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A LOVE AFFAIR WITH THE LAW

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Introduction

Have you ever heard any of these expressions—or ever used them? “I love you so much.” “I dream about you night and day.” “I’d rather have you than a million dollars.” “Your troubles are my troubles.” It sounds like a lover whispering to his sweetheart, doesn’t it? But no, it’s David talking about the law.

David expresses with exuberance what the law of God means to him. “O how I love thy law! it is my meditation all the day” (Ps 119:97). As he considers the workings of God’s laws in nature as well as in the affairs of man, he exclaims: “More to be desired are they than gold, yea than much fine gold” (Ps 19:10). When he sees people spurning God’s law, he cries, “Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law” (Ps 119:136). To the psalmist, law is sweeter than honey in the honeycomb (Ps 19:10).

We would have to admit, that David’s expressions are a bit unusual. Unfortunately, the word “law” often arouses skeptical feelings. People don’t usually like to hear about rules and regulations. True in the secular world, it may be even more so in the Christian world. Unfortunately, law in the spiritual realm is often viewed as a negative aspect—in opposition to the positive message of the gospel.

Salvation and Law. This short study will seek to portray that, in truth, salvation and law are so bound up together they cannot, if understood correctly, be separated. Since all law comes from God, and expresses various facets of His character, (such as

justice, love, constancy, etc.) law cannot be in antitheses to salvation or any other expression of His character.

In this sense, one could say quite fairly, that, salvation is all about law. The whole function of salvation is addressed to getting the law back into the heart, the being of man. The process begins on this earth at the time of conversion, continues throughout life, and is completely fulfilled at the Second Advent when the believer is re-created—brought back to the original perfection—with God’s law an integral part of the being.

Bible Terminology. In the Scriptures, the word “law” is understood in different ways. The Hebrew word *torah* is used in a wide sense and may mean not only a regulative code of conduct as we use the term “law,” but also “the Bible,” that is, the Old Testament as a teaching instrument. The Greek word *nomos* is also associated with this much wider sense of the Hebrew term. When *nomos* is used with the definite article as “the law,” it is usually thinking of a specific law or the law as a way of life. When it speaks of “law,” without the definite article, it is thinking of law in general, law as a governing principle.

Law As a Governing Principle. Law in general, or law as a governing principle, can be understood as the placing of a divine structure upon all created reality by the Creator. It can be viewed as the revelation of God both in the natural world and in the spiritual world. This general principle of law is most important to the well being of all created beings, for it brings consistency and dependability to the universe, setting limits and bounds to time and space.

“Law is the principle and operation of order in the world. . . it expresses the fact that diverse and changing relations unfold in a dependable and intelligible pattern.”¹ Law brings order and direction to an otherwise chaotic existence. It keeps man and all other reality, from “swirling around unpredictably like small balloons whose air is escaping. We are not to be like wild balloons, but like aircraft—controlled, disciplined, orderly and capable of reaching our chosen destination.”² Without law there could be no meaningful history of this planet. Reference to the past would have no utility in decision-making or in understanding the functions of life.

In the same sense, just as God built his laws into the structure

of the physical creation, so also He built His spiritual or moral law into man's nature at creation. So we could say that spiritual law is not a set of rules, but is a recognition of what is, of how life is naturally lived in a perfect state. Until man sinned, spiritual law could be considered also part of the "law of nature." Frank Holbrook comments, "Neither physical nor moral law oppresses the creation. . . . Both angels and human kind in their *original* creation—possessing *naturally* loving hearts—would have taken pleasure in obeying God."³

Moral Law

Implanted Within Human Mind. With moral law we think especially of the principles of the Ten Commandments. Before sin, as mentioned above, this law was incorporated in natural law. In every respect man was created to cooperate with the will of God. Every fiber of his being responded naturally to the goodness and justice of his Creator.

Moral law may not have had a systematic, external expression at first. It probably operated within the mind of man as controlling principles of love toward God and the created world about him. So long as man operated within the bounds of these principles he was very likely unaware of any external structure of law.

To illustrate: When a marriage is dominated by love, the couple is unaware of the undergirding legal requirements of the marriage relationship. They have no thought of the mandated principles of the marriage vows. They are too wrapped up in trying to please each other. If love wanes, the relationship begins to disintegrate; the couple ends up in the divorce court; their greatest concern is no longer love, but law: What are the legal demands that must be adhered to?

In the perfect state the law was within man. Thus moral law began as a part of natural law, being written in Adam's being, not apart from him. Timothy Crosby observes: "Once God created the universe and gave it a specific form, not all possibilities remained open. Moral laws. . . spring from the very nature of God Himself, and are dictated by the structure of the universe." He further states that just as "'downness' is a necessary part of the system that He

created, similarly, the prohibition of murder reflects the very nature of society and God, and so it is with all other moral laws."⁴

So it could be said that just as natural law cannot be broken, neither can moral law be broken within the bounds of perfect creation. Expressed another way, we may say that the moral law *was violatable*, but *not* within a perfect state. Having violated moral law, man moved outside the perfect creation. It became necessary for moral law to be phrased as an outward code to be obeyed. And to some, it now even appears as an enemy.

It is interesting to note, however, that even at this point, all vestige of the moral law has not been obliterated from fallen man, as can be gathered from Romans 2:14, 15. "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness. . . ." Some sense of "ought" seems to speak at times to all human beings.

Law Describes God. Moral law originates in the very center of God's holy being; it springs from the very nature of God Himself. God's law cannot originate from some cosmic oracle outside of Himself.⁵ And it can never be considered as antagonistic to His love. If God is love, and law is the expression of God's character, then law must equal love (1 John 4:8).

The law, when given at Sinai, written on two tables of stone, was as much a description of God as it was a code. And with it came the covenant of grace which further characterized the God who gave it. It was Christ Himself who spoke to His people Israel at Sinai when He made a covenant of love with them based on these ten great principles.

The moral law summarized in ten brief statements "is comprehensive of all human conduct. It is the only law that can effectively control the conscience. It is for all time a condensed manual of human conduct and covers the entire field of human duty."⁶ While there are said to be 35 million laws, yet no improvement upon the Ten Commandments have been found. It is heaven's standard of holiness and an expression of Heaven's love.

When Jesus, the Lawgiver Himself, came to this earth and walked among men, He explained the meaning of the law in terms

of a personal spiritual relationship to his God and to his fellowmen (Matt 22:37-40). When each commandment is seen as the expression of love, the law loses its negative and external dimension and is seen from its spiritual perspective as a covenant of love between God and man. Thus breaking moral law is not merely the breaking of some external code, but in a deeper sense is an affront to the person of God whose character is the essence and foundation of its precepts.

To view moral law other than as an essential part of God's nature, may lead easily to an unhealthy dichotomy between God's justice and His mercy—that of seeing God's law as an external code which identifies and condemns sin and forces Him to carry out penalties that He regrets. To pitch law against grace is like pitching law against God. Richard Fredericks,⁷ quotes Nathaniel Dinock saying:

There can be nothing in the demands of the law, and the severity of the law, and the condemnation of the law, and the death of the law, and the curse of the law, which is not a reflection (in part) of the perfection of God. Whatever is due to the law, is due to the law because it is the law of God, and is due therefore to God Himself.

"The law expresses God's character and personality, revealing a moral God who is concerned equally that justice and mercy triumph."⁸

God's dealings with Israel as a nation demonstrates the close association of His grace with His law, with grace—in a sense—preceding law. God first met Israel in Egypt and miraculously delivered the nation from bondage. Only then did God invite the nation to accept His law as a covenant of mutual trust and commitment. Similarly, in the life of the Christian, Christ died while we were yet estranged sinners; only then did He ask for obedience to His law (Romans 5:8, John 14:15).

Unity of Law and Grace. Just as law is inseparable from God, it is inseparable from grace, from the gospel. There is a tendency by some modern thinkers (antinomians) to strain out the divine justice from the divine benevolence. To sink benevolence into an emotion rather than exalting it as a principle. The employment of such theological "prism" puts asunder what God has joined together. Ellen White quoted a Professor Edward A. Park:⁹

The law is a transcript of the divine perfections, and that a man who does not love the law does not love the gospel; for the law, as well as the gospel, is a mirror reflecting the true character of God.

There exists a fundamental theological union between the law and the gospel that if not recognized, will lead to certain obvious perils.

This peril [of not appreciating the law] leads to another, that of underrating the evil of sin, the extent of it, and demerit of it. In proportion to the rightfulness of the commandment is the wrongfulness of disobeying it.¹⁰

Further, with "the habit of underrating the divine law and justice, and the extent and demerit of human disobedience, men easily slide into the habit of underestimating the grace which has provided an atonement for sin."¹¹

G. C. Berkouwer comments, "If anything is clear in the Biblical revelation it is certainly that the cross is the revelation of God's love but *also*, at the same time, of his holiness and justice." He adds, "The cross shows us that sin was atoned for precisely because *it was also condemned*. Thus the Gospel is a fountain of knowledge for our sins as well as our forgiveness."¹²

God Upholds His Law. Jesus declares (Matt 5:17, 18) that He did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill and to magnify it. His *life* fulfilled and magnified the law, and "by the crucifixion, the law of Ten Commandments was established. The gospel has not abrogated the law, not detracted one tittle from its claims. It still demands holiness in every part."¹³

When we speak of the "fall" of man, we speak of man's transgression of the will of God. Man has stepped outside the bounds of the law and finds himself in a state of rebellion. Salvation is not God adjusting His law in order to help man out of his dilemma. Salvation is God's way of upholding the justice of His law while finding a way to meet the demands of its violation.

Through Calvary, Christ presented to man the invitation and the power to break the control of sin and be drawn into a new relationship with God. Salvation instead of changing the *law* confirmed the law through the death of the Son of God, and gave power to change *men*. Salvation is God's work of bringing man back into

harmony with the law and His expressed will. The purpose of the entire plan of salvation is the restoration of man, this earth and even the entire universe to the original pre-sin condition. Once more the "law of God" will be the natural thing to do.

The Present Function of the Moral Law

We have discussed the law—its place in a perfect world, its place in the very heart of God, its place in man's being at the time of creation, and the evidence that God upholds his law through the plan of salvation. But it is obvious from humanity's universal sinfulness that the moral law is no longer a primary controlling part of man's nature. So, what is the function of the law now in the plan of salvation? Its function is twofold.

(1) To the lost sinner, it reveals his condition.

(2) To the saved sinner, it provides a standard of behavior and points the way toward the restoration of all things. It becomes implanted in his heart as a token or pledge of the full restoration or recreation when law will once more be inseparable from the nature of man. A further discussion of these points follows.

Reveals the Sinner's Condition. Man in his fallen condition does not know—apart from the Holy Spirit—that he is lost. Thus he feels no desire to change toward goodness. His confrontation with the law shows him his desperate situation. But, when initially confronted with the law, he finds himself in a strange dilemma: (1) He is unable to keep the law, but (2) God demands that he should. C. S. Lewis observes, in this respect:¹⁴

The Moral Law does not give us any grounds for thinking that God is 'good' in the sense of being indulgent, or soft, or sympathetic. There is nothing indulgent about the Moral Law. It is as hard as nails. It tells you to do the straight thing and it does not seem to care how painful, or dangerous, or difficult it is to do. If God is like the Moral Law, then He is not soft.

Without Christ the law presents bad news to man in his carnal state. C. S. Lewis describes the situation in colorful language.¹⁵

If there does exist an absolute goodness it must hate most of what we do. That is the terrible fix we are in. If the universe is not governed by an absolute goodness, then all our efforts are in the long run hopeless. But if it is, then we are making ourselves enemies of that

goodness every day. . . . We cannot do without it, and we cannot do with it. God is the only comfort, He is also the supreme terror: the thing we most need and the thing we most want to hide from. He is our only possible ally, and we have made ourselves his enemies.

It is not until man realizes that there is a real moral law, and a Power behind the law, and that we have broken that law and put ourselves at odds with that Power, to use Lewis' words—"It is after all this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk."¹⁶

The law has been the "schoolmaster" bringing the sinner to Christ (Gal 3:24). But, having brought man this far, the law now becomes helpless. For by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified (Romans 3:20). It cannot save.

Before going on, let us answer this question: Why can't the law save the sinner? Is there something wrong with the law? Ivan Blazen, in a presentation at the Daytona Beach 1986 North American Division Evangelism Council, poses that question: Is something wrong with the law? He then answers:¹⁷

No, the law has just been called holy, just and good. Then what is the problem? Reading Romans 8:3, 4: "What the law could not do in that it is weak through the flesh." That is the crux—"weak through the flesh." The problem is not the law, it is *us*. The principle of indwelling sin makes it impossible for the law to bring about the righteousness in the life that it would like to bring about. That's why Paul says in Gal 3:21, If a law had been given which could make alive, then indeed righteousness would be by the law, but the law cannot bring life.

He goes on to say, "But do you mean that the law never promised life? Oh, yes. It promised life alright. Romans 7:10 speaks of 'The law which was ordained unto life.'"¹⁸ But the carnal nature beats it back. An interesting comment from the "Augsburg Sunday School Teacher," August 1937, is quoted in the *SDA Bible Commentary*:¹⁹ "The law would work differently *if* we were to let it have its way in our hearts." It leads to righteousness which would make life possible.

Could we then say that, in a sense, in the beginning, law brought life. Adam in his original condition did not need a savior, although he needed a *sustainer*. The law was within him; as he

continued in it, he continued in life. But Adam and his race having fallen, rather than the law of God dwelling within, the principle of sin is dwelling in the members. In such a condition the law of God can do nothing other than condemn and thereby deal a death blow.

Much of Paul's commentary on the law deals with it on this level—the law as our condemner. If the law is so delightful, why is Paul so harsh with it? By Paul's time a great body of tradition had been added to the requirements God had given. E. W. H. Vick comments:²⁰

These traditions obscured the purpose of the law, which was to reveal what God is like and to tell men what He expects them to be. This traditional system placed obedience to external commands ahead of a personal relationship with the God who made the commands. Acceptance to this system was considered necessary to salvation. . . . Salvation involved performance. . . . One was saved by what one knew, and by what one did.

Paul's argument is against this practice of using the "law" as a legalistic system to earn merit with God. "When the letter was emphasized and the spirit forgotten, the relationship with God degenerated into a matter of doing this and doing that, keeping one law or another, externalism."²¹

In the Pharisee's system, man would not be acceptable in God's sight if he did not do all that Jewish tradition required. This the Pharisees were working very hard to accomplish. Paul insisted that because of the inability of the carnal nature to come up to this standard, the law could bring nothing but condemnation. "For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them.' Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law; for 'He who through faith is righteous shall live'" (Gal 3:10, 11, RSV).

Here we see the picture in Romans 7 of a man striving to keep the holy law, but being beaten back by the power of indwelling sin. So the next step is man's realization that he cannot keep the law on his own.

Blazen describes man's need, at this point, for "a healthy look at Calvary." Man sees at Calvary how awful sin is; how powerful it is; how much it takes to get rid of it. He realizes that he is helpless

on his own, that what he needs is not "good intentions, but a Savior."²² Though the law is spiritual, and belongs to the heavenly realm, it does not have power to help man at this point.

What the penitent needs now is Jesus Christ. And coming to the cross, by faith receiving justification, man is freed from the condemnation of the law. So, according to Romans 10:4, the "end" or *telos*—aim and goal of the law—is to point the sinner to the righteousness of Christ.²³ "We do not try to approach God under law, by way of what we do. We grasp the gift of His grace in faith. . . . This is what it means to be under grace and not under law."²⁴

Becomes an Internal Guide. Now the sinner has come to the cross for justification, and has been granted pardon and the imputed righteousness of Christ. What happens to the law in the process? Being looked upon as perfect in God's sight, the repentant believer is no longer condemned by the law. Rather, the believer is lead by the law into closer harmony with God. Once again its function changes. The moral law becomes not our "condemner," but our inner guide (Romans 8: 1-4). Here we come back to David, who as a saved sinner exclaims, "I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea thy law is within my heart" (Ps 40:8).

Under the promise of the new covenant the law of God continues to occupy an important role in the life of the Christian. "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days. . . . I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts. . . ." (Heb 8:10; cf. Jer 31:31-33). This matter of keeping the law is not to be a matter of mere outward conformity, but God promises an inward transformation and an establishment of new principles in the mind.

This inner transformation is described in symbolic language in Ezekiel 36:26, 27 as the prophet declares that God will take away the heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh. In conversion the cold, irresponsive heart is replaced by the heart of warmth and life, the "heart of flesh," that is sensitive to the movings of God's Divine spirit.

The resultant, inner harmony is no different than that into which man was created in the beginning—that which existed at creation when spiritual law and natural law beat in unison. The fruit of this harmony with God leads inevitably to obedience in

conduct. The inner experience precedes visible conformity. Change in mind results in change in action.

He who receives Christ through the new covenant (new-birth experience) no less receives His holy law as the guide of his life. And thus "becomes a partaker of the divine nature and will be in harmony with God's great standard of righteousness, His holy law."²⁵ However, action in harmony with law is not offered to God in place of the devotion of the human heart. First the heart is given, then God transforms the heart, and Christlike conduct results.²⁶

God's goal for the new covenant is expressed by Ellen White in *Desire of Ages*. The believer may become so in union with God that when he is doing God's will, it will seem to him he is doing his own. "If we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him, we shall be but carrying out our own impulses."²⁷

Here the question could be raised: Does Christlike conduct and character result automatically from God's work on the heart, without thought or effort on the part of the believer? The answer is, no! As the Holy Spirit works on the human will, the power of choice must be exercised. Man must exert every human energy on the side of God's will. "To man is allotted a part in this great struggle for everlasting life—he must respond to the working of the Holy Spirit. It will require a struggle to break through the powers of darkness, and the Spirit works in him to accomplish this. But man is no passive being, to be saved in indolence. He is called upon to strain every muscle and exercise every faculty in the struggle for immortality; yet it is God that supplies the efficiency."²⁸ The believer's efforts do not earn salvation, but if his/her heart has been transformed by the Holy Spirit, then he/she will enlist every power on God's side.

We may now summarize the two basic functions of God's law as expressed in the Ten Commandments. First, it points out sin in individual lives by revealing God's will for the human family. This is its preliminary work under the operation of the Holy Spirit to bring conviction of sin and to create a sense of need in the soul. Second, the Holy Spirit "writes" God's law on the mind of the believer. The law, now dwelling within as it were, continues to serve

as guide and a mirror as at first (James 1:22-25). But it is the work of Christ to provide the power for godly living. Nevertheless, faithful obedience to the divine precepts becomes the believer's delight (Ps 40:8).

Conclusion

We see around us the disintegrating effects of sin and lawlessness. Even within the churches there is lack of power. Ellen White comments: "The nature and the importance of the law of God have been, to a great extent, lost sight of. . . Here is to be found the secret of the lack of the Spirit and power of God in the revivals of our times."²⁹

The message and mission of God's people today is to proclaim the everlasting gospel of Revelation 14 to this dying world, this world that is "hurting and bleeding" from the results of "broken love" and a "broken law." An important part of this message deals with the presentation of a deeper understanding of the broad, spiritual nature of God's holy law. "We have a world wide message," declares Ellen White, "The ten commandments of God and the testimonies of Jesus Christ are the burden of our work."³⁰

The mission is not to give a call to legalism or judgmentalism, nor to pronounce law as a way of salvation. It is a call to the worship of the Creator; a call to the submission and acceptance of the atoning death of Calvary for the violated law; it is a call to let Christ come into the heart and establish His throne in the very seat of life, to accept the love of God as it is poured out, prompting wholehearted obedience to Him (Deut 6:4-5).

A homey, personal story illustrates the theme of this study. Our family moved to a mid-western city and bought a house on a busy street. We brought our little collie pup with us. At considerable expense and long hours of work, we erected a fence.

The little dog, tied on a chain, watched the family without the least understanding of the love going into the toil of hauling material, pounding posts, stretching wire. But when the fence was finished and he was free to run, the favorite pastime seemed to be his trying to find a way to get out of the enclosure. Some days later when the phone rang in my office, I heard a teary voice begging me to "Come home quickly, Daddy, something awful happened."

I rushed home to find mother and three children gathered around the form of the little collie dog—stretched on the grass, bloody and lifeless—struck by a fast-moving car on the busy front street to which he had escaped. So the tears of the five all rained down together. Our beautiful little dog—if only he could have seen those tears, could have understood the mystery of the fence—that it was love that erected the fence—nothing else—only love.

The church's message to the world is just that. To tell them God's law was never meant to oppress the universe. It was given, all for love. It was provided at great expense and suffering—all for love—only for love.

Endnotes

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- 28 Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Teachers*, p. 366.
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