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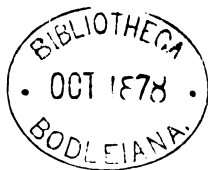
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## THE IMPOTENCE OF THE LAW.

BY REV. WILLIAM G. T. SHEDD, D.D.

*“For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did ;  
by the which we draw nigh unto God.”—HEBREWS vii. 19.*

IT is the aim of the Epistle to the Hebrews to teach the insufficiency of the Jewish dispensation to save the human race from the wrath of God and the power of sin, and the all-sufficiency of the Gospel dispensation to do this. Hence the writer of this epistle endeavours, with special effort, to make the Hebrews feel the weakness of their old and much esteemed religion, and to show them that the only benefit which God intended by its establishment was to point men to the perfect and final religion of the Gospel. This he does by examining the parts of the old economy. In the first place, the sacrifices under the Mosaic law were not designed to extinguish the sense of guilt—“for it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sin”—but were intended merely to awaken the sense of guilt, and thereby to lead the Jew to look to that mercy of God which, at a future day, was to be exhibited in the sacrifice of his eternal Son. The Jewish priesthood, again, standing between the sinner and God, were not able to avert the Divine displeasure, for as sinners they they were themselves exposed to it. They could only typify, and direct the guilty to the great High Priest, the Messiah, whom God’s mercy would send in the fulness of time. Lastly,

the moral law, proclaimed amidst the thunderings and lightnings of Sinai, had no power to secure obedience, but only a fearful power to produce the consciousness of disobedience, and of exposure to a death far more awful than that threatened against the man who should touch the burning mountain.

It was thus the design of God, by this legal and preparatory dispensation, to disclose to man his ruined and helpless condition, and his need of looking to him for everything that pertains to redemption. And he did it by so arranging the dispensation that the Jew might, as it were, make the trial and see if he could be his own redeemer. He instituted a long and burdensome round of observances, by means of which the Jew might, if possible, extinguish the remorse of his conscience, and produce the peace of God in his soul. God seems, by the sacrifices under the law, and the many and costly offerings which the Jew was commanded to bring into the temple of the Lord, to have virtually said to him, "Thou art guilty, and my wrath righteously abides within thy conscience; yet, do what thou canst to free thyself from it—free thyself from it if thou canst—bring an offering, and come before me. But when thou hast found that thy conscience still remains perturbed and unpacified, and thy heart still continues corrupt and sinful, then look away from thy agency and thy offering, to my clemency and my offering; trust not in these finite sacrifices of the lamb and the goat, but let them merely remind thee of the infinite sacrifice which in the fulness of time I will provide for the sin of the world, and thy peace shall be as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea."

But the proud and legal spirit of the Jew blinded him, and he did not perceive the true meaning and intent of his national religion. He made it an end, instead of a mere means to an end. Hence it became a mechanical round of observances, kept up by custom, and eventually lost the power, which it had in the earlier and better ages of the Jewish commonwealth, of awakening the feeling of guilt and the sense of the need of a Redeemer. Thus, in the days of our Saviour's appearance upon

the earth, the chosen guardians of this religion, which was intended to make men humble and feel their personal ill-desert and need of mercy, had become self-satisfied and self-righteous. A religion designed to prompt the utterance of the greatest of its prophets, "Woe is me! I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;" now prompted the utterance of the Pharisee, "I thank thee that I am not as other men are."

The Jew, in the times of our Saviour and his Apostles, had thus entirely mistaken the nature and purpose of the Old dispensation, and hence was the most bitter opponent of the New. He rested in the formal and ceremonial sacrifice of bulls and goats, and, therefore, counted the blood of the Son of God an unholy thing. He thought to appear before him, in whose sight the heavens are not clean, clothed in his own righteousness, and hence despised the righteousness of Christ. In reality, he appealed to the justice of God, and, therefore, rejected the religion of mercy.

But this spirit is not confined to the Jew. It pervades the human race. Man is naturally a legalist. He desires to be justified by his own character and his own works, and reluctates at the thought of being accepted upon the ground of another's merits. This Judaistic spirit is seen wherever there is none of the publican's feeling when he said, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." All confidence in personal virtue, all appeals to civil integrity, all attendance upon the ordinances of the Christian religion without the exercise of the Christian's penitence and faith, is, in reality, an exhibition of that same legal unevangelic spirit which in its extreme form inflated the Pharisee, and led him to tithe mint, anise, and cummin. Man's so general rejection of the Son of God as suffering the just for the unjust, as the manifestation of the Divine clemency towards a criminal, is a sign either that he is insensible of his guilt, or else that, being somewhat conscious of it, he thinks to cancel it himself.

Still, think and act as men may, the method of God in the

Gospel is the only method. Other foundation can no man lay than is laid; for it rests upon stubborn facts and inexorable principles. God knows that however anxiously a transgressor may strive to pacify his conscience, and prepare it for the judgment day, its deep remorse can be removed only by the blood of incarnate Deity; that however sedulously he may attempt to obey the law, he will utterly fail, unless he is inwardly renewed and strengthened by the Holy Ghost. He knows that mere bare law can make no sinner perfect again, but that only the bringing in of a "better hope" can, a hope by the which we draw nigh to God.

The text leads us to inquire: *Why cannot the moral law make fallen man perfect?* Or, in other words: "*Why cannot the ten commandments save a sinner?*"

That we may answer this question, we must first understand what is meant by a perfect man. It is one in whom there is no defect or fault of any kind—one, therefore, who has no perturbation in his conscience, and no sin in his heart. It is a man who is entirely at peace with himself and with God, and whose affections are in perfect conformity with the Divine law.

But fallen man, man as we find him universally, is characterized by both a remorseful conscience and an evil heart. His conscience distresses him, not indeed uniformly and constantly, but in the great emergencies of his life—in the hour of sickness, danger, death—and his heart is selfish and corrupt continually. He lacks perfection, therefore, in two particulars: first, in respect to acquittal at the bar of justice; and secondly, in respect to inward purity. That, therefore, which proposes to make him perfect again must quiet the sense of guilt upon valid grounds, and must produce a holy character. If the method fails in either of these two respects, it fails altogether in making a perfect man.

But how can the moral law, or the ceremonial law, or both united, produce within the human soul the cheerful, liberating sense of acquittal and reconciliation with God's justice? Why, the very function and office work of law, in all its forms, is to condemn and terrify the transgressor; how, then,

can it calm and soothe him? Or, is there anything in the performance of duty, in the act of obeying law, that is adapted to produce this result, by taking away guilt? Suppose that a murderer could and should perform a perfectly holy act, would it be any relief to his anguished conscience, if he should offer it as an oblation to Eternal Justice for the sin that is past—if he should plead it as an offset for having killed a man? When we ourselves review the past, and see that we have not kept the law up to the present point in our lives, is the gnawing of the worm to be stopped by resolving to keep it, and actually keeping it from this point? Can such a use of the law as this is, can the performance of good works, imaginary or real ones, imperfect or perfect ones, discharge the office of an atonement, and so make us perfect in the forum of conscience, and fill us with a deep and lasting sense of reconciliation with the offended majesty and justice of God? Plainly not. For there is nothing compensatory, nothing cancelling, nothing of the nature of a satisfaction of justice, in the best obedience that was ever rendered to moral law, by saint, angel, or seraph. Because the creature owes the whole. He is obligated from the very first instant of his existence, onward and evermore, to love God supremely, and to obey him perfectly in every act and element of his being. Therefore the perfectly obedient saint, angel, and seraph must each say: "I am an unprofitable servant, I have done only that which it was my duty to do; I can make no amends for past failures; I can do no work that is meritorious and atoning." Obedience to law, then, by a creature, and still less by a sinner, can never atone for the sins that are past; can never make the guilty perfect "in things pertaining to conscience." And if a man, in this indirect and roundabout manner, neglect the provisions of the gospel, neglect the oblation of Jesus Christ, and betake himself to the discharge of his own duty as a substitute therefor, he only finds that the flame burns hotter, and the fang of the worm is sharper. If he look to the moral law in any form, and by any method, that he may get quit of his remorse and his fears of judgment, the feeling of unreconciliation with justice, and the

fearful looking for of judgment, is only made more vivid and deep. Whoever attempts the discharge of duties for the purpose of atoning for his sins takes a direct method of increasing the pains and perturbations which he seeks to remove. The more he thinks of law, and the more he endeavours to obey it for the purpose of purchasing the pardon of past transgression, the more wretched does he become. Look into the lacerated conscience of Martin Luther before he found the Cross; examine the anxiety and gloom of Chalmers before he saw the Lamb of God, for proof that this is so. These men, at first, were most earnest in their use of the law in order to reinstate themselves in right relations with God's justice. But the more they toiled in this direction, the less they succeeded. Burning with inward anguish, and with God's arrows sticking fast in him, shall the transgressor get relief from the attribute of Divine justice, and the qualities of law? Shall the ten commandments of Sinai, in any of their forms or uses, send a cooling and calming virtue through the hot conscience? With these kindling flashes in his guilt-stricken spirit, shall he run into the very identical fire that kindled them? Shall he try to quench them in that "Tophet which is ordained of old; which is made deep and large; the pile of which is fire and much wood, and the breath of the Lord like a stream of brimstone doth kindle it?" And yet such is, in reality, the attempt of every man who, upon being convicted in his conscience of guilt before God, endeavours to attain peace by resolutions to alter his course of conduct, and strenuous endeavours to obey the commands of God; in short, by relying upon the law, in any form, as a means of reconciliation. Such is the suicidal effort of every man who substitutes the law for the gospel, and expects to produce within himself the everlasting peace of God by anything short of the atonement of God.

Let us fix it, then, as a fact, that the feeling of culpability and unreconciliation can never be removed so long as we do not look entirely away from our own character and works to the mere pure mercy of God in the blood of Christ. The transgressor can never atone for crime by anything that he can



suffer, or anything that he can do. He can never establish a ground of justification, a reason why he should be forgiven, by his tears, or his prayers, or his acts. Neither the law, nor his attempts to obey the law, can re-instate him in his original relations to justice, and make him perfect again in respect to his conscience. The ten commandments can never silence his inward misgivings and his moral fears, for they are given for the very purpose of producing misgivings and causing fears. "The law worketh wrath." And if this truth and fact be clearly perceived, and boldly acknowledged to his own mind, it will cut him off from all these legal devices and attempts, and will shut him up to the Divine mercy and the Divine promise in Christ, where alone he is safe.

We have thus seen that one of the two things necessary in order that apostate man may become perfect again,—viz., the pacification of his conscience,—cannot be obtained in and by the law, in any of its forms or uses. Let us now examine the other thing necessary in order to human perfection, and see what the law can do towards it.

The other requisite, in order that fallen man may become perfect again, is a holy heart and will. Can the moral law originate this? That we may rightly answer the question, let us remember that a holy will is one that keeps the law of God spontaneously, and that a perfect heart is one that sends forth holy affections and pure thoughts as naturally as the sinful heart sends forth unholy affections and impure thoughts. A holy will, like an evil will, is a wonderful and wonderfully fertile power. It does not consist in an ability to make a few or many separate resolutions of obedience to the divine law, but in being itself one great inclination and determination continually and mightily going forth. A holy will, therefore, is one that from its very nature and spontaneity seeks God, and the glory of God. It does not even need to make a specific resolution to obey, any more than an affectionate child needs to resolve to obey its father.

In like manner, a perfect and holy heart is a far more pro-

found and capacious thing than men who have never seriously tried to obtain it deem it to be. It does not consist in the possession of a few or many thoughts mixed with some sinful ones, or in having a few or many holy desires together with some corrupt ones. A perfect heart is one undivided agency, and does not produce, as the imperfectly sanctified heart of the Christian does, fruits of holiness and fruits of sin, holy thoughts and unholy thoughts. It is itself a root and centre of holiness, and nothing but goodness springs up from it. The angels of God are totally holy. Their wills are unceasingly going forth towards him with ease and delight; their hearts are unintermittently gushing out emotions of love, and feelings of adoration, and thoughts of reverence, and therefore the song that they sing is unceasing, and the smoke of their incense ascendeth for ever and ever.

Such is the holy will and the perfect heart which fallen man must obtain in order to be fit for heaven. To this complexion must he come at last. And now we ask: can the law generate all this excellence within the human soul? In order to answer this question we must consider the nature of law, and the manner of its operation. The law, as antithetic to the gospel, and as the word is employed in the text, is in its nature mandatory and minatory. It commands, and it threatens. This is the style of its operation. Can a perfect heart be originated in a sinner by these two methods? Does the stern behest, "Do this or die," secure his willing and joyful obedience? On the contrary, the very fact that the law of God comes up before him coupled thus with a threatening evinces that his aversion and hostility are most intense. As the Apostle says, "The law is not made for a righteous man; but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners." Were man, like the angels on high, sweetly obedient to the divine will, there would be no arming of law with terror, no proclamation of ten commandments amidst thunderings and lightnings. He would be a law unto himself, as all the heavenly host are,—the law working impulsively within him by its own exceeding lawfulness and beauty. The very fact that God, in the instance of

man, is compelled to emphasize the penalty along with the statute,—to say, “Keep my commandments upon pain of eternal death,”—is proof conclusive that man is a rebel, and intensely so.

And now what is the effect of this combination of command and threatening upon the agent? Is he moulded by it? Does it congenially sway and incline him? On the contrary, is he not excited to opposition by it? When the commandment “comes,” loaded down with menace and damnation, does not sin “revive,” as the apostle affirms (Rom. vii. 9-12)? Arrest the transgressor in the very act of disobedience, and ring in his ears the “Thou shalt not,” of the Decalogue, and does he find that the law has the power to alter his inclination, to overcome his carnal mind, and make him perfect in holiness? On the contrary, the more you ply him with the stern command, and the more you emphasize the awful threatening, the more do you make him conscious of inward sin, and awaken his depravity. “The law,” as St. Paul affirms in a very remarkable text, “is the strength of sin” (1 Cor. xv. 56), instead of being its destruction. Nay, he had not even known sin, but by the law: for he had not known lust, except the law had said, “Thou shalt not lust.” The commandment stimulates, instead of extirpating, his hostility to the Divine government; and so long as the mere command, and the mere threat—which, as the hymn tells us, is all the law can do—are brought to bear, the depravity of the rebellious heart becomes more and more apparent, and more and more intensified.

There is no more touching poem in all literature than that one in which the pensive and moral Schiller portrays the struggle of an ingenious youth who would find the source of moral purification in the moral law; who would seek the power that can transform him, in the mere imperatives of his conscience, and the mere strugglings and spasms of his own will. He represents him as endeavouring earnestly and long to feel the force of obligation, and as toiling sedulously to school himself into virtue by the bare power, by the dead lift, of duty.

But the longer he tries, the more he loathes the restraints of law. Virtue, instead of growing lovely to him, becomes more and more severe, austere, and repellant. His life, as the Scripture phrases it, is "under law," and not under love. There is nothing spontaneous, nothing willing, nothing genial in his religion. He does not enjoy religion, but he endures religion. Conscience does not, in the least, renovate his will, but merely checks it, or goads it. He becomes wearied and worn, and conscious that after all his self-schooling he is the same creature at heart, in his disposition and affections, that he was at the commencement of the effort, he cries out, "Oh! Virtue, take back thy crown and let me sin." The tired and disgusted soul would once more do a spontaneous thing.

Was, then, that which is good made death unto this youth by a Divine arrangement? Is this the original and necessary relation which law sustains to the will and affections of an accountable creature? Must the pure and holy law of God, from the very nature of things, be a weariness and a curse? God forbid! But sin that it might appear sin, working death in the sinner by that which is good—that sin by the commandment might become, might be seen to be, exceeding sinful. The law is like a chemical test. It eats into sin enough to show what sin is, and there it stops. The lunar caustic bites into the dead flesh of the mortified limb, but there is no healing virtue in the lunar caustic. The moral law makes no inward alterations in a sinner. In its own distinctive and proper action upon the heart and will of an apostate being, it is fitted only to elicit and exasperate his existing enmity. It can, therefore, no more be a source of sanctification, than it can be of justification.

Of what use, then, is the law to a fallen man? some one will ask. Why is the commandment enunciated in the Scriptures, and why is the Christian ministry perpetually preaching it to men dead in trespasses and sins? If the law can subdue no man's obstinate will, and can renovate no man's corrupt heart—if it can make nothing perfect in human character—then, "wherefore serveth the law?" "It was added because of

transgressions," says the Apostle in answer to this very question (Galatians iii. 19). It is preached and forced home in order to detect sin, but not to remove it; to bring men to a consciousness of the evil of their hearts, but not to change their hearts. "For," continues the Apostle, "if there had been a law given which could have given life"—which could produce a transformation of character—"then verily righteousness should have been by the law." It is not because the stern and threatening commandment can impart spiritual vitality to the sinner, but because it can produce within him the keen, vivid sense of spiritual death, that it is enunciated in the Word of God, and proclaimed from the Christian pulpit. The Divine law is waved like a flashing sword before the eyes of man—not because it can make him alive, but because it can slay him, that he may then be made alive, not by the law, but by the Holy Ghost—by the breath that cometh from the four winds, and breathes on the slain.

It is easy to see, by a moment's reflection, that, from the nature of the case, the moral law cannot be a source of spiritual life and sanctification to a soul that has lost these. For law primarily supposes life, supposes an obedient inclination, and therefore does not produce it. It is not the function of any law to impart that moral force, that right disposition of the heart, by which its command is to be obeyed. The State, for example, enacts a law against murder, but this mere enactment does not, and cannot, produce a benevolent disposition in the citizens of the commonwealth in case they are destitute of it. How often do we hear the remark that it is impossible to legislate either morality or religion into the people. When the Supreme Governor first placed man under the obligations and sovereignty of law, he created him in his own image and likeness, endowing him with that holy heart and right inclination which obeys the law of God with ease and delight. God made man upright, and in this state he could and did keep the commands of God perfectly. If, therefore, by any subsequent action upon their part, mankind have gone out of the primary relationship in

which they stood to law, and have by their apostasy lost all holy sympathy with it, and all affectionate disposition to obey it, it only remains for the law, not to change along with them, but to continue immutably the same pure and righteous thing, and to say, "Obey perfectly, and thou shalt live; disobey in a single instance, and thou shalt die."

But the text teaches us, that although the law can make no sinful man perfect, either upon the side of justification or of sanctification, "the bringing in of a better *hope*" can. This hope is the evangelic hope—the yearning desire, and the humble trust—to be forgiven through the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to be sanctified by the indwelling power of the Holy Ghost. A simple, but a most powerful thing! Does the law, in its abrupt and terrible operation in my conscience, start out the feeling of guiltiness until I throb with anguish and moral fear? I hope, I trust, I ask, to be pardoned through the blood of the Eternal Son of God, my Redeemer. I will answer all these accusations of law and conscience, by pleading what my Lord has done.

Again, does the law search me, and probe me, and elicit me, and reveal me, until I would shrink out of the sight of God and of myself? I hope, I trust, I ask, to be made pure as the angels, spotless as the seraphim, by the transforming grace of the Holy Spirit. This confidence in Christ's person and work is the anchor—an anchor that was never yet wrenched from the clefts of the Rock of Ages, and never will be through the æons of æons. By this hope, which goes away from self, and goes away from the law, to Christ's oblation and the Holy Spirit's energy, we do indeed draw very nigh to God—"heart to heart, spirit to spirit, life to life."

1. The unfolding of this text of Scripture shows, in the first place, the importance of having a *distinct and discriminating conception of law, and especially of its proper function in reference to a sinful being*. Very much is gained when we understand precisely what the moral law, as taught in the Scriptures, and written in our consciences, can do, and cannot do, towards our

salvation. It can do nothing positively and efficiently. It cannot extinguish a particle of our guilt, and it cannot purge away a particle of our corruption. Its operation is wholly negative and preparatory. It is merely a schoolmaster to conduct us to Christ. And the more definitely this truth and fact is fixed in our minds, the more intelligently shall we proceed in our use of law and conscience.

2. In the second place, the unfolding of this text shows the importance of *using the law faithfully and fearlessly within its own limits, and in accordance with its proper function*. It is frequently asked what the sinner shall do in the work of salvation. The answer is nigh thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart. Be continually applying the law of God to your personal character and conduct. Keep an active and a searching conscience within your sinful soul. Use the high, broad, and strict commandment of God as an instrumentality by which all ease and all indifference in sin shall be banished from the breast. Employ all this apparatus of torture, as perhaps it may seem to you in some sorrowful hours, and break up that moral drowse and lethargy which is ruining so many souls. And then cease this work the instant you have experimentally found out that the law reaches a limit beyond which it cannot go—that it forgives none of the sins which it detects, produces no change in the heart whose vileness it reveals, and makes no lost sinner perfect again. Having used the law legitimately, for purposes of illumination and conviction merely, leave it for ever as a source of justification and sanctification, and seek these in Christ's atonement, and the Holy Spirit's gracious operation in the heart. Then sin shall not have dominion over you; for you shall not be under law, but under grace. After that *faith* is come, ye are no longer under a schoolmaster. For ye are then the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians iii. 25, 26).

How simple are the terms of salvation! But then they presuppose this work of the law—this guilt-smitten conscience, and this wearying sense of bondage to sin. It is easy for a *thirsty* soul to drink down the draught of cold water. Nothing

is simpler, nothing is more grateful to the sensations. But, suppose that the soul is satiated, and is not a thirsty one. Then, nothing is more forced and repelling than this same draught. So is it with the provisions of the gospel. Do we feel ourselves to be guilty beings; do we hunger, and do we thirst for the expiation of our sins? Then the blood of Christ is drink indeed, and his flesh is meat with emphasis. But are we at ease and self-contented? Then, nothing is more distasteful than the terms of salvation—Christ is a root out of dry ground. And so long as we remain in this unfeeling and torpid state, salvation is an utter impossibility. The seed of the gospel cannot germinate and grow upon a rock.