

THE  
**WORKS**  
OF  
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LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF  
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CONTAINING  
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,  
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,  
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,  
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,  
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED  
**MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.**

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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## LETTER XXX.

### ON THE RIGHT USE OF THE LAW.

DEAR SIR,

YOU desire my thoughts on 1 Tim. i. 8. "We know the law is good if a man use it lawfully," and I willingly comply. I do not mean to send you a sermon on the text; yet a little attention to method may not be improper upon this subject, though in a letter to a friend. Ignorance of the nature and design of the law is at the bottom of most religious mistakes. This is the root of self-righteousness, the grand reason why the gospel of Christ is no more regarded, and the cause of that uncertainty and inconsistency in many, who, though they profess themselves teachers, understand not what they say, nor whereof they affirm. If we previously state what is meant by the law, and by what means we know the law to be good, I think it will, from these premises, be easy to conclude what it is to use the law lawfully.

The law, in many passages of the Old Testament, signifies the whole revelation of the will of God, as in Psalm i. 2. and xix. 7. But the law, in a strict sense, is contradistinguished from the gospel. Thus, the apostle considers it at large in his epistle to the Romans and Galatians. I think it is evident, that, in the passage you have proposed, the apostle is speaking of the law of Moses. But, to have a clearer view of the subject, it may be proper to look back to a more early period.

The law of God, then, in the largest sense, is that rule, or prescribed course, which he has appointed for his creatures, according to their several natures and capacities, that they may answer the end for which he has created them. Thus it comprehends the inanimate creation: the wind and storm fulfil his word, or law. He hath appointed the moon for seasons; and the sun knoweth his time of going down, and going forth, and performs all his revolutions according to his Maker's pleasure. If we could suppose the sun was an intelligent being, and should refuse to shine, or should wander from the station in which God had placed him, he would then be a transgressor of the law. But there is no such disorder in the natural world. The law of God in this sense, or what many choose to call the law of nature, is no other than the impression of God's power, whereby all things continue and act according to his will from the beginning; for "he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast."

The animals, destitute of reason, are likewise under a law; that is, God has given them instincts according to their several kinds, for their support and preservation, to which they invariably conform. A wisdom unspeakably superior to all the contrivance of man disposes their concern-

ments, and is visible in the structure of a bird's nest, or the economy of a bee-hive. But this wisdom is restrained within narrow limits; they act without any remote design, and are incapable either of good or evil in a moral sense.

When God created man, he taught him more than the beasts of the earth, and made him wiser than the fowls of heaven. He formed him for himself, breathed into him a spirit immortal and incapable of dissolution, gave him a capacity not to be satisfied with any creature-good, endued him with an understanding, will, and affections, which qualified him for the knowledge and service of his Maker, and a life of communion with him. The law of God, therefore, concerning man, is that rule of disposition and conduct to which a creature so constituted ought to conform; so that the end of his creation might be answered and the wisdom of God be manifested in him and by him. Man's continuance in this regular and happy state was not necessary as it is in the creatures, who, having no rational faculties, have properly no choice, but act under the immediate agency of divine power. As man was capable of continuing in the state in which he was created, so he was capable of forsaking it. He did so, and sinned, by eating the forbidden fruit. We are not to suppose that this prohibition was the whole of the Law of Adam, so that if he had abstained from the tree of knowledge, he might, in other respects, have done (as we say) what he pleased. This injunction was the test of his obedience; and while he regarded it, he could have no desire contrary to holiness, because his nature was holy. But when he broke through it, he broke through the whole law, and stood guilty of idolatry, blasphemy, rebellion, and murder. The divine light in his soul was extinguished, the image of God defaced; he became like Satan, whom he had obeyed, and lost his power to keep that law which was connected with his happiness. Yet, still the law remained in force: the blessed God could not lose his right to that reverence, love, and obedience, which must always be due to him from his intelligent creatures. Thus Adam became a transgressor, and incurred the penalty, death. But God, who is rich in mercy, according to his eternal purpose, revealed the promise of the seed of the woman, and instituted sacrifices as types of that atonement for sin, which He, in the fulness of time, should accomplish by the sacrifice of himself.

Adam, after his fall, was no longer a public person; he was saved by grace through faith; but the depravity he had brought upon human nature remained. His children, and so all his posterity, were born in his sinful likeness, without either ability or inclination to keep the law. The earth was soon filled with violence. But a few in every successive age were preserved by grace, and faith in the promise. Abraham was favoured with a more full and distinct revelation of the covenant of grace; he saw the day

of Christ, and rejoiced. In the time of Moses, God was pleased to set apart a peculiar people to himself, and to them he published his law with great solemnity at Sinai. This law consisted of two distinct parts, very different in their scope and design, though both enjoined by the same authority.

The decalogue, or ten commandments, uttered by the voice of God himself, is an abstract of that original law under which man was created; but published in a prohibitory form, the Israelites, like the rest of mankind, being depraved by sin, and strongly inclined to the commission of every evil. This law could not be designed as a covenant, by obedience to which man should be justified; for long before its publication, the gospel had been preached to Abraham, Galatians iii. 8. But the law entered that sin might abound; that the extent, the evil, and the desert of sin might be known; for it reaches to the most hidden thoughts of the heart, requires absolute and perpetual obedience, and denounces a curse upon all who continue not therein.

To this was superadded the ceremonial or levitical law, prescribing a variety of institutions, purifications, and sacrifices, the observance of which were, during that dispensation, absolutely necessary to the acceptable worship of God. By obedience to these prescriptions, the people of Israel preserved their legal right to the blessings promised to them as a nation, and which were not confined to spiritual worshippers only; and they were likewise ordinances and helps to lead those who truly feared God, and had conscience of sin, to look forward, by faith, to the great sacrifice, the Lamb of God, who, in the fulness of time, was to take away sin by the sacrifice of himself. In both these respects, the ceremonial law was abrogated by the death of Christ. The Jews then ceased to be God's peculiar people; and Jesus having expiated sin, and brought in an everlasting righteousness, by his obedience unto death, all other sacrifices became unnecessary and vain. The gospel supplies the place of the ceremonial law, to the same advantage as the sun abundantly compensates for the twinkling of the stars, and the feeble glimmering of moonlight, which are concealed by its glory. Believers of old were relieved from the strictness of the moral law by the sacrifices which pointed to Christ. Believers under the gospel are relieved by a direct application to the blood of the covenant. Both renounce any dependence on the moral law for justification, and both accept it as a rule of life in the hands of the Mediator, and are enabled to yield it a sincere, though not a perfect obedience.

If an Israelite, trusting in his obedience to the moral law, had ventured to reject the ordinances of the ceremonial, he would have been cut off. In like manner, if any who are called Christians are so well satisfied with their moral duties, that they see no necessity of making Christ their only hope, the law, by which they seek life, will be to them a ministration unto

death. Christ, and he alone, delivers us, by faith in his name, from the curse of the law, having been made a curse for us.

A second inquiry is, How we come to know the law to be good? for naturally we do not, we cannot, think so. We cannot be at enmity with God, and at the same time approve of his law; rather this is the ground of our dislike to him, that we conceive the law, by which we are to be judged, is too strict in its precepts, and too severe in its threatenings; and therefore men, so far as in them lies, are for altering this law. They think it would be better if it required no more than we can perform; if it allowed us more liberty; and especially if it was not armed against transgressors with the penalty of everlasting punishment. This is evident from the usual pleas of unawakened sinners. Some think, "I am not so bad as some others;" by which they mean, God will surely make a difference, and take favourable notice of what they suppose good in themselves. Others plead, "If I should not obtain mercy, what will become of the greater part of mankind?" by which they plainly intimate, that it would be hard and unjust in God to punish such multitudes. Others endeavour to extenuate their sins, as Jonathan once said, "I did but taste a little honey, and I must die:" "These passions are natural to me, and must I die for indulging them!" In short, the spirituality and strictness of the law, its severity, and its levelling effect, confounding all seeming differences in human characters, and stopping every mouth without distinction, are three properties of the law, which the natural man cannot allow to be good.

These prejudices against the law can only be removed by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is his office to enlighten and convince the conscience; to communicate an impression of the majesty, holiness, justice, and authority of the God with whom we have to do, whereby the evil and desert of sin are apprehended. The sinner is then stripped of all his vain pretences, is compelled to plead guilty, and must justify his Judge, even though he should condemn him. It is his office likewise to discover the grace and glory of the Saviour, as having fulfilled the law for us, and as engaged, by promise, to enable those who believe in him to honour it with a due obedience in their own persons. Then a change of judgment takes place, and the sinner consents to the law, that it is holy, just, and good. Then the law is acknowledged to be holy; it manifests the holiness of God; and a conformity to it is the perfection of human nature. There can be no excellence in man, but so far as he is influenced by God's law; without it, the greater his natural powers and abilities are, he is but so much the more detestable and mischievous. It is assented to as just, springing from his indubitable right and authority over his creatures, and suited to their dependence upon him, and the abilities with which he originally endowed them. And though we, by sin, have lost those abilities, his right remains unalienable; and

therefore he can justly punish transgressors. And as it is just in respect to God, so it is good for man; his obedience to the law, and the favour of God therein, being his proper happiness, and it is impossible for him to be happy in any other way. Only, as I have hinted, to sinners these things must be applied according to the gospel, and to their new relation, by faith, to the Lord Jesus Christ, who has obeyed the law, and made atonement for sin on their behalf; so that through him they are delivered from condemnation, and entitled to all the benefits of his obedience. From him likewise they receive the law, as a rule enforced by his own example, and their unspeakable obligations to his redeeming love. This makes obedience pleasing, and the strength they derive from him makes it easy.

We may now proceed to inquire, in the last place, What it is to use the law lawfully? The expression implies, that it may be used unlawfully; and it is so by too many. It is not a lawful use of the law to seek justification and acceptance with God by our obedience to it; because it is not appointed for this end, or capable of answering it, in our circumstances. The very attempt is a daring impeachment of the wisdom and goodness of God; for if righteousness could come by the law, then Christ has died in vain, Gal. ii. 21, iii. 21; so that such a hope is not only groundless, but sinful; and, when persisted in under the light of the gospel, is no less than a wilful rejection of the grace of God. Again, it is an unlawful use of the law, that is, an abuse of it, an abuse both of law and gospel, to pretend that its accomplishment by Christ releases believers from any obligation to it as a rule. Such an assertion is not only wicked, but absurd and impossible in the highest degree; for the law is founded in the relation between the Creator and the creature, and must unavoidably remain in force so long as that relation subsists. While he is God, and we are creatures, in every possible or supposable change of state or circumstances, he must have an unrivalled claim to our reverence, love, trust, service, and submission. No true believer can deliberately admit a thought or a wish of being released from his obligation of obedience to God, in whole or in part; he will rather start from it with abhorrence. But Satan labours to drive unstable souls from one extreme to the other, and has too often succeeded. Wearied with vain endeavours to keep the law, that they might obtain life by it, and afterwards taking up with a notion of the gospel devoid of power, they have at length despised that obedience which is the honour of a christian, and essentially belongs to his character, and have abused the grace of God to licentiousness. But we have not so learned Christ.

To speak affirmatively, the law is lawfully used as a means of conviction of sin. For this purpose it was promulgated at Sinai. The law entered, that sin might abound: not to make men more wicked, though occasionally, and by abuse, it has that effect, but to make them sensible how wick-

ed they are. Having God's law in our hands, we are no longer to form our judgments by the maxims and customs of the world, where evil is called good, and good evil; but are to try every principle, temper, and practice by this standard. Could men be prevailed upon to do this, they would soon listen to the gospel with attention. On some the Spirit of God does thus prevail; then they earnestly make the jailor's inquiry, "What must I do to be saved?" Here the work of grace begins; and the sinner, condemned in his own conscience, is brought to Jesus for life.

Again, when we use the law as a glass, to behold the glory of God, we use it lawfully. His glory is eminently revealed in Christ; but much of it is with a special reference to the law, and cannot be otherwise discerned. We see the perfection and excellence of the law in his life. God was glorified by his obedience as a man. What a perfect character did he exhibit! yet it is no other than a transcript of the law. Such would have been the character of Adam and all his race, had the law been duly obeyed. It appears, therefore, a wise and holy institution, fully capable of displaying that perfection of conduct by which man would have answered the end of his creation. And we see the inviolable strictness of the law in his death. There the glory of God in the law is manifested. Though he was the beloved Son, and had yielded personal obedience in the utmost perfection, yet, when he stood in our place, to make atonement for sin, he was not spared. From what he endured in Gethsemane and upon the cross, we learn the meaning of that awful sentence, "The soul that sinneth shall die."

Another lawful use of the law is, to consult it as a rule and pattern, by which to regulate our spirit and conversation. The grace of God, received by faith, will dispose us to obedience in general; but through remaining darkness and ignorance, we are much at a loss as to particulars. We are, therefore, sent to the law, that we may learn how to walk worthy of God, who has called us to his kingdom and glory; and every precept has its proper place and use.

Lastly, we use the law lawfully when we improve it as a test whereby to judge of the exercise of grace. Believers differ so much from what they once were, and from what many still are, that without this right use of the law, comparing themselves with their former selves, or with others, they would be prone to think more highly of their attainments than they ought. But when they recur to this standard, they sink into the dust, and adopt the language of Job, "Behold, I am vile: I cannot answer thee one of a thousand."

From hence we may collect, in brief, how the law is good to them that use it lawfully. It furnishes them with a comprehensive and accurate view of the will of God, and the path of duty. By the study of the law, they acquire an habitual spiritual taste of what is right or wrong. The exercised

believer, like a skilful workman, has a rule in his hand, whereby he can measure and determine with certainty; whereas others judge as it were by the eye, and can only make a random guess, in which they are generally mistaken. It likewise, by reminding them of their deficiencies and shortcomings, is a sanctified means of making and keeping them humble; and it exceedingly endears Jesus, the law-fulfiller, to their hearts, and puts them in mind of their obligations to him, and of their absolute dependence upon him every moment.

If these reflections should prove acceptable to you, I have my desire; and I send them to you by the press, in hopes that the Lord may accompany them, with his blessing to others. The subject is of great importance, and, were it rightly understood, might conduce to settle some of the angry controversies which have been lately agitated. Clearly to understand the distinction, connection, and harmony between the law and the gospel, and their mutual subserviency to illustrate and establish each other, is a singular privilege, and a happy means of preserving the soul from being entangled by errors on the right hand or the left.

I am, &c.