

Three Uses of the Law

Introduction

Last week, in Book II, Chapter VII (first part), Calvin taught that the Mosaic revelation of both the Moral and Ceremonial Law was not done to establish a way of life for any purpose apart from Christ, but was done to prepare the way for him. Furthermore, Calvin began to emphasize a use of the Law which condemns everyone who sins. He calls this its “punitive” function. This is also called the “first” use by theologians, and also the “theological” use. It is a fundamental principle of Reformation theology. In this lesson, which concludes Chapter VII, Calvin further develops this use of the law, and also enumerates and explains two other important uses, and how these different uses relate to both believers and nonbelievers. Calvin concludes this chapter by giving insight on why the ceremonial law had to be abolished.

This exposition of the three “uses” of the Moral Law is a shared product of the Lutherans and the Reformed. Though the many concepts of the use of the Moral Law contained in this enumeration of three uses can be seen in the writings of the early Reformation, the actual enunciation of these uses in a systematic manner is due to Philipp Melancthon, Luther’s eminent disciple and co-teacher in his own right.¹

We will now review our progress through Chapter VII, from the beginning:

———— BEGINNING OF REVIEW OF CLASS 4 ————

Book II, Chapter VII – *The Law Was Given, Not to Restrain the Folk of the Old Covenant Under Itself, but to Foster Hope of Salvation in Christ Until His Coming*

A. The moral and ceremonial law leads us to Christ, 1-2

1. The Mediator helps only fallen man
2. The Law contains a promise

The ceremonial law, centered in sacrifices, points forward to the future reality of the sacrifice of Christ. The Moral Law, which was broken daily by them, points forward to the moral need for this sacrifice.

If this Moral Law could be kept, then its promissory function would be negated and futile.

¹ Melancthon is responsible for other “firsts”: 1) First Protestant systematic theology, the Loci Communes, 2) First Protestant Commentary, on the Epistle to the Romans. This latter commentary was highly influential on the structure of later versions of the Institutes.

Those who take the Mosaic Law as efficacious unto itself are forgetting the point of it all, and saying that they can earn their eternal life through the sacrificial system and their works.

B. We cannot fulfill the Moral Law, 3-5

3. The law renders us inexcusable and drives us into despair

Calvin: But, in order that our guilt may arouse us to seek pardon, it behooves us, briefly, to know how by our instruction in the moral law we are rendered more inexcusable. If it is true that in the law we are taught the perfection of righteousness, this also follows: the complete observance of the law is perfect righteousness before God. By it man would evidently be deemed and reckoned righteous before the heavenly judgment seat. Therefore, Moses, after he had published the law, did not hesitate to call heaven and earth to witness that he had "set before Israel life and death, good and evil" [Deut 30:19]. We cannot gainsay that the reward of eternal salvation awaits complete obedience to the law, as the Lord has promised. On the other hand, it behooves us to examine whether we fulfill that obedience, through whose merit we ought to derive assurance of that reward. ...

At this point the feebleness of the law shows itself. Because observance of the law is found in none of us, we are excluded from the promises of life, and fall back into the mere curse. I am telling not only what happens but what must happen. For since the teaching of the law is far above human capacity, a man may indeed view from afar the proffered promises, yet he cannot derive any benefit from them.

Since Calvin referred to Deut 30 in the exposition of his thesis that no one can obey the law perfectly, the question then arose, how to interpret Moses' comments in that Chapter, especially Moses' implication that the Jews could obey the law. Here is Moses:

Deuteronomy 30:11-20 ¹¹ For this commandment which I command thee this day, it *is* not hidden from thee, neither *is* it far off. ¹² It *is* not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? ¹³ Neither *is* it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? ¹⁴ But the word *is* very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it. ¹⁵ ¶ See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil; ¹⁶ In that I command thee this day to love the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply: and the LORD thy God shall bless thee in the land whither thou goest to possess it. ¹⁷ But if thine heart turn away, so that thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them; ¹⁸ I denounce unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish, *and that* ye shall not prolong *your* days upon the land, whither thou passest over Jordan to go to possess it. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, *that* I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live: ²⁰ That thou mayest love the LORD thy God, *and* that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he *is* thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the LORD swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.

Here is Calvin's response, taken from his commentary on the passage:

... For the Law, as respects its doctrine, contains in it life and death; for the reward of eternal life is not promised in it in vain; but since no one is found worthy of the promised reward, Paul justly teaches that the Law ministers death. Still this is accidental, and proceeds not from any fault in the doctrine, but from the corruption of men. Nevertheless, it is asked how, if the corruption of our nature causes that the Law should engender nothing but death, Moses commands us to "choose life," which the sinner cannot attain to by it? Then the Papists² uplift their crests, both to extol free-will and to boast of merits,³ as if Moses did not also testify and proclaim the gratuitous [free] mercy of God, and direct his disciples to Christ in order to seek salvation from Him. When, therefore, he speaks of keeping the Commandments, he does not exclude the two-fold grace of Christ, that believers, being regenerated by the Spirit, should aspire to the obedience of righteousness, and at the same time should be reconciled freely to God through the forgiveness of their sins. And assuredly, since the same covenant is common to us and to the ancient people, it is not to be doubted but that they "chose life" who of old embraced the doctrine of Moses. At the same time, in so far as his legation was different from the Gospel, he rather insists on the office peculiarly entrusted to him, so that the distinction between Christ and himself might more clearly appear. This is the reason why he more sparingly touches upon justification by faith, whilst he enlarges fully on loving and serving God and fulfilling His Commandments.⁴

Questions?

4. Nevertheless the promises in the law are not without meaning

Calvin: ... I reply: even if the promises of the law, in so far as they are conditional, depend upon perfect obedience to the law – which can nowhere be found – they have not been given in vain. For when we have learned that they will be fruitless and ineffectual for us unless God, out of his free goodness, shall receive us without looking at our works, and we in faith embrace that same goodness held forth to us by the gospel, the promises [of the law] do not lack effectiveness even with the condition attached. For the Lord then freely bestows all things upon us so as to add to the full measure of his kindness this gift also: that not rejecting our imperfect obedience, but rather supplying what is lacking to complete it, he causes us to receive the benefit of the promises of the law as if we had fulfilled their condition. But since we will have to discuss this question more fully under the heading of justification by faith, we will not pursue it farther for the present.

5. The fulfillment of the law is impossible for us

² As is clearly shown in many chapters of Book IV of the Institutes, Calvin believes that the fundamental error of the Papists is not that they are Catholics, but that they are Papalists – that is, that they believe in the office of Pope – a single monarch over all Christendom. In the early church, it was customary to reject the concept of a single bishop over the entire catholic church. Calvin thinks that the growth and final dominion of the Papacy is the reason for the fall of the church. This accounts for references to the office of the Pope as the office of Antichrist. This sentiment is not new to the Reformers, but may be found in published complaints by Catholics about the state of the Catholic church hundreds of years earlier.

³ What Calvin means by free-will and merits is the teaching that persons can obey the law by free-will, possibly under the influence of grace, and that the result is personal merit. Calvin's teaching, as we have seen, is that the partial, or chaotic, "obedience" coming about under the influence of grace is 1) strictly speaking sin, since it is not perfect, and 2) through faith and the merits of Christ, the sinfulness is remitted and rewards are given by grace only. There is no merit.

⁴ John Calvin, Harmony of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, p. 288-9.

C. The law shows the righteousness of God, and as a mirror discloses our sinfulness, leading us to implore divine help, 6-9

6. The severity of the law takes away from us all self-deception
7. The punitive function of the law does not diminish its worth
8. The punitive function of the law in its work upon believers and unbelievers
9. The law, as Augustine states, by accusing moves us to seek grace

————— END OF REVIEW OF CLASS 4 —————

D. The law restrains malefactors and those who are not yet believers, 10-11

This section introduces what the Reformed traditionally call the “2nd use” of the law. Sometimes this is called the “civil use.”⁵ It is the use of the law to restrain and punish outward misbehavior in society.

10. The law as protection of the community from unjust men

Calvin: The second function of the law is this: at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats in the law. But they are restrained, not because their inner mind is stirred or affected, but because, being bridled, so to speak, they keep their hands from outward activity, and hold inside the depravity that otherwise they would wantonly have indulged. ...

But this constrained and forced righteousness is necessary for the public community of men, for whose tranquility the Lord herein provided when he took care that everything be not tumultuously confounded. ... Nay, even for the children of God, before they are called and while they are destitute of the Spirit of sanctification, so long as they play the wanton in the folly of the flesh, it is profitable for them to undergo this tutelage. ... As a consequence, when they are called, they are not utterly untutored and uninitiated in discipline as if it were something unknown. ...

11. The law a deterrent to those not yet regenerate

Calvin argues in this section that God uses the Law to discipline the elect before conversion.

E. Principally it [the law] admonishes believers, and urges them on in well-doing, 12-13

This section introduces the so-called “3rd use” of the law.⁶

⁵ The “civil use” means the use in human courts of law at any level of seriousness, from petty offense to felony.

⁶ In some theological writers and theological traditions, what I have enumerated as the 1st and 2nd uses of the Moral Law are switched, the term “1st use” being tied to the civil use, and the term “2nd use” being tied to the theological, or punitive, use. This alternate numbering is most often seen in the context of Lutheran theology. However, this does not imply any difference in the meaning of the civil and theological “uses.” Therefore, in contexts where confusion may result, it is better to use a name rather than a number to indicate one of these uses. However, both Reformed and Lutheran theological traditions agree on the application of the label “3rd use” to refer to the use of the Moral Law to exhort and direct believers. And so, for this use, the number of the “use” is the most commonly used label!

12. Even the believers have need of the law

Calvin: The third and principal use, which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns. For even though they have the law written and engraved upon their hearts by the finger of God [Jer 31:33⁷; Heb 10:16⁸], that is, have been so moved and quickened through the directing of the Spirit that they long to obey God, they still profit by the law in two ways.

Here is the best instrument for them to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it. If is as if some servant, already prepared with all earnestness of heart to commend himself to his master, must search out and observe his master's ways more carefully in order to conform and accommodate himself to them. And not one of us may escape from this necessity. For no man has heretofore attained to such wisdom as to be unable, from the daily instruction of the law, to make fresh progress toward a purer knowledge of the divine will.

Calvin speaks not only of knowledge, but secondly of exhortation:

... In this way the saints must press on; for, however eagerly they may in accordance with the Spirit strive toward God's righteousness, the listless flesh always so burdens them that they do not proceed with due readiness. ... Doubtless, David was referring to this use when he sang the praises of the law: "The law of the Lord is spotless, converting souls; ... the righteous acts of the Lord are right, rejoicing hearts; the precept of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes," etc. [Ps 19:7-8⁹]. ... These do not contradict Paul's statements, which show not what use the law serves for the regenerate, but what it can of itself¹⁰ confer upon man. But here the prophet proclaims the great usefulness of the law: the Lord instructs by their reading of it those whom he inwardly instills with a readiness to obey. He lays hold not only of the precepts, but the accompanying promise of grace, which alone sweetens what is bitter. For what would be less lovable than the law if, with importuning and threatening alone, it troubled souls through fear, and distressed them through fright? David especially shows that in the law he apprehended the Mediator, without whom there is no delight or sweetness.

13. Whoever wants to do away with the law entirely for the faithful, understands it falsely

Calvin: Certain ignorant persons, not understanding this distinction, rashly cast out the whole of Moses, and bid farewell to the two Tables of the Law. For they think it obviously alien to Christians to hold to a doctrine that contains the "dispensation of death [2 Cor 3:7¹¹]." Banish this

⁷ Jeremiah, referring to the New Covenant, states: **Jer. 31:33** ³³ But this *shall be* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

⁸ The writer of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah, applying the prophecy to the Church: **Heb. 10:16** ¹⁶ This *is* the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them;

⁹ **Psalms 19:7-8** ⁷ The law of the LORD *is* perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD *is* sure, making wise the simple. ⁸ The statutes of the LORD *are* right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD *is* pure, enlightening the eyes.

¹⁰ That is, what the law can confer without the Gospel or the gift of the Holy Spirit in man.

¹¹ **2 Corinthians 3:7-8** ⁷ ¶ But if the ministration of death, written *and* engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which *glory* was to be done away: ⁸ How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious?

wicked thought from our minds! For Moses has admirably taught that the law, which among sinners can engender nothing but death, ought among the saints to have a better and more excellent use. ...

We ought not to be frightened away from the law or to shun its instruction merely because it requires a much stricter moral purity than we shall reach while we bear about with us the prison house of our body. For the law is not now acting toward us as a rigorous enforcement officer who is not satisfied unless the requirements are met. But in this perfection to which it exhorts us, the law points out the goal toward which throughout life we are to strive. ... Indeed, this whole life is a race; when its course has been run, the Lord will grant us to attain that goal to which our efforts now press forward from afar.

- F. The law's "abrogation" has reference to the liberation of the conscience (concerning the Moral Law), and the discontinuance of the ancient ceremonies (concerning the Ceremonial Law), 14-17

If the Moral Law still has significance for the believer, how are we to understand its "abrogation," as so often spoken of in the New Testament, especially by Paul, when he says we are not "under law"?

14. To what extent has the moral law been abrogated for believers?

Now, the law has power to exhort believers. This is not a power to bind their consciences with a curse, but one to shake off their sluggishness, by repeatedly urging them, and to pinch them awake to their imperfection. Therefore, many persons, wishing to express such liberation from that curse, say that for believers the law – I am still speaking of the moral law – has been abrogated. Not that the law no longer enjoins believers to do what is right, but only that it is not for them what it formerly was: it may no longer condemn and destroy their consciences by frightening and confounding them.¹²

Paul teaches clearly enough such an abrogation of the law [Rom 7:6¹³]. That the Lord also preached it appears from this: he would not have refuted the notion that he would abolish the law [Matt 5:17¹⁴] if this opinion had not been prevalent among the Jews. ... When the Lord testifies that he "came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it" and that "until heaven and earth pass away ... not a jot will pass away from the law until all is accomplished," he sufficiently confirms that by his coming nothing is going to be taken away from the observance of the law. And justly – inasmuch as he came rather to remedy transgressions of it. Therefore through Christ the teaching of the law remains inviolable; by teaching, admonishing, reproof, and correcting, it forms us and prepares us for every good work.

¹² This implies that Calvin sees that the relationship of the Moral Law to believers has changed with the advent of Christ. Since the curse is abrogated by the New Covenant, then the curse must have been in force previously. However, as other passages in this section of the Institutes have taught, the believers have always been under the forgiving protection of God, even prior to the advent of Christ. But, this "abrogation" of the Law appearing with the New Covenant does imply that the Moral Law was a "threat" to the believers in old time in a sense in which it is not now. This affects how the Law is used under the New Covenant. Exactly how the use of the law is affected will need to be gleaned from Calvin's teaching in the rest of Chapter VII, and in other parts of the Institutes, particularly Book III.

¹³ **Romans 7:6** ⁶ But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not *in* the oldness of the letter.

¹⁴ **Matthew 5:17-18** ¹⁷ ¶ Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. ¹⁸ For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

15. The law is abrogated to the extent that it no longer condemns us

What Paul says of the curse unquestionably applies not to the ordinance itself but solely to its force to bind the conscience. The law not only teaches but forthrightly enforces what it commands. If it be not obeyed – indeed, if one in any respect fail in his duty – the law unleashes the thunderbolt of its curse. For this reason the apostle says: “All who are of the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be every one who does not fulfill all things’ [Gal 3:10; Deut 27:26¹⁵]”. He describes as “under the works of the law” those who do not ground their righteousness in remission of sins, through which we are released from the rigor of the law. He therefore teaches that we must be released from the bonds of the law, unless we wish to perish miserably under them.

But from what bonds? The bonds of harsh and dangerous requirements, which remit nothing of the extreme penalty of the law, and suffer no transgression to go unpunished. To redeem us from this curse, I say, Christ was made a curse for us. “For it is written: ‘Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree.’ [Gal 3:13; Deut 21:23¹⁶]” In the following chapter Paul teaches that Christ was made subject to the law “that he might redeem those under the law.” This means the same thing, for he continues: “So that we might receive by adoption the right of sons.¹⁷” What does this mean? That we should not be borne down by an unending bondage, which would agonize our consciences with the fear of death. Meanwhile this always remains an unassailable fact: no part of the authority of the law is withdrawn without our having always to receive it with the same veneration and obedience.

16. The ceremonial law

The ceremonies are a different matter: they have been abrogated not in effect¹⁸ but only in use. Christ by his coming has terminated them, but has not deprived them of anything of their sanctity; rather, he has approved and honored it. Just as the ceremonies would have provided the people of the Old Covenant with an empty show if the power of Christ’s death and resurrection had not been displayed therein: so, if they had not ceased, we would be unable today to discern for what purpose they were established.

... In their abolition the truth shines forth better than if they, still far off and as if veiled, figured [were a prefiguration of] the Christ, who has already plainly revealed himself.

¹⁵ **Galatians 3:10** ¹⁰ ¶ For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. **Deuteronomy 27:26** ²⁶ ¶ Cursed be he that confirmeth not *all* the words of this law to do them.

¹⁶ **Galatians 3:13** ¹³ 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: **Deuteronomy 21:22-23** ²² ¶ And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: ²³ His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.

¹⁷ **Galatians 4:4-5** ⁴ But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, ⁵ To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

¹⁸ I.e., the effect of the curse of the broken Moral Law is removed. However, the effect of the ceremonial laws, which instituted fellowship with God, is carried forward by the finished work of Christ. Therefore, the ceremonial law is abrogated in use only.

17. "The written bond against us" is blotted out

In this section Calvin deals with the passage in Col 2:13-14: "And you, when you were dead through sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven you all your sins, having canceled the written bond which was against us in the decrees, which was contrary to us." Calvin argues that the "written bond" in the passage concerns the ceremonies.¹⁹ Calvin continues later in this section:

... But I am sure that I have come upon the true understanding of it – provided the truth be granted of what Augustine somewhere most truly writes, or rather takes from the apostle's clear words: In the Jewish ceremonies there was confession of sins rather than atonement for them.²⁰ What else did the Jews accomplish with their sacrifices than to confess themselves guilty of death, since they substituted purification in place of themselves?²¹ What else did they accomplish with their cleansings but confess themselves unclean? They thus repeatedly renewed the "written bond" of their sin and impurity. But in giving such proof there was no release from it. The apostle, for this reason, writes: "Since Christ's death has occurred, redemption from the transgressions which remained under the old covenant has been accomplished."²² The apostle rightly, therefore, calls the ceremonies "written bonds against" those observing them, since through such rites they openly certify their own condemnation and uncleanness.²³

There is no contradiction in the fact that they also were partakers in the same grace with us. For they attained that in Christ; not in the ceremonies that the apostle in that passage distinguishes from Christ, inasmuch as these, then in use [after Christ's advent], obscured Christ's glory. ... When the false apostles wanted to bind the Christian church again to observe them, Paul with good reason, more profoundly restating their ultimate purpose, warned the Colossians into what danger they would slip back if they allowed themselves to be subjugated to the ceremonial law in this way. For at the same time they were deprived of the benefit of Christ, since, when once he had carried out the eternal atonement, he abolished those daily observances, which were able only to attest sins but could do nothing to blot them out.²⁴

¹⁹ Others might argue that the fact that the bond was written could imply that the Moral Law is in view, since that was written by the hand of God on Mount Sinai – and possibly on the ground by Jesus, in the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8). We will not investigate Calvin's exegesis at this point.

²⁰ There was a simulation of atonement in them, and God did remit their sins, under the discipline revealed through Moses. Yet, the real atonement was not yet, because these sacrifices had to be repeated until the One Sacrifice which is eternally efficacious was made by Our Lord Jesus. **Hebrews 10:1-2** For the law having a shadow of good things to come, *and* not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. ² For then would they not have ceased to be offered? **Leviticus 16:21-22** ²¹ And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send *him* away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: ²² And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.

²¹ In other words, they confessed themselves guilty of the Moral Law, in the use of the Ceremonial Law.

²² **Hebrews 9:15** ¹⁵ ¶ And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions *that were* under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.

²³ **Hebrews 10:3** ³ But in those *sacrifices there is* a remembrance again *made* of sins every year.

²⁴ The apostle teaches that going back to the sacrifices reveals a kind of apostasy from faith in Christ who has already come (and in his work). This is also seen in Galatians.