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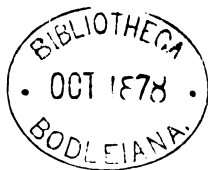
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THE ORIGINAL AND THE ACTUAL RELATION OF MAN TO LAW.

BY REV. DR. W. G. T. SHEDD.

ROMANS vii. 10.--"*The commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death.*"

THE reader of St. Paul's epistles is struck with the seemingly disparaging manner in which he speaks of the moral law. In one place he tells his reader that "the law entered that the offence might abound;" in another, that "the law worketh wrath;" in another, that "sin shall not have dominion" over the believer because he is "not under the law;" in another, that Christians "are become dead to the law;" in another, that "they are delivered from the law;" and in another, that "the strength of sin is the law." This phraseology sounds strangely respecting that great commandment upon which the whole moral government of God is founded. We are in the habit of supposing that nothing that springs from the Divine law, or is in any way connected with it, can be evil or the occasion of evil. If the law of holiness is the strength of sin; if it worketh wrath; if good men are to be delivered from it; what, then, shall be said of the law of sin? Why is it that St. Paul, in a certain class of his representations, appears to be inimical to the ten commandments, and to warn Christians against them? "Is the law sin?" is a question that very naturally arises, while reading some of his statements; and it is a question which he himself asks,

because he is aware that it will be likely to start in the mind of some of his readers. And it is a question to which he replies: "God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law."

The difficulty is only seeming, and not real. These apparently disparaging representations of the moral law are perfectly reconcilable with that profound reverence for its authority which St. Paul felt and exhibited, and with that solemn and cogent preaching of the law for which he was so distinguished. The text explains and resolves the difficulty. "The commandment which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death." The moral law, in its own nature, and by the divine ordination, is suited to produce holiness and happiness in the soul of any and every man. It was ordained to life. So far as the purpose of God, and the original nature and character of man, are concerned, the ten commandments are perfectly adapted to fill the soul with peace and purity. In the unfallen creature they work no wrath, neither are they the strength of sin. If everything in man had remained as it was created, there would have been no need of urging him to "become dead to the law," to be "delivered from the law," and not be "under the law." Had man kept his original righteousness, it could never be said of him that "the strength of sin is the law." On the contrary, there was such a mutual agreement between the unfallen nature of man and the holy law of God, that the latter was the very joy and strength of the former. The commandment was ordained to life, and it was the life and peace of holy Adam.

The original relation between man's nature and the moral law was precisely like that between material nature and the material laws. There has been no apostasy in the system of matter, and all things remain there as they were in the beginning of creation. The law of gravitation, this very instant, rules as peacefully and supremely in every atom of matter as it did on the morning of creation. Should material nature be "delivered" from the law of gravitation, chaos would come again. No portion of this fair and beautiful natural world needs to become "dead" to the laws of nature. Such phraseology as this is inapplicable to

the relation that exists between the world of matter and the system of material laws, because, in this material sphere, there has been no revolution, no rebellion, no great catastrophe analogous to the fall of Adam. The law here was ordained to life, and the ordinance still stands. And it shall stand until, by the will of the Creator, these elements shall melt with fervent heat, and these heavens shall pass away with a great noise; until a new system of nature, and a new legislation for it, are introduced.

But the case is different with man. He is not standing where he was when created. He is out of his original relations to the law and government of God, and therefore that which was ordained to him for life, he now finds to be unto death. The food which in its own nature is suited to minister to the health and strength of the well man, becomes poison and death itself to the sick man.

With this brief notice of the fact that the law of God was ordained to life, and that therefore this disparaging phraseology of St. Paul does not refer to the intrinsic nature of law, which he expressly informs us "is holy, just, and good," nor to the original relation which man sustained to it before he became a sinner, let us now proceed to consider some particulars in which the commandment is found to be unto death to every sinful man.

The law of God shows itself in the human soul, in the form of a sense of duty. Every man, as he walks the streets, and engages in the business or pleasures of life, hears occasionally the words: "Thou shalt; thou shalt not." Every man, as he passes along in this earthly pilgrimage, finds himself saying to himself: "I ought, I ought not." This is the voice of law sounding in the conscience; and every man may know, whenever he hears these words, that he is listening to the same authority that cut the ten commandments into the stones of Sinai, and sounded that awful trumpet, and will one day come in power and great glory to judge the quick and dead. Law, we say, expresses itself for man, while here upon earth, through the sense of duty. "A sense of duty pursues us ever," said Webster, in that impressive allusion to the workings of conscience, in the trial of the

Salem murderers. This is the accusing and condemning sensation in and by which the written statute of God becomes a living energy, and a startling voice in the soul. Cut into the rock of Sinai, it is a dead letter; written and printed in our Bibles, it is still a dead letter; but wrought in this manner into the fabric of our own constitution, waylaying us in our hours of weakness, and irresolution, and secrecy, and speaking to our inward being in tones that are as startling as any that could be addressed to the physical ear—undergoing this transmutation, and becoming a continual consciousness of duty and obligation, the law of God is more than a letter. It is a possessing spirit, and according as we obey or disobey, it is a guardian angel, or a tormenting fiend. We have disobeyed, and therefore the sense of duty is a tormenting sensation; the commandment which was ordained to life, is found to be unto death.

1. In the first place, to go into the analysis, the sense of duty is a sorrow and a pain to sinful man, because it *places him under a continual restraint*.

No creature can be happy so long as he feels himself under limitations. To be checked, reined in, and thwarted in any way, renders a man uneasy and discontented. The universal and instinctive desire for freedom,—freedom from restraint,—is a proof of this. Every creature wishes to follow out his inclination, and in proportion as he is hindered in so doing, and is compelled to work counter to it, he is restless and dissatisfied.

Now, the sense of duty exerts just this influence upon sinful man. It opposes his wishes; it thwarts his inclination; it imposes a restraint upon his spontaneous desires and appetites. It continually hedges up his way, and seeks to stop him in the path of his choice and his pleasure. If his inclination were only in harmony with his duty; if his desires and affections were one with the law of God; there would be no restraint from the law. In this case, the sense of duty would be a joy, and not a sorrow, because, in doing his duty, he would be doing what he liked. There are only two ways whereby contentment can be introduced into the human soul. If the Divine law could be altered

so that it should agree with man's sinful inclination, he could be happy in sin. The commandment having become like his own heart, there would, of course, be no conflict between the two, and he might sin on for ever and lap himself in Elysium. And undoubtedly there are thousands of luxurious and guilty men, who, if they could, like the Eastern Semiramis, would make lust and law alike in their decree; would transmute the law of holiness into a law of sin; would put evil for good, and good for evil; bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter; in order to be eternally happy in the sin that they love. They would bring duty and inclination into harmony, by a method that would annihilate duty, would annihilate the eternal distinction between right and wrong, would annihilate God himself. But this method, of course, is impossible. There can be no transmutation of law, though there can be of a creature's character and inclination. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but the commandment of God can never pass away. The only other mode, therefore, by which duty and inclination can be brought into agreement, and the continual sense of restraint which renders man so wretched be removed, is to change the inclination. The instant the desires and affections of our hearts are transformed, so that they accord with the Divine law, the conflict between our will and our conscience is at an end. When I come to love the law of holiness and delight in it, to obey it is simply to follow out my inclination. And this, we have seen, is to be happy.

But such is not the state of things in the unrenewed soul. Duty and inclination are in conflict. Man's desires, appetites, and tendencies are in one direction, and his conscience is in the other. The sense of duty holds a whip over him. He yields to his sinful inclination, finds a momentary pleasure in so doing, and then feels the stings of the scorpion-lash. We see this operation in a very plain and striking manner if we select an instance where the appetite is very strong, and the voice of conscience is very loud. Take, for example, that particular sin which most easily besets an individual. Every man has such a sin, and knows what it is. Let him call to mind the innumer-

able instances in which that particular temptation has assailed him, and he will be startled to discover how many thousands of times the sense of duty has put a restraint upon him. Though not in every single instance, yet in hundreds and hundreds of cases the law of God has uttered the, "Thou shalt not," and endeavoured to prevent the consummation of that sin. And what a wearisome experience is this!—a continual forth-putting of an unlawful desire, and an almost incessant check upon it from a law which is hated, but which is feared; for such is the attitude of the natural heart toward the commandment. "The carnal mind is enmity against the law of God." The two are contrary to one another, so that when the heart goes out in its inclination, it is immediately hindered and opposed by the law. Sometimes the collision between them is terrible, and the soul becomes an arena of tumultuous passions. The heart and will are intensely determined to do wrong, while the conscience is unyielding and uncompromising, and utters its denunciations, and thunders its warnings. And what a dreadful destiny awaits that soul in whom this conflict and collision between the dictates of conscience and the desires of the heart are to be eternal; for whom, through all eternity, the holy law of God, which was ordained to life, peace, and joy, shall be found to be unto death and woe immeasurable!

2. In the second place, the sense of duty is a pain and sorrow to a sinful man, because it *demand*s a *perpetual effort* from him.

No creature likes to tug and to lift. Service must be easy, in order to be happy. If you lay upon the shoulders of a labourer a burden that strains his muscles almost to the point of rupture, you put him in physical pain. His physical structure was not intended to be subjected to such a stretch. His Creator designed that the burden should be proportioned to the power in such a manner that work should be play. In the garden of Eden, physical labour was physical pleasure, because the powers were in healthy action, and the work assigned to them was not a burden. Before the fall, man was simply to dress

and keep a garden; but after the fall he was to dig up thorns and thistles, and eat his bread in the sweat of his face. This is a curse—the curse of being compelled to toil, and lift, and put the muscle to such a tension that it aches. This is not the original and happy condition of the body in which man was created. Look at the toiling millions of the human family, who, like the poor ant, “for one small grain, labour, and tug, and strive;” see them bending double, under the heavy weary load which they must carry until relieved by death; and tell me if this is the physical elysium, the earthly paradise, in which unfallen man was originally placed, and for which he was originally designed. No, the curse of labour, of perpetual effort, has fallen upon the body, as the curse of death has fallen upon the soul; and the uneasiness and unrest of the groaning and struggling body is a convincing proof of it. The whole physical nature of man groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now, waiting for the adoption—that is, the redemption of the body from this penal necessity of perpetual strain and effort.

The same fact meets us when we pass from the physical to the moral nature of man, and becomes much more sad and impressive. By creation it was a pleasure and a pastime for man to keep the law of God, to do spiritual work. As created, he was not compelled to summon his energies, and strain his will, and make a convulsive resolution to obey the commands of his Maker. Obedience was joy. Holy Adam knew nothing of effort in the path of duty. It was a smooth and broad pathway, fringed with flowers, and leading into the meadows of asphodel. It did not become the “straight and narrow” way until sin had made obedience a toil, the sense of duty a restraint, and human life a race and a fight. By apostasy, the obligation to keep the Divine law perfectly became repulsive. It was no longer easy for man to do right, and it has never been easy or spontaneous to him since. Hence the attempt to follow the dictates of conscience always costs an unregenerate man an effort. He is compelled to make a resolution, and a resolution is the sign and signal of a difficult and

unwelcome service. Take your own experience for an illustration. Did you ever, except as you were sweetly inclined and drawn by the renewing grace of God, attempt to discharge a duty, without discovering that you were averse to it, and that you must gather up your energies for the work, as the leaper strains upon the tendon of Achilles to make the mortal leap? And if you had not become weary, and given over the effort; if you had entered upon that sad but salutary passage in the religious experience which is delineated in the seventh chapter of Romans; if you had continued to struggle and strive to do your duty, until you grew faint and weak, and powerless, and cried out for a higher and mightier power to succour you; you would have known, as you do not yet, what a deadly opposition there is between the carnal mind and the law of God, and what a spasmodic effort it costs an unrenewed man even to attempt to discharge the innumerable obligations that rest upon him. Mankind would know more of this species of toil and labour, and of the cleaving curse involved in it, if they were under the same physical necessity in regard to it that they lie under in respect to manual labour. A man must dig up the thorns and thistles, and must earn his bread in the sweat of his face, or he must die. Physical wants, hunger and thirst, set men to work physically, and keep them at it; and thus they well understand what it is to have a weary body, aching muscles, and a tired physical nature. But they are not under the same species of necessity in respect to the wants and the work of the soul. A man may neglect these, and yet live a long and luxurious life upon the earth. He is not driven by the very force of circumstances to labour with his heart and will, as he is to labour with his hands. And hence he knows little or nothing of a weary and heavy-laden soul; nothing of an aching heart and a tired will. He well knows how much strain and effort it costs to cut down forests, open roads, and reduce the wilderness to a fertile field; but he does not know how much toil and effort are involved in the attempt to convert the human soul into the garden of the Lord.

Now in this demand for a perpetual effort which is made upon the natural man by the sense of duty, we see that the law which was ordained to life is found to be unto death. The commandment, instead of being a pleasant friend and companion to the human soul, as it was in the beginning, has become a strict, rigorous task-master. It lays out an uncongenial work for sinful man to do, and threatens him with punishment and woe if he does not do it. And yet the law is not a tyrant. It is holy, just, and good. This work which it lays out is righteous work, and ought to be done. The wicked disinclination and aversion of the sinner have compelled the law to assume this unwelcome and threatening attitude. That which is good was not made death to man by God's agency, and by a Divine arrangement, but by man's transgression (Romans vii. 13, 14). Sin produces this misery in the human soul through an instrument that is innocent, and in its own nature benevolent and kind. Apostasy, the rebellion and corruption of the human heart, has converted the law of God into an exacting taskmaster and an avenging magistrate. For the law says to every man what St. Paul says of the magistrate: "Rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou, then, not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same. For he is the minister of God to thee for good: but if thou do that which is evil, be afraid." If man were only conformed to the law; if the inclination of his heart were only in harmony with his sense of duty; the ten commandments would not be accompanied with any thunders or lightnings, and the discharge of duty would be as easy, spontaneous, and as much without effort, as the practice of sin now is.

Thus have we considered two particulars in which the Divine law, originally intended to render man happy, and intrinsically adapted to do so, now renders him miserable. The commandment which was ordained to life, he now finds to be unto death, because it places him under a continual restraint, and drives him to a perpetual effort. These two particulars, we need not say, are not all the modes in which sin has converted the moral law

from a joy to a sorrow. We have not discussed the great subject of guilt and penalty. This violated law charges home the past disobedience and threatens an everlasting damnation, and thus fills the sinful soul with fears and forebodings. In this way, also, the law becomes a terrible organ and instrument of misery, and is found to be unto death. But the limits of this discourse compel us to stop the discussion here, and to deduce some practical lessons which are suggested by it.

1. In the first place, we are taught by the subject, as thus considered, that the mere sense of duty is not Christianity. If this is all that a man is possessed of, he is not prepared for the day of judgment and the future life. For the sense of duty, alone and by itself, causes misery in a soul that has not performed its duty. The law worketh wrath in a creature who has not obeyed the law. The man that doeth these things shall indeed live by them; but he who has not done them must die by them.

There have been, and still are, great mistakes made at this point. Men have supposed that an active conscience and a lofty susceptibility towards right and wrong will fit them to appear before God, and have, therefore, rejected Christ the Propitiation. They have substituted ethics for the Gospel, natural religion for revealed. "I know," says Immanuel Kant, "of but two beautiful things: the starry heavens above my head, and the sense of duty within my heart." But is the sense of duty beautiful to apostate man—to a being who is not conformed to it? Does the holy law of God overarch him like the firmament, "tinged with a blue of heavenly dye, and starred with sparkling gold"? Nay, nay. If there be any beauty in the condemning law of God for man the transgressor, it is the beauty of the lightnings. There is a splendour in them, but there is a terror also. Not until he who is the end of the law for righteousness has clothed me with his panoply, and shielded me from their glittering shafts in the clefts of the Rock, do I dare to look at them as they leap from crag to crag, and shine from the east even unto the west.

We do not deny that the consciousness of responsibility is a

lofty one, and are by no means insensible to the grand and swelling sentiments concerning the moral law and human duty to which this noble thinker gives utterance. But we are certain that if the sense of duty had pressed upon him to the degree that it did upon St. Paul—had the commandment “come” to him with the convicting energy that it did to St. Augustine and to Pascal—he, too, would have discovered that the law which was ordained to life is found to be unto death. So long as man stands at a distance from the moral law, he can admire its glory and its beauty ; but when it comes close to him, when it comes home to him, when it becomes a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart, then its glory is swallowed up in its terror, and its beauty is lost in its truth ; then he who was alive without the law becomes slain by the law ; then this ethical admiration of the decalogue is exchanged for an evangelical trust in Jesus Christ.

2. And this leads us to remark, in the second place, that this subject shows the meaning of Christ’s work of redemption. The law for an alienated and corrupt soul is a burden. It cannot be otherwise, for it imposes a perpetual restraint, urges up to an unwelcome duty, and charges home a fearful guilt. Christ is well named the Redeemer, because he frees the sinful soul from all this. He delivers it from the penalty by assuming it all upon himself, and making complete satisfaction to the broken law. He delivers it from the perpetual restraint and the irksome effort by so renewing and changing the heart that it becomes a delight to keep the law. We observed, in the first part of the discourse, that if man could only bring the inclination of his heart into agreement with his sense of duty, he would be happy in obeying, and the consciousness of restraint and of hateful effort would disappear. This is precisely what Christ accomplishes by his Spirit. He brings the human heart into harmony with the divine law, as it was in the beginning, and thus rescues it from its bondage and its toil. Obedience becomes a pleasure, and the service of God the highest Christian liberty. Oh ! would that by the act of faith you might

experience this liberating effect of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. So long as you are out of Christ, you are under a burden that will every day grow heavier, and may prove to be fixed and unremovable as the mountains. That is a fearful punishment which the poet Dante represents as being inflicted upon those who were guilty of pride. The poor wretches are compelled to support enormous masses of stone, which bend them over to the ground, and, in his own stern phrase, "crumple up their knees into their breasts." Thus they stand, stooping over, every muscle trembling, the heavy stone weighing them down, and yet they are not permitted to fall and rest themselves upon the earth. In this crouching posture they must carry the weary, heavy load without relief, and with a distress so great that, in the poet's own language,

"It seemed

As he who showed most patience in his look

Wailing exclaimed: I can endure no more."

Such is the posture of man unredeemed. There is a burden on him under which he stoops and crouches. It is a burden compounded of guilt and corruption. It is lifted off by Christ, and by Christ only. The soul itself can never expiate its guilt—can never cleanse its pollution. We urge you once more to the act of faith in the Redeemer of the world. We beseech you once more to make "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" your own. The instant you plead the merit of Christ's oblation, in simple confidence in its atoning efficacy, that instant the heavy burden is lifted off by an Almighty Hand, and your curved, stooping, trembling, aching form once more stands erect, and you walk abroad in the liberty wherewith Christ makes the human creature free.