

Preaching on the Law

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There is an understandable reluctance to preach on the law. We are ministers of the gospel, the good news, and the law seems in many cases to be bad news. It is a collection of prohibitions, of “thou shalt nots.” Or it is a collection of unattainable admonitions, of “be ye perfects.” Preaching the law can lead our hearers to despair or to angry rebellion.

Or, all too often, the law is presented as a very specious kind of good news, an offer that if we will be obedient up to a certain attainable level, God will pay off. Keeping the law will earn us brownie points, win God’s favor, get us into heaven. Paul calls this “justification by works of the law” and declares that it never works. Despite that clear biblical word, innumerable jokes begin with a person who dies and knocks on the pearly gates to be met by St. Peter with a record in hand of all his or her good deeds and bad deeds. A hasty balance is computed and admission or rejection follows. This is not merely a joking matter, because it pictures in a clear mythology the serious belief of many who call themselves Christians. I remember the cautionary word of an older minister when I first started preaching: “Remember, son, that the majority of Presbyterians are Judaizers,” referring to Paul’s opponents in the letter to the Galatians. This mythology is partly the product of bad preaching — the airwaves are full of it. But mainly it is the product of the natural legality of the human heart. People want to earn and take credit for their own salvation by keeping the law, defined usually as a sort of minimal decency. We don’t preach the law because we don’t want to encourage that heresy.

Even if we make it perfectly clear that “by works of the law shall no flesh be justified,” even if we use the law to strip away all self-righteousness, to drive our hearers toward the atoning work of Christ, preaching the law remains problematical. Our aim is to enable the congregation to sing with great sincerity “Rock of Ages” as the hymn to follow the sermon:

Not the labors of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law’s demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone,
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

But does preaching the law get us there? Luther and Calvin agree that it should. The law is a hammer, said Luther, that breaks up our hardened self-righteousness and leads us to repentance. The law is a mirror, said Calvin, in which we see our weakness and iniquity; it drives us to the mercy that is in Christ.

The experience of Thomas Chalmers indicates otherwise. For years, in the rough and unresponsive parish of Kilmany, Scotland, Chalmers preached the law, thundering from Sinai against the wickedness and hardness of heart of his parishioners. His aim was conversion of their hearts and amendment of their conduct. But nothing happened. Following a serious illness and his own “evangelical conversion,” Chalmers returned and began to preach the grace of God. Hearts melted. Conduct

reformed. The church grew. Hundreds of pastors, including myself, can testify that the preaching of God's undeserved love and mercy has proven far more effective than the preaching of law in melting hard hearts, moving people to repentance, drawing them to Christ, and leading them to walk in newness of life.

The Necessity of Preaching on the Law

Yet, if we do not preach the law, we do not preach a large part of the Bible: not just the Ten Commandments, not just the first five books of the Old Testament, but the admonitions of the prophets, and much of the New Testament as well. The ethical teaching of Jesus is law. Luther was not wrong to call the Sermon on the Mount a new law preached by a new Moses on a new mountain. The epistles are shot through with prescriptions for conduct that is well pleasing to God. Sometimes a solid section of law is clearly marked off as in Romans 12-15; Galatians 5-6; Ephesians 4-6; Colossians 3-4; or Hebrews 12-13. Luther called James "a right strawy epistle" because he correctly discerned that it was mainly law. If we are to declare to our people "the whole counsel of God," we cannot omit all this.

Preaching the Law

How, then, are we to preach the law?

Timing is all important. The law must always follow grace and never precede it. The epistles are a model for us here. But Exodus 19-20 is no less a model.

"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation....I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me..." and so on through the Ten Commandments.

The deliverance from slavery, the escape from the Egyptian army, the safe-conduct through the wilderness to Sinai, the covenant, the special election of Israel, calling to be a nation of priests — all this is grace, freely given, with no special deserving on Israel's part. It is not: if you keep the law, then I will deliver you and make covenant and choose you for my own. Rather it is: because I have already done this for you, this is the way you should live, the appropriate response to grace.

If you start with the law, you do not easily get to grace. Law never earns grace, and it does not very effectively drive people to seek grace. But if you start with grace, you always get to law; people who understand and accept God's grace are driven to ask what an appropriate response should be. Karl Barth puts it in a magnificent figure. Just as the tables of the law were carried within the Ark of the Covenant, so law is the law of God only if it is carried within the gospel. And the gospel is gospel only as it contains the law. But the correct order is always the gospel, followed by the law.¹

The Graciousness of the Law

Preached in the proper order, the law is never merely a series of intolerable

prohibitions or impossible demands. It is never a way to get to heaven, to justify ourselves, a ground for boasting. It is not even primarily the hammer that cracks open our self-righteousness or the mirror that confronts us with our sinfulness. It is Torah, instruction. We really do not know how to respond to the grace of God. Left to our own devices we could wander into all sorts of weird and inappropriate responses. It is a further act of God's grace, having graced us already, to say: "This is the way; walk in it."

What we have said thus far is well summarized in "A Declaration of Faith,"² Chapter 9, section 2:

Christ calls us to live in disciplined freedom.
Jesus came to set people free
by the power of the gospel.
In so doing he did not abolish,
but fulfilled the law and the prophets.
Through his teaching and the teaching of the apostles
he showed what it is to be free and obedient.
We declare that Christ has freed us
from trying to save ourselves by obeying the law.
He restores to us God's law as a gift and delight.
The law describes concretely the shape of our freedom.
When we accept its discipline,
it keeps our personal lives from being chaotic
and increases our effectiveness in the church's
mission.

The Third Use of the Law

This is Calvin's famous "third use of the law," and according to him its principal use. It teaches believers more thoroughly what God's will is, and urges them on in well-doing.³ Without the law, believers would be like servants eager to please their master, but unclear as to what the master expects of them. Law is not the instrument of our justification; it is a primary instrument of our sanctification. The law is our instructor in such fruits of the Spirit as gratitude, love, and hope.

When people understand and accept the grace of God, they are filled with profound *gratitude*. They want to thank God. But they do not always know how. Mere words do not seem to be enough. Here the Heidelberg Catechism offers a marvelous insight. In its three-fold outline: Guilt, Grace, and Gratitude, the discussion of the Ten Commandments comes under Gratitude. The purpose of the law is to show believers the proper way to say "Thank you" to God!

When people understand and accept the grace of God, they are filled with an overflowing *love* for God and for other people and for all that God has made. But it is possible to love "not wisely, but too well." So Paul prays for the Christians in Phillipi that "your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best." The law is designed to provide precisely that knowledge and insight.

When people understand and accept the grace of God, they are filled with *hope* for the future. Hope can be fanciful, deluding, selfish. The law instructs our hopes by revealing God's purposes, God's dreams for the future. I am convinced that it is not

entirely an accident of Hebrew grammar that most of the Ten Commandments are presented in the future tense.

The Corporate Dimension of the Law

Thus far we have spoken of the law and of sanctification mainly in individual terms, and the law is certainly addressed to “thee,” to individual believers. But when we come to hope, we become aware of the corporate dimension of the law, of the way it is addressed to the community of the people of God, to be a structured society. Let us examine this briefly in connection with the Ten Commandments and with the teaching of Jesus.

The Ten Commandments can be read as a picture of what the common life of the people of God will be like when God’s dreams for them are realized: a people no longer fragmented by many competing loyalties and centers of confidence (gods); a people without idols; a people who revere the Name of God, unashamed of it, and not a shame to it; a people who understand and practice the rhythm of doing their own human work and stopping to contemplate God’s work; a people who honor and care for aging parents; a people who are champions of life; a people who are chaste and faithful in the sexual arena; a generous society where locks are not needed; a truthful society without slander, deceit or falsehood; a contented society where greed is no longer the engine of prosperity, where enough is not always more.⁴

The ethical teachings of Jesus are the law of the kingdom of God, of that hoped-for realm, that new society, where the will of God is done on earth as it is done in heaven. But this does not mean, as some have taught, that “the law of Christ” will be applicable only in the eschaton, beyond history. For Jesus teaches that the kingdom is at hand, that the kingdom is already present, like seed sown in the ground, leaven mixed in the dough.

So when we preach the law we are midwives of the new society that God is bringing to birth. We are encouraging people to live now as though God’s dreams were already true, as though the kingdom has already come. We are calling for resident aliens, for a subversive community that threatens the way things are in the world.

Good News!

Such preaching of the law is in no way bad news, but very good news. Things don’t have to stay the way they are, in our individual lives, or in the Christian community, or ultimately in the world, for the church is “the provisional form” of what the world will be.⁵ God has better dreams. Something like this must be what Barth had in mind when he said: “The law is nothing else than the necessary form of the Gospel, whose content is grace.”⁶

When we understand preaching on the law in this way, it becomes a joy and delight to both preacher and hearers. At length we understand the ecstatic way in which the psalmists speak of the law:

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;

the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11)

NOTES

¹ Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law," in *Community, State, and Church*, ed. Will Herberg (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1960).

² This document is to be considered by the 1992 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

³ *Institutes* 2:6:12.

⁴ For an experiment in preaching the law in this way, see the chapters on the Ten Commandments in my *Christian Primer* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

⁵ Barth, *Dogmatics* IV, 3, sec. 62.

⁶ "Gospel and Law," 80.