

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the attributes of God. We have been discussing God's immutability, which means that he does not change. Are we done with that topic Dr. Spencer?

Dr. Spencer: Not quite. It is such an important issue in the modern church that I want to really drive home the point that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are the very same God, he has not changed.

Marc Roby: Very well, what else do you want to say to support this view?

Dr. Spencer: I want to point out that there has never been a time when anyone was saved by keeping the law. Salvation has *always* been by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Immediately after the fall God promised a redeemer. And the only way of salvation in the Old Testament times was by faith in that promised redeemer just as it is today.

Marc Roby: When you say that God promised a redeemer immediately after the fall, you are of course referring to Genesis 3:15, sometimes called the protoevangelium, which tells us that when God pronounced his curse on Satan he said to him, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly what I was referring to. Jesus Christ is the offspring of the woman and he figuratively crushed Satan's head when he died on the cross to pay the penalty owed by all of his chosen followers. And no one was saved in the time before Jesus Christ except by believing in this promised Messiah. And yet, God established both an elaborate system of sacrifices, which pointed forward to Christ and ended when he came, as well as the moral law, which is summarized by the Ten Commandments. So, in order to fully understand that God has not changed, we need to ask what role the law played in the Old Testament, and then we will see that it functions in exactly the same way today.

Marc Roby: What role then did the law play in Old Testament times?

Dr. Spencer: The law played three roles in the Old Testament, just as it does today. John Calvin wrote about the threefold use of the law in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.<sup>2</sup> The first use of the law is that it shows us where we fall short of meeting God's standard of righteousness. That standard has not changed since Old Testament times and there is absolutely nothing in the New Testament that indicates that God has relaxed his standard in any way. In fact, we are told

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008, 2.7.6

in Hebrews 12:14 that we must, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

**Marc Roby: I’m also reminded of Paul’s introduction to his first letter to the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 1:2 he wrote, “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and *called to be holy*” (emphasis added).**

Dr. Spencer: Paul also wrote in Ephesians 1:4 that God “chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” And Peter wrote, in 1 Peter 1:15-16, “just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’” And Peter was quoting from Leviticus 11:44 where God said to his people, “I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy.” This demonstrates the continuity of God’s requirement that his people must be holy.

**Marc Roby: I think it is important to add that being holy requires obedience.**

Dr. Spencer: It absolutely does. Our obedience doesn’t earn anything from God, salvation is by grace, but we can’t allow ourselves to think that the requirement to be holy is *only* referring to our being united with Christ and clothed with his perfect righteousness. If we have been born again, it will be evident in our lives. We must have obedient lives or our claim to be a Christian is false.

As it says in Hebrews 5:8-9, Christ “learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him”. So, Christ’s obedience in suffering made him the perfect sacrifice required and as a result he is the source of eternal salvation “for all who obey him”. It doesn’t say that he is the source of eternal salvation for those who call themselves Christians.

If some of our listeners don’t like this idea of obedience being necessary, I encourage them to look up the word obey in a concordance and look at the New Testament verses that use the word. There are quite a few that speak about the need for Christians to obey. For example, anyone who is interested should at a bare minimum look at John 14:15 and 15:10, Acts 5:32, Hebrews 13:17 and 1 John 2:3, but there are many, many more.

**Marc Roby: Alright, I think that is enough to establish that God’s standard for us in both the Old and New Testament times is that we be holy, which means that we obey God’s commands. And, of course, it is obvious to any reasonable person that none of us are holy. So, you said that the first use of the law is to show us that very fact.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. Calvin wrote that our being convicted by the law of God “is necessary, in order that man, who is blind and intoxicated with self-love, may be brought at once to know and to confess his weakness and impurity.”<sup>3</sup> He also wrote that “the Law is a kind of mirror. As in a mirror we discover any stains upon our face, so in the Law we behold, first, our impotence; then, in consequence of it, our iniquity; and, finally, the curse, as the consequence of both.” In

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

other words, we must conclude from the fact that we don't measure up to God's standard that we have a serious problem, which should drive us to cry out "What must I do to be saved?"

**Marc Roby: That is the rational response. What is the second use of the law as elucidated by Calvin?**

Dr. Spencer: The second use is to restrain moral evil in this world. Calvin wrote that "The second office of the Law is, by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, to curb those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude and justice."<sup>4</sup> The fact that there are serious punishments threatened for disobeying God's law is a strong incentive for people to not break that law. This is the function of the law that Paul wrote about in 1 Timothy 1:9-10, where he said that "We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers".

This is why properly functioning civil governments should have laws that mirror God's laws. Not all people will respond to God's threats – although they are far more consequential and serious than anything man can do to us. And because not all people will respond to God's threats, our civil governments have the responsibility of imposing sanctions on those who violate God's laws. That is the basis of any proper legal system.

**Marc Roby: That idea is not very popular today.**

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't, because people have an unbiblical worldview. That worldview ignores what the Bible teaches us about human nature. This false worldview says that man is basically good. The idea is that people only steal because they need something. And people only do terrible things to other people because somewhere along the line someone did something terrible to them.

**Marc Roby: I've certainly come across that view as well. But all of human history, and any honest evaluation of our own hearts, argues quite strongly against it.**

Dr. Spencer: The facts argue very strongly against that view. The human heart harbors tremendous evil. Fortunately, most people keep it under wraps most of the time, and I don't think that we are all capable of the same depths of evil and depravity, but to deny the existence of real evil in human beings is to put your head in the sand and ignore the obvious. And to think that people only do bad things because bad things have happened to them ignores the obvious problem of how did all these bad things get started? And why are they many people who do terrible things who have never had any terrible thing done to them?

**Marc Roby: That is a good question.**

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is. I remember just a few years ago there was a young man in our town, who hadn't had anything terribly unusual happen to him, but he brutally murdered an elderly

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 2.7.10

couple in their bed with a knife just because he wanted to know what it felt like to kill people. Now that depth of depravity and wickedness is, admittedly and thankfully, quite rare. But, any theory of human behavior has to take that sort of thing into account because it is not so exceptionally rare that it can be explained away as some extreme aberration. And when you include actions like rape, assault and robbery, which while certainly less wicked are, nonetheless, still wicked, you have a serious problem defending the idea that people are basically good at heart.

**Marc Roby: OK. We've established two uses of the law: first, to show us that we ourselves do not meet God's standard and need a Savior, and second, to moderate evil in society. What is the law's third use?**

Dr. Spencer: The third use that Calvin listed, which he called "the principal use, and more closely connected with its proper end"<sup>5</sup>, only applies to believers and was to show God's people how we can please him. Every child who loves his parents wants to know what he can do to please them. And every true child of God will want to live a life that is pleasing to God. But, no one can do that if we aren't told what pleases God. The law serves that purpose, and every single person who has been born again will lead a changed life; a life that is characterized by obedience to God's law.

**Marc Roby: But, we must be clear that we are not saying that our obedience earns salvation.**

Dr. Spencer: Of course not. Our obedience is never perfect in this life, and God's standard is perfection. Therefore, it is fundamentally impossible for us to earn our salvation. Nevertheless, a born-again person has a new heart and desires to please God and will strive for holiness. We must be different than the rest of the world or we are not truly God's people.

**Marc Roby: And that has not changed since Old Testament times.**

Dr. Spencer: No, it hasn't changed at all. And we can now see that these three uses of the law are the same today as they were at the time of Moses, or King David, or any other Old Testament saint. As we noted in Session 57 there are three things that have changed since the Old Testament: First, we have much greater revelation than even Moses had; Second, the promised Messiah has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, so the ceremonial law has been done away with because its only purpose was to point to the coming Redeemer; And, third, we no longer live under the same civil government.

So there have been changes, and they are significant. But God has not changed. His standard of holiness has not changed, and the way of salvation has not changed. The Old Testament is still relevant today, but we have to be intelligent in applying it. We no longer stone adulterers for example because that was part of the civil law in effect at that time. But adultery is still a terrible sin and a properly functioning government will have some kind of penalty in place for people who commit that sin.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 2.7.12

**Marc Roby: But we as individuals do not have authority to punish anyone for their sins, even if the civil government fails to.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. God has only given that power to the state, not to individuals or to the church. As we've said, unless we are commanded to sin, we should obey the civil authorities. The church, of course, still has the power of the keys and must exercise authority in disciplining people who sin and refuse to repent.

**Marc Roby: Are we done with discussing God's immutability now?**

Dr. Spencer: We are.

**Marc Roby: What's next then?**

Dr. Spencer: I want to look at God's eternity. I want to discuss it next because it is related to God's immutability. Wayne Grudem defines God's eternity as meaning that "God has no beginning, end, or succession of moments in his own being, and he sees all time equally vividly, yet God sees events in time and acts in time."<sup>6</sup>

**Marc Roby: Now that's a difficult definition to wrap your mind around completely.**

Dr. Spencer: It is, especially for our listeners who aren't following along in the written transcript. But, I think it will become clearer as I explain how it is related to God's immutability.

**Marc Roby: Alright, please proceed.**

Dr. Spencer: If God is immutable as we have claimed, then it follows that his knowledge does not increase or decrease from one moment to the next. In other words, as Grudem said, he has no "succession of moments in his own being, and he sees all time equally vividly". This is a very difficult thing for us to grasp because we experience only the present vividly. We experience the past less vividly and the further we go back in time the worse our memory becomes in general.

**Marc Roby: Although we all have particularly memorable events or experiences that we remember better than others.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we do. But the point is that God sees all times equally well. It is as if everything were the present to him. There isn't some particular moment in time that God sees or experiences more clearly or vividly than others. If that were not the case, he would not be immutable. Grudem notes that when Jesus said, in John 8:58, that "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!" He used the present tense verb in referring to his existence prior to the time of Abraham, which in Greek indicates something that continues to be true.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Jesus' statement suggests that every moment in our history is, essentially, the present to God.

**Marc Roby: That is extremely hard for us to understand.**

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<sup>6</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 168

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 169

Dr. Spencer: I agree. In fact, it is impossible for us to grasp fully. But it is a necessary conclusion based on God's revelation to us in the Bible. Many of the Scriptures that we cited when we discussed God's self-existence, or aseity, are also applicable here. For example, the fact that God existed prior to this universe, which is clearly taught in Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1, is evidence that he is not subject to the succession of events that occur in this universe, which is what we think of as defining the passage of time.

**Marc Roby: The fact that God can predict the future also requires that he does not experience time as we do.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And God uses that fact to mock idols. For example, in Isaiah 41:22-23 God says to his people, "Bring in your idols to tell us what is going to happen. Tell us what the former things were, so that we may consider them and know their final outcome. Or declare to us the things to come, tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods. Do something, whether good or bad, so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear."

**Marc Roby: And this contrasts with God himself. He tells us, in Isaiah 46:9-10, to, "Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please."**

Dr. Spencer: I think this is the hardest thing for us to grasp, that what we think of as future is equally vivid in God's sight as our present. And yet, as Grudem's definition says, "God sees events in time and acts in time." Which means that he understands how we perceive time as a succession of events. He knows that we can't see the future and he is able to interact with us in time.

**Marc Roby: I think a good part of the reason why we can't understand God's knowing the future is that the future seems to us to not yet be determined. It depends on exactly what we and billions of other people and animals do, which seems to us to be fundamentally unknowable until it happens.**

Dr. Spencer: That's a good point. God's eternity and immutability are difficult to reconcile with man's free will or the free actions of animals. But, I want to leave that topic for later. For now, let me cite one other verse that is very interesting to examine. In 2 Peter 3:8 the apostle wrote that "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." The second part of this statement, that "a thousand years are like a day" is the same point made in Verse 4 of Psalm 90, which says that "a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by". In other words, God doesn't have trouble remembering things from a thousand years ago, they are just like yesterday. And this is, of course, a figurative way of saying that he knows all of the past perfectly.

But, the first part of Peter's statement, that "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years" is new and very interesting. Let me quote from Grudem here. He notes that "since 'a thousand years' is a figurative expression for 'as long a time as we can imagine,' or 'all history,' we can say from

this verse that any one day seems to God to be present to his consciousness forever.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, every moment of human history is like the immediate present to God.

**Marc Roby: It is clear from these verses that God does not experience time as we do.**

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is clear but it is also impossible for us to grasp completely.

**Marc Roby: It certainly is, and I think we need to end here for today. But I look forward to continuing this discussion next time. I would like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We appreciate hearing from you.**

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<sup>8</sup> Grudem, pg. 170