

Chapter 7

The Ten Commandments and the Priority of Jesus Christ

Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ*

Quote of the Week:

The New Covenant believer bypasses the terrifying display at Sinai for a scene that surpasses it, not in earthly terror, but in heavenly celebration. The two covenants have in common the superior nature of their giver. No covenant maker could be greater than God. After that, the comparison recedes. All else is contrast.¹

Key Scripture:

For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them...But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. (Heb. 12:18-19, 22-24, NASB).

Lesson Outline:

- I. "In a matter of extreme importance, we use a summary only if there is no other fuller information available" (87).
 - A. Unless the Ten Commandments are the *only* moral law in Scripture, we'll have to look beyond them to see how to live.
 1. If they are directly to us and exhaustive, they will tell us all we need to know.
 2. If they are a summary, then we "turn to that fuller revelation for our direction," and they are left only as a symbol (87).
 - B. Some argue that all other moral law is *implicit* in the Ten Commandments.
 1. One may see the Ten Commandments as the "moral law of God," but practically speaking, any Christian with a Bible will turn to other places that spell out what the Ten Commandments only imply.
 2. But realistically, there is a lot that the Decalogue doesn't cover; defenders of the Ten Commandments as the whole moral law have to read a lot back in from elsewhere.
 - C. A better way to see the Ten Commandments: an important link in progressive revelation.
 1. The Decalogue is clearer and more specific than the natural law written on men's hearts (Rom. 2:14-15, Rom. 1:32).

¹ Tom Wells, *The Priority of Jesus Christ* (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2005), 92. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are from *The Priority of Jesus Christ*.

2. “Now, under the New Covenant, the same thing has happened again; the person, example, and teaching of our Lord Jesus and his immediate agents superseded the former ‘summary statement.’ The church is built on this fuller foundation, and the older summary, while still in a real sense true, has been transcended” (89).

II. Objection: the manner in which the Ten Commandments were revealed shows their special and lasting significance.

A. Robert Dabney: “The manner of their publication plainly showed that God intended to give them the peculiar importance we assign them.”² Dabney claims

1. The audible voice of God, the sending of angels as messengers (Acts 7:53), and the attending thunder, lightning, and sound of a trumpet mark the giving of the law at Sinai as uniquely significant.
2. God himself wrote these laws, and no others, on stone tablets, “the imperishable material signifying the perpetuity of the laws” (Dabney, 354; quoted in Wells, 89).

B. But the material doesn’t *prove* that these laws were to last forever; at most, it is an illustration of the point.

C. Hebrews addresses each part of Dabney’s argument:

1. The voice of God: “In the New Covenant, we have laws uttered by God, to his church, in an audible voice. The covenant under which this law operates is unique and superior to all other covenants because its mediator is the God-Man” (91, citing Heb. 1:3).
2. Angels: Hebrews shows that the Son is *superior* to angels (Heb. 2:2, Heb. 1:4ff.).
3. Displays of nature:
 - a. “Are the atmospheric conditions that surround the incarnation (or the crucifixion) any less impressive?” (91)
 - b. Regardless of how astonishing the display at Sinai was, Hebrews says we come to a different mountain (Heb. 12:18-24; see the Quote of the Week, above).

III. The Decalogue itself shows that it is not the eternal moral law of God.

A. The Ten Commandments, as written by God and given to Moses, do not address the heart.

1. “You shall not give false witness against your neighbor” (Exod. 20:16) only demands telling the truth about other people. The Westminster Longer Catechism says the commandment demands “a charitable esteem of our neighbors; loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name; sorrowing for, and covering of their infirmities,” and more (quoted 93). Those are good, heart-centered possible implications, but they are nowhere to be found in Exodus 20.
2. Likewise, “You shall not steal” (Exod. 20:15). The Tenth Commandment forbids coveting, which is the heart attitude of one tempted to steal—which means the Eighth Commandment on its own *doesn’t* address the heart.

² Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1871; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 354; quoted in Wells, 89).

3. “It is a dangerous practice to read into Scripture what is not there, even if one’s motive is good” (94).
 4. “Negative commands starting, ‘You shall not!’ (eight of the ten) are more suited to rebels than to believers” (94; see 1 Tim. 1:9-11).
- B. The Sabbath command (and the further laws attached to it) don’t look like moral law, and the New Testament treats the Sabbath as a ceremony.
1. Scripture doesn’t actually define a separate “moral law,” but the traditional divisions of moral, civil, and ceremonial may be a useful category to describe the way different laws apply to different aspects of life.
 2. But *all* kinds of laws are inherently moral when given by God.
 - a. Some have taken the Ten Commandments as being entirely “moral law” because they are given together in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.
 - b. But elsewhere we see different categories intermixed (see Lev. 11:44-45, Lev. 19:2-3, Lev. 20:25-27).
 - c. God treated all of his laws alike (Lev. 5:1-5, 21:7-10; Num. 5:1-10).
 3. The New Covenant describes the Jewish Sabbath as one of Israel’s ceremonies that prophesied of Christ.
 - a. Colossians 2:16-17 forbids judgment based on matters of indifference—including the Sabbath—because they were shadows of Christ, who has now come.
 - b. Gal. 4:9-11—To make special days (including the Sabbath) morally obligatory is to go back to slavery under the Law.
 - c. Rom. 14:5-6—If you observe such days, do so to the Lord; if not, then choose not to observe them “to the Lord;” *both* can be done in ways to please Christ.
 4. Regardless of how we observe the Lord’s Day, it is *his* day—and so “the Lord Jesus, in his New Covenant revelation, should have the final word” about what the day is like (100).

C. Conclusion

1. Some of the Ten Commandments speak to moral issues, but do not address the heart. Can an ungodly person with an unregenerate heart be said to keep “God’s moral law”?
2. The New Testament connects the Jewish Sabbath with rites and ceremonies, and treats it as having passed away. This is not unchanging moral law.
3. “Does the Decalogue contain moral law? The Lord Jesus must tell us” (100).

IV. Excursus: The Purposes of Mosaic Legislation

A. Seven reasons for the Mosaic Law (100-101):

1. To give Israel a holiness analogous to God’s holiness (Lev. 11:45, 19:1).

2. To distinguish and to separate Israel from the surrounding nations (Lev. 18:1-5, 24-30; Lev. 20:23-26; Eph. 2:11-16).
 3. To maintain earthly life and to grant Israel continued possession of the promised land (Deut. 4:1-4. See also Deut. 5:32-33, Deut. 6:2-3, 20-25).
 4. To demonstrate Israel's greatness (by the grace of God) in wisdom and understanding to the nations (Deut. 4:6-7).
 5. To identify sin and transgression, leading to despair of one's own righteousness (Rom. 3:20, 5:20, 7:7-13; Gal. 3:19-25).
 6. To be a disciplinarian for the nation of Israel until Christ came (Gal. 3:23-25).
 7. To provide a framework with which to understand the priestly work of Christ (Heb. 3:16; 5:1; 5:4-6; 8:1-6; etc.).
- B. Like other nations' laws, Mosaic Law is addressed not only to regenerate people, but to people of all kinds.
1. Over 90% of the laws in the Mosaic Law address, not the heart, but outward actions.
 2. Yet national laws do notice motives—hence the distinction between murder and manslaughter.
 3. Many nations' laws call for ultimate allegiance to something beyond the law itself—whether a so-called god (as in many Islamic nations), or a flag, or a monarch, or the nation's well-being. The Mosaic Law's demand for loyalty to Yahweh is not unique for a national law code.
- C. The New Testament gives laws that address regenerate hearts.
1. Some of those laws parallel laws found in the Old Covenant, but the Old Covenant has a pattern of addressing outward performance, while the New Covenant focuses on the heart [with prescribed behavior as an overflow of that heart—MDY].
 2. The New Testament law of Christ emphasizes “calls for love, humility, heart-peace, longsuffering with others, gentleness, goodness, faith, and hope” (103). The Old Testament also speaks to these, but only occasionally. Mosaic Law was primarily for the unregenerate and the ungodly (1 Tim. 1:8-11).
 3. “To read Paul here [in 1 Tim. 1:8-11] would suggest that regenerate men and women need no law, but that is hardly his point. Godly persons need direction, but they less often need the kinds of laws that constitute the Mosaic code. Note the phrase ‘less often.’ Believers are not perfect, but they are characterized by the absence of the sins Paul finds in the Mosaic law and lists here” (104).