

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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8/3/25

Sermon Title: The Limits of Law

Sermon Text: Romans 3:20

Rom. 3:20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Main Point: The law of God is good because it is an expression of God's own good character, but it was not given to justify sinners, since only Christ can do that.

Outline:

1. The Goodness of the Law
2. The Limits of the Law

Introduction

A while back I preached a sermon on the wrath of God. And in that sermon I said that God's wrath may perhaps be the most unpleasant Christian doctrine to most people, and the one Christians may be tempted to be the most embarrassed of.

Now, I don't think most Christians talk that way about the law of God. But I do think, in practice, that the Law of God is one of God's gifts that is perhaps the most disliked and misunderstood, even by Christians.

Just like the wrath of God needs to be appreciated anew, the same is true of God's law.

And I suppose my concern is that many Christians believe that there may be something about the law that is bad, or that there is something about the law itself that brings death. And for many people they think they have to choose either

between the law or Christ. But that is, of course, a false choice. Paul is going to say throughout this letter that the problem was never actually with the law, but with the *misuse* of the law. The problem is with us, not the law.

Remember that when we talk about “the law,” we’re talking about the things God has told us that please him, and also the things that displease him. Any “ought” that God gives to us in Scripture is what we mean by “law.”

And Paul’s larger point in verses 19 and 20 is that if the *Jews* could not be justified by obeying the law, then *no one* can be justified by it. But this means that we need to think well about the law. And so today I want us to reflect on the law’s goodness, and the law’s limits. *Why* is it good, and even though it’s good, what is it that we *shouldn’t* expect the law to be able to do for us as sinners?

So our first point today is the goodness of the law. Our second point is the limits of the law. Why is it good, but why should we not expect God’s good law to justify us in God’s sight?

1. The Goodness of the Law

First this morning we have to address something incredibly fundamental, and that is The Goodness of the Law.

Among many, it’s very common for there to be a very anti-Old-Testament bias in American Christians, where we may not be Marcionites and think that the God of the Old and New Testaments are different Gods – one good and one bad – but we may have absorbed some of his attitudes. So we may tend to look at the Old Testament as sort of like a venus fly trap that sits there in waiting for unsuspecting sinners so that the law can close down on us and catch us.

On the other hand, it’s also common to think that God has given us the gospel so that we can finally be free from the law... free from moral requirements. This tends to go along with a misguided view of Christian freedom. Christian freedom isn’t fundamentally about escaping from God’s moral demands, but finally being free to keep them and to be shaped more and more into someone who loves what God loves (which is goodness) and hates what God hates (which is sin). God’s goal isn’t

get us away from that, it's to move us toward that. And the law (in conjunction with the gospel) is an incredible help to that.

Think about how positively Scripture speaks of the law.

Psalms 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible. It's 176 verses long. Written in an acrostic format, it moves through the whole Hebrew alphabet from A to Z (actually from Aleph to Tau), with every letter organized around extolling and praising the law of God as an expression of God's perfect character.

The author connects keeping God's law with seeking him with his our whole heart. He says things like "Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments" (119:66). "The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces" (119:72). This Psalm also says this, "Righteous are you, O LORD, and right are your rules" (119:117). This goes on and on. The author is besought with God's law because he is besought with God. He sees the law as an expression of the character of the God whom he loves.

You also see here that this very positive attitude toward the law grows out of the Psalmist's understanding that the Law and God himself are closely connected. Because God is good, his law is good. Because God is a Savior, I see the promises of the gospel in his Law. Even as I see what he expects of me in the law and the ways I fall short, that same law points me to the sacrifice of Christ. Even though I will fail to keep this law from the heart, there is a Savior who kept it completely.

If we have a wrongheaded view of God's moral requirements, or even of the Law of Moses, we will have a fundamentally negative view of God himself. The one grows out of the other, but at rock bottom, if we look at God's law, in all its forms, and we see it as constricting... if we think that his law is about catching us... if we think that he gave us his law not as a help but as something that hurts... then we will also attribute those things to God, too.

If his law is like this, then that means in some sense he is like this. Like his law, he is out to catch me.

If this assumption takes hold, we will think that the gospel is about getting away from such a God or finding a way to get him to let us in in spite of himself. And

either of these errors leads to legalism or antinomianism (which we'll get to later in this chapter of Romans).

But this is why I belabor this issue of the goodness of the Law. The law is an expression of the good, holy, and perfect character of God. If we fundamentally think that the law is against us, we will also think that way about God himself.

Historically Christians have understood three primary uses of the Law.

The first use of the law is that the law teaches sinners how to live among others. The way John Blanchard puts it, "God forbids sin, not to prevent us enjoying ourselves, but to prevent us destroying ourselves."

There is a temporal good that comes from God's law if we hear it and practice it. The world, in other words, is a better place when people hear and obey God's law. Especially with the commands not to murder or steal or lie, life is definitely better when people obey those commands. That's what's known as the first use of the law: it's useful to make life among other sinners more bearable.

The second use of the law teaches sinners their need of a Savior. This is the use of the law that most people are familiar with.

And in fact, we see it right here in this passage. Today's verse says, "Through the law comes knowledge of sin." We read the law, and we see our problem. We see our sin. So for example, we read the ten commandments, and we think, "Man; I'm not living up to this standard at all. I'm such a sinner. I see God's righteous demand, and I'm so far short." And in that realization, the law also preaches Jesus. So the law shows us our need of Christ. And the result is that we see our need of Jesus because of the law. Clement of Alexandria says, "The law did not create sin; it revealed it." Martin Luther says it like this: "The law discovers the disease. The gospel gives the remedy." That's what we call the second use of the law: It's useful to expose our sin.

The third use of the law is when we use the law to show us what a redeemed person lives like so that we can aim at being more Christlike. You see, the law doesn't just keep us well-behaved, and it doesn't just condemn. The law also

has good uses for the person who is in Christ, because the law instructs redeemed people what holiness looks like; it's just that it can't make us holy apart from faith in the Savior.

Let me see if this helps: The law is like a set of railroad tracks. It shows you the direction the train is supposed to go — it gives structure, order, and a clear path. But if your train has no engine, no matter how hard you push, you won't move. The law gives you the path, but it can't supply the power. Only the gospel — the grace of God in Christ — gives you the engine. First, the law shows you that you're off the tracks entirely. But then, once you've been put back on the rails by grace, the law guides your journey forward. John Flavel says it like this: "the law sends us to Christ to be justified, and Christ sends us to the law to be regulated."

So for example, we might read the law *before* our confession of sin. That's an example of the second use of the law. We read the commandments, and it breaks our heart how far short we fall. But Calvin's church in Geneva was fond of also reading the ten commandments *after* the confession of sin. Why? Because the law doesn't just condemn, it instructs and points us in the right way once we've repented and come to Christ in faith. The law goes from being a condemning force to being a blessing and a help in the hand and heart of a believer whose sin has been dealt with by Jesus.

You see, the problem is *not* with the law. It was never with the law. The law reflects the character of God. If we have a problem with the law, it's because we fundamentally have a fundamentally wrong view of God. If we have a negative view of the law, then instead of seeing him as a wise and loving creator and father, we are seeing him as the eternal bean counter who is just waiting for the slightest error so that he can destroy us. But Christians, of all people, have seen the grace of God in Christ, and we know the goodness of God. Because of that, we of all people see and love the goodness of his law. The attitude of Psalm 119 has not expired. In fact, it is embodied in the Christian.

The problem is not the law. The problem is, and always has been sin.

We need to keep this in mind as we move to our second point.

2. The Limits of the Law

Second today, Paul wants us to know the limits of the law.

We've seen the goodness of the law. We've seen that it reflects God's own character. And we saw positively the three ways the law can be used: It preserves society when we obey it, it drives us to Christ by preaching Jesus and showing us our need, and it also gives Christ-followers a guide to life, and a picture of obedience that we can aim for. It lays down the tracks that the gospel will drive us to follow.

But there is one thing that the law cannot and will not do. You see it in our reading: "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (3:20).

Paul says, "I love the law. But not for this. It cannot and will not bring justification to a sinner."

It's at this point that we need to answer an important question. I've said that the law can't justify. Actually Paul has said that. It can't bring justification. But what is justification? What is this amazing thing that God's law can't do for sinners?

Our own church's catechism defines justification like this:

"Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone."

Notice that justification is something that God does, and that he does from grace. But at its core justification is about the declaration that (even though we are sinners) we are pardoned of our sins and now we are righteous.

Justification is law-court language about someone's standing in the eyes of the law. The word we use for that category is "forensic." Justification is about the declaration of someone's guilt. It's about God's judgment about us.

Justification is God's gracious act of declaring us righteous in his sight. The question is this: *on what basis* does God declare someone to be righteous, who was not previously righteous? If we're guilty of sin, how can we ever be "not

guilty” of sin? And the Scriptural answer to this has its roots in the sacrificial system.

You look at the sacrifices that the Jews made in the Old Testament, and what we see is that God was teaching us that he will accept a substitute in our place. And so he sent his son, who became a man, into the world, to be the perfect sacrifice on behalf of any and all who are united to Christ by faith.

And when we are united to Christ by faith, we receive his blessings and benefits, and his status. And that status change where we were once guilty and are now declared innocent is not because of something we did, but because of the work and righteousness that Jesus achieved. That is what we call justification.

God justifies us. Now, the rest of Romans will cover this ground, so I’m not going to go deeper there, though it is tempting. But I want you to see that there is one thing, especially which is very good, and holy, but cannot accomplish this. One place you should not look to in order to gain this benefit of the gospel of justification: don’t look to the law to make this happen, Paul says.

“By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.” We will be justified, Paul says, but *not* by means of the law.

Paul is so definitive that it’s worth thinking of other ways people try to avoid the guilty verdict.

We can’t and shouldn’t ask something of our works that our works can never perform.

Now, Roman Catholicism does not see justification as an act that takes place when we are united by faith to Christ at a point in time. In Roman Catholic theology, justification is not seen as a declaration by God when we trust in Jesus. They see it as a life-long process. For them, it begins with baptism, which removes original sin and infuses grace into the soul. So it’s not a declaration by God, but a renovation by God in our heart. For Rome, Justification involves both the forgiveness of sins *and* the internal renewal of the person (making them inherently righteous). Faith is necessary in the Roman Catholic system, but it must be formed by love (charity) and cooperation with grace through good works and participation in the

sacraments. Final justification depends on persevering in grace until death. And even once the person has died (in the Roman system), they may have hundreds or thousands of years to spend in the cleansing fires of purgatory before they are able to enjoy the comfort and peace of heaven.

Now, among Protestants such as ourselves, there can sometimes be a lazy or ignorant misconception that Roman Catholics don't believe in God's grace, or that they don't believe that Jesus saves sinners. Roman Catholics do absolutely believe in the *necessity* of Christ and his sacrifice. Speak to any Roman Catholic, and if they know their stuff they will tell you how much they appreciate Jesus. The problem is not that they don't believe they need Jesus. The problem is that they do not believe in the *sufficiency* of Christ, nor do they believe that justification can be spoken of as a definitive past tense act of God for the Christian. For them it is always a process, it is always ongoing, and it is a destination never arrived at so long as we are breathing.

As we will see as we read through Romans, the Bible doesn't see justification as a lifelong process. Instead, it speaks of Justification as a once-for-all legal declaration by God, where sinners are declared righteous solely on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness, received by faith alone in which we are united to Christ by the Spirit through faith.

For example, Paul says in Romans for that "Abraham was justified" in Romans 4. In chapter 5, Paul speaks of justification entirely in the past tense: "Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God" (5:1).

Then a few verses later he says, "Since, therefore, *we have now been justified* by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God" (5:9). He can confidently say that we have now been justified. Justification is possessed now. Not after we persevere finally.

The Roman Catholic system sees us as never justified in this life. Justification is only begun, but never finished until final perseverance.

In Roman Catholicism, justification and sanctification are rolled in together, and you can be justified through a life of works and efforts, through a system of penance and sacraments and merits. But you are never justified or declared

righteous or secure in Christ. You are only ever in the process of being made righteous or secure or justified in God's sight.

And of course Luther's great struggle was that this system which had grown so far away from the Scripture's teaching is not (and cannot be) good news to a sinner, because it never brings peace, it never lifts the burden off of the sinner. The church's system as the basis of our peace with God just becomes another law in another form. This is why Luther was so crushed by it and could not find peace with God. In the Roman system, that peace was always a carrot on a string dangled out in front of the sinner but never really given to him.

And yet Paul has said very clearly, no one can be justified by the works of the law.

We ought to have a high view of God's law, but we should never make it do what it was never made to do. This was the chief complaint of the Reformers against Rome. They said, "they tried to make the law do what only Christ could do for us."

Exactly what Paul has said here today: no one will ever be justified by the works of the law.

We may be protestants, but we aren't immune to this. We can easily live differently than what we profess. Countless Christians are tempted to feel confident in our own works. So when we are doing well or have served in some way we think we are more secure because of things we've done.

We can also fall into this if we wrongly understand the sacraments. If we believe that our baptism or participation in the Supper is why God accepts us, we may fall into a very similar idea: that something we did or received in the past is a replacement for faith in Jesus. Instead of faith in Christ, we look to and lean on ourselves and what we've done to secure God's grace for ourselves.

Many Christians even settle for this. They stop going to church, abandon growing in Christ, yet they think that it is sufficient that they were baptized and have their names on the rolls somewhere. They are trusting in their baptism or in their past participation in the things of God. They feel more secure because they did something in the past than they do because they are looking to Jesus now.

As you can see, we don't just have to be Roman Catholic in order to fall into the error of trying to make our deeds accomplish what only Christ can do. The law

cannot justify. It can show us our need of Christ, and it can show us how to live as followers of Christ, but it cannot justify us.

Why? Well Paul says here, because “through the law comes knowledge of sin.” For a sinner, the law does one thing incredibly effectively: it exposes our need, but it doesn’t fill the need.

You see, it is our sin which is the problem, not God’s law.

Conclusion

The law is good. Why have I belabored this issue? When we get closer to the end of chapter 3 I’m going to address serious errors that arise when we don’t appreciate the law rightly.

If we don’t appreciate and love God’s law for what it is and what it’s meant to do, we’ll become convinced that God gave it to us as some sort of curse. And we’ll think that the goal of the gospel is really about how we can escape from the law or evade the law.

But if we think well about the law, we’ll not only know to flee to Jesus, but we’ll see the law as a friend of sinners in Christ. J. Gresham Machen said it this way: “a low view of the law leads to legalism in religion; a high view makes man a seeker after grace.”

I want you to be seekers after grace. So does Paul. Let’s have a high view of the law, but let’s not make it do what was not meant to do.

You *never* see Paul denigrate the law or talk badly of it. In fact, the biblical authors never speak badly of God’s law. Instead, they speak against its misuse. 1 Tim. 1:8: “We know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully.” I mean, there it is in a nutshell, right?

So I want us to be convinced as a church, not that the law is bad, but that it should be used rightly. We see it as a reflection of God’s good character, but that we would not try to make it do what it was not made to do. What is the wrong way to use the law? As a means of justification. Don’t do it.

Paul says, of all the things the law can do, so many try to use it for the one thing it cannot do, and was never made to do.

Paul's entire message to you and me is this: flee to Jesus. Make no provision for the flesh. Do not hope in your deeds or lawkeeping. Make no mistake though: we are saved through lawkeeping. But because we are sinners it is not our lawkeeping that saves us.

The good news is this: Jesus Christ was sinless. He didn't sin. But even more, he actively kept the law that you don't keep, didn't keep, and can't keep.

Matthew 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law of the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

Jesus fulfilled the law by obeying the law. This is what Paul will say later in Romans 5:19: "For as by one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."

Jesus Christ obeyed. He was obedient. He kept the law that you break. He fulfilled the law that you don't. Will you come to him with a repentant heart, laying yourself before him, arguing no works on your part, giving no excuses, placing no hope in what you've done, but only clinging to the cross of Jesus Christ?

Let's pray.