

The Rule of Love

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broken, fulfilled, and applied

J. V. Fesko



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To

David and Susan Winslow

*For their
tireless service
to Christ and His church*

Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
The Prologue	7
The First Commandment	19
The Second Commandment	31
The Third Commandment	43
The Fourth Commandment	55
The Fifth Commandment	69
The Sixth Commandment	81
The Seventh Commandment	91
The Eighth Commandment	101
The Ninth Commandment	111
The Tenth Commandment	123
Conclusion	133
Scripture Index	137

Acknowledgements

This little book originally began with a sermon series on the Book of Exodus. As the sermons were shaped into a book, my parents, brother, in-laws, and several friends read through various manuscripts. I truly appreciated their feedback. My wife also gave me helpful suggestions as we talked about the book in the car or at the dinner table. I am especially indebted to my friends Wally King and Dave Van Drunen for reading the entire manuscript and giving me helpful critique and feedback. Many thanks are due to Jay T. Collier, who also read the manuscript and encouraged me to publish it with Reformation Heritage Books. I am grateful, therefore, for Jay and the staff at Reformation Heritage for all of their work in preparing this book for publication.

There is a saying, "Behind every great man is a great woman." The first part of this saying does not apply to me, but the second part certainly applies to my beautiful wife, Anneke. I am profoundly grateful for her unwavering love, encouragement, and support. She not only cares for and loves me but also for our young son, Val. Anneke, thank you for your love and encouragement.

I first heard of David and Susan Winslow's tire-

less work with covenant youth of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church by word of mouth and later through my wife, who went on two Backpacking Adventures in the High Sierras led by the Winslows when my wife was in college. What amazes me is David's ability to remember by name each college and high school student who went with him and Susan in more than twenty years of backpacking trips. They typically led two trips per year. I saw David and Susan's devotion firsthand, as my wife and I accompanied them on a backpacking trip in the summer of 2005, when I used this material for daily devotions. I also witnessed firsthand their indefatigable labors on behalf of the church. They have set a Christ-honoring example of what Paul says about the goal of the Law: "Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10). So, it is to David and Susan Winslow, a dear brother and sister in Christ, that I dedicate this book. SDG.



Introduction

Various events form a kaleidoscopic image in my mind about the Ten Commandments. I once observed a demonstration relating to a controversy over efforts to place the Decalogue in courthouses across the country. I wondered as I saw the protestors marching, *How many of these people have the Law read to them in their own churches during public worship?* I remember listening to a radio program in which the hosts interviewed a number of people during a Christian booksellers convention, asking them to list the Ten Commandments. No one could name them all.

Another time I saw a politician speak about the importance of placing the Ten Commandments in public schools. When asked to name the commandments, however, he could only come up with one. Another contribution to this mental collage are the discussions about the Law that I've had

with Christians over the years. A number of people only understood the Law as a series of prohibitions, and others said that Christ had done away with the Law. This latter point was especially true regarding the fourth commandment and Sabbath observance.

I have read many books on the Law, whether for recreation or for sermon preparation, which rarely referred to Christ vis-à-vis the Ten Commandments. One book explicated the Law as if it were merely a legal document with principles that should be applied to our present day civil government. It seems that tumbleweed was more likely to blow across the pages than a reference to Christ. What accounts for these different responses to the Law?

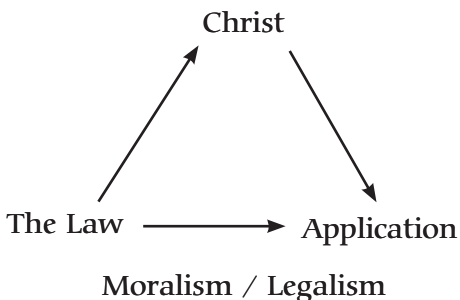
At one level we can say sloth accounts for the ignorance that too many in the church have regarding the Decalogue. We can remember sports statistics, e-mail addresses, phone numbers, birthdays, and the like, but have trouble naming what the Jews have called the Ten Words. Another contributing factor to this ignorance is that people believe they can extract the Law from the Bible with little attention to its historical or covenantal context. For example, some have tried to place stone monuments of the Ten Commandments in courthouses that do not carry its prologue, thereby bypassing questions such as: What is the historical context in which the Law was given? To

whom was it given? Why was it given? Who gave it? Divorced from these all-important contextual questions, the Law is shorn from its biblical moorings and becomes a wax nose, pliable to a number of different political causes. Many well-intending Christians claim they have no religious agenda but merely want to return this country to its historic Judeo-Christian ethical roots. However, severing the Law from its historical context (that it was given to the people of Israel) and its covenantal context (YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who delivered Israel from Egypt) fails to recognize that the Law is far more than a memorial to a Judeo-Christian ethic. We must recognize with Paul that Christ is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 10:4).

Far too many people look at the Law apart from Christ. They go from the Ten Commandments straight to its application to life, never asking the question: What about Christ? That inevitably leads to legalism, or the belief that we are able to fulfill the Law. Yet Paul says about this approach to the Law, "The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law" (1 Cor. 15:56). The Law is powerless to save—it only condemns. Therefore, Christians must look at the Law and ask how it relates to Christ. How has Christ fulfilled the Law? How has He removed its curse? How has He written it upon our hearts? Only Christ can remove the Law's condemnation and

make it a friend. As Romans 8:1–4 says, “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.”

The following diagram illustrates this important relationship between the Christian and the Law:



In studying the Law, we must first investigate it in its original historical setting: God giving the Law at Sinai. Second, we should see how God’s covenantal dealings relate to the Law. That will help us recognize that God delivered His people from Egypt because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then how Christ fulfilled the

Abrahamic covenant. Third, we must consider the redemptive context of the Law and determine how Christ fulfilled the Law. We must recognize that we are participants, not in the Mosaic covenant, but in the new covenant through Christ's shed blood. Keeping these three contexts in mind, we will see how the Law points to Christ and how He applies it to us by the indwelling power and presence of the Holy Spirit. In this light, our prayer should be that the church will increase its understanding of how the Law points to Christ and our need for redemption as well as to the holiness that should characterize those who are in union with Jesus.

Before moving on to our treatment of the Ten Commandments, we should take note of one more important aspect of the Law. The Law is not merely a legal bond; it is also the rule of love between God and His people. Recall the first and greatest commandment: "And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deut. 6:5). This same emphasis can be found in Christ's teaching to the church: "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Hence, we must see that breaking God's Law is violating that bond of love. Alternatively, Christ fulfilled that rule of love because He loved His Father, obeying Him perfectly (John 17:4). And now, the Holy Spirit applies the Word to us and enables us to love our triune God, to obey our heavenly Father. To this end the apostle

John writes, “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:2–3). Hence the Law is a rule of love, one broken by Israel, fulfilled by Christ, and applied by the Spirit.

To gain an appropriate understanding of the Law, it is crucial to study the prologue to the Ten Commandments. It is therefore to the prologue that we turn.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How important is it to consider Christ in relation to the Ten Commandments?
2. Have you witnessed the legalistic results of failing to relate Christ to the Law?
3. What does it mean to consider the Law in its historical, covenantal, and redemptive contexts?
4. What are some ways that God’s love relates to the Law?
5. In what ways does the Law reflect the level of love in our hearts?



The Prologue

The Ten Commandments is one of the best-known passages in the Bible. While unbelievers might have difficulty finding the Ten Commandments in Scripture, they and believers can give some account of what the Decalogue includes. Familiarity with the Decalogue has its benefits, since people do not need to struggle to understand the subject matter. Familiarity, on the other hand, has its drawbacks, since people tend to ignore what they believe they understand. For example, public displays of the Ten Commandments, whether in the church or in the public square, often omit the prologue (Ex. 20:1–2). Why are the first two verses of the Ten Commandments important? Let us see how necessary the prologue is to the proper understanding of the Ten Commandments.

The Prologue

In Exodus 20 God precedes the giving of the Law with these words: "And God spake all these words, saying" (Ex. 20:1). While these words might not strike us as significant, they are, for they clearly indicate the divine origin of the Law. The Decalogue was not just written by God; it is the very Word of God. While subsequent Scripture attributes the authorship of the Law to Moses (Ex. 24:4; John 1:45), its prologue tells us that the ultimate author is God.

Moving forward, we read: "I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2). Notice that God prefaces the Law with two important facts: (1) YHWH is their God, and (2) He is the one who has redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. These two elements are key because this first places the Law within God's covenantal dealings with Israel. Remember, the one true God, creator of heaven and earth, revealed Himself to Moses and demonstrated His power in the ten plagues that He sent against Egypt. At the same time, God delivered Israel from Egypt because of the covenant promise He had made to Abraham. As Exodus 2:24 says: "And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob." God delivered Israel from Egypt because of His covenant with Abraham. That offers us a multifaceted context from

which to view the Law. In the realm of God's covenant with Abraham and His gracious dealings with His people, God has already saved Israel from slavery in Egypt. So the Law is not revealed to God's people as the means by which they should earn their redemption. Rather, the Law is revealed to show them how they can be conformed to the image of their loving, covenant Lord.

We know that Israel was to be conformed to the image of her covenant Lord because God called Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:5–6). The Law was the tool to show Israel what it meant to be a holy nation as well as to reveal God's character and attributes. The Law was not revealed so that Israel could earn redemption. Rather, Israel was to continuously remember her redeemed state in her reflection upon the Law. That is evident from God's own instructions to Israel:

And when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, which the LORD our God hath commanded you? Then thou shalt say unto thy son, We were Pharaoh's bondmen in Egypt; and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand: and the LORD shewed signs and wonders, great and sore, upon Egypt, upon Pharaoh, and upon all his household, before our eyes: and he brought us out from thence, that he

might bring us in, to give us the land which he swore unto our fathers (Deut. 6:20–23).

Notice the interpretive instructions here: when the children ask about the significance of the Law, the first part of the answer is how God, the creator of heaven and earth, has redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. Moreover, Israel's redemption was the fulfillment of the covenant promise to bring them to the land of promise, which God swore by a covenant to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This information is crucial when we consider the relevance of the Ten Commandments for the church today.

The Prologue Today

We must always read the prologue along with the Ten Commandments because it sets the Law within its historical, covenantal, and redemptive contexts. In searching for the significance of the Ten Commandments for the church today, we must likewise consider the Law within our own historical, covenantal, and redemptive contexts.

Our Historical Context

We do not stand at the foot of Mt. Sinai today and receive the Law as Israel did in the Old Testament. We stand at a point in time after the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The advent of Christ is crucial for under-

standing the Law for the church today, for we must interpret the Law in the light of the revelation of Christ. Historically, then, we must account for the person and work of Christ.

Our Covenantal Context

Like Israel, we must also consider our covenantal context. We are not the recipients of the Mosaic covenant, as Israel was, but instead are the recipients of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. In other words, with the revelation of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, redemptive history has taken great steps forward. This means first, we must recognize that we receive the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, the ground of the Mosaic covenant, with the revelation of Christ. The apostle Paul, commenting on the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:7), explains: "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, and to thy seed, which is Christ" (Gal. 3:16). In other words, receiving the Law was not the culmination of redemptive history. Rather, the Abrahamic covenant looked beyond the Mosaic covenant to its fulfillment in the advent of Christ.

Second, we no longer live under the economy of the Mosaic covenant but under the economy of the new covenant, ratified by the blood of Christ. As Hebrews 8:6–7 says: "But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how

much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second" (cf. 12:24). Our covenantal context, therefore, is not the Mosaic covenant but the new covenant mediated by Jesus Christ.

Our Redemptive Context

Just as Israel was to recall its redemptive context, namely, its deliverance from bondage in Egypt (Deut. 6:20–23), so we must continually remember our own redemptive context. We must remember that the events of the Old Testament foreshadowed the events of the New Testament. For example, the Passover (Exodus 12) foreshadowed the sacrifice of the true Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ: "For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us" (1 Cor. 5:7). In this regard, Israel's deliverance foreshadowed our own deliverance. Israel was in bondage to Pharaoh, and we were in bondage to Satan, sin, and death. God "hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13–14). In this light, we might state the prologue for today as: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of slavery to Satan, sin, and death, by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ."

There are more parallels between Israel and the church. Recall that Israel was supposed to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:5–6). If the Old Testament foreshadowed New Testament events and realities, we should not be surprised that the apostle Peter gave the New Testament church the same calling as Old Testament Israel: “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

In remembering our historical, covenantal, and redemptive contexts, we cannot examine the Law and its significance for the church apart from Christ. For we stand after the work of Christ in the new covenant mediated by Him, redeemed out of the kingdom of darkness. The Law is therefore not the means of our redemption, just as it was not for Israel.

The Purpose of the Law

The Law was never intended to be the means for earning our salvation. On the contrary, since the Abrahamic covenant was fulfilled in Christ, the same promise upon which Israel’s redemption from Egypt was founded, then it stands to reason that the Israelites were to look to Christ, not the Law, for their redemption. Note how Paul explains the purpose of the Law: “For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise: but God gave

it to Abraham by promise. Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made" (Gal. 3:18–19b). Paul goes on to say, "But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our school-master to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:23–24).

The Israelites were to look at the Law, see that they did not measure up to its rigorous demands, then look to the only one who could fulfill the requirements of the Law—Jesus Christ. Again, Paul writes:

And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them. Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:12–14).

The Law is not the agent of our salvation—it is not a stepladder by which we can climb the heights of Mt. Zion and earn God's favor by our obedience to the Law. No. The Law was revealed to show us our inability to fulfill its requirements and to bring a curse against us so that in despera-

tion we would cry out to Christ, the only one who can fulfill the requirements of the Law. Indeed, as Paul says, Christ suffered the penalty of the Law by becoming a curse for us.

The Implications of a Christ-centered Approach to the Law

I hope it is now evident why we must never separate the Ten Commandments from its prologue (Ex. 20:1–2). The prologue reminded Israel of her gracious redemption and directed her to the coming redemption of Christ. If we separate the Ten Commandments from its historical, covenantal, and redemptive contexts, we are left with a document that is neither Jewish nor Christian. Can we then post the Ten Commandments without its prologue in public places, courthouses, government buildings, and schools?

When people read, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3), they might ask in some confusion: To whom does this statement refer? Who is speaking? What is the context? What god has made this demand? Divorced from the prologue, the Ten Commandments are disconnected from their historical (the Law delivered at Sinai), covenantal (the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant), and redemptive contexts (the deliverance from Egypt). By disconnecting the Law from its moorings, the Law becomes the very thing it was never intended to be, a legalistic ladder by which

some might attempt to earn salvation. When the prologue is connected to the Law, it ultimately directs us to Christ, for it points us to the Abrahamic covenant, which finds its fulfillment in Christ. Jesus has fulfilled the bond of love on our behalf.

Does the Law Only Function as a Guardian?

Let us consider one last question before we explore the commandments themselves. Does the Law function merely as a schoolmaster or guardian to drive us to Christ (Gal. 3:18–26)? In other words, does the Law have any other function?

Many people believe the Law only has the negative function of pointing out our sin. However, the Law also has a positive function. Paul writes, for example, “Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good” (Rom. 7:12). In a similar way James writes: “If ye fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well” (James 2:8). Based upon such passages of Scripture, the Reformed church teaches there are three functions of the Law: (1) political—to restrain evil in the public realm; (2) pedagogical—the guardian aspect of which Paul speaks, which drives us to Christ; and (3) normative—the Law no longer condemns the believer because of the work of Christ but is now a guide for Christian behavior (cf. WCF 19.6).

According to Exodus 19:5–6, Israel was to be

a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. She was to shine forth the image of her Creator before the world. As Israel foreshadowed the church, we, too, have been called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to shine forth the image of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, before the world. Thus, when we read the Law, we must always be mindful of our redemption through Christ. At the same time we must realize that we are reading about the image and perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. Christ perfectly fulfilled the obligations of the Law. If we are to reflect the image of Christ, the Law will assist us by showing us what we are supposed to look like. With the psalmist, we should love the Law of God because it shows us who we are in Christ and the righteousness with which we are to shine forth. As we examine the Law, we cannot simply explore ethical questions, for to do so is to divorce the Law from the prologue. Rather, we are to remember the trajectory that the prologue sets and which terminates in Christ. We must always examine the Law in connection with Christ.

Conclusion

The Law of God is good, but it will only be good for us if we use it the way God intended. We must read the Law in its historical, covenantal, and redemptive contexts so that our gaze will inevitably fall upon Christ. As we read the Law, may it

reveal our sinfulness and wickedness, remind us of our need for redemption, and drive us to Christ. May we remember that we need not fear the condemnation of the Law because Christ has become a curse for us and has borne the curse of the Law upon the cross. May we also love the Law of God as it points us to the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, in whose image we are being renewed. Let us therefore give thanks for the Law of God and for Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled the Law on our behalf. May we never divorce the Law from its prologue, for to do so is to divorce it from Christ.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why is the prologue important for the comprehension of the Ten Commandments as a whole?
2. Why must we account for the original historical context of the giving of the Law?
3. What difference does the ministry of Christ make for how we approach the Law?
4. In what way is the Law a guardian or schoolmaster that drives us to Christ?
5. How is the Law a guide for holy living?