

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen!

Today we are going to do two things with the sermon. Firstly, we are going to hear about the three uses or functions of the law and secondly, we are going to walk through some of the texts for today and see how God's law is intended to function on us in these texts. In doing this we will also see the gospel come to light.

Pray

Three uses of the law:

The long-used term 'three uses of the law' might sound like something you learnt in confirmation or have discussed in a bible study. This is a good opportunity to dig into your memory bank and see how useful this distinction is for us. While theologians that have gone before us have designated these as 'uses' of the law, I (Pastor Sam) prefer the title 'functions' of the law. This is because what we are trying to explain is that when God's law is read, heard, or proclaimed, it functions on the human conscience in three ways, or it is intended to function in three ways. (If you learn better by singing then the modern Christian rapper Flame in the song 2KR details these three uses also.)

The first function of the law is that it keeps order in society. That is, God's law keeps the members of society safe from each other, it curbs (that's the traditional title) our sin. When we hear that command, 'you shall not murder', our hate and anger is curbed so that we do not kill our neighbour. Another title for this first function is the 'civil' use of the law, for all societies throughout time have used God's law to an extent to order their society. For God's law is known inherently through nature as detailed in Romans 1 ¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. Romans 1:19–20 (ESV) In this function our sin is tempered because we fear punishment of a higher authority, and we somehow recognise the need for some harmony between people, which requires each person to not act on their impulses. Therefore, theft is reduced because we realise if I take something belonging to another then I don't have any right to claim something as my own, and we could apply this to all the commandments.

The second function of the law is that it shows us our sin! This is true for Christians and non-Christians alike except the response of a non-believer is different. Christians who are convicted of sin by God's law should know that we always need the gospel to closely follow. For the gospel is what sets us free from sin. Sometimes the gospel even comes before the law so that the conviction of sin is easier to swallow. We call this function the 'mirror', as the law of God holds a mirror to our heart and reveals its sin. Non-Christians don't really know what to do when their sin is revealed as they have not heard/believed/understood the gospel of freedom. It is the reason why our society thinks the church is only setting out to be a moral arbiter, it is the cause of a lot of anger against the church/God, the source of criticism of hypocrisy in the church, and most probably the reason many people have a deep hate for God or any higher authority. The key thing for Christians is that the law shows us our sin, and this should drive us to the gospel.

The third function and the most debated function (for a long discussion on this debate see the Formula on Concord Article VI), is specifically for Christians. Once we have heard the gospel and been set free from our works righteousness, we are free to serve God. The Christian asks 'how now shall we live?' Here the law of God comes to serve us showing us how to serve God and how to serve our neighbour, commonly referred to as the 'signpost'. It is why the psalmists can claim to love the law of God because it directs their life, it is the basis of many of the New Testament letters and even much of Jesus' preaching as we will see today, how Christians should interact with each other and the world.

The Curb, Mirror and Signpost are the three functions of the law, but we must remember that whenever a Christian encounters the law it will always perform the second function no matter the intention because the law always accuses us of sin (the Latin phrase is 'lex semper accusat').

God speaks to Ezekiel and commands.

⁷ "So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ⁸ If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. ⁹ But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

¹⁰ "And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: 'Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?' ¹¹ Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? Ezekiel 33:7–11 (ESV)

The first thing to note that this a specific command to a specific person. Ezekiel is to speak a message, this command is for him. We can extrapolate that all preachers are required by God to warn their hearers to repent, but this message is not to all Christians. We should not take spiritual responsibility for the faith of others so that we are so burdened by their lack of faith or unrepentant life where God has not given us that spiritual oversight. On the other hand, Pastors and preachers should not avoid their responsibility to deliver both the law (call to repentance) and the gospel to save sinners.

We can see that this first part is a third use of the law. It is a direction for how forgiven sinners are supposed to behave, and very specifically for how Ezekiel and by extension all preachers are to preach.

The message Ezekiel is to preach is a message of repentance. Turn from your wicked ways! This is a second use of the law; it is pointing out sin. Yet it is infused with the gospel. God speaks through Ezekiel 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked'. This is a gospel proclamation. Understand that the context here is that the people of Israel appear to know that they are sinning, and they can see that their life and the life of the nation is destroyed by that sin. Their complaint is that God is judging them harshly and they see they will die. The Gospel here is that God does not desire their death, he wants them to live, he wants to forgive them, he wants them to put off their sin and trust in him, to turn from their wicked ways and live. Even those who are believers, or once were believers need the second use of the law to convict their sin and be released by the gospel.

The latter part of Romans is infused with the third use of the law, second use and gospel. For much of this letter Paul has been showing us the gospel, how much God loves us, but in these chapters he is encouraging the Romans, and by extension us, to live as we are called:

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹ Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us

walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. Romans 13:8–14 (ESV)

While the intention of this writing is to encourage Christians in Godly living, we must remember that whenever we encounter the law we will always be convicted of sin. We need to notice how quickly Paul can change from offering commands to proclaiming gospel.

He tells us to love one another. This is a command, and specifically a third use of the law. Christians who are saved by grace through faith have been given a good work to do, love your neighbour. We want to do it; we know we need to do it. But this command reminds us, and the list of commandments that follows reminds us, that we are not as good at loving as we should. Actually, we fail to love as God intends, when Paul tells us that love fulfils the law we should be thinking about who fulfills the law. It is not us by our actions, it is Christ Jesus and his work in suffering, dying, and rising to life for our sake that fulfills the law! This command is infused with the gospel, and the call to action on our behalf should only be because Christ has fulfilled the law of love for us, and therefore we, being infused with his Holy Spirit, and out of gratitude for his great gifts to us, desire to love our neighbour.

Furthermore, the command to ‘wake up!’ is intended to make Christians think about their living and life, ‘does it agree with the holy living Christ commands, because he has already made me holy?’ This is a third use of the law. But it functions also as the second use as the sins listed point a mirror on our souls showing that we are still sinners requiring Christ’s forgiveness. Paul provides the gospel in abundance as he reminds us to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ’, that is come under the dominion of Jesus Christ, let him be your Lord. Or in other words live in your baptism, daily drowning your sinful self and rising as a new child of God! This requires the gospel, obviously; baptism is the gospel enacted. It requires a God who desires forgiveness for us, not punishment, the law always needs the gospel when it shows us our sins! The Christian faith is not built on our moral superiority but on Christ’s forgiveness of our great and grave sins! The faith also requires the adherents to forgive each other, as we learn in the gospel today.

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” Matthew 18:15–20 (ESV)

This passage begins with a technical term, and we should not miss this key point. That term is ‘brothers’. Many English translations will render this ‘brothers and sisters’ but the ‘sisters’ is really unnecessary. All Christians are made brothers of Christ on account of faith, as Paul teaches earlier in Romans.

¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are **sons of God**. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the **Spirit of adoption as sons**, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and **if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ**, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. Romans 8:14–17 (ESV)

Here we learn that on account of Christ and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit we are made brothers with Jesus and heirs (receiving the same inheritance as him). Therefore, when this introduction to reconciliation in

Matthew begins with 'brothers' it is referring to other believers. This is not guidance on how to reconcile with non-believers. This gives away that the command of Christ here is a third use of the law, it is how Christians should interact with one another.

The immediate presentation is to present the brother with his sin, 'go and tell him his fault'. We must be well versed in sin and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, holy living and unholy living, the commandments! We are called, commanded by Christ Jesus here to show our brother his sin. This flies in the face of the popular notion that we should not judge, for knowledge of sin requires judgement. In fact, we must judge one another in this instance, but it is only in matters of personal sins. When a brother has sinned against you! You are not invited to go to your brother and air just any old grievance, your offense at how they spoke, their opinion that doesn't fit your narrative, you are only called to point out personal and private sins against yourself. The church and its preachers on the other hand (as shown in Ezekiel and in this passage in Matthew) has the responsibility of pointing to all sins, because all sins require Christ's forgiveness and it is the church that has the authority to forgive even on behalf of God. There are connotations of forgiveness in this requirement to 'show fault', there is an expectation that when sin is confessed because the brother listened that you personally forgive them, but that is not the first step in reconciliation.

The full weight of the gospel comes at the end of the process in the words that we assume equates to rejection. Notice the progression of 'if he does not listen' to you, to other believers, to the church (inferred the leaders of the church, preachers who are called to point out sin, see Ezekiel). At the end of the progression is the command to treat that person as a 'Gentile and a tax collector', with some biblical knowledge you might think this means exclude. But when you observe Jesus' interaction with gentiles and tax collectors you will notice he treated them as the greatest sinners who desperately needed God's forgiveness. He ate and drank with them, in their homes. This command is a command to proclaim the gospel to the unrepentant Christian. Yes, it requires us to remove them from the communion, but it also requires us to endeavor to bring them back to faith with the gospel. (You would do well to go and read your constitution on excommunication).

The binding and losing that is repeated here by Jesus is also an expression of the gospel. The church is called to release people from their sin with God's authority, on earth and in heaven. Again, we are reminded that it is pertinent for us to know right from wrong so that the agreement indicated is on God's grounds and not on our human desires.

All of our texts today are intended primarily to encourage Christians in their life of faith but secondarily to encourage sinners (Christians) to remember the gospel, repent of their sin and live at peace with God and one another. Therefore brothers, put on the Lord Jesus Christ for love is the fulfilling of the law.

Amen