

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 3:
**ANTHROPOLOGY—
THE DOCTRINE OF MAN**

Lecture 10
**THE DOCTRINE OF
THE LAW OF GOD**



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Module 3 ~ Lecture 10

The Doctrine of the Law of God

If I were to ask you exactly how much you weigh, you could guess, but if you wanted an accurate and precise answer, you would need to use a scale that measures weight. We're all accustomed to standards of measurement. If you want to know how tall you are, you use a tape measure or a ruler. The same could be said for measuring distance between two places, or the volume of a container, and so on. Standards provide precise accuracy. But the standards themselves must be exact and trustworthy, otherwise, all of the measurements will be thrown off. God has provided a perfect, infallible standard for measuring man spiritually, that is, for testing man's conformity to God's revealed will. That standard is God's moral law, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments. We're not left to guess or estimate how closely man matches what God requires. Man's whole life and character is tested by the objective rule given in God's law. The standard is unchanging, and it applies to all men, in all ages, in all places.

The theme of this last lecture ties together what we learned about the fall, about man's sinful nature, and about the continuity of Old and New Testaments. The series of lectures in this third module, or course, on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the Doctrine of Man. In the last two lectures, we considered the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works, and the Covenant of Grace. And while the Covenant of Grace could also be included in the fifth module, under Doctrines of Salvation, it adds clarity to learn about those two covenants side by side. Building on the two previous lectures then, we now turn our attention to the Law of God, which is the rule of man's obedience and his duty towards God. The Ten Commandments are a concise summary of the entire ethical code given to the world by God, and expounded throughout the whole of Scripture.

And so, first of all, we'll begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the Doctrine of the Law of God. In Matthew 5, verses 17 to 19, which is part of the Sermon on the Mount, we read Jesus saying these words: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. 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. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Notice a few things with regards to this text. Christ states explicitly that his coming did not destroy the law or the prophets. The word "law" is used in a variety of ways within the Bible. The word "law" can refer to God's will in general in some passages. It can refer to the whole Old Testament. It can refer to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. It can refer to the entirety of the Mosaic code. It can refer to any of the three categories of Mosaic law that we'll be

considering later in this lecture. But it can also refer to the Ten Commandments. And as you look at that passage in Matthew 5, in the remainder of the chapter, Christ makes clear what he means by “law”, because he goes on to expound the moral law found in the Ten Commandments. So likewise, when theologians speak of the law of God, they are most often referring to the moral law summarized in the Ten Commandments.

Secondly, not only did Christ’s coming not dispose of the moral law, but Christ says that it will continue until heaven and earth pass away, which is to say, until the end of time. The preservation of the moral law applies to every detail. Jesus says every jot or tittle, and that refers, in the Hebrew language, to the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, and a little stroke of the pen that’s a part of some of the letters. He goes on to say that it applies to the least of these commandments. Jesus was drawing upon, actually, what the law and prophets themselves had taught. Because in the law, we read, “But those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law”—Deuteronomy 29:29. And in the prophets, we are told, “As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the LORD; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed’s seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever”—Isaiah 59, verse 21. In addition, we see that Christ issues a sober warning to any who curtail, in the least degree, the revelation we have received from him in the moral law. The person who teaches others to break the least of his commandments will be least in the kingdom of heaven. Those who uphold and teach them will be great in the kingdom. Christ does not diminish the demands of the moral law. He actually intensifies their application. So in confronting the perversions of the Pharisees, who restricted the law to outward actions, Jesus teaches a more thorough, penetrating application of the law to man’s thoughts and heart and motives, not just his outward actions. You’ll remember, he says—the Pharisees thought that if they committed physical adultery, they were breaking the seventh commandment—Jesus says, Now, wait, if you even look upon a woman lustfully, you’re committing adultery in your heart. And he does that with the commandments that are expounded in that chapter. All of this introduces us to God’s permanent moral standard for man. If we’re going to understand man, which is the theme of this whole series or module, we need to understand God’s moral standard.

That brings us secondly, to considering some of the doctrinal details regarding the moral law of God. In the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 19, paragraph 1, we’re taught that God’s moral law was first given to Adam in the Garden, prior to the fall. Now, in the opening chapters of Genesis, you can trace the seeds of the moral law revealed to Adam, the various commandments. And this includes the fourth commandment, the Sabbath, as you’ll note in the opening verses of Genesis 2. But we also learn that God’s moral law was written on the heart of man. Romans 2, verse 15 says, “Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.” But then in Westminster Confession, chapter 19, paragraph 2, it goes on to say this: “This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai in ten commandments, and written in two tables; the first four commandments containing our duty towards God, and the other six our duty to man.” Now you can compare this to what the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, in questions 39 to 42. “The duty which God requires of man, is obedience to his revealed will. The rule which God at first revealed to man for his obedience was the moral law.” And that moral law is summarized in the Ten Commandments. Christ went on to say, in the Gospels, that the first table of the law—commandments one to four—reveals our duty

to God, namely, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and the second table of the law—commandments five to ten—reveal our duty to man, namely, to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Secondly, we see that the law is a transcript and revelation of God's character, and therefore, an expression of eternal truth, binding on all creatures, from creation to eternity. In other words, the law reveals who God is, and, what God requires. It reveals his holiness, for example. We read, "Be ye holy, as I am holy"—that's set in the context of God's law: Leviticus 11, verse 44; Leviticus 19, verse 2; chapter 20, verse 7. And this remains the standard in the New Testament, as seen when it is quoted by Peter, in 1 Peter, chapter 1, verse 16. "Holiness" is one of the most prominent words in the Bible to express the character of God. You'll remember the vision of Isaiah, in Isaiah 6, "Holy, holy, holy." Holiness, as we saw in the previous lecture, refers to both separation, and to purity—separation from sin, and to purity. God's laws of holiness emphasize the difference between a holy God and a sinful people. Now, the redeemed are called by gospel grace to share in God's holiness, by being separate and different from the rest of humanity. God alone has the authority to define sin, as a holy God. When we refuse to call something sin that God calls sin, or alternatively, when we call something sin that God does not call sin, we are usurping God's authority, and taking it for ourselves. So we see holiness.

We also see love. God is love, and we see his promise of love, even in the law. In the beginning of the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord thy God." What can he give more than himself? Just as the promise is a promise of love, so his precepts are precepts of love. We're told, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." It's speaking about love for the Lord. Rather than an antithesis between law and love, there's an inextricable connection between them. "Love is the fulfilling of the law"—Romans 13:10. Love is expressed by obedience to the law. "If you love me, keep my commandments," we read in 1 John 5:3, and in the Gospel of John, chapter 14, verse 15. The law is summarized in terms of love, as we saw a few moments ago from Matthew 22, verses 37 to 40.

This love is closely connected to another revelation of God's character, his jealousy. He's a jealous God. "The Lord thy God," which is repeated through the first table of the law. You'll notice, for example, in the second commandment, when we're told not to make any graven images, it's because he's a jealous God. He puts his name and claim on Jacob's seed, "Thou art mine." And jealousy is the fire of love, and of holiness. So we see that this law is a revelation of who God is.

Thirdly, understanding the different categories of law will help you make sense of the points of continuity and discontinuity between the Old Testament law and the New Testament. Some laws are permanent, other laws are temporary. But realize that, even Old Testament believers understood these categories and distinctions. I'm not going to cover that here, but you see it coming out in the Psalms. You see it in relationship to King Saul, in the prophets, and so on. The church down through the ages has distinguished between three primary categories within the law. There's moral law, which we've been talking about, summarized in the Ten Commandments. There's judicial law, and there's, thirdly, ceremonial law. So we'll consider these very briefly.

In contrast to the moral law—the Ten Commandments—the ceremonial laws pointed forward as shadows to the person and work of Christ, and the result of that work in the New Testament. You had the clean and unclean laws, separation and purity laws, laws pertaining to the temple and tabernacle worship, the sacrificial system, and so on. All of these pointed forward to Christ, but were fulfilled in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. The picture book, all of these types are no longer needed, we have the fulness of Christ in his completed work, and so those laws have completely expired with Christ's coming. We see this in Colossians 2, verses 16 and 17. We see it in Galatians 4;

1 Timothy 4, verses 1 to 4; Hebrews, really chapters 8, 9, and 10; Acts, chapter 10, and many other places.

Secondly, the judicial law refers to the case laws, or political-economic laws of Israel. These were sociopolitical laws that applied to Israel's theocracy as a unique nation. Westminster Confession of Faith states, in chapter 19, that they expired with the state of Israel, and are only obligatory as far as, "the general equity thereof may require." In addition to these, and in addition to what we've already noted, the moral law, which is sometimes called the decalogue—that word means "ten words"—the ten words of God. Consider, for example, the language of Exodus 34, verse 28, and Deuteronomy 4, verse 13, and Deuteronomy 10, verse 4. These ten words were written with the Lord's finger on tables of stone—Exodus 31, verse 18; chapter 34, verse 1; Deuteronomy 5, verse 22; Deuteronomy 9, verse 10, and so on. The fact that they were written by the Lord's finger on tables of stone, showed their permanence—they're set apart. Notice Deuteronomy 5, verse 22, where it says, "These words the LORD spake unto all your assembly in the mount out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice: and he added no more," the passage says. "And he wrote them in two tables of stone, and delivered them unto me." So you see something of the permanence of those ten commandments. Those ten commandments, of course, were placed in the ark, under the symbolic feet of God.

Fourthly, let me say something in terms of summary of the relationship of law and gospel. In brief, the law drives us to Christ in the gospel, and the gospel drives us back to the law. So the law shows us our sin and our need for a Savior, sending us to the gospel. And those who come by faith to the Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel then sends us to the law as a rule of life, to instruct us on how to glorify God. So both law and gospel are means of grace in the Scriptures, used by the Lord. Obedience to the law was never a means of justification, and is not a means of justification, but rather, it is an expression, in the life of sanctification, of the believer's love. So the law and gospel work together, and must not be separated. The law, the moral law makes Christ more precious to the believer. He perfectly and fully obeyed all of the law's precepts for his believing people, so they are united to him, who did for them what they could never do for themselves, in terms of perfect obedience to God's standard. In the New Testament, Jesus and Paul confront distortions of the use of the moral law. They're defending and upholding the right use of it. So Paul, after refuting the use of the law as a means of justification, or the idea of obeying the law to earn or merit acceptance with God, having refuted that, he says, at the end of Romans 3, in verse 31, "Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law."

Fifthly, we should say something about the three uses of the moral law—the three uses. The first use of the moral law is for restraining wickedness, and maintaining order in the world. This is sometimes referred to as the civil use of the law. So the proclamation of the law serves as a restraining influence against sin in the world. God's authority over men in general is upheld, and serves as the basis for law systems among the nations. The second use pertains to the fact that the law reveals sin. It terrifies the conscience. It awakens us to our neediness and drives us to Christ. This is referred to sometimes as the pedagogical use of the law. This brings man under conviction, and makes him conscious of his inability to meet the demands of the law. Thus the law is a tutor to lead us to Christ. This continues to be true for the believer in his sanctification, as well as the unbeliever in their need of conversion. The third use is to instruct believers in how to live a life of godliness out of love and gratitude for their redemption. This is referred to the law as a rule of life for the believer. This directs us as to our duties, and the sins which we must put to death and avoid. It directs us in the way of righteous living in salvation. Our motivation for loving and keeping the

law is one of gratitude and love for the redemption we have in Christ. That love is demonstrated by obedience. And the standard of obedience is God's character, seen in the law. So to summarize the three uses: the law is a restrainer—that's the first; a revealer—that's the second; and a rule—that's the third use.

Sixthly, in terms of our doctrinal exposition, we should say something about the rules for interpreting the Ten Commandments. I would encourage you to look at Westminster Larger Catechism, question 99, for more information on this, and we'll cover this very quickly, some rules for interpreting the Ten Commandments.

Well, we're to recognize it is perfect, the law is perfect, and requires full conformity in the whole man. So each command requires full perfection in every duty. Every command forbids the least degree of every sin. Secondly, we see that it is spiritual, that it reaches every aspect of men, our will, our mind, our affections, our words, our actions, our gestures, our motives, our thoughts. We saw this in Matthew 5, in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We also recognize that there are various aspects of the same thing often addressed in multiple commands. Another one, and this is important, the opposite of each command is always binding. So when a duty is commanded, the contrary is forbidden; but when a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded. When a promise is given, the opposite threatening is included, and when a threatening is given, the opposite promise is included. The commands are exhaustive—they're exhaustive for all of time. So what God forbids is never to be done; what God commands is constantly our duty. Under every duty, and under every sin that's forbidden, all of the same kinds are addressed, including the causes and the means and the occasions and appearances of it, or provocations to it. Whatever is commanded to us, we are bound to endeavor to see others keep, as far as we are able. Whatever is commanded of others, we are bound ourselves to help them keep. We're to keep it and assist them in keeping it. We're forbidden to partake with them in what is forbidden, and we're to help them to avoid what is forbidden. Those are some brief rules to help us in interpreting the law of God.

Thirdly, third main point of this lecture, we need to consider some errors relating to the moral law, and we're going to specify two here. First of all, a theological system that goes under the title, dispensationalism. Dispensationalism teaches a stark discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. So God's intentions, we're told, in the Old Testament, failed, and thus he's created a better system in the New Testament. God deals with his people in a variety of modes and administrations, with differing plans of redemption throughout history. God's whole mode of operation in the Old Testament was radically different than in the New Testament. The common conclusion among various schools of dispensationalism is that the moral law has been totally abrogated in the New Testament, and replace with a different standard—what they call "the law of Christ." If something from the Old Testament is not repeated in the New Testament, then it's

only illustrative—it gives us illustrations of things. And there's all sorts of problematic ramifications that come from this: the relationship of Old and New Testaments; the relationship of Israel and the church; the relationship of law and gospel; as well as implications for our view of the future and end times, and so on. So you can see how what dispensationalism is teaching is contradictory to all that we've seen in this lecture, with regards to the permanent standard of God's moral law.

Secondly, I want to highlight specifically attacks on the fourth commandment, on the Sabbath, as a perpetual command. Because, of the ten, this is the one that is most frequently rejected. And there are several things we can say here. I'll try to say it quickly. First of all, we see the Sabbath appears prior to the fall, in Genesis 2, verses 2 to 3. It was established as a creation ordinance. This precedes the fall, so it has relevance apart from sin and redemption. The Sabbath belongs, in

other words, to the same category as other creation ordinances, like marriage, and work, and procreation, and is no more abrogated than they are. The Sabbath is built into the very structure of the universe. A seven-day work-week, and all attempts to change that to a ten-day week, or whatever else, has been a dismal failure. Furthermore, in Exodus 16, verses 22 to 30, we have an account of God stipulating for the people necessary preparations for the Sabbath, which existed prior to the giving of the Mosaic covenant at Sinai. There was no interruption in the flow of Sabbath observance from the time of Adam, to the ratification of the Sabbath in the Ten Commandments. And that brings us to the fact that, in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, the Sabbath is embedded in the Ten Commandments. These commands, as we've seen, are moral in nature, and are a continuing standard for all time, as a reflection of the character of God. These commands were engraved in stone by the finger of God, showing their unchangeable standard for all time. We also saw Jesus affirms this in Matthew 5, verses 17 to 19, regulating the conduct of all nations and all peoples. So failing to set apart one day in seven is as sinful as stealing, or committing adultery, or a violation of any of the other of the Ten Commandments. Furthermore, we see in Exodus 35:2, and in Numbers 15, verses 32 and following, the penalty for desecrating the Sabbath was capital punishment under the Old Testament. Well, this establishes irrefutably the importance of keeping the Sabbath to Jehovah. Can you think of anything that merited capital punishment in the Old Testament that is not considered a sin in the New Testament? It should be fixed in our minds that the Lord does not take lightly violations of this moral law. Furthermore, the Hebrew word "Shabbat"—the word for Sabbath—means "to cease or to rest." Isaiah 58:13 and 14, says that we're not to profane the Sabbath by treading down and suppressing it, that we have six days that we are to work, and one that we are to rest. Indeed, within the fourth commandment itself, our life is patterned after divine example. The Sabbath of God's rest, six days of creating the world, the seventh resting, is the reason for the Sabbath of man's rest. He blessed our Sabbath, because he first blessed and sanctified his Sabbath. Professor John Murray, a Reformed theologian from the twentieth century, said, "Has the divine example become obsolete? Can we think of the exemplar established by God's working and resting as ever ceasing to be the pattern for man's conduct in the ordinance of labor and rest?" We also learn in this commandment that all who are under our responsibility and jurisdiction are to cease from their normal six-day labors and recreation. Nehemiah 10, verses 29 and 31, illustrates that we are not to buy food or support those who buy and sell, engage in commercial enterprise or activity, on the Sabbath day.

But rest is not equated with inactivity. Jesus said, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working," but that's long after the six days of creation. God ceased from his creating work, and continued his work of providence. We cease from our six-day labors and recreation, and devote ourselves to worship, and the works of mercy and necessity. Contrary to the view of some, in both the Old Testament and New Testament, the whole day was devoted to rest and worship: Leviticus 23:3; Ezekiel 46:3; or in the New Testament, Acts 13, verse 14; and Revelation 1, verse 10. You'll note the words in Hebrews 4, verse 9: "There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God." That Greek word, rest, is actually "Sabbath-keeping." There remaineth therefore a Sabbath-keeping to the people of God. Hebrews 4 is pointing forward to heaven, as a picture of an eternal Sabbath, and a weekly Sabbath is a signpost, or a picture that's pointing forward to that eternal Sabbath. Well, the signpost can't be taken away until the thing that it's pointed to arrives. You know, the weekly Sabbath will be set aside, when we come to an eternal Sabbath in heaven, but until then, there is a Sabbath-keeping that remains for God's people. Isaiah 58, (verses) 13 and 14, describe the Sabbath as a delight, and as honorable, as a day of celebration and joy, joy in the

Lord, triumph, feasting, and so on. It is a day in which the people of God get to do what they love most, and that is, spend a whole day, undiverted, with the Lord.

Well, fourthly, we can now draw some practical application for ourselves, and I want to do so by directing us to the believer's love for the moral law of God. We sing about this in the Psalms, in Psalm 119, verse 97: "Oh, love I thy law, it is my meditation all the day," or in Psalm 1, verse 2, "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law doth he meditate day and night." You see it expressed in the life of Joshua, in Joshua 1, verse 8: "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success." We find the same language in the New Testament. Paul, in Romans 7, verse 12, 14, and 22, it says: "Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. . . For we know that the law is spiritual"—and he goes on—"For I delight in the law of God after the inward man." We read about it in 1 Timothy 1, verse 8: "But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully." Or, the words of 1 John 5, verse 3: "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous." What is the point, in terms of application, we are to cultivate a love for God's law, and what happens? We think about what we love, and we speak about what we think about. So, if we're cultivating a love for God's law, it's going to be in our minds, meditating on it; it's going to be in our mouths, and so on. But we can say more, because we also need to apply this in terms of thinking that God's law reveals the glory and holiness of God to us. That should lead us to worship and adore him. It causes us to walk humbly before God and men, reminding us that we have not arrived. The law comes, by way of application, it pierces into the depths of our soul and reveals the areas that we need to grow in sanctification and Christ's likeness. Yes, it convicts us of sin, teaching us to hate it and mortify it. It teaches us how to walk and live in a way that is pleasing to the Lord, by his grace, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It also gives wisdom for decisions and godly living—that comes out with the psalmist. Living in accord with God's law is the way of blessing; living in violation of his law brings hardship: "The way of the transgressor is hard." This is part of why the psalmist makes it his constant meditation. But most of all, it makes Christ more precious to the believer. He perfectly and fully obeyed all of the law's precepts for his people. And those who are believers are united to him, who did for them what they could never do for themselves, making them acceptable before God, giving them access into his presence, and enabling them by the Spirit to live for his glory.

Well, in this lecture, we've explored the Doctrine of God's Moral Law, the permanent rule that guides man's duty to God. This law is written in the hearts of men, and revealed in writing, in the Ten Commandments. We cannot understand the Doctrine of Man without knowing the standard to which God holds man. This exposes the sinner's great need for a Savior. It magnifies the glory of Christ and all that he has secured in the redemption of his people, and it provides an enduring rule, wisely to guide the believer in their pursuits of love and gratitude to God for their salvation.

Well, this brings this series of lectures for this third module on Systematic Theology to a close. We began in the first module with the Doctrine of First Principles, in the second module the Doctrine of God, and now in this third module, which we are completing, the Doctrine of Man. Now, in the fourth module which is to come, we will turn our attention to the Doctrine of Christ, and the revelation of the glory of his Person and his work.