



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)

### Lesson 18.4.3.12.1 – The Doctrine of Law and Gospel

#### God's Law as a Curb to Check to Some Extent the Coarse Outbreak of Sin

Now that we have studied God's moral law in detail, it remains for us to consider why God has given us this moral law. What is the purpose of the law? As we study God's Word, it becomes clear that there are several different purposes for God's law. Our Lutheran confessions mention, in particular, three uses (or functions) of God's moral law. The first use of the law is as a curb to check (that is, prevent) to some extent the coarse outbreak of sin. The second use of the law, which is its most important function, is as a mirror to show us our sins and sinfulness. The third use of the law is as a fixed standard to teach us which works are pleasing to God.

The first two uses are intended for all human beings, unbelievers as well as believers in Christ. The third use applies only to Christians. It is important to remember that believers in Christ have both the old man (the sinful flesh) in them as well as the new man (the spirit) created by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. If Christians did not have the sinful flesh, they would not need the law in any of its uses; out of perfect faith and love toward God they would fulfill the requirements of the law without even knowing it, for the new man is in perfect harmony with the Holy Spirit and therefore does God's will. But because Christians still have the sinful flesh in them throughout their earthly life, they need the law in all of its uses. They need the law to curb their flesh. They need the law to remind them that they are sinners who deserve punishment. They need the law to inform them as to what is right and what is wrong, because the flesh can mislead them into thinking evil is good and good is evil.

The struggle between flesh and spirit is described in both Romans 7 and Galatians 5 and is summarized in the following passages. **"The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish"** (Galatians 5:17). **"With the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin"** (Romans 7:25).

So let us consider the first use of the law, its use as a curb. On many city streets in the United States and perhaps in other countries a curb is placed on both sides of the road. This curb is a sudden rise in elevation, made of something hard like concrete. The curb serves the purpose of letting drivers know they are going off the road if they hit the curb; the curb may also prevent them from going over the curb if they are not driving too fast. But the curb does not keep them on the road as a wall would; if they are going fast enough, they will jump the curb and go off the road.

The law as a curb cannot keep anyone on the perfect road of obedience, but it can check to some extent the coarse outbreak of such sins as murder, adultery, or theft. The law checks such sins by its threats of punishment or by the shame or guilt that may result from that sin. God uses human government as its agent to make civil law and administer punishments for disobedience. Through the ages most human governments have agreed with God's laws to some extent, and have condemned such sins as murder, assault, adultery, robbery, theft, slander, perjury. If there were no laws and no punishments for crimes against the laws, this world would be in a state of anarchy without law or order.

When God gave the Ten Commandments to His people and the people were frightened by the voice of God, Moses said to them: **"God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin"** (Exodus 20:20). Surely God's threats of punishment keep some sinners from

committing the worst crimes and offenses, even as strict enforcement of the law by the government can be a deterrent to some of the most heinous crimes. The laws and punishments God prescribed in the Old Testament had the purpose and the effect of deterrence. For example, if someone among the people suggested the worship of another god or idol, he was to be swiftly punished by stoning. Moses told the people: **“All Israel shall hear and fear, and not again do such wickedness as this among you”** (Deuteronomy 13:11).

So God uses His law in this world as a curb to uphold decency and order. The civil government, whatever its form, is God’s minister (or agent) for the punishment of evildoers and the protection of those who follow the law. God Himself uses the law as a curb when He blesses the outwardly obedient with temporal blessings and punishes the disobedient with earthly judgments in order to check the grossest outbursts of wickedness. The apostle Paul taught this clearly when he wrote: **“He (the governing authority) is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil”** (Romans 13:4).

The law-abiding citizen does not have to fear the governing authorities and law enforcement. Paul states it as a general rule: **“The law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners”** (1 Timothy 1:9). It is only because the Christian still has a sinful flesh that they also still need the law as a curb to keep their own flesh in check. Unbelievers need the law because they are only sinful flesh and need to be restrained by law and the enforcement of law.

For this very reason our Lord wants us to pray **“for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence”** (1 Timothy 2:2). Good government is an aid to the proclamation of the Gospel and the living of a godly life in keeping with the Gospel.

Because the moral law is written in the hearts of all men, the concept of law and punishment is not foreign to the peoples on earth. No doubt every culture has found it necessary to establish certain rules and regulations for the control of human violence. This law of God, written in men’s hearts, also serves as a deterrent to crime. All human beings have a conscience, that is, a consciousness of a divine being that will punish them for their crimes. It is written: **“The LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God”** (Deuteronomy 4:24). Sinners try to escape from God like Adam and Eve, but they cannot, no matter how hard they try. Sometimes atheists who claim that there is no God are still afraid they might have to face God, and therefore they try as hard as they can to convince themselves that there is no God. That may be the reason why evolution is so popular among the educated people in this world. But the apostle Paul wrote: **“The Gentiles show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them”** (Romans 2:15). The unbelieving heathen **“know the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death”** (Romans 1:32). That is the reason that people all over the world are afraid of death and dying.

Because of his sinful flesh, the Christian also says with the psalmist: **“My flesh trembles for fear of You, and I am afraid of Your judgments”** (Psalm 119:120). Only Christ and His Gospel can take away such fears; only in Christ can we conquer the fear of death and the fear of the hereafter.

Our Lutheran confession summarizes this first use of the law in these words: *“The law has been given to people for three reasons: first, that through it external discipline may be maintained against the unruly and the disobedient”* (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 502).

## Questions

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1. What are the three uses of the law?
2. What is meant by the use of the law as a curb?
3. Why do we say that the law can check sin but not prevent it totally?
4. Why does a Christian still need the law as a curb?
5. What agency does God use as His servant to apply the law as a curb?
6. Why can we be sure that law and its enforcement helps to deter crime?
7. For what reason does God want us Christians to pray for government?