

The Law's Blessing and Curse

THEOLOGICAL THEME: The law is God's good gift, but it cannot save us from the penalty of disobedience.

Many television shows and movies tell stories about seeking justice for those who have criminally broken the law. You probably have your favorite. From the Westerns of yesteryear to the sci-fi of today, we long for the good guys to win and the bad guys to get what's coming to them. As the saying goes, the arm of the law is long.

? What is your favorite movie that shows the “good guys” bringing the “bad guys” to justice? What circumstances might cause us to see the law as difficult or bad instead of good?

This session draws our attention to the purposes of God's law, revealed to the Israelites by Moses. It came from the perfect Lawgiver; thus, it was perfect, unlike contemporary legal codes. Yet like today's laws, Old Testament law involved both a blessing and a curse.

In this study, we will take a closer look at Moses' final instructions to the children of Israel. In his farewell address, Moses explained how God had given them the law for their own good, and he also claimed that the requirement of the law was total perfection. Obedience to God's law would bring blessing, but disobedience would bring God's curse. As believers, we recognize the law as a good gift of God, but we rely on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to save us from the penalty for our disobedience.

1. The law is for our good (Deut. 10:12-22).

¹² *“And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?”*

¹⁴ *Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. ¹⁵ Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day.*

¹⁶ *Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. ¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. ¹⁸ He executes justice*

for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.

¹⁹ *Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. ²⁰ You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear. ²¹ He is your praise. He is your God, who has done for you these great and terrifying things that your eyes have seen. ²² Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.*

The law, said the apostle Paul, “is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Rom. 7:12). Paul must have had passages such as Deuteronomy 10 in mind. In this passage, we can see that Moses indicated a number of truths about the law. These aspects of the law are as valid for us as they were for the Israelites.

First, the law reveals the greatness and goodness of God. Notice how Moses spoke about God in verses 14,15,17,18,22.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

15. God Is Holy

God's holiness refers to His uniqueness in being separate from all He has created. The Hebrew word for “holy” means “separate” or “set apart.” God's holiness also refers to His absolute purity. God is unstained by the evil of the world. His goodness is perfect, and the moral code we find in the Scriptures is a reflection of His holy nature. As people made in God's image, we are called to holiness.



What are the dangers of focusing on God's law apart from His goodness?

Second, God intended the law as an objective standard for restraining evildoers. A more civil society results from people following laws designed with the wellbeing of the whole in mind. In this sense, the law's threats of punishment help secure order and protect the innocent from the guilty. (Again, the apostle Paul was certainly aware of this; see Rom. 13:3-4.)

Note how these ideas are found in Moses' discourse:

- The law was given “for your good” (10:13). God is no cosmic killjoy desiring to keep people from enjoying life. Rather, following God's laws provided individual Israelites guidelines for the best way to live peaceably with their neighbors.
- The law provided principles for social justice which, if left alone, the Israelites might not take into account. Because widows, orphans, and foreigners were often “invisible,” God's law took pains to provide justice for all.



Voices from the Church

“The demands of the law are not arbitrary or capricious. They stem from and reflect the character of God and his purpose for mankind in creation and redemption. They point to the nature of the reconstruction of the perfect relationship that God built into creation but which was disrupted by human sin.”¹

—Graeme Goldsworthy



What are some aspects of Christian morality that people in our culture believe are joy-suppressing rather than joy-enhancing?

Third, we see specific guidelines on what the Lord meant when He asked His redeemed people to love Him “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). Here are the ways that the law guided Israel’s understanding of what it means to love God:

- *Fear the Lord (10:12,20).*
- *Worship the Lord (10:12,20).*
- *Walk in all His ways (10:12-13).*
- *Circumcise your hearts (10:16).*
- *Be just and loving to the marginalized (10:19).*
- *Honor His name by fulfilling oaths taken in His name (10:20).*
- *Praise the Lord (10:21).*

The law of God, then and now, reveals His greatness and goodness. The law restrains evil in society and is “for your good.” The law provides specifics about how God desires for His people to express their love for Him. Truly the law was a great blessing. Thank God for His law.



How would you respond to someone who doubted the idea that God gave the law for our good?

2. The law requires perfection (Deut. 11:1).

¹ *“You shall therefore love the LORD your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always.”*

Here Moses noted the strictness of the law. He piled up a number of terms that considered the law from a variety of angles: mandate, statutes, ordinances, and commands. But the really important term here is “always.” The demands of the law were relentless. There was no time off for good behavior.

The essence of living under the demands of the law is that it requires perfection. And because no one is capable of perfectly obeying the law—the rules for sacrifice demonstrate that truth easily enough—then all have transgressed the law. In fact, by knowing the strict demands of the law, human beings actually become more and more aware of how far short of perfection they have come.



What is your reaction to the comprehensiveness of the command to obey in Deuteronomy 11:1? Does it make you want to be more disciplined or make you despair? Why?

An illustration from the laws of nature throws light on how the law demands perfection. As we know, gravity is at work all the time. So imagine a beautiful candelabrum (with real candles), suspended from a high ceiling with a golden chain. Suppose farther that the chain is made up of ten interlocking links. As long as all ten links are strong, the candelabrum will stay suspended, being more powerful than the force of gravity. But let only one link break, and it all comes crashing down.



Voices from Church History

“As the sharp needle prepares the way for the thread, so the piercing law makes a way for the bright silver thread of divine grace.”²

—Charles Spurgeon
(1834–1892)

So it is with humans and the law. Let the ten-link chain represent the Ten Commandments, and let the candelabrum stand for the person trying to earn favor with God by the works of the law. All it takes is a single slip up to be a lawbreaker, as James 2:10 notes. The law cannot save us from the penalty of disobedience.



Why does understanding the demands of the law help increase our desire for and gratitude for grace?

3. The law brings a blessing or a curse (Deut. 11:26-28).

After reviewing God's laws for the Israelite people, Moses wanted to make sure they understood that there are consequences for obedience as well as for disobedience. The punishment goes beyond the ordinary cause-and-effect built into the moral universe. The results exist because of the Lawgiver who instituted the law. He is so committed to justice that, either in this life or at the last judgment, the distinction between those blessed in their obedience or cursed in their disobedience will be manifest.

In order to drive that principle home, Moses gave an unusual set of instructions for the Israelites for a one-time ritual (Deut. 27). At a designated time, the 12 tribes were to assemble near Shechem, near the center of the promised land. Six tribes were to gather at Mount Ebal, just north of Shechem, to pronounce God's curses orally on those who disobeyed any of His laws (Deut. 28:15-68). Six tribes were to gather at Mount Gerizim, south of Shechem, to proclaim the blessings for obedience (28:1-14).

Joshua 8:30-35 describes the fulfillment of this ritual under Joshua's leadership.³ In Deuteronomy 11, Moses anticipated this ceremony of blessing and cursing:

²⁶ "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse:²⁷ the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you today,²⁸ and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known.

Two points are worth emphasizing. First, God put Himself on the line to see to it that obedience to Him would result in positive benefits and that disobedience would be punished. For example, if the Israelites kept God's laws, He "will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated...the LORD will make you abound in prosperity" (28:7,11). If they did not obey, God "will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions...the LORD will give you there a trembling heart and failing eyes and a languishing soul" (28:59,65).

Second, the fundamental act of disobedience was "[going] after other gods that you have not known" (11:28). God longed for His people to be loyal to Him above all. Sadly, over the centuries, the Israelites were prone to disobey, resulting in the promised curse: captivity by a foreign nation (28:64).



What does our loyalty to God and our rejection of false gods communicate about our love?

Each of us is inclined to disobedience. We are rebels against God and therefore justly under His curse. In the fullness of time, Jesus came and took the curse for us. As Paul explained, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13).

All who are in Christ are set free from the eternal condemnation that the law decreed against us. We are liberated by faith in the One who took the curse on our behalf. We need not fear the curse, for "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:1-2).



Voices from Church History

"Paul shows that the fulfillment of the law is found in love...So he who came to fulfill the law gave love through the Holy Spirit, so that charity might accomplish what fear could not."⁴

—Augustine (354–430)

Yet in this life, "we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:9-10). Or, as James noted, "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty" (Jas. 2:12).



How should Christians use the law in their pursuit of holiness?



How should Christians use the law in their evangelistic efforts?

Conclusion

Because breaking God's law brought a curse, salvation based on something other than the law has been necessary from the beginning. That "something" was salvation by faith (Gen. 15:6; see also Rom. 4:3,9,22; Gal. 3:6; Jas. 2:23). We believe in Jesus Christ.

The law was a short-term guardian, and the guardianship ended with the completion of Christ's saving work. This means that, as believers, we can focus on the blessings that come from reflecting God's character as we follow the moral precepts of the law (for example, the moral guidelines given for Christians in the New Testament). As we respond to the awesome work of salvation He has accomplished for us, God calls us to reflect His character in the way we treat others.



Voices from Church History

"Christ moves beyond the work of the law. He does not intend to abolish it but to enhance it by fulfilling it."⁵

—Hilary (circa 300-368)

CHRIST CONNECTION: Obedience to God's law brings a blessing. Breaking God's law brings a curse. Jesus is the One who took the curse of our law-breaking in order that we might experience the blessing of His law-keeping.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: In response to the awesome works He has accomplished for us, God calls us to reflect His character in the way we treat others.

1. List some specific, practical examples of how we can love God and neighbor according to the law.

2. How should the law's demand for perfection help us see Jesus as gracious and glorious?

3. How would you explain to a non-believer that works of the law cannot save someone from the curse of the law?

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Eric Geiger

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Michael Kelley

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Send questions/comments to:

Managing Editor,
The Gospel Project: Adult Personal Study Guide,
One LifeWay Plaza, Nashville, TN 37234-0102;
or make comments on the Web at
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About the Writers



Unit 1:

Tony Merida is the founding pastor of Imago Dei Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. He also serves as associate professor of preaching at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. His books include *Ordinary* and the *Christ-Centered Exposition* commentary on the Book of Exodus, among others. He is happily married to Kimberly, and they have five adopted children.



Unit 2:

Rick Morton (sessions 7-8) is Vice President of Engagement for Lifeline Children's Services in Birmingham, Alabama, where he leads the ministry's partnership efforts to manifest the gospel to vulnerable children around the world. He is married to Denise, and they have two middle school sons and a daughter in college.



Kendell Easley (sessions 9-12) is a professor of biblical studies at Union University and is the director of the Master of Christian Studies and Doctor of Ministry programs for Union in the Memphis area. He also serves as pastor of McLean Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. Kendell is married to Nancy, and they have one married young adult son.



Unit 3:

D. A. Horton is currently serving in the Church Planting Residency at Summit Church in Durham, North Carolina. He and his wife, Elicia, and their three children are preparing to plant a church in Los Angeles, California. He is working on his PhD in Applied Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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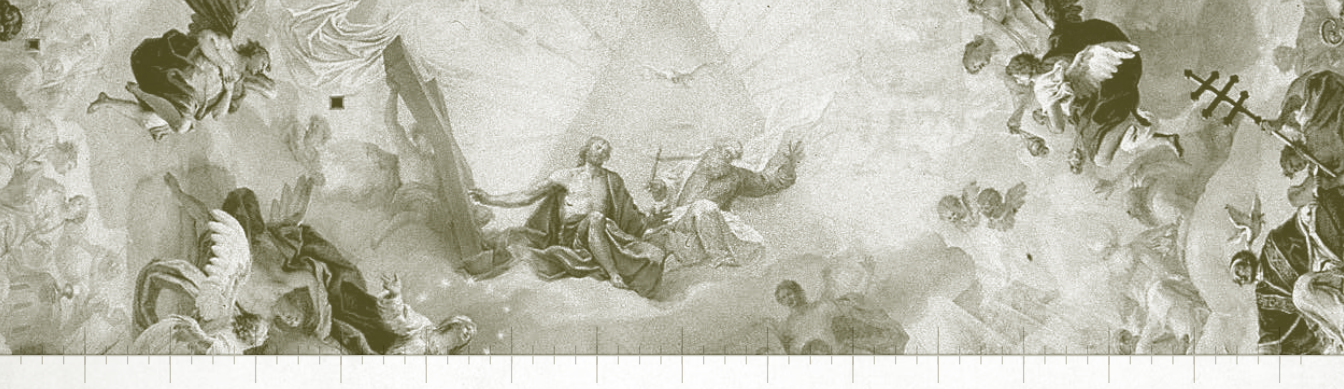
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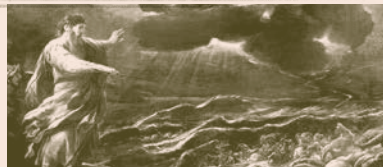
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