

AWFUL LAWFULNESS

by Ray C. Stedman

When I was in Nashville, Tennessee, last week, I noticed that city, like many American cities, seems to have a church on every street corner. >From outward appearances, it would seem that our cities are filled with vital Christianity. But that is not the case, because those buildings do not represent, except in but a few cases, any vitality or effectiveness whatsoever. For the most part, those buildings are often empty, and held in contempt by secular society. Their services are pedantic, dry, appallingly dull and dreary. People stay away from them in crowds!

There are two basic reasons for that:

First, churches, and whole denominations oftentimes, give themselves over to a rationalistic unbelief, setting aside the glory and the light of the Scripture. In our pastor's conference at Nashville, we met at a university that was church-related. That university consists of a beautiful set of very expensive Gothic buildings which were obviously designed to accommodate hundreds. The student body today, however, consists of thirty students who are there to study religious education. As I walked about that campus I could see what terrible inroads rationalism had made into a once evangelical and powerful denomination. The irony of it was that in a Gothic arch in one of the buildings the words, "Expect great things from God," were inscribed. Obviously, nothing great was happening there.

There are also many churches today which are still evangelical -- they still subscribe to an orthodox statement of faith -- but they, too, are dead, dull and empty. What has robbed their faith and vitality is a rigid kind of orthodoxy which is legalistic in nature, which has, essentially, maintained "a form of godliness, but denies the power thereof," {2 Tim 3:5 KJV}.

Now, that was the trouble with the church at Ephesus. That was what the Apostle Paul feared was happening to his beloved Christians there, so he sent Timothy to Ephesus to try to correct that condition.

Now, in First Timothy 1:8-11, Paul gives us a very helpful passage in dealing with this problem of how to avoid the awful lawfulness of unlawful law!

Now we know that the law is good, if any one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, immoral persons, sodomites, kidnapers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted. {1 Tim 1:8-11 RSV}

Here the apostle deals with four simple, clear propositions:

First: The Law is both good and useful in the Christian life. We know, Paul says, "that the Law is good if any one uses it lawfully." That immediately does away with the claim of many Christians, and the misunderstanding of many, that we are so completely delivered from the Law that we have nothing to do with it anymore. Paul says that is not the case. The Law is good and useful, but it has to be used rightly. So the lawful use of the Law is what we are focusing on this morning.

The Law is good, of course, because God himself gave it. The striking thing about the Law is that, in all of the Bible, Old and New Testaments alike, those Ten Commandments are the only part that God himself wrote. Moses did not write them; Charlton Heston did not write them! They were written by the hand of God on tablets of stone and delivered by angels to Moses on Mt. Sinai. In fact, the Law was twice written by God. After the first tablets were broken, Moses returned to the mountain and God wrote the Law again. That in itself

ought to indicate that the Law is important and is not to be done away with.

Furthermore, as you study those Ten Commandments you discover that they reflect the character and the holiness of God. They are an expression of the life of God, both in its outward behavior and its inward attitudes. That is why the Law never will change. The Law represents God's righteous demands for human behavior, anywhere on earth. It is even written into the hearts of people who have never heard of the Ten Commandments. Paul argues this in Romans 2: "When the Gentiles who have not the Law do by nature what the Law requires, ... they show that what the Law requires is written on their hearts," {cf, Rom 2:14-15a KJV}. That is why all human laws -- laws we make for the control of our behavior in city, state and national government -- are all based upon, and reflect, the Ten Commandments. So the Law is not going to be done away with. Paul says it is wholly just and good.

Further, the Law is useful. Even as Christians the Law has a place in our lives, Paul says, "if any one uses it lawfully." Not everything about the Law carries over into the Christian life (Paul will point that out in a moment), but there is a lawful use of the Law in the Christian life. Remember that this was written long after Paul wrote in Romans 7,

We are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit. {Rom 7:6 RSV}.

That phrase, "not under law," does not mean, however, that the Law has no use in the Christian life. That point needs to be made very clear.

Our Lord himself indicated that in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." {Matt 5:17-19 RSV}

Those words ought to make very clear what Paul insists on here in First Timothy -- that the Law is not eliminated. The Law will always be there because it is holy, just and good; it reflects the character of God. So it does have a part in our Christian experience.

The next proposition helps us identify what part.

Second, Paul says: The Law is not made for the righteous (or the just). "Righteous" is the better term here, because the key component of the gospel is that we are given the righteousness of Christ. In Chapter 3 of Romans, Paul argues that the righteousness of God is made manifest in the gospel. It is for all who believe, Paul says. This is the status we have when we come to Christ.

So the Law is not made for the righteous man. Many Christians have deduced from this the idea that, once you become a Christian you, have no need to refer to the Law of Moses any longer. But Paul is correcting that idea here. He wants us to understand that there is a lawful use of the Law in the Christian's experience, but that the Law was not made for those who are already righteous in Christ.

The reason, of course, is that what the Law requires has already been achieved when you came to Jesus. Remember those great words in Romans 8, where Paul says, "What the Law could not do because it was weak in the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh [then here comes the great word] in order that the righteousness that the Law requires might be fulfilled in us [by another process] who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit," {cf, Rom 8:3-5 RSV}.

Now, it is clear from that that the Law requires something from us. It has a righteous standard; it insists that men behave themselves. That is what God's Law is all about. Not because God likes that, but because it is

necessary to the fulfilling of all the possibility and potential of human life. Sin eliminates that, puts us back under bondage and makes us slaves. But the Law says that is never God's intention. He wants to free us.

So there is a certain righteousness required. Those verses in Chapter 8 of Romans tell us that when we believe in Jesus, who died upon the cross for us, and we understand that we were involved in that death, as in his resurrection, we are given righteousness as a gift, handed to us. We start our Christian life on that basis. The life of Jesus has come in; our spirits have been joined to his. As Paul says in First Corinthians 6, "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit," {cf, 1 Cor 6:17 KJV}. That Spirit is righteous, so our human spirits have already been made righteous in Jesus.

For that reason, the Law has nothing to say to Christians about fulfilling that righteous standard. Our nature is now changed. That is the good news. That is "the glorious gospel of our blessed God," {cf, 1 Tim 1:11 RSV}. We are no longer under Law as a means of winning approval from God. We have his approval already.

Who, then, was the Law given for? Paul goes on to answer that by saying, "the Law is not laid down for the just but for...", then he goes on to list two groups of people for whom the Law was given:

The first three pairs listed there constitute one class, i.e., it has to do with what people are, not what they do. Notice that Paul does not say a word about what people do, rather, what they are: They are "lawless and disobedient," they are "ungodly and sinners," they are "unholy and profane." Those terms describe attitudes, outlook on life, basic, fundamental nature. In other words, the unregenerate.

Everybody starts out life unregenerate. There are no exceptions. I held my little grandson, who is less than a year old, in my arms this morning. He was mad as he could be, yelling his head off, trying to strike at me. If he had had a knife he would have stabbed me, I am sure. We are all born that way. Fortunately, I am bigger than he, so I could control him. But his intent was murderous. Now, the Law is made for that kind of a thing. It has something very important to do to us, which we will look at in just a moment.

The next classification has to do with deeds. It starts with "murderers of father and mothers, manslayers." Then it deals with sexual wrongs, "immoral persons." ("Fornicators" is the idea -- those who indulge in sexual intercourse outside of marriage, either before or within marriage.) Then there are "homosexuals" (that is the word translated "sodomites" here). Then it lists "kidnappers," "liars," and "perjurers." (That last term is applied to an intensified form of lying, where you say you are going to tell the truth, and even take an oath, but still lie.) Then Paul lists them all together in these words, "whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine."

That is a list of deeds which the unregenerate do, but so also do the regenerate. Many of us have fallen into that category. We may not have been "murderers of parents, manslayers, kidnappers, fornicators, etc.," but how about "liars, perjurers," and "whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine?" The Law is made for the flesh, whether it is active in the unregenerate or in the Christian. Paul makes that clear.

For the unregenerate in both classifications, the Ten Commandments are designed to do three precise things:

First, they reveal the only acceptable standard of behavior before God, both outward actions and inward thoughts.

Second, they were given to make us sin more, to "increase transgression," {cf, Rom 5:20}. That is hard for us to understand. Millions of people today read the Ten Commandments and say that we ought to do those things. They think that the Law is given to them to help them stop sinning, but, according to the Word of God, that is not true. God gave the Law to make them sin even more, because there is a quality about sin that deceives us. Everybody thinks his sin is insignificant. It is other people's sins that are bad. Furthermore, many people convince themselves that there is nothing wrong about what they do. Usually they have a double standard, a second list of names for things they do:

- You have prejudices -- I have convictions.
- You lose your temper and blow your top -- I am indulging in righteous indignation.
- You are spendthrifts -- I am just trying to get ahead in life.

Thus, they convince themselves that they are not sinners. But then the Law comes in and it is so rigid, so unbending, that it makes them angry and rebellious. They do things they did not intend to do. One day they wake up to say to themselves, "I did that? I can't believe it. I must be worse than I thought I was." That is what the Law seeks to do.

Then the third thing the Law does is that it demands punishment, even unto death. It shows no mercy. It will not let anybody off. That is what the Law was intended to do. With the unregenerate, it does so in order that we might be, as Paul puts it, "shut up to grace," {cf, Gal 3:23 KJV}. By means of the Law we discover that there is no way out. There is something so wrong inside that we cannot behave. We can outwardly toe the mark, but inwardly our thoughts and our attitudes are filled with viciousness, self-centeredness and vileness of various sorts. But that is what the Law was intended to do, because at that point we begin to listen to this good word that God has found a way in Jesus Christ to set us free. It shuts us up to the gospel. Or, as Paul puts it in Galatians, it becomes our "custodian" {Gal 3:24-25 RSV}, to keep us in custody until it brings us to Christ. It does its work well. It is not an enemy, but a friend.

But what about some in this second group who do some of these ugly things listed here, yet they are regenerate; they have been born again; they have already been made righteous in spirit?

That is a very ugly list. Young people who are about to join an organization or go to a certain school sometimes show me a pledge which says, "I promise I will not drink, or smoke, or dance, or go to movies, etc.," and ask should they sign it. I always tell them to do so, but to add underneath, "I reserve the right to indulge in malice, envy, jealousy, viciousness and all the other sins of the saints. You never see those sins listed. There are the sins of the saints -- "whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine." That is what we are talking about here.

What does the Law say to people who indulge in those things? I call those people, the "unrestored," because what the Law says to them is: "They need to be restored." For the regenerate, but unrestored, the Law says, restore them to understanding who they really are in Christ. They have forgotten that. That is why Paul says in Galatians,

... if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted." {Gal 6:1 RSV}

To a believer, the Law says two of the three things it was sent to do in the first place:

First, it helps us define and recognize sin. It still applies as a standard of righteousness; it is still what God requires of us even though we achieve it by another way. So the Law can be helpful to believers.

There are two examples of this in Paul's writings to the Corinthians:

In First Corinthians, Chapter 9, he says, "... in the Law of Moses it is written, 'Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treads out the corn,'" {cf, 1 Cor 9:9a KJV}. Paul asks, "Did God write that because he is concerned about oxen?" "No," he says, "it is not just for oxen, it is for us," {cf, 1 Cor 9:9b-10a}. In other words, the law refers to an injustice that applies to people, not just to oxen, and that is that you must not deny benefit to somebody who was involved in a work. Paul, writing to Christians, uses the Law to help them understand that. That is what the Law is for: it is a guide to what is right. In that sense it is rightly used.

Again, in the 14th chapter of First Corinthians, Paul is writing about the problem of women talking too much in church and disturbing the meetings. He says, "Now don't do that. If you want to ask questions do so of your husband at home and be subject to him, 'as also the Law states,'" {cf, 1 Cor 14:34}. That is not putting them back under Law. It is simply using the Law as an example of the right behavior that God desires. That is the first use of the Law that is lawful.

The second is that it will increase unrighteousness. The reason a righteous person does unrighteous deeds is because his flesh has deceived him. In order to show him that he is deceived, the Law comes in to make him

try hard not to do it, and, thus, in rebellion, do no more. That is what Paul is describing in Romans 7. "The thing I would not do," he says, "that I do, and the thing I would do I do not. Wretched man that I am!" {cf, Rom 7:19-20, 7:24a}. That is the Law at work, correcting the flesh in a believer to make visible to him that he is trying to correct himself on a basis that can never work. The most hopeful note in that passage is when Paul cries out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" {Rom 7:24 RSV}. Immediately, the right answer comes, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" {Rom 7:25a RSV}. Then come the revelations of Romans 8 that we have been talking about -- the fact that we have been made righteous already. We are reminded of that so that we might begin to act on that basis, not on an effort to try to correct by our own determination something that is wrong in our life.

The third thing that the Law was given for can no longer apply to the believer: The Law cannot condemn us. That is why Romans 8 begins on that note, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus," {Rom 8:1 RSV}. The Law cannot insist on punishment; it cannot condemn us and make us feel we are subject to the wrath of God. It cannot any longer put us in that relationship to him. God is now our loving Father.

The fourth proposition that emerges from this passage is that the Law in the Christian life, Paul says, must be "in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God." Now, that involves several things:

First, we must recognize that the spirit in an individual who has been born again has already been made righteous. You cannot bring law in to correct somebody's misdeeds by exhorting him to try harder to behave himself. That will never work. He has been made righteous.

I talked with someone just the other day about another individual, a Christian, who was doing something wrong. The one to whom I was talking said, "Yes, what he is doing is wrong, but, remember, his heart is right." That is recognizing that there is a righteousness already there. At the very depths of his being there is a hunger to be righteous. It is to *that* that the lawful use of the Law makes its appeal. Then people can begin to act anew on what they already are. That is in accordance with the gospel.

The second thing that is in line with that is that the only form of punishment that is ever permitted (in accordance with the gospel) is ultimate separation or withdrawal from a Christian who is misbehaving. But only then after completing the three steps of Matthew 18:

1. Go to him privately,
2. Then, if he will not hear you, take one or two others;
3. Then, if he will not hear them, finally, tell it to the church; and if he will not hear, then, "let him be unto you as though he is not a Christian," {cf, Matt 18:17b}.

But there is no penance, no sanction, no execution to be exacted.

Some of the Reformers forgot this. Even John Calvin burned a man, Servetus, at the stake, because the man did not measure up to the "new law" that Calvinism, to a considerable degree, represented.

So these people are simply to be recognized as having given witness themselves that they are not Christians; they have not been made righteous; they have not been changed. Until God moves their hearts to demonstrate that anew, Christians are to treat them as though they are not Christians. That is the only form of punishment allowed.

Third, the lawful use of the Law means we do not impose detailed rules of conduct on others without their consent. We are brothers and sisters, not lords. We are not in charge of other people's lives. That is why it is always legalism to set up a series of rules for other people, telling them that this or that is what they have to do. If you can involve them in agreeing to do something for right and proper purposes, then it is not legalism. Laws and rules are required, they are necessary in life, but they do not change the heart. Until that happens, there has not been a satisfactory fulfilling of the Law.

Fourth, no set of laws or rules can impart life or vitality. Only by returning people to a realization of who they

really are -- born anew by the Spirit, filled with the righteousness of Christ, and living under the love of God -- that is what will change people.

I clipped this quotation from a magazine recently:

Laws, rules and regulations define social morality. They are often very little help in the growth of personal morality. The reason for this is not hard to understand. A law may prevent me from robbing my neighbor, but no law can prevent me from coveting his possessions and thinking of new and devious ways of making them mine. A law can discourage me, if not prevent me, from abandoning my wife and children, but it cannot stop me from making them miserable. A law can inhibit me from knifing an enemy, but it can do nothing if I merely hate him and make him feel my hate. The law, in short, can regulate my behavior, within certain limits. It cannot cleanse my mind, nor purify my heart, nor neutralize the poison of my worst intentions.

The only thing that can accomplish this is the realization of the love of God that is already ours. It has already made us different and that will not change. God deals with us as a loving, tender, merciful, but sometimes relentless, Father. That is what changes us. The lawful use of the Law is to drive us to a fresh realization of the love of God. That is why in Romans 13, Verse 10, the apostle says:

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. {Rom 13:10 RSV}

And where the Law is fulfilled, it has nothing more to say, so that inner righteousness becomes, at last, outward righteousness. That was what the Law sought to do in the first place.

I hope this will help us understand what God is doing with us, and what we must and must not do with one another:

We must not go to another person, holding up a set of rigid demands, and say, "Either shape up or ship out." That is, to force them by sanctions.

What we should do is go and say, "Look, you are not this way. Do you really want to be like this? God has made you different. He has given you a whole new way of life. He loves you, and that love becomes a power and a force in your life. Are you going to go on flaunting his love?"

On that basis, power is imparted, and appeal, and correction are made. Then people can see what they need to do, "to reckon themselves dead to sin and alive unto God." That is the lawful use of the Law.

That is authentic Christianity.

Prayer

Lord, we pray that you will help us apply this to the practical details of our interaction with one another. Teach us that we are not lords running other people's affairs, but we are brothers and sisters, deeply concerned and involved with their actions. We pray that we may recognize afresh the glorious good news that we have been made righteous in Jesus Christ, and we can live on that basis. Thank you for that impartation of love, which is power to change. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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