

*Run John run  
the law commands  
but gives me neither feet nor hands  
far better news  
the gospel brings  
it bids me fly and gives me wings*

**Unknown author, attributed to John Bunyan (1628-1688)  
or John Berridge (1716-1793)**

What are Christians to do with the Old Testament law?

Skeptics cry “foul” and claim hypocrisy and inconsistency in our application of prohibitions against actions such as homosexual behavior (Lev. 18 and 20) while neglecting restrictions regarding outfits, agricultural techniques and haircuts (Lev. 19). How can Christians enforce some laws and ignore others? Surely this is nothing more than deceptive and selective reading, right?

Even Christians are confused. Some think we should be living more intentionally according to the tenets of the Torah (*torah* is the Hebrew word for law, commandment or statute), and most are simply ignorant as to why their food, clothes and lives should not more closely approximate the forms of the Old Testament.

What are we to make of and do with the law?

## What is the Law?

First, it is helpful to define our terms. What does the word “law” mean? Well, really it depends on who is using it and the context in which it is being used.

Even in the Scriptures, there are various uses of the term. In the New Testament, the term “law” can be used of the entire Old Testament (Rom. 3:19), the particular commands of the Old Testament given to Moses (Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:44) and even the improper use of the Old Testament (Rom. 6:14). John Piper has provided the following grid for helping interpret the various uses: “Whenever you read the word ‘law’ in the New Testament, ask yourself: is this the OT, or the writings of Moses, or the legalistic distortion of Moses’ teaching?”

It is important to note that no definition of “law” will perfectly capture every nuance of every use, so we will restrict ourselves to *the prescriptions and prohibitions commanded as conditions of the Mosaic covenant* (described throughout Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers and basically reaffirmed in Deuteronomy).

Though the Pentateuch<sup>1</sup> contains a collection of hundreds of various “laws,” the Bible often speaks of the “law” in the singular, and we will use this same convention.

These various statutes of the law include everything from the obvious Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1-17; Deut 5:1-21) to the more obscure and, frankly, odd. Consider the following:

- *You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material.*  
**Leviticus 19:19**
- *You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard.*  
**Leviticus 19:27**
- *When a woman has a discharge, and the discharge in her body is blood, she shall be in her menstrual impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. And everything on which she lies during her menstrual impurity shall be unclean. Everything also on which she sits shall be unclean.*  
**Leviticus 15:19–20**
- *You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.*  
**Exodus 34:26**
- *You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of the garment with which you cover yourself.*  
**Deuteronomy 22:12**

We might also mention the various commands regarding **homosexuality**, **slavery** and **the conquest of Canaan** which many find to be intolerant, primitive and shameful.

Such laws sound foreign to most of us. The fact is, they are foreign to most of us. The vast majority of us don’t boil goats, and even if we did, it would never occur to us to do so in its mother’s milk. Most of us do not sew our own clothes or plant our own food. Some of us can’t even grow a beard; much less mar its edges.

How are we to understand our Christian obligation toward these laws in light of the extreme cultural distance and, more importantly, the gospel?

<sup>1</sup> The Pentateuch is the first five books of the Bible. The name comes from the Greek words *penta* (five) and *teuchos* (scrolls).

## Why was the Law Given?

In order to understand our current responsibility toward the law, it is helpful to discuss the intent of the law as it was originally given to the nation of Israel.

The law is good (Rom. 7:12) if viewed properly and used for that for which it was intended (1 Tim. 1:8). Unfortunately, people naturally tend to conceive the law as a means of justification, something it is unable to provide (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16). As John Stott writes, "The function of the law was not to bestow salvation, however, but to convince men of their need of it."

To further expound the original intent without exhausting the topic, let us consider a few of the main uses of the law.

### Reason 1: to distinguish

The Mosaic Law was to mark Israel as a people distinct from the rest of the nations (Lev. 20:26). Israel was to be different, set apart and sanctified from the world and to the LORD. We see this function in the various "ceremonial" aspects of the law such as dietary and clothing restrictions.

### Reason 2: to restrain

The Mosaic Law was to restrain evil at least to some degree. Martin Luther once wrote, "As a wild beast is tied to keep it from running amuck, so the Law bridles mad and furious man to keep him from running wild." The Mosaic Law functions like a speed limit. Though a posted sign does not typically keep man from speeding, it does restrain speeding to some degree. Most will drive 45 or 50 in a 40 mph zone, but few will burn through at 95 out of fear of the penalty of the law.

### Reason 3: to diagnosis

The Mosaic Law was to diagnose sin and reveal transgression. This is the reason which receives the most explicit biblical treatment in passages such as Romans 3:20, 5:20, 7:7; and Galatians 3:19. In this sense, the law is a mirror in which we see our filthiness. We read of gaining life by perfect obedience (Lev. 18:5), but find ourselves unable and thus cursed (Deut. 27:26).

*God awakens us through the law and leads us to acknowledge our desperate condition.*

*It was added in order that we might realize that God is right to condemn us all, and to give our minds no rest from anxious and tortuous thoughts, in order that our despair might lead us to find hope in his promise.*

**John Calvin**

The law is like an MRI scan that reveals our cancer but provides no cure. We respond to this revelation of disease and depravity in one of three ways: by trying harder and, thus, only compounding our condemnation, by giving up in despair or by responding in desperation and hoping completely in God's merciful and gracious promises rather than our own works. In this sense, the law is, as Martin Luther declared, "an usher to lead the way to grace."

The Mosaic covenant was good but not without fault (Heb. 8:7). It was subjected to imperfection by God Himself so that we might run only to the perfection provided in Christ.

## Freedom from the Law

To begin formulating an understanding of Christian responsibility toward the Mosaic covenant, let's look at how apostolic authors spoke about a few explicit elements of Old Testament law and life. Though more examples could be offered, we will simply consider those that receive the most explicit treatment in the New Testament.

### Circumcision

Circumcision was established prior to the Mosaic covenant (Gen. 17) but was particularly marked as a representative sign of that covenant (Lev. 12:3). So inherently central was the rite of circumcision to the Mosaic Law, the first early church conflict erupted over the rite. Circumcision further dominated a large portion of Pauline theology as will be discussed below.

Put simply, circumcision was no peripheral or hypothetical discussion in the early church. Historically and biblically, to be a Jew necessitated circumcision according to the law. What then were early Christians to do?

This very question prompted the first church council as the apostles and other faithful fathers gathered in Jerusalem in response to the claim of some teachers that, "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Reflecting upon God's grace to the Gentiles in light of the gospel, the apostles determined that circumcision was no longer binding upon the people of God. This represented a watershed moment in God's redemptive movement.

Paul, a representative at that first council, would write:

*Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.*

**Galatians 5:2-4**

*For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.*

### **Galatians 6:15**

*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.*

### **Galatians 5:6**

For the apostle, inspired by the same Spirit who spoke at Sinai, circumcision was no longer essential for the people of God. Instead, it was a physical sign pointing to and shadowing a spiritual reality – circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:28-29, Col. 2:11-12). Physical circumcision was thus no longer universally binding upon God's people. Rather, Paul's principle in regards to circumcision became one of love and ministry.

Let's see how this principle played out in the lives of Timothy and Titus. Both were missionary companions of Paul. Both were uncircumcised when they received the gospel. Subsequent to conversion, Timothy was circumcised by Paul, but Titus was not. Was this duplicitous or inconsistent?

In Acts 16:3 Paul circumcises Timothy "because of the Jews." As this follows directly on the heels of the Jerusalem Council in which circumcision was not prescribed as universally necessary, this is an important account. Did Paul compromise his own gospel by circumcising Timothy?

Timothy was the son of a Jewish mother (Acts 16:1). As such, he would have been considered Jewish. As a Jew ministering among Jews, circumcision would be instrumental in regards to credibility, because a Jewish audience would have immediately rejected an uncircumcised Jewish messenger. The principle of Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-9 was being manifested. Paul was willing to carry out the demands of the law in order to win Jews from under the law.

Titus, however, was not circumcised for his ministry (Gal. 2:3). Why not? Because Titus was a Gentile ministering primarily among Gentiles. What benefit would his circumcision have presented? Rather than benefiting the ministry, his circumcision would have set back the cause of the gospel by implying that circumcision was necessary for acceptance and adoption to sonship.

In these two accounts, we see that circumcision is no longer universally mandated for God's people. Paul was willing to compromise personal rights for the sake of the gospel, but he was not willing to compromise the gospel itself.

The established principle is that circumcision is not inherently essential. What matters now is not the removal of flesh, but the removal of a heart of stone and that is only accomplished in the gospel.

## **Food Laws**

Another major section of the Old Testament law involved a distinction between clean and unclean foods (Lev. 11). How does the New Testament apply such laws?

Starting with Christ, we see that "he declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19). This is a radical statement and efforts to limit its vast sweep fall short. For example, some have said that this verse simply teaches that Christ declared all foods to be clean which were already seen as clean. Surely this interpretation completely dismisses the text. Why would Mark take the time to parenthetically comment that all clean foods are to be considered clean?

No, the gospel holds out far more drastic news than that clean things are clean. In Acts 10, we see further evidence of the sweeping implications of the gospel. In Peter's vision, he is told to eat even though the food presented to him is unclean. The Lord's response is clear: "What God has made clean, do not call common."

This reality is not restricted to foods, but indeed crumbles every law which separated clean from unclean. Walls were broken down and laws abolished as Christ reconciled even the Jew and Gentile in one body through the cross.

*For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

### **Ephesians 2:14-18**

In Christ, there are no binding distinctions between clean and unclean foods. In our eating or not eating, we are no longer ruled by the letter of the Mosaic covenant. There are some general boundaries to our eating:

- The laws of the land provide some boundaries as we are called to submit ourselves to the government (Rom. 13) except in instances where doing so infringes upon a higher responsibility.
- Wisdom and stewardship should provide some general boundaries as we are called to be good stewards of all gifts, including our bodies.
- Our hearts should provide some boundaries as we must beware the tendency toward idolatry or gluttony in our eating and drinking.
- A love for others should provide some boundaries as we are called to lay down our rights and preferences for the sake of others (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8-10).

Beyond these few gracious limitations, we are free to partake of whatever we want. May our eating and drinking only lead to thanksgiving and the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31, 1 Timothy 4:1-5).

### **Sabbath**

Sabbath keeping was absolutely essential to the Mosaic covenant and its transgression was punishable by death (Exod. 20:8-11; Exod 31:13-17).

Especially considering that this command is derived from the Ten Commandments, we might expect Christ and the apostles to state an abiding imperative, but that is not what we see in the New Testament:

*Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.*

### **Colossians 2:16-17**

*One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.*

### **Romans 14:5-6**

According to Paul, the Sabbath was a shadow pointing to the substance set forth in Christ. Sabbath as a sign pointed back to the original creation (Gen. 2:1-3) and forward to the eternal rest we will one day fully find in Christ (Heb. 3:7-4:10). The explicit Sabbath regulations of the Mosaic covenant were never intended as an eternally binding law upon the people of God.

So should Christians rest? Yes. Is it wise to have an established rhythm of rest? Yes. Are we bound to a particular day in which particular activities are prescribed or prohibited? No.

Therefore, let us freely and joyfully pursue rest in the Lord by engaging in those things which stir our affections for Him and disengaging from that which does not. Sabbath is no burden, but rather an opportunity and gift of God's grace to us; orienting us to a future rest when our struggles with a cursed creation will forever cease, and we will eternally repose in His presence and provision.

## **The Law and the Work of Christ**

To understand the demands of Mosaic Law on the Christian today, we must read through the lens of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The advent of Christ marks a decisive break with the Old

Covenant and its commands, and unless we understand the complex beauty of the gospel, we will forever find ourselves enslaved to various regulations and rules.

*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.*

### **Romans 10:4**

Meditate on this truth for a second. The word translated "end" can also mean "goal," and Paul probably intended both nuances. As Thomas Schreiner noted, "Christ is the goal to which the law points; and when the goal is reached, the law also comes to an end." This idea is further supported in extended Pauline discourses, such as 2 Corinthians 3:4-18 and Galatians 3:15-4:7. Consider the following sections:

*Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.*

### **2 Corinthians 3:7-11**

*Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.*

### **Galatians 3:23-26**

Christ is the end of the law, and those grafted into Christ through faith are no longer subject to its legal demands as an attempt to gain righteousness. Our righteousness comes not from works of the law but from faith in the Son of God who has loved us and given Himself for us.

## **The Heart of the Law is Love**

If Christ fulfilled the precepts of the law so that we are no longer bound to obedience, is anything permissible and proper?

The answer is no. As Christians, we are no longer bound to the Old Testament law, but rather to a higher law of love. We see this primacy and rule of love in a number of texts:

*For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

#### **Galatians 5:13-14**

*Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*

#### **Romans 13:8-10**

*Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.*

#### **Romans 12:9**

*Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up.*

#### **1 Corinthians 8:1**

*The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*

#### **1 Timothy 1:5**

*And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

#### **Colossians 3:14**

When Christ is asked about the greatest commandment, He responds that a love for God and others should inform and influence every affection, attitude and action. Rather than a dilution of our responsibility, this actually deepens it. Consider the radical implications of these commands.

If you love God, you will not worship other gods. If you love God, you will not take His name in vain. If you love God, you will love others who are made in His image. If you love others, you will not murder them or commit adultery with or against them or covet their possessions or gossip or oppress or objectify or lie to them. If you love others, you will serve them and lay down your life for them.

Christ's death and resurrection and the consequent abrogation of the law do not diminish our responsibilities but, instead, infuse them with an original intent buried beneath the letter of the law. Love is the rule, and where certain attitudes, actions and affections might remain ambiguous, the Bible occasionally clarifies the boundaries of love for us.

As an example, when speaking to the issue of homosexuality, the most biblically gospel-centered approach is not to begin

with Leviticus, for skeptics will instantly assert an inconsistent failure to additionally prohibit bacon and haircuts. A better approach is to connect this issue to the biblical call, demands and contours of love and the purpose and intent of sexuality to orient us toward the gospel. From there we can further comment on the explicit biblical (both New Testament and Old Testament) **testimony against homosexuality**.

## **Why did Christ say that the law and prophets would not pass away?**

If the law is no longer binding, then why did Christ say that it would never pass away?

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

#### **Matthew 5:17-20**

*The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.*

#### **Luke 16:16-17**

To answer this question, we must reflect upon the work of Christ. Christ did not merely set aside the law. Indeed, He fulfilled the law perfectly. He did not come to do away with the law but to fulfill it.

As one who was born under the law (Gal. 4:4), circumcised according to the law (Luke 2:21) and presented to the Father as the firstborn according to the law (Luke 2:22-24), Jesus lived obediently to its demands in full. He fully fulfilled the law. Christ consistently violated Pharisaical interpretation of the law by associating with tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 9; Luke 7:15), working miracles on the Sabbath (Matt. 12; Mark 3; Luke 13, 14) and failing to ceremonially wash before eating (Matt. 15; Mark 7; Luke 11). However, such actions were not transgressions of the law itself but rather intentional disregard for traditional extensions of the law.

By living in perfect obedience to the true intent of the law, Christ fulfilled it ultimately and finally. In His death and resurrection, He thus accomplished the demands of the law so that we are no longer under its curse (Gal. 3:10-14), guardianship (Gal. 3:25) and bondage (Gal. 4:1-7).

The Mosaic Law was not intended as a universal and eternal reflection of the will of God. It was intended for a particular time, place and people. In Christ, it is no longer binding. Abel, Noah, Abraham and many others were declared righteous before the law. Moses, Joshua, David, the prophets and many others born under the law were declared righteous not through obedience to the law but through faith in the promises of God. Now, in Christ, we relish in the final revelation of the fulfillment of the promises in the coming of the object of the faith which alone justifies.

## Interpreting and Applying the Law

*Even though the Old Testament law is not literally binding upon believers, we see principles and patterns and moral norms that still apply to us today since the Old Testament is the word of God.*

**Thomas Schreiner**

What then are Christians to do with the law? Though we are no longer enslaved to its custody (Gal. 3-4), we shouldn't dismiss or ignore it.

Many have traditionally pointed to distinctions between civil, ceremonial and moral elements of the law and posited that the former two were abrogated, while the latter is binding. Though there is perhaps some value in such distinction, it is somewhat arbitrary and does not find solid biblical support. For example, are Sabbath regulations moral, civil or ceremonial? I think a better option remains than attempting to apply the three-fold dimensions theory.

As Christians reading the Old Testament, rather than simply applying the literal content of the law (or certain aspects of the law) or dismissing it entirely, we should instead seek a better approach consisting of a few steps:

1. By diligent study of the text and context, interpret the original intent of the law to the original audience to whom it was directed.
2. Determine the various substantial (not merely superficial) differences between the original audience and modern audience.
3. Determine the underlying universal principle from the prescription or prohibition.
4. Filter this principle through the progressive revelation of the gospel and New Testament clarity.
5. Apply the modified universal principle to life today.

Let us apply this method to a particular law as an example. Speaking of the other nations surrounding Israel, the Lord commanded: "You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons" (Deut. 7:3).

Some have wrongly applied this prohibition directly and literally from the text. The result is a restriction of interracial marriage. However, this is not how we are to read the Old Testament law today.

Applying the principles above, we would see that Israel was called to be set apart or sanctified both from the surrounding nations and to God (see the "distinguishing" purpose of the law expounded above). Many of the laws which the Lord prescribed were intended to enforce this fundamental distinction between Israel and "the nations." The nation of Israel represented "God's chosen people" and was not to be diluted or corrupted through intermarriage.

Though God has not completely forgotten or neglected the ethnic nation of Israel entirely, the New Testament infuses both the concepts of a "chosen people" and of sanctification with new and greater meanings.

Who are the chosen people? The chosen people are those of faith (Rom. 9:6-12; Gal. 3:23-4:7; 1 Peter 2:9-10), whether they are physically descended from Israel or not.

What is sanctification? In the Old Testament, there was emphasis on physical separation. Thus, we see the consistent theme of homogeneity (don't mix fibers in clothing, don't till the field with mixed breeds, etc.). Jews and Gentiles were quite clearly distinguished as Jews were "set apart" from the nations. God's people are still "set apart," but that distinction is no longer defined by laws detailing physical separation but rather spiritual sanctification.<sup>2</sup>

In light of these truths, what principle should we derive from Deuteronomy 7:1-4 and related texts? Filtering this question through a passage such as 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, we see that the original Mosaic restriction is no longer to be applied racially or ethnically but rather spiritually. God does not now prohibit interracial marriage. He **prohibits marriage between believers and unbelievers.**

Using this system, we should be able to affirm the abiding validity of the Old Testament without woodenly and literally applying it as if living under the former covenant.

## Conclusion

So, should Christians obey the Old Testament law? An answer to that question is extremely complex depending on how we define our terms and nuance our answers.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this subject, consider the contrasted uses of the phrase, "You shall be holy" in the Old Testament and the New. As an example, in Leviticus 11:44, the phrase is used in relation to food laws whereas in 1 Peter 2:15, the context is spiritual and not physical separation.

In general, we can say that Christians are free from the demands of the law, not in such a way as to imply that there are no longer certain moral boundaries and explicit obligations which are in some sense even more demanding than the letter of the Old Testament.

Christ has freed us from the Mosaic Law, but has given us a new law, a law of love founded upon a gracious gospel beckoning for our entire lives. In Christ we are no longer under the law as slaves, but are under grace as sons – sons who are indwelt and empowered by the Spirit. In Christ we respond not to demands of the law but to the promises of the gospel.

*A rigid matter was the law,  
demanding brick, denying straw,  
But when with gospel tongue it sings,  
it bids me fly and gives me wings*

**Ralph Erskine (1685-1752)**

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by Thomas Schreiner