

THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

By A.P. Adams

To misapply a **good** thing is to make it in effect a **bad** thing, hence we need to be sure not only that which we use is **good**, but that we use it for the right purpose and in the right manner. "*Now we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully*" (I Tim. I. 8). There is such a thing then as using the law unlawfully, and thus "*that which is good is made death unto us*" (Rom. 7:13). Turn we then prayerfully and earnestly to study the purpose of the law, that we may use it for that purpose and no other. I shall consider the subject briefly, for I am very sure that most of the readers of this paper are not in bondage to the law, and yet they may need clearer light on its real purpose. I will try first to show what is meant by the word **law**, then the **purpose** of the law, **negatively** and **positively**.

I will not go into a lengthy consideration of the meaning of the word law in the abstract, except to say that we should not consider law separate from God; all law of any kind, if it really is law, is of **God** and is founded on eternal **truth**; anything that is **not** so founded is not law and never can be whatever it may be called. God is the source, author, and executor of all law.

But we are to examine especially the meaning of the word **law** as it is used in the Bible. My subject is the "**purpose of the law**," some particular law; what law is meant? From the Scriptures we find that this term is used in a very broad sense to express the great body of God's precepts, rules and directions, given to us through Moses or other Biblical writers; and even in many passages it is used as a general name for all God's written revelation; thus it is used mostly in the 119th Psalm. The distinction which some have tried to make between the Ceremonial law, or Temple Ordinances, and the Moral law, or Ten Commandments, the former, as they claim, being the law of Moses and the latter the law of God, this distinction is not a Scriptural one.

The ceremonial laws were as much the laws of God as were the ten commandments; and both were in the same sense the law of Moses; i.e., God gave them to the people through Moses. When Paul says, for instance, in his epistle to the Romans that we are "***not under the law***" (Rom. 6:14), we know that he includes the ten commandments, for in the next chapter (7: 7) he quotes one of the ten commandments as a specimen of the requirements of the law to which he referred. We take the term law then in this broad sense; there are a few passages where it is restricted, but in the many it is used in the general way indicated above.

Now what is the purpose of the law? In other words, why did God lay upon man any commands at all? We are certain, in the first place, that God knew **beforehand** that none of his laws would be **kept**; from the first one given in Eden down to the last precept of Holy Writ, every one of them have been transgressed again and again; and God knew this when he gave them; hence we conclude that God did **not** give the law for the purpose of having it **kept** or **obeyed**. That is why man is in his present condition. He **knew** it would not be obeyed; He **knew** it would be repeatedly broken by all generations; hence it is impossible that He could have given the law for a purpose that He knew would not be carried out. I will notice presently the difference between **keeping** the law and **fulfilling** the law. The law will all be strictly fulfilled, it is impossible that it should not be fulfilled; but it has never been **kept** by any human being excepting the Lord Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, if the law was not given for the purpose of being obeyed, then surely it was not given to make man holy, pure and good, and acceptable to God. If the law had been **perfectly kept**, it might have made man pure and good; but it has never been kept, as we have already observed, and this was not the purpose for which it was given, hence it could **not** have been given to make man good or to recommend him to God; and this position is perfectly scriptural for we are distinctly told that **righteousness does not come by the law** (Gal. 3: 21), and that "***the law made nothing perfect***" (Heb. 7: 18).

Again we are told that "***the law is not of faith***" (Gal. 3: 12,) nor of grace, (Rom. 6: 14). If we are under the law, we are **not** under grace; if we are living by law we are not living by faith; and if we are not living by faith we are

not **justified**, for *"a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law"* (Rom. 3:28), and *"the just shall live by faith"* (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3: 11). All this is very positive and clearly indicates what the purpose of the law is **not**. We turn now to consider what it **is**.

We have several passages of scripture that set forth in formal terms the purpose of the law, so that we need not be in the least doubtful upon the subject. The first passage we will notice is Rom. 3: 20, 21. This passage declares two purposes of the law.

1. By the law is the **knowledge** of sin.
2. The righteousness of God is **witnessed** by the law and the prophets.

The first purpose of the law then is to give knowledge of sin; or in other words to bring us to a true knowledge of ourselves. The law is the **perfect standard** to be set up alongside of imperfect man that he may know **how far he is out of the way**, *"that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God"* (Rom. 3:19). Paul says, *"I had not known sin but by the law"* (Rom. 7:7); again, *"The law worketh wrath"* (Rom. 4:15); and yet again, *"The law entered that the offense might abound"* (Rom. 5:20), *"that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful"* (Rom. 7:13). Thus the law aggravates the offense, and makes it more prominent and conspicuous, until its thralldom becomes hateful and intolerable, as set forth in Rom. 7, and the poor *"servant of sin"* cries out, *"O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"* (Rom. 7:24). Thus also it is seen that *"the strength of sin is the law"* (I Cor. 15: 56); the law gives to sin a strength that makes its deadly grip unyielding; *"where there is no law there is no transgression"* (Rom. 4:15); *"sin is not imputed where there is no law"* (Rom. 5:13). *"But when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died"* (Rom. 7:9). Hence we read again that that was a *"ministration of death"* (II Cor. 3:7), which was *"written and engraved in stones"* (i.e. the ten commandments, for that was the only part of the law that was engraved on stones; Deut. 22; 10: 1-5) and we are also told that it was a *"ministration of condemnation"* and was to be **"done away;"** and Paul further tells us when it is **"done away,"** viz., *"after that faith is come."* (Gal. 3: 23-25). The law is

a ***"child-leader"*** (Gal. 3:24), until we get along far enough for Christ to take us up. He opens up the way of ***"righteousness by faith,"*** (Rom. 1:17) and ***"we are no longer under a child-leader."*** (Gal. 3:25). ***"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth"*** (Rom. 10: 4).

Thus the law brings us to perfect self-despair, and we cry out, ***"O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me?"*** (Rom. 7:24). Then the work of the child-leader for the time being is done and the work of Christ begins, ***"I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord"*** (Rom. 7: 25). ***"Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*** (I Cor. 57 :57). Thus Christ is ***"the end of the law"*** (Rom 10:4), and the beginning of grace, for ***"grace and truth came by Jesus Christ,"*** (John 1: 17); and hence the believer is ***"not under the law but under grace."*** (Rom. 6:14). By faith (not yet in actual reality, for ***"faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"*** (Heb. 11:1; compare Rom. 8: 24, 25), by faith, I say, the believer has passed out of the ***"ministration of death and of condemnation,"*** into ***"the ministration of the spirit and of righteousness"*** (II Cor. 3: 7-11), and thus, ***"The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus, makes us free from the law of sin and death."*** (Rom. 8:2). This purpose of the law then is to give ***"knowledge of sin,"*** and thus to reveal man to himself so as to destroy pride, and self-trust, and false security, that God may ***"work in us"*** (Heb. 13:21), through Christ, ***"to will and to do of his good pleasure"***(Eph. 1:9). We cannot walk the way of ***"grace through faith"*** until the law has accomplished this purpose in us. ***"For God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble"*** (James 4:6). ***"We have the sentence of death in ourselves that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God that raiseth the dead"*** (II Cor. 1:9);and we know that there is no security out of Christ, ***"for other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ."*** (I Cor. 3:11).

Now there is one other passage that I would notice in this connection that fully confirms the foregoing. See Gal. 3: 19; in this passage Paul asks the very same question that we are considering, ***"Wherefore then serveth the law?"*** and he answers it, ***"it was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by***

angels in the hand of a mediator." Notice in this passage how the temporary, transient character of the law is indicated; it was **"added"** for the time being, **"until"** a certain further step in the development of God's plan, and then it was to be **"done away."** Notice also that *"it was added because of transgressions,"* i.e., as we have endeavored to show, to give *"knowledge of sin,"* that *"sin might become exceeding sinful,"* that *"the offense might abound."* Sinful man needed this sort of discipline for a while, as we have seen, *"until the Seed should come,"* i.e., until Christ should come (Gal. 3:16), and then **He** would *"become the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth"* (Rom. 10:4); thus this formal enunciation of the purpose of the law is in perfect harmony with the view we have deduced from other scripture.

The second purpose of the law is that of a **Witness** to *"the righteousness of God"* (II Cor. 5:21). There is a deeper meaning in this expression, *"the righteousness of God,"* than I now have time to speak of. I will only say that perhaps it has not occurred to some of my readers that **God is on trial** as well as humanity. But as strange as it may seem, it is even so. Does not the apostle say, *"Let God be true, though every man be false; as it is written, that thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome (or be victorious) when thou art judged."* (Rom. 3:4). Is God to be judged, or tried? Young renders it, *"That thou mayest be declared righteous in thy words, and mayest overcome in thy being judged."* The idea here may seem very strange to some who have not thought of it before, but it is a great truth, and is fully confirmed by other scripture; see Heb. 3: 8. 9: *"Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation (trial), in the wilderness, when your fathers tempted (tried) me, proved me; and saw my works forty years."* Probably most have thought that it was the children of Israel that were being tried and proved during that forty years, but the above passage seems to indicate that it was God. I throw out this thought simply as food for consideration, and will only say now by way of explanation that in the outcome of the work of creation, God's **honor and credit** is at stake, as well as man's well-being, and the result will fully vindicate his wisdom, power, and love. He will be fully *"justified in his words, and be victorious when he is judged"* and his righteousness, i.e. his **rightness**, his absolute

rectitude of character, will clearly appear; and even now is this righteousness ***"witnessed by the law and the prophets"*** (Rom. 3:21-22).

That is to say in plain language, the law and the prophets (those writings that go by that name) are mediums through which God is made known to man; they are his **witnesses**; and thus of these two purposes of the law that we have thus far considered, the one is to **make man known to himself**; the other is to **make God known to man**. It is not difficult to see how the law and the prophets witness to the **rightness** of God. The history of God's dealings with his ancient people under the law, and during the times of the prophets, reveals to us the character of God, his kindness, and good will, his long suffering and patience, his mercy and faithfulness, his tenderness and compassion. It also reveals God's hatred of sin, his severity and wrath, his unswerving justice, and his terrible chastisements. All these, and much more, do the law and the prophets witness, and all these when rightly understood, as they will be by all ultimately, ***"for God will have all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth"*** (I Tim. 2:4), all these clearly show the true character of God, his undeviating righteousness, his changeless love, so that men will at length cry out, ***"Lo, this is our God, we have waited for Him; he will come and save us"*** (Is. 25:9).

There is **one more purpose of the law** that we will notice in Heb. 10:1. ***"The law has a Shadow of good things to come."*** This is an important purpose of the law. It is a system of types, allegories, patterns, figures, and shadows whereby the ***"good things to come"*** are clearly set forth. I need not dwell upon this point, every Bible student knows that this is the character of the law. Everything in it, all its ceremonies and ordinances, were typical, foreshadowing the ***"better things"***(Heb. 6:9), ***"the heavenly things themselves"*** (Heb. 9:23), even ***"the unseen, and eternal things"*** (II Cor. 4:18); and in this purpose of the law we find its great value and utility to the Christian. How dry and uninteresting it is to read the details of the law as laid down in Exodus, Leviticus, etc., if we see nothing but the letter. Many of the laws thus viewed seem trivial; some seem exceedingly harsh and severe and even cruel, and others seem perfectly meaningless and foolish. But how full of significance and interest these dry details become when we see their typical import! Take for instance the law of the Passover, of the Atonement,

of the Sabbatical cycles and the Jubilees, of the Sacrifices, the Tabernacle with all its apartments, veils, furniture, and ceremonies, all this and everything else in the law, down to *"every jot and tittle,"* is pregnant with meaning as types and shadows of *"good things to come."* And this brings me to notice the difference between keeping and fulfilling the law. The law has never been kept by any human being excepting one, the Lord Jesus, but *"Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled."* (Matt. 5:18). Keeping the law is obedience to its requirements. Fulfilling the law is the performance or accomplishment of that to which it points, or typifies. As we have seen, the law is a perfect system of types and patterns, it *"has a shadow of good things to come,"* and these types and shadows are just as sure of being carried out as God is sure. In this respect it is not possible that the law should fail, *"it would be easier for heaven and earth to pass away."* The fulfilling of the law is in God's hands; it is one of the purposes for which the law was established, *"for see, saith he, that thou make everything according to the pattern showed thee in the holy mount"* (Ex. 25:40).

The law was to be a **pattern of spiritual things**; hence of course, the fulfillment of the law is an absolute certainty, for in God's economy nothing is incomplete; in his great workshop there never could be a **pattern** without the real thing sometime appearing, that the pattern was intended to pre figure; hence the fact that the law is a system of patterns is an absolute guarantee of its ultimate fulfillment; but that has nothing whatever to do with keeping the law.

We have found then that the purposes of the law are three:

1. It gives **knowledge of sin.**
2. It witnesses of the **righteousness of God.**
3. It is a system of **patterns of heavenly things.**

I find no other purpose of the law laid down in Holy Writ. If we use the law according to these three purposes we shall use it **"lawfully,"** and shall find it **"good;"** if we use it for other purposes for which it is not intended we shall

find ***"that which is good made death unto us."*** A story of Mr. Moody's so well illustrates this subject that I will give it here, even though some of my readers may have already heard it. His little boy was going away with him. Mr. Moody told the boy that he must first have his face washed as it was dirty. The boy said that mother had already washed his face that morning and that it was clean. **"No,"** said the father, **"You have got it dirty since it was washed, you must have it washed again before you can go with me."** **"It does not need washing, it is clean,"** insisted the boy. Then the father without another word took him up in his arms and let him look into the mirror where he could plainly see the reflection of his face, streaked with dirt where he had been playing in the street; at this sight the boy was silent and quietly submitted to his washing. **"But,"** significantly remarks Mr. Moody, **"I did not wash his face with the mirror."** So the law shows us what manner of person we are, and ***"every mouth is stopped and all the world becomes guilty before God."*** But it is vain to try to wash yourself with the mirror. ***"By the law is the knowledge of sin."*** But cleansing does not come by the law; nor **life**, nor **improvement**, nor **deliverance** from the bondage of corruption, nor **salvation** of any kind or in any degree.

O, cannot all see that to use the law as a means whereby to lift ourselves **out** of sin, is to use it unlawfully, and the result **can** be nothing but failure and loss in the end; let no one try to wash their face with the mirror. You cannot **keep** the law perfectly, try ever so hard; no one ever kept it but the immaculate Jesus, and the keeping of the law would be of no benefit to you, not a particle, unless you could keep it perfectly. ***"For it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them"*** (Gal. 3:11). ***"Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, is guilty of all"***(James 2:10). What can you, then, poor, weak, sinful man, expect from such a law? Can you satisfy its rigid, absolute requirements? **"But,"** says one, **"though I cannot keep the law perfectly, I can keep it partially, and it is no reason because I cannot do the former that I should not do the latter."** Well, and how then will you get rid of the **"guilt"** of the partially broken law? **"O, by faith in Christ, and by the grace of God, of course we need that to cover our shortcomings, and to make up for our defects."** O, ye Satan-deluded souls, ***"Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the***

flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). Do ye think to unite that which God has divided, law and faith? and so partially earn heaven by keeping the law and partially receive it by the grace of God? Are ye not then ***"climbing up some other way,"*** (Jn. 10:1) and so showing yourselves to be ***"thieves and robbers?"*** (Jn. 10:8). You need no Savior, no ***"door,"*** if you can climb over the fence into the ***"sheep fold"*** in this way. ***"For if righteousness come by the law, Christ is dead in vain."*** (Gal. 2:21). Either you are wrong, or the death of Christ was a gigantic mistake. God help us all to see the truth on this subject, and to ***"have no confidence in the flesh."*** (Phil. 3: 3). How wonderfully God has simplified this whole subject and brought all the great tangle of the law down to one luminous point when he says by the mouth of his servant, ***"All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, Therefore LOVE is the fulfilling of the law"*** (Gal. 5: 14; Rom. 13: 10). O, blessed simplicity of the gospel of Christ! Let the whole ponderous ritual of the law go; cast off the bondage of all legal requirements, not to give license to sin, ***"God forbid!"*** (Rom. 6: 15), but to turn our whole thoughts and aspirations to the ***"more excellent way,"*** (I Cor. 12:31) the way of love. ***"God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him;"*** (I Jn. 4:16) and such an one will possess, not the righteousness ***"which is of the law"*** (Phil. 3: 9), but the righteousness ***"without the law,"*** even ***"the righteousness of God."***

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