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Sermon 36 - The Law Established Through Faith: Discourse Two

The Sermons of John Wesley 1872 Edition (Thomas Jackson, editor)

SERMON THIRTY-SIX

The Law Established Through Faith: Discourse Two

"Do we then make void the law through faith God forbid! Yea, we establish the law." Rom. 3:31.

1. It has been shown in the preceding discourse, which are the most usual ways of making void the law through faith; namely, First, the not preaching it at all; which effectually makes it all void a stroke; and this under colour of preaching Christ and magnifying the gospel though it be, in truth, destroying both the one and the other: Secondly, the teaching (whether directly or indirectly,) that faith supersedes the necessity of holiness; that this less necessary now, or a less degree of it necessary, than before Christ came; that it is less necessary to us, because we believe, than otherwise it would have been; or, that Christian liberty is a liberty from any kind or degree of holiness: (So perverting those great truths, that we are now under the covenant of grace, and not of works; that a man is justified by faith, without the works of the law; and that "to him that worketh not, but believeth, his faith is counted for righteousness:") Or, Thirdly, the doing this practically; the making void the law in practice, though not in principle; the living or acting as if faith was designed to excuse us from holiness; the allowing ourselves in sin, "because we are not under the law, but under grace." It remains to inquire how we may follow a better pattern, how we may be able to say, with the Apostle, "Do we then make void the law through faith God forbid: Yea, we establish the law."

2. We do not, indeed, establish the old ceremonial law; we know that is abolished for ever. Much less do we establish the whole Mosaic dispensation; this we know our Lord has nailed to his cross. Nor yet do we so establish the moral law, (which, it is to be feared too many do,) as if the fulfilling it, the keeping all the commandments, were the condition of our justification: If it were so, surely "in His sight should no man living be justified." But all this being allowed, we still, in the Apostle's sense, "establish the law," the moral law.

I. 1. We establish the law, First, by our doctrine; by endeavouring to preach it in its whole extent, to explain and enforce every part of it, in the same manner as our great Teacher did while upon earth. We establish it by following St. Peter's advice: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God;" as the holy men of old, moved by the Holy Ghost, spoke and wrote for our instruction; and as the Apostles of our blessed Lord, by the direction of the same Spirit. We establish it whenever we speak in his name, by keeping back nothing from them that hear; by declaring to them, without any limitation or reserve, the whole counsel of God. And in order the more effectually to establish it, we use herein great plainness of speech. "We are not as many that corrupt the word of God;" - kaphleuontes, (as artful men their bad wines;) we do not cauponize, mix, adulterate, or soften it, to make it suit the taste of the hearers: -- "But as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God, speak we in Christ;" as having no other aim, than "by manifestation of the truth to commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."

2. We then, by our doctrine, establish the law, when we thus openly declare it to all men; and that in

the fullness wherein it is delivered by our blessed Lord and his Apostles; when we publish it in the height, and depth, and length, and breadth thereof. We then establish the law, when we declare every part of it, every commandment contained therein, not only in its full, literal sense, but likewise in its spiritual meaning; not only with regard to the outward actions, which it either forbids or enjoins, but also with respect to the inward principle, to the thoughts, desires, and intents of the heart.

3. And indeed this we do the more diligently, not only because it is of the deepest importance; -- inasmuch as all the fruit, every word and work, must be only evil continually, if the tree be evil, if the dispositions and tempers of the heart be not right before God; -- but likewise because as important as these things are, they are little considered or understood, -- so little, that we may truly say of the law, too, when taken in its full spiritual meaning, it is "a mystery which was hid from ages and generations since the world began." It was utterly hid from the heathen world. They, with all their boasted wisdom, neither found out God, nor the law of God; not in the letter, much less in the spirit of it. "Their foolish hearts were" more and more "darkened;" while "professing themselves wise, they became fools." And it was almost equally hid, as to its spiritual meaning, from the bulk of the Jewish nation. Even these, who were so ready to declare concerning others, "this people that know not the law are cursed," pronounced their own sentence therein, as being under the same curse, the same dreadful ignorance. Witness our Lord's continual reproof of the wisest among them for their gross misinterpretations of it. Witness the supposition almost universally received among them, that they needed only to make clean the outside of the cup; that the paying tithe of mint, anise, and cummin, -- outward exactness, -- would atone for inward unholiness, for the total neglect both of justice and mercy, of faith and the love of God. Yea, so absolutely was the spiritual meaning of the law hidden from the wisest of them, that one of their most eminent Rabbis comments thus on those words of the Psalmist, "If I incline unto iniquity with my heart, the Lord will not hear me:" "That is," saith he, "if it be only in my heart, if I do not commit outward wickedness, the Lord will not regard it; he will not punish me unless I proceed to the outward act!"

4. But alas! the law of God, as to its inward, spiritual meaning, is not hid from the Jews or heathens only, but even from what is called the Christian world; at least, from a vast majority of them. The spiritual sense of the commandments of God is still a mystery to these also. Nor is this observable only in those lands which are overspread with Romish darkness and ignorance. But this is too sure, that the far greater part, even of those who are called Reformed Christians are utter strangers at this day to the law of Christ, in the purity and spirituality of it.

5. Hence it is that to this day, "the Scribes and Pharisees," the men who have the form but not the power of religion, and who are generally wise in their own eyes, and righteous in their own conceits, -- "hearing these things, are offended;" are deeply offended, when we speak of the religion of the heart; and particularly when we show, that without this, were we to "give all our goods to feed the poor," it would profit us nothing. But offended they must be; for we cannot but speak the truth as it is in Jesus. It is our part, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, to deliver our own soul. All that is written in the book of God we are to declare, not as pleasing men, but the Lord. We are to declare, not only all the promises, but all the threatenings, too, which we find therein. At the same time that we proclaim all the blessings and privileges which God hath prepared for his children, we are likewise to "teach all the things whatsoever he hath commanded." And we know that all these have their use; either for the awakening those that sleep, the instructing the ignorant, the comforting the feeble-minded, or the building up and perfecting of the saints. We know that "all Scripture, given by inspiration of God is profitable," either "for doctrine," or "for reproof," either "for correction or for

instruction in righteousness;" and "that the man of God," in the process of the work of God in his soul, has need of every part thereof, that he may at length "be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works."

6. It is our part thus to preach Christ, by preaching all things whatsoever he hath revealed. We may indeed, without blame, yea, and with a peculiar blessing from God, declare the love of our Lord Jesus Christ; we may speak, in a more especial manner, of "the Lord our righteousness." We may expatiate upon the grace of God in Christ, "reconciling the world unto himself;" we may, at proper opportunities, dwell upon his praise, as "bearing the iniquities of us all, as wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities, that by his stripes we might be healed:" -- But still we should not preach Christ, according to his word, if we were wholly to confine ourselves to this: We are not ourselves clear before God, unless we proclaim him in all his offices. To preach Christ, as a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, is to preach him, not only as our great High Priest, "taken from among men, and ordained for men, in things pertaining to God;" as such, "reconciling us to God by his blood," and "ever living to make intercession for us;" -- but likewise as the Prophet of the Lord, "who of God is made unto us wisdom," who, by his word and his Spirit, is with us always, "guiding us into all truth;" -- yea, and as remaining a King for ever; as giving laws to all whom he has bought with his blood; as restoring those to the image of God, whom he had first re-instated in his favour; as reigning in all believing hearts until he has "subdued all things to himself," -- until he hath utterly cast out all sin, and brought in everlasting righteousness.

II. 1. We establish the law, Secondly, when we so preach faith in Christ as not to supersede, but produce holiness; to produce all manner of holiness, negative and positive, of the heart and of the life.

In order to this, we continually declare, (what should be frequently and deeply considered by all "who would not make void the law through faith,") that faith itself, even Christian faith, the faith of God's elect, the faith of the operation of God, still is only the handmaid of love. As glorious and honourable as it is, it is not the end of the commandment. God hath given this honour to love alone: Love is the end of all the commandments of God. Love is the end, the sole end, of every dispensation of God, from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things. And it will endure when heaven and earth flee away; for "love" alone "never faileth." Faith will totally fail; it will be swallowed up in sight, in the everlasting vision of God. But even then love, --

Its nature and its office still the same, Lasting its lamp and unconsumed its flame, -- In deathless triumph shall for ever live, And endless good diffuse, and endless praise receive.

2. Very excellent things are spoken of faith, and whosoever is a partaker thereof may well say with the Apostle, "Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift." Yet still it loses all its excellence when brought into a comparison with love. What St. Paul observes concerning the superior glory of the gospel above that of the law may with great propriety be spoken of the superior glory of love above that of faith: "Even that which was made glorious hath no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth. For if that which is done away is glorious, much more doth that which remaineth exceed in glory" Yea, all the glory of faith, before it is done away, arises hence, that it ministers to love: It is the great temporary means which God has ordained to promote that eternal end.

3. Let those who magnify faith beyond all proportion, so as to swallow up all things else, and who so totally misapprehend the nature of it as to imagine it stands in the place of love, consider farther, that as love will exist after faith, so it did exist long before it. The angels who, from the moment of their

creation, beheld the face of their Father that is in heaven, had no occasion for faith, in its general notion, as it is the evidence of things not seen. Neither had they need of faith in its more particular acceptation, faith in the blood of Jesus: for he took not upon him the nature of angels, but only the seed of Abraham. There was therefore no place before the foundation of the world for faith either in the general or particular sense. But there was for love. Love existed from eternity, in God, the great ocean of love. Love had a place in all the children of God, from the moment of their creation. They received at once from their gracious Creator to exist, and to love.

4. Nor is it certain (as ingeniously and plausibly as many have descanted upon this) that faith, even in the general sense of the word, had any place in paradise. It is highly probable, from that short and uncircumstantial account which we have in Holy Writ, that Adam, before he rebelled against God, walked with him by sight and not by faith.

For then his reason's eye was strong and clear, And (as an eagle can behold the sun) Might have beheld his Maker's face as near, As the' intellectual angels could have done.

He was then able to talk with him face to face, whose face we cannot now see and live; and consequently had no need of that faith whose office it is to supply the want of sight.

5. On the other hand, it is absolutely certain, faith, in its particular sense, had then no place. For in that sense it necessarily presupposes sin, and the wrath of God declared against the sinner; without which there is no need of an atonement for sin in order to the sinner's reconciliation with God. Consequently, as there was no need of an atonement before the fall, so there was no place for faith in that atonement; man being then pure from every stain of sin; holy as God is holy. But love even then filled his heart; it reigned in him without rival; and it was only when love was lost by sin, that faith was added, not for its own sake, nor with any design that it should exist any longer than until it had answered the end for which it was ordained, -- namely, to restore man to the love from which he was fallen. At the fall, therefore, was added this evidence of things unseen, which before was utterly needless; this confidence in redeeming love, which could not possibly have any place till the promise was made, that "the Seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head."

6. Faith, then, was originally designed of God to re-establish the law of love. Therefore, in speaking thus, we are not undervaluing it, or robbing it of its due praise; but on the contrary showing its real worth, exalting it in its just proportion, and giving it that very place which the wisdom of God assigned it from the beginning. It is the grand means of restoring that holy love wherein man was originally created. It follows, that although faith is of no value in itself, (as neither is any other means whatsoever,) yet as it leads to that end, the establishing anew the law of love in our hearts; and as, in the present state of things, it is the only means under heaven for effecting it; it is on that account an unspeakable blessing to man, and of unspeakable value before God.

III. 1. And this naturally brings us to observe, Thirdly, the most important way of establishing the law; namely, the establishing it in our own hearts and lives. Indeed, without this, what would all the rest avail We might establish it by our doctrine; we might preach it in its whole extent; might explain and enforce every part of it. We might open it in its most spiritual meaning, and declare the mysteries of the kingdom; we might preach Christ in all his offices, and faith in Christ as opening all the treasures of his love; and yet, all this time, if the law we preached were not established in our hearts, we should be of no more account before God than "sounding brass, or tinkling cymbals:" All our preaching would be so far from profiting ourselves, that it would only increase our damnation.

2. This is, therefore, the main point to be considered, How may we establish the law in our own hearts so that it may have its full influence on our lives And this can only be done by faith.

Faith alone it is which effectually answers this end, as we learn from daily experience. For so long as we walk by faith, not by sight, we go swiftly on in the way of holiness. While we steadily look, not at the things which are seen, but at those which are not seen, we are more and more crucified to the world and the world crucified to us. Let but the eye of the soul be constantly fixed, not on the things which are temporal, but on those which are eternal, and our affections are more and more loosened from earth, and fixed on things above. So that faith, in general, is the most direct and effectual means of promoting all righteousness and true holiness; of establishing the holy and spiritual law in the hearts of them that believe.

3. And by faith, taken in its more particular meaning, for a confidence in a pardoning God, we establish his law in our own hearts in a still more effectual manner. For there is no motive which so powerfully inclines us to love God, as the sense of the love of God in Christ. Nothing enables us like a piercing conviction of this to give our hearts to him who was given for us. And from this principle of grateful love to God arises love to our brother also. Neither can we avoid loving our neighbour, if we truly believe the love wherewith God hath loved us. Now this love to man, grounded on faith and love to God, "worketh no ill to" our "neighbour." Consequently, it is, as the Apostle observes, "the fulfilling of the" whole negative "law." "For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery; Thou shalt not kill; Thou shalt not steal; Thou shalt not bear false witness; Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." Neither is love content with barely working no evil to our neighbour. It continually incites us to do good, as we have time and opportunity; to do good, in every possible kind, and in every possible degree, to all men. It is therefore, the fulfilling of the positive, likewise, as well as of the negative, law of God.

4. Nor does faith fulfil either the negative or positive law, as to the external part only; but it works inwardly by love, to the purifying of the heart, the cleansing it from all vile affections. Everyone that hath this faith in himself, "purifieth himself, even as he is pure;" -- purifieth himself from every earthly, sensual desire, from all vile and inordinate affections; yea, from the whole of that carnal mind which is enmity against God. At the same time, if it have its perfect work, it fills him with all goodness, righteousness, and truth. It brings all heaven into his soul; and causes him to walk in the light, even as God is in the light.

5. Let us thus endeavour to establish the law in ourselves; not sinning "because we are under grace," but rather using all the power we receive thereby, "to fulfil all righteousness." Calling to mind what light we received from God while his Spirit was convincing us of sin, let us beware we do not put out that light; what we had then attained let us hold fast. Let nothing induce us to build again what we have destroyed; to resume anything, small or great, which we then clearly saw was not for the glory of God, or the profit of our own soul; or to neglect anything, small or great, which we could not then neglect, without a check from our own conscience. To increase and perfect the light which we had before, let us now add the light of faith. Confirm we the former gift of God by a deeper sense of whatever he had then shown us, by a greater tenderness of conscience, and a more exquisite sensibility of sin. Walking now with joy, and not with fear, in a clear, steady sight of things eternal, we shall look on pleasure, wealth, praise--all the things of earth, as on bubbles upon the water; counting nothing important, nothing desirable, nothing worth a deliberate thought, but only what is "within the veil,"

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Table of Contents

[Español](#)

[What is Wesleyanism?](#)

[John Wesley](#)

[The Journal of John Wesley](#)

[The Life of John Wesley by John Telford](#)

[A Compendium of Natural Philosophy](#)

[The New Testament - John Wesley's Translation](#)

[Translating Wesley's Writings into Late 20th-Century American General English](#)

[The Sermons of John Wesley \(1872 Edition\)](#)

[A Plain Account of Christian Perfection](#)

[John Wesley's Notes on the Bible](#)

[John Wesley the Methodist](#)

[The Letters of John Wesley](#)

[John Wesley - Evangelist](#)

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