

CHAPTER XIX.

OF THE LAW OF GOD.

Section I.—God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it; and endued him with power and ability to keep it.

EXPOSITION

God having formed man an intelligent creature, and a subject of moral government, he gave him a law for the rule of his conduct. This law was founded in the infinitely righteous nature of God, and the moral relations necessarily subsisting between him and man. It was originally written on the heart of man, as he was endowed with such a perfect knowledge of his Maker's will as was sufficient to inform him concerning the whole extent of his duty, in the circumstances in which he was placed, and was also furnished with power and ability to yield all that obedience which was required of him. This is included in the moral image of God, after which man was created.—Gen. i. 27. The law, as thus inscribed on the heart of the first man, is often styled the law of creation, because it was the will of the sovereign Creator, revealed to the reasonable creature, by impressing it upon his mind and heart at his creation. It is also called the moral law, because it was a revelation of the will of God, as his moral governor, and was the standard and rule of man's moral actions. Adam was originally placed under this law in its natural form, as merely directing and obliging him to perfect obedience. He was brought under it in a covenant form, when an express threatening of death, and a gracious promise of life, was annexed to it; and then a positive precept was added, enjoining him not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, as the test of his obedience to the whole law.—Gen. ii. 16, 17. That this covenant was made with the first man, not as a single person, but as the federal representative of all his natural posterity, has been formerly shown. The law, as invested with a covenant form, is called, by the Apostle Paul, "The law of works" (Rom. iii. 27); that is, the law as a covenant of works. In this form, the law is to be viewed as not only prescribing duty, but as promising life as the reward of obedience, and denouncing death as the punishment of transgression. This law "which was ordained to life," is now become "weak through the flesh," or through the corruption of our fallen nature. It prescribes terms which we are incapable of performing; and instead of being encouraged to seek life by our own obedience to the law as a covenant, we are required to renounce all hopes of salvation in that way, and to seek it by faith in Christ. But all men are naturally under the law as a broken covenant, obnoxious to its penalty, and bound to yield obedience to its commands. The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but also for all his posterity, when he violated it, he left them all under it as a broken covenant. Most miserable, therefore is the condition of all men by nature; for "as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse."—Gal. iii. 10.

Truly infatuated are they who seek for righteousness by the works of the law; for "by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in the sight of God."—Rom. iii. 20.

Section II.—This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon mount Sinai in ten commandments, and written in two tables; the first four commandments containing our duty toward God, and the other six our duty to man.

EXPOSITION.

Upon the fall of man, the law, considered as a covenant of works, was annulled and set aside; but, considered as moral, it continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness. That fair copy of the law which had been inscribed on the heart of the first man in his creation, was, by the fall, greatly defaced, although not totally obliterated. Some faint impressions of it still remain on the minds of all reasonable creatures. Its general principles, such as, that God is to be worshipped, that parents ought to be honoured, that we should do to others what we would reasonably wish that they should do to us—such general principles as these are still, in some degree, engraved on the minds of all men.—Rom. ii. 14,15. But the original edition of the law being greatly obliterated, God was graciously pleased to give a new and complete copy of it. He delivered it to the Israelites from Mount Sinai, with awful solemnity. In this promulgation of the law, he summed it up in ten commandments; and, therefore, it is commonly styled the Law of the Ten Commandments. These commandments were written by the finger of God himself on two tables of stone.—Exod. xxxii. 15, 16, xxxiv. 1. The first four commandments contain our duty to God, and the other six our duty to man; and they are summed up by our Saviour in the two great commandments, of loving God with all our hearts, and our neighbour as ourselves.—Matt. xxii. 37-40. The Church of Rome assigns only three precepts to the first table, and seven to the second. They join together the first and second commandments, and that for an obvious reason. Standing separately, the second forbids the use of images in the worship of God, and plainly condemns the practice of that Church; but viewed as an appendage to the first precept, it only forbids, as they pretend, the worship of the images of false gods; and, consequently, leaves them at liberty to worship the images which they have consecrated to the honour of the true God and his saints. Having thus turned two precepts into one, in order to make up the number of ten, they split the last precept of the Decalogue into two, making "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house," one, and the words which follow, another. This division cannot be vindicated. The two first precepts obviously relate to distinct things. The first points out the object of worship, viz., the living and true God, and no other. The second prescribes the means of worship—not by images or any other plan of human invention, but by the ordinances which are divinely appointed. The tenth precept is as clearly one and indivisible. The whole of it relates to one subject—covetousness, or unlawful desire; and if it ought to be divided into two, because the words "Thou shalt not covet" are

twice repeated, it would follow that it should be divided into as many commands as there are different classes of objects specified; for the words "Thou shalt not covet" must be understood as prefixed to each of these objects. The Apostle Paul plainly speaks of it as one precept, when he says: "I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet."—Rom. vii. 7.

It may be remarked, that the law of the ten commandments was promulgated to Israel from Sinai in the form of a covenant of works. Not that it was the design of God to renew a covenant of works with Israel, or to put them upon seeking life by their own obedience to the law; but the law was published to them as a covenant of works, to show them that without a perfect righteousness, answering to all the demands of the law, they could not be justified before God; and that, finding themselves wholly destitute of that righteousness, they might be excited to take hold of the covenant of grace, in which a perfect righteousness for their justification is graciously provided. The Sinai transaction was a mixed dispensation. In it the covenant of grace was published, as appears from these words in the preface standing before the commandments: "I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage;" and from the promulgation of the ceremonial law at the same time. But the moral law, as a covenant of works, was also displayed, to convince the Israelites of their sinfulness and misery, to teach them the necessity of an atonement, and lead them to embrace by faith the blessed Mediator, the Seed promised to Abraham, in whom all the families of the earth were to be blessed. The law, therefore, was published at Sinai as a covenant of works, in subservience to the covenant of grace. And the law is still published in subservience to the gospel, as "a schoolmaster to bring sinners to Christ, that they may be justified by faith."—Gal. iii. 24.

Section III.—Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a Church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament.

Section IV.—To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other, now, further than the general equity thereof may require.

Section V.—The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator who gave it. Neither doth Christ in the gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen, this obligation.

EXPOSITION.

Besides the moral law, God gave to Israel ceremonial and judicial laws; the two latter are of limited and temporary use; the former is of universal and perpetual obligation.

1. The ceremonial law respected the Jews in their ecclesiastical capacity, or as a Church, and prescribed the rites and carnal ordinances which were to be observed by them in the external worship of God. These ceremonies were chiefly designed to prefigure Christ, and lead them to the knowledge of the way of salvation through him.—Heb. x. 1. This law is abrogated under the New Testament dispensation. This appears—1. From the nature of the law itself. It was given to the Jews to separate them from the idolatrous rites of other nations, and to preserve their religion uncorrupted. But when the gospel was preached to all nations, and Jews and Gentiles were gathered into one body, under Christ, their Head, the wall of separation was taken down.—Eph. ii. 14, 15. 2. Because these ceremonies were only figures of good things to come, imposed upon the Jews until the time of reformation, and were abrogated by Christ, in whom they were realised and substantiated—Heb. ix. 9-12. 3. Because these ceremonies were given to the Israelites to typify and represent Christ and his death; and, since Christ has come, and has, by his death and satisfaction, accomplished all that they prefigured, these types must be abolished.—Col. ii. 17. 4. Because many of these rites were restricted to the temple of Jerusalem, and the temple being now destroyed, these rites must cease along with it. 5. Because the apostles expressly taught, that the ceremonial law is abrogated under the Christian dispensation.—Acts xv. 24. One chief design of the Epistle to the Hebrews is, to prove that this law must necessarily be annulled.—Heb. vii. 12.

2. The judicial law respected the Jews in their political capacity, or as a nation, and consisted of those institutions which God prescribed to them for their civil government. This law, as far as the Jewish polity was peculiar, has also been entirely abolished; but as far as it contains any statute founded in the law of nature common to all nations, it is still obligatory.

3. The moral law is so called because it relates to moral actions, and to distinguish it from the positive laws, which were only of temporary obligation. This law has no relation to times and places, or to one nation more than another; but being founded in the relations of men to their Creator, and to one another, it retains its authority under all dispensations. In opposition to the Antinomians, who say that believers are released from the obligation of the moral law, our Confession teaches that this law is perpetually binding on justified persons, as well as others. Believers are, indeed, delivered from this law in its covenant form; but they are still under it as a rule of life, in the hand of the Mediator, being "not without law to God, but under the law to Christ."—1 Cor. ix. 21. Christ, in the most solemn and explicit manner, declared, that he "came not to destroy the law, but to fulfil it."—Matt. v. 17. He fulfilled it, as a covenant, by his own perfect obedience, and his most grievous sufferings in the room of his people; and its heavenly precepts he has enforced upon their minds, by the most cogent motives, as a perfect rule of duty. The gospel, instead of weakening the obligation of the law, confirms and strengthens its authority, and enforces obedience to its precepts by the strongest motives: "Do we make void the law through faith? God forbid; nay, we establish the law."—Rom. iii. 31. Although the moral law is to believers divested of its covenant form, it remains immutably the same, in regard both to its matter and its au-

thority. And as the law was binding on the first man as a rule of life, antecedent to any covenant-transaction between God and him, we may easily understand that the law may be entirely divested of its covenant form, while it continues in full force as a rule of moral conduct.

Section VI.—Although true believers be not under the law as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin; together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of his obedience. It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin, and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve, and what afflictions in this life they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promises of it, in like manner, show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof; although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works: so as a man's doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one, and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law, and not under grace.

Section VII.—Neither are the aforementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it: the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.

EXPOSITION.

It is here affirmed, that true believers are completely delivered from the law, as a covenant of works. Christ, as their representative and surety, endured the curse of the law in all its bitterness, and in its utmost extent, in his sufferings unto death, and thus set them completely free from its condemning power.—Gal. iii. 13; Rom. viii. 1. But had Christ only endured the curse of the law, and still left his people under its commanding power as a covenant, this would only have restored them to the same uncertain state of probation in which Adam originally stood, and every transgression would have again involved them under the curse. Christ, however, not only sustained the full infliction of the penalty of the law, he also yielded perfect obedience to its precepts, and thus obtained for his people deliverance from its commanding, as well as its condemning power. To show the complete nature of this freedom, we are told that they are dead to the law through the body of Christ; that Christ is the end of

the law for righteousness to every one that believeth; and that they are not under the law, but under grace.—Rom. vii. 4, x. 4, vi. 14.

The doctrine of the believer's freedom from the law, as a covenant, has no tendency to licentiousness; for it has already been established, that they are under the obligation of the law as a rule of life; and here it is further shown that the law is of manifold use to them, as well as to others: "The law is good," says the Apostle Paul, "if a man use it lawfully" (1 Tim. i. 8); that is, if he use it in a suitableness to the state wherein he is, either as a believer or an unbeliever. The law serves numerous and important purposes, both to the unregenerate and to the regenerate. Some of these uses may be briefly stated: -

First. To the unregenerate the moral law is of use in the following respects:—

1. To restrain them from much sin.—1 Tim. i. 9.
2. To convince them of their sinfulness and misery.—Rom. iii. 20, vii. 9.
3. To discover to them their absolute need of Christ, and drive them to him as their all-sufficient Saviour.—Gal. iii. 24.
4. To render them inexcusable, if they continue in their sins, and finally reject the only Saviour of lost sinners.—Rom. i. 20, ii. 15; John iii. 18, 36.

Second. The moral law is of use to the regenerate in the following respects:

1. To render Christ more precious to them, and excite their gratitude to him who so loved them as to obey its precepts and suffer its penalty, that he might deliver them from it as a covenant.—Gal. iii. 13, iv. 4, 5.

2. To show them the will of God, and regulate their conduct.—Mic. vi. 8.

3. To serve as a standard of self-examination, in order to discover the pollutions of their hearts and lives—to keep them self-abased—to lead them to a constant dependence upon Christ, and to excite them to a progressive advancement in holiness.—Phil. iii. 10-14.

4. To serve as a test of their sincerity, that they may assure their hearts that they are of the truth, and that they delight in the law of God after the inward man, notwithstanding their manifold defects in duty.—1 John iii. 19; Rom. vii. 22, 25; 2 Cor. i. 12.