

## CHAPTER 5

### ETHICS AND THE MORAL LAW

#### Definitions

##### *Ethics*

From the classical Greek ἠθικός *ethikos* (adj. “of or for morals, ethical, moral [as opposed to intellectual],” a term expressive of moral character). The Greek term is related to the term ἦθος *ethos*, used in 1 Cor 15:33 (NIV “character”). In English *ethics* has come to mean “the science of morals, the department of study concerned with the principles of human duty” (*OED*). It is a branch of the field of axiology, the study of values. In the Christian context, ethics is the study of what God expects of humans in their personal and social behavior. We find the source of this study in the law of God, revealed in the Scriptures.

##### *Types of law*

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith (chapter 19, “Of the Law of God”), biblical law can be divided into three major categories: moral law, civil law, and ceremonial law.

II. 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.

III. Beside this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws containing several typical ordinances; partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth diverse instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the New Testament.

IV. To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.

### ***Moral law***

Moral law is that law which is based on God's nature and on the realities of his created order.

- God's nature does not change.
- Realities and relationships within his created order may change.
- Therefore, a change within the created order itself is necessary before there can be a change in the moral law. E.g., the seventh commandment presupposes the institution of marriage.
- Further, the moral law can be so understood, that ultimately it is itself unchangeable, if its principles be understood, as based in God's nature.

### ***Civil law***

Civil law is that law which governs people in society. It is based on moral law, but it can change with changing conditions in society and government.

WCF 19:4, "To them also (Israel), as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any other, now, further than the general equity thereof may require."

### ***Ceremonial law***

Ceremonial law is that code of divinely imposed, arbitrary laws, which are not based on the moral law as such, but are intended primarily to teach religious or moral truth.

WCF 19:3, "God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a Church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament."

## ***Time of laws***

All these types of biblical law are found in each major dispensation, as the following chart demonstrates:

<u>Law type</u>	<u>Pre-fall</u>	<u>After fall</u>	<u>Mosaic</u>	<u>NT</u>
Moral:	Sabbath, Serve God only	No murder	10 Coms., 2 Great Coms.	Several coms., 2 Great Coms.
Civil:	Regulate animals, Family law	Capital punishment	Israeli laws	Civil magistrate
Ceremonial:	Not tree of knowledge, Tree of life	Eat no blood, Sacrifices, Circumcision	Priesthood, Holy days	Baptism, Lord's Supper

## **History of the moral law**

Since ethics is the study of human morals and duty, it is concerned primarily with the moral law. For this reason, an understanding of moral law is imperative for the proper application of ethics within any historical context.

### ***The moral law given to Adam***

The moral law was part of the covenant of works (WCF 19:1, WLC 92, WSC 40).

WLC 92, “The rule of obedience revealed to Adam in the estate of innocence, and to all mankind in him, beside a special command, not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was the moral law.”

This responsibility on Adam’s part is implied by the very nature of moral law, and in Adam’s moral responsibility as a creature in God’s image (Gen 1:27). Likewise, the threat of death in Gen 2:17 implies that Adam was living in a legal structure (cf. Rom 10:5; quotes Lev. 18:5, “The man who does these things will live by them”).

Biblical data concerning Adam confirm the existence of moral law at that time. Note these examples:

Com. #1 – Honor God first, obey him over wife, etc.

- #2 – God defines order of worship, tree of life
- #3 – Work the earth, respect for creation
- #4 – Sabbath rest, Gen 2:2-3
- #5 – To have children
- #6—To help self and others live
- #7 – Marriage instituted
- #8 – Working in garden to procure “wealth and outward estate”
- #9 – Evil results of false witness, Gen 3:4, 14
- #10 – Evil results of coveting, Gen 3:6

### ***The moral law still in force after the fall***

WLC 94, “Although no man since the fall can attain to righteousness and life by the moral law; yet there is great use thereof, as well common to all men, as peculiar either to the unregenerate, or the regenerate.”

The moral law was administered through conscience (cf. Rom 1:32; 1 Cor 5:1). It was also administered through direct revelation.

- Preaching of Enoch, Jude 14-15
- Preaching of Noah, 1 Pet 3:19-20; 2 Pet. 2:5
- Known and taught by Abraham, Gen 17:1; 18:19; 26:5
- Job and his friends

People in that dispensation were held accountable for obeying the moral law. The punishment of Sodom for its wickedness is a good example.

### ***The moral law codified in the Mosaic covenant***

Given formally in the Ten Commandments

“This law, after his [Adam’s]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.” (WCF 19:2)

Ten Commandments given, Exod 20:2-17; Deut 5:6-21

Two tables of the law, possibly reflecting division of commandments into two parts: toward God and toward man, Exod 31:18; 34:1; Deut 4:13; 5:22. If divided by length in the Hebrew text, the Preface through #3, and #4 through #10. Another possibility is that the two

tablets are two copies (for God and for Israel; see Meredith Kline, *Treaty of the Great King*, p. 19).

Exactly Ten Commandments, Exod 34:28; Deut 4:13; 10:4

These Ten Commandments codify the moral law of God (*WCF* 19:2, *WLC* 98, *WSC* 41; see exposition below).

The form of these commandments is fairly unique in the ancient Near East. Nearly all other ancient Near Eastern law codes employ exclusively casuistic law forms (“if someone does something, then this is the penalty”). But the Ten Commandments are in the apodictic form (“you shall/shall not do something”). There are very few other examples of apodictic law in the ANE.

A rare example of ANE apodictic law: Code of Hammurapi #36, “In no case is the field, orchard, or house belonging to a soldier, a commissary, or a feudatory salable.”

### Sprinkled throughout the Mosaic law

In addition to the Ten Commandments themselves, portions of the moral law are repeated and expanded in the rest of the Mosaic legislation.

Example of the “book of the covenant” (Exod 20:23 - ch. 23); note 22:22, 28; 23:1-2, 12, 24.

### Summarized in the two great commandments

1<sup>st</sup> great commandment: Deut 6:5, Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

2<sup>nd</sup> great commandment: Lev 19:18, Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

### Recognized throughout the OT as superior to the ceremonial law

Examples:

Isaiah 1:10-17,

Hear the word of the LORD,  
you rulers of Sodom;

listen to the law of our God,  
    you people of Gomorrah!  
“The multitude of your sacrifices —  
    what are they to me?” says the LORD.  
“I have more than enough of burnt offerings,  
    of rams and the fat of fattened animals;  
I have no pleasure  
    in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.  
When you come to appear before me,  
    who has asked this of you,  
    this trampling of my courts?  
Stop bringing meaningless offerings!  
    Your incense is detestable to me.  
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations —  
    I cannot bear your evil assemblies.  
Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts  
    my soul hates.  
They have become a burden to me;  
    I am weary of bearing them.  
When you spread out your hands in prayer,  
    I will hide my eyes from you;  
even if you offer many prayers,  
    I will not listen.  
Your hands are full of blood;  
    wash and make yourselves clean.  
Take your evil deeds  
    out of my sight!  
Stop doing wrong,  
    learn to do right!  
Seek justice,  
    encourage the oppressed.  
Defend the cause of the fatherless,  
    plead the case of the widow.

Amos 5:21-24,

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts;  
    I cannot stand your assemblies.  
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
    I will not accept them.  
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,  
    I will have no regard for them.  
Away with the noise of your songs!

I will not listen to the music of your harps.  
But let justice roll on like a river,  
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Compare 1 Cor 7:19, “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts.”

### ***The moral law reaffirmed in the NT***

#### Reaffirmed by Christ

The two great commandments, Matt 22:36-40; Luke 10:26-28

The Ten Commandments, Matt 19:16-19 = Luke 18:18-20 (reaffirms Coms. #5-9)

#### Reaffirmed by Paul

Ten Commandments reaffirmed in Rom 2:21-23 (Coms. #1-2, 7-8); and Rom 13:8-10 (Coms. #6-8, 10, and “any other”)

### ***The moral law still in force***

It is applicable to Christians, as well as all other people (WCF 19:5, WLC 95-97; cf. verses cited below).

Christ did not abolish the moral law; rather, as Matt 5 shows, he strengthened our understanding of it by instilling in us God’s original purpose and interpretation. Verses which apparently contrast law and grace (as John 1:17) in no way abrogate the law; they simply turn us to the grace of God in Christ for our salvation.

Many claim that the moral law, as interpreted in Scripture itself in various situations, is culturally conditioned to such an extent that we can define right and wrong in a way “more advanced” than that found in the Bible, even in the NT. For an excellent refutation of this viewpoint, see Wayne Grudem, “Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic?” *JETS* 47:2 (June 2004) 299-346 (a detailed review of William J. Webb, *Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*).

### **Uses of the moral law**

The Westminster standards list several uses of the moral law (WCF 19:6, WLC 97):

1. It shows us God's will for conduct, Ps 119:4-6; Rom 7:12; Gal 5:14.
2. It shows us our sin and pollution, Rom 3:20; 7:7.
3. It convicts us of sin, makes us more humble, Rom 7:9, 14, 24.
4. It shows us the perfection of Christ, and our need for him, Rom 8:3-4; Gal 3:24.
5. Its threats show us God's hatred for sin, and warn us against sin, Ezra 9:13-14; Ps 119:101, 104, 128; Heb 10:26-31.
6. Its promises show us God's love of obedience, and inspire us to live righteously, Ps 19:11; Eph 6:2-3; Heb 12:1.

It should be noted that many of these verses refer to the Mosaic law in general, which contains civil and ceremonial laws as well as the moral law. Yet the import of these verses emphasizes the moral aspects of the law, and clearly reveals the principles spelled out in the Westminster standards.

The moral law must be our guide in life, even though we live under God's grace (Heb 12:28-29). The moral law is harmonious with the gospel:

WCF 19:7, "Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done."

It is clear that we are not saved by keeping the law (Gal 2:16); but, if we are saved, then we will desire to keep the moral law of God. This change in attitude toward the law is the essence of the promise of the new covenant, as it relates to the heart (note esp. Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26-27; and Heb 8:10, 13).

Jer 31:33, "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

Ezek 36:26-27, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Heb 8:10, 13, This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. . . . By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

## **Identity of the Ten Commandments**

It is clear from Scripture that there were Ten Commandments, written on two tables (see above). These Ten Commandments were written by God himself, emphasizing their great importance (Exod 31:18; 32:15-16; 34:28). Jesus also accepted the division into the two parts (cf. Matt 22:36-40).

The text of the commandments is given to us in two places; the only question is the manner in which the ten are to be divided and identified.

### ***Reformed and early Jewish numbering***

Reformed Protestant churches have followed the numbering system practiced by the Jews in the time of Christ (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 3:5:5 [pp. 70-71]; Philo, who reverses #6 and #7, as the LXX does).

Duty to God: 1) No other gods  
2) No images or idols in worship  
3) Name of God  
4) Sabbath day

Duty to man: 5) Honor parents  
6) No murder  
7) No adultery  
8) No stealing  
9) No false witness  
10) No coveting

### ***Later Jewish numbering***

The Jews after the time of Christ taught in the Talmud that the word “commandment,” דְבָרָה *dabar*, be translated as “word,” the literal meaning. Then they said that the introduction to the commandments in Exod 20:2 was the first “word.” The next two commandments were combined into one, thus making the ten.

- Duty to God:
- 1) Identity of God
  - 2) No other gods or images
  - 3) Etc., as in Reformed version

For a modern practical treatment of the commandments from the Orthodox Jewish perspective, see Laura Schlessinger (“Dr. Laura” on the radio) and Rabbai Stewart Vogel, *The Ten Commandments: The Significance of God’s Laws in Everyday Life* (1998).

### ***Roman Catholic and Lutheran numbering***

Saint Augustine (ca. A.D. 400) suggested that the first two commandments be combined, as the Jews were then doing. But he made up for the ten by dividing the tenth commandment into two parts. Augustine followed the order in Deuteronomy and made the ninth commandment, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife,” and the tenth commandment against coveting his property. The church of that time was encouraging the use of images in churches, and therefore accepted this arrangement, since it linked images to the worship of the other gods, not to the true God. However, unlike the Lutherans (who follow Augustine), the Roman Catholics have adopted the order of Exodus, making the ninth commandment “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house.”

- Duty to God:
- 1) No other gods or images
  - 2) Name of God
  - 3) Sabbath day

- Duty to man:
- 4) Honor parents
  - 5) No murder
  - 6) No adultery
  - 7) No stealing
  - 8) No false witness
  - 9) No coveting house (Lutherans: wife)
  - 10) No coveting wife or property (Lutherans: property)

### ***Evaluation of numbering systems***

The Reformed system seems the best for these two reasons:

(1) It was the system used by the Jews in the time of Jesus, and therefore probably by Jesus himself.

(2) It is the most logical division. The commands regarding coveting apparently belong to one commandment, as they speak of the same sin, only in different manifestations; plus, the

different order in Exodus and Deuteronomy indicates that the items coveted are considered as a group. The second commandment, regarding the manner of worship of the true God, is quite different in content from the first, which is concerned with the object of worship being the true God, as opposed to false gods (see, e.g., the golden calf incident, Exod 32:5, 8). Therefore, the first two commandments should not be combined into one.

## **General rules for interpreting the moral law**

In this section we will see how the Ten Commandments are to be interpreted and incorporated into one's ethical system and life. First we will study the Reformed method of interpreting the commandments; then we will examine NT passages specifically dealing with this question.

### ***Rules as expounded in the Westminster Standards***

The particular section of the Standards which deals with this matter is WLC 99, "What rules are to be observed for the right understanding of the ten commandments?"

WLC 99, What rules are to be observed for the right understanding of the ten commandments?

A. For the right understanding of the ten commandments, these rules are to be observed:

1. That the law is perfect, and bindeth everyone to full conformity in the whole man unto the righteousness thereof, and unto entire obedience for ever, so as to require the utmost perfection of every duty, and to forbid the least degree of every sin.
2. That it is spiritual, and so reacheth the understanding, will, affections, and all other powers of the soul; as well as words, works, and gestures.
3. That one and the same thing, in divers respects, is required or forbidden in several commandments.
4. That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded; so, where a promise is annexed, the contrary threatening is included; and where a threatening is annexed, the contrary promise is included.
5. That what God forbids, is at no time to be done; what he commands, is always our duty; and yet every particular duty is not to be done at all times.
6. That under one sin or duty, all of the same kind are forbidden or commanded together with all the causes, means, occasions and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto.
7. That what is forbidden or commanded to ourselves, we are bound, according to our places, to endeavour that it may be avoided or performed by others, according to the duty of their places.

8. That in what is commanded to others, we are bound, according to our places and callings, to be helpful to them; and to take heed of partaking with others in what is forbidden them.

The answer in WLC 99 lists eight rules for applying the Ten Commandments to all areas of life. These rules are summarized below.

1. The law is perfect, and is to be obeyed perfectly, both positively and negatively.
  - Perfection of the law, Ps 19:7
  - Perfection of obedience, Matt 5:19; Jas 2:10
  - Obedience of the heart, not mere traditionalism; cf. work on the Sabbath, Matt 12:1-14 = Mark 2:23-28 = Luke 6:1-5
2. The law is spiritual; it reaches the understanding, will, and affections, as well as words and deeds.
  - Law is holy, Rom 7:12
  - Heart intended, Matt 5:22, 28
  - Sins originate in the heart, Matt 15:1-20 = Mark 7:1-23 = Luke 11:37-41
3. Laws often overlap.
  - E.g., Col 3:5, covetousness equals idolatry
4. Laws imply their opposites.
  - Commands and prohibitions imply each other; e.g., stealing in Eph 4:28
  - Penalties and rewards imply each other; e.g., parents in Lev 20:9; Sabbath in Isa 58:13-14
  - But use caution when “expanding” the ten commandments; it is possible to prove too much, unless results also confirmed by Scripture
5. Laws are always in effect (except some duties not required at all times).
  - Laws for all generations, Deut 4:9

- Not all duties at all times; e.g., help poor in Mark 14:7
- Meaning of “love neighbor as self” is not to sin against him; allow him to follow his own will. Cf. U.S. Constitution: “provide for the national defense,” but only “promote the general welfare”

6. Laws are to be understood as hedged about.

- Laws include sins or duties of the same kind (Greek of 1 Thess 5:22)
  - E.g., honor parents, includes all authority
- Laws include areas surrounding sins or duties
  - causes
  - means
  - occasions, Prov 4:14-15
  - appearances, 2 Cor 8:20-21
  - provocations, Heb 10:24 (good); Col 3:21 (evil)
- NOTE. This rule must be a general principle; it should not be perverted into legalism. For example, not all these qualifications should surround all duties (secret prayer, giving, etc.). Likewise, we cannot always avoid providing the causes or means which might lead to sin (entrusting someone with money, etc.). God himself does not sin, yet he in his providence provides means and opportunities for men to sin.
- This principle was absolutized by the Pharisees. Jesus rebelled against such “hedging of the law” (Matt 15:1-20 and parallels). For Jewish legalism, see *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, “Oral Law,” and “Commandments, the 613.”
- This tendency was a danger for some of the Puritans (no secular reading, iconoclasm, no Christmas observance, etc.).

7. Laws are to be as influential in society as possible.

- For children, Gen 18:19; Deut 6:6-7; Josh 24:15
- For those under authority, Exod 20:10; cf. Rom 13:1-6
- For neighbors, Lev 19:17

- The phrase “according to their places” in this rule protects this section from advocating a pseudo-theocracy, in which sinful men regard their ideas as divine rules for others to obey.
8. Laws include our associations, which should influence them and us to obey.
- Duties —2 Cor 1:24; Heb 10:24
  - Sins —Eph 5:11; 1 Tim 5:22

### ***Rules as expounded in Scripture***

The Scriptures link the Ten Commandments and their significance to the concept of love: love to God and love to neighbor. In turn, love is defined by the Ten Commandments.

WSC 42, WLC 102, 122 (adds the Golden Rule)

#### The law in the Synoptic Gospels

The Golden Rule, in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 7:12 = Luke 6:31.

The lawyer’s question in Judea, Luke 10:25-37. Both great commandments given; Jesus answers follow-up question with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The ruler’s question, Matt 19:16-19 = Mark 10:17-19 = Luke 18:18-20. Deals with second table of the law; Matthew links with the second great commandment.

The lawyer’s question in the temple, Matt 22:34-40 = Mark 12:28-34. Love summarizes both tables of the law; Mark adds comment by scribe.

#### The law in John

Christ emphasized the second table, said it was a “new” commandment, John 13:34; 15:12, 17; cf. 1 John 2:7-10; 2 John 5.

In the same context, Christ defined love to God as keeping the commandments, John 14:15, 21, 23-24; cf. 1 John 5:1-3; 2 John 6.

#### The law in Paul

Paul in Rom 13:8-10 and in Gal 5:14 clearly teaches that the second table of the law is summarized and interpreted by the second great commandment, to love one's neighbor.

#### Conclusion, Scriptural interpretation of the law

The gospels and epistles agree that love defines the essence and purpose of the commandments. On the other hand, the love God desires is defined by those commandments.