

# Natural Law

All of God's laws fall into one of two categories: Natural Laws or Positive Laws. Natural Laws apply to all accountable adults, whereas Positive Laws apply only to a select group. This article will focus on the existence of Natural Laws and will point out some lessons from them.

Natural Laws are laws that can be known naturally and are discernable through human reason, i.e. self-evident laws. For example, a person can determine through natural means that it is wrong to kill or to eat another human being. Natural Laws are often referred to as Moral Laws, but the term "Moral Law" misses the mark and speaks of a quality of a law rather than the method by which the law is revealed.

By contrasting Natural Laws with Positive Laws, one can reach a clearer understanding of the differences between the two. Positive Laws are laws God has supernaturally revealed; they cannot be discovered through natural means alone. For example, man could never have discovered God's requirement of baptism for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38, John 3:5, Romans 6:4) through purely natural means. Positive Laws originate with God and speak to His authority.

## **The Existence of Natural Law**

Paul gives one of the clearest proofs of the existence of Natural Law in the following passage:

Romans 2:14-15

"for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, <sup>15</sup> who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*)"

Several points are significant:

- 1- The Old Testament law was to the Jews exclusively.
- 2- By nature, some Gentiles kept part of the Old Law.
- 3- When Gentiles obeyed Natural Law, their consciences bore witness or gave approval.
- 4- When Gentiles violated Natural Law, their consciences bore guilt.
- 5- Thus, the Gentiles proved the existence of Natural Law by their ability to keep it without supernatural revelation.

In Romans 1:26 Paul points out a Natural Law:

“For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature.”

The violation of Natural Law is Paul’s explanation of the reason God gave up on certain individuals. Paul not only affirms the reality of Natural Law but also he warns people of the penalty it bears when broken.

Other passages also teach the reality of Natural Law.

### **Natural Law Discovered**

Genesis 2:5

“For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When Adam ate of the forbidden fruit, he became aware of good and evil—not right and wrong. Adam was already aware of right and wrong because of the Positive Law God had given him: “Do not eat of the tree of knowledge.”

Eating the forbidden fruit taught him two lessons: First, he gained the experiential knowledge of good and evil. Second, he gained awareness of Natural Law.

Prior to eating of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve had been in a state of innocence like children: they knew right from wrong but had not experienced evil and guilt. Once they ate of the fruit, evil became a reality; and Natural Law began to convict them.

Genesis 3:7:

“Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they *were* naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.”

Adam and Eve knew instantly they were naked; God did not have to tell them. So, they sowed fig leaves together and hid themselves in shame. Natural Law, in a prohibitive sense, was now evident to man.

To illustrate the discovery of Natural Law, picture a parent telling his five year old child, “Don’t commit adultery!” The child cannot understand what the parent is saying because he is in a state of innocence; however, the child eventually grows up and loses his sense of innocence as he becomes aware of the existence of evil. In a similar way, Adam and Eve lost their innocence and became “full grown” when they ate of the forbidden fruit.

### **Corruption of Knowledge**

A question that is commonly raised is, "If Natural Law can be understood without supernatural revelation, why do so many people not recognize it?"

The Hebrew writer gives the answer in Hebrews 3:13:  
"lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."

Throughout the Bible, God has reminded His people of Natural Laws, not because they cannot know them through nature but because they can become hardened to them and forget them. Indifference towards sin speaks of the corrupting nature of sin and not the absence of Natural Law.

### **Keys to Understanding Natural Law:**

First, It is important to understand the definition of Natural Law. The question is not whether or not the law has some sort of moral quality; the question is whether or not a law can be determined naturally (without revelation). Some Natural Laws are more easily understood than others, but all Natural Laws must be discoverable through natural means.

Second, it is important to understand the foundation of all Law:

#### **Mark 12:29-31 (parallel in Matthew 22:40)**

Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments *is*: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.'<sup>30</sup> And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This *is* the first commandment.<sup>31</sup> And the second, like *it*, *is* this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Loving God and loving your neighbor are both Natural Laws and represent the foundation of all law (both Positive and Natural).

Third, for every Negative Natural Law there is a Positive Natural Law. To state it differently, when a Natural Law is observed, the inverse of that law is also true and binding.

With these three keys in mind it is possible to understand what is contained in Natural Law. Consider the following non-exhaustive list:

## **Natural Laws**

	<b>Specific Sins According To Natural Law</b>		
Genesis 3:7	Nakedness		
Romans 1:18-31  Vs.19-20 indicate this passage	Not Honoring God	Wickedness	Violent
	Unthankfulness	Covetousness	Boasters
	Promoting Self as God	Malice	Inventors of Evil Things

contains a list of Natural Laws.	Pride	Envy	Disobedient to Parents
	Idol Worship	Murder	Undiscerning
	Lust	Strife	Untrustworthy
	Lying	Deceit	Unloving
	Sexual Perversion	Evil Mindedness	Unforgiving
	Homosexuality	Whisperers	Unmerciful
	Forgetting God	Backbiters	Approval of the Wicked
	Sexual Immorality	Haters of God	
Galatians 5:19-21  “The works of the flesh are evident”	Adultery	Hatred	Heresies
	Fornication	Contentions	Envy
	Uncleanness	Jealousies	Murders
	Lewdness	Outbursts of Wrath	Drunkenness
	Idolatry	Selfish Ambitions	Revelries
	Sorcery	Dissensions	The Like
Ephesians 5:3-7	Sins listed above plus Foolish Talking and Coarse Jestng.		
	Other Related Verses: 1 Corinthians 6:9-11/ 11:14.		
	<b>A Blessing Given By Nature</b>		
Hebrews 13:4  “Marriage is honorable among all”	<p>Marriage.</p> <p>Objection: Marriage was a Positive Law – Genesis 2:21-25 Answer: Moses is giving commentary about when God made the Natural Law of marriage.</p> <p><u>Natural Law regarding marriage is limited and does not reveal:</u> Who can a person marry (with the exception of your parents 1 Corinthians 5:1)? What happens if one spouse dies? What are the rules of divorce?</p> <p><u>Natural Law does reveal:</u> Marriage is between a man and a woman. Sex outside of marriage is prohibited.</p>		

Man’s failure to keep Natural Laws is not based on his inability to understand them; the problem is man’s lack of desire to keep them.

### **The Judgment of God**

After pointing out more than thirty violations of Natural Law in Romans 1, Paul impresses upon his readers the righteous judgment of God. In the first ten verses of

chapter 2, Paul declares that all have sinned, both Jew and Gentile, and stand guilty before God. God's judgment upon all mankind is, therefore, righteous.

The question is: How can the Gentiles be guilty of anything if the Old Testament law was not revealed to them (Ps. 147:19-20)? Paul answers this question in verses 11-16 by demonstrating that Gentiles are under Natural Law. Gentiles were expected to keep Natural Law just as Jews were expected to keep the Old Testament, yet both chose to reject the law they were under. Thus, they all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ. In Romans 2:16 Paul is not stating that all people of all time will be judged according to his gospel; he is warning both Jew and Gentile that according to the gospel they will be judged by the law they are under.

### **The Bottom Line**

Since the time that sin entered the world, mankind has been aware of and bound by Natural Law—one cannot escape this fact. Mankind is still governed by Natural Law. At times God further bound select groups of people with Positive Law. For example, the Jews were given the Old Testament Law, and it belonged to them only (Psalms 147:19-20). To keep part of the Old Law obligated a person to keep the whole law—Galatians 5:3. Thus, if a Gentile wanted to become a Jewish convert, he had to submit himself to the entire Law by doing what the Law required for conversion. Prior to conversion, a Gentile was not bound by any of the Old Law; after he was converted, he was bound to keep all of the Old Law. So it is with the New Covenant: only those under the covenant are bound to keep the covenant.

One distinction remains to be made:

<b>Under the Old Law</b>	<b>Under the New Law</b>
Two groups existed: Jews and Gentiles	Two groups exist: Christians and Sinners
Salvation was not limited to the Jews Romans 9-11	Salvation is limited to Christians Acts 17:30

While the gospel message must now go forth to all men (Matthew 28:18-19), only those obedient to the gospel are bound by the gospel (Matthew 28:20).

If brethren could understand and apply the differences between Natural and Positive Laws, they could avoid many doctrinal errors.