

The Place of God's Law in Counseling

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Abstract: Many have noted that the biblical counseling movement began with an admonitional emphasis on sin. Jay Adams's nouthetic approach to counseling was largely centered on confrontation of sin and calls to obedience. This emphasis implies the importance of the law of God in Christian living. Though such an emphasis has been central to the biblical counseling movement since its inception, little has been done within the movement to tap into historic resources regarding the use of the law of God. This paper argues that the biblical counseling movement would benefit from a retrieval of the historic Reformed understanding and uses of the law of God. Such a retrieval promotes a more nuanced approach to the use of the law and an increased understanding of the practicality and power of the gospel for daily living.

Key Words: biblical counseling, counseling, law and gospel, law of God, threefold use of the law

The writing, teaching, and ministry of Jay Adams (1929–2020) was controversial partly because it was confrontational. His published work from the beginning was intentionally set against non-directive, client-centered, Rogerian methods of counseling.¹ In opposition to such an approach, Adams proposed an authoritative, confrontational, admonitional approach to counseling. This approach centered on identifying sinful patterns in the counselee that needed to change and helping the person through the use of Scripture in dependence upon the Holy Spirit. All of this was with the goal of replacing sinful patterns with righteous patterns of behavior.² Several authors have shown that Adams's work was more heavily influenced by secular psychological principles and methods than

he explicitly acknowledged.³ However, it is undeniable that the modern biblical counseling movement has, from its inception, set itself against the most popular modern therapeutic models by focusing on the necessity of dealing with sin. Various emphases in biblical counseling such as nouthetic confrontation,⁴ “idols of the heart,”⁵ and “saints, sufferers, and sinners”⁶ all assume sin as being an essential variable of the counseling process.

The acknowledgment of sin as an essential consideration of the counseling process assumes that there is a standard by which we must judge something to be sinful or righteous: a law—indeed, God's law. Though the law of God has been acknowledged and utilized in various ways among biblical counselors, the movement as a whole has largely neglected to tap into the historic understanding of the nature and use of the law of God in the Christian life. Even Jay Adams, who taught at Westminster Theological Seminary, did not avail himself of the abundant resources available to him in his own confessional tradition for understanding and applying the law of God.⁷

Thus, I suggest that there is a rich theological, practical, and experiential heritage in the Christian faith for understanding and applying the law of God that has rarely been resourced by modern Christian counselors. I do not intend to prove *that* the law of God ought to have a place in Christian counseling. All truly Christian counselors agree on that either implicitly or explicitly. My aim, rather, is to propose *how* the law of God ought to function in the task of counseling *in order to rightly understand the gospel*. I will base my proposal on the way that Christians have understood the law of God to function in the Christian life for centuries prior to the modern age. In making this proposal, I will examine first the nature of the law of God, then the use of the law of God, and finally the experience of the law of God. I will conclude with some brief practical assertions. Overall, my goal is to show the importance of rightly understanding the law of God

³ George M. Schwab, for example, documents this well in his article, “Critique of ‘Habituatio’ as a Biblical Model of Change,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 21.2 (2003): 67–83.

⁴ Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 41.

⁵ David Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and ‘Vanity Fair,’” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 13.2 (1995): 35–50; Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart: Learning to Long for God Alone* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

⁶ Michael R. Emlet, *Saints, Sufferers, and Sinners: Loving Others as God Loves Us* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2021).

⁷ On the contrary, in his published work he explicitly denied specific portions of the teaching on the law of God in his own Westminster Standards. See, for example, his book *Keeping the Sabbath Today?* (Stanley, NC: Timeless Texts, 2008).

¹ See the chapter titled “Nouthetic Counseling and Rogerian Counseling,” in Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel: Introduction to Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 78–104.

² Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 41–64; Adams, *The Christian Counselor's Manual: The Practice of Nouthetic Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 180–90.

because, as Scottish theologian John Colquhoun (1748–1827) wrote over 200 years ago, if a man “does not have spiritual and just apprehensions of the holy law, he cannot have spiritual and transforming discoveries of the glorious gospel.”⁸

The Nature and Identity of the Law of God

I begin with the nature and identity of the law of God. Function follows nature. That is, the nature of a thing determines the way in which it ought to be used. Thus, how we use the law of God must be determined by what it is. What are the attributes of its essence, and what is its identity? I will first discuss three clusters of attributes of God's law and then move on to its identity.

Holy, Just, and Good

First, the law is holy, just, and good, which is asserted by Paul in Romans 7:12. It is holy, just, and good because it proceeds from the very nature of God who is himself holy, just, and good. It is holy because it is perfect as God is perfect. It is just because it is impartial as God is impartial. It is good because, as God is good, nothing that he commands in his law can be anything but good. Thus, as counselors, when we call our counselees to do something that is in accordance with God's law, we can be assured that what we are asking of them is accurately described by each of these three attributes. We can commend the commandments of God to them with the full confidence that they display the perfect holiness of God, the impartial justice of God, and the goodness of God and his design for his creation. No commandment of God that we might encourage a counselee to obey is sinful, unfair, or lacking in goodness. As Colquhoun explains, the law, “enjoins everything that is holy, everything which is conformable to those moral attributes and actions of God which are patterns for our imitation.”⁹ As the law is just, it is “exactly suited to our frame as reasonable creatures, and to our condition in this world.”¹⁰ As the commandments of God's law are good, “they enjoin nothing but what is conducive to the happiness of both the souls and bodies of men.”¹¹ We can be confident—and we can help our counselees to be confident—with the psalmist that the commandments of the Lord rejoice the heart and enlighten the eyes (Ps 19:8).

⁸ John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, ed. Don Kistler (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), xxvi.

⁹ Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 79.

¹⁰ Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 80.

¹¹ Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 81.

Eternally and Universally Binding

Second, the law of God is also eternally and universally binding upon all humans. God has put his law within our hearts. Paul explains in Rom 2:15–16 that, though Gentiles did not have the written law as the Jews did, they had the law of God written on their hearts, and the work of their conscience is a testimony to this. This text teaches that God has written the basic content of his moral law on the hearts of all people.¹² Thus, as those who have this law written upon our hearts, we are eternally and universally bound by virtue of our natural constitution to keep it. As Colquhoun writes, the law “retains, and will continue throughout eternity to retain, its whole authority and obligation over every sinner of mankind who lives and dies under it.”¹³

Personal, Entire, Exact, and Perpetual Obedience

Third, the law of God also demands personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience. As the law of God written on our hearts is part of our natural constitution, we are personally required to keep it. This law demands entire and exact obedience because, as James writes, “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (Jas 2:10). Additionally, it demands entire and exact obedience not only with regard to our actions, but also with regard to every thought, intention, and affection of our hearts.¹⁴ Christ himself makes this clear in Matthew 5 when he corrects the teaching of the Pharisees with regard to the law. This means that a proper understanding of the law of God is important for the counselor because it directs us with regard to how we ought to instruct our counselees in both their heart and actions.

The perpetual obligation of the law is also taught by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. He states in Matt 5:17–20,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the

¹² J. V. Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2021), 162–63.

¹³ Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 83.

¹⁴ See Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 76; Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 45.

kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.¹⁵

Paul similarly says in Rom 3:31, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.” Commenting on these two texts James Durham (1622–1658) wrote, “Christ was so far from destroying this law in its authority, and Paul so far from making it void by the doctrine of faith, that our Lord tells [us], He came to fulfill it (Matt 5:17), and Paul shows that his preaching of faith was to establish it (Rom 3:31). Which truth being confirmed by them both in their practice and doctrine shows that the breach of the holy Law of God is no less sinful to us now than it was to them before us.”¹⁶ Thus, every counselee that sits before us has a moral obligation to keep God’s law in its entirety with the entirety of their person for the entirety of their lives.

The Identity of the Law of God

In discussing the law of God, the only thing that remains before moving on to its use is to assert its identity. To which laws do all of the above-mentioned attributes belong? Certainly they do not all describe the ceremonial laws or judicial laws of the Mosaic Covenant, which are positive laws that are not binding and perpetual upon those who do not belong to that covenant.¹⁷ Rather, the “law of God” as I have discussed it thus far refers to the eternal moral law of God, which is inscribed on the heart of every human and is set down in written form in the Ten Commandments. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism succinctly states, “The moral law is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments.”¹⁸ Proving this is beyond the scope of this article. The reader can consult numerous Reformed works, confessions, and catechisms from the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries to find plentiful proofs that

¹⁵ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.

¹⁶ James Durham, *A Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*, ed. Chris Coldwell (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 3.

¹⁷ Positive law here is distinguished from natural law. As Samuel D. Renihan explains, “Natural law refers to the universal moral law of God impressed on the mind of man. Positive law refers to indifferent things prescribed for a particular period, place, and people” (*The Mystery of Christ: His Covenant and His Kingdom* [Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2019], 15).

¹⁸ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession: The Confession of Faith, The Larger and Shorter Catechisms, The Directory for the Public Worship of God, with Associated Historical Documents* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2018), 440.

this is both a widely-received belief in the church and can be well-established from the Scriptures.¹⁹ Suffice it to say that it *must be* believed by all Christians that there is an eternal moral law of God to which all people are bound and that it *has been* believed by most Christians throughout history that this eternal moral law is set down in written form in the Ten Commandments.

The Use of the Law of God

Having established the nature and identity of the law of God, I now turn to its use. After Adam’s fall into sin the law took on an entirely different use for humanity. Prior to the fall, Adam and Eve, who had been created upright (Eccl 7:29), had the ability to keep the law. They had the promise of life set before them in the form of the Tree of Life and the

¹⁹ For sixteenth-century catechisms, see Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism* and *The Heidelberg Catechism*. For theological and practical works see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960); Henry Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. Thomas Harding, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021); William Perkins, *A Golden Chain*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Greg A. Salazar, *The Works of William Perkins, Volume 6* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018).

For seventeenth-century confessions and catechisms, see Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession*; James M. Renihan, ed., *The Baptist Confession of Faith and the Baptist Catechism* (Port St. Lucie, FL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2010). For theological and practical works, see Durham, *A Practical Exposition of the Ten Commandments*; Watson, *The Ten Commandments*; Godefridus Udemans, *The Practice of Faith, Hope, and Love*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Annemie Godbehere, *Classics of Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012); Thomas Vincent, *The Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly Explained and Proved from Scripture*, Puritan Paperbacks (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1980); Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology: Volume Two: Eleventh through Seventeenth Topics*, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992); Wilhemus à Brakel, *Christian’s Reasonable Service, Volume 3: The Law, Christian Graces, and the Lord’s Prayer*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Bartel Elshout (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1994).

For nineteenth-century works, see John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity: Or a System of Evangelical Truths, Deduced from the Sacred Scriptures* (Paris, AK: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2007); Theodorus Vandergrae, *The Christian’s Only Comfort in Life and Death: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Bartel Elshout, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books; Dutch Translation Society, 2016).

For twentieth-century works, see Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 6th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013); Robert Lewis Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996).

threat of death held before them in the form of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.²⁰ After the fall, the law of God can no longer be used by fallen humans as a means of attaining the promise of life. Rather than promising life, it offers the condemnation of death (Rom 7:9). But that does not mean that it is not useful for both the regenerate and unregenerate. Historically, theologians have thought of the moral law as having a threefold use. In each of these uses, the law must be understood with relation to the gospel, which is the only hope of redeeming sinners from the curse of the law.

The First Use

The first use—or civil use—is the wielding of the law for the restraint of the sins of men in general.²¹ Colquhoun explains, “It is of use, by its terrible denunciations, to curb those who, destitute of every good principle, would rush forward to all manner of sin, and to deter them, through fear of punishment, from many gross enormities.”²² This use is equivalent to Paul’s description in Rom 13:1–7 of the use of the law by the civil magistrate. According to this use, the law restrains sinners from being as bad as they could be and paves the way for the proclamation of the gospel. It does this by preventing the further darkening of lost minds and providing roadblocks to keep them from being more and more handed over to their sin as were the sinners in Romans 1. The counselor may avail himself of this use whether or not a counselee is regenerate. We must provide warnings to our counselees when they choose sin. Sin offers a false hope of life, but we must remind people that the breaking of the law promises only death.

The Second Use

The second use—or evangelical use—is the use of the law to drive the sinner to Christ. Joel Beeke explains, “the Holy Spirit uses the law as a mirror to show us our impotence and our guilt, to shut us up to hope in mercy alone, and to induce repentance, creating and sustaining the sense of spiritual need out of which faith in Christ is born.”²³ This use is not limited merely to the bringing about of conversion. Rather, it also serves us in our ongoing sanctification by chastening us in our sin and driving

²⁰ Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 334–35.

²¹ Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality: A Practical Theological Study from Our Reformed and Puritan Heritage* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006), 102–3.

²² Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 125.

²³ Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 103.

us back to Christ day in and day out as we seek to put our sin to death.²⁴ The law continually reminds us of what Christ did which we could not do.²⁵ Much of contemporary gospel-centeredness focuses only on the passive obedience of Christ whereby he took upon himself the deserved penalty of the law for sinners. But more is needed by us than for Christ to simply take our penalty. We needed him to fulfill all of the righteous requirements of the law on our behalf.²⁶ When we look at the law rightly, we see what Christ accomplished on our behalf. And if we are in him, we see what was imputed to us through no merit of our own. The law used rightly leads us to cling to Christ not only as our atoning sacrifice but also as our righteousness (Jer 23:6; Rom 10:4; 1 Cor 1:30). Such a glorious truth is why the great twentieth century theologian J. Gresham Machan (1881–1937) as he was dying sent a telegram to his friend John Murray (1898–1975) saying, “I’m so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.”²⁷ Our counselees need the law to help them to see their complete inadequacy in and of themselves and their utter need in every moment to rest in the righteousness of Christ. Their hope depends on this, and they will not see it rightly without a right use of the law.

The Third Use

The third use of the law—the didactic use—is the law’s usefulness as a rule of life for the Christian.²⁸ Upon regeneration, the Christian is infused by the Holy Spirit with a principle of life which now enables him to keep the law, though imperfectly. It has been noted by many that the structure of the *Heidelberg Catechism* is (1) guilt, (2) grace, (3) gratitude. Question two of the catechism asks, “How many things are necessary for thee to know, that thou, enjoying this comfort [that you are not your own but belong to God], mayest live and die happily?” It answers, “Three; the first, how great my sins and miseries are; the second, how I may be deliv-

²⁴ Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 104.

²⁵ Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 130.

²⁶ As John Owen (1616–1683) wrote, “we have need of more than the mere sufferings of Christ, whereby we may be justified before God” (*The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967], 5:254).

²⁷ J. Gresham Machan, *Things Unseen: A Systematic Introduction to the Christian Faith and Reformed Theology* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2020), xxvii.

²⁸ Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, 104.

ered from all my sins and miseries; the third, how I shall express my gratitude to God for such deliverance."²⁹ These three points serve as the overall structure of the catechism, which, it can be argued is both the summary of Scripture and of the Christian life.³⁰ The third section on gratitude is where the exposition of the Ten Commandments is located within the catechism. Thus, the Ten Commandments—which reveal the eternal moral law of God—are presented as a means of showing our gratitude to God for what he has done for us in redeeming us from our sin in Christ. The Dutch pastor Theodorus Vandergrae (1705–1784), stated in his sermon on the second question of the catechism,

This gratitude is nothing less than the life of sanctification—a spiritual living unto God—by the Lord's redeemed, whereby they, in Christ, are inwardly transformed into His image and renewed by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, they surrender themselves with soul and body to the Lord, offering themselves as a holy sacrifice of praise to Him in order to live entirely and exclusively to and for the Lord. To know and to enjoy this thoroughly, spiritually, and experientially is the third matter that is requisite for acquiring this true spiritual comfort.³¹

For the Christian, the law of God rightly applied is not legalistic drudgery. Rather, it puts before us a life of obedient service fueled by Spirit-wrought gratitude to God for the glorious work of redemption which he has accomplished on our behalf in Christ. Contemplating our utter inability to keep the law and to justify ourselves, we are led to rest in the glorious promises of God's gospel which have been fulfilled for us by Christ and applied to us by his Spirit. The only right response to being deeply affected by such truths is obedient sacrifice to our Savior in the form of keeping his laws out of love for him.

We must teach our counselees to love the God who first loved them if they are in Christ (1 John 4:19). We must teach them that loving him involves contemplating the depth of their sinfulness and the glorious comfort of the gospel. And we must teach them that if they love this Christ who has redeemed them, then they will obey him by keeping his law (John 14:15). Indeed, we will teach them that his commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3), and we will teach them that they are not

²⁹ Vandergrae, *The Christian's Only Comfort in Life and Death*, 1:1.

³⁰ Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Theology: Historical, Experiential, and Practical Studies for the Whole of Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), 574–75.

³¹ Vandergrae, *The Christian's Only Comfort in Life and Death*, 1:12–13.

only to love the Savior but also his commandments such that his commandments become their meditation all the day (Ps 119:97).

The Experience of the Law of God

Having discussed the nature and identity of the law of God as well as its use, I now briefly discuss the experience of the law of God. It is not enough to have a mere intellectual knowledge of the nature and use of the law of God. We must also be experientially acquainted with its application to our own souls. John Owen explained this well when he described what he called the twofold sense of sin. On the one hand a man can and must have a general and notional sense of his own sinfulness.³² According to this sense, he knows what sin is and that he himself is sinful, but not to the degree that his heart has been affected by it. All true Christians must have this sense of their own sinfulness. Indeed, no true conversion has occurred where this sense of one's sinfulness is not present. However, such a general recognition of one's sinfulness can also be present in an unbeliever without that person ever coming to a true saving knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In order for true conversion and sanctification to occur, one must have a sense of his own sinfulness that is active and efficacious.³³ Most unregenerate sinners have had an experience of the first sense of their own sinfulness at some point, but only true believers have experienced the second. And even true believers can fail to experience the second at times, as David did prior to being confronted by Nathan.³⁴

The second sense of one's sinfulness gives one a true experiential knowledge of the Spirit's work in applying the law to our hearts. Owen described it as

a deep and practical apprehension, wrought in the mind and heart of a believing sinner by the Holy Ghost, of sin and its evils, in reference unto the law and love of God, the cross and blood of Christ, the communion and consolation of the Spirit, and all the fruits of love, mercy, or grace that it hath been made partaker of, or on gospel ground hoped for.³⁵

Owen explained that this ongoing, experiential knowledge of one's sinfulness according to the law is the only avenue to experiencing in an ongoing manner the glorious rest of forgiveness in Christ. Explaining the

³² Owen, *Works*, 6:368.

³³ Owen, *Works*, 6:368–69.

³⁴ Owen, *Works*, 6:369.

³⁵ Owen, *Works*, 6:369.

importance of weighing our sinfulness according to the law, Owen wrote,

As ever you desire to come to rest . . . attend unto what the law speaks of your sin and its desert, or you will never make a due application to God for forgiveness. As ever you would have your souls *justified* by grace, take care to have your sins *judged* by the law.³⁶

John Flavel (1627–1691) wrote, “The law wounds, the gospel cures.”³⁷ We seek to have the law applied to the depth of our souls so that we will come to a deep, experiential knowledge of our ever-present need for the gospel. Without an experiential knowledge of our sinfulness according to the law, we will not be able to have an experience of the glorious comfort and cure of the gospel.

In his extended exposition of Ps 51:17, titled *The Acceptable Sacrifice*, John Bunyan (1628–1688) explained that a spirit broken by the law of God is the only sacrifice acceptable by God and is the necessary fuel of all truly holy outward duties to God. Without a heart broken by sin, all our sacrifices are nothing.³⁸ In our attempts to help our counselees, we must show them that the only avenue to true rest and true obedience is humility in accordance with the law: true brokenness over our sin and an experience of our ongoing need for Christ the perfect Lawkeeper to cover our sin.

Practical Conclusions

As counselors we must be like skillful surgeons who wield the law with precision. It should be used more like a surgical scalpel than like a club. We must apply the law to our counselees if we wish to see them experience the glory of the gospel, but we must be discerning with regard to how we use it. There is a danger in being quick to apply the law without having an adequate understanding of the person. When we do this, we are like “one who gives an answer before he hears,” thus bringing about our own “folly and shame” (Prov 18:13). Furthermore, we may cause great harm to our counselees when we apply the law without understanding, potentially leading them into legalism or false condemnation. In our use of the law, we must strive to be counselors who heed the instructions of

³⁶ Owen, *Works*, 6:370.

³⁷ John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1968), 2:297.

³⁸ John Bunyan, *The Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 1:689. See also Bunyan’s beautiful illustration of the relationship between the law and the gospel in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, ed. W. R. Owens, Oxford World’s Classics (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 30–31.

Proverbs and the example of Christ:

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver. Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reprove to a listening ear. (Prov 25:11–12)

To make an apt answer is a joy to a man, and a word in season, how good it is!” (Prov 15:23)

The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. (Isa 50:4).

Moreover, counselors must always recognize that, as we use the law in the lives of others, we ourselves also remain lawbreakers. We must always have a sense of our shared humanity with our counselees, and we must be careful to never let them think that we have somehow come to a place in which we have the authority to stand above them in our relationship to the law. Christ is the only human who has ever ministered to others from a place of perfect sinlessness, and he himself displayed a disposition of compassion and care toward even the most egregious offenders. Having made these qualifications, I offer the following brief suggestions for using the law with different types of counselees.

For those whom we counsel that have been egregiously sinned against, we must help them to see that forgiving their offender can only come through the avenue of experiencing a sense of their own sinfulness according to the law and the depth of the forgiveness that they themselves have received in Christ. Christ himself said so in the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matt 18:21–35. Though we must do this with patience and great care, we must do it nonetheless.³⁹

For those who themselves are offenders, we must help them to look their sin in the face and see it for what it truly is: an egregious offense against a holy God. And we must help them to see that whatever offense they have committed against their fellow man is ultimately a trespass

³⁹ To nuance this paragraph a bit, those who have been egregiously sinned against often need a great deal of compassion, care, and tenderness. The counselor must demonstrate to them the truth that God is still good despite the trials that they have undergone. My point in focusing on the use of the law for those who have been egregiously sinned against is simply to say that when the time comes to help the counselee move toward forgiving their offender, a recognition of how good God has been to them in redeeming them from their own sin will be an important motivating factor for experiencing the freedom of forgiving those who have sinned against them.

against the eternal moral law of God. In doing so, we must lead them on the path of humility toward the glorious experience of rest in the forgiveness of Christ and obedient gratitude to him for what he has done for them.

In addition to the above categories, some will experience suffering that has not come immediately as a result of their own sin or from the hand of any particular person but is, rather, an effect of the hard providence of God. We must not blame these counselees for their present suffering, but we must also help them to see that their present suffering is much less than what they deserve for their sin. Only through contemplating our sinfulness in accordance with the law can we find rest in the gospel that fuels our ability to remain steadfast amidst trials. Being humbled by the law is the only avenue for gospel rest and gospel obedience.

Conclusion

Much more could be written regarding a methodology for how a counselor uncovers false deception and confusion regarding the law and the gospel in the heart of different counselees with various particular struggles. Additionally, much can and should be written regarding how to skillfully bring gospel hope through rightly utilizing the law. However, the point of this article has simply been to assert that if we would be counselors who are Christian, biblically grounded, gospel-centered, and Christ-exalting, then we must have a right understanding and use of the law of God. For where there is no right understanding of the law of God, there can be no right understanding of the gospel, which is the only place where hope can be found, both for ourselves and for our counselees.