

## SESSION 16: God's Declared Will

### Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 67-103

WCF	WLC	WSC
19	91-152	39-84

### Introduction

The third question of the Shorter Catechism asks, "What do the Scriptures principally teach?" The answer gives us the greatest single division in our understanding of the Bible: "The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man."

Both Catechisms divide at this point. WSC 4-38 teach us what we are to believe concerning God (cf. WLC 6-90). Having seen this, WSC 39-107 then teach us our duty to God (cf. WLC 91-196).

To this point in our sessions, our study has focused primarily upon the first of these divisions. But in this session, we begin focusing on the second division. Consequently, this portion of our standards deals with the rule of man's obligation: the law of God.

### Obligated to Obey

An understanding of our duty to God begins with the nature and character of God. As the Creator of all things – "the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things" – God has absolute rights over all creatures. "To Him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience He is pleased to require of them," (WCF 2.2).

As covenant theologians, we are used to thinking of our obligations to God in terms of the two great covenants revealed in Scripture: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. And rightly so. Yet as Paul Helm notes, "the law of nature – the obligation mankind has to worship and serve the Creator – precedes any covenant, both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. It is only on this basis that the covenant of works can be made intelligible."<sup>205</sup>

Helm's point is essential. Our obligation to obey God does not originate in *covenant*, but in *creation*. It forms the basis of the covenant of works. Yet because it is not exhausted in the covenant of works, man's obligation to obey God *remains intact within the covenant of grace*. Sinai and Zion are two separate mountains. Yet both rest upon the same earth. Likewise, the covenants of works and grace are distinct covenants in Scripture. Yet both rest upon man's obligation to serve his Creator.

So "what is the duty which God requireth of man?" (WSC 39, WLC 91). "The duty which God requireth of man is obedience to his revealed will." Scripture puts it more poetically: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6.8).

---

<sup>205</sup> Paul Helm, "Introduction" in *Reformed Thought*, 5-6.

## The Moral Rule

The first rule of obedience given to mankind was the moral law (WSC 40). WLC 93 gives an excellent definition of this moral law:

The moral law is the declaration of the will of God to mankind, directing and binding every one to personal, perfect, and perpetual conformity and obedience thereunto, in the frame and disposition of the whole man, soul and body, and in performance of all those duties of holiness and righteousness which he oweth to God and man: promising life upon the fulfilling, and threatening death upon the breach of it.

The moral law is revealed to man in two ways. First, it is revealed to man via *conscience*: “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them...” (Rom 2.14-15). Thus all human beings are without excuse (Rom 1.18-20).

The second way God reveals the moral law to us in via the *Ten Commandments*. Speaking of the moral law revealed to Adam, WCF 19.2 notes, “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.” The Ten Commandments did not begin at Sinai. Rather, they were an *externalization* – a hardcopy – of what was *inscribed* on man’s heart from the start.

WLC 92 makes an interesting distinction. Note its wording: “The rule of obedience revealed to Adam... besides a special command not to eat of the fruit... was the moral law.” The distinction here is between *moral* and *positive* laws. A moral law is a law based on God’s *nature*. Moral laws are permanently binding on all people (cf. WCF 19.5). A positive law, on the other hand, is a declaration of God’s *will in a specific instance*. Positive laws have holy purposes and remain in place for a period of time. Yet because they are not based on God’s nature, they are not permanently binding. The command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a positive law. Yet it was related to the moral law. Bavinck explains:

Adam knew the moral law by nature. Hence, it did not, like the probationary command, have to be revealed to him in a special way. It is essentially the same as the Ten Commandments but differed in form, for the law given on Sinai presupposes a catalog of sins and therefore almost always speaks in the negative (“Thou shalt not...”), and the moral law before the fall was much more positive. But precisely because in the prefall life of Adam the moral law was in the nature of the case entirely positive, it did not make clear to Adam’s mind the possibility of sin. Hence, in addition to the commandments a positive law. In addition to the commandments, whose naturalness and reasonableness were obvious to Adam, this command was in a sense arbitrary and incidental. In the probationary command the entire moral law came to Adam in a single throw, confronting him with the dilemma: either God or man, God’s authority or one’s own insight, unconditional obedience or independent research, faith or skepticism. It was an appalling test that opened the way either to eternal blessedness or eternal ruin.<sup>206</sup>

## Ceremonial & Judicial Laws

In addition to the moral law, our standards also speak of two other types of law given to the people of God under the Old Testament. These are the *ceremonial* and *judicial* laws.

---

<sup>206</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.574.

Ceremonial laws can be thought of as wedding decorations and preparations. They were elaborate, tangible outworkings of the second and fourth commandments applied to the religious life of Israel, “containing several typical ordinances; partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, His graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly of divers instructions of moral duties,” (WCF 19.3). But just as the decorations and preparations are finished after a wedding, so after the advent and accomplishments of Christ the ceremonial laws are fulfilled. Thus “all which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament.”

The judicial laws of Israel were specific applications of the moral law to the civic circumstances of the Jewish commonwealth. As such, they “expired together with the State of that people” in 587 BC and do not bind “any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require,” (WCF 19.4).

What is “general equity”? The proof texts cited in the standards helpful in getting an idea of what is in view here. For example, the judicial principle of *lex talionis* (law of retaliation) is articulated in the Mosaic law (Ex 21.24). Likewise, Paul in 1 Corinthians 9.8-14 cites a Mosaic legal provision (Dt 25.24) in explaining why “those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.”

We must take extreme care when making “general equity” arguments for the application of Mosaic judicial laws to modern society. A comparison of Leviticus 20.10-11 with 1 Corinthians 5.1-5 and 6.9-11 show us that a simplistic “copy and paste” approach is not biblical.

### The Usefulness of the Moral Law

Having surveyed the types of law given to the people of God in Scripture, our standards go on to affirm that “the moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others,” (WCF 19.5). But of what use is the moral law to those outside the church? This question is taken up by our standards in WLC 95-97. We might summarize the answers in the following chart:

To Whom	How Useful
All	Shows us God’s nature Shows us our duty, inability, corruption, and need Shows us Christ’s perfection
Unregenerate	Awakens the conscience and drive them to Christ Leaves them inexcusable if they refuse
Regenerate	Shows us our debt to Christ Provokes us to more thankfulness Provides the rule for obedience

### The Extent of the Moral Law

Having shown the usefulness of the moral law, WLC 99 articulates eight principles “to be observed for the right understanding of the ten commandments.” We may summarize these as follows:

1. The law is perfect and thus requires perfection.
2. The law is spiritual and thus all-encompassing.
3. The law is interconnected and unified in its commandments.
4. The law is both explicit and implicatory.
5. The law is absolute without being impractical.
6. The law is categorical and thus bind all specifics of the same kind.
7. Obedience to the law involves federal obligations.
8. Obedience to the law involves social obligations.

In addition to these rules of interpretation, WLC 151 lists for us “those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others.” We may summarize these as follows:

*Sins receive their aggravations...*

1. *From the persons offending.* A sin is more heinous if the sinner possesses superior experience, influence, or prominence.
2. *From the parties offended.* A sin is more heinous if committed against God or those to whom we bear a special obligation or relation.
3. *From the nature and quality of the offense.* A sin is more heinous if outward, irreparable, insensible, willful, or continual.
4. *From circumstances of time or place.* A sin is more heinous if it disrupts the Lord's Day, divine worship, public order, or personal company.

### **The Exposition of the Moral Law**

Having laid out the framework for interpretation and application of the moral law, our standards go on to provide a detailed explanation of the Ten Commandments. This exposition is presented in WSC 41-84 and WLC 100-152. Though neither space nor time allow us to treat this material exhaustively, we may here mention two particular cases of special relevance.

The first is the case of pictures of Jesus. Such pictures are accepted as a matter of course in most evangelical churches in our day. Yet WLC 109 makes it clear that the second commandment forbids "the making any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever." The proof texts cited include Deuteronomy 4.15-19. To this we might add a consideration of John 14.9.

The second is the case of Sabbath observance. Again, this is an area where most evangelical churches in our day have either abandoned or diluted biblical teaching. Yet our standards hold a very high view of the Sabbath (WSC 58-62, WLC 116-121). Though they do not include legalistic catalogues, they list serious obligations. Consider WSC 60-61 and WSC 117-119 with prayerful care.

We may groan at the level of specificity in our standards' exposition of the Decalogue. Yet we would do well to remember that lists of Scripture accompany the lists of duties and sin. Our standards are trying to apply the principles of WLC 99. Out of love for God, we should do the same.

### **Important Questions**

1. You have a friend who gets cancer. In facing death they ask you about heaven. "I'm a pretty good person. Do you think God will let me in?" In view of WLC 93, how do you respond?
2. How does the distinction between *moral* and *positive* laws explain the change of day in the fourth commandment (WSC 59)?
3. Are civil authorities accountable to God to govern in accordance with the *moral* law? Should they simply copy and paste the Old Testament *judicial* laws?

### **Additional Resources**

Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., *The Lord's Day*

### **For Next Session**

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 104-118, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
20-21	178-196	98-107