apostle Paul shares with us, in Romans 7, his conflict with the law of God when the Lord indeed converted him. Before his conversion, he resisted God's law. But upon his conversion, he even resisted it more when he felt the resistance of his heart driving up against God's law when it came to him particularly in the 10th commandment, "thou shalt not covet."

But in the end, the apostle Paul reassures his readers [that] there is nothing wrong with the law. The law is good, holy, and just. It's our sinfulness problem that reacts upon the holiness and the justice of God's law. So the question then is, 'How can this condition change? How can we come to love the law of God as David expressed in his devotional book, the Psalms? The short answer is, 'That's now God's work of salvation. He is the One and the only One [Who] can change our condition.'

In this lecture, I'd like to explore with you how God now uses His own law to save a sinner. Let's define what I mean with a sinner. A sinner is an unregenerate, unrepentant, unbelieving, spiritually dead person defined in the Scriptures (for example, [in] Ephesians 2, the first 3 verses, Paul describes the Ephesians as being dead in trespasses and sin). So, I propose to consider the use of the law that God uses in our salvation. And first, let's consider for a moment what the law is not in our salvation. And secondly, let's look at how God uses the law to bring us to the knowledge of salvation.

So, the purpose of the law in the life of a sinner is not to give us instruction in how to be saved from our sin and guilt. Before Adam and Eve broke their covenant with God, law-keeping, or work-obedience, was the way to life. God promised them the eternal life, the quality of life and deepening relationship with Him, upon obedience. That was the original intent of the law, the way to life. "Do this and you shall live," live in an ever-deepening relationship with God, which in the New Testament is mostly always called eternal life. But, we are no more in this spiritual condition of Paradise. And, you see, here is where the Jewish Pharisees went wrong. And in essence, here goes all religion wrong that is not pure Christianity.

The Pharisees saw law obedience as the way to life. They saw actually no difference in the context of the law in Paradise and the law at Sinai, but the context is radically changed. Even though the law is the same, though the original law of Paradise and the exposition of that original law at Mount Sinai are the same, the context in which God gives that law is not the same. Recall [that] Paradise was the context of the covenant of works. The law directed these original parents, 'walk, do, and you shall live.' What's the context of Mount Sinai? That's no more the covenant of works; that's the context of the covenant of grace.

As we will look specifically at the 10 Commandments, you notice the first opening statement, commonly called the preamble, speaks about deliverance, speaks about grace: "I am the Lord thy God which has brought thee out of Egypt out of the land of house of bondage." You notice what God reminded them of, "I am the Lord thy God:" relationship, grace relationship. And, this is important to grasp, for here the Pharisees struggled to understand even the ministry of Jesus. Paul regretfully needs to share how he looked at the Romans as his brothers, as it were, in the flesh. And, he describes in Romans 10 the fatal mistake that the Jews cling to with regard to salvation. Hear this, he says in Romans 10:2-3, "For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God," they're zealous and sincerely zealous, but not according to knowledge, "for they being ignorant of God's righteousness," or God's law obedience, "and going about to establish their own righteousness," in their own law obedience, "have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God," which is the righteousness which He has given in His Son Jesus Christ's doing and dying.

So, [it is] essential for us to understand that the law in relationship to us sinners is not given as the way to life. Then what is the purpose of the law in relationship to us as a sinner? First, it is God's diagnostic tool to convict us of our sin, to confront us with the hopelessness and helplessness of our condition. Remember [that] Romans 3:20 stated, "for by the law is the knowledge of sin." In Romans 7:7 the apostle expounds this somewhat further when he says, "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid," no way! "Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except that the law said, Thou shalt not covet." You notice how he there shares that his knowledge of his own sinfulness came by that diagnostic tool that God used in the law. "By the law is the knowledge of sin." That means that God uses His law to bring home the diagnosis of what we are now in His holy sight. God uses His law as a mirror to set before us, how far we are off the mark, how unsightly we are. Even though we may cover ourselves with fig leaves of religious things and good deeds, we are still at naked, as it were, in His sight, shameful, sinful.

Now, the law is used to teach us that. We're blind for this condition. As outlined again in Ephesians 2 and 3, we're blind about the condition we're in. We don't feel the sin as sin. We don't realize how bad sin is until God comes in with His law to make us feel [and] sense what it is to be a sinner. And no matter how much gospel we hear, friends, we simply are not interested in the message until we feel the hurt, until we feel the spiritual cancer, until we have the knowledge of sin.

Let me give an example. We've had a great surgeon in our town where I live for many years already. Each week he treats many people. He replaces knees, five or six of them each week, and has done this for 15 years. I might have heard of him sometime, but I didn't pay any attention to him. I didn't think about him. I didn't need him until my knee began to hurt so [badly that] I couldn't sleep or sit, [it was] so painful. Then, I went to look for

the surgeon, not before that, and I remember coming to him and telling him, “I don’t need a big surgery. I know what I need. I need again a little repair.” He says, “Friend, let’s go make an x-ray. Let’s see what is the problem.” I saw the problem. I felt the problem, and I submitted to the knee replacement surgery in my own body. Now, that illustration is only [to show] a use [of the law]. This is how God uses the law. This is the case with all of us.

Not until we feel the pain of sin, not until we have a sense of the burden of sin (or if we see and taste the bitterness of the evil of sin, and we get a realization of the banishment that we have caused by our sins from God when He ushered us out of Paradise, that means out of His communion), not until we feel those things will we become serious about the gospel message of Jesus Christ. And so, to get us serious, God uses the law to bring conviction, to make us feel the need for a Savior bigger than ourselves. He uses the law as a hammer to humble us, to crush that pride, that resistance that lives within us that Paul described in Romans 7.

Now, I agree that such an awakening is a rude reality to realize. If all of the sudden I get the message I have an incurable cancer, my life falls apart like a card house. Well, so it is spiritually. When God uses His law to bring home to us the condition we are in, [then] yes, we feel a fright. It makes us feel vulnerable [and] ashamed, but how necessary this is to open up our hearts for the Lord in His salvation. That’s not typically our first reaction. Our first reaction is, ‘Let’s go change. Let’s improve. Let me do something.’ Now, that’s a hopeless action, for no matter what we do, everything we do falls under God’s standard of perfection. Even our best works, the prophet writes in Isaiah 64, are like filthy rags (verse 6).

So, it falls outside the scope of this lecture for me to explore our spiritual condition in deeper detail. I urge you to ponder your own diagnosis as outlined in the Scriptures. Take Romans 3:10-18, or look at Mark 7:20-23 to study the diagnosis that God gives of us humans in His Word. And why is that necessary? That every mouth may be stopped from excusing, from minimizing, from denying, from objecting before God’s law. That we all may become guilty before God. That’s how Paul put it in Romans 3. That makes us willing to also begin to listen to the message of the gospel, and that is then the second great use in which God uses the law. He uses the law to guide us sinners to Jesus Christ.

Let’s go to Galatians 3:24 where Paul stated this use of the law in these words. He says, “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” That last part is the gospel: justified by faith, by faith in the Lord Jesus. How did we get there? He says God used the law as a schoolmaster. Let us understand what the word schoolmaster means. In the Greek culture, a schoolmaster was someone who collected children and brought them to school to be taught by a teacher. In our culture, we might call the schoolmaster the bus driver. That’s all he was. He wasn’t a teacher. He was the means, the person, who guided the children to the school to be taught. Each day he would do the same thing. Each day, he would go around and gather the children to bring them to school.

Now, Paul uses that cultural schoolmaster idea to compare how God uses the law to bring us to the Lord Jesus Christ. The law doesn’t save us. The law has no ability to save us. It can only accuse the sinner, but God uses it in His ministry of the Spirit to bring us to the Savior. And so, this relationship between the law and the gospel is extremely important for us to grasp well and never to mix them up or eliminate either one of them.

Let me therefore bring this together for a moment yet: how law and gospel work together in God’s saving ministry. Think of the law as God’s court servant to bring us to the throne of grace. That’s where He wants us to come. That’s why He sent out the law as a convicting court servant, arresting us, alarming us in order to lead us to Christ. The law says, “Do,” and then we begin to realize that we can’t do and that we did do the wrong things and stand guilty. And, God uses that demand that we can’t meet to bring us unto the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the gospel of Jesus Christ says, “Done.” So, He uses the “do” to bring us to the “done” of Christ’s work.

Or another example: God uses the law as the needle in the doctor’s hand. He has this needle and this injection with medicine, and he wants to get that medicine under our skin. What [does] he do? He pokes that needle in the skin. That hurts. It doesn’t heal. No, the law doesn’t heal. The law pricks. But it is the way for that needle to get into that skin for Him to administer medicine into the body. And so, God uses the law again in His ministry to bring us to the gospel

So, we learned earlier that the schoolmaster does his work every day, not once [but] every day. That’s also true [in] spiritual life. [As] the law initially alarms us to seek the Lord Jesus Christ, so the law continues to be a source of conviction, even in the life of God’s saints. [This is] especially [true] the more and more we look at the

person of Jesus Christ, as we saw in our previous lecture, and see in Him the fulfillment of the law in the way He lived, in the way He acted, in the way He reached out, in the way He denied Himself, loved His Father [and] loved others.

Friends, the more we look at that picture of the law, also in the life of grace, the more conviction will be experienced and the more need for Christ will be experienced as well. So, God's saints, though fully justified by faith, aren't fully sanctified until they are glorified. The apostle Paul confesses that in Romans 7:14. He makes a startling statement, "I am carnal, sold under sin." Being regenerate, he still says, "I find a law working in me against the law to love the Lord. I find this war inside of me" (Romans 7:21-23).

Why is that? This is what Paul writes in Romans 8:7. He says, "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." The carnal mind, enmity, which cannot be subject to the law of God. See, when God saves a person, He doesn't convert the carnal old man. He will starve him and subdue him, and finally, in the day of our decease, He will redeem us from the body of death that we carry along. And so, the Lord continues to be a source of conviction, also in the life of God's saints, or we could say he continues to be a schoolmaster to bring us to the Lord Jesus.

So when we now conclude together, I encourage you to have some personal reflections about your spiritual journey and your relationship to the law of God as a sinner, for the Pharisees of Jesus' days are not extinct in our day. It is easy for us to fall back in their error, which is officially called legalism or works-based salvation. Examine that in yourself, how easy it is for us to think that way. This thinking is familiar to us. Let's be honest.

We operate on that level every day in our daily, natural life. You know you work hard to get ahead. Be good and you get a promotion. Please the boss, and you may get a pay raise. That's how we operate. We think works-based, merit-based obedience brings blessing, and this thinking feels very natural to us because that's once also how we related to our Creator when we were in Paradise. We always were acting on that basis [of our obedience to the law] to merit closer communion with the Lord. We knew that [at] that time, obedience was the way to life; but that's no more the way today.

Today, it is Jesus that is the way to life. "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me," (John 14:6) the Lord Jesus speaks. That means by Him Who, in His doing and in His dying, became for us the way to life again. And because grace thinking is so unnatural for us, Paul calls therefore the gospel in Jesus Christ a hidden wisdom of God. If you take a moment to read to I Corinthians 2, you'll see that developed beautifully by the apostle there. And he comes with this statement: "which eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and neither has come up in the heart of man" (verse 9). Now, often we relate that verse to heaven, but in the context, it's related to the wisdom of God as is revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Never could we think out the way of grace. It is not in us. It needs to come from without us. So, the question, friends, that we all need to face is the question on the verse we started with: Has God used the law to bring us to the knowledge of sin, which then also may be used as a schoolmaster to bring us to the Lord Jesus Christ?

And so, let me conclude by asking you a few questions to consider in your own personal reflection. Do you love God with all the intensity of your heart like Jesus did? All the time? Never compromising? Devoting yourself from morning to evening to do all things only to His glory, even when it would cost you dearly? Even when it would inconvenience you? Even when it might bring the scorn of the world? Even if it asks us [to pay] the ultimate price? By the law, this mirror in which all of this we could see in Jesus Christ perfectly, is the knowledge of sin.

Let's ask about the second part of the law. Do you love your neighbor as you love yourself? Are we spending as much comforting our neighbor as we spend comforting ourselves? A high standard, isn't it. Are we willing to sacrifice anything dear in order to love others as we love ourselves? And not only our friends and family. Let's ask about the enemy: those that hate us, those that curse us. Do we love our enemies as Jesus loved, lifted up on the cross and in all the agony, [and] prayed for His enemies, "Father forgive them"? Now, this is love, and this is the law. As we look at that picture, what does that do to you? Do we feed our enemy when he or she is hungry? That's what God the Father does each day as He shines His light and He brings His rain on the just and unjust (Matthew 5:45).

Why do I ask these questions? Do you sense how short we come of the glory of God in our life? That's the purpose. Why? Because, friends, this only will make us see the beauty and necessity of the Lord Jesus Christ for us personally. Listen to this. To top it all off, the apostle writes in Galatians 3:10, "Cursed is everyone who

continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.” That’s sharp. That’s a terrible diagnosis as well as a terrible sentence: cursed because we do not keep all the things written in the book of the law. No, [it is] not comfortable to face this dark reality of God’s spiritual x-ray, but [it is] necessary so that we may learn with the apostle Paul, as he confessed in Philippians 3:9, counting all things lost that he first counted gain. And then, he expresses himself, “Oh, to be found in Him,” Jesus, “not having my own righteousness, which is of the law,” which he didn’t have - he saw it now - “but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”

So, our next lecture will be to explore the law again, now in relationship to saints: those who have been given grace. How does the law function in their life? May the Lord then blessing these lessons and multiply the fruit of it as we ponder this together. Thank you.