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Advanced Bible Correspondence Course

Lesson 34A: The Law of God

The Ten Commandments

In the previous answer it was said that good works are only good in God's sight if they are done according to the law of God. That is the law of the Ten Commandments. This law was once given by God to His people of Israel. It took place in a very solemn manner on Mount Sinai in the wilderness. The people of Israel were on their journey from Egypt – out of the house of bondage, that is, from slavery – to Canaan. With His own finger God himself engraved the Ten Commandments on two tables of stone. There are four commandments concerning love toward God, and six commandments regarding love toward our neighbour.

Ceremonial laws

On Mount Sinai, the Lord gave His people Israel more commandments than only these ten. He also gave them the so-called ceremonial laws, which describe the complete form of worship in and around the tabernacle (and later the temple) with altar, sacrifice, etc. Included in these laws were also laws for the special people of Israel concerning food (for instance, the prohibition of eating pork).

The ceremonial laws are no longer in force for Christians, because the sacrificial services were fulfilled in that *one* sacrifice of Jesus Christ. After this sacrifice, no more offerings need to be brought, and altars and priests are no longer necessary. Also the commandments regarding circumcision and foods are no longer in effect for Christians. Paul said to Peter: *"If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?"* (Galatians 2:14). Paul said this to him because, although Peter did not keep the laws concerning food anymore, he was in danger of falling under the influence of people who taught that Christians should still keep some of these laws.

Civil laws

Beside the ceremonial laws, God also gave civil laws, which regulated social life (for instance, various rules for the protection of widows and orphans, poor people, and strangers). These civil laws were also only for the people of Israel in the Old Testament days. God reigned over them in a special, more direct way. He did this

by means of leaders given by Him, such as Moses and Joshua, judges and kings, priests, who also administered justice, and prophets, who often had to admonish the people to keep His law. We certainly can still learn many lessons from these laws, for example, not *how*, but *that* we must protect widows and orphans, the poor ones and strangers (as well as refugees!)

Moral laws: the Ten Commandments for all people and for all times

However, the moral law, or the law of the Ten Commandments, is a special law, which was written on Sinai by God's own finger on two tablets of stone. By doing so, God declared that this law endures forever; it is a universal law for all people of all times. The content of this law deals with love toward God and our neighbour. So the Ten Commandments are not only for Old Testament Israel, but are also applicable to all people even now. All standards and principles must be based on these commandments. The wise Solomon said: *"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil"* (Ecclesiastes 12:13&14).

Therefore the holy law of God comes up in the Catechism, immediately following the discussion about conversion, the new life, and good works.

The purpose of living according to the law

God's child desires to live according to God's law again, but not as a means to earn eternal life by living in accordance to it. That was merited by Christ for His children by His suffering and death *and* by His perfect and spotless obedience to God's law. The law was, among other things, given to us to show our gratitude for our deliverance by Christ. That is the desire of every sinner who has been delivered by Christ. This desire is wrought by the Holy Spirit, who in regeneration gives a new heart with a new will and new desires. (see Lord's Day 32)

Should we not gladly desire to serve this God, Whom we have learned to love because He has given us deliverance in and through Christ? This is certainly true, no matter how imperfectly this may take place. Paul said: *"For I delight in the law of God after the inward man"* (Romans 7:22).

Not yet perfect

The believer is often grieved that here he cannot yet live perfectly according to God's law. That was the reason believing Paul complained: *"But I see [yet besides] another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind ... O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"* (Romans 7:23&24). Therefore he also says immediately: *"I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Romans 7:25). This is why a Christian longs for heaven (and for a new earth!). Then he will perfectly enjoy communion with God and can again serve God without any sin, just as Adam once was able to do in Paradise.

Living according to the law: a delightful life

Living according to God's commandments is not a dismal life, but is a delightful one. It is a great blessing for society, for the law of God is not only meant for the

individual believer, but also for all society. Solomon said: “*Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man*” (Ecclesiastes 12:13). If society no longer lives according to God’s law, all of society will flounder.

LORD’S DAY 34

Q.92. WHAT IS THE LAW OF GOD?

ANSWER: GOD SPAKE ALL THESE WORDS (A), SAYING: I AM THE LORD THY GOD, WHICH HAVE BROUGHT THEE OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT, OUT OF THE HOUSE OF BONDAGE.

1. THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME.
2. THOU SHALT NOT MAKE UNTO THYSELF ANY GRAVEN IMAGE, NOR THE LIKENESS OF ANYTHING THAT IS IN HEAVEN ABOVE, OR THAT IS IN THE EARTH BENEATH, OR THAT IS IN THE WATER UNDER THE EARTH: THOU SHALT NOT BOW DOWN THYSELF TO THEM, NOR SERVE THEM; FOR I, THE LORD THY GOD AM A JEALOUS GOD, VISITING THE INIQUITY OF THE FATHERS UPON THE CHILDREN UNTO THE THIRD AND FOURTH GENERATION OF THEM THAT HATE ME; AND SHOWING MERCY UNTO THOUSANDS OF THEM THAT LOVE ME, AND KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS.
3. THOU SHALT NOT TAKE THE NAME OF THE LORD THY GOD IN VAIN; FOR THE LORD WILL NOT HOLD HIM GUILTLESS THAT TAKETH HIS NAME IN VAIN.
4. REMEMBER THE SABBATH DAY, TO KEEP IT HOLY. SIX DAYS SHALT THOU LABOUR AND DO ALL THY WORK: BUT THE SEVENTH DAY IS THE SABBATH OF THE LORD THY GOD; IN IT THOU SHALT NOT DO ANY WORK, THOU, NOR THY SON, NOR THY DAUGHTER, THY MANSERVANT, NOR THY MAIDSERVANT, NOR THY CATTLE, NOR THY STRANGER THAT IS WITHIN THY GATES: FOR IN SIX DAYS THE LORD MADE HEAVEN AND EARTH, THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IN THEM IS, AND RESTED THE SEVENTH DAY: WHEREFORE THE LORD BLESSED THE SABBATH DAY, AND HALLOWED IT.
5. HONOUR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER: THAT THY DAYS MAY BE LONG UPON THE LAND WHICH THE LORD THY GOD GIVETH THEE.
6. THOU SHALT NOT KILL.
7. THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.
8. THOU SHALT NOT STEAL.
9. THOU SHALT NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS AGAINST THY NEIGHBOUR.
10. THOU SHALT NOT COVET THY NEIGHBOUR’S HOUSE, THOU SHALT NOT COVET THY NEIGHBOUR’S WIFE, NOR HIS MANSERVANT, NOR HIS MAIDSERVANT, NOR HIS OX, NOR HIS ASS, NOR ANY THING THAT IS THY NEIGHBOUR’S.

(A)EXODUS 20:1-17, DEUTERONOMY 5:6-21

Q.93. HOW ARE THESE COMMANDMENTS DIVIDED?

ANSWER: INTO TWO TABLES (A); THE FIRST OF WHICH TEACHES US HOW WE MUST BEHAVE TOWARDS GOD; THE SECOND, WHAT DUTIES WE OWE TO OUR NEIGHBOUR (B).

(A)DEUT. 4:13, EXODUS 34:28, DEUT. 10:3&4; (B)MATTHEW 22:37-40

The distinction into two tables

Before discussing each individual commandment, we deal with the division into two tables. The Law was written on two tables.

On the first table there were four commandments. All of them deal with the question of how we must serve God. They have to do with God’s honour, God’s service, God’s name, and God’s day.

On the second table there were six commandments. They deal with our attitude over against our neighbour, our fellow man. That neighbour includes everyone with whom we come into contact, whether far away or nearby, even our enemy. The Lord Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, in which He gave the basic law of the kingdom of heaven: *“Ye have heard that it has been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust”* (Matthew 5:43-45). In the parable of the Lord Jesus about the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), He gave a beautiful example of this.

No separation between the first and the second table

We can and may distinguish between the two tables, but we must never separate them. God wants us to love and serve Him, but also that we love His creature, our fellow man, and that we help him as much as we are able to. When we experience God’s love towards us, guilty sinners, we will also spontaneously love Him *and* our neighbour. Then love, empathy, and compassion will emerge instead of hate, envy, jealousy and indifference. John wrote in one of his letters: *“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another”* (I John 4:11).

God’s great requirement

In the law God has placed a requirement, namely, perfect love. Only if there is perfect love there will be a good relationship between man and God and between man and his fellow man. That is how it was in Paradise, and that is how it will be one day in a new heaven and on a new earth.

Questions:

1. *To what purpose did God not give His commandments, and to what purpose did He give them?*

2. *What are the four matters which are considered in the first four commandments?*

3. *What is the great requirement which God has set before us in the law?*

Evaluator: _____