

Why do we have the Law, and what is our relationship to it as Christians? Has it been completely done away with because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, or does it still apply to us today? These are questions that God's people – the Church – have been wrestling with even in the time of the Apostles. Thankfully, our Lord in love and mercy has given us His Word, in which He answers these questions for us. As we consider His Word today, we'll see that, not only does the Law still apply, but it is in fact tied to who we are as men.

So the first thing to do when discussing the Law is be sure we define our terms. What are we talking about here when we say "the Law"? The Scriptures use the word in several ways. One way, found especially in the Old Testament, refers to the whole of God's revelation to man. We might think of this as the way we often use "the Word" or "the Scriptures," speaking broadly about all that God has declared to man.

That's not what we're speaking of here today, though. Our focus is a bit narrower. "The Law" is also used to refer to the commandments, decrees, and rules of God – what God requires. That's where we're going, though even there we need to specify a little. In the Old Testament, God gave two kinds of this Law: the ceremonial or civil Law and the moral Law.

The ceremonial or civil Law was divine instructions for how God's people were to worship and practice justice. This Law was to set them apart as a special people, visibly distinct from all the other peoples of the earth. This included regulations about clean and unclean foods, not cutting certain parts of your hair, the attire that priests were to wear and the specific sacrifices they were to offer, and so forth.

The ceremonial Law was given to set the people of Israel apart as the people through whom God would send His Messiah. Once the Messiah, Jesus, came, the ceremonial Law was fulfilled; its purpose was completed. That's why in several places in the New Testament, the command for God's people to follow the ceremonial Law was done away with. For example, in Mark 7 and Acts 10, all foods are declared clean. Or in Romans 14 and Colossians 2, God's people are no longer required to keep the seventh day of the week as the Sabbath.

The Scriptures tell us concerning the ceremonial Law that it was "a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ." Now that Christ has come, the ceremonial Law is unnecessary.

The moral Law, on the other hand, directs us to what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. This Law is summarized for us in the Ten Commandments. Its precepts and rules don't point us to some event or coming promise of God, as did the ceremonial Law.

No, the moral Law points us to God Himself. It all flows out of God who is goodness and truth and righteousness Himself, and therefore also the source of all these things. Thus St. Paul writes in Romans 7, "Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good."

In each of the Commandments, God's divine character and holiness are revealed. Each one tells us something about Him.

He commands us, "You shall not murder," because He is life and the One who creates and sustains all life. He commands us, "You shall not steal," because all things belong to Him and He gives to each person as He knows is best. He commands us, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy," because only He provides true and lasting rest.

This can be done for each of the Ten Commandments, with every one of the them showing forth the Lord.

This understanding as the moral Law showing forth the holiness and goodness of God Himself lets us then understand the teaching of Jesus in our Gospel reading. Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

The reason that the Law cannot be abolished, or even an iota or a dot taken away from it, is because it shows forth God, and God cannot be abolished or diminished even in the slightest way. He is unchanging, from everlasting to everlasting, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The moral Law showing God is also why Jesus teaches on the Fifth Commandment as He does in today's reading. It isn't as though the Commandment used to mean that, as long as you didn't end anyone's life unjustly, you were okay, but now Jesus has come along and added more to it. No, Jesus is here simply applying what it means that this Commandment shows forth God.

God doesn't become angry with people unjustly and then rashly pour forth that anger in insults and hatred. No, He is long-suffering and merciful, bearing the burdens of those who wrong Him, forgiving over and over again. To be angry without cause, insulting, rash, or unmerciful is therefore to go against the nature and goodness of God Himself.

The moral Law, right and wrong, are therefore eternal, because they reflect the eternal God. So why then do we as God's people follow it? Is it simply because God says so? In a sense, yes, but there is much more than that, and as I said at the beginning of the sermon, it's connected to who we are as human beings.

How is this? Well, remember that the moral Law reflects God and who He is as God. What do you call something that shows you what something else is like? An image! If you have an image of something, that image shows what the thing is like. You could even call it a "likeness." An image or likeness doesn't depict every single aspect of a person or thing, but it conveys certain truths about the person or thing it is depicting.

For example, we have an image of Jesus on the cross – a crucifix – here in our sanctuary. This image is not Jesus Himself. And it doesn't portray the exact historical event of the crucifixion of Jesus in every detail. We don't know that this was Jesus' hair color, or the exact position in which He was nailed to the cross.

But those things aren't the point. The point of a crucifix is to be an image of God's sacrificial love, of the suffering He endured in our place, of the way in which our merciful God paid the price for our sins Himself. The image captures a truth – that Jesus was crucified for us – and then leads us to think on all that's entailed there.

So the moral Law is not God Himself, but it is an image, meaning that it shows forth God's holiness, goodness, justice, faithfulness, purity, and so forth. Do the Ten Commandments list every way that Jesus is good, or that God is faithful? No, they couldn't! To try to record every single way in which those things happen would be impossible; there are just too many examples.

But those Ten Commandments hold forth truths of God's moral Law to show us about God and to get us to reflect on all that is connected to such things.

What else is to serve as an image of God? What – or who – did He make in His likeness? Humanity! On the sixth day of creation, God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness." And so, "God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

That man is made in the image of God doesn't mean that God from eternity has two legs and ten fingers and eyebrows, though when God became man in Jesus that all became true. The point, though, that God made man in His image is to say that man was to reflect God. We are made to show forth His goodness, His purity, His love, His justice, His wisdom, and so forth.

We aren't gods – there is only One God. But we are made to be His images, showing in our lives – our thoughts, words, and deeds – what God is like.

Now, from the moment that Adam and Eve fell into sin in the Garden, that image, that reflection of the divine, has been broken. Rather than show forth holiness, goodness, and truth, we show forth pride, selfishness, deceit, unfaithfulness, and every sort of evil. From conception, we are tainted by sin, and that sin clings to us and poisons our thoughts, words, and deeds every moment of this life.

But though sin shattered the image of God in us, it didn't take away God's intention for us to bear that image. Sin corrupted our nature, but it didn't change the purpose for which God made us. We are still called to show forth God's light to the world. And therefore we are liable and held guilty for not doing so.

When we break the Commandments of God, doing evil instead of good, we aren't just breaking some arbitrary rules God pulled out of thin air, but rather we're rebelling against who God made us to be.

Yet God knows that our fallen nature cannot fulfill this task. And so He came and did it for us. Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God, because He is God in human flesh. He perfectly kept the Law. In all His actions, in all His words, even in all His thoughts He remained pure.

Jesus revealed the holiness, righteousness, and goodness of the Father for the world to see, such that, as He Himself declared, to see Him is to see the Father. And in mercy, Jesus offered this life of perfect obedience to the Law as a sacrifice upon the cross.

Having died, risen, and ascended to the right hand of power, Jesus now sends forth His Word and Spirit to bring man to Himself, to restore that image broken by sin. When we are baptized in Christ, we are buried with Him and then raised to newness of life, we hear in Romans. In the font, the Holy Spirit comes and begins to put back together that image which sin had shattered. Through water and the Word, we are clothed with the righteousness of Jesus and given a new life as a child of God Most High.

Having received these gifts, what then are we to do? Is it true that, once you're baptized, or saved, or confirmed, you can just live however you please? Or as St. Paul asks, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" By no means! No way! God begins to restore His image in us so that we might show forth His image to the world.

As Lutherans, we love Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Saved by grace alone through faith alone! Hallelujah and amen! But then sometimes we forget to ask, "saved for what purpose?"

Thankfully, the Holy Spirit had St. Paul write this immediately after in verse 10: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." Walk in good works, walk in newness of life – this is what Christians are given to do until the Lord calls us to glory.

So then, how do we do this? How do we live showing the image of God? That's where the Law, which again also acts as an image of God, comes in. Not only does the Law convict us of sin and lead us to repentance, it also shows us how to lead a life that reflects God to each other and to the world. The new man, born in Holy Baptism, delights in the Law, because it shows us the goodness of God and how we show that goodness to the world.

This is essential to remember, because we are often tempted to follow our own hearts, our own ideas, about what it means to show God to the world. So many Christians, congregations, denominations, have fallen into error and sin because they have looked to their feelings, rather than the moral Law, to define what it means to do good works and show God's love to the world. Our sinful flesh would make the image of God into always being nice, affirming people in whatever choices and lifestyles they lead, never making anyone sad, etc.

But if we look to Jesus, who again is the perfect image of God, we see that this isn't the case. Jesus forbids relaxing even the least of the Commandments, even if that Commandment upsets people or goes against the world's ideas.

Yet when we do walk according to His Commandments, we shine His light into the darkness. We reveal truth to people trapped in lies. We show forth the image of God, the very thing for which humanity was made, to countless men and women looking for purpose.

The moral Law of God will upset those who are living contrary to God's design for them, but it will also reveal a higher and better way of life, a life lived in the goodness of God Himself, a life for

which we are created. And as we live according to the Law, we do so in the confidence that our Lord has already brought us out of slavery to death, that He has delivered from the powers of sin and hell.

As David says over and over in Psalm 119, we delight in the Law, for the Law shows us our Lord and guides us in the life worth living.

In the name of Jesus, amen.