

# THE KINGDOM, THE BIBLE, & US

Understanding the Bible's story, Jesus' importance, and Our place in God's plan



Lesson 49- Must a Christian Follow the Law (Part 3)  
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## Introduction

We are now on Part 3 of our mini-series, does a Christian have to follow the Old Testament Law? This will be our final lesson seeking an answer to this question. This is admittedly a complicated question. As such, I want to spend more time reviewing what we have said so far.

So far, we have made the following case:

1. The Old Testament Law had a specific purpose
  - a) It was given to Old Testament Israel as God's covenant people
  - b) It governed Israel as a nation, not just their religion
2. The Church of the New Testament era is NOT the same as Israel
  - a) **The Church is not a nation like Israel was**
  - b) The Church is a called out assembly bound by common faith in Jesus Christ
  - c) **The Law cannot apply to the Church in the same way it did to Israel**
3. Paul taught Jesus Christ came to **fulfill the purpose of the Law**
  - a) Jesus upheld the Law on our behalf & He bore the curse of the Law on our behalf (Galatians 3:10-26)
4. The Old Covenant has ended & the New Covenant is in force
  - a) Jesus said He came to *fulfill* the Law
  - b) Jesus did not abolish the Law, He fulfilled its purpose (Matthew 5:17-20)
  - c) Jesus said His death & resurrection enact the New Covenant and close out the Old Covenant (Luke 22:19-20; Hebrews 8:13)
  - d) This means **the Old Covenant, and the Law within it, are no longer in force. Christ has fulfilled them and started the New.**

To say it another way, **whatever we believe about a Christian's relationship to the Old Testament Law, it cannot be the same relationship that Old Testament Israel had to the Law.**

We must keep Jesus in mind in answering this question. The Old Testament Law was preparatory, Paul said it was a tutor teaching people about faith in Christ to come. Now that Christ has come, we are no longer under the Old Testament Law. We are under a new Law.

Another idea we explored was the answer typically given throughout church history, the Tri-Partite Nature of the Law. This theory answers our question by claiming the OT Law had three parts: Moral, Civil, Ceremonial. The Moral Law portion is said to be the only one we follow today. The Civil (Governmental/Societal) and Ceremonial (Religious/Sacramental) are thought to be closed out since they were specific to Israel.

While it may be helpful to see that the OT Law had different sections to it, we need to be honest about this approach. First, the Bible never says the Law had these categories. Second, the Law is spoken of in the Bible by several writers as being one whole unit. If a person breaks one part of the Law, they have broken the whole Law. Someone who broke the ceremonial law was considered guilty of also breaking the moral and civil parts of the Law. This means Christ fulfilled the **whole** Law, not just 2 out of 3 parts.

My answer so far is this. Christians are to follow the moral parts of the Law, but not for the reasons the Tri-Partite answer says. I'd like us to ask ourselves, why are the moral laws moral at all? For example, why is it wrong to murder? Because God is not a murderer, and He says do not murder. Therefore, God is a moral Being.

God does not change the Bible says. Therefore, the moral standards that God wants people to follow will never change. Before Moses handed down the Ten Commandments, it was already wrong to lie, steal, covet, murder, etc. I believe we are to keep a moral type of law, but not because the OT Law has moral laws in it. Rather, we keep moral laws because they come from God's own moral nature.

This is proven to be the case since nine out of the Ten Commandments are repeated as in force in the New Testament. The only commandment not repeated is the Sabbath Day law. This is most likely because Jesus fulfilled it and is spoken of as being our Sabbath Day's rest for eternity.

Let's dive in and finish out this question. We will explore a couple of New Testament examples of how the Church dealt with this issue. We will then tackle the passage where Jesus said if anyone teaches a person to annul any of the commandments, they are guilty of sin.

## Peter's Vision

### **Acts 10:9-16**

Up to this point, the Apostles and other disciples of Jesus had focused on sharing the Gospel to their fellow Jewish countrymen. God opens the doors for the Gentiles to hear the good news of Jesus too. Peter has a vision while on the rooftop of a massive sheet descending from Heaven. It opens and all kinds of animals come out of it. The interesting point about these animals is they were unclean according to Jewish Law from the Old Testament.

Peter hears a voice from Heaven instruct him to kill and eat from these animals. Peter refuses because he knows these are unclean animals and it would not be right for him to violate God's Law and eat of them. The voice informs Peter that what God has made clean he should not call common.

The important idea to grasp here is that the voice said God had made these animals clean. This was a major shift for a devout Jewish man such as Peter. He had spent his whole life trying to obey the laws from Moses, including the food laws. Now he has been given a vision from God and told that the former unclean animals are now considered clean and free to eat.

What do you think God was communicating to Peter?

If you read all of chapter ten you can see the context for this vision. God was preparing Peter's heart and mind for the Gentiles to hear the Gospel and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit just like he did. If God had not given Peter that vision, he may have not entered the home of the Gentile Roman Centurion Cornelius. Peter admits this in Acts 10:28.

This scene shows us that the food laws are no longer valid from the Old Testament Law. God had declared the unclean clean. Does a Christian have to follow the Old Testament Law? So far, we have seen only nine out of the Ten Commandments repeated as in force. Now, we see the food laws are no longer in force.

## The Church Addresses a Serious Problem – The Jerusalem Council

### **Acts 15:1-5**

Gentiles began converting to Christ and enter the Church's fellowship. This mixture of Jews and Gentiles, all sharing common faith in Christ, was not agreed upon by everyone. Some of the Jewish Christians were holding on to the Old Testament Law tightly. Division in the Church began to form over this issue. The heart of the issue was, must Gentile converts to Jesus be forced to uphold the Law of Moses like the Jews were?

The primary question was should the Gentile converts be circumcised to keep the covenant of Abraham and Moses? Then, how much of the Law of Moses should the Gentile Christians keep to be accepted in the Church? This was a difficult issue because the Church Jesus started began with Jews. These Jews were used to a system where you had to keep the Law of Moses. For many of them, faith in Christ was the way of salvation, but keeping the Law of Moses was your act of obedience to the Lord. Now that Gentiles are coming to faith, they had never kept the Law of Moses. Should they be forced to do so just like the Jews were? What should happen with the Law of Moses?

Paul and Barnabas took the position that the Gentile converts must not be forced to be circumcised and keep the Law. This debate became such a problem that it was decided the two groups should go to Jerusalem and sort this out with the rest of the Apostles in the Church.

Why do you think this was such an issue in the early Church?

Notice in Acts 10:5 there was a group of Christians who were Jews that belonged to the Pharisees. We know that this Jewish party was very strict in their adherence to the Law. They made laws on top of the Law to ensure it was kept. It makes sense that these Jewish Christians held on to adherence to the law. They could not grasp the fact that faith in Christ meant people did not have to keep the law of Moses. This issue was a serious debate in the Church at that point in time. It was hard for the Jewish mind to let go of law keeping proving their devotion to the Lord. Adding Gentiles in to the mix complicated this question since they had no concepts of strict adherence to the Jewish Law of Moses.

### **Acts 15:6-12**

After the law-keeping side made their case, Peter stood and made a case. Peter recounted how that through the Roman Centurion Cornelius, the Gospel had clearly been granted to the Gentiles. Peter also shared that since the Gentiles were receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit by faith in Christ, this proved they were just as accepted by God as the Jews were. Peter's bottom line point was that faith in Christ leads to salvation whether one is a Jew or a Gentile. Keeping the Law of Moses has no bearing on the legitimacy of salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Notice verses 10 and 11. Peter reminds the Council that it makes no sense to impose Law keeping on the Gentile converts since not even the Jewish forefathers, nor themselves were able to faithfully keep the Law. Peter argued it was hypocritical to impose rules on the Gentiles that the Jews were not following either.

This silenced the Council. Then, in verse 12, Paul and Barnabas gave testimony how God had saved many Gentiles through their ministry and the Holy Spirit had been given to them as well.

## Acts 15:19-29

James, Jesus' half-brother we think, was one of the leading Apostles in the Jerusalem Church. He gave a concluding exhortation. He believed the best course of action was to ask the Gentile converts to keep a small portion of the Law for the sake of maintaining open doors of ministry to the Jews who had yet to come to Christ.

James said they should abstain from these things:

Things polluted by idols  
Sexual immorality  
What has been strangled  
From eating blood

James' logic is in verse 21. There are Jews in every city that follow Moses' Law and they teach the Law in their synagogues on the Sabbath. James believed that they should not offend the Jews too aggressively by casting away all the laws. James wanted them to at least keep to a baseline of law adherence so when they share the Gospel with Jews, they might have an open mind to listen. If they were to share the Gospel to Jews and the Jews knew that these new 'Christians' were totally abandoning the law of Moses, then the Jews would probably never listen to them at all since they would consider them blasphemers.

Acts 15:29 contains the summary from the letter they sent the Gentile Christians.

James advocated for what Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 9:19-21

<sup>19</sup> For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. <sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (**though not being myself under the law**) that I might win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but **under the law of Christ**) that I might win those outside the law. (ESV)

Based on James' logic, and what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9, when do you think it might be helpful to keep some of the Law of Moses?

Paul believed he was free from keeping the Jewish Law of Moses. However, if it would help him reach other Jews for Christ, then Paul would willingly keep some of the Law of Moses so he could win Jews for Jesus.

This helps us answer our question, must a Christian keep the Old Testament Law? The short answer is no. We are not bound to keep the Old Testament Law. However, are there times when it could be helpful to adhere to some of it for the sake of Gospel witness? Sure! Paul thought so. However, Paul also said if dealing with Gentiles who do not adhere to the Law, then reach them in a way that is helpful for the Gentile mind.

Notice in 1 Corinthians 19:20, Paul says he is not under the Law, but he may voluntarily follow it for the sake of evangelism to the Jews who still follow it.

## The Law of Christ

Paul said something interesting in 1 Corinthians 19:21. He said he is under the Law of Christ. Paul was clear, he may not be bound to keep the Law of Moses anymore, but that does not mean he can live like a lawless man doing whatever he pleases. God still has moral standards for people to follow. Paul suggested that there is now a new Law we are under, the Law of Christ.

Paul mentions this idea of the Law of Christ in one other place, Galatians 6:2. In this verse Paul says, “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ” (ESV).

In Galatians Paul charges Christians to support one another and help one another live faithfully for Jesus. He says that when we bear with one another’s burdens we are fulfilling this Law of Christ. One could summarize this as ‘love on another.’ The Law of Christ is marked by love and grace.

Paul also mentions something called the ‘law of the Spirit.’

Romans 8:1–4 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. <sup>2</sup> For the **law of the Spirit of life** has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. <sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Paul is clear that a person who has been saved by faith in Jesus has been set free from the Old Testament Law that could only reveal sin and its punishment of death. It could

never save someone. God sent Jesus to fulfill the Law on our behalf. Now that we have faith in Jesus, we walk according to the Holy Spirit.

Here is a summary answer to our question we have explored for these three lessons. Does a Christian have to follow the Old Testament Law? No. Why not? Because Jesus has fulfilled its righteous requirements on our behalf, and He has suffered the curse of the Law on our behalf. Faith in Christ not only saves us from our sins, but it also credits the Law's fulfillment on our behalf.

Does the Christian follow any sort of law? Yes! The Law of Christ, the Law of the Holy Spirit. We are bound to follow whatever Jesus Christ has commanded us to do. We follow Jesus' Law. Jesus commanded many things in the Gospels that we are to follow. We pray, we honor the one true God, we help the poor, the widowed, the orphan, and so much more. The point is, we follow what Jesus said we are to do.

In addition to this, we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will guide us, He will change our hearts, to follow the law that God wants us to follow as believers in Jesus. This is the fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:33, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

We also follow what the Apostles in the rest of the New Testament handed down for us to obey. The Apostles were appointed messengers by Jesus Christ. For example, when we read Paul in Romans and he says avoid certain things and do certain things, then we obey this. We apply this logic to each letter in the New Testament.

What we find is many of the moral type commands from the Old Testament are repeated, such as avoid sexual immorality, do not murder, help the poor, have no idols, and many more. This proves the point we made earlier that the moral commands are always the right thing to do because they come from God's moral nature, and they will never change. We are not bound though to keep the Law of Moses. Christians follow the Law of Christ.

We follow Jesus, His appointed Apostles, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This the Law of Christ and the Spirit we are under.

This functions much like the Old Testament Law was supposed to for Israel. We follow the Law of Christ, and the non-Christians see this. They will see how differently we live our lives. They should see how our morals are not like that of the lost world's. Then, they should see how "it works." It causes our lives to be more at peace, have more harmony, more joy. Why? Because although we are not perfect, we live according to God's ethics. This results in our lives having greater order and greater peace than those who are not in Christ. This is not so we can look like we are better than the non-Christians. Rather, this is so our lives lived in faithfulness to Christ will draw the lost to Christ through our example.

## What about Jesus' Words in Matthew 5:17-20?

Before we close out this study, I want to briefly mention Matthew 5:17-20. Specifically in verses 19 and 20. Jesus warned that anyone who relaxes (loosens or lightens) any of the commandments will be considered least in the Kingdom of Heaven. Whoever keeps them and teaches others to keep them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven (verse 20). Is my view about the Old Testament Law guilty of violating Jesus' words here? I hope not, but I have an answer for why I do not think my view violates Jesus' warning.

We must keep in mind the context when Jesus said these words. He was speaking to Jews before He died on the cross and brought in the New Covenant. Jesus said He came to fulfill the Law in verse 17. The issue in Jesus' day many scholars point out is the Pharisees in particular had developed a grading system for the Law. They felt some laws were *weightier* and others were *lighter*. It is likely Jesus was pointing out an error for His day. He warned that no one should teach any of the Law is *lighter*. The Greek word in verse 19 is sometimes translated in English as annuls. But the word is better thought of as to loosen, make lighter, or relax. This makes sense given the historical context.

Jesus warned against the practice of the Pharisees and scribes to make less of some of the commandments and make more of others. All the commandments were important, and all were equally worthy to be taught and adhered to.

After Jesus died and rose again, He brought in the New Covenant and His new Law, the Law of Christ. I believe my view fits Jesus' words in this way. I would never teach the Old Testament Law is unimportant. It is very important, and it is God's Word to us.

The key claim I have made in these lessons is we are not bound to adhere to it in the same way Old Testament Israel was. Jesus has fulfilled its righteous requirements and bore its curse on our behalf. The value for the Old Testament Law for a Christian is not in keeping in line-for-line. Rather, the value is in studying the principles behind the laws and living according to the heart of God. The specific laws we adhere though are those that Christ and His Apostles handed down. Many of these though are carried over from the Old Testament Law.

But it should be obvious we are not bound to the Old Testament Law anymore. We have no need for animal sacrifices, Christ is our sacrifice. We do not have to be circumcised, Paul clearly said so. We do not follow the dietary laws per Acts 10. Acts 15 taught the Law is no longer binding, but it could be wise to follow it for the sake of evangelism to Jews. Then, whatever the Apostles and Christ commanded, we clearly follow as our Law, guided by the Holy Spirit. I believe my view is in the same spirit as the Jerusalem Council's verdict in Acts 15. They were not guilty of violating Jesus' warning in Matthew 5:17-21, and I do not believe my view is either.

## Conclusion

I hope you enjoyed this mini-study of the Christian's adherence to the Old Testament Law. I hope you learned and were helped by it. This is a complicated issue and the answer I offered may not be shared by everyone.

At the end of it all I hope I have at least made it clear that Jesus fulfilled the Law for us, its requirements, and curses. We do not relate to the Law of Moses the same way Israel did. We have a new Law from Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit within us, and explained to us in the New Testament by the Apostles.

We show God our love and devotion through obedience and we engage in a type of witness to the lost world when we order our lives according to the Law of Christ.