

HOW TO KNOW IF A BIBLE PRINCIPLE APPLIES TODAY

What is a Christian to do about God's very specific instructions that appear throughout Scripture?

Are Christians expected to keep any of the biblical laws, or are there any from which we would gain benefit by voluntarily observing them? We are not talking about a legalistic, works-oriented approach to salvation, but about people who are already saved enjoying fuller “new covenant” life and service by following divine guidance and thereby revealing God’s character to others.

For many centuries, Christians have followed a simplistic approach: “The early Church Fathers dealt

with Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and chunks of Exodus very simply: We keep the Ten Commandments, and the rest of the Law and Commandments do not apply to Christians. One might ask how they squared that with what Jesus himself

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had to say about *Torah*, that he did not come to change a single 'jot or tittle' of it; further, when asked what were the greatest of the commandments, Jesus gives two, neither of which comes from the ten. Rather, one is from Deuteronomy, and the other from Leviticus. Nevertheless, the Church Fathers deemed those extra 603 laws to be superfluous. There were those who thought they should be removed from the Christian canon entirely, but fortunately they did not prevail."¹

For the purpose of determining if or how various kinds of Old Testament laws apply today, it is traditional for Christians to divide them into categories, such as the following:

1. Moral laws, consisting of the Ten Commandments, which express timeless and universal principles governing relationships with God and other human beings.

2. Ritual laws that served as "types" or "shadows" until they met their fulfillment at the Cross.

3. Civil laws applicable only under the Israelite theocratic government.

4. Health laws that have ongoing value because human bodies function the same today as they did in ancient times.

While such categories have some validity and usefulness, the understanding of them as just summarized needs major nuance and qualification. Careful examination leads to a paradigm shift and opens up a treasure trove of practical guidance for daily living.

To begin with, we should recognize that the Bible does not delineate categories such as those outlined above. They are more recent analytical constructs. Biblical law does not even make the sharp distinction between religious and secular categories to which we are so accustomed.

Since every aspect of life of the people of God came under His jurisdiction, laws belonging to what we would classify as the religious and

secular domains often appear together. For example, the "religious" laws of Exodus 28a-30; 23:10-19a appear in contexts primarily relating to secular life. The remarkably diverse mixture of laws in Leviticus 19 gives the impression that distinctions between religious and secular are largely irrelevant; what is important is that God's people keep all His commandments.

In the ancient Near East, this wholistic approach to life under God is unique to Israel. Only in biblical law collections "are moral exhortations and religious injunctions combined with legal prescriptions; elsewhere . . . these three distinct spheres are found in separate independent collections."²

Moral law expresses principles that modern people would regard either as religious, e.g., the first four of the Ten Commandments regarding responsibilities primarily to God (Ex. 20:3-11), or secular, e.g., the last six of the Ten Commandments covering responsibilities primarily to human beings (vss. 12-17).

Two points should be clarified regarding moral law:

First, any command that God requires a given group of people to obey could be viewed as a moral law for them in the broad sense that it is relevant to their divine-human relationship.

Second, though the Ten Commandments are towering expressions

of timeless, universal moral law, they are not the only moral laws in the Bible. Exodus 23:9, for example, contains another one: "Do not oppress an alien."³ This works out part of the overarching principle of love for fellow human beings (compare Leviticus 19:18; John 15:12), on which the last six of the Ten Commandments are also based (Matt. 22:39, 40; Rom. 13:9). Another example is Leviticus 19:11, where the comprehensive commandment against lying is found, rather than in Exodus 20:16.

Ritual law regulates a ritual system, by means of which human beings interact with entities that are ordinarily inaccessible to the material domain, such as to God (e.g., by offering sacrifices) and ritual impurity (by removing it through purification). The Old Testament ritual laws that were required to be carried out at the Israelite sanctuary/temple, where the Aaronic priests officiated (see e.g., Leviticus 17:3-9), can no longer apply because this institution is gone.

Laws having to do with regulation and treatment of ritual impurities to keep them from contacting the holy sphere of the earthly sanctuary with its resident divine Presence are also obsolete for the same reason: The sanctuary no longer exists. Since the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, Christian worship is focused toward God's temple in heaven, where Christ has been ministering (Heb. 7–10). Nev-

ertheless, the Old Testament ritual laws teach us much about the nature and character of God and human-kind, the dynamics of divine-human interaction, and God's plan of salvation through Christ.

The ritual of circumcision originated long before the Israelite sanctuary was constructed and was never dependent upon its function (Genesis 17). However, this requirement was removed for Gentile Christians when the new covenant was transformed from a covenant of Israelite election, as Jeremiah originally prophesied (31:31-34), to a universal covenant without ethnic boundaries (Acts 15; Gal. 3:26-29).

Civil law can embody and exemplify timeless moral/ethical principles within the ancient Israelite context. Consider, for example, the following civil law from the "Covenant Code" of Exodus 21-23: "Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death" (21:12). This contextualizes the sixth of the Ten Commandments, which reads: "You shall not murder" (20:13).

There are two basic

differences between the two laws. First, the civil law is narrower in scope, limited to striking that results in death. But this is still a timeless principle. Second, the civil law attaches a penalty, namely, capital punishment, that would be administered by the Israelite system of jurisprudence within the theocratic covenant community. We can no longer count on this court system to



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enforce the law in this way because the system no longer exists. So we have found that the law contains both ongoing and temporary elements. If we simplistically dismiss it as a civil/Mosaic law and therefore no longer applicable, we miss the timeless moral element: You must not hit a person in such a way that he or she dies. A modern court in any country would undoubtedly agree that such striking is a crime, although it may or may not impose the same penalty.

In civil laws, timeless principles come to us in various layers of cultural garb. When we get below the specifics to the underlying dynamics, we can find helpful guidelines to clothe in modern dress. For example: "If a man uncovers a pit or digs one and fails to cover it and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit must pay for the loss; he must pay its owner, and the dead animal will be his" (Ex. 21:33, 34). Although this could literally apply today, most of us do not have oxen or donkeys. We do have cars and trucks, with re-

gard to which the principle applies: We are liable for damage to the property of other people resulting from our carelessness or neglect.

Some civil laws no longer apply simply because we lack the social institutions they were designed to regulate, for instance, servitude (Ex. 21:2-11, 20, 21, 26, 27) and ancestral land tenure (Lev. 25:8-55). By studying these laws in light of their cultural context, however, we can still learn valuable principles of justice and mercy to protect those who are socially and economically disadvantaged. For example, even when your workers are completely dependent upon you and under your control, "Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God" (vs. 43).

Regarding health law, in connection with Leviticus 11, we found that Pentateuchal laws for which we recognize health implications are consistently formulated with motivations other than health. God was concerned for the health of His people, but He bestowed this benefit wholistically as a blessing that would come

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from observing all of His commands.

Now we are in a better position to grapple with the question of whether the prohibition in Leviticus 17:10-14 against eating meat with blood (compare 3:17; 7:26, 27) still applies. Is it a moral, ritual, civil, or health law? The fact that eating meat with blood has to do with diet implies that health could be involved, and modern science confirms that blood carries disease.

This could be reason enough to abstain from meat with blood. However, in 17:11 the Lord's reason for the prohibition is: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you on the altar to ransom your lives; for it is the blood that ransoms by means of life."⁴ Mention of the altar indicates a ritual element in the law. Indeed, because God assigned the blood of certain species of animals for application on His altar, the Israelites were not permitted either to offer their sacrifices anywhere else or to eat the blood of well-being offerings. But does this mean that the law has no application now that the

ritual system is gone?

In Leviticus 17:11, the most basic reason for the prohibition is that the blood represents life. This is why God selected the blood of certain animals for the function of ransom. Even where ransom through animal sacrifice did not apply, as in the case of a game animal not appropriate to sacrifice, the Israelites were forbidden to eat meat with blood because the blood of any animal represented its life (vss. 13, 14). That this was the basic reason is confirmed by Genesis 9:3, 4, where the Lord first allowed human beings to eat meat just after the Flood (vs. 3), but withheld permission to eat meat with its lifeblood still in it (vs. 4). The next two verses read: "For your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (vss. 5, 6).

The prohibitions of blood and of murder are both based on the time-

less moral principle of respect for God-given life that is expressed in the sixth of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:13). So although the blood prohibition in Leviticus 17:10-14 has health and ritual implications, it is more fundamentally a moral law. This explains several pieces of biblical data:

1. In Genesis 9, God gave the prohibition to Noah for the entire human race before the Israelite nation and its ritual worship system existed.

2. In Ezekiel 33:25 and 26, eating meat with blood is listed with moral faults such as murder, idolatry, and adultery.

3. Although the early Christian council in Jerusalem recognized that the ceremonial requirement of circumcision was nonbinding upon Gentile Christians, the prohibition of eating meat with blood was included in the "bottom-line" lifestyle requirements that were laid upon Gentile Christians among other tests of fellowship (Acts 15:20, 29). Notice that Acts 15 refers by implication to the Old Testament, where the only biblical requirement for preventing ingestion of blood along with meat is to drain it out at the time of slaughter (Lev. 17:13; Deut. 12:24; 1 Sam. 14:32-34).

Although it is impossible to remove every bit of blood in this manner, just as draining the oil out of a car leaves a small amount of oil lin-

ing parts of the engine, basic drainage fulfills the divine command. If this is done, as is often the case in modern butchering, it is not necessary for Christians to follow additional traditional practices of salting and roasting to get more blood out.

Can we boil the above discussion into a single, simple rule of thumb to determine whether the Bible intends for Christians to keep a given Old Testament law? Here is an attempt: *A law should be kept to the extent that its principle can be applied unless the New Testament removes the reason for its application.* G. Wenham concluded that "the principles underlying the OT are valid and authoritative for the Christian, but the particular applications found in the OT may not be."⁵

But if we overcome our neglect of biblical law, won't this lead to legalism? Not if we understand the purpose of God's law. It is a standard of acting and thinking in harmony with God's character of love. It is not, cannot be, and never was intended to be a means to salvation. Doing right can never redeem us from our mortality or past sins. Only God's grace through Christ's sacrifice, received by faith, can do that. God's commandments are for people who are already delivered, as demonstrated by the fact that He gave Noah covenant stipulations after bringing him through the Flood (Gen. 9:4-6), and He pro-

claimed the Ten Commandments to the Israelites after delivering them from bondage in Egypt (Ex. 20).

A venerable Christian fallacy is the idea that the more Christian we want to become, the less Jewish our religion must be. This anti-Semitic notion, which has wreaked havoc on Jewish-Christian relations for more than a millennium and a half, is not supported by Scripture. Rather, the more Jews and Christians absorb and live up to the essential ideals of our respective biblical holy books, the more common ground we will discover.

God's law is a precious gift to protect human beings for our own good. Moses explicitly stated this: "Now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today *for your own good?*" (Deut. 10:12-13; italics supplied; compare 32:46, 47).

Jesus agreed, saying of the Sabbath: "'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath'" (Mark 2:27, NRSV).

In teaching his barber how to pray through the Ten Commandments, Martin Luther emphasized their positive protective function. For example, on "You shall not bear false witness," he commented, "Thus

a wall has been built around our good reputation and integrity to protect it against malicious gossip and deceitful tongues."⁶

In their profound and practical book *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God*, H. T. Blackaby and C. V. King speak of the gift of God's law: "God loves you deeply and profoundly. Because He loves you, He has given you guidelines for living lest you miss the full dimensions of the love relationship. Life also has some 'land mines' that can destroy you or wreck your life. God does not want to see you miss out on His best, and He does not want to see your life wrecked. Suppose you had to cross a field full of land mines. A person who knew exactly where every one of them was buried offered to take you through it. Would you say to him, 'I don't want you to tell me what to do. I don't want you to impose your ways on me?'"⁷

Properly viewed within a covenant framework of love and grace, God's law is not legalistic, and obedience to it is not legalism. People are legalistic when they put His law in place of His grace as a means of salvation, as in Jesus' story of a Pharisee who despised a tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). He failed to discern God's free grace.

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and right to which individuals and groups should conform and which judicial authority should enforce. Rules will necessarily play some role in this order, but there also will be principles and values which form a consistent system, cover all possible situations, and belong to the collective conscience of the community. By this definition, explicit rules—laws—are only the tip of the iceberg of the phenomenon of Law."⁸

Patrick does not deal with the reasons for justice, right, and order, but the possible situations covered by law are involved in relationships. Relationships can be harmonious only if the respective parties show proper respect for one another's well-being. Thus the orderly, just, right principles of law are based on the foundational principle of love (compare Matthew 22:36-40), which is also the basis of God's grace (see John 3:16). Without love, external law-keeping is meaningless (compare 1 Corinthians 13).

Comparison between biblical and

other ancient Near Eastern laws has led J. H. Walton to the conclusion that the laws given to Israel were not, for the most part, presented as a new mode of conduct: "Israel had laws before to insure the smooth functioning of society, and it is logical to believe that they would have been heavily dependent on other cultures of their day for those guidelines. The revelation, though, had to do with providing a foundation for those norms (the covenant) and establishing *YHWH* as the source of those norms. One does not refrain from adultery merely because adultery disrupts society. Rather, adultery is prohibited because it goes against an absolute standard of morality by which *YHWH* himself is characterized."⁹

We need absolute standards. Can you imagine listening to an orchestra in which the players have not agreed that A = 440 vibrations per second? What about transforming plans into a building if the construction workers interpret the basic

units of measure differently? So why shouldn't we enjoy the security of absolute moral standards, which help us to get along with one another smoothly rather than having our harmony disintegrate into a cacophony of chaos?

If standards were continuously left up to agreement between people, they would suffer from variability and circularity, as when a man who blew the noon whistle at a factory regularly set his watch to a clock in the window of a shop, only to learn that the shopkeeper set his clock every day by that whistle. This is why we have Greenwich Mean Time and a Bureau of Standards. It is also why we have the Bible. Only God is big, wise, and good enough to set our moral standards.

In addition to the attempt to make God's law into a means of salvation, another misuse is to employ it as a political tool by making artificial human interpretations into the standards to which others must adhere. There is no question that setting standards can generate power and/or wealth (e.g., Bill Gates and Microsoft computer operating systems). But putting subjective human authority in place of God's absolute authority is nothing short of blasphemy (compare John 10:33), and it is even worse to do this for gain by preying on people's legalistic fears that they will be eternally damned unless they measure up to the dic-

tates of a human voice that they mistake for the voice of God.

If we disregard the Bible, our moral compass may appear logical and self-consistent, but it lacks an external reference point. It would be like the woman who was traveling by plane over a large body of water at night. To calm her apprehension, she asked the pilot how he could navigate in the dark. "You see that green light on that wingtip?" he replied. Yes, she saw it. "You see that red light on the other wingtip?" he continued. "Yes," again. "I just steer the plane straight between them," he assured her.

Absolute moral standards are out of vogue in our postmodern world. We are supposed to listen to whatever voices we feel comfortable with, as long as they do not claim to be absolute. Respect for others demands that we recognize anyone else's source of moral guidance (or lack thereof) as equal to our own. Value judgments are strictly forbidden.

Respect for others is crucial. But must we purchase it by relinquishing our right to absolute moral standards and assenting to a polytheistic moral culture that puts anything claiming divine authority (including human beings) in place of God? Masquerading as enlightenment, moral subjectivity is not only inconvenient and irritating; it is also terribly dangerous, as Rabbi Stewart Vogel points out with startling pas-

sion: "If each of us creates his own meaning, we also create our own morality. I cannot believe this. For if so, what the Nazis did was not immoral because German society had accepted it. Likewise, the subjective morality of every majority culture throughout the world could validate their heinous behavior. It comes down to a very simple matter: Without God there is no objective meaning to life, nor is there an objective morality. I do not want to live in a world where right and wrong are subjective."¹⁰

Postmodernism refuses to recognize the possibility that a person sincerely following his or her religious or cultural norms, whatever they may be, could perpetrate something that should be characterized as evil. So what was it that stared us in the face on September 11, 2001, through the eyes of Mohammed Atta? □

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