

CHRIST MAGNIFYING THE LAW

A SERMON

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OF AMERICA

AT THE TABERNACLE, MOORFIELDS.

"The Lord is well pleased for his righteousness' sake; he will magnify the law and make it honourable."--

ISAIAH 62: 21.

IN speaking from these words, I propose to consider--

I. OF WHOM THE PROPHET IS SPEAKING.

II. WHY HE SHOULD MAGNIFY THE LAW AND MAKE IT HONOURABLE.

III. HOW HE SHALL DO THIS. AND THEN CONCLUDE WITH SOME INFERENCES AND REMARKS.

I. *Of whom the prophet is speaking.*

I believe it is agreed that these words are spoken of our Lord Jesus Christ: I know not that this is called in question. It is said, "The Lord is well pleased for his righteousness' sake," the person spoken of here, then, is our Lord Jesus Christ. The next inquiry is--

II. *Why he should magnify the law and make it honourable; and what law is this?*

1. Here let me remark, that very much of the infidelity and skepticism in the world has originated in this fact, that so many men have never attained to clear conceptions of what the law of God really is, and its relation to themselves; they generally look no farther than the letter of the law, entirely overlooking its spirit; and regarding it as emanating simply

from the arbitrary will of God, and that he can dispense with the execution of it at pleasure. To make myself understood, I must give you my idea of the true nature of the moral law which is here spoken of. We have the letter of this law in the table of what are called the ten commandments; and indeed all the preceptive parts of the Bible may be regarded as simply explanatory of this law, as the principle contained in it applies to the outward conduct of human life. A just conception of the spirit of the moral law will show us that it originated in the eternal and immutable nature of God. From all eternity, God necessarily possessed an existence, and with that existence certain attributes--natural attributes. He possessed omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and so forth. Now, there must have been some way in which it became him, from his very nature, to use these attributes; these attributes he possessed necessarily, and eternally, and there must be some way in which his intelligence must affirm that these attributes ought to be used. Now, observe, when we understand truly the spirit of the moral law, our reason affirms that all creatures are under obligation to exercise universal obedience to it. The moral law, then, is this--the eternal affirmation of God's own mind in respect to what course of conduct is proper in himself and in all moral agents; it is the eternal and necessary affirmation of the Divine reason and conscience as to how the attributes of any moral agent ought to be used. It is a necessary idea in God's mind, and in the mind of all moral agents: for example, no man can doubt that God's eternal reason must have affirmed that he ought to be benevolent. Who can doubt that selfishness or malevolence in God would have been sin in him? If God had been selfish and malevolent instead of being benevolent, that would have been sin in him; and why? Because God is a moral agent. Men are moral agents, and they have a nature which necessarily leads them to affirm this. The benevolence of God is really his virtue: and why? Because the exercise of benevolence is in compliance with that rule of conduct which was becoming in God to pursue; his reason affirmed his own obligation to it. Now, I have thought sometimes, that persons entirely overlook the fact that God is himself a moral agent, and the subject of moral obligation as really as they are. Some people startle at this, lest it should be thought derogatory to God's character; but if this were not so, God could not be virtuous: as he is a moral agent, he must be under moral obligation. The moral law was not given to God by any other being, for he is "a law unto himself"--his own eternal reason and conscience affirming that the carrying out of the principles of benevolence would be right in him, and of course the opposite wrong. When, therefore, God acts according to the moral law, he acts in compliance with an eternal law of his own nature, by which he was led to determine his own conduct, as the condition of his own happiness, and as the condition of the happiness of all moral agents. Let it be understood, then, that the moral law did not originate in God's arbitrary will; it lay further back--in a necessary law of his own eternal consciousness; as a rule of action it was prescribed to him by his own consciousness. This law is also prescribed to us by our own consciousness as well as enforced by the authority of God; and if we possessed none to legislate for us, and while possessing the same nature that we now do, our consciousness would have prescribed this rule of action to us--affirming that we ought to be benevolent. If the arbitrary will of God had originated this law, he could dispense with it at his pleasure; he could change the nature of virtue and vice, he could make that which is now virtue vice, and that which is now vice virtue, simply by altering his law; but does any one think that God could do this? Now, God never can change the nature of virtue and vice, and he claims no such power. This law

having originated thus, and not by God's arbitrary will, it is binding upon us, as moral agents, by the very laws of our being. God created us moral agents like himself, and thus made this law obligatory upon us, enjoined it upon us by his own authority, and made it obligatory, also, by a law of our own nature. Now, the spirit of this law requires universal and perfect benevolence to God and man. By benevolence I mean love, with reference to the law of God and to the universe; this is what God's law requires of all moral agents. Now, observe, this law is as unalterable as God's own nature is--he did not create it, neither can he alter it in the least degree; he did not create it any more than he created himself--it never began to be any more than God did himself. Originating in his own self-existing nature, his own reason must have eternally recognised it as the course of action to be pursued by him; and thus it is plain that this law can never be repealed by him, and made less obligatory in reference to himself, or us--it can never undergo any change in its requirements, and can never be dispensed with in any case whatever.

2. Again: this law is infinitely valuable in the ends which it aims to secure. It is naturally impossible for moral agents to be happy unless they are virtuous, and virtue consists in obeying this eternal law. All virtue consists in perfect love--this is virtue in all moral agents. Now, in no further than this law is conformed to can there be happiness amongst men. Virtue is the basis of happiness, properly so called, in God or in anybody else. This law, then, aims to secure and promote all that creates happiness, as the condition of the happiness of God and of his creatures.

I suppose that the things which I am affirming this morning will be admitted by all who hear me as self-evident truth; the mind of every moral agent must affirm them to be true, by a law of our own nature we affirm it, that they are true, that they must be true; for example, benevolence was proper and becoming in God, therefore obligatory upon him; and the opposite course would have been wrong--mind, I am not supposing that such a thing ever was or ever will be; but I am only supposing that if such a thing were possible, that God was not a good but a wicked being. Hence every moral agent will affirm that the moral law is a law which God imposed upon himself, and that it did not originate in his own arbitrary will--that its obligations can never be dispensed with in any case, neither repealed nor altered in any particular.

Again: every moral agent, also, must affirm that this law must be of infinite value, because it aims to secure an infinitely valuable end.

3. The true spirit of this law can never be violated. There may be exceptions to the letter of the law, but not to the Spirit--nobody possesses any power to make the slightest exceptions to the spirit of the moral law; but as I just now said, to the letter of the law there may be exceptions. The law prohibits any work being done on the Sabbath, and yet the priests were allowed to do the work of the sanctuary on that day without violating the spirit of the command. All labour was prohibited, but works of necessity and mercy were nevertheless allowed, and even required. These were exceptions to the letter of the moral law, but not to its spirit; to which there can be no exception. Again: the transgression of the moral law by any human being, is a public denial of its obligation. It is a denial of the propriety, necessity, or justice of its being law at all, and that it is unworthy of being so.

4. Again: let us look at the necessity that Christ should magnify the law and make it honourable. Mankind had denied the obligation of this law, publicly and most blasphemously denied it. Now, observe, if any other than a public act, for forgiving sin, and setting aside the penalty of this law, had been adopted, if no regard had been paid to its vindication, God would have sanctioned and completed the dishonour. The law had been denied, man had denied its justice, and now suppose God should come forth and set aside the execution of the law, and make a universal offer of pardon without taking any notice of this dishonour to the law by any public act whatever, would not this have been to dishonour the law. Now, man in a most direct and emphatic manner had come right out in the face of the whole universe and denied that it was obligatory, that it was just, proper, necessary, and reasonable; and let me say that by their actual transgression they had denied the power of the law in a higher sense than they could by mere words. Now, if God very good-naturedly had said, "Well, no matter, I will forgive you, only be sorry," and had taken no notice of the dishonour that had been done to the law, would this have been to magnify the law and make it honourable? would it not have been rather, on the part of God, by a most public and emphatic act, just to sanction the horrible dishonour that had been done to his law? To have thus acted, every one will see, would have been unjust to himself, unjust to the law, and unjust to the universe, and ruinous to all parties--and therefore it never could be.

5. Again: two things, then, must be done if men were to be saved at all. First, something must be done to honour this law, and to honour it as thoroughly as it had been dishonoured: second, something must be done to restore men to obedience as a condition of their being pardoned; something that must restore them to that state of virtue, love, and confidence which the law required. These two things must be done, to save the law from dishonour and the universe from ruin. Observe, the law had been disgraced in some way, therefore the degraded law must be made honourable. Man had been rebellious, he must be made obedient as a condition of the first proposition.

6. This leads me to say that both precept and penalty must be vindicated: both had been denied, both had been dishonoured. Now, it is easy to see that this could be done by no subject of the government; a mere creature could not magnify either the precept or the penalty of this law. It is easy to see that the lawgiver must provide for both, as the condition of its being proper in him to set aside the execution of the penalty in the case of sinners. Now, this law may be honoured by its penalty being executed on the offender, or it may be by some substitute taking the sinner's place, if one could be found.

7. Again, I inquire, how can God honour the law? Here again, we have an important light shed upon the two natures of our Lord Jesus Christ, and upon the necessity of his possessing two natures in order to perform the work that was assigned him. The obedience of any mere creature could not be a sufficient vindication of this law. Great multitudes of the whole race had denied its propriety and justice. Now, if any mere creature had come forth and obeyed it, this would not have been to sufficiently honour the law which had been dishonoured by myriads. Now, it is very easy to see that if Christ possessed two natures, human and Divine, that he would be precisely in a position to magnify the law and make it honourable. Officially, and before the universe, he obeyed

the law in both his natures; recognising its obligation as respects God and all moral agents. It is thus shown to be the rule of God's conduct, as well as the rule of our conduct; it is a rule which God imposed upon himself, and as really obligatory upon himself as upon us. Now, no mere creature, by obeying this law, could show its obligation upon Jehovah himself. But when man denied its obligation, Jehovah himself came forth, in the presence of the universe, and acknowledged its obligation, by recognising it in his two natures--one the nature of man, who denied its obligation; and in this nature he obeyed every jot and tittle of it--"Heaven and earth," he said, "shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away." Heaven and earth were not so steadfast as this law. Thus we see that in these two natures Christ fully obeyed the law, and though it had been trampled upon and degraded, lifted it up high as the throne of Jehovah.

8. Again: we say that the suffering of one who sustained no other relation to God than that of a mere creature, could not vindicate the justice of the law, or the penalty that it denounced against sin; but the Lord Jesus Christ, by taking two natures, and by the public sacrifice of the human nature on the altar of public justice, in vindication of this law, and as a substitution for the execution of its penalty, for the legitimate subject of it, did what none but himself could do. Christ, we say, suffered the penalty of this law, but in some sense he suffered it not as sinners would--as they must have done; he could not feel the bitterness and remorse which is a part of the lawful penalty awarded to those who commit sin; but he magnified this law, and made it honourable, for he sustained at once a relation to the lawgiver, and to those who had denied the obligation of the law. How beautifully, then, in these two natures united, could he vindicate the law, and thoroughly honour it in every particular.

There is great difficulty in any government exercising mercy towards rebels, and this is especially felt in such a government as that of God; and a little reflection on this will lead to the conclusion that an atonement was absolutely necessary.

9. Our Lord Jesus Christ by his life completely illustrated the true spirit of the law. He must magnify the law and make it honourable; and he asserted its universal obligation in his life, which was a perpetual illustration of what the law required of human beings. He ever manifested the true spirit of this law. He thus lived among mankind, taught them what they ought to be, and what they would be if they thoroughly obeyed the law of God; what sort of a thing society would be if all men obeyed the law of God; what men would be; what children and youth would be--how obliging, and kind, and holy. Now, by his life he calls upon us, and says, "Suppose all men were as you see me; suppose all men possessed the same simple-heartedness, the same truthfulness, the same regard for God's honour, and regard for the happiness of others,--would society be what it is? The whole race have denied the propriety of this law; but I give you a proof of its excellency by showing in my life what the state of society would be if it were obeyed. I obey it in every respect. You deny the propriety and goodness of this law; but if it were illustrated in each individual life as it is in mine, what would there be lacking in any society in heaven or upon earth?" Thus, then, God, by this his living teacher, condemns sin, shows the importance of the law, and its absolute perfection.

10. Again: Christ thus, by his life, declared and illustrated the great and unspeakable necessity of this law. He not only expounded its meaning, and gave himself up to teach the Jews and the world its real meaning, but in every way he contended for its reasonableness, beauty, necessity, and immutability in all things. Thus Christ illustrated, both in his life and preaching, this Divine and immutable law of God. Who can doubt that he was all the law required him to be?

11. Again: we may say that he taught, that mercy without satisfaction being made to its insulted majesty was not possible; and he undertook the work of satisfaction--to magnify the law and make it honourable. I cannot enlarge further on this part of the subject.

A few remarks and inferences will close what I have to say.

1. The intention of the Gospel is by no means to repeal the law. "Do we, then, make void the law through faith?" said the apostle; "God forbid; yea, we establish the law." By his life and death, Christ honoured the law; and thus himself furnished the means of rebuking the rebellious lives of sinners. The spirit of the law pervades the Gospel, and they infinitely mistake the subject who suppose that the moral law is not part of the Gospel. This is the way to make Christ the minister of sin. This is to array Christ against the moral law; for how could he by abrogating the law make it honourable? This would be to weaken the law. Do not mistake me: I do not mean that men are to be saved by their own righteousness--that they are to be restored to happiness by the law, as the ground of their acceptance with God. I mean no such thing as this; but what I do mean is, that this is a condition of their forgiveness, --they must break off their rebellion, and become submissive and obedient to its authority. A man who has once violated a law can never be justified by it; this is both naturally and governmentally impossible. But there must be obedience to the law as a condition of forgiveness for past sins and offences.

2. Again: this is implied in the exercise of saving faith. No faith is saving but that which works by love. No faith is justifying faith that is not sanctifying faith. No hope is a good hope but that which leads its possessor to purify himself even as Christ is pure. There are persons who suppose that the Gospel abrogates the moral law, and that they are going to be saved by faith without love; they are Antinomians, and they know nothing of the true way of salvation. They ought to understand at once that the law is an essential part of the Gospel. Let me be understood: I do not mean that universal and perfect obedience to the law is a condition of being saved by the Gospel; but I do mean that under the Gospel we have the same rule of life that they have in heaven. The law there is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy strength," and this is as truly our rule of duty here as it is in heaven. The Gospel enjoins this love, and makes it obligatory upon us. That faith which is saving faith is the result of this love; and this love, when rightly understood, is indispensable to virtue.

3. Again: Christ still honours the law by continuing to require its fulfillment as a condition of saving those for whom he died. He requires them first to confess and renounce their sins, and thus acknowledge the propriety of the law. The law is not evil; and those who continue in sin dishonour the law. They must repent; they must justify the

law and condemn themselves; they must, by a public act, renounce their sins--the act of renunciation must be as public as the act of rebellion. They must reverence the law; they must subscribe to it; they must obey it; they must exercise the love that it requires;--this is his condition of saving those for whom he hath already died.

Even in the days of the Apostles people began to have a wrong idea on this subject. The false idea that the law and the Gospel were opposed to each other, doubtless, took possession of their minds, because the Apostles so largely insisted upon the necessity of justification by faith. But the Apostles had no such meaning. The Jews had supposed that sinners were to be saved by obedience to the moral and ceremonial law; their religion was a religion of mere outward morality. That was the condition of the Jews as a nation. I do not mean that all the Jews had this view; for, doubtless, there were many who understood the true nature of the law--understood that the moral law required love and confidence in God; they also knew that the ceremonial law was figurative of the atonement, which was to be at some future day made clear to men; pious and devout men understood this, but the Jews, as a nation, almost without exception, had no idea of the spiritual character of the law, and their teachers taught a different doctrine altogether--they taught that men would be saved by mere outward morality, by abstaining from those things that were in the ceremonial law forbidden as wrong, and by keeping the letter of the commandments written in the two tables of stone. Now, observe, the Apostles sought to show them that they entirely misunderstood the conditions of salvation. Christ had taught this, and after Christ's ascension, the Apostles enlarged upon what he had taught--illustrating their position by his death and resurrection, the ceremonial law, the tabernacle, and so on, insisting upon it that men were to be saved by faith in Christ. Upon this there were some who misunderstood what the Apostles intended, which was this, that they were to be justified by faith in Christ, which works by love, as opposed to all legal works. The Apostle Paul, who wrote chiefly on this subject, did not mean to say that they would be saved without love to the law, for he insisted upon it that the faith which was essential to salvation was that "faith which works by love." "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature." He did not mean to say that a man could be saved without obedience to the law, without love. Men were, he said, to be justified by that faith in Christ which works by love, in opposition to any works of their own. He did not mean to teach that men were justified on the ground of love an obedience to the law, but he meant this, that they were justified entirely by Christ, by what Christ had done; that they were to expect forgiveness on the *ground* of what Christ had done; but upon the *condition* that they should believe in him and love him.

Now, the mistake against which I am endeavoring to guard you, has prevailed, more or less, from the days of the Apostles till the present time. This mistake early began to develop itself, and James, by his Epistle, designed to correct this mistake. It has been thought that the Epistle of James contradicts the Epistle of Paul, but nothing is further from the truth. James insisted upon men having faith which works by love--practical faith, that makes them holy. The Apostle Paul says, men are not justified by works, but both agree that personal holiness is a condition of salvation--not a ground, but a condition.

4. Again: multitudes of persons, in every age of the Church, have been found, who have seemed to array the Gospel against the law, as if the moral law had been abrogated. Let me illustrate what I mean. In one of the cities of the United States, where a revival took place some few years since, a lady who belonged to an episcopal church in that city, came to me and said, "I am distressed with the state of things in our Church; the ladies of that Church are so conformed to the world in their habits of dress, and in their frivolous and light conduct, that I went to our minister about it, and told him how much I was grieved; and what do you think he said to me? 'I consider that these ladies are among the most pious members of my church; the reason why they act as they do is, they do not rely upon their own works, they expect to be saved alone by the merits of Christ.'" Now, what sort of an idea had these people, and this minister, of the Gospel, of the way of salvation? Just think of this; these people were living worldly, selfish, self-indulgent lives, and yet they expected to be saved by the merits of Christ. They supposed that the righteousness of Christ was imputed to them in such a sense; that they could personally conform to the world, and yet be saved. Personally, like all other sinners, and yet by an imputed righteousness that did not imply any personal holiness, they could be saved. What is this but Antinomianism? And what is this but the religion of great multitudes of persons? You urge them to holiness of life, and this is not preaching the Gospel to them; you urge them to obedience, to self-denial, and to live lives worthy of their high vocation, and this imply no Gospel,--this is urging men to be a holiness of their own!

Now, my beloved hearers, wherever you see such a spirit as that, you may be sure there is something wrong. To be sure, men are to be accepted and justified on the ground of what our Lord Jesus Christ has done; but mark, only upon the condition of their *personally* accepting him, giving him their hearts, yielding themselves up to obedience.

5. Again: sinners, by faith, must honour the law which they have dishonoured. Suppose Christ should honour the law, but should not require us to pay any regard to his atonement, by repentance and faith, as a condition of our salvation, could we honour the law thus? If God would not pardon sin unless Christ died, neither will he forgive any human being who does not repent of sin and accept Christ personally. Have mankind trampled on the law, and has Christ made an atonement, and does God intend to save men without any reference to this atonement? Never! God will never forgive sin without faith and repentance. Nothing can be more certain. It is as certain that God will never consent to dishonour the law, as it is that Christ has made an atonement for sin, and thus honoured the law. He will never stop short and save sinners, because they are sceptical, proud, and self-righteous enough to reject the atonement. I tell you there is no hope of this. Let all persons who reject the atonement, and expect to be saved without Christ, know that so certain as God will never consent to dishonour his law, so certain will he never forgive them unless they recognize Christ! Why should he do so?

But as I have to preach again this evening, I will not remark further this morning.