Submission to the Law builds a “get over yourself” mindset. “It is inherently sanctifying.” It forces you to deal with yourself.

THE LAW AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER LAWS
Paradox = What does one do when two laws conflict?

The Problem  “While the Law is a reflection of Gods’ moral character, and is not in conflict with the Gospel, some have suggested that laws themselves conflict. If so, we must have a means for resolving conflicts to have a viable system of [Christian] ethics.” Such an alternative is necessary if the system affirms more than one moral norm.

The Law in Conflict – Six Alternatives

1) **Antinomianism** “no/anti/against law”
   a) There are no universal or absolute moral norms
   b) With there no norms, then by “definition” there is no conflict
   c) Practically speaking, most common—Nietzsche most famous proponent; others include Julian Huxley, and Jean-Paul Sartre
   d) Problems –
      ∞ Does not correspond to reality; by nature it is de facto self-defeating.
      ∞ Impractical—humans need absolutes to exist.
      ∞ Creates anarchy (if actually pursued); by nature we like order.¹
      ∞ Irrational and illogical to sentient folk since two contradictory positions can not be correct; to wit, “There are no absolutes” is an absolute.
      ∞ Scripture contains many axiomatic norms.

2) **Generalism**
   a) No universal norms or absolutes exist, only “general principles (good ideas)”
   b) Ergo, conflict between moral norms can not arise—simply “pick a principle.”
   c) Principal proponents include John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham.

¹We’ll even create “it” (a perception of order) even if it is not warranted by the phenomenon in question. Organization (creating order) seems to be a primordial part of human nature.
d) Problems –
   - Reducible easily to antinomianism because there are no universal moral norms
   - Ergo, the same critiques of antinomianism apply.
   - Consider for example ... Kill a pregnant woman on the way to an abortion clinic to have her pregnancy terminated: What law has been broken? Yet, a 15 year old needs parental approval for an aspirin [or a tattoo in Florida], but not an abortion.

3) Situationalism

a) There is only one universal and absolute norm (e.g., “Do what is the most loving thing” or “Do what is the most good for the most people.”
b) Thus moral norm conflict can not occur because there is only one norm.
c) The “right” thing, however, will vary as a function of agent and situation; to wit,
   - Two different people in identical situations could make different [and ethical] choices and both be correct.
d) Or, one person in two different situations across time makes different choices and be [ethically] correct in both situations.
e) Classic proponent – Joseph Fletcher; others include neo-orthodox Christians (e.g., Bultman, Brunner).

f) Problem – “You” decide what is the proper way to behave/act/be.
   - For example, if “compassion” is your one universal, then subjectivity comes to bear with a vengeance.
   - Even though claiming one moral norm, this norm changes with situation and agent; it is not really a moral normative.
   - Reduces, thus and again, to antinomianism since it ultimately denies the existence of moral absolutes.
   - Scripture reveals that loving others is difficult, if not impossible—cf. Romans 3:10-18; 7:18-19 ...

   “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” “The poison of vipers is on their lips.” “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

   –Romans 3:10-18

   “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I
do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” –Romans 7:18-19

➢ Thus, the same critiques of antinomianism apply.

**Nota Bene:**
The remaining 3 approaches, Conflicting Absolutism, Graded Absolutism, and Non-Conflicting Absolutism are considered compatible epistemologically with Christianity. Considerable variance across these last 3, however, does not permit equal acceptance.

4) **Conflicting Absolutism**

a) Also known as “Ideal Absolutism” “Absolutism” or “Tragic Morality.”

b) Holds there are many universal and moral norms.

c) Moral norms can and do conflict because we live in a fallen, depraved world (e.g., Rahab; Shiprah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives of Egypt).

d) Ergo, we are sometimes forced to break moral norms (e.g., “choose between the lesser of two evils”). We have then sinned and must seek repentance and forgiveness.

e) Key advocates include: Helmut Thielicke, Dietrich Bonhoffer, Martin Luther, JI Packer, Erwin Lutzer, John Warrick Montgomery.

f) Biblical evidence includes …

i) Psalm 51:5 — “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

ii) Romans 3:23 — “… for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

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2So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: "Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land." 4But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.)


3The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, "When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?"

The midwives answered Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive."

So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. 21And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every boy that is born [to the Hebrews] you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."– Exodus 1:15-22.
g) Arguments in favor include:

   i) Emphasizes God’s holiness (by focusing on moral absolutes) and man’s sinfulness (by focusing on man’s need for repentance for breaking moral absolutes).
   ii) Emphasizes fullness of creation by rooting corruption in sinfulness of people rather than by design of God.

h) Problems (of Conflicting Absolutism) include:

   • If the Law is a reflection of God’s character, then conflicts within His Law has created a dysfunctional view of God’s unanimity.
   • Not useful, nor pragmatic for it lends little instruction about what to do to avoid sin.
   • If there are indeed “evils that are lesser,” then subjectivity—[the enemy of any ethical system, especially a Godly/Christian ethic]—becomes the operating force.
   • God says to “be holy” yet puts us in situations where we can not do anything but an unholy act—sin.
   • Confuses the reality of the Incarnation and obfuscates orthodoxy regarding same; cf., Hebrews 2:14-18; 4:15

   “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for [or and that he might turn aside God’s wrath, taking away] the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempting.” –Hebrews 2:14-18

   “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.” –Hebrews 4:15

   It seems to make Jesus’ incarnation either less authentic or artificially engineered since Jesus never sinned.

   • Seems to make God unjust if He allows mankind to exist in an environment in which he has to sin, yet still holds him accountable for “necessary’ transgressions;4 cf., I Corinthians 10:13 ...
“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

II Peter 1:3 and 2:9 …
“His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.”
“… if this is so [the rescue of Lot from unrighteous men], then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment [Or unrighteous for punishment until the day of judgment].”

• Seems to minimize personal holiness since it results in a moral “duty” to sin on some occasions. Consider, for instance, 1 Peter 1:14-16:

“As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”

• In a formal sense, God gave His Law (i.e., His absolutes) to humanity after it had fallen; therefore, we ought to expect that it is possible to keep the Law (cf., Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”)

• Tenuous view of the Law’s nature—there is no conflict in God’s character.

• Overly simplistic—doesn’t look for a way out of sin; in fact, one could argue that it encourages sin because it reinforces avoidance of the hard work of working it out [cf., Philippians 2:12-13, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”].

• Anthropocentric—puts human in charge of deciding which laws to break and when two laws are apparently in conflict.

5) **Graded Absolutism**

a) Also known as Contextual Absolutism, Hierarchicalism, Qualified Absolutism
b) Holds there are many universal and absolute moral norms.
c) Moral norms can and do conflict.
d) Moral norms can be and are arranged in a hierarchy of merit. It is not, therefore, sinful to break a moral norm in order to keep a higher moral norm. It is “just” a matter of
choosing the proper “greater good.”

e) Biblical evidence includes …
   i) Matthew 5:19 “to the least of these commandments …”
   ii) Matthew 22:38 “this is the first and greatest commandment …”
   iii) Matthew 23:23 “the weightier matters of the Law …”
   iv) John 19:11 “the greater sin …”
   v) I Corinthians 13:13 “the greatest of these is love …”

f) General arguments in favor include …
   i) Apparent unavoidability (e.g., Rahab, Abraham & Isaac, Hebrew mid-wives, Samuel’s anointing of David, David as king—God’s instruction to lie and go to worship. Ahab—angel says he will be a lying spirit.
   ii) Thus, the “Jews in the basement” is resolved by committing the lesser sin—lying—to avoid a worse sin, permitting innocent people to be murdered.

g) Key proponents include Norman Geisler (inventor?), also John Jefferson Davis, John Feinberg, Paul Feinberg.

h) Problems
   ✧ Who sets the hierarchy and how are we to know it? [Why not base it on what gives honor and glory to God?]
   ✧ In practice, Graded Absolutism may be absolutism in disguise (i.e., one does not have to confess sin).
   ✧ Scripture indicates a hierarchy, but do they prove there is a conflict indeed between “heavier” and “lighter” matters?
   ✧ And, there is no evidence that the Lord sanctions breaking lower norms.
     • Prove the hierarchy empirically.
     • Show it is acceptable to break the “lower” moral norms.
     • Find an empirical basis for ordering the hierarchy.
   ✧ Appears to define sin as non-sin when an absolute is broken in a given situation—trivializes “absolutes.”
   ✧ Makes Graded Absolutism resemble situationalism/situational ethics with the one moral norm being “Do the right thing.”
   ✧ It has a tenuous view of the nature of Law—ceases to be an acceptable view of God’s character.
   ✧ Anthropocentric in that the moral agent becomes the focus of the ethical situation rather than the Law giver.
6) **Non-Conflicting Absolutism**

a) Also known as “Unqualified Absolutism,” “Case Analysis,” “Casuistical Divinity”

b) Conflict can not occur because conflict is mere illusion, “only apparent.” That is, there will never be a case having to break one moral norm in order to keep another.

c) Results from human misperception of circumstances, or [more likely] human misunderstanding of moral norms.\(^5\)

d) Commonly known advocates include John Murray, Kant, Augustine, Charles Hodge, John Frame, and most ethicists in the Protestant tradition. Most RC ethicists as well, and orthodox Judaism.

e) General Arguments …

   - Moral norms are rooted in God’s character—an absolute, non-contradictory character; therefore, we ought to expect that moral norms likewise will be absolute and non-contradictory.
   - Entire Biblical record speaks to conflict between believers and moral norms—not conflict between moral norms themselves. [search for an exception?]
   - Practically speaking, it minimizes the moral agent—obey, maximize the Law-giver, minimize the Law-follower. When we obey, we are focused on obedience, not other stuff.

f) Biblical evidence includes …

1. Matthew 5:48— “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”
2. I Corinthians 10:13— “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”
3. Hebrews 4:15— “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.”
4. II Peter 2:9— “… if this is so [the rescue of Lot from unrighteous men], then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment [Or unrighteous for punishment until the day of judgment].”

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\(^5\)We could also attribute some of this “misperception” to Porter’s First Law of Human Behavior: “Sentient human beings see, believe, remember, and do what we want to see, believe, remember, and do.” Note also a critical corollary—to wit, Porter’s Second Law of Human Behavior: When we manifest the First Law, we must rely ever so less on our experience and ever so more on the empirical world around us. Thus, for the scholar, it means searching for evidence not to confirm our experience, but to disconfirm. For the Christian, it means searching the Scriptures not to confirm our hypotheses, but to affirm God’s evidence—regardless of where it leads. It is this latter “regardless” that trips most of us—again, because of Porter’s First Law.
“God is not against us; we are against us. With Holy Spirit, we can prevail; if we do not, we are broken, not God.” –djones

**Applying Non-Conflicting Absolutism**

“It is not always wrong to lie.” Shiprah and Puah are to be understood not just by what they did, but why. By speaking untruth, they protected God’s people and did so, not to protect themselves, but for God’s glory, specifically to honor God. Just as we do not assume that premarital sex is wrong without examining the “why,” (e.g., rape and victimizing), we can not automatically call speaking an untruth “sin.” But, just like praying to be seen of men is a sin, speaking an untruth to benefit ourselves, rather than honor God, is sin. The heart is the key.

The internal workings of the heart tell the real motive behind the act; character, goals, and consequences—all count. Motives of Shiprah & Puah: “And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.” (Exodus 1:21)

Ergo, “lying” is not inherently sinful anymore than any behavior/act is inherently sinful.

**Problems with Non-Conflicting Absolutism**

- Real-life experiences seem to testify that conflict does occur; [e.g., it is difficult not to feel conflicted after killing the burglar, even if it was not a sin. Perhaps, the conflict is not between killing or not killing, but our inner conflicts about our true motives. Remember Augustine’s pear thievery.]

- Biblical examples seem to testify that conflicts occur …

1. Samson’s divinely approved suicide, Judges 16:30
2. Abraham’s offering of his son Isaac, Genesis 22:1-19
3. Shiprah and Puah, the Hebrew mid-wives in Egypt, Exodus 1:15-20
4. Rahab’s lie to the king of the city (Joshua 2:1-14; James 2:25)
5. Daniel’s disobedience to the governing authorities (Daniel 3:8-30)
• Non-conflicting absolutism appears to place value on rules rather than human beings.
  [Yes, God’s Law is more important than human beings, given Character, Goals & Conduct.]

SPECIAL REVELATION: THE LAW AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO MANKIND

Essential problem: How does the Law relate to us? How do we use the Law in everyday life?

Christian ethics is the **study and application** of morals **prescribed in God’s word** that pertains to the **conduct, character, and goals required** of one who professes to be in a redemptive relationship with the Lord Jesus the Christ.

So far then, the Law itself is a reflection of God’s character (nature), and it is not at odds with the Gospel (its relevancy), and can not conflict (coherency). Yet, how do we use the Law in everyday life?

**Key Notion**

The purpose of life is ... To glorify God. What then is “God’s glory?” The totality of His being; therefore, we glorify God by...

• Reflecting Him, obeying His commandments—we imitate God:
  ➢ Ephesians 5:1-2—“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”
  ➢ I Corinthians 11:7—“A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God …”
  ➢ II Corinthians 2:15—“For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”
  ➢ BTW: Roles worth as in husbands glorifying God and wives glorifying husbands.

• Scripture reveals that the Christian life is not ultimately about law-keeping, but about glorifying God ...
  ➢ God created the world for His glory:

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6 I Corinthians 11:4-7 (NIV) has an alternative translation (in the footnotes), later removed in 2003 by the NIV translation committee, which reads, “Every man who prays or prophesies with long hair dishonors his head. And every woman who prays or prophesies with no covering of hair on her head dishonors her head—she is just like one of the ‘shorn women.’ If a woman has no covering, let her be for now with short hair, but since it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair shorn or shaved, she should grow it again. A man ought not to have long hair.”
Christian Ethics: Building Biblical Foundations

“As for me and my mouse, we will serve the Lord.”

It’s not about you.

Proverbs 16:4—“The LORD works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster.”

Colossians 1:16—“For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.”

God elected His people before the foundation of the world for His glory; see Ephesians 1:5-6—“In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”

God created humankind for His glory; see Isaiah 43:7, 10—“…everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

[And our purpose?]

“You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He.”

God delivered Israel for His glory; Psalm 106:7-8—“When our fathers were in Egypt, they gave no thought to your miracles; they did not remember your many kindnesses, and they rebelled by the sea, the Red Sea. Yet he saved them for his name’s sake, to make his mighty power known.”

God restored Israel after exile (Isaiah 48:9-11). God didn’t save you for you but for His sake. It’s not about you; it’s about Him.

God sent His Son into the world that Gentiles might glorify His Son (cf. John 16:14, “He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.”).

God commands His people to do all things for His glory (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:31; 1 Peter 4:11).

God will send His Son a second time to receive the glory due Him (cf. Philippians 2:9-10, 2 Thessalonians 1:10).

In the end times, God will fill the earth with the knowledge of His glory (cf. Hebrews 2:14).