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THE LAW AND APOSTASY: A PATHWAY OF FALLING AWAY FROM  
THE GOSPEL

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# Chapter Three - The Law and Apostasy: A Pathway of Falling Away From the Gospel

## Universal or Not?

Deuteronomy 27:9-10 states:

“Then Moses and the Levitical priests said to all Israel, Keep silence and hear, O Israel: this day you have become the people of the LORD your God. You shall therefore obey the voice of the LORD your God, keeping his commandments and his statutes, which I command you today.”

If only “the people of the LORD” obeyed the voice of the LORD in keeping His Law, apostasy would not exist. Thomas Watson begins his introduction to the Ten Commandments by saying, “*Obedience is a part of the honor we are to give God.*”<sup>1</sup> Apostasy comes from the disobedience of the Law, and it comes from one who walks away from the gospel because he does not obey the commands that God has given “His people.” Or is it because he – the so-called Christian – does not see that the Law is a part of his gospel-centered life? Perhaps one of the most important issues in dealing with apostasy and the Ten Commandments is whether or not it is still binding for today’s “people of the LORD.” It is hard to understand how apostasy deals with the Law if one does not even believe the Law is binding at all; and if it is, there is still the question – to whom is it binding? To believers, unbelievers, or both?

Thomas Watson asks the most important question in understanding to whom the Law is given. He saw that the Law – although given in God’s *decreed will* to the people of Israel – was God’s *desired will* for all of creation, and he

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), p. 1.

understood how important this was when dealing with the Law. He begins his section on the first commandment asking the following question:

“‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me.’ Exod. 20:3. WHY is the commandment in the second person singular, Thou? Why does not God say, You shall have no other gods?”<sup>2</sup>

He answers his own question by saying:

“Because the commandment concerns everyone, and God would have each one take it as spoken to him by name. Though we are forward to take privileges to ourselves, yet we are apt to shirk off duties from ourselves to others; therefore the commandment is in the second person, Thou and Thou, that every one may know that it is spoken to him, as it were, by name.”<sup>3</sup>

The present need to see this truth (that the Law is for *all* of creation) is much needed, especially in the 21st century.<sup>4</sup> In a day and age that creates their own ethics, tolerates whatever they can, bases truth from their experiences, and lives according to their own personal convictions, the Law is needed; and it is even more so for the “LORD’s people.”

## **Man and Law**

The nature of mankind hates rules, it cannot stand Law<sup>5</sup>, regulations, or limits, and wherever the line is drawn, the human flesh always wants to cross it. This is most easily seen from creation in Adam and Eve. In Genesis 2:17 God

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 49

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Sections on why the Moral Law is universal and important today: Brain Edwards, *The Ten Commandments* (Surrey: Day One, 2002), p. 8-31; Ed. Stuart Bonnington and Joan Milne, *Love Rules: The Ten Commandments for the 21st Century* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), p. 5-10; Peter Master’s, *God’s Rules for Holiness: Unlocking the Ten Commandments* (London: The Wakeman Trust, 2003), p. 9-20; Francis Nigel Lee, *God’s Ten Commandments: Yesterday, Today, Forever* (Ventura: Nordskog, 2007); J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*. Trans. Nelson Kloosterman. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1996), p. 9-11; and James Durham, *Practical Exposition of The Ten Commandments* (Dallas: Naphtli Press, 2002), p. 51-72.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, “The Right Understanding of the Law,” p. 43-48.

commands, “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” From Adam – the father of the human race – man has never, and will never, be able to keep the commands of God the Father. The account in Genesis 3:4-7 best describes Man and Law,

“But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.”

Adam and Eve’s flesh saw God’s protection as a rule and not an act of God’s love. J. Douma states how Adam and Eve should have seen the Law:

“A rule that prohibits on particular things still permits many others. In the Garden of Eden, eating from one particular tree was forbidden, but Adam and Eve were permitted to eat from all other trees. The gates of freedom provide a permanent opening in a wall that you may not climb over. Traffic signs do not so much restrict travel, as provide for its safe and orderly movement.”<sup>6</sup>

Adam and Eve did not see all that God had given them, but instead wanted only the one limitation they were told not to take. They wanted to break the Law in every way; and they did in their coveting of what they were not to desire, their moral authority they placed in front of God, their idolatry of placing the fruit before their God, their act of stealing which was not rightfully theirs, their lie after eating of the fruit, and their suicide they committed upon themselves – for they would now surely die after eating the fruit. From this one event, all of mankind will suffer the rest of their lives with authority. In jobs, schooling, households, relationships,

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<sup>6</sup> Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, p.11.

marriages, and with children, humanity will forever struggle with dealing with any rules in life. From that day in the garden, man would see God's commands as rules rather than love. Because of Adam's decision to take part in eating the forbidden fruit, humanity will always fall short in properly understanding the voice of God and what is required of the "LORD's people."

Israel's and today's New Testament Church apostasy is because of this fall. The "people of the LORD" struggle to understand the Moral Law; they struggle to understand that God wants "His people" to be separate from the norm of today's sinful world. "His people" struggle with the understanding that it is God that has shown His love through the Law, in order to keep "His people" from sin. It is "His people" that struggle to understand that the Moral Law is what God has used since the beginning of time to direct "His people" in a pursuit of holiness – sanctifying them as they strive to live like Jesus Christ.

### **Jesus and Law**

The regenerate and unregenerate person both have a hard time understanding how Law and love go hand-in-hand. At times, Christians want to make up their own model of what the everyday Christian looks like. They come up with ideas, slogans, and programs, sometimes even misrepresenting Scripture in order to get their own point across. People in and out of Christianity want to interpret their own way of living, based on what they think Jesus would have done. What they totally forget at times is that Jesus – in every way – lived

out the Law – the moral, civil, and ceremonial Law. Christ, because of His love for His Father, enjoyed living out the Law of God for two reasons:

1. *Christ's Love for His Father* - John 17
2. *Christ's Love for His people/to have victory over sin* - Hebrews 2:14-18

Christ knew that the Law itself represented the very character of who He was and who His Father was; therefore, breaking that Law was impossible for Him.

However, temptation to do so was very real and was one way that Christ showed His love for the Father – that is, by fulfilling and obeying the Law in its entirety.

It is seen many times throughout Scripture how examples of God's Love interweave with His Law. When one looks at Christ's example of obedience and love for the Law, we can truly live accordingly also. The Apostle Paul expressed this best in Romans 11: 8-10:

“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet, and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Paul addresses the Romans so that they would see that love and Law go hand-in-hand. The believer cannot love like Christ without living according to the Law; likewise, the believer cannot live according to the Law without loving like Christ. When one truly understands that the Law of God flows from His love for His people, to humble them and see how beautiful Christ is, then one can truly value and come to the understanding of how love and Law cannot be separated. J. Douma states the personal effect this has on the individual, when he states:

“Apart from Christ, the law condemns us; but in the hands of Christ, the law remains the charter of our liberty. It functions this way as the foundation for knowing our misery (it drives us to Christ) and as the rule for gratitude (it teaches us the form of Christian living.)”<sup>7</sup>

### **The Law and Apostasy**

When reading with the Ten Commandments, the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me,” seems pretty straight forward. It is very easy to interpret, easy to understand, and yet also very easy to break. One could venture to say that the first commandment is the most broken commandment in the everyday life of a non-believer and believer alike. One could go even further and say that the first commandment is broken every time the other nine commandments are broken. This is because when one sins, they have in some way placed something – or someone – else as a god before committing the sin. But how does that relate with apostasy? The answer is that one who has become an apostate has disregarded the first three commandments in the Moral Law.

**Step One** - making light the name of the LORD, and using it meaninglessly in life.

**Step Two** - finding fulfillment in the making and crafting of personal idols, and placing them before the LORD.

**Step Three** - leaving the Gospel altogether and placing other gods before the LORD.

The constant breaking of the Law and not properly understanding its usefulness for the believer’s life leads to apostasy from the gospel. Apostasy is caused by a loss of the believer’s delight in what God has commanded and given

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<sup>7</sup> Douma, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 10-11.

to “His people,” and instead, finding delight in what the world has to offer. It is extremely important to understand the proper relationship between man’s sinful nature – his desires to destroy the Law, to overrule the Law, to break the Law – and living for the gospel... that is, wanting to obey the gospel, yet at the same time, stuck with that every day nature that wants to continue to break the Law. Apostasy comes from allowing that sinful nature and the flesh’s desires overtake what the gospel has taught. This is precisely what Paul deals with in Romans 7:21-25, and it is no where else expressed so well but by him, through the Spirit:

“So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.”

## **A Pathway to Apostasy**

### **Step One: Making Light of the LORD – Breaking the Third Commandment**

Exodus 20:7 - *You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.*

The third commandment is easily misunderstood in today’s culture. Many unbelievers, and even believers, read “*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain*” and believe that command to only mean you should not cuss using His name, or you cannot get mad and use His name in vain because you slammed your thumb with a hammer while you were driving a nail into your wall. But it is extremely important – not only with just the third commandment, but with all of the Law – to understand the Law in the way the LORD intended; meaning



that we are to look deeper into the text by itself. Many translations do a poor job of translating the exact meaning of texts from the original Hebrew. The following are a few more literal translations of the third commandment that may make it easier to understand:

- “*You shall not misuse the name of the LORD*”<sup>8</sup>
- “*You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God*”<sup>9</sup>
- “*You must not lift up the name of the LORD your God frivolously/false*”<sup>10</sup>

It is important when coming to the practical side of theology to understand how this command is played out. It is not merely taking the LORD’s name in vain, and not only saying His name meaninglessly, but it is the misuse of His name in all of the everyday life. Brian Edwards deals best with the practical theology behind the blasphemy in breaking the third commandment. He describes eight common ways in which one does so:

- A common swear word (Leviticus 24:11)
- Misusing His name in false worship (Psalm 24:4; Judges 17:2-3; Deuteronomy 12:4,8,13; John 14:6 & Acts 12)
- Misusing the name of the Lord in careless worship (Ecclesiastes 5:1-2; Numbers 26:61; Deuteronomy 12:48 & John 14:14)
- Using the name of the Lord to support a lie (Leviticus 19:12; 1Kings 13:18 & Acts 5)
- Mocking God (Isaiah 52:5; 2 Samuel 12:14 & Romans 2:23-24)
- Using the name of the Lord in idle oaths (Numbers 30:2 & Matthew 5:33-37)
- Using the name of the Lord in complaint and unbelief (Malachi 3:13-14; Numbers 14:27 & 1Corinthians 10:10)

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<sup>8</sup> Brian Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> R. Kendall Soulen, “The Blessing of God’s Name,” in *The Ten Commandments: For Jews, Christians, and Others*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> Herber B. Huffmon, “The Fundamental Code Illustrated: The Third Commandment,” in *The Ten Commandments: The Reciprocity of Faithless*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), p. 207.

- In mishandling His word (Example: Matthew 8:5-13 was a homosexual slave)<sup>11</sup>

The issue behind these common actions among humanity is that the name of the LORD is carelessly thrown around, and His character is belittled. But what is even worse is when the actions are commonly done in and by the church – that is, among so-called believers of the gospel. If the believer of the gospel properly understood that the squandering of God's name is to really say that their God is of no noteworthy value, the beginnings of apostasy would never exist; for doing this is the very beginning of leaving the central gospel truths, is making less of who God is, and using His name meaninglessly. The way the believer talks about God – the way he talks about the One in whom he claims relationship with – can begin a pathway to apostasy.

To make light of His name, to make fun of His being, to speak loosely of His character, to joke about His Word, to laugh at His nature, to allow His name to be misused, to constantly gain a tolerance for the misuse of God Himself, then claim that one is in right relationship with Him is thoroughly hypocritical. Yet this is where it is most typical to begin falling away from Christ and leave the gospel, if one does not fully understand or know the importance of the third commandment. They put to waste the LORD's name, and make light of Him as if He is like any other human being. But how does that lead to apostasy? Simply put, it is this command that the LORD's people are asked to keep, and yet they allow themselves to fall short, and in most cases allow the way of the culture to

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<sup>11</sup> Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p. 97-113.

decide for them what is acceptable and what is not. To some it is just a name or perhaps just a little joke... no biggie, just something to swear by in order to sound right... make a promise in His name because that is what people do. It is these acts which draw the individual away from the gospel truths, and it is in these acts that the individual starts to leave that which God has asked of His people.

If one breaks the third commandment of the Decalogue, does that make him an apostate? Is not an apostate one who departs from the gospel? Though it does not make one an apostate directly, this here – the misuse of the LORD's name – is where apostasy easily begins. Disrespecting the LORD's name is only the beginning of the act of apostatizing. It is here where one loses their respect for the name of the LORD and begins their path of leaving either what they had claimed to believe, or what they were taught about the gospel. But how can the believer of the gospel keep from a constant breaking of the third commandment?

The believer must see and fully understand that the use of the LORD's name a *privilege* for them to use. Edwards speaks to this when dealing with the third commandment in relation to us today:

“It is our privilege to use the ‘name’ of our triune God-the Father, Son and Holy Spirit-both in worship and in witness. But we must use it carefully. There are few things more wonderful than to use the name of our God and Saviour-and nothing more dangerous than to abuse it.”<sup>12</sup>

This is how the Law is love to the believer: not that it is restricting us from the things our nature wants to do, but it lays the principles in which we can enjoy the

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<sup>12</sup> Edwards, *The Ten Commandments for Today*, p. 115.

gospel fully. It is in this that one can continue to focus in happiness, being able to speak of God as his God.

### **Step Two: The Making and crafting of personal Idols before the LORD - Breaking the Second Commandment**

Exodus 20:4-6 - *You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

In the simplest of words, the second command is that you shall not make for yourself an idol. But what type of idol? The answer is: any kind – be it physical or metaphysical, anything replacing or taking a place before God is what this command is speaking of. The explanation of why this command exists is found in Exodus 20:5 when it states, *“You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.”* God created humanity to serve Him with the utmost respect, and for “His people” to place Him first and foremost in their life. Today’s culture – and cultures throughout history – seems to have gods to offer of every kind. There are sex gods, money gods, gossiping gods, power-hungry gods, and even the often-overlooked coveting gods. If you have a hunger, the world has a “god” that you can fulfill your flesh with and make you satisfied for some time. What is frightening, however, is how these things that our culture has to offer often sweep their way into the church.

When thinking of this command, many people look at things in their lives and think, “I don’t worship that!” Yet it is these very things that easily end up

controlling their entire life because it pleases them the most.<sup>13</sup> This is a part of the process in the lives of those who have lost a high respect for the name of God... once that is lost, God's place is easily pushed aside to make room for other things. Without exaltation of Him, there will be no placement of Him in the life of the one who claims to be a believer of the gospel. What once began as joking, lightening-up on the third commandment has now opened the door for the breaking of the second commandment. What is worse is that it makes all the more sense. If you do not have respect for the LORD's name and do not use it like He wishes and allows, then why not place idols in one's life beside Him, or even in front of Him? It is very sad, but true, that many so-called believers have placed their possessions (house, money, cars, etc.), their personal desires, their plans for life, and even their family, in front of God. One of the biggest problems about living in a culture that feeds the needs of personal desires is finding an idol that fits to one's desire. Sadly, it is what gets in the way of following the second commandment the most. The issue is not just simply worshipping another God. The issue in the second commandment is worshipping God in a wrong way. Letting other idols take place of what He is to do, letting other gods come in and lay beside Him, and replacing what this world offers as idols to get one's "fix" so they find their solace in something other than God Himself. This is not okay in the least and leads to nothing but rebellion against God Himself and what He has commanded of "His people."

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008).

How does this lead to apostasy? The individual makes and crafts idols, placing them in their heart, life, and mind, above that which God has asked “His people” to keep. What this idolatry does is blind the person from seeing the light of the gospel. The person then sees the importance of whatever it may be that they have placed in front of their sight, and then constantly looks toward that for their happiness. This leads to apostasy as it blinds the person from thinking eternally; instead, they look for the best idol that pleases them now in life. The nice car, big house, beautiful wife, new suite, big pool, green grass, fine wine, etc., becomes what they worship. This path leads to worshipping the items which mean so much to their everyday life, and which come to mean even more to their heart. This blinds their pathway to Christ, and provides a flattened ground to walk away from what they know to be true of the gospel, leading them to hell.

The less respect that one holds for the name of God leads to a life that holds less importance and less need for God overall; the less need for God one has, the more one turns to other things (gods) that they feel they need instead. It makes perfect sense that if one does not give the honor to God that He asks in the third commandment, then one will rob God of His place in the life of the individual. It is the first three commandments that deal with the worship of God, and if one does not hold a high-regard for His Deity's name then why would one have a high-regard of placing Him above all things? All of this leads to one result in the end, apostasy completely from God.

How does one not fall down this pathway to apostasy? By seeing that the second commandment is utterly important in the way one worships God. Nothing should ever come close to one's own personal worship of God. Both in the home with the family, and in the church, no idol of any kind can come close to the measure in which one worships God. By focusing on the truth that this commandment forbids the "LORD's people" of worshipping any other idol, provides a principle by which one is to live by and to enjoy – that is, that one can only worship the one, true, living God who is all-satisfying, enjoyable, and giving – both now and throughout all of eternity. However, when one does not honor the LORD's name, and does not worship Him first, only then comes the placing one's self in front of God and totally apostatizing.

**Step Three: Apostasy from the LORD - Breaking the First Commandment**  
Exodus 20:3 - *You shall have no other gods before me.*

If one walks down a path that includes having no respect for the LORD's name, and then crafts their own idols – that is, replacing the LORD – then how would one ever really know God? That is the problem when one habitually breaks the Law with no remorse – it leads to a road of apostasy. James Durham speaks of what is required of the "LORD's people" in the first commandment, saying, "*It requires the right knowledge of God: for there can be no true worship given to him, there can be no right thought or conception of him, or faith in him, till he be known*"<sup>14</sup> He continues, giving two more requirements: both the *suitable*

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<sup>14</sup> James Durham, *Practical Exposition of The Ten Commandments*, p. 73.

*acknowledging of God and such duties as a result from his excellency.*<sup>15</sup> The point is that the “LORD’s people” know their heavenly Father like no other. If one does not know the Father in the way the Father asks – that is, in the way one is asked to respect His name, and in the way one worships God above and beyond all idols – how will one ever know God to the point of actually being a believer?

One author also said on this issue:

“A man’s chances of successfully living the Christian life without an accurate and adequate knowledge of God are about the same as arriving at a desired vacation destination without knowing how to get there.”<sup>16</sup>

How does this break the first commandment? It breaks the first commandment in that when one falls into the pattern of breaking the second and third commandments, they place themselves in front of what God has designed – making their ways more important to them; and even more, making *themselves* a god. When one falls into believing their self to be above and in front of God’s commandments, believer or unbeliever, they have made themselves their own god by telling God that their way, their thinking, and their practices are more important than following that which God has given “His people.”

Properly knowing God, is knowing His commandments, who He is, and what He commands of His people. If one walks down a path of constantly breaking the Law, loosing respect for His name, not worshipping Him alone, then how will God be first? He will not be. God lays His commandments out for His people as principles in which they are to live accordingly in life, so that He will be

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<sup>15</sup> James Durham, *Practical Exposition of The Ten Commandments*, p. 72-4.

<sup>16</sup> Buddy Hanson, *God’s Ten Word: A Commentary on the Ten Commandments* (Tuscaloosa: Buddy Hanson, 2002), p. 3.



first and foremost in the life of the believer. If one uses the name of God like that of any other, or if one worships anyone or anything like that of god, then God cannot be number one in their life. It is impossible to live for God while serving one's own personal desires of living. The command which is the most important and most easily broken is the command that lays at the heart of every apostate. The reason one leaves what they had either confessed or heard from the gospel, is because he or she places something from their everyday life in front of God.

The first command states, *"You shall have no other gods before me."* When an individual is living for himself and walking down a pathway of apostasy, there is much importance to be seen at the end of the first command as it says, *"before me."* It means that the individual lives in the midst of many gods, but always is held accountable before God. In today's culture, with the many gods this world has to offer, in the many forms it has to give, and the many ways the idols of today can be worshipped, one must at all times understand that they are before God at all times. In this lies the ultimate struggle in one's apostasy – that not only does one walk away from the gospel, but completely places idols, gods, etc, in front of God Himself, and therefore easily forgets the gospel truth that they are in the presence of God at all times. The first commandment demands loyalty to God in every way. One cannot do so once they have not properly followed the third and second commands of the Decalogue, because if one does not honor the LORD's name, nor worship Him first, how will they then, on the road of apostasy, believe that they can remain loyal to the One and true God? They

cannot; instead, they will continue to walk down that path on which they started, dishonoring His name, not worshipping Him like they are called, and completely apostatizing from Him and the gospel truths, not remaining loyal to Him.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The first three commandments parallel themselves to one another in one way or another, saying the same thing. One – “no gods before Me;” two – “keep to the way I have imaged Myself;” and three – “do not use My name for mischief.” They all make an absolute demand for “His people” in understanding Him – that His name represents His person and His work. His exclusive demand comes from the fact that He is the only true and living God, and He has revealed Himself (which is at the core of the gospel). The Law is to bring the “LORD’s people” to a pursuit of sanctification; to be used as a growth process, and as a list of principles to follow, which God has given in love for His people in order for them to be redeemed. The freedom in the Law has been given for His people in the Law of God so that they can be brought constantly as a redeemed people with His Law that intends for them to be in harmony with their God. That is how the Law is love for the believer – that they can be in harmony living in the way that their God has commanded for them to live in this world.