

The Commands of Christ

Part Seven

Why I'm a Theonomist—E

2 Timothy 3:16, 17

With Study Questions

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Deuteronomy 19:15-21

One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established. ⁻¹⁶⁻ If a false witness __rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing, ⁻¹⁷⁻ then both men in the controversy shall stand before the Lord, _before the priests and the judges who serve in those days. ⁻¹⁸⁻ And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, *if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother,* ⁻¹⁹⁻ __then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so __you shall put away the evil from among you. ⁻²⁰⁻ __And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you. ⁻²¹⁻ _Your eye shall not pity: __*life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot* (Deuteronomy 19:15-21).

Introduction

Psyche 5 was the basic introductory psychology class taken by all college freshmen. Though 35 years is the gap between then and now, there were two things I remember my instructor pounding into my 19-year-old head newly converted head: “Spare the rod, spoil the child” (a rough interpretation of Proverbs 13:24) was absurd; and the death penalty was ineffective as a deterrent to crime. This second point was something I heard in every psychology and sociology class I attended.

That the death penalty is not a deterrent just didn't seem right to me—at very least the person executed wouldn't commit another crime. But it also seems so basic to human nature, and the survival instinct, that people wouldn't commit certain heinous crimes if they knew the consequences were severe. The above passage seems to verify that which is obvious—“**and those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you.**”

But even more shocking in the above passage is instruction coming from God which appears contrary to so much of what we read in Scripture. “**Your eye shall not pity**” God says. But does not God also say,

He has __shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But _to do justly, To love __mercy, And to walk humbly with your God (Micah 6:8)?

How does one love mercy yet show no pity? The words are almost synonymous!

Review

This morning we will complete, what has amounted to, a seven lesson preface to the Ten Commandments.

In quick review, this series, which I have entitled “The Commands of Christ” is a follow-up on the Great Commission where Jesus taught that disciples are to be instructed to obey—“**all things that (He) commanded**” (Matthew 28:20).

Hopefully we are beginning to appreciate the beauty of God’s law as His inscription of genuine and authentic love. When Jesus was asked what commandment was greatest, His answer was to love God and love our neighbor. Jesus defines love as obedience to God’s commands (Matthew 22:37-40).

We also discussed how James calls the law God’s the “**perfect law of liberty**” (James 1:25). The law of God liberates (or sets us free) from legalism and manipulation, consequences, bondage and, most importantly, pride (casting us to Christ for help).

A recurring theme in our study of God’s law is how the law is of God is not the means by which we approve ourselves before God—we are approved by God’s grace in the gospel—by the blood of Christ. Even our desire to obey God’s law does not come from God’s law but by the grace of God in the gospel.

I will put My __Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*. (Ezekiel 36:27).

Another common error we addressed is the supposed conflict between Spirit and law—that the leading of the Spirit is somehow at odds with being led or directed by God’s law. The spiritual man recognizes God’s law as coming from God and seeks to walk in it.

We then embarked upon a sub-issue known as Theonomy. Theonomy specifically addresses the extent of the application of the Old

Testament civil codes to modern politics. I put forth four reasons why I think theonomy is important: 1. the preeminence of Christ in all areas, including politics; 2. it addresses the influx of relativism in the very large arena of civil law; 3. it is a key factor in the spreading of the gospel since it is generally civil leaders God uses to open or close doors to the preaching of the gospel; 4. it reveals the justice of the gospel (Proverbs 28:5), since there is no other arena which more clearly demonstrates the just and due penalty for sin than the civil arena—a society which loses its sense of justice will not so clearly perceive the due penalty for sin.

This morning I would like to complete this somewhat lengthy preface with some brief answers to some practical questions regarding Theonomy **and, finally, a thoughtful look at what God says as a preface to his commands.** So here are today's four questions:

Questions for today:

- Is God's civil law harsh or compassionate?
- What do the Secondary Standards of our Church Say about Theonomy?
- In a Society Which Views God's Laws as Extreme and Ridiculous, How are we to Reasonably Apply this Theonomic Concept?
- A Proper Approach to God's Law?

1. Is God's Civil Law Harsh or Compassionate?

I'm Guilty—So the Law Must be Wrong

Our first question: is the civil law of God harsh or compassionate? To be sure, the civil laws of God, especially as they are presented in Leviticus 20 give a harsh appearance. Adultery, homosexuality, kidnapping, rape, etc. are capital crimes given the death penalty. Many of us look at those laws realizing that we'd be in San Quentin, on death row, if they were still enforced today.

But frankly, the fact that I might deserve the death penalty simply doesn't address the issue. How amazingly self-centered have we become that we evaluate and dismiss God's law based upon the fact that we're transgressors of it! That God chose not to execute David for his sin with Bathsheba and Uriah did not mean that David was not deserving of death. If God, according to His own wisdom and providence, chooses to let those who are worthy of death live (something which happens quite

frequently—how many murderers are never caught?!) does not mean the murderer does not deserve death from a perspective of civil law.

But the passage we read earlier, where God tells us to show “no pity” is a passage which also reveals how merciful and compassionate God truly is.

No False Witnesses

The passage reveals God’s concern for the innocent who are accused. Not only does a conviction require two or three witnesses, but those witnesses, if they are shown to be false, will have done to them what they **“thought to have done to (their) brother” (Deuteronomy 19:19)**. By this standard, most people on death row today in America wouldn’t on death row. By this standard, those who are truly innocent of particular crimes will seldom be falsely accused. God is very compassionate toward the innocent.

Compassion for Society

We also learn from this passage that God is compassionate toward a society. Evil people should fear to do evil and that fear will deter them. God is very compassionate. He will not suffer the innocent to be convicted nor victimized by the evil which surrounds it. This brings us to that funny sounding comment where we’re told that our **“eye shall not pity”**.

The Hebrew word which is used for pity (*ûs*), means to “show mercy, have compassion, with a focus on sparing or delivering one from a great punishment”.¹ So how do we square this with the clear biblical admonition to be merciful? The answer is simply context. In a context of that which is personal and within the church, it is the responsibility of the faithful Christian to exercise mercy and seek to restore the erring brother.

Brethren, if a man is __overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of __gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted (Galatians 6:1).

But when a criminal is brought before the civil magistrate (a judge or jury) he is to be tried and given a fair due process. If he is indeed guilty, the judge or jury should not view themselves as having the right to reduce

¹Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (electronic ed.) (DBLH 2571, #1). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

or forego the due punishment. By what standard would they do this for some and not for others? This would result in judicial anarchy with judges and juries capriciously convicting some and releasing others based upon what kind of mood they're in or how friendly the defendant might happen to look.

Criminals who are guilty of capital crimes are often set free (perhaps in the name of compassion or a perceived rehabilitation) only to commit crimes again. It is a highly compassionate prescription of God to protect a society from those who would harm the innocent.

Just Laws

When it comes to the civil arena, it is up to God's ministers (Romans 13:4) are to be just. The passage teaches "**life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.**" These words are often used by the world as a criticism—as if the Bible were overly austere. What it actually asserts is that punishments for crimes are not to be overly harsh or overly lenient—they are to be just. You don't cut a hungry man's hand off for stealing a loaf of bread nor do you set a murderer free because he seems nice or there is no room in the prison.

2. What do the Secondary Standards of our Church Say about Theonomy?

Our primary standard as a church is the Bible. All churches have secondary standards. Secondary standards may be a statement of faith or they may simply be whatever the pastor might teach on a given Sunday. Our secondary standards include a document called the Westminster Confession. It's sort of an elongated statement of faith.

There is a portion of the Westminster Confession (Chapter 19—Of the Law of God) that addresses this issue.

General Equity

To them (Israel) also, as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.

Again, at first glance this appears contrary to what we've been teaching. But it really isn't. It is not the Theonomic position (at least as I would teach it) that we are to simply take the laws of Old Covenant Israel and plop them down in the middle of twenty-first century America.

God had given laws unique to certain tribes which wouldn't apply to the New Covenant. And the laws given by God, though detailed in many respects, are not exhaustive. When God's law demands restitution of four sheep for one stolen and five bulls for one stolen, one must seek to understand why there is a difference. Perhaps it can be compared to stealing one's car versus stealing one's tractor (one being a vehicle of transportation the other necessary for production and income).

And, of course, the Bible doesn't mention every type of thing or animal that can be stolen or every type of crime that can be committed. But this portion of the Westminster Confession, I believe, is highly Theonomic. It basically teaches that the Old Covenant political laws serve as a model for us; that we are obliged to utilize them to determine what is fair or just. "General equity" means fair or just.

Let me provide a scenario:

If a man committed a capital crime, say kidnapping, in 20 B.C., the crime would incur the death penalty. Say he was not caught. Now say the same man commits the same crime at the same place in 20 A.D. If we answer anything other than that the man still deserves the same punishment for the crime, we are not holding to our church's secondary standards of general equity.

3. In a Society Which Views God's Laws as Extreme and Ridiculous, How are we to Reasonably Apply this Theonomic Concept?

Who is actually foolish?

So often the argument against Theonomy is that it is harsh, weird and simply impossible to apply. I hope we can begin to understand how arrogant we are when we suggest that God's laws, which reflect His character are overly harsh—to suggest that is to suggest that God is overly harsh.

My friends, if we think God's laws are foolish and ludicrous; it is very likely that God thinks we're foolish and ludicrous. So we really need to decide who we are going to trust—the wisdom and law of man or the wisdom and law of God.

How is God's Law Applied?

What is the practical application of Theonomy in a secular society? Some would argue that it is so impossible to fully apply that we shouldn't apply it at all. But how many of us govern ourselves that way—because we fail to do everything do we do nothing? I think there is a simple principle that needs to be applied.

In logic it is called *argumentum a fortiori* which denotes 'argument from the stronger reason'. For example, if God's law teaches that homosexuality is a capital crime, how much more should we vote against laws which aim toward sanctioning gay marriage! If God's law teaches that adultery is a capital crime, how much more should we vote against laws which seek to justify and promote pornography.

I am not sure if Theonomy should be the first conversation we have with our non-Christian friends. There are many topics I might not delve into with my non-Christian friends: Calvinism, eschatology, views on the sacraments, sign gifts, women in ministry, etc. I wouldn't avoid these but there is something more critical and basic for people to understand—which is my final, and ever critical, point.

4. A Proper Approach to God's Law

What God has Done

Before God tells us what to do, He tells us what He has done. How do the Ten Commandments begin? **"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2)**. It is after this preface that the commands are given. God does not say, "Keep these commandments and I will bring you out of bondage."

The Apostle Paul uses the bondage of the Israelites in Egypt as an example of being in bondage to sin and death then drinking from the spiritual Rock which was Christ (1 Corinthians 10:1-5). If we approach the law thinking that by keeping it we can find peace with God, we will be sadly mistaken. With that frame of mind the law is a minister of death (1 Corinthians 3:7).

We are to rejoice in the superior and more glorious **"ministry of the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 3:8)** where the veil (which blinds our minds to the

truth of God's grace) is taken away in Christ. We must approach the law of God with humility—recognizing its danger. Like a small child who runs to his parent whenever a threat appears, we must run to the cross of Christ in light of the convicting power of the commandments of God.

May that subdue our hearts this morning as we prepare to partake at the Lord's Table.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Is the death penalty a deterrent to crime (page 2)?
2. Give a quick review of why we are to study the law of God. Where are the blessings (pages 3, 4)?
3. Is God's law harsh or compassionate? Explain your answers (pages 4-6).
4. Does the Westminster Confession teach or oppose Theonomy (pages 5, 6)?
5. How do Christians practically apply Theonomic principles in a society which is indifferent or hostile to the law of God (page 8)?
6. What must man always remember as he seeks to obey God's law (page 9)?