“The Essence of Divine Law”  
by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

According to Scripture the PRIMARY PURPOSE of the law of God is to “reveal sin” and to “convince us that we are sinners” in need of a Savior (Rom 5:20; 7:7-11; Gal 3:19, 24), not to teach us how to be good (as is commonly assumed), though it does serve in that secondary capacity as well. The significance of “divine law” in Scripture is that it is an authoritative expression of the holy character and mind of God, and His revealed will with respect to human conduct. Webster’s Dictionary describes “law” as a fixed canon, code, edict or injunction that has been established and enforced by the governing authority who is its source. The “eternal law of God” is derived from the only sovereign God of creation, who has existed from all eternity, and because He is infinitely holy, so also is His law. Furthermore, since He is the authority behind the law, He is the preeminent One who enforces the law… and the subsequent effect for not conforming to God’s divine economy (as it is expressed by the law) is death (eternal separation from God). One of the primary functions of the law in the Bible is to “restrain evil,” as Paul points out in his first letter to Timothy (1 Tim 1:9-10) — “the law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane… for murders and immoral men… and for whatever else is contrary.” John Calvin says, “the law is something like a tether to restrain the otherwise wild and destructive ragings of our sinful nature… it is a mirror in which we contemplate our weakness… the iniquity arising from this… and finally the curse coming from both — just as a mirror shows us the spots on our face” (Calvin, Institutes, p. 355). The mirror is provided so that having seen the dirt on our faces, we will turn from the mirror to the soap and water (Christ) with which the dirt (sin) may be washed away (cleansed). Note what the scriptural following passages have to say about the law —

- The law of God is truth (Ps 119:142, 151, 160).
- The law of God is holy, righteous, good, and spiritual (Rom 7:12, 14; 1 Tim 1:8).
- The righteous have the law of God in their hearts (Ps 37:31; 40:8; Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26-27).
- The righteous joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man (Rom 7:22).
- The righteous serve the law of God with their minds (Rom 7:25).
- The righteous walk in the law of God (Ps 119:1, 34, 55).
- The righteous delight in the law of God and meditate upon it all day (Ps 1:2; 119:70, 77, 92).
- The righteous love the law of God and meditate upon it all day (Ps 119:97, 113, 163).
- Those who love the law of God have great peace and do not stumble (Ps 119:165).
- Those who keep the law are discerning (Prv 28:7).
- Those who turn away from listening to the law are an abomination (Prv 28:9).
- Those who keep the law of God are happy (Prv 29:18).
- Not a single letter of the law shall pass away until all is accomplished (Mt 5:18).

The great summation of law in the Old Testament is contained in Ex 20:1-17 and Deut 5:6-21 — it is referred to by theologians as “the Decalogue;” this word in Greek is made up of the words “ten” and “word” — hence “ten words” (referring to the “ten commandments”). Half of them deal with our relationship to God, and half with our relationship to other people. The standard description of the Old Testament is “the Law and the Prophets” (Mt 5:17; Lk 16:18; Rom 3:21); the usual Jewish threefold division is “the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms” (Lk 24:44).
The law of God has a threefold purpose: 1) The law is to be a mirror — it reveals human sinfulness. Augustine described the law as follows: “The law highlights our weakness so that we might seek the grace and strength that is found in Christ.” The apostle Paul said “the law acts as a severe schoolmaster who drives us to Christ” (Gal 3:24). 2) The law is to restrain evil — John Calvin said the purpose of the law is “by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, to curb those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude and justice (Calvin, Institutes, p. 307). 3) The law is to reveal what is pleasing to God — Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (Jn 14:15). The Christian is to love and obey the moral law of God — this is the highest function of the law, to serve as an instrument for the people of God to give Him honor and glory. By studying or meditating on the law of God (the Bible), we attend the “school of righteousness” and learn what pleases Him and what offends Him.

The law of God is not a “system of merit” whereby the unsaved seek to earn divine favor, but a pattern of life given by the Redeemer to the redeemed so that they might know how to live for His good pleasure — such is the biblical understanding regarding the function of the law; thus the Old Testament asserts that the law was given for our good, to bring us to a hitherto unrealized fullness of life (Deut 4:1; 5:33; 8:1). The first desire of God is that His redeemed should be obedient. In the Old Testament, as in the New Testament, obedience is a means of grace (Gal 5:16, 22-23; 6:7-9; Jam 4:6; 2 Pet 3:18). A life based on the law of God is constantly nourished by secret springs and is consistently fruitful (Ps 1:2-3; Jn 4:10, 14; 15:5, 7), and is under the blessing of God (Ps 1:1). The psalmist speaks for every true believer when he says that the way of obedience is the way of true liberty (Ps 119:45; Jn 8:31-32).

The psalmist David in Psalm 19 celebrates the “two main sources” of revelation to man. In verses 1-6 he describes general revelation. He says in the first verse, “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps 19:1); though there is no audible voice, yet creation itself proclaims the glorious presence of God in the universe. This witness is in nature, especially the work of His hands in the heavens — their vastness, splendor, majesty, order and mystery reveal God’s glory and greatness. Only a proud heart is blind to the glory of God in creation (Mt 13:14-15; Rom 1:21). In verses 7-10, David describes the written revelation of God’s law. Both the heavens and the law make God known — whereas the heavens reveal His glory… the law reveals His will. God’s works reveal His genius and power, but His Word reveals His love and grace. Scientific truth may stimulate our intellect, but spiritual truth convicts our heart and conscience. Verses 7-10 describe both what God’s will is and what it does:

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul;  
the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.  
The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.  
The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;  
the judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.  
They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.

Verses 6-9 present six descriptions of the law of God — law, testimony, precepts, commandment, fear, and judgments… six evaluations of the law — perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, and true… and six results of the law — restoring the soul, making wise the simple, rejoicing the heart, enlightening the eyes, enduring forever, and righteous altogether. The psalmist does
not merely contemplate the law of God as it is in itself, he also unfolds its beneficial effects. Then he goes on to say that the value of the Scriptures cannot be compared with any other desirable thing — not even gold — but it does have one thing in common with gold: persons must dig for its treasures; great wealth is hidden in the pages of God’s Book, and our best interests are served by searching for them. Do you want to experience more of God’s grace? Get into His Word! The law of God provides the key to wisdom, joy, and most importantly, eternal life. Most commentaries on this particular passage quote the nineteenth century German philosopher “**Immanuel Kant’s**” famous declaration —

> The starry sky above me and the moral law within me, 
> are two things which fill the soul with ever increasing 
> admiration and reverence.

**From the very beginning “God’s law” lay at the center of His dealings with humankind.**
The major focus of Gen 2 does not obscure the fact that man in the garden was under law and that it was through obedience that they would enjoy life — the balance is seen in the contrast between “every tree” that was there for their enjoyment, and the “single tree” that was forbidden. Obedience [to God – to the law] safeguarded the enjoyment of the life of God, and disobedience not only forfeited that life but brought death. The effect of disobedience resulted in the birth of a bad conscience (Gen 3:8), the replacement of love by resentment (Gen 3:12), the corruption of marriage (Gen 3:16), and most notably, the dislocation of man from his environment (Gen 3:17-19). **The rest of the Old Testament teaches us that only by obedience to God’s law can we prosper and live successfully in God’s world,** even though the earth is defiled by lawbreakers (Lev 18:24-30; Deut 28:1-14; 28:15-68). The Law of God, as given to Moses at Mt. Sinai, was not only given to liberate man from a life of sin, but to redeem him to a life of holiness (Ex 6:6) — the blood and the flesh of the Passover lamb made him a redeemed pilgrim of the Lord (Ex 12); [this predated the Mosaic Law], and only then was he brought to the place of lawgiving (Ex 20:2). **Grace preceded law.**

From the very beginning, the purpose of God has remained the same — the obedience of His people — and it remains true that those who walk in the light (Rom 13:12; Eph 5:8; Tit 2:14), find that the blood of Jesus Christ keeps on cleansing them from all their sin (1 Jn 1:7, 9).

**During the earthly ministry of Jesus a Jewish scholar of the law posed this question to Him:**

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responded, “**What is written in the law?**” The man replied, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart… and love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this and you will live” (Luke 10:25-28). Over and over again in His ministry Jesus appealed to the law (Mt 5:17-18; 7:12; 12:5; 22:36, 40; 23:23; Lk 16:17; 24:44; Jn 7:19; 10:34). Obviously, God is the **LAWGIVER** of the universe… He is the One who has established the economy by which it operates, and as He has decreed, so shall it be (Jam 4:12; Is 14:24; 5:5-6; 6:9-11; 33:22; 48:16-18; 55:8-9, 11; Mt 24:35; Rom 11:33-36 — also cf. Ex 24:12; Deut 4:8; Deut 5, 6, 28) — to fight against that is to be in rebellion against God (like Satan)! The essence of God’s law is nothing less than the expression of **His character**… His written law is a revelation of **His holiness** — the externalized summation of **His will**; therefore, **the law is saying something to us about God.** God’s laws are the governing principles of the universe — they are rules that are meant to bind us as individuals to certain actions. The concept of law is the underlying principle of morality — by understanding the law we better understand how we are to act; essentially, we are guided in our actions by a system of law. The speed limit, for example, is intended to keep drivers from exceeding an acceptable speed; drivers are bound to this by police officers and the threat of fines or arrest. As Christians we strive to adhere to greater principles of law.
The essence of the spirit of God's law is “love.” The commandments are proscribed as “rules of life” — when we love, we have found the true principle of obedience, the true spirit of the law (Mt 22:40; Rom 13:10; Gal 5:14). Paul sums it all up in love. And we, having received the love of Christ, living in His love, see the law not as a stern, condemning taskmaster but as an appealing bright vision of understanding and blessing. We see it as a positive — not as a negative — because it is liberating! (Jn 8:31-32; Rom 8:2). We see the law embodied in Christ, and we fulfill the law, not simply as a standard outside, but as a living principle within. When we act according to the dictates of the way of love, our lives conform to the image and law of Christ. Love therefore is “the fulfillment of the law” and “the law of Christ” (Gal 5:14; 6:2; Mt 7:12; 22:39-40; Rom 13:9-10) — love expresses the substance and intrinsic nature of the entire law. So our duty to others is fulfilled when we love them (Jam 4:8). Tradition has it that the apostle John toward the end of his life was exiled on the island of Patmos — apparently he was quite feeble and at nearly 100 years of age needed to be carried daily in and out of the sanctuary… his message to the people was always the same: “Little children, love one another.” One day the people asked him why he always said that — John replied: “If this alone be done, it is enough.” Wow… what a profound statement!

The measure or rule of love is “as yourself” (Mt 22:38). We are to do the same kind acts of love to others that we would choose to do to ourselves — that’s the essence of the golden rule (Mt 7:12). Such love is the fulfilling of the law; that is, as far as man loves rightly, so far does he fulfill the law; not that he does it perfectly — man in his fallen state is unable to do that, because the law is exceedingly broad and reaches to thoughts, desires, inclinations, words and deeds. Love (though imperfect) is said to be the fulfilling of the law. Since there can be no justification by imperfect human works of charity — no one can say they have fulfilled the law perfectly but Christ — therefore we must look to Him alone for a justifying righteousness (i.e., the cross).

During the days of Jesus’ ministry here on earth, the scribes and Pharisees were said to sit in “Moses’ seat” (Mt 23:2) — that represented the ultimate authority in Judaism. Because Jesus’ teaching of Scripture was so utterly contrary to theirs, which for centuries had been subjected to an endless number of humanly-devised rabbinical interpretations, the Pharisees were convinced that Jesus was teaching a message that contradicted Moses, and to contradict Moses was to contradict God Himself; thus they believed He was guilty of heresy. Over the years, the rabbis had determined that, just as there were 613 separate letters in the Hebrew text of the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments), there were also 613 separate laws in the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses). The rabbis had divided those 613 laws into affirmative and negative groups, holding that there were 248 affirmative laws, one for every part of the human body (as they supposed), and 365 negative laws, one for each day of the year. They also divided the laws into heavy and light — the heavy ones being absolutely binding and the light ones less binding; there has never been unanimity, however, as to which laws were heavy and which were light, so the rabbis and scribes would spend countless hours proudly debating the merits of their positions. In spite of all that, the Jews believed God had given 613 commandments to Moses… when David came along, he reduced that number to eleven (Ps 15)... Isaiah then reduced them to six (Is 33:15)... Micah reduced them to three (Mic 6:8)... Isaiah again reduced them to two (Is 56:1)... and Amos finally reduced them to one (Amos 5:4)... as did Habakkuk (Hab 2:4).

Let me close with a word regarding the essence of “human law” — The source of human law in secular society is “human reason.” It is interesting to note that natural lawyers argue that law must partly depend on some moral criteria — that is, law must be determined in some sense by
what the law ought to be. With that said, human law is inevitably shaped by ideas emanating from some human power outside the law; thus human law in and of itself has no intrinsic character or essence — it is simply the product of some “human political power,” influenced by economic and societal pressures, that ultimately determines the content and form of a societal legal system. So the normative aspects of human law are defined in terms of the interests they serve, rather than some divine moral absolute. Human ideology is simply a part of the sociological landscape to which their concepts of law apply. ([http://plato.standord.edu](http://plato.standord.edu)). In the first century BC, the Roman statesman Cicero described it thus: “True law is right reason in agreement with nature; it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting” (*De Republica*, c. 50 B.C.). It should be remembered, God has placed “His moral laws” in the hearts of men, thus all humans embrace a “universal moral ethic of sorts” (though they are ignorant as to the reason) — murder, stealing, lying and rape are wrong in all societies. So all societies the world over have a “common moral foundation” upon which they have established their legal systems. But because God’s laws are holy in the absolute sense (without the slightest imperfection or blemish), and men in their fallen state are darkened in their understanding, they “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” when it fails to serve their corrupt desires (unbeknownst to them) or advantages (Jn 3:19; Rom 1:18-32; Jam 1:14-15); hence, human beings simply “lower the bar to that level of morality” that is reasonably achievable (according to human reason) and with which they can cope and co-exist. Following are some insightful quotes from a number of famous philosophers and theologians:

- **Thomas Aquinas** (13th century Italian theologian) — “Human law has the true nature of law only in so far as it corresponds to right reason, and therefore is derived from the eternal law. In so far as it falls short of right reason, a law is said to be a wicked law… lacking the true nature of law” (*Summa Theologize*, 1272).

- **Niccolo Machiavelli** (15th century Italian philosopher) — “There never was any remarkable lawgiver amongst any people who did not resort to divine authority, as otherwise his laws would not have been accepted by the people” (*The Prince*, 1513).

- **Richard Hooker** (16th century English theologian) — “Of law there can be no less acknowledged, than that her seat is in the bosom of God” (*Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 1585).


In addition to the various individuals referred to in the foregoing material, the following sources were also used in putting this study together —

- **James Montgomery Boice** — “*Foundations of the Christian Faith*” (pp. 219-225)
- **R. C. Sproul** — “*Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*” (pp. 257-258)
- **Walter A. Elwell** — “*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*” (pp. 674-676)
- **John R. W. Stott** — “*Favorite Psalms*” (pp. 21-25)