

Living the New Covenant  
August 17, 2014

How many of you want to go to heaven? Okay, you need to fill out the form that is being passed out now. We'll run through this very quickly. I'm sure you already know these things about yourself.

You'll have to read number one first before you put your name in it. But if, after reading it, you find that it is true of you, then write your name in the blank.

"I, \_\_\_\_\_, believe that Jesus is God's one and only Son, who died to make entrance into heaven a possibility for me. I believe His teachings, His commands, and in His death for all sins, His resurrection, ascension, and return. Without His death and resurrection, I would not have heaven available to me.

2. I attend church, except for work or illness... every Sunday, 3 out of 4 Sundays, 2 out of 4 Sundays, once a month, or occasionally.
3. I read the Bible... daily, a few times a week, once a week, or rarely.
4. I pray... daily, a few times a week, once a week, or rarely.
5. I give financially to the church... a tithe, a half tithe, a quarter tithe, some, or none.
6. Except for number 5, above, I give to charity... at Christmas, monthly, weekly, occasionally, or never.
7. I do something about my sin... when I feel guilty, when I'm at church, when I'm depressed, or never.
8. I don't drink, do drugs, smoke, or chew and don't date those who do.  
(circle one)      Yes                  No

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I believe God **weights** the items above for getting me into heaven as follows (pick one)

- |                                |                               |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. #1 at 30%, #2-8 at 10% each | 4. #1 at 51%, #7-8 at 7% each |
| 2. All items at 12.5% each     | 5. #1 at 100%, #2-8 at 0%     |
| 3. #1 at 93%, #2-8 at 1% each  | 6. #1 at 44%, #2-8 at 8% each |

We'll come back to those forms later. Many years ago, in an email discussion, I joked that Christians ought to be gathering for worship on Saturday instead of Sunday. Not everyone thought I was joking. One person wrote that he had always wondered if maybe we were supposed to be worshipping on Saturday.

Many people who love Jesus question what we are expected by God to do with the Old Testament laws. They know we are not supposed to be offering animal sacrifices. They also know we are to avoid all immoral behavior the Law addresses like murder, adultery,

and stealing. But what about the commands about tithing and the Sabbath? Are we supposed to keep them? **(Are we to keep the tithe and Sabbath laws?)**

For example, some Christians believe that God expects them to keep a Sabbath every week. Some believe that Sabbath observance can be any day of the week. Others believe it should be Sunday. Still others believe it should be sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. You have probably heard of Seventh Day Adventists. They practice a sundown Friday to sundown Saturday Sabbath. There used to be a small, local grocery store in Gambrills, owned by a Seventh Day Adventist who closed the store before sundown Friday and opened again after sundown Saturday. There are other Christians, like Seventh Day Baptists, who observe a Friday sundown to Saturday sundown Sabbath. And still other Christians don't believe we are commanded by God to observe a Sabbath at all.

So there is no unity among Christians about the Old Testament commands for the Sabbath. Nor is there agreement about tithing 10% of one's income. Christians are divided over that as well. Some Christians believe God requires them to tithe. Other Christians believe the tithe went out with the animal sacrifices.

Perhaps you too have questions about what to do with the old covenant commands. Such questions are almost as old as the New Testament church. We're going to look at how the early church dealt with this issue for it speaks to us as well.

We are in the book of Acts this morning. For the last few Sundays we've been in this book. We've seen some of the exciting things that were happening in this church and the city of Jerusalem. We also saw some of the problems they faced. Today's question could have become a major problem for them, but was instead a blessing.

Today's story did not take place in the early days of the first church, not even in the first couple of years. The time is about 14 or 15 years after the beginning of the very first church. During these years the Christian faith had spread throughout the land of Israel. The good news of Jesus had gone to cities all over the Mediterranean region, either by the Apostles of Jesus, or by other Christians who returned home from Jerusalem and took the gospel with them to their family and friends.

In addition, the good news had been accepted by a good number of non-Jews. Some of these had already been attracted to Judaism, but more had almost no knowledge of Judaism. They knew nothing of the Law of Moses. They practiced none of it. Yet, they believed in Jesus and lived for Him.

Well some of the Jewish Christians got to thinking about this and they decided that these non-Jewish Christians had to become circumcised and live out the Old Testament commands or they weren't fully Christian. Let's pick it up at verse one of chapter fifteen.

**Acts 15:1-4 (NIV)** Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved."

This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

Okay, I've got a quiz question for you, and you don't even have to be very close to get it right. **How many centuries after God gave Moses the old covenant commandments did this event in Acts 15 occur?**

I'll give you a hint. There is a clue in the question. **The answer is 15. God gave Moses the Old Testament laws in about 1445 B.C., making this about 1,500 years later, or 15 centuries.**

Now I asked you that to give you an idea of how ingrained the Law of Moses had become to the Jews. America is less than 300 years old, (less than 240 years since 1776) not even one fifth of the time that the Law of Moses was central to the Jews' covenant relationship with God. Yet we have an identity as Americans. We think like Americans. Our short history has shaped how we think, what we want. We speak of the American Dream. We have an American mindset. This took less than 200 years.

So imagine how ingrained the Law of Moses was to the mindset of these people who had lived it for 1,500 years. They had been told all their lives to obey the Law of Moses. And they had been trying all their lives. Every year they had traveled to Jerusalem for one or more of the annual festivals. They practiced the commands about Sabbath, tithe, and the dietary restrictions. The idea that these commands were no longer required was too hard them to accept.

Some of you grew up in a home and church that taught you to always be in a church on Sunday. And you have done so. Hearing, now, the idea that you don't have to do so is hard to accept. You may feel guilty just considering what I'm saying. Imagine how hard it was for them.

Let's go back to their story.

**Acts 15:5-11 (NIV)** Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

The Holy Spirit spoke to Peter that day. Peter realized that Jesus was the key to answering this question about the O.T. Law. Peter knew that no one he had ever known had EVER kept the Law of Moses good enough to be right with God. It was too hard for

any Jew to accomplish. That is why Jesus' death was necessary. Faith in Jesus was the only solution to righteousness and eternal life.

If we gave Peter this handout you have, he would not hesitate to put his name in number one. And likely he would ignore the other questions. He knew them to be irrelevant. At the bottom he would chose number 5. Peter was trusting 100% in Jesus alone for the forgiveness of his sins and eternal life. Let's see if the others agreed with Peter.

**Acts 15:12-21 (NIV)** The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' that have been known for ages.

"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

The rest of the leaders agreed with James. They prepared the letter and sent it with Paul and Barnabas and others to the church in Antioch.

Now be clear about what the council did not do. **The council did not require circumcision, the keeping of the Sabbath, tithing, or the kosher regulations.** These four things they could have easily included, if necessary.

Secondly, what they did include were all things associated with immorality for the Jews. Pagan worship included meat offered to other gods, and then eaten or sold in the marketplace. Pagan worship often included immoral sexual practices. The Romans accepted many of these in society at large, not just the temples. Some peoples would strangle an animal instead of using a knife, which meant the blood was not drained from the body before eating it. Blood was not to be eaten by God's people. God had given the restriction about blood to Noah. This command predated the Moses covenant. So these moral issues would be minimum requirements for Jewish and non-Jewish Christians to partner together in Jesus.

The part about Moses being read in the synagogues meant that the Holy Spirit could direct any Christian, even non-Jewish ones, to go to the local synagogue and hear the Law of Moses read.

If Christians were required to keep the commands about the Sabbath, the tithe, or the kosher restrictions this would have been the time in the New Testament to say so. But it is not here, nor is it anywhere else in the New Testament. Such commands are not part of the new covenant that God initiated through Jesus.

A.J. Jacobs wrote a book about five years ago. His book is about his year of living biblically as he calls it. He decided to read the Bible and spend a year trying to obey all

the commands in it. He started his reading of the Bible in July 2005. He came up with over 700 commands from both old and new testaments. He did not shave for a year, and his wife refused to kiss him the last two months. He did not wear clothes of mixed fabrics, ate kosher, etc. He had to buy one of those canes with a small seat attached so he could sit in his home. His wife was offended that he could not sit on a seat that a menstruating woman sat on. So in protest she sat on every chair in the house in protest.  
( [http://www.ted.com/talks/a\\_j\\_jacobs\\_year\\_of\\_living\\_biblically](http://www.ted.com/talks/a_j_jacobs_year_of_living_biblically) )

Mr. Jacobs is not a Christian, nor a Jew. He says he is an agnostic. Of the several things he mentions that he learned, he did come to believe more in the God of the Bible. He did not become a Christian. He read the Bible only looking for commands. He did not read for the story. He did not learn the story of the Jews. He did not learn the reasons for the Old Testament commands as detailed in the New Testament. He did not see what we are learning today, here in Acts 15.

I tell you his story because many Christians miss this important fact of the Christian life. They miss the fact that we are free from living under the burden of the Law of Moses. Some Christians read this passage and others and simply refuse to accept this truth. They refuse to believe it since it goes against what they have been taught since birth.

Christian you are free. You are free from the Old Testament commands to the people who related to God under the old covenant. The word testament means covenant. Our Bible is divided into two parts, the old covenant part and the new covenant part. Christians relate to God through Jesus in a new covenant. The terms, conditions and promises in this covenant are different than those of the old covenant.

If you want to, you can practice some of those old things. You can practice the tithe. I do. Some of you do. It is one reason our small church has continued to be able to support this place and a full-time pastor. There is nothing wrong with tithing. **There is nothing wrong with keeping any of the Old Testament commands if you do so for the right reasons.** The reason to keep them is as an act of personal praise, gratitude, and commitment to God.

**But, if you keep them as a method of being right with God, you have left the gospel behind.** You have made Jesus' death of no account.

God does not demand Christians to obey the commands of the Old Testament in order to live in a right relationship with Him. Instead, God calls you to believe that Jesus died to give you a right relationship with God as a gift, not something earned through obedience to the Law of Moses.

So if, out of love for God, you want to tithe, then do so. But don't tell anyone that God requires you or them to do so. Maybe one day Jesus appeared to you and told you to tithe your income. Then you better do so. But don't assume that because He told you to do that, that every Christians is now commanded to do so. He has not.

Jesus told me He wanted me to become a pastor. He did not tell my brother or sister that. He told me. Don't make what Jesus tells you to do a command that everyone has to follow.

If, out of your desire to grow in Christian maturity you see a need for YOU to be in church on Sundays, then do so. But don't rely on your attendance to add anything to what Jesus did on the cross. God does not command us to be here on Sunday morning, or Sunday night, or Wed afternoon, or any other time.

**If you add anything to Jesus for your righteousness and eternal life, you receive neither.** Jesus paid the entire price of both on the cross.

Invitation

Jesus died for ALL of your sins. There was nothing lacking in His death for you. There is nothing you have to add to His death for the forgiveness of your sins, a right relationship (righteousness) with God, or eternal life. If you try to add anything to Jesus' death and resurrection, you negate what He did for you.

Is that you? Have you been trusting in something in addition to Jesus for heaven? Have you been trusting in something you have done? Have you trusted in going to church? Have you trusted in taking a day of rest each week? Have you trusted in tithing? Have you trusted in being obedient to Jesus? Have you trusted in being a good person?

None of these things alone, together, or added to Jesus will get you to heaven. Only Jesus alone is the answer to your need and desire for heaven.

Today, won't you put your faith in Jesus alone for the forgiveness of your sins?

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**Passages on the new covenant and our freedom from the law:** Jeremiah 31:31-34; Acts 15:1-35; Romans 7; 1 Corinthians 9:20; Galatians 3:10, 13, 23-25; Galatians 5:4; Ephesians 2:14-18; Philippians 3:7-9; Colossians 2:13-14, 16-17; Hebrews 6:17 - 10:22