

God introduced man at his creation as a moral agent, under inalienable and perpetual subjection to an all-perfect moral law, which binds his conscience and requires perfect obedience. This follows self-evidently and necessarily from the very nature of God as a moral Governor, and from the nature of man as a moral agent.

Of this law we remark --

(1) that it has its ground in the all-perfect and unchangeable moral nature of God. When we affirm that God is holy, we do not mean that he makes right to be right by simply willing it, but that he wills it because it is right. There must therefore be some absolute standard of righteousness. This absolute standard of righteousness is the divine nature. The infallible judge of righteousness is the divine intelligence. The all-perfect executor and rule of righteousness among the creatures is the divine will. The form of our duties springs from our various relations to God and to man; but the invariable principle upon all duty is grounded, and which gives it its binding moral obligation, is rooted in the changeless nature of God, of which his will is the outward expression. All the divine laws belong to one or other of four classes. They are either

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(a) Such as are grounded directly in the perfections of the divine nature, and are hence absolutely immutable and irrevocable even by God himself. These are such as the duty of love and obedience to God, and of love and truth in our relations to our fellow-creatures. Or, --

(b) Such as have their immediate ground in the permanent nature and relations of men; as, for instance, the laws that protect the rights of property and regulate the relation of the sexes. These continue unchanged as long as the present constitution of nature continues, and are of universal binding obligation, alike because of their natural propriety as because of the will of God by which they are enforced; although God, who is the author of nature, may in special instances waive the application of the law at his pleasure, as he did in the case of polygamy among the ancient Jews. Or, --

(c) Such as have their immediate ground in the changing relations of individuals and communities. Of this class are the great mass of the civil and judicial laws of the ancient Jews, which express the will of God for them in their peculiar circumstances, and which of course are intended to be binding only so long as the special conditions to which they are appropriate exist. Or, --

(d) Such as depend altogether for their binding obligation upon the positive command of God, which are neither universal nor perpetual, but bind those persons only to whom God has addressed them, and only so long as the positive enactment endures. This class includes all rites and ceremonies, etc. . . .

The great rule for interpreting the Decalogue is to keep constantly in mind that it is the law of God, and not the law of man -- that it respects and requires the conformity of the governing affections and dispositions of the heart as well as of the outward actions. Every commandment involves a general moral principle, applicable to a wide variety of particular conditions, respecting the motives and ends of action, as well as action itself. The rules of interpretation . . . are in substance as follows: --

(1) The law is perfect, requiring perfect obedience, and condemning the least shortcoming as sin.