THIRTEEN

Christian Ethics

Daniel J. Baker – *Systematic Theology* – 2025

Introduction

When the Spirit regenerates a person, that person is "a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). Such a complete change will mean a change in our behavior and attitude toward obeying the Lord. Titus even says, "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, [12] training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age" (Titus 2:11–12). Being God's people is to embrace God's holiness. All of this means that the work of God in saving us we have studied above leads directly to what is called Christian (or biblical) ethics. John Murray wrote, "If ethics is concerned with manner of life and behavior, biblical ethics is concerned with the manner of life and behavior which the Bible requires and which the faith of the Bible produces."[1]

Most works of systematic theology do not contain a chapter on ethics, but this is not always true. John Frame adds a final chapter

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[1] John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 12.

in his *Systematic Theology* called, "How Then Shall We Live?"[2] In this chapter he discusses God's commandments as "what God commands us to do," and here he looks at the Decalogue and the Two Great Commandments as foundational laws to obey.[3] John Calvin has an extensive section on the new life we are to live as God's people, and he has a lengthy treatment on the Ten Commandments.[4] Many of the major historic catechisms include reflections on the Ten Commandments (*Heidelberg Catechism* questions 92–115; *Westminster Larger* questions 91–149; *Westminster Shorter* questions 39–82). But given that systematic theology is the organized presentation of what the bible teaches, it seems reasonable that some time be devoted to the subject of biblical ethics. Ethics is a massive part of God's revelation to us in his Word. Doing God's will is no peripheral concern, and thus it seems that it should have a place in systematics. As with all topics in systematics we cannot cover the subject exhaustively.

First Indicatives, *then* Imperatives

As we enter the world of ethics and reflecting on what we are to *do* as Christians, it is helpful to orient ourselves in a right way. One principle to keep in mind is the idea of "first indicatives, *then* imperatives." We think first about what *God* has done and will do and *then* we think about what he commands us to do. Sinclair Ferguson refers to this idea as the "gospel grammar" that goes with all progressive sanctification: "Divine indicatives (statements about what God has done, is doing, or will do) logically precede and ground Divine imperatives (statements about what we are to do in response)....Who God is, what God has done, is doing, and will do for us (indicative) provides the foundation for Our response of faith and obedience (imperative)."[5] An example is Romans 12:1, where

[2] Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1101.
[3] Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 1103.
[4] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.8; 3.6.
[5] Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 33.

Paul says, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” His “therefore” means that this command is tied to the previous discussion on the gospel of Christ, the gospel that saves by faith and not works (Rom 1:16–17); the gospel that unites us to Christ so we can walk “in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). “The mercies of God” in Romans 1–11 are the foundation for the ethics to which we are called in Romans 12:1–15:13. We can see the Bible’s “gospel grammar” also in 2 Thessalonians 2:13–15,

> But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. [14] To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. [15] So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

As those who are chosen and “sanctified by the Spirit,” we are to “stand firm and hold to” the new obedience he has called us to as Christians.

One last example will do: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, [13] for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12–13). We are certainly called to “work” as Christians, but we do so knowing at a very deep level of God’s prior work. Once again, *first* indicatives, *then* imperatives.

How Do We Know What We are to Do?

But once we understand our obligation to obey God and the provision of grace he has given us to enable that obedience, *what exactly are we called to do?* The Old and New Testament are filled

with commandments. Some are clearly to be obeyed, "You shall love the LORD" (Deut 6:5). Others are not: "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (John 9:7). We know in this second example that this command of Jesus only applies to the paralytic he heals. And yet, many commands are not so clear as these two.

To understand God's commandments, we apply the "analogy of Scripture," which means we need to *let Scripture interpret Scripture*. Scripture is its own best guide in how to interpret it. Two ideas are preeminent here. First, the New Testament must be our guide as we interpret the Old Testament. Jesus, the apostles, and the New Testament writings provide crucial instruction for how to approach the commands of the Old Testament. Second, we can never rightly understand a commandment if we look at it by itself. We always need to see it in light of the rest of God's revelation.

Looking at the New Testament as a guide for us, we notice three important patterns. First, some commands in the Old Testament are no longer binding for Christians. In Mark 7:19, Jesus "declared all foods clean," and in Acts 10:10–16 this is confirmed again. With the coming of Christ, then, the dietary laws are no longer binding. In Hebrews 7–10 there is an extensive look at the Old Testament sacrificial system. The point is made that with the sacrifice of Jesus, forgiveness of sins is now ours and "there is no longer any offering for sin" (Heb 10:18). Further, Peter calls believers collectively "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:8), a profound clue that the Levitical and Aaronic priesthood is now obsolete. Such commands as these are often called *ceremonial laws*.

Second, some commands in the Old Testament are binding in their moral principle but not in their civil particularity. That is a complex idea. It means that some laws commanded (or forbade) some moral action, but they also included a civil component that related to Israel the geo-political nation. Stealing in the Mosaic Law was a sin, but under the old covenant various kinds of restitution were added when someone stole: "If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four

sheep for a sheep" (Exod 22:1). The New Testament certainly forbids stealing (Eph 4:28), but the specific laws about restitution are not taught as binding on all Christians. Instead, Paul says, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need" (Eph 4:28). There is profound wisdom in the Old Testament laws about all matters of government and justice, but we need also to see the difference between what they are commanding *morally* and what they are including at a civil level. In the words of the *Trinity Confession*, "the general equity within these laws retains a moral component" (21.4; cf. *WCF* 19.4). These types of laws are often called *civil (or judicial) laws*.

Third, the New Testament presents many, many Old Testament laws as binding on Christians. The Ten Commandments (Matt 5:21–48; Exod 20:1–17; Rom 13:8–10), the two great commandments (Matt 22:37–40; Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18), laws about holiness (1 Peter 1:15–16), being merciful (Matt 9:13; 12:7; Hos 6:6), laws about vengeance (Rom 12:19–20; Deut 32:35; Prov 25:21–22), and laws about heeding the voice of God (Heb 3:7–11; Ps 95:7–11) are all presented by New Testament writers as binding on Christians today. These laws refer to loving God and loving our neighbor, the two great commandments. These laws are typically called *moral laws*.

This pattern is referred to as the "tripartite law of the Old Testament." It provides a profoundly helpful interpretive guide for approaching Old Testament laws. When a law is ceremonial, we know it is not binding for us but does help us understand Christ's sacrifice more deeply. When a law is civil, we know it points to a moral law that is binding and provides tremendous practical wisdom for living out God's laws in a society or organization. When a law is moral, we know it is something for us to obey through Christ. Of course, not every law is equally easy to place into these various categories. Yet, this is a good framework to start with.

With these interpretive ideas in mind, we can say that the following are four ways to determine God's ethical requirements.

The Commandments of God

The most important category to determine what is ethical for the Christian is God's written commandments. These include explicit commandments in the New Testament, the explicit moral laws of the Old Testament, and the moral element of the civil laws. We will look at many of these commandments in more detail below. One thing to note about obedience to commandments, is that sometimes obeying one law leads to a whole comprehensive set of behaviors we must fulfill. For instance, the command to children to "obey your parents in the Lord" (Eph 6:1) is a single command, but this single commandment has a multitude of related behaviors a child must do to obey the Lord. "Cleaning your room" is nowhere in the Bible, but Ephesians 6:1 might require that a child cleans her room in her specific parent-child relationship.

Natural Law and the Conscience[6]

The Bible bears witness to a law God writes on the hearts even of unbelievers who are without his written law:

> When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. [15] They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them [16] on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Rom 2:14–16)

In Romans 1, where Paul presents the litany of sins presumably by Roman unbelievers, he ends with a surprising statement: "Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such

[6] This section was greatly helped by conversations with Dr. Nathan Sasser, William Baker, and Josiah Wolfe.

things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them" (Rom 1:32). Not only does the unbeliever have a conscience that speaks of right and wrong (Rom 2:14–16), but here we learn that it knows "God's righteous decree" and even the fitting punishment for it (Rom 1:32). Further, we see the idea in Romans 13:1–4 where "governing authorities" are presented as "bearing the sword" in order to reward "the good" and to punish "the evil." Yet, "good" and "evil" can only be defined by God himself. Thus, there is in the hearts even of pagan governors some knowledge of God's moral law. This would apply to commandments like, "you shall not murder" (Exod 20:13), "you shall not steal" (Exod 20:15), but not necessarily ones like, "you shall not covet" (Exod 20:17).

There is much debate on what the natural man can know of God's moral law, but based on the above there is some common knowledge of right and wrong. As an example, in a 2024 oral argument at the Supreme Court of the United States in the case *Delligatti v. United States*, the attorney for the United States, Eric J. Feigin, appealed repeatedly to "common law." "Common law" typically means the law as understood by legal precedent (judicial decisions) and not by written statutes. And yet, in this quotation Feigin seems to mean more:

> It's hard to believe that we're actually here debating whether murder is a crime of violence….This is one case where the law already tracks common sense….And there's really no basis in law or logic to draw a distinction between the person who gently sprinkles poison in the cup and the person who, hating the victim, just withholds the antidote. By urging that distinction, Petitioner is asking this Court to discard literally two

> millennia of common law that treat acts of omission just like other acts.[7]

"Common law" going back "two millennia" seems to be less about legal precedents and more about "what everyone knows instinctively to be true." Said in this way, "common law" is coming close to what we mean by "natural law."

One of the foremost Medieval theologians was Thomas Aquinas, whose writing on natural law has cast big shadows in many circles. His major work is his *Summa Theologica*, which is arranged into various parts that contain dozens of questions. He deals with God's law in what is called the "First Part of the Second Part" (or I-II). Aquinas has an elaborate framework for his theory of law, and it is within this framework that he develops what he calls "natural law." To Aquinas, there are four types of law: eternal, natural, human, and Divine (I-II, Q 91). "Eternal law" is God's plan as it orders all things according to his intended ends. This "Divine Reason" governs "the whole community of the universe" and is "not subject to time but is eternal," and therefore he calls it "eternal law" (I-II, 91, Art 1). Second is "natural law," which is "an imprint on us of the Divine light" (I-II, Q 91, Art 2). God imprints on us certain "inclinations" or tendencies that cause us to pursue the ends for which we and all things were created (Q 91, art 2). Given that this "imprint" is done by God directly into our "nature," it is a natural law for Aquinas (Q 90, Art 4). Later he will argue that these "inclinations" reflect a "first principle of practical reason," which is that "good is that which all things seek after" (Q 94, Art 2). Note that for Aquinas "all things" means "all things." An example from nature he gives is that "fire is inclined to give heat" (Q 94, Art 3). Its respective "form" inclines it in this direction. He lists three "inclinations" that we have (Q 94, Art 2). The first is shared with

[7] Accessed at https://www.supremecourt.gov/oral_arguments/argument_transcripts/2024/23-825_2a34.pdf. See also https://wng.org/podcasts/legal-docket-defining-violence-and-fairness-1733077015.

all things, and it is the inclination to self-preservation. The second is shared with other animals, and it is the inclination toward reproduction and the "education of offspring," and includes all that this entails. The third is connected to our "rational soul" and so is not shared with all things or just animals. This inclination is "to know the truth about God, and to live in society," and also includes all that this entails. Thus, the pursuit of knowledge generally is included here, since to "to know the truth about God" requires a growth in knowledge. Virtue is living consistently with these inclinations, and vice is living contrary to them.

The third type of law is "human law," and this is less absolute. It is determined by individuals and groups of people reasoning their way to writing laws they think are best (Q 91, Art 3). This subjectivity opens the door to his last category of law, which is "Divine law." Given that our knowledge is finite, and we are prone toward evil, we also need "Divine law" to guide our behaviors (Q 91, Art 3). Divine law includes "Old Law" (old covenant laws) and "New Law" (new covenant laws). Divine law is not a replacement of natural law but at times is a restatement of natural law, and such moral laws are always binding. As an example, the command to "honor your father and mother" is to Aquinas a natural law that is restated in the Divine Law (Q 100, Art 1). It is a law that will be found in all cultures. And yet other laws like rising before the elderly (Lev 19:32) is Divine Law but not natural law (Q 100, Art 1). The Old Law contains moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws (Q 99, Art 2), with only the moral being binding perpetually. The New Law is written on our hearts through the Holy Spirit as promised in Jeremiah 31:31–33 (Q 106, Art 1).

As will be clear below, Reformed theology is far less optimistic about what man knows of the good and moral (and just) apart from God's special revelation. To be sure, Aquinas does have a place for "Divine law," but he can sound at times as if this is a helpful add-on to our moral code and not something absolutely essential to knowing right from wrong, good from evil, justice from

injustice. But it is hard not to see his "inclinations" as somewhat arbitrary. His view is that the binding biblical commandments are those which accord with the natural law (which in turn reflects eternal law). But how are we to know what those precepts are? The Decalogue is an important statement of these binding laws, but how do we know this is the case? This arbitrariness in something as critical as establishing ethics is unsettling, to say the least. Thomas Jefferson famously wrote in the Declaration of Independence that it was "self-evident" we are "created equal" and "endowed" by our "Creator" with "certain unalienable rights" and these include "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." To Jefferson such rights are a given, just as to Aquinas a different set of laws are seen as inherent to all people as part of his "natural law." Yet, which of these authors are right? Or are they both right? It is hard to escape this arbitrariness if you attempt to build a moral edifice apart from Scripture. The Reformed tradition has typically embraced the teaching of Romans 2:14–16 and 1:32 and yet also tried to incorporate the corrupting influence of sin into our theology of any kind of natural law.

As an example, John Calvin in the *Institutes* also includes extensive reflection on the conscience and natural law. He connects the Ten Commandments to the natural law.[8] There the natural law is called the "inward law…written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all," and he says it "asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables" (i.e., the two tables or tablets of the Ten Commandments). The conscience of man knows the essence of "the two Tables," but the sinfulness of man makes a new revelation of these laws necessary: "Man is so shrouded in the darkness of errors that he hardly begins to grasp through this natural law what worship is acceptable to God…. Accordingly (because it is necessary both for our fullness and for our arrogance), the Lord has provided us with a written law to give us a clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law, shake off our listlessness, and

[8] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.8.1.

strike more vigorously our mind and memory."[9] Like Aquinas before him, Romans 2:14–15 looms large in Calvin's thinking on these issues. In an earlier passage of Book 2, he addresses the "natural law" teaching of Romans 2:14–15 by saying,

> The purpose of natural law, therefore, is to render man inexcusable. This would not be a bad definition: natural law is that apprehension of the conscience which distinguishes sufficiently between just and unjust, and which deprives men of the excuse of ignorance, while it proves them guilty by their own testimony.[10]

Our sinful hearts do not erase our knowledge of natural law entirely, but they do obscure that knowledge. Further, our sinful hearts deaden our wills to desire the good and thus make the work of the Holy Spirit necessary for both knowing God's will accurately and especially for doing it.[11]

Herman Bavinck echoes the essential position of Calvin, but he does expand the content of the natural law. Reflecting on the conscience and Romans 2:14–15, he says the conscience provides "a positive law" to which the sinner can refer.[12] This private "conscience" becomes a "public conscience," however, as cultures take their combined sense of morality and impose it on others through laws and government. Such a law and practice of it does not reach far enough to satisfy the full demand of God, for "pagans do not keep the law in its deep spiritual significance and fullness (Rom 7:14), but they nonetheless externally obey the commandments in varying degrees."[13] While the content of this law does relate to the Decalogue (Ten Commandments), "the natural law and Decalogue differ in manner of revelation, in extent, purity,

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[9] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.8.1.
[10] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.22.
[11] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.25–27.
[12] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 1:175.
[13] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:175.

clarity, and foundation ('I am the LORD your God')."[14] He notes that the "ought" of the natural law which binds our conscience "presupposes" a higher authority speaking the "*Thou* shalt" of the natural law.[15]

He lists seven reasons why it is appropriate to speak of a "natural law": (1) "all human beings experience obligations toward God and to their neighbor, regardless of what those obligations are and how they must be fulfilled; *and* they feel bound to obey the moral law when they know it"; (2) He sees Romans 1:19–20 as evidence; (3) "our conscience" is proof; (4) Cicero and other philosophers affirm it; (5) "the nations with their natural and national law bear witness to it"; (6) "the church fathers" affirm it; and (7) "without natural law the moral world order, the moral order of God's kingdom, and human dependence on God would completely collapse."[16]

In a later section he looks at the world of fallen humanity for traces of God's moral law. Here he seems to imply that what the unbeliever pursues as morality is a kind of testimony of what God writes on the heart of the sinner (Rom 2:14–15). The way even sinners pursue "marriage," "family," "friendship," diligence and integrity in the workplace, and even the pursuits of "science, art, and the state" "are products of natural morality."[17] He sees "science" as "knowledge of reality," thus pursuing it bears witness to a true reality we can explore; "art" is a pursuit of "the beautiful," a beauty that echoes God the Creator; and "the state" bears witness to God's natural law through its effort to limit "sin" and define what is just and right.[18] Bavinck is operating with a more optimistic and comprehensive sense of a natural law than Calvin, and seems to encompass more of Bavinck's highly developed theology of creation. This features prominently throughout his *Reformed*

[14] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:219.
[15] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:219.
[16] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics,* 1:219.
[17] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:232.
[18] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:231–232.

Dogmatics and enables him to speak of the pursuit of beauty within "art" or the pursuit of "knowledge" within the sciences without fear of religious compromise. His natural law has a superficial likeness to Aquinas but is built on much sturdier foundations.

One facet of the natural law not often mentioned is the place of the covenant with Noah. As we noted above, the Noahic covenant applies to *all humanity*: "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, [10] and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth" (Gen 9:9–10). But within this covenant is the command against murder (vv. 5–6) and the call to "be fruitful and multiply" (v. 7). In other words, the moral obligations contained here include protection of life and the pursuit of the institutions and relationships that will lead to human flourishing. Marriage, family, and even good civil government are thus in the background, for these are necessary if we are to "be fruitful and multiply." Given that the Noahic covenant is given to all the people alive at the time, and this group will be the ones to carry on what it requires, there is no race or generation of humanity that can argue total ignorance of what God requires. Always there has been *some* trace of a positive law in the peoples of history and the peoples of the world. We would thus expect some connection between these Noahic commandments and what is observed to be "natural law" among fallen humanity. That is just what we find. Human consciences echo the Noahic statutes.

Romans 14 is a profound passage where we see our conscience speaking in a strong manner. It is not exactly the same as the natural law written on a heart, but it is related. Romans 14 has several areas of behavior where there is freedom for the Christian to do one thing or another. A Christian can eat vegetables only or he can add meat to his diet (14:2). He can recognize certain holy days or consider "all days alike" (14:5). A Christian can "drink wine" or abstain (14:21). What a Christian cannot do is sinfully judge the choice of another Christian (14:3–4). Further, a Christian cannot impose his free choice on someone else who thinks that

choice is actually sinful to make. If I cause another believer to do something he believes to be sinful, I am causing them to "stumble" (14:20). Paul concludes by saying something remarkable: "But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (14:23). Given how serious sin is in the writings of Paul, it is important to see that doing what our conscience forbids is actually "sin."

Discernment/Wisdom

Another way we know God's ethical requirements is through Christian discernment and spiritual wisdom. Wisdom is skill in living in the fear of the Lord in all areas of life. We know from Proverbs that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight" (Prov 9:10). And yet, Proverbs also reminds us that wisdom guides us in our speech (Prov 31:26), diligence (10:4; 12:24), relationships (10:12), just dealings (11:1), humility (11:2), sexual purity (5:1–23), hunger for wisdom (2:1–15), and all areas of life. Wisdom is not a simple thing, however. Proverbs is not an instruction manual, where step-by-step we build our bookshelf. It is a set of principles for living that requires wisdom to apply. Wisdom is not only an Old Testament concept, for Paul says we are to, "be careful how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, [16] making the best use of the time, because the days are evil" (Eph 5:15–16; cf. James 3:13–18). "Discernment" is a similar idea. In Romans 12:2, Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Notice that discernment here enables us to know "the will of God," which means his "preceptive will," his will for our behavior. In Ephesians 5 he will say similar things: "try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord" (5:10); "understand what the will of the Lord is" (5:17).

The Bible's teaching on wisdom and discernment reminds us that God guides our ethics at times in an individual and somewhat subjective manner. My wisdom and discernment might lead me to a certain path different from my brother or sister in Christ. I might choose to vote for a presidential candidate my Christian brother does not choose. I might choose a schooling option for my children that differs from someone else. These choices are the result of wisdom at work in my life. Wisdom and discernment are slightly different than the conscience. The conscience is more of an umpire, calling balls and strikes. It tells us what is wrong or right. Wisdom and discernment step in where we might have a choice between several allowable options, and we need to figure out the best choice to make. Of course, the line between wisdom and conscience is not always easy to draw. Since both are concerned with discerning God's will, they can both be engaged with a given decision.

Walking by the Spirit

A final way that God guides our behavior is through the Holy Spirit. There are various ways this can happen. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was concerned with determining what was ethical for Gentiles at this early stage of the church. After wrestling with the issues involved, they made a decision on certain behaviors. In their letter to the churches they wrote that their decision was what "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). They were aware that the Spirit was guiding their discussion on the matter. The Spirit can guide more immediately, as when "the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Paul for the work to which I have called them'" (Acts 13:2). Elsewhere, it seems that the Spirit acted through providence or perhaps in another prophetic moment, where Paul's team wanted to go "into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" (Acts 16:7). In our last chapter we also looked at Galatians 5:25, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit." "Keep in step with the Spirit" means walking in the path he has set, as when soldiers keep in step and march as a unit. We

have to be careful with this aspect of God's guidance, lest we misuse it. At times a person says, "the Spirit told me to," regarding some questionable decision. Adding the voice of the Spirit is a kind of trump card that eliminates someone else critiquing their decision. This can be appropriate, but it can also be a way to manipulate people and decisions.

The Commandments of God

For the rest of the chapter, we will survey the commandments of God. When we turn to the hundreds of commandments in the Bible, it can be dizzying to organize and make sense of them. Yet, with Scripture as the interpreter of Scripture, we can find our way through the forest and see God's design.

The Two Great Commandments

To organize God's commandments, we start with the two great commandments, because that is what Jesus did in his teaching. When he was asked, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (Matt 22:36), he gave this answer:

> And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. [38] This is the great and first commandment. [39] And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. [40] On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt 22:36–40)

Somewhat surprisingly, when asked about "the great commandment," Jesus does not look to the Decalogue for an answer. He looks at Deuteronomy 6:5 in what is called the *Shemah*, named after the opening Hebrew word in the passage: "Hear!" (*Shemah*): "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. [5] You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with

all your soul and with all your might" (Deut 6:4–5). And then Jesus turns to a chapter from Leviticus that deals with how we are to treat our "neighbor": "You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD" (Lev 19:18). In the original setting, this would have meant how we treat our *Jewish* neighbor, but in Jesus' teaching he uses the figure of a compassionate Samaritan to expand our understanding of who our neighbor is to include anyone in need whom God brings across our path (Luke 10:29–37).

Jesus says of these two laws, "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt 22:40). That word "depend" in the ESV is not the best choice for a translation of the Greek word (*kremannumi*, κρεμάννυμι). "Hang" would capture the Greek word better, as is used in the NRSV, NIV2011, NJB, KJV, and NKJV. The Greek verb is used in the Greek Old Testament (LXX) where Absalom gets his hair caught in a tree and he is "hanging" from the tree (2 Sam 18:9). Jesus uses the term also to speak of someone causing a child to sin. He says it would be better if a "great millstone" was "hanging" on his neck, and he was thrown into the sea (Matt 18:6). A criminal was "hanging" on the cross next to Jesus (Luke 22:39), and Jesus was killed by Romans "hanging him on a tree" (Acts 5:30; 10:39; Gal 3:13). To say that "all the Law and the Prophets" "hang" on the two great commandments means that all of the commandments help you obey one or the other (or both) of the great commandments. All of them relate to either loving God or loving our neighbor.

Confirmation of this idea comes in Romans 13:8–10:

> Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. [9] For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." [10] Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom 13:8–10)

Notice that Paul says these commandments from the Decalogue (adultery, murder, steal, covet) are "summed up" in the neighbor commandment (Lev 19:18). Within Leviticus 19:18, Paul is saying, is all the commandments that relate to treating our "neighbor" rightly. Paul even adds somewhat incidentally, "and any other commandment." We do not want to miss this phrase. It implies that there are many commandments outside of the Decalogue that are included in what he is saying. With respect to all these commandments, if we "love" our neighbor, then we will automatically be keeping all these other commandments. Jesus and the New Testament documents refer to "love" as a noun and verb hundreds of times. It has a centrality to Christian behavior unlike any other activity. But part of the reason for this is that within this verb "love" is a massive set of commandments that relate to others. "Love" is no vague sentimental positive feeling about someone else. Love is instead a way of thinking about, speaking to, and acting toward another that always seeks what is best for them—what is best being defined by God's Word and not our own sentimentality. Love therefore will reflexively keep more basic commandments like not murdering, not stealing from, not lying to, not harming. As Paul says, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor" (Rom 13:10). Paul is really modelling what Jesus said in Matthew 22:40, that all "the Law and the Prophets" hangs on the two great commandments.

Loving God works in a similar manner. John says, "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). "Loving God" is being extended to include a whole complex of commandments. Because God is our *God* and *Lord*, loving him is not like loving anyone else. He occupies a place of lordship and authority over us that is absolute. To love him is necessarily to obey him. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). We cannot love God and yet be indifferent to his commandments. Since loving God involves obedience to *all* relevant commandments, any command that relates to loving our neighbor *also* fits beneath the category of loving God. Yet, there are

commands that relate to loving God and *not* loving our neighbor. "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3) from the Decalogue relates to God and not our neighbor. Commands regarding the worship of God also fit here (Exod 20:4–11; Matt 4:10; 1 Cor 11:17–34; Rev 19:10).

Herman Bavinck's posthumous *Reformed Ethics* actually divides our ethical obligations into three categories based on the "object" of the ethic.[19] My actions can be directed toward God, others, but then also toward myself. When I take physical care of myself by eating and wearing clothes, I am loving myself. Not committing suicide and not taking unnecessary risks is protecting the sacred life God has given me. Developing my knowledge and "intellect" through proper attendance to God's Word and even general education is a way to care for myself properly.[20] Yet, this triad of God, self, and others, is really application of the overarching obligation on our lives, which is to love God. Bavinck on this writes,

> Viewed properly, there is only one duty, that of love, which is the fulfillment of the law (Rom 13:10). And there actually is only one object of that love—namely, God. Everything else—people, angels, nature, art, and so forth—may and must be loved only in God and for God. The sole end of all things—ourselves, our neighbors, the state, and the like—is God's glory.[21]

The Decalogue (Ten Commandments)

Though it is often said that the great commandments are a summary of the Decalogue, it is better to reverse the relationship. The Decalogue is the most important *elaboration* on the two great commandments. We learn volumes about loving God and loving

[19] Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: The Duties of the Christian Life*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 2:114, 277–416.
[20] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2:141.
[21] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 2:101.

our neighbor from the Decalogue. The first four commandments instruct us in loving God, and the next six commandments teach us how to love our neighbor. These two sections of the Decalogue are sometimes referred to as "the first table" and "the second table," an idea connected to the commandments being given in "two tablets" (Exod 31:18). Yet, it is better to think of the two tablets as each containing a copy of the whole Decalogue, a practice common when parties made a covenant with one another. Each party would be given a copy of that covenant.[22] Yet, for purposes of organizing the Decalogue, thinking of a first table and second table is not a problem. Within the Old Testament, the Decalogue is profoundly important. Note these descriptions: "And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God" (Exod 31:18); "And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments, and he wrote them on two tablets of stone" (Deut 4:13). These verses distinguish the Decalogue from the hundreds of other commandments given to Israel in these years. While on Mt. Sinai, Moses is given all the commandments in Exodus 20–23, only the Decalogue was given to him on "tablets of stone written with the finger of God." Further, while all of Exodus 20–23 can be said to be the covenant, "his covenant" is said to be "the Ten Commandments" (or "Ten Words," hence the name "Decalogue").[23]

The importance of the Decalogue is evident in the New Testament, too. Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount spends much time on two of the ten commandments, murder (5:21–26) and adultery (5:27–30). Numerous commandments in the New

[22] Kline, "Two Tables of the Covenant."
[23] For more on the unique significance of the Decalogue within the Old Testament, see Philip S. Ross, *From the Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Threefold Division of the Law* (Scotland: Mentor, 2010).

Testament cite a commandment directly (Rom 7:7; 13:9; Eph 6:1–3; James 2:11) or hint at one (Eph 4:28; James 4:2; 1 John 3:12).

The first table of the Decalogue speaks to how we are to relate to God. In the first commandment, we learn that God alone is to be our God, and we are to absolutely reject any idol or other false god (Exod 20:3). In the second commandment (Exod 20:4–6) God forbids the worship of any idol (false god) we create, but the law would also include any physical recreation of the true god. In the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, question 109 asks, "What are the sins forbidden in the second commandment?" What is forbidden includes "the making any representation of God, of all, or of any of the three Persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever; all worshiping of it, or God in it or by it." The golden calf is a vivid illustration of the truth of this interpretation. While the people say, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (Exod 31:4), Aaron says, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD" (Exod 31:5). But both actions are seen as offensive by God. Only Moses's intervention stops a more dramatic punishment by Yahweh on his people. J.I. Packer seems exactly right speaking of the second commandment: "In its Christian application, this means that we are not to make use of visual or pictorial representations of the Triune God, or of any person of the Trinity, for the purposes of Christian worship."[24] He goes on to say that Christians debate whether this includes picture Bibles that have pictures of Jesus, and we could include here nativity scenes with representations of Jesus.[25] Certainly, it includes the use of elaborate stained-glass or statues of Jesus in buildings used for Christian worship. We might include here another modern example, the television show, *The Chosen*. Part of the problem with representations of Jesus is that they begin to influence our beliefs about Jesus. We can think of him as being a certain way and treating people in a certain way, simply because of

[24] Packer, *Knowing God*, 39.
[25] Packer, *Knowing God*, 39.

the way an artist portrays him. The words of Jesus in our Bibles can take on the voice of the person in the movie or television show we watched. There is no way to create a representation that in some way does not also teach a certain theology. And that theology can have a powerful formational influence. Soon it is indeed impacting our worship of the true God.

The third commandment (Exod 20:7) requires that when we use God's name, we are either speaking to him or about him. Using his name as an expression of anger or joy or sympathy is not appropriate—unless these moments are ones where we are sincerely addressing him. The *Trinity Catechism* on the third commandment says,

> Q61. What does the third commandment require?
> A. It requires revering and forbids profaning or misusing God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word, and works in our thoughts and words, whether alone or with others. (Ps 148:13; Lev 19:12; Ps 29:2; Isa 52:5; Matt 6:9; Mal 1:6–7)

The fourth commandment (Exod 20:8–11; Deut 5:12–15) has been the subject of great controversy. The basic command is straightforward enough: the Israelite was to "labor" for six days in the week and then on "the seventh day," they were not to do "any work" (vv. 9–10). This rest was a way to "remember the Sabbath day" and "keep it holy" (v. 8). The rationale offered in Exodus 20:11 was God's rest on the seventh day after the six days of creation (Gen 2:1–4). In this way God "made holy" the seventh day (Gen 2:4). The rationale in Deuteronomy 5:12–15 is different, however. In this second presentation of the Decalogue (Deut 5:6–21), the rationale is connected to God's deliverance of the nation from Egypt: "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (v. 15). Both rationales, creation and redemption, have a place in keeping the

Sabbath. By the time of Deuteronomy 5, more Israelites would have become owners of slaves and possessors of more wealth and power. God is saying that when this happens, they need to remember where they came from and offer everyone within their sphere of responsibility a seventh day of rest.

In the Old Testament the emphasis is very much on keeping the seventh day for rest. The work-rest rhythm is what gets accented. Violators of the Sabbath are ones who work on the Sabbath as if it is like any other day. God condemns such disregard and sees it as greed (Exod 31:14–16; 35:2–3; Neh 10:31; 13:15–22; Isa 56:2–6; 58:13; Jer 17:21–27). The worship dimension of the Sabbath is very understated in the Old Testament. Yet, there are a couple places where it is brought out. First is Leviticus 23:3, "Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work. It is a Sabbath to the LORD in all your dwelling places." We get no detail about this "holy convocation," but the mention of it is noteworthy. Chronicles records "burnt offerings" being offered "on the Sabbaths" (1 Chr 23:31; 2 Chr 2:4; 8:13; 31:3). And then is Psalm 92, which has the caption, "A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath." It is no small thing for a Psalm to be explicitly connected to the Sabbath. Thus, by the end of the Old Testament era rest, a "holy convocation," "burnt offerings," and the singing of Psalm 92 were part of what it meant to "remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exod 20:8).

When we get to the New Testament, we see that Jesus is "the Lord of the Sabbath" (Matt 12:8). He teaches that doing good on the Sabbath is commendable, and he models this by healing on the Sabbath (Matt 12:10–12; John 7:23). He allows his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath to get nourishment (Mark 2:23–28). He reminds the self-righteous and oppressive Pharisees that, "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Rest and worship are not burdens but blessings for those who do them in faith. In the rest of the New Testament, we observe the early church's evangelism in the synagogues. They would join the Jews

in worship on the Sabbath and seize opportunities to preach Christ (Acts 13:14, 27, 42, 44). From these passages we might assume that keeping the Sabbath in a way continuous with the Old Testament is the right path to take.

Yet, there is an observable shift that takes place in the New Testament. The first one is a shift for the day of the week the church would typically gather. While centuries of Jewish practice kept to a seventh day Sabbath observance, the church gathered "on the first day of the week" (Acts 20:7; cf. 1 Cor 16:2). Further, John refers to "the Lord's day" as the time when he received a vision (Rev 1:10). The day of worship has changed to Sunday. No longer is it on Saturday to commemorate creation or the Egyptian deliverance (Exod 20:11; Deut 5:11). Now it will be on Sunday to commemorate the resurrection of the Lord on "the first day of the week" (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1). We should not minimize this adjustment to the Christian's calendar. It reminds us of the massive significance of the redemption of Christ. Time changes with his resurrection. The *worship* aspect of Old Testament Sabbath-keeping is thus clearly maintained but with the seismic shift of going from Saturday to Sunday.

The *rest* dimension of Old Testament Sabbath-keeping is harder to nail down in the New Testament. Hebrews 3:17–4:13 speaks of a rest we possess in Christ by faith, a rest that anticipates the fullness of a rest to come. Yet, it offers no hint that as Christians, a day of rest now is to be practiced. Paul rebukes the Galatians for keeping "days and months and seasons and years," which he equates with serving "the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world" (Gal 4:9–10). To the Colossians he says that "a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath" are only "a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col 2:16–17). And then there is what he says in Romans 14:5, "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." Given that Paul was not at all indifferent to the gathering of the church and this on "the first day of the week" (1 Cor 16:1; Acts

20:7), it seems that Paul in his writings is rebuking Christians for binding a person's conscience into keeping a *Jewish* seventh-day Sabbath. That would make sense of his different statements on the rhythm of our week. A Christian might call his worship on the Lord's day a "Sabbath," but he is not keeping an unmodified *Jewish* Sabbath law when he does this. A Christian might rest on the Sabbath, but she is not keeping an untouched *Jewish* Sabbath law when she does this. This explains the fact that the rest dimension of the Sabbath disappears almost entirely in the New Testament, and the worship side is expanded massively. Along these lines, Richard Bauckham has researched the development of the Sabbath from the New Testament to the present and found that Constantine's decree of March 3, AD 321, which spoke of Sunday as a day of rest as "the earliest clear reference to Sunday as a day free from work."[26]

The Reformed tradition often speaks of Sabbath keeping as a "creation ordinance," meaning it is an obligation laid on humanity at creation and continuing "to the end of the world" (*WCF* 21.7). There is not unanimity on *how* the Sabbath is to be kept, however. Calvin and Turretin believe the commandment contains both moral and ceremonial aspects, and that the moral dimension remains after the work of Christ but not the ceremonial.[27] The "burnt offerings" mentioned in Chronicles are clearly ceremonial, but for Calvin even a tight understanding of keeping one-day-in-seven for worship is a ceremonial aspect. For Turretin the moral dimension includes (1) public worship on a "certain and fixed time and day," (2) a "sanctification of the day itself" by resting from "the works of our ordinary calling," and (3) giving rest to "servants and beasts" as we

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[26] Richard Bauckham, "Sabbath and Sunday in the Post-Apostolic Church," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 280–81. For an outstanding look at the Sabbath throughout church history, see all of Bauckham's chapters in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982. Reprint: Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock, 1999).

[27] Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:85. See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.8.32–33.

have opportunity.[28] *Regular* but not *weekly* worship is what he finds in the fourth commandment.[29] John Frame argues for both rest and worship to be kept on the Lord's Day.[30] Greg Beale downplays the rest dimension of the commandment and elevates the place of worship on the Sabbath (which to him is not *necessarily* to be kept on a Sunday).[31] The documents of Westminster present a rigorous understanding of the Sabbath, detailing extensively what must be done and what must not be done. As one example we can look at question 117 in the *Larger Catechism*:

> How is the sabbath or the Lord's day to be sanctified?
> A. The sabbath or Lord's day is to be sanctified by an holy resting all the day, not only from such works as are at all times sinful, but even from such worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful; and making it our delight to spend the whole time (except so much of it as is to be taken up in works of necessity and mercy) in the public and private exercises of God's worship: and, to that end, we are to prepare our hearts, and with such foresight, diligence, and moderation, to dispose, and seasonably to despatch our worldly business, that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of that day. (*WLC* 117)

Not all Reformed scholars are convinced by such an approach. D.A. Carson sees more discontinuity than continuity between the Old Testament Sabbath and the new covenant Lord's day, and thus named the work he edited, *From Sabbath to Lord's*

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[28] Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:88.
[29] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.8.33.
[30] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2008), 574.
[31] G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 791–97.

Day[32] to capture the progression he sees in the Bible. Thomas Schreiner would hold a similar position.[33]

Circumstances can sometimes make worship on the Lord's day impossible for a Christian, and at times even rest is beyond our control (much less the rest of others). Yet, when possible, it seems that the right approach to the Lord's day (and thus the Sabbath) is to give oneself to worship with God's people on the Lord's day and to rest from our normal labors one day in seven. The words of Jesus are helpful here, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). It is not hard to go from a gracious command of God that leads to communion with him and fellowship with other Christians and natural recovery from our work to a restricting commandment that invests far too much energy on what must and must not be done on a given day of the week. Rest and worship on the Lord's day as one is able thus seems the right application of the fourth commandment.

The second table of the Decalogue includes the commands connected to how we love our neighbor as ourselves. In the fifth commandment, God says to "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you." (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16). In the new covenant, this commandment is unchanged, being cited verbatim in Ephesians 6:1–3:

> Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. [2] "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), [3] "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land."

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[32] D.A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999).

[33] Thomas R. Schreiner, "Good-Bye and Hello: The Sabbath Command for New Covenant Believers," in *Progressive Covenantalism* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 159–88.

Note that even the promise is seen as true for the people of God now. Of course, where "live long in the land" means Canaan to the old covenant saints, the blessing to us means enjoying God's favor and blessings as we obey the commandment.

The sixth commandment, "you shall not murder" (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17), echoes what was given to humanity in the covenant with Noah (Gen 9:5–6). Murder means the *sinful* taking of a life, not simply "killing," since civil governments have the right to take life as they enforce the laws of a land and in acts of war. This is what it means to "bear the sword" (Rom 13:4). Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount teaches that murder is indeed wrong, but so, too, is any kind of sinful anger (Matt 5:21–22). The Old Testament also condemns sinful anger: "Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly" (Prov 14:29). Thus, murder with our body is forbidden, but so, too, is murder in our hearts.

The seventh commandment, "you shall not commit adultery" (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18), is certainly unchanged when we get to the new covenant (Matt 15:19; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20; Rom 2:22; 7:1–4; 13:9; James 2:11). Adultery means sexual intercourse between two people who are not married to each other but where one of them is married to someone else. Jesus, however, says that lust is also forbidden, for a man lusting after a woman is committing "adultery with her in his heart" (Matt 5:28). Proverbs condemns such lust, too, but more because unchecked lust leads to the massively destructive sin of adultery (cf. Prov 7:6–27). Yet, the tenth commandment says explicitly, "you shall not covet your neighbor's wife" (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21), which is essentially sinful lust.

The eighth commandment, "you shall not steal" (Exod 20:15; Deut 5:19), refers to a whole variety of sins. It forbids sinful dealings in business (Prov 11:1), literally taking another man's property (Exod 22:1), but it could also be withholding something we owe to another (Deut 24:14–15). In the new covenant we are to be generous with our property, but we are still to respect the

property of others: "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need" (Eph 4:28).

The ninth commandment, "you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20), is not just a general commandment against lying. Of course, God's people should not lie (Prov 6:16–19; Zech 8:16; Eph 4:25). But bearing "false witness" also has special relevance for legal situations when someone is giving testimony about a person or situation. God condemns giving false testimony in severe ways (Deut 19:16–21).

The tenth commandment forbids coveting: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's" (Exod 20:17). In Deuteronomy 5:21, the tenth commandment reverses the order of "house" and "wife." The tenth commandment helps us interpret all the other nine commandments. Where many of them might refer primarily to an obedience with our bodies, the tenth commandment means that God is also requiring an obedience in the heart. We can understand, then, why Paul singled out this commandment in Romans 7, when he spoke of how the sin in his heart came to life in a whole new way when he encountered God's commandment, "you shall not covet" (Rom 7:7–8).

Maximal vs. Minimal Reading of the Decalogue

The mention of coveting in the tenth commandment and how it causes us to reinterpret the other nine commandments, leads us to another discussion. In Reformed theology (and prior Medieval theology as well) there is a long tradition of equating the Decalogue with the moral law. The Decalogue to many is not just one important expression of the moral law, but it *is* the moral law. In the words of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism,* "The moral law is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments" (*WSC* 41). In the *Westminster Larger Catechism* question 99 we get explicit

instruction on how we should interpret the Decalogue, given its place as a sum of God's moral law. We can call their interpretive grid the "maximal" reading of the Decalogue.

A good example is the fifth commandment, "you shall honor your father and your mother" (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:15). In questions 123–132, the *Larger Catechism* explains all that is meant by this commandment. If the Decalogue is the sum of the moral law, then all moral commandments need to tie to one of the ten commandments. To accomplish this, the Westminster theologians tied to the fifth commandment not just how we are to treat our parents, but also how any authority relationship is to be handled. This commandment, then, requires a right way of "inferiors" dealing with "superiors" (meaning only lesser vs. greater authority), but also a right way of "superiors" dealing with "inferiors" and even those on equal standing dealing rightly with their peers (what they call "the duties of equals" and "the sins of equals," q. 131–132). When the fifth commandment about honoring our parents is said also to require that masters treat their slaves in a righteous manner, we know we are reading in a maximal kind of way.

A minimal reading would be to so limit what the commandment requires that even Jesus's interpretations are seen as a stretch. A minimal reading would forbid seeing lust and adultery as related in the Decalogue.

Once again, we are to let "Scripture interpret Scripture." Scripture is its own best guide for interpretation. It would seem that when other Scriptures have a clear tie to one of the commandments, we should see them as related. The benefit of this type of connection is that it allows us to organize God's commandments in a helpful manner. But part of the history of the maximal reading of the Decalogue is seeing it as equivalent to God's moral law. Every moral commandment really had to be explicitly connected to the Decalogue to be seen as a moral commandment. Yet, if we see the two great commandments in that role instead, this is not necessary. Commandments about masters treating slaves might not find an easy place within the fifth commandment, but such laws certainly

relate to how we "love our neighbor." Commandments about how much we are to live for the good and flourishing of others might not fit easily with the sixth commandment forbidding murder, but such positive commandments fit easily with the call to "love our neighbor."

Yet, it must be said that the Decalogue has an undeniable glory. God selected ten specific commandments to be a primary guide for Israel's ethics, and it is profound how complete and how universal these commandments are. There is a reason it is still debated whether these should be posted in schools and courtrooms in the United States in the 21st century. So, while not every single moral law easily finds a place within the Decalogue's ten commandments, we should not miss how many of them can. For those that do not find a ready place, this is no obstacle, since the real definitive summation of the moral law is the two great commandments: "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt 22:40).

Love God

At this point we want to summarize some of the Bible's teaching on loving God and loving our neighbor. In the discussion above on the two great commandments and the Decalogue, we have surveyed some of this ground. Further, in prior chapters we considered how we are to live according to our biological sex (and corresponding gender), our response of faith and repentance to God's offer of salvation through Christ, his call on life in the church (worship, leadership and responding to leadership), and our pursuit of spiritual gifts for the sake of building others up. Our ethical response to God involves all of this. Now we want to mention some things which have yet to be covered.

Loving God Through Fear, Faith, and Trust

In John Murray's classic on biblical ethics, he wrote, "The fear of God is the soul of godliness."[34] He is right, since "fear" (Eccl 12:13; 1 Peter 2:13) or "faith" (Mark 11:22; John 14:1) or "trust" (Ps 37:3; Prov 3:5) are responses to God that contain within them all other right responses to God. Obedience, worship, and devotion will flow out of the one rightly related to God—and right relationship means that we have embraced his lordship, supremacy, and total reign over our lives by giving him the fear he deserves. Fear does not run away in cowardice but runs toward God in a captivated submission to him. Fear, faith, and trust zealously look to God's Word for direction, true wisdom, and the revelation needed to orient our lives correctly. Related here also is the flipside of such fear and trust, the refrain throughout the Bible when considering enemies or threats in light of God's care and protection, "Do not fear" (Deut 1:21; 20:3; 31:6; Josh 10:8; Isa 8:12). Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul" (Matt 10:28). "Do not be anxious" (Matt 6:25, 31, 34) is the same idea, since the command against anxiety is related to a confidence in God's provision. Paul commands, "Do not be anxious" but instead respond to God with "prayer" and "thanksgiving" (Phil 4:6).

Loving God Through Obedience

God is unlike any other being in the universe, and our relationship with him is unlike any other relationship we have. No one else can claim the allegiance he claims. No one else can have the place he has in our lives. The first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7), has sweeping application in our lives. God alone is our King, Master, God, and Lord. To love the One who has authority over all things and who is King over all things will automatically entail obedience. To say you love a king you will not obey is to have a false love. We see this in God's Word: "For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And

[34] Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 229.

his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Jesus told us, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

We could say much more, but remember, all the commandments that deal with loving our neighbors are also commandments that deal with loving God, since "this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

Loving God by Imitating God and Christ

An aspect of loving God that contains within it myriad other responses is the call to imitate God himself: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1); "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph 5:1). This will involve imitating Christ in his crucifixion as well: "And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matt 10:38). On this Bavinck writes,

> Christ, however, is not only our prophet, priest, and king; he is also out example and ideal. His life is the shape, the model, that our spiritual life must assume and toward which it must grow.[35]

Loving God By Pursuing Holiness

We are to be holy, set apart for God, devoted to him in our hearts, minds, souls, words, conduct, and pursuits.

> As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, [16] since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Pet 1:15–16)

> Strive for...the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. (Heb 12:14)

[35] Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:317.

Above we spoke of "holiness" being defined not only by being "separated to God," but also being "devoted to God" (Ferguson). Ferguson said that one thing that distinguishes the holiness of the persons of the Trinity is their devotion to one another. Such devotion is to be reflected in us as well:

> If this is what holiness means *in God*, then *in us* it must also be a corresponding deeply personal, intense, loving *devotion* to him....Simply put, it means being entirely his, so that all we do and possess are his....To be holy, to be sanctified, therefore, to be a "saint," is in simple terms to be *devoted to God*.[36]

Loving God Through Delighting in Him

Being devoted to God is related to another strand of truth in the Bible that relates to loving God, which is delighting in him. Delighting in him will overflow in our hearts, prayers, and worship. David said,

> Delight yourself in the LORD,
> and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Ps 37:4)

> You have said, "Seek my face."
> My heart says to you, "Your face, LORD, do I seek." (Ps 27:8)

God in these passages is not just our first allegiance; he is also our first love. We can add prayers here also. Prayers can be the result of a vivid sense of our need for and dependence on the Lord. Desperate situations often motivate our prayers. And yet, a delight in God will reflexively motivate prayer as well. When we delight in someone, we talk to them and want to talk to them. Thus, Paul's command to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17) will not be felt as a hardship

[36] Ferguson, *Devoted to God*, 4.

but as what we desire to do. Paul says we are to "rejoice in the Lord" (Phil 3:1). Such expressions are the overflow of a heart that loves God.

Loving God by Exaltation

By "exaltation" I mean that God is to be set apart as above all things in our hearts, worship, priorities, and all that we do. He is to be acknowledged as high above all things, transcendent and supreme and unrivalled in his rank, authority, and glory. Where "devotion" has a measure of delight in the Lord, the notion of "exaltation" is concerned more with God's place over all things. The cry of the Psalmist expresses this idea forcefully, "Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!" (Ps 57:5). And David in Psalm 29 echoes the same, "Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. [2] Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness" (Ps 29:1–2). God is to be our chief pursuit, our "chief end," as the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* says: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31). And elsewhere we read:

> I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Rom 12:1).
>
> In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy. (1 Peter 3:15).

Internally, there is a seeking of Christ only: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1). Jesus himself is our ultimate example of this devotion: "Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work'" (John 4:34).

Loving God Through Purity

Purity has a lot of sides to it, but at a basic level it means a clean and unpolluted commitment to God that does not give way to sinful and lesser passions. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt 5:8). Sexual purity is involved here, which is not just a call to do one thing with our bodies and not another. It has a Godward side to it: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, [20] for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:19–20).

Loving God Through Gratitude

Throughout the Bible is the worshipful command, “Give thanks to the Lord!” (1 Chr 16:8, 34; 20:21; Pss 30:4; 33:2; 97:12; 105:1; Isa 12:1, 4). Often it is tied to a specific aspect of God’s greatness or love for us: “Give thanks to the LORD, for his steadfast love endures forever” (1 Chr 20:21); “Give thanks to the LORD of hosts, for the LORD is good” (Jer 33:11). One sign of the depravity of man is a failure to “honor him as God, or give thanks to him” (Rom 1:21). Paul writes, “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess 5:18). Such exhortations are entirely appropriate, since God’s provision, goodness, protection, salvation, nearness, and unwavering commitment to us are exactly what it means that he is our God and we are his people.

The commands above are only a summary look at all that is entailed with the obligation to love God. Much more could be said. Yet, our survey has captured something of the comprehensiveness of what it means to rightly “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37).

Love Your Neighbor

Above we said that loving God entails obeying God. That means that all we are commanded to do in our love for our neighbors is also an expression of our love for God. When we turn to the second great commandment, to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39; Rom 13:9), we are confronted in God's Word by myriad commandments. The Old and New Testament are filled with commandments that speak to how we are to think of, act toward, and speak to other people.

Loving Others by Doing Good Works

A place to start is the general call to live a life of "good works," doing what is beneficial, kind, and helpful to those around us. "Good works" are not flashy or attention-seeking but are simple acts of kindness and goodness intended to bless others. Jesus said, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt 5:16). Dorcas was commended, because "she was full of good works and acts of charity" (Acts 9:36). Paul said Christ "gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14). Berkhof said, "Just as the old life expresses itself in works of evil, so the new life, that originates in regeneration and is promoted and strengthened in sanctification, naturally manifests itself in good works."[37] Berkhof clarifies that good works "do not refer to works that are perfect, that answer perfectly to the requirements of the divine moral law, and that are of such inherent worth as to entitle one to the reward of eternal life under the conditions of the covenant of works." Yet, these works are nonetheless "essentially different in moral quality from the actions of the unregenerate, and that are the expressions of a new

[37] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 540.

and holy nature, as the principal from which they spring. These are works which God not only approves, but in a certain sense also rewards."[38] Related to our organization of ethics into a love for God and a love for neighbor, Berkhof notes that "they spring from the principle of love to God and from the desire to do His will (Deut 6:2)," and "their final aim is not the welfare of man, but the glory of God, which is the highest conceivable aim of man's life" (1 Cor 10:31)."[39]

One area of good works that is worthy of special mention is how we practice these good works through the means of our finances. As Christians, we are to be concerned for "the poor" (Gal 2:10) and "to visit orphans and widows in their affliction" (James 1:27). We are to be those with generous spirits but also those who model a pattern of generosity with our resources: "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need" (Eph 4:28).

Loving Other Believers

Though Christians are called to love all people (Matt 5:44; Luke 10:25–37), there is a special love we are to have for God's people and especially those within our local church. This is vividly seen in the over fifty times we are commanded to do something to "one another." These "one anothers" in the New Testament remind us that it is right to prioritize our church relationships over others. We can wrongly prioritize these relationships and become isolationists, but the priority is nonetheless biblical. Here is just a sampling of these "one anothers":

> These things I command you, so that you will love one another. (John 15:17)

[38] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 540–41.
[39] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 541.

> For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. (Gal 5:13)
>
> Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. (1 Thess 5:11)
>
> And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, [25] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Heb 10:24–25)
>
> Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. (Rom 12:10)
>
> Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal 6:2)
>
> As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: [11] whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet 4:10–11)

We can include here the special relationship church members have with their leaders. Members are commanded, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb 13:17). Church leaders in a reciprocal fashion are to see themselves as caring for the very ones Christ died to purchase, and also as mere under-shepherds serving sheep that belong to the Chief Shepherd: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you

overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). In 1 Peter 5 we see the kind of attitude leaders are to maintain:

> Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; [3] not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. [4] And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Pet 5:2–4)

Loving Those in Our Family

Another special love commanded of Christians is a love for their families. This is a love with comprehensive responsibilities, since the relationships in a family are so multi-faceted and involve so much of our time, resources, and earthly devotion. We start with the husband, since he is head of the marriage (1 Cor 11:3). A husband is to love, protect, lead, provide for, romance, and cherish his wife (Genesis 2:7–25; Eph 5:25–33; 1 Peter 3:7; Col 3:18–19; Prov 5; Song of Solomon; 1 Cor 7:3–5; 11:3). A wife is to love, submit to, honor, romance, and help her husband (Gen 2:18–25; Eph 2:22–24; Col 3:18–19; 1 Peter 3:1–7; Song of Solomon; Prov 31:10–31). Parents rightly related to each other as husband and wife are then to have children (Gen 1:28; 9:1, 7), love and discipline these children (Prov 3:12; 13:24; Eph 6:4; Col 3:21), and work hard not to "provoke your children" (Col 3:21), which can easily be done when we are hypocrites or unwise in asking a child to do what is beyond them or unaware of his particular abilities and situation. One of the most important aspects of our parenting is teaching God's Word to our children in a regular and thorough manner (Deut 6:6–7; 1 Tim 3:14–17). Children are to honor their parents (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16), submit to them when they are minors (Eph 6:1; Col 3:20), and care for and provide for parents as they age and need the assistance of others (1 Tim 5:8, 16).

Loving Our Neighbor Through Our Vocations

One of the helpful legacies of Martin Luther is his reformation of vocations. Luther came of age in a time when the Roman Catholic Church had divided vocations into the sacred and the secular. Those set apart as priests were doing "sacred" work, while others were doing only "secular" work. The "sacred" was clearly more important. Luther rejected this division and reclaimed a doctrine of creation where all work is a noble, God-given activity that can be done to the glory of God and the benefit of our neighbors. It is even a way we can love our neighbor. Wingren captures Luther well:

> God himself will milk the cows through him whose vocation that is. He who engages in the lowliness of his work performs God's work, be he lad or king. To give one's office proper care is not selfishness. Devotion to office is devotion to love, because it is by God's own ordering that the work of the office is always dedicated to the well-being of one's neighbor. Care for one's office is, in its very frame of reference on earth, participation in God's care for human beings.[40]

Solomon in Ecclesiastes teaches us that our work is to be a noble joy we pursue throughout our days on earth:

> I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; [13] also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man. (Eccl 3:12–13)

> So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who

[40] Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 9. For more on Luther's approach to the sacramentalism of the Roman Catholics, see Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*.

> can bring him to see what will be after him? (Eccl 3:22)

Paul will echo something similar, except add that our work is to keep eternity and God in view while we energetically do it:

> Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, [24] knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. [25] For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. (Col 3:23–25; cf. Eph 6:5–9)

Those in the role of "masters" also need to keep their own "Master" in mind as they deal with those under their responsibility:

> Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven. (Col 4:1)

The Bible, especially Proverbs, is filled with attitudes we are to maintain and an integrity we are to pursue as we carry out our vocations:

> Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established. (Prov 16:3)

> A just balance and scales are the LORD'S; all the weights in the bag are his work. (Prov 16:11)

> Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys. (Prov 18:9)

Loving Our Neighbors Who are Unbelievers

There are commands related to how we are to treat unbelievers in particular. Given the rapid expansion of the church in the New Testament, it is actually possible to overstate what we find in terms of how we are to love our unbelieving neighbors. The dozen or so explicit passages are dwarfed by the several hundred commands

directed at how we are to relate to other Christians. But what is said is nonetheless significant. A good starting point is Jesus's treatment of Leviticus 19:18 ("love your neighbor") in Luke 10:29–37. Here is where he teaches the famous "Good Samaritan" parable. The "priest" and "Levite" in the parable "passed by on the other side" and are clearly judged negatively by Jesus (vv. 31–32). It is the "Samaritan" who "had compassion" and presents the model where we are to "go, and do likewise" (vv. 33, 37). The parable provides clear instruction that helping those in need whom God brings into our paths is our obligation whether believer or unbeliever. Paul commands similarly, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal 6:10). The evangelistic burden on Christians is captured in Colossians 4:5–6:

> Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. [6] Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (Col 4:5–6)

We also see in the New Testament the need to "make a defense" in 1 Peter 3:15, "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect." The Great Commission is a broad and encompassing vision for the church (Matt 28:18–20), but its call to "make disciples of all nations" clearly has parts to play for all of us in the church. For most of us, the call will be indirect (pray, supporting the church in various ways), but for some of us the commission will involve direct participation in the going, evangelizing, and church building it entails.

Loving Our Neighbors Within the State

Neighbor love also has implications for us as citizens within the state, in whatever geo-political context we find ourselves. A love

for my neighbor means that I will be concerned with the "good, peace, security, and well-being"[41] of all those I am connected to within the boundaries of my earthly dwelling. Al Mohler, in fact, refers to "love of neighbor" as "a profound political philosophy," since it so effectively carves out a path between a sinful "disengagement" from all political matters and "the idolatry of politics as our main priority."[42] As Christians we are dual citizens, for "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil 3:20) most importantly. And yet, Paul was right also to see himself as a citizen of Rome with certain rights and privileges (Acts 21:39; 22:25). Being citizens of heaven and of some earthly state, we seek to love our neighbor through participation in political processes as we are able. At the very least, we are to be "subject to the governing authorities," for such authorities are "from God" and "have been instituted by God" (Rom 13:1; cf. 1 Peter 2:13–14). Of course, at times Christians *are* those "governing authorities," and so then neighbor love impacts how we execute these various offices. God defines the role of civil government as in place "to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good" (1 Peter 2:14), and so Christians in office bring to that office a deep knowledge of "good" and "evil" as God defines it. Furthering "good" and restraining what is "evil" has great benefit to all the citizens of a realm and thus is clearly an expression of neighbor love. We will say more on these issues below in our chapter on civil government.

Grace at the Beginning, Grace at the End

Having looked at so many obligations we have as Christians, it is good to stop and remember grace. Paul's pattern in his epistles was to open and close his letters with an explicit reference to the grace of God. As an example, in Philippians he begins with his customary

[41] R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Culture Shift: Engaging Current Issues with Timeless Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2008), 4.
[42] Mohler, *Culture Shift: Engaging Current Issues with Timeless Truth*, 4.

prayer-greeting, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:2). And at the end, after he has chastised, warned, commanded, and informed them, he leaves them with a benediction of grace: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (Phil 4:23). It is *grace at the beginning, grace at the end*. And when we consider the holiness we are called to live out, it is good to remember this picture of grace. Grace began our journey in Christ, grace will sustain us in this journey, and grace will bring us home. Grace empowers our obedience, and grace covers our disobedience. Grace transforms us over time, and grace brings the forgiveness of Christ for those parts of us that will not change. In our triumphs and tragedies, successes and failures, *grace wins!*