

THE MORAL LAW, THE RULE OF MAN'S OBEDIENCE.

ROM. II. 14, 15.—*For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves; which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.*

THE apostle here shews three things. 1. That *the Gentiles have not the law*; that is, the law of Moses, or written law. They want the scriptures. 2. That yet they have a law within them, they are *a law unto themselves*; they have the natural law, which for substance is all one with the moral law. Only it is less clear and distinct, and wants the perfection of the moral law written: several points thereof being, through the corruption of nature, obliterated in it. 3. How they have it. It is not of their own making, nor by tradition, but they have it by nature derived from Adam. *The work of that law is written in their hearts*; it is deeply inscribed there, and cannot be erased; it is such a work as tells them what is right and what wrong; so their consciences, by virtue thereof, excuse their good actions, and accuse the evil.

Now, this natural law is nothing else but the rubbish of the moral law left in the heart of corrupt man: from whence we gather, that the moral law in its perfection was given to Adam in innocence, while we see the remains of it yet with those of his posterity, who have not the advantage of the written law.

The doctrine arising from the words is,

DOCT. 'The rule which God at first revealed to man for his obedience, was the moral law.'

First, It is here supposed, that man always was and is under a law: for being a rational creature, capable of obeying the will of God, and owing obedience to his Creator by virtue of his natural dependence upon him, he behoved to be under a law. The beasts are not capable of government by a law, because of the imperfection of their nature: so those that will be lawless, seeing they cannot lift up themselves to the throne of God, who has no superior, they do in effect cast down themselves to the condition of beasts, whose appetite is all their rule. Indeed all the creatures are subjected to laws suitable to their various natures. Every thing has a law imprinted upon its being. The inanimate creatures, sun, moon, and stars, are under the law of providence, and under a covenant of night and day. Hence it is said, Psalm cxlviii. 6. 'He hath esta-

blished them for ever and ever, he hath made a decree which shall not pass.' They have their courses and appointed motions, and keep to the just points of their compass. Even the sea, which is one of the most raging and tumultuous creatures, is subjected to a law. God hedges it in as it were with a girdle of sand, saying to it, 'Hitherto shalt thou come, but no farther: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed,' Job xxxviii. 11. But much more are rational creatures subject to a law, seeing they are capable of election and choice. Man especially, being a rational creature, is capable of and fitted for government by a law; and seeing he is an accountable creature to God, he must needs be under a law.

Quest. How could man be under a law, before the law was given by Moses, for we are told, that the 'law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ,' John i. 17?

Ans. Before the law was given at Sinai, all the race of Adam had a law written in their hearts, even the light of reason, and the dictates of natural conscience, which contained those moral principles concerning good and evil which have an essential equity in them, and the measures of his duty to God, to himself, and to his fellow-creatures. This was published by the voice of reason, and, as the apostle says, Rom. vii. 12. was 'holy, just, and good:' *Holy* as it enjoins things holy, wherein there is a conformity to those attributes and actions of God, which are the pattern of our imitation. *Just*; that is, exactly agreeable to the frame of man's faculties, and is most suitable to his condition in the world. *Good*; that is, beneficial to the observer of it; for, 'in keeping of it there was great reward.' And thus Adam in the state of innocence had the law of God written on his heart; and therefore it is said, Gen. i. 27. that 'God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him.' This image consisted in the moral qualities and perfections of his soul. He was made after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness. The Lord imparted to him a spark of his own comeliness, in order to communicate with himself in happiness. This was an universal and entire rectitude in his faculties, disposing them to their proper operations. But of this I spoke largely, when discoursing of the creation of man.

Secondly, There are three sorts of laws we find in the word.

1. The ceremonial law, which was given by Moses. This bound only the Jews, and that to the coming of Christ, by whom it was abrogated, being a shadow of good things that were then to come: a hedge and partition-wall betwixt them and the Gentiles, which is now taken down.

2. The judicial law, which was the civil law of the Jews, given

also first by Moses, by which their civil concerns were to be regulated, in respect of which the Jewish government was a Theocracy. What a happy people were they under such a government! Yet does it not bind other nations farther than it is of moral equity, being peculiarly adapted to the circumstances of that nation.

3. The moral law, which is the declaration of the will of God to mankind, binding all men to perfect obedience thereto in all the duties of holiness and righteousness. The ceremonial law was given to them as a church in their particular circumstances; the judicial law as a state; but the moral law was given them in common with all mankind. But of these laws I spoke more largely in a preceding discourse.

Thirdly, This moral law is found, 1. In the hearts of all men, as to some remains thereof, Rom. ii. 15. There are common notions thereof, such as, That there is a God, and that he is to be worshiped; that we should give every one his due, &c. Conscience has that law with which it accuses for the commission of great crimes, Rom. i. ult. This internal law appears from those laws which are common in all countries for the preserving of human societies, the encouraging of virtue, and the discouraging of vice. What standard else can they have for these laws but common reason? The design of them is to keep men within the bounds of goodness for mutual commerce. Every son of Adam brings with him into the world a law in his nature; and when reason clears up itself from the clouds of sense, he can make some difference between good and evil. Every man finds a law within him that checks him if he offends it. None are without a legal indictment, and a legal executioner, within them. This law is found, 2. In the ten commandments summarily. 3. In the whole Bible largely. This is that law which the carnal mind is enmity against in the natural man, which is written over again in the heart in regeneration, Heb. viii. 10; and that was fulfilled by Christ in the room of the elect.

Fourthly, As to the revelation thereof, we may consider three special seasons thereof.

1. It was revealed to Adam in innocency, and to all mankind in him. Not by an audible voice, but it was written in his heart: the knowledge of it was concreated with his pure nature; his understanding was a lamp of light, whereby he plainly saw his duty as it was revealed to him.

Note, (1.) That it is a part of the moral natural law, that man is to believe whatever God shall reveal, and obey whatever he commands. Accordingly God did reveal to him the symbolical law of the forbidden fruit, for the trial of him; and then the law so extended was the rule of his duty.

(2.) God added to this law a promise of life upon obedience, and a threatening of death upon disobedience. So it was cast into the form of a covenant, called 'the covenant of works.' This prohibition was founded upon most wise and just grounds. As, first, to declare God's sovereign right in all things; and, next, to make trial of man's obedience in a matter very congruous to discover it. For if the prohibition had been grounded on any moral internal evil in the nature of the thing itself, there had not been so clear a testimony of God's dominion, nor of Adam's subjection to it. But when that which was in itself indifferent became unlawful, merely by the will of God, and when the command had no other excellency but to make his authority more sacred, this was a confining of man's liberty, and to abstain was pure obedience.

2. It was revealed to the Israelites again upon mount Sinai, in ten commandments. For Adam having fallen, and so man's nature being corrupted, the knowledge of this law was darkened, howsoever the godly patriarchs kept up the knowledge of it. But in Egypt they had lost much of the sense of it, which made it necessary to be renewed.

3. By Jesus Christ and his apostles, the law was again revealed to the world, the knowledge of it being then much lost among the Jews as well as the Gentiles. And now we have it comprehended in the scriptures of the Old and New Testament.

Fifthly, As to the properties of it, it is,

1. An universal law, binding all men, in all places, and at all times, Rom. ii. 14, 15. *For when the Gentiles, &c.*

2. It is a perfect law, comprehending the whole of man's duty to God, and to his neighbour. There were no new duties added to it by Christ, for it was perfect before. So says the Psalmist, Psal. xix. 7. 'The law of the Lord is perfect.'

3. It is indispensable and perpetual, Luke xvi. 17; 'It is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tittle of the law to fail,' Matt. v. 18; 'Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.'

Lastly, For what use is the law revealed? I answer,

1. It was revealed at first, that man by obedience to it might be justified; but now it is not revealed for that end, seeing no man by obedience to it can obtain justification: For 'that the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh,' Rom. viii. 3. 'Since the fall no mere man can attain happiness by the law; for all are guilty of sin, and cannot possibly yield that perfect obedience which the law requires. 'For there is not a just man upon earth that doeth good, and sinneth not,' Eccl. vii. 20. 'In many things we offend all.' Yet it is of use,

(1.) To all men in general. It is of a threefold use.

[1.] To let all men know what the holy will of God and their duty is, Micah vi. 8. 'He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good: and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?'

[2.] To let all see their inability to keep it, and so to humble them in the sense of their sin. 'By them,' says David, 'is thy servant warned. Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults,' Psal. xix. 11, 12.

[3.] To give them a clear sense of their need of Christ. 'Wherefore serveth the law?' saith the apostle. 'It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come, to whom the promise was made,' Gal. iii. 19. And says the same apostle, ver. 24. 'The law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.' And it brings men to Christ, (1.) As it convinceth them of their sin. The prohibitions of the law convince men of their sins of commission; and the injunctions of it convince them of their sins of omission. Hence says the apostle, Rom. iii. 20. 'By the law is the knowledge of sin,' Rom. vii. 7. 'I had not known sin but by the law,' &c. There are many things which men had never reckoned sins unless the law of God had discovered them. (2.) By discovering unto them the dreadful wrath and curse of God that is due unto them for their sins. It tells them, 'Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them,' Gal. iii. 10; (3.) By awakening their consciences under a sense of their guilt, and apprehensions of their misery, and begetting in them bondage and fear, whereby they are brought to a clearer sight of their need of Christ, and of the perfection of his obedience.

(2.) To the unregenerate: Particularly it is,

[1.] For a looking-glass to let them see their state and case, by convincing them, that 'by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in God's sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin,' Rom. iii. 20; and so to bring them to Christ, who has wrought out a perfect righteousness for their justification.

[2.] For a bridle to hold them in with its commands and threatenings, who otherwise would regard nothing. 'The law (says the apostle) is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners,' &c. 1 Tim. i. 9.

[3.] For a scourge, vexing and tormenting their consciences, and making them uneasy in a sinful course, rendering them inexcusable, and laying them under the curse.

(3.) To them that are in Christ. It serves,

[1.] To magnify Christ unto them, shewing them their obligation to him for fulfilling it in their stead. 'O wretched man that I am! (says the apostle); who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord,' Rom. vii. 24, 25. 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree; that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith,' Gal. iii. 13, 14.

[2.] To be a rule of life unto them, wherein they may express their gratitude by obeying the law of Christ. So the law leads to Christ as a Redeemer from its curse and condemnation, and he leads back to the law as a directory, the rule and standard of their obedience to him.

Object. But does not the apostle say, Rom. vi. 14. 'Ye are not under the law but under grace?' and Gal. v. 22, 23. 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, &c.—against such there is no law?'

Ans. Believers are not under the law as a covenant of works, to be either justified or condemned thereby. For the apostle says, 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us,' Gal. iii. 13; and that there is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.' They are neither under the commanding nor the condemning power of that law, seeing Christ has given perfect obedience to it as a covenant of works, so that under that character it can have nothing to demand of them; and has fully satisfied all its demands in point of punishment, having suffered the very penalty threatened therein. So that as a covenant of works they are entirely delivered from it. And as to the fruits of the Spirit in them, they are the product of the Spirit, agreeable to the will and law of God; and no law can be against them, seeing they are agreeable to the very letter and spirit thereof. But believers are still under the law as a rule of life, according to which they are to regulate their hearts and lives. It is the pole star that must direct their course to heaven, and is of singular use to provoke and excite them to gratitude to Christ, who hath perfectly fulfilled it in their room and stead.

I shall conclude with drawing a few inferences from what has been said.

Inf. 1. That the Pope is Antichrist, and that man of sin, who shews himself as if he were God, by commanding things contrary to and inconsistent with the moral law, 2 Thess. ii. 3, 4. The Papists add canons and traditions to the moral law, as if it were in itself an imperfect rule of manners. This is taxing God's wisdom and good-

ness, as if he knew not to make his own laws, or would not give a sufficient and complete rule to his creatures. This is a provoking sin in the sight of God; and a most dangerous thing it is to add to or impair his holy law. See Rev. xxii. 18, 19.

2. Is the moral law the rule of our obedience to which we ought to conform ourselves in heart and conversation? Then what ground of reproof is there here to many among you! Are there not many who cast God's words behind their backs, and trample upon his commandments? Some set up their carnal wisdom, as the standard and rule of their actions, and regulate themselves by the dictates of their corrupt reason. Others subject themselves to the law of their lusts and passions. They study to fulfil the desires of their fleshly mind, and to gratify their sensual appetite; but have no regard to the holy law of God. They break all these cords, and cast all the divine commands from them. This their way is their great sin and folly, exposes them to the wrath of God, and sooner or later will bring down Heaven's vengeance on their guilty heads.

3. It is necessary that the law be preached, in order to convince men of their sin, and inability to yield perfect obedience to it, that they may betake themselves to Jesus Christ, who hath fulfilled all righteousness for every one that will come to him for deliverance from sin and the wrath to come. It is necessary to be studied and known by all who would attain to true holiness both in heart and life, which principally lies in a sincere and upright obedience to the whole law of God, in dependence upon the grace that is in Jesus Christ. The law is a lamp to their feet, and a light to their path; and the more they study it in its spirituality and extent, the more vigorously will they press after conformity to it.

4. Let us remember we are under a law in whatever case we be; and therefore our actions are a seed that will have a proportionable harvest. And there will be a day of judgment wherein every man's works and actions will be narrowly examined. Let us therefore study to conform ourselves to the holy law of God, being holy as God is holy, and exercising ourselves to keep consciences void of offence both towards God and towards man.