Three Uses of Law

Video Transcript

In his Word, God calls us to “be perfect,” but Scripture also clearly describes all people as sinful from conception and guilty of actual sins throughout their lives.

Thankfully, Christians have God’s sure and certain promise of life, forgiveness, and salvation in Jesus Christ.

Still, the sinful nature of man raises a tough question: how do we get inherently sinful people—Christians and non-believers alike—to behave well, especially when some basic level of good behavior is necessary for society and the market economy to function?

Fortunately, God’s Word and the accumulated wisdom of economic and legal philosophy are helpful in showing us how we should regulate different aspects of people’s behavior in order to promote a virtuous society and a prosperous economy.

1. Restraint, Repentance, and Reform: Three Uses of the Law

The Renaissance theologians are useful in helping us think about how to apply God’s Law. They categorized the law into three major uses: the law as curb; the law as mirror, and the law as guide. These uses help us think through where and how to enforce particular moral requirements.

The first use of the law, the law as curb, works through civil authorities, including “authority figures” such as parents and teachers. In this context, the law prevents us from harming our neighbor by sinning outwardly, from committing sins that are plainly harmful. Hence, parents punish their kids when they fight, lie, or steal, and the legal system enforces laws against such evils as murder, rape, theft, assault, and so on. When the first use of the law is effectively enforced, violence is kept to a minimum and property is secure, giving us a solid foundation for the market economy and civil society.
The second use of the law, the law as mirror, is of the greatest spiritual importance, and hence it is mainly the province of the church. When faithful Christian pastors preach God’s law to us, their aim is not to punish, but to convict us of our sin, to show us the weight of our guilt so that we may be spiritually crushed and thereby prepared to receive the gospel of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ Himself excelled at this kind of preaching, as evidenced in His admonitions against the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and the famous comments regarding the hatred or lust we commit “in our hearts,” which He equates to actual outward acts.

The third use of the law, the law as guide, cuts across categories of church, state, and home, because these entities govern us in some way and play a role in promoting good works and service to our neighbor.

Christians can, in good conscience, disagree about how far each level of government should go in enforcing morality. While drunk driving represents a clear danger against the neighbor and should therefore fall under the 1st use of the law and protections should be enforced by the state, the morality of alcohol consumption is debatable and not clearly within the state’s realm.

2. Applying the Law: Home, State, and Church

A useful exercise in applying the three uses of the law is to think about how and where the Ten Commandments are enforced. God requires obedience to all his commands, but in our day only three are really enforced by the state: you shall not kill, you shall not steal, and, in some cases, you shall not bear false witness. The rest are left to the family and the local community, including the church.

Ultimately, there is no hard and fast rule about which laws, beyond the basic protection of life, person, and property, should be enforced by the state. Each society, and subdivisions within each society, have the freedom in their own spheres to add or remove moral regulations. For instance, some counties are “dry,” prohibiting the sale of alcohol, and some “wet,” allowing it. As long as we recognize that the job of enforcing morality does not apply only to the state, but also to the “local” government, starting with parents, we can make wise use of the three uses of the law and strive for the right balance of moral regulation across all levels of government.

About this transcript:
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