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## *Living Under Law*

*Basic Scripture resources: Exodus 20:1, 2  
Deuteronomy 5:32 6:3; Psalm 119:97-104;  
Matthew 5:17; Mark 12:13-17*

The present generation has witnessed an unprecedented assault upon the very concept of law. For many people the phrase /aw and order has become an expression of contempt. Radical theologians and advocates of the "new morality" keep telling us that the human race has "come of age," meaning that it has reached a level of moral maturity that should enable it to get along without laws.

Such rebellion against law should not surprise us, for the Bible says the very essence of sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4, NAS). A spirit of lawlessness has been in the world almost from the beginning. The apostle Paul testified to its presence in his day, and he indicated that it would get much worse before the end (2 Thessalonians 2:3-8, NAS).

In the face of such lawlessness the Christian must continue to uphold the sanctity and validity of law, both human and divine. The Christian teacher must be able to meet the challenge of the anarchists in his classroom. Christian parents especially must be able to convey to their children a sound rationale and a deep respect for law, both by explanation and by example.

It is true, of course, that we are not under law but are under grace (Romans 6:14). This means that we are not under a law code as a way of salvation. We are not saved by law, but by grace. It does not mean, however, that a Christian under grace is no longer obligated to obey the laws that apply in our age. Even though we are not under law as a standard to be judged by, we definitely are under law as a standard to live by.

In this opening chapter we will give a brief explanation of what it means to live under law. We will discuss the basis, the source, and the nature of law.

### *I. The Basis of Law*

The basic rationale for the validity of law is the fact that we live in a God-created universe. The world in which we live did not originate by blind chance. It did not develop into its present state according to the impersonal forces of naturalistic evolution. This universe was planned and created by God (Genesis 1:1).

#### *A God of Order*

Who is this God who has created the heavens and the earth? Is He an irrational being who does things in a disorderly, disorganized way? Hardly. When Paul was instructing the Corinthians to conduct their church affairs "decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40), he suggested this is only proper since "God is not the author of confusion" (1 Corinthians 14:33).

That God is "not the author of confusion" is important not only for the kind of worship services we ought to have, but also for the kind of universe we actually live in. It is a God-created universe, and therefore an orderly universe, a universe that operates according to law.

God has built "law and order" into the very structure of creation. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the realm of natural law. The movements of stars and planets and their satellites

are so beautifully regular that they are the most exact indicators "for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years" (Genesis 1:14). The Creator has established laws of genetics whereby each category of living things reproduces after its kind (Genesis 1:11,12, 21, 24, 25).

### ***The Moral Law***

Just as God has made natural law an inherent part of His orderly creation in general, so also has He built His moral law into the fabric of human nature in particular. Why does every human creature on the face of the earth have a set of laws and regulations and taboos? Why is there such a remarkable agreement among these law codes with regard to their general emphasis against such things as adultery, theft, and murder? It is because God has created mankind with a built-in awareness of the rightness and wrongness of certain things. Thus Paul can say that even those people who have never seen the specially-revealed law of God (the Bible), may nevertheless "do by nature the things contained in the law," and thereby "show the work of the law written in their hearts" (Romans 2:14, 15).

God wrote this law on the hearts of men when He created mankind in His own image (Genesis 1:26). Unfortunately sin has defaced the image-character in us, thereby dimming our awareness of the moral law and requiring a radical renewal process before it can be useful again. This renewal of the image of God in us is one of the fruits of conversion to Christ, which is described in effect as a re-creation in God's image (see Ephesians 4:20-24; Colossians 3:9, 10).

The restoration of the sin-marred image involves being re-created "in righteousness and true holiness" (Ephesians 4:24) and being "renewed in knowledge" (Colossians 3:10).

What is this moral law that God has stamped upon the very heart of His crowning creature, man? It does not include all the various laws that God has given from time to time and that apply only to a limited time or place, such as the laws of sacrifice and temple worship. These applied only to the Jewish nation in the Old Testament era. The term moral law refers rather to those moral principles that are universally and eternally valid, those that apply to all men in all times. These include the laws requiring love and truth and justice. These are the laws that reflect the very nature of God himself (see Matthew 5:44, 45; 1 Peter 1:16; 1 John 4:8, 16).

### ***Civil Government***

Even human laws, the laws imposed upon citizens by civil authorities, should ideally be nothing more than an extension of the divine moral law. God himself has ordained the existence of civil government so that it may enact and enforce law. Paul says that "the powers that be are ordained of God" (Romans 13:1). He describes the role of civil authorities:

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil (Romans 13:3, 4).

There is a strong emphasis here on good and evil. The civil government encourages good works and punishes evil works. It must do this by establishing and enforcing laws. Who will decide what is good and what is evil? Are rulers and lawmakers free to decide this as they please? No! Ideally they are God's ministers and should look to Him and to His eternal moral law as the ultimate standard. When governments are operating according to their God-given

roles, they will be making and enforcing laws that are in accord with God's moral law.

Why, then, is there law? The answer is that it just could not be any other way, since this is a God-created universe. The God who made the worlds is a God of reason and order. He created the human race in His own image, which means that His moral law is imprinted on the hearts of all. He ordained civil government to maintain "law and order" in accord with His moral law.

## ***II. The Source of Law***

Since law is so important for an orderly, peaceful society and for a life that is pleasing to God, it is obviously essential that we have a knowledge of this law. But how can we know it?

We have already suggested that any innate knowledge of right and wrong has been spoiled by sin, and that the renewal of this knowledge comes only with conversion to Christ. But how is this accomplished? Does it come automatically at Christian baptism? Is new knowledge of God's law simply implanted directly in the heart? The answer is no. Once the original creation knowledge has been defaced, it can be renewed only through a study of the revelation that God has given us in the Bible.

This means that we do not have a *subjective* source of law. We do not have a reliable inner moral sense. The only source of law that we can trust is the *objective* Word of God. To this alone can we turn for a true knowledge of right and wrong.

There are several false ideas regarding the source of law. One is that the conscience is a reliable moral guide. "Let your conscience be your guide," is the popular philosophy. This is a serious misunderstanding of the function of the conscience. The conscience is not a built-in source of information about right and wrong. Rather, it presupposes that such knowledge is already present. Then, like a moral alarm system, it merely *compares* an action with one's accepted ideas of what is right and wrong. If the act is one already determined to be wrong, the conscience "hurts" or accuses us or makes us feel guilty when we commit such an act.

In this sense the conscience is like a computer, which can sort data correctly only if it has been programmed accurately. The computer will perform its functions faithfully even if programmed improperly, but its results will be unreliable. Likewise the conscience will operate with whatever value system a person has accepted; it will continue to "accuse or excuse" with regard to particular acts. But if the accepted value system happens to be the wrong one, the conscience will accuse and excuse the wrong things.

In other words, the conscience itself is not a guide: it *needs* a guide. It needs to be taught and informed from some reliable outside source. What is that source? The Bible alone.

Another false idea regarding the source of law is that the Holy Spirit will provide inner guidance in the making of ethical decisions. "Just let the Spirit lead you," is the idea. We must emphatically point out, however, that this is *not* the purpose of the Holy Spirit's presence in the life of the Christian. The Spirit is not given to provide us with inner knowledge. John 16:13 ("He will guide you into all truth") applies only to the apostles. Christians receive the Holy Spirit for quite a different purpose, namely, to give us inner strength to do God's will (Ephesians 3:16; Romans 8:13). Our knowledge of that will comes only through a study of His Word.

As long as we continue to look within ourselves for a knowledge of God's law, we will keep coming up with conflicting and confusing and inadequate answers to life's problems. When we look to God's revelation in the pages of Scripture, and point others to the same source, we will find a law that will bring peace and happiness to ourselves and to society, if everyone will abide by it.

### ***III. The Nature of Law***

We live under our Creator's laws, which are revealed to us in the words of the Bible. These laws are just and good, and are designed for the welfare of individuals and of society as a whole.

One thing in particular needs to be stressed concerning the nature of God's laws, especially the eternal moral law that applies in every age. It is this: God's laws are usually general in nature, and require honest and sincere application to the *particular* situations of our lives.

God could have given us a lawbook that spelled out detailed rules and regulations for every possible ethical situation and decision. Of course, if He did this for us -- twentieth century Americans -- he would have to do it for *all* cultures in *all* times. Can you imagine the size of the library of books that would be required for such detailed instructions? Can you imagine the difficulty of trying to read and understand all those volumes?

This is part of the very genius of the Bible. Here in one small volume, carried in one hand or pocket, are all the laws needed to govern the conduct of all peoples of all times! How is this possible? It is possible because the laws are mostly so general that they transcend cultural differences, and can be given relevant applications from culture to culture, from age to age.

This means that if we are going to use the Bible as God intends, we must know the general laws and principles it teaches and must make every honest effort to see how they apply to particular problems in our lives. A general commandment such as "Be kind to one another" (Ephesians 4:32, NAS), or a general principle such as "Blessed are the meek" (Matthew 5:5) binds us to particular forms of conduct that we can know by serious study and meditation.

If the Bible does not mention a particular issue by name, such as cigarette smoking or labor strikes, that does not mean it is silent on these problems. There are general principles that do apply, and it is wrong for us not to apply them.

In the following chapters we will be studying many of the great general commandments and principles of God's law. We will try to understand the principles themselves, and we will see how they apply to many particular moral problems in our time. There are other principles and other applications, which the readers are urged to investigate for themselves.