

Preaching The Law Of God

by Walter Chantry

Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Defraud not, Honour thy father and mother. And he answered and said unto him, Master, all these have I observed from my youth. Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor. [Mark 10:19-21a]

First nine commandments

The more closely we analyse our Lord's message to the rich sinner, the more striking becomes the contrast with modern evangelism. After mentioning the holiness of God, Jesus spent most of the remainder of the interview talking about God's holy law,¹ especially as summarized in the Ten Commandments.

In a sense His first remark to the young man was related to the perfect Law of God. The moral law reveals the character of God. A distorted knowledge of God had kept the inquirer from adequately worshipping according to the first four commandments. He seemed to be more ready to praise men than God. Jesus' rebuke should have convicted the ruler of breaking the 'first table of the law.'

Our Lord went on with an explicit quotation of the next five commandments, although not in their exact order. Doesn't this seem to be an odd answer to 'What shall I do to inherit eternal life?' Surely Jesus didn't imagine that this fellow could have eternal life by keeping the law. 'A man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ ... for by the works of the law shall NO flesh be justified' [Galatians 2:16]. Why didn't Jesus speak of the free gift offered to all? That's it! Why not offer Himself as a 'personal Saviour?' Why all this attention to the law?

Again, we need to be reminded that Jesus is a better evangelist than any of us! Begin to judge your message by His, not vice versa. God's law is an essential ingredient of Gospel preaching, for 'by the law is the knowledge of sin' [Romans 3:20]. The absence of God's holy law from modern preaching is perhaps as responsible as any other factor for the evangelistic impotence of our churches and missions.

The ruler was perplexed. He had no idea what was lacking to receive eternal life. Whom had he offended? What had he done to offend God? As Jesus listed the commandments, the gentleman sincerely acquitted himself of all guilt before them. Jesus said, 'Do not commit adultery.' The rich man said, 'Completely innocent.' And so, on it went. Thus Jesus continued to press the law on him until his blinded eyes would begin to see, really see, his sin. Only by the light of the law can the vermin of sin in the heart be exposed.

After all, what is sin? The Bible's answer is found in I John 3:4; 'Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law; for sin is the transgression of the law.' The word 'sin' makes no sense apart from God's righteous law. How could the young ruler understand his sinfulness if he completely misunderstood God's law? How can today's sinners, who are totally ignorant of God's holy law and its demands upon them, look at themselves as condemned sinners? The idea of sin is strange because God's law is foreign to their minds.

Normal evangelical practice is swiftly to run to the cross of Christ. But the cross means nothing apart from the law. Our Lord's wretched suffering must be tragic and senseless in the eyes of any who have no reverent esteem for the perfect commandments. On the cross Jesus was satisfying the just demands of the law against sinners. If sinners are unaware of the decalogue's requirements for themselves, they will see no personal significance in Christ's broken body and shed blood. Without knowledge of the condemnation of God's holy law, the cross will draw sympathy but not saving faith from sinners. Christ was set forth to be a propitiation [Romans 3:25] — i.e., the substitutionary object of God's wrath poured out against a violated law.

What sense was there in offering the man salvation when he had only a very vague awareness of danger? Though he had doubts that he would inherit eternal life, he certainly did not think of himself as a lawbreaker. But 'sin is the transgression of the law' [John 5:4]. So he was saying in effect that he had no real sin. And Jesus 'came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance' [Luke 5:32]. Until this moralist could see his soul in the light of God's law, he was unprepared for the Gospel.

Present-day preaching only pays lip service to the concept that a man must recognize himself to be a sinner before he can genuinely embrace the Saviour. The average witnessing booklet insists on the question, 'Do you believe that all men are sinners?' If there is any hesitation, you establish the point with, 'For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God' [Romans 3:23]. But no definition of sin is included. There is scarcely a man alive, including the most hardened sinner, who will deny this broad statement. Anyone would answer, 'Of course I am less holy than God. No one is perfect.' The young ruler would have conceded as much. But such is hardly an acknowledgment of sin. He would still deny that he was a liar, an adulterer, a thief.

Hosts of Christians have a dreadful fear of God's law, as if it were the useless relic of a past age, the use of which in our day would keep sinners from the grace of God. Our Saviour used the law as a primary tool of evangelism. He knew that preaching the Ten Commandments was the only way to teach a sinner his guilt and thereby stir within him a desire for God's grace.

The woman at the well must have the seventh commandment applied to her conscience or she would never be converted. This nobleman must have the law personally preached or he would dwell in constant confusion. Every true

saint would have to agree with Paul, who attributed his own conversion to the agency of the law: 'I had not known sin, but by the law' [Romans 7:7]. It is God's law that convicts of sin. Until its condemnation of particular evils is forcefully pressed upon a sinner, he will not flee to Christ for mercy. At best he can only ask, 'What is it that I need for eternal life?' The man who understands the law clearly knows that only God's grace can help him. What the sinner must do is beg for mercy.

The present moment of history finds more ignorance of God's law than in many previous generations. The pulpit ignores Exodus 20. Even church members despise the fourth command, 'Remember the Sabbath day.' How can the world feel guilty in the neglect of worship? Afraid of offending the dime-store theology that has no time for God's law, many preachers are silent on the very element of truth that is needed in this hour.

Satan has effectively used a very clever device to silence the law which is needed as an instrument to bring perishing men to Christ. He has suggested that the law and love are irreconcilable enemies; they are opposites. If they are in conflict, men will obviously choose love and spurn law; for no one would dare to despise love. Thus, the Wicked One has declared that love is independent of law and contrary to it.

Precisely the opposite is declared by Holy Scripture. Law and love are mutually affirming. Jesus plainly taught that the law was urging men to nothing but love. The righteous commandments may be summarized as:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy hearty and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. And thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. [Matthew 22:37-40]

The law is neither more nor less than an elucidation of the demands of love.

In the same manner our Lord defined love by reference to the law. The repetition on this point is striking. 'If ye love me, keep my commandments' [John 14:15]. 'He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me' [John 14:21]. Love cannot be expressed without the guidelines of law, and law cannot be kept spiritually except by the motivation of love.

John very clearly said, 'This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous' [I John 5:5]. Love makes the law enjoyable. Anyone who loves God delights in keeping His precepts. The man who loves God cries as David, 'Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight' [Psalm 119:55]. To the natural man, God's laws are as chains, the harsh imposition of a ruler's will. Thus the law reveals in him an absence of love for God and men. Were his heart loving, he would not find the law grievous.

Just as love makes law enjoyable, law makes love practical. Love which is unexpressed will die. 'How can I show my affections?', asks the truly loving man. God's holy commandments give the answer. They are vents for devotion to God, as I John 5:3 declares. They are also guides to displaying love for men, as Romans 15:8-10 so clearly asserts:

Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Law and love have no quarrel. The conflict arises between law and grace as a way of salvation. Law provides no pathway to life for the sinner. It slays him and drives him to God's grace as his only hope for justification. Salvation is by grace through faith only [Ephesians 2:8].

But this is not to suggest that law is useless for evangelism. It is useless as a standard to be kept in order to gain approval before God. 'By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight' [Romans 5:20]. Nevertheless, Paul extensively wielded the sword of law at the outset in Romans. This he did 'that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God , . . for by the law is the knowledge of sin' [Romans 5:19, 20].

It is essential to declare the commandments in order to show the sinner his heart of hatred toward God and enmity toward men. Only then will he flee to the grace of God in Jesus Christ to provide him with righteousness and love.

Men are not turning to Christ because they have no sense no sense of sinning against the Lord. They are not convicted of sin because they don't know what sin is. They have no concept of sin because the law of God is not being preached. You cannot improvise a hasty sop, 'All men have sinned.' You must dwell on the subject at length. Exposit the Ten Commandments until men are slain thereby [Romans 7:11]. When you see that men have been wounded by the law, then it is time to pour in the balm of Gospel oil. It is the sharp needle of the law that makes way for the scarlet thread of the Gospel.²

Tenth commandment

Our Master found the ruler's knowledge of the commandments superficial. As he mentioned a requirement, the poor deluded man confessed innocence. Exemplary outward behaviour is not the only demand of the commandments. The young man must learn that 'the law is spiritual' [Romans 7:14]. Perhaps he did recognize the stringent outward rule of the law. But he failed to appreciate that the law made demands upon the thoughts and intents of the

heart. Hence our Saviour would have to be the more thorough in preaching the law. He would have to use it as a probe to bring pain deep within the soul.

To any of the commandments our Lord could have added a spiritual application, as He did in His Sermon on the Mount. With 'Do not commit adultery', He could have explained, 'that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart' [Matthew 5:28]. He might have expanded on 'Do not kill' to include 'whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause' [Matthew 5:22]. But the 'Good Master' waited to put His finger on the most darling sin of the rich man's heart.

When Jesus said, 'Sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor', he was preaching the tenth commandment in an applicatory fashion. Christ was using God's word, 'Thou shalt not covet,' as a knife to lance the festering sore of greed in the man's soul. The sin was invisible to the human eye. It did not show its colours on the surface of the ruler's behaviour. But in all its filth and ugliness, covetousness ruled his soul. Like a dart, the law of God pierced the conscience of this youth for the first time.

Had Jesus merely said, 'Do not covet', the polite seeker would have said, 'I do not desire anyone's property or wealth. I am satisfied with my station in life.' It would not do simply to quote Exodus 20 again. Jesus translated the tenth of God's commands into a practical test by demanding that he abandon his riches. The youth loved his riches more than he loved God and His Son, and he turned away. But when he went away, he had a clear consciousness that he was a covetous sinner. He was deficient in love for God, upon which all of the law was hanging [Matthew 22:40].

Do you see that Jesus was not looking for intellectual assent to the fact that the young man was less holy than God? Christ wielded the sword of God's law until it made deep and painful gashes on the ruler's conscience. The Saviour did not try to argue him into agreeing that 'all have sinned'. He continued labouring with the law till the man's soul was deeply impressed that he was a rebel against a holy God and that his soul was dreadfully sold out to Satan in covetousness.

Rather than compromise the truth of God's holy law in the name of love, our Lord allowed the ruler to depart. Had Christ ignored the inviolable character of the perfect law to win this sinner to Himself, He would have destroyed love; for love is bound up in the keeping of the commandments. True love will never negotiate over the truth upon which it is established.

It is imperative that preachers of today learn how to declare the spiritual law of God; for, until we learn how to wound consciences, we shall have no wounds to bind with Gospel bandages. In the twentieth century the church has tried to see how little it could say and still get converts. The assumption has been that a minimal message will conserve our forces, spread the Gospel farther, and, of course, preserve a unity among evangelicals. It has succeeded in spreading the truth so thinly that the world cannot see it. Four facts droned

over and over have bored sinners around us and weakened the church as well.

Now is the hour to recover the full, rich Gospel of Christ. We must preach the holy character of God. We must preach the eternal law of God with diligent and thorough application to our congregations. General terminology is accomplishing just what Jesus' general mention of the law would have elicited: an ignorant, unfeeling, self-exalting protest. Oh, for the studied application of the moral law to the inward man! Where are there pulpits clearly showing that God's pure law makes strict demands upon the motives, desires, feelings and attitudes of the soul? When you find them, you also discover churches with convicted sinners prepared to hear the way of salvation.

Notes

1. All references to God's Law in this chapter have in view only His moral law, which is eternal. Ceremonial and civic laws are not under consideration.
2. Samuel Bolton.

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