

Tenth Commandment -- the value of contentment with what one is and has

Earlier we noted that values are qualities or characteristics we esteem or prize. Norms incorporate values. And laws incorporate norms.

We also noted that values say "These qualities are good things." Norms say "These values ought to guide and rule our conduct." Laws say "These norms are established by governing authority and involve penalties for their violation."

In connection with the Decalogue, we could say that the value of the Eighth Commandment is that the preservation of the right of ownership is desirable and important; that the norm of the Eighth Commandment is that human beings ought to preserve the right of ownership; and that the law of the Eighth Commandment is that God has established the rule that human beings must preserve the right of ownership or receive a penalty.

Perhaps what is meant by statements such as "The moral principles of the ten laws did not begin at Sinai but are as eternal and immutable as the character of God" and "The moral law is the basis of the Mosaic Law, but the two should not be confused" is simply an affirmation that the value and norm aspects of the Ten Commandments are and always have been binding, but that the law aspect of the Ten Commandments is not binding on believers today.

This could mean that the civic penalties for stealing prescribed for Israel are not binding on believers today. Or it could mean that there is no eternal penalty that falls on believers today for transgressing God's eternal moral law concerning the right of ownership, because Christ has taken away all eternal condemnation. Of course, this would not rule out the possibility of temporal results of transgression of God's law (not as a penalty, but as an allowance of natural consequences, with a view toward a corrective application of discipline). Or it could mean that the Ten Commandments have both divine and human sides, and that the divine side (the eternal moral law of God) remains in force, but the human side (rules of conduct or action prescribed by a human governing authority and enforced by human penalties) is no longer binding.

But if some writers say that the law aspect of the Ten Commandments is not binding on believers today, they cannot be understood to mean that the Mosaic Law is not binding simply because it is law, for they speak of "the moral principles of the ten laws," "the moral law," and "the eternal moral law of God." Perhaps what they mean is that the penalty dimension of the Ten Commandments (whether that means civic penalties prescribed for Israel, eternal penalty, or human governmental penalties in general) is no longer binding on believers today.

This would mean that the value aspect, the norm aspect, and the law aspect (without the penalty dimension) of the Ten Commandments are still binding on believers today, but without the motivations of fear, threatening, and penalty, whether temporal or eternal.