

Introduction

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[0 : 00] We are grateful to God, and indeed grateful to the members of the Scottish Parliament, for the manner in which Margo MacDonald's end-of-life assistance bill was crushed in Parliament on Wednesday.

No doubt you will have seen the reports as I did, 85 votes to 16. Now, one would like to think that such a resounding defeat would also prevent any attempted resurrection of the bill and its objectives, or in any case, the presentation of something very similar in the near future.

Ordinarily, when something is brought to Parliament and it is defeated in such a dramatic way, it buries it. And generally the view would be, well, it would be very difficult for something to be brought soon after, given the scale of the defeat.

I hope that that is so, but I fear that it is not so, and I will tell you why I fear that it is not so. It was revealing and sobering to consider some of the responses to that vote in Parliament.

The Scotsman editorial, if I can take it just as one example of a response to the vote. The Scotsman editorial identified, and I quote, deep misgivings among the parliamentarians as the cause of the bill's demise.

[1 : 31] And they mentioned two in particular. First of all, the concern of potential abuse by family members, and that older folk would feel some kind of pressure to make use of this opportunity to end their lives.

So that was one of the misgivings that was identified. Another misgiving was that in our stretched health system, the possibility of bringing to a quicker end lives that are very expensive to look after might be a danger, might be an attraction.

So these were the two misgivings that certainly the Scotsman editorial identified as the reason why the bill had not prospered. However, the same editorial praised Margot MacDonald for, and I quote, doing the parliament and the wider public a service by focusing informed discussion on the issue, and also welcome the prospect of the proposals being brought again in the future.

Presumably, though this was not said, presumably in a manner that addresses the deep misgivings. So the idea is, well, there were deep misgivings, and so it was right not to approve this proposal at this time.

But if you can bring it in another form, if you can address the concerns, then perhaps this would be suitable. Now, I think that the comments in that editorial were representative of much comment and opinion.

[3 : 05] No doubt there are many different opinions, but I think that editorial in great measure represents the feelings of many. Now, what is the problem there?

The problem isn't so much what was said. It is true, and quite rightly so, that there were deep misgivings, and so there should be. What was said wasn't so much the problem.

What was the problem is that which was conspicuous by its absence. There was no reference whatsoever to the small matter as to whether what was being proposed was right or wrong.

Now, it doesn't surprise us that these concepts were not even mentioned. These are two words, if not the words, certainly the words in their original meaning, the concepts.

These are words that are being relentlessly airbrushed from public debate. They are, of course, we are told, so difficult to tie down. Right and wrong.

[4 : 05] Who decides, after all, what is right and what is wrong? And this is indeed the question. Who decides? Is it Parliament that decides what is right and what is wrong?

Is it public opinion? Is it a free-for-all where all may decide for themselves and the rest of us are obliged to tolerate a veritable cocktail of mutually contradictory moral conclusions?

That certainly would be a recipe for chaos. Now, as Christians, we have no such difficulty. God decides what is right and what is wrong.

But we can say further, not only does He decide, He has been pleased to share His conclusions on this matter with us. He has done so in His Word, the Bible.

In the Bible, we can discover what God has determined is right and what is wrong. Now, that can be found, and truth concerning that can be found throughout the Scriptures.

[5 : 11] But that declaration of God's opinion is helpfully and memorably articulated and presented in what we know as the Ten Commandments.

And over these winter months, in the evenings, perhaps not every Sunday evening, but over a good number of them, we want to consider what God has to say to us in the Ten Commandments.

And today we will begin with the prologue, as we find it there at the beginning of chapter 20 in Exodus. Now, before we do turn to the text, just a brief word concerning the continuing relevance and applicability of the Ten Commandments today.

This is a matter in which not all would seem to be agreed, not only with the church, but even within it. Is the law of Moses, after all, not part of a legal system that has been dispensed with through the work of Christ?

He is, after all, the one who perfectly kept and fulfilled the law on our behalf, and indeed He did. Is it not said of the Christian that he is no longer under the law?

[6 : 26] And for these reasons, could we not say, well, these things no longer apply to us? In considering this matter of relevance and of continuing applicability, it would be helpful to remind ourselves of what our confession of faith teaches concerning the law of Moses, and the distinctions to be drawn between different categories within the law of Moses, within the whole body of the law, how different categories are identified.

And we'll just briefly remind ourselves of what the confession says, because this is very relevant to the question of applicability today. The confession identifies what it describes as ceremonial laws.

And I quote what the confession says, these laws contain typical or symbolic ordinances that point to Christ and His work.

Now, there is so much that could be said here, but simply to illustrate this particular point, the most obvious type or symbol that we have are the animal sacrifices.

that point to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Concerning these laws, these ceremonial laws, the confession concludes all which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, no longer apply under the New Testament.

[7 : 52] So that's clear. That part of the law of Moses is no longer applicable today. The confession also identifies what it calls judicial laws.

Now, in some of the literature, the more common term to use is civil law. Maybe that's what some are more familiar with. But the language of the confession is of judicial laws or civil laws, given to Israel as a body politic or as a nation.

Laws for the nation, the political entity that was Israel in the Old Testament. And these laws include, among others, laws related to a penal system.

There are food and hygiene laws. Sometimes some prefer to see these in a different category. But food and hygiene laws, there are even, you will be perhaps amused to discover, though it perhaps isn't a discovery, there are even health and safety regulations.

So those of you who bemoan health and safety regulations, I'm afraid we have to, in a measure, recognize that even in the law of Moses, there are a number of laws that could very reasonably be understood under that category.

[9 : 08] These laws, these civil laws or judicial laws, and again I simply quote the language of the confession, expired with the state of that people.

That is, Israel as a nation, not obliging any other now further than the general equity thereof may require. Now that's rather old-fashioned language.

Really what it's saying is that the principles that we find embodied in these laws still apply. The principles still apply, and of course it could be no other way.

This, after all, is the law of God. These laws reflect and speak of who God is. And so it is necessary, we could say, that the principles would have abiding significance, but the details, if you wish, no longer apply as they did for the nation of Israel.

But then in the third place, the confession identifies what it calls the moral law. And in the language of our catechism, the sum of the moral law is found in the Ten Commandments.

[10 : 14] On the two tablets given to Moses on Mount Sinai. Now while the law was given through Moses at this moment in history, it is important to stress that what was given to Moses was no novelty.

The laws that were engraved on the tablets of stone were the same laws that were given to Adam in a more, if you wish, informal way.

I can't say this for sure, but I think it's reasonable if we were to speculate that if you'd ask Moses, see these laws that you've brought down, is there anything there that you find surprising that you didn't know before?

I imagine Moses would have said, well, no, these are things that we already knew. But now God has been pleased to give to us in this systematic, codified, if you wish, manner.

To put it this way, at Sinai, the law that was already current, the moral law already in existence, was formally and physically delivered by God in a systematic, codified manner.

[11 : 27] What then of the permanence of the moral law? And again here, we limit ourselves simply to sharing with you what the confession says in this regard.

The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others. That is to say, it is applicable not only to those who are Christians, but it is applicable to all, Christians or other ones.

Bind all to the obedience thereof, and that not only in regard to, of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator who gave it. And then it adds something very significant.

Neither doth Christ in the gospel in any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation. So the framers of the confession were very clear, grounded of course in the scriptures, that these laws remained applicable, and that the coming of Christ, far from dissolving, reinforced the applicability and the relevance of the moral law given through Moses.

There is a sense in which the permanence of the moral law was given a visible symbol, if you wish, in the manner in which they were given, engraved in tablets of stone.

[12 : 48] And there must be, I'm sure, symbolic significance, even in the manner in which God gave these laws. But more importantly, their permanence was confirmed by Jesus Himself, who in the gospels affirms and validates each and every one.

Now time doesn't allow us this evening to give the references for that. I can leave that as a homework for you. But take it on trust, and if you're not convinced, by all means challenge me one-on-one on another occasion.

But each and every one, we find Jesus validating in one way or another in the gospels. Indeed, we could say that Jesus goes further in His application of the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount.

He is much more radical in how they are to be understood and how they are to be obeyed, even than would have been perhaps understood by Moses and those who followed Him.

Now the permanent relevance and applicability of the Ten Commandments ought not to surprise us when we appreciate, as the Scripture very clearly tells us in both the Old and the New Testaments, that the sum of the Ten Commandments, they are using the language of the Catechism, the sum of the Ten Commandments is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind and our neighbor as ourselves.

[14 : 18] Now what could be of more contemporary relevance and obligation than to do these things? Moving on then to the text of the prologue of the Ten Commandments there in Exodus chapter 20, we read, And God spoke all these words, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

There are four questions that we want to briefly pose and answer in relation to these introductory words, if you wish, to the Ten Commandments.

The four questions are these. First of all, who is speaking? And even in posing the question, I'm sure your response is, well, that is just such an easy question.

And it is. But it merits posing and answering who is speaking, to whom is he speaking, when is he speaking, and why is he speaking?

These are the four questions we want to think about as we consider the prologue to the Ten Commandments. First of all then, who is speaking? As I say, not the most taxing question you're ever likely to be asked.

[15 : 29] We read there at the beginning of the chapter, And God spoke all these words. Not taxing, but very important.

The law of Moses, as it is sometimes described, is not the law authored by Moses. It is the law of God given through Moses. In this matter, certainly with regard to the two tablets of the law, Moses did not even perform what we might call a secretarial function of writing down what God spoke.

Not even that was entrusted to Moses, but rather, even in the engraving of this law on the tablets of stone, this was something done directly by God.

And again, there is surely great significance, significance, certainly symbolic significance in that. We can notice how that is described to us in Exodus chapter 32, and verses 15 and 16.

Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. The tablets were the work of God.

[16 : 44] The writing was the writing of God engraved on the tablets. And when there was a need for new tablets, we know what happened, how the original tablets were destroyed, and new tablets are required.

And what do we read there in chapter 34 and verse 1? The Lord said to Moses, chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablet which you broke.

Who is speaking? It is God. God spoke. Not Moses, not the prophets, not an angel. God spoke. These are the words of God.

These commandments that we will be considering in these winter evenings, it is the word of God. God spoke. And that reason alone is reason enough for us to pay attention and to listen in humble reverence and to obey.

In that regard, it's also instructive to notice the sense of awe and fearful expectation present when God first spoke these words.

[17 : 55] We've read chapter 19 and all this, as it were, preparation for the delivery of this word from God. And maybe if we just remind ourselves of what we read there in verses 18 and 19 of chapter 19.

Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace. The whole mountain trembled violently and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.

Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. And would that we would in some measure experience something of that awe as we would listen to God speaking to us today through His word.

before moving on to the second question, there is just a we word, but a we word with big implications that relates to this first question, who is speaking?

We read there at the beginning of the chapter, and God spoke all these words. And the we word is that word all. All these words. So any attempt to pick and choose, to select that which is more convenient, to leave aside those that we are less comfortable with, is excluded.

[19 : 11] God spoke all these words. The second question that I said we wanted to consider, and one we will deal with very briefly, is this one, to whom is He speaking?

Well, what does He say? In verse 2, I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of Egypt.

The key word is your, or you. God is speaking to His covenant people. He is speaking to that people with whom He enjoyed, in the language of transatlantic relationships, He enjoyed a special relationship.

We are told, I don't know how special it is, but we are told that we enjoy a special relationship with the United States. Well, certainly it is true that God had a special relationship with the people of Israel.

These are the people to whom He had sovereignly and graciously committed Himself. When He declared, as it's recorded for us in this selfsame book of Exodus, He declared in Exodus chapter 6 and verse 7.

[20 : 26] And what do we read there? I will take you as my own people and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.

To whom is God speaking then as He delivers, as He gives to the people these Ten Commandments? He is speaking to His own people, His own covenant people.

But the third question, one that is more significant, I think, or certainly one that we need to spend a little bit more time considering, is this. When is He speaking? What is the occasion?

What are the circumstances in which God speaks and delivers these words? These words we know as the Ten Commandments. When did this occur? And is there any significance in the when?

Or is it a random thing? Well, it happened to be at this time. It could have been before. It could have been after. But, well, it happens to have been on this occasion. When is He speaking? Well, God Himself very explicitly identifies the time in which this has been done.

[21 : 35] I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt. Who has just brought you out of the land of Egypt? God is not looking back to ancient history and saying, this is what I have just done for you.

I am speaking to you as a people who I have just rescued from slavery and from oppression and from the yoke of Egypt. That is the people to whom I am speaking.

God is speaking to a redeemed people. Their redemption, their rescue is a done deal. And the law, this permanently relevant law, this moral law of God is given to an already redeemed people.

Now, I'm sure this is a point that many of you are familiar with. But it is so important that we will perhaps labor it. maybe just to help us as we would identify the importance of that, a quick reminder of the order of events going back four centuries.

Jacob and his family are brought to Egypt by Joseph in a time of famine. There they settle, they multiply, the centuries pass, and as we're told, a Pharaoh arises who did not know Joseph.

[22 : 58] And he realizes to his fear and consternation that this family or extended family has now become a people, the Israelites. And he views them as a threat and so they are enslaved and cruelly oppressed.

And God hears their cry for help. It's interesting in the passages that make reference to God hearing their groaning, it's not altogether clear if they're actually addressing a cry of help to God at all.

They're groaning and God hears their groaning. But it's not altogether sure if they're even addressing that to God. But he hears. He hears their groans.

He hears their cries and he responds. And he sends Moses to rescue them. And even the rescue that they are the objects of is a rescue in which the people are at best passive, at worst very reluctant participants.

Again, time doesn't allow us to look at all the passages that confirm that. But I think the account is so familiar to us. We know that that is so. The initiative is all of God.

[24 : 07] And the people themselves are, as I say, often reluctant participants, unsure if they want to leave Egypt at all. You know how they complain, well, we'd rather be back in Egypt.

There we had plenty to eat and here we are in the desert. So far from being those who had in any way secured their liberty, they are of those who weren't very sure if they wanted the liberty at all.

But once they had been rescued by the sovereign action of God, by the decision of God to rescue them, once they had been freed from slavery, what does God do?

God renews His covenant with them and gives them His commandments. not the other way around. It is not that Moses went to them and said, look, if you want to be free, if you want God to save you, if you want God to help you, if you want God to be pleased with you, if you want God to be propitious to you, well, here are the rules.

You keep the rules and God will save you. That is not the way. God saves them and having saved them, He says, here are the rules if you wish.

[25 : 19] Here are the instructions for how a saved people should live. And this is, as I'm sure you recognize, a huge redemptive significance as it establishes, or perhaps establishes in the Word, it demonstrates the way of salvation for every age.

Law is never a means whereby we might be saved, a means whereby we might gain the favor of God by our obedience. obedience. No, it is God who graciously, according to the purpose of His own will, saves whom He will save.

And to a saved people, He graciously and lovingly provides His law that we might live in a manner that reflects our new identity as His people.

So the order is clear. First Egypt, and then Sinai, and will betide he who seeks to revert the order. first the rescue, and then the response of loving obedience.

This has great importance in our presentation of the gospel. Indeed, if there be any here this evening who is not yet a Christian, I would urge you to forget any notion that there is something you must first do to gain the favor of God, to prepare the way, or that you somehow should prepare yourself, or reform your character or behavior before you can cry for mercy.

[26 : 51] First come to Jesus as you are, just as you are, and then as you put your trust in Jesus, He will rescue you, and He will then equip you and help you to keep His commands that you are quite incapable of doing in your own strength.

So the when of the delivery of the law, the when of when God spoke these words is hugely important. But the fourth question that we want to pose an answer is this, why is He speaking?

Why is God speaking? We've already made it very clear, I hope, that the law does not have as its purpose to establish a way whereby we will be saved.

So that has been set aside. That is not its purpose. Well, if that's not its purpose, what is its purpose? I want to suggest three purposes of the law.

Now, in the literature on this matter, different categories or different uses or purposes of the law are identified. And what I'm going to say, I think, is consistent with the manner in which this is dealt with in our Reformed tradition, but maybe the language used will be slightly different.

[28 : 14] Certainly three purposes, and I don't claim that these are exhaustive, but three that I want to highlight this evening. And for anybody who's filling out the worksheet, then listen carefully here because the final question requires you to listen carefully.

The first purpose of the law is this, that the law reveals the character of God. The law shows us what God is like.

You see, the law shares the characteristics of its author. This is something that God very explicitly states in the Ten Commandments. In the Third Commandment specifically, it's interesting to note how God very explicitly actually describes Himself in explaining why He is giving this law.

The commandment in question is about not making any idol in the form of anything, not bowing down before these idols or worshipping them, and then God explicitly says, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.

God there very helpfully tells us what it is about Himself that explains why He gives this law. He says, the reason I'm giving you this law is because this is the kind of God I am.

[29 : 29] I am a jealous God, hence the law. Now, the other commandments, He doesn't go and give us that explanation, but it remains a principle that can be applied that we discover what God is like as we study His law.

It is a means whereby God reveals what He is like to us. The law reveals the character of God. He is a jealous God, as we've already noticed. He is a holy God.

He is a just God. He is a God who is concerned for truth. He is a loving God who is concerned that relationships be carried out and be lived in a manner that is fitting.

He is a loyal God. And we could go on. Perhaps as we do explore them one by one, we'll be able to in more detail consider how each of the laws reveals to us something of what God is like.

We won't do that this evening. Simply to make the general point that the law reveals the character of God. The law helps us to know what God is like. But a second purpose of the law is that the law drives us or points us or leads us to Jesus Christ.

[30 : 43] Now in our tradition in Reformed theology, this has often been called the pedagogical. It's a difficult word to say, pedagogical. I'm not sure I even know if that's the right way to pronounce it, but function.

And that comes from the verse in Galatians chapter 3 and verse 24, where Paul tells us that the laws are, in the language of the AV, our schoolmaster who leads us to Christ.

And the Greek word there is pedagogos, instructor, trainer, schoolmaster. And what is being said by that, what Paul is saying there, and it's not purely this conclusion isn't built entirely on this one verse in Galatians, though it is a significant text.

What is being said is that what the law does is help us and lead us to Christ in two ways. First of all, by showing us what sin is.

If it were not for the law, we wouldn't know what sin was at all. But perhaps even more importantly, by helping us to realize our inability to keep the law. Because first of all, we discover what the law is, and that's necessary.

[31 : 53] But then, to our horror, we discover that we can't keep it. It's there in black and white. It's not difficult to understand. I remember reading a billboard in the States when I was there once, and it had, thou shall not commit adultery.

And then down below in little letters it said, what part of that don't you understand? God. You see, it's not complicated. We can understand it. A child can understand it, but we can't keep it.

And as we fail to keep it, as we are conscious of our failure and our inability to keep the law, so we are made aware of our need of one to forgive us, of one who can keep the law for us.

And so the law, in that sense, leads us to Christ, points us to Christ, takes us by the hand to the one who has indeed kept the law fully.

Paul, in Romans chapter seven, speaks of how the law allowed him even to understand what sin was, and there he uses the example specifically of covetousness. He said, if it wasn't for the law, I wouldn't even know that that was a sin.

[33 : 04] I wouldn't even know that to covet was something that I shouldn't do, but the law tells me. And I discover that, yes, this is a sin, and this is something that I am guilty of. And I can't keep the law, and so I need help.

I need one who can forgive me. The law shows us what sin is, and it demonstrates to us how we are unable to keep the law.

Now, in our society today, this is a huge problem. There is a great absence of any sense of sin. Now, why is that? Why is there, generally speaking, a great absence of any sense of sin?

Well, precisely because people don't know the law. And if they don't know the law, they're then it's not to be admired at that there is so little sense of sin. This was, naively, I would suggest, illustrated by our friend Margo MacDonald, who we've already made reference to.

I've got here the transcript of the debate on Wednesday in the Scottish Parliament concerning the bill that we began the sermon by making reference to. And in the context of that debate, and the time doesn't allow me to give you all the background to when she said this, but listen to what Margo MacDonald says.

[34 : 16] I'm sure very sincerely in her, this was on Wednesday, I believe in the goodness of people. I believe in the goodness of people. She makes this argument.

I believe in the goodness of people. So when people say, oh, but people might abuse of this, she says, no, they won't abuse of it. I believe in the goodness of people. Well, call me a miserable Calvinist, but I don't believe in the goodness of people because I know my own heart, and I know the law because by grace I have been taught the law, and I know what sin is, and I know that I'm a sinner.

And I am grateful for the law for showing me I'm a sinner and leading me to a Savior. The law drives us, leads us to Christ.

The law enables us to see our need of a Savior and by grace see in Jesus the Savior that we need. But then one third purpose of the law that we can mention, and again, I don't claim that the ones that I'm going to mention this evening are exhaustive, but perhaps I would suggest the most significant purposes.

The third purpose is that law helps us to live blessed, happy, and grateful lives. The purpose of the law as given to the people of Israel was to help the people live as God's people.

[35 : 38] They were a redeemed people. They bore the mark of their God. They were in a relationship with their God, and God wanted them to live in a manner that was fitting for His people.

He wanted them to live lives characterized by shalom, by well-being, total well-being. And in order for them to live these blessed, happy lives, it was necessary for them to know and to keep the law.

In Deuteronomy chapter 6, this is made very clear that this is God's purpose in giving the law to His people. There in chapter 6 of Deuteronomy, and if we, for reasons of time, go straight to verse 3, it's in the context of the law having been given, and we read, Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you.

Obey these words. Obey these laws. Why? Because I tell you to? Yes, indeed. Because I have the authority to demand obedience of you? Yes, indeed. But also, and certainly this is presented by God as His intention, that it may go well with you.

It's for your good that you would live happy and blessed lives. Now, an aspect of this is the manner in which the law protects us from harm.

[37 : 00] That's the reason why the Ten Commandments are framed in what we can describe as negative terms. Now, I use that not as a criticism, but simply as a description.

They are indeed framed in negative terms. Don't do this. Don't do that. This is forbidden. But this is the negatives of a father who wants to protect his children.

It's like what parents do with their small children. Don't touch the electricity. Don't go there. Don't go out without the proper clothing in the winter days. Why? Because they're brutal authoritarians?

No, it's a form of protection. And so the law also has that protective function. God loves His people. He wants us to live happy lives. He wants us to live blessed lives.

He wants us to protect us from harm. And so He graciously gives us the law as a means of helping us to live such lives. The law helps us to live blessed and finally grateful lives under the same third purpose.

[38 : 06] Blessed and grateful lives. The careful keeping of the law is a means, not for us to be saved, but it is a means whereby we can show God our gratitude for His love and His salvation.

And this truth is echoed in the words of Jesus that He addressed to His disciples that we find in John chapter 14 and verse 15. If you love me, you will obey what I command.

Jesus says you want to demonstrate that you truly love me. You want to have a means of showing your love. Well, here is a means. Obey what I command.

And so the law that God gives us provides us with a means whereby as those who are grateful to God for so great salvation, who are grateful to God that He has kept the law for us, who are grateful to God that He grants to us and gives to us His righteousness that we can clothe ourselves in, grateful for all these things, we show our gratitude by keeping the law that He has given us.

So another purpose. The first purpose that we've mentioned this evening tells us what God is like, it drives us, it leads us to Christ, and it helps us to live blessed and grateful lives.

[39 : 28] And we could really do no better than to close by having these words of Jesus echoing in our minds, if you love me, you will obey what I command.

Let's pray. b b