The Law of God is Good and Wise

"[God's] commands are not burdensome," says 1 John 5:3. But it doesn't always feel that way. Mainstream culture often portrays biblical Christianity as very restrictive, full of rules and judgment. Our own experience, often, might seem to support that picture: there are things our hearts wish for that God tells us that we should not have—that we should not even want. As Christians, we believe that what God says is right. But that doesn't always mean it *feels* right.

It takes faith to make the bold statement that starts this hymn: "The law of God is good and wise." The starting place for this hymn, the starting place for any understanding of God's commands, is faith that what God says is good, even when it doesn't seem that way.

When we use the word "law" in this special, technical way, we're talking about a teaching that Lutherans call "law and gospel." The law tells us everything that God wants us to do. The gospel tells us everything that Jesus has already done for us. This is one of two hymns about law and gospel. Together with its partner, "The Gospel Shows the Father's Grace," these hymns are written to help us see the way that God uses the message of our sin to drive us to the message of our Savior.

The first point that this hymn gives us to consider is the way in which the law *works*. In a sense, it's very similar to the way in which laws in society work. They tell us what we can do and what we can't do. They warn us about what will happen if we do something illegal.

But God's law also "sets his will before our eyes." Unlike society's laws, God's commands are more than just a set of rules to obey. God's "law" includes everything about his will for us, from the actions we take to our decision-making process itself, from the thoughts we think to the underlying attitudes we have. God doesn't just have a code of regulations. He establishes an entire path of righteousness for us.

God has a purpose in showing us what the righteous path looks like. The law isn't just the standard of goodness; it's also good *for us*. God uses it to do good things in our lives and in the whole world. Traditionally, Christians have pointed out three big-picture goals that God has in revealing his will to us. The hymn uses a stanza to discuss each of those three uses of the law.

One of the natural results of encountering God's perfect law is that we realize we're incredibly imperfect: "[The law's] light of holiness imparts [gives] the knowledge of our sinful hearts." This function of the law is often compared to a mirror. When we see ourselves through the image of God's commands, we are confronted by every wrong thing we have been and done. God's warnings of punishment make it clear that there is a

penalty for our sin—death and hell. God does not want to punish anyone. His eager desire is that everyone would turn to him for forgiveness and live (Ezekiel 33:11).

For Christians, God's commands serve another purpose: they show us what a righteous life looks like—"what works are God's delight." One of God's reasons for saving us was so that we could be people who do the good works that he has prepared for us (Ephesians 2:10). The Old Testament writers often meditated on how vital it was to have God's instruction, which could help them know which path was right and which was wrong (e.g., Psalm 1, Psalm 19, Psalm 119, Proverbs 1–4). God's laws are meant to teach us and shape us so that our hearts align with his.

On the other hand, God's law is also meant to restrain people who want to do evil things. When people "scornfully disdain" (entirely reject) God's law, "its terror in their ear resounds and keeps their wickedness in bounds." Most people have a sense of right and wrong that agrees with many of God commands (Romans 2:14). This conscience is a "law" that God gave to people as a merciful gift. When people do things that they know are wrong, they often feel guilty, ashamed, and afraid of punishment. This use of the law is sometimes compared to a curb, because it keeps sin from overpowering the world.

Although we can see the good things that God does through the law, this hymn also drives us to see a problem: God's law is good—in fact, it is *too* good for sinful people like us. "Since the fall [of Adam and Eve into sin], its holiness condemns us all." God's law is good, but it can't save us. We are not good enough to meet its high standard of holiness.

There is only one place that we can find the holiness that we need: the cross of Jesus. Jesus was righteous. He kept God's law perfectly. He gives that righteousness to us. And we give our sins to him. He suffered the law's punishment. He died the death we should have died. We are saved, as the last stanza says, through faith in him alone. The law tells us that our works will never be enough. But the gospel tells us that Jesus has been enough. God's law is good, above all, because it calls us to give up on ourselves and cling to Jesus in faith.

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"The Law of God is Good and Wise" was written by Matthias Loy (1828–1915). Loy grew up in Cumberland County and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in the United States. Between 1849 and 1902, he served as a pastor in the Ohio Synod, a Lutheran church body that for a time had fellowship with the WELS, ELS, and LCMS. In 1881, he became president of Capital University in Columbus, Ohio.