

Christians & the Old Testament Law – Part 1



“I long for your salvation, Lord, and your law gives me delight.”

Psalm 119:174

Introduction

As Christians we believe that God’s word, our scriptures, have been given to us in two parts, the Old and New Testaments. We share the Old Testament with the Jews, to whom we owe so very much, which is one reason why Paul encouraged Gentile congregations to help Jewish Christian congregations struggling with famine.

‘For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.’

Romans 15:27

Sometimes, however, the application of this spiritual blessing of the Old Testament scripture to our daily lives is not quite as straightforward as we might think. We cannot read the Bible like a recipe book because it was written to people in very different circumstances to ours. The words were certainly inspired (or God-breathed) and written **for** us, but they were not written **to** us. So, we need to think carefully about what they have to say to us today and how we should apply them. Here, I want to reflect on how we should

respond to the **Laws of the Old Testament**. Are they binding, or can we pick and choose? If some are binding, how do we know which ones? Clearly this cannot be a matter of personal preference and what suits our taste. We need some sound principles.

One thing we certainly *cannot* do is to dispense with the Old Testament and say that we don’t need it! Back in the first part of the second century there was a church teacher called Marcion, who taught that Christians don’t need the Old Testament at all, now that we have Jesus. He said that all we need are the letters of Paul and a shortened version of Luke’s Gospel. But the Early Church Fathers, speaking for the rest of the church, declared that he was completely wrong. They declared him a heretic. If we ignore our Old Testament, we will miss out on a great deal.

Before taking up the challenge of how to apply Old Testament laws, it would be appropriate to consider some real-life examples.

The Problem Illustrated

1. Eric Liddell was a devout British Christian athlete and a gold medallist in the 1924 Olympic Games. During those Olympic games he refused to run a race on a Sunday. His reason was the fourth commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” (Exodus 20:8) His story was made into the film *Chariots of Fire*. God over-ruled and he ran in another race on another day. Liddell was totally sincere, but was he right? He believed that Sunday was *the Sabbath* and that to run would be to disobey God. Christian athletes today do not generally follow his example. Are they wrong? On the other hand, no serious Christian today would say that it is perfectly alright to ignore the seventh commandment. Adultery is not something that should feature in the life of a Christian. But why should we say it’s fine to take a more relaxed approach to commandment number four but most definitely not for number seven?
2. Let’s take another commandment between the two, number 6: *Thou shalt not kill*. During World War II there was a plot to kill Adolf Hitler and, in fact, Christians were part of that plot. The attempt failed and

some were executed including the pastor/theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But were they wrong to try? After all, Hitler was responsible for the death of millions.

3. For another example, we turn to Leviticus 27:30 which commands a tithe of 10%. Is that a *requirement* for Christians today? Put bluntly, are Christians sinning (as the Jews undoubtedly were) if they do not put 10% in the offering when they go to church. Jesus mentioned tithes when he was speaking to Jews in the gospels, but they were of course, as Jews, under the law. But was the custom binding on Gentile converts and what was the situation after AD 70 when the temple was destroyed?
4. There are, in fact, more than 600 rules in the Old Testament and quite a variety, including a building instruction for people who build houses with flat roofs (Deuteronomy 22:8). But is a Christian who builds an extension to his house without a parapet on the flat roof, guilty before God?

Furthermore, we need to remember that the Law of Moses is a package not a menu of choices. To live *under the Law* is to live under the whole package. Break one command and you have *broken the law*. That's what Jews believed. That's what James wrote in his letter.

'Anyone who obeys the law, but then breaks one of the laws, has broken all the laws.'

James 2:10

So where do we go in the New Testament for some guidance on this matter? Our starting point will be the letter that Paul wrote to the Galatians and especially chapter 3. By the end of part 3 of this short series, I will have set out some guidelines. You'll need to persevere and follow this through with me...

The Problem at Galatia

Galatians is the *angriest* letter of the New Testament. Paul was not in a bad mood. He had good reason to be cross. There was a lot at stake. The issue occurred in the early days of the church when relations between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus were not altogether clear. The letter is very instructive because, as part of his response to the *Galatian problem*, Paul clarified the Christian's relationship to the Old Testament Law of Moses and its requirements, which he calls *works of the law*.

To understand the situation, we need to know the historical background. On his first missionary journey in Asia, Paul had established some churches in the south of the province of Galatia (Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, Derbe and Iconium). These churches included both Jewish and Gentile believers. Now, these young congregations had been infiltrated by some outsiders, Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who insisted that to become a *proper* Christian, you had to become a Jew first. Their understanding was that Christians were a *particular type of Jew*. Jews regarded Gentiles as unclean, unless they adopted Judaism, kept the dietary laws, circumcised their baby boys and so on. So obviously there was a controversy. Under pressure from this so called '*circumcision party*', the Galatian Christians became unsettled because they were being told that the apostle who had planted their churches had got his gospel wrong. This explains why Paul begins his letter so abruptly and confrontationally.

The fact is that the precise relationship between Jews and Gentiles wasn't at all clear to everyone at this stage. Christians were on a journey of understanding. Their uncertainty wasn't their fault. Jesus, after all, only ministered to Jews (with one brief exception). But after Pentecost the '*good news*' became *international* and shortly afterwards a breakthrough occurred when God spoke to Peter through a vision in a dream; this led to Peter's visit to Cornelius's house in Caesarea, and his discovery that *Gentiles could become Christians directly through hearing the gospel*. This was a major bombshell for the Jewish believers who were still adjusting to the idea that God has made it possible for the Gentiles to be '*one of us*' – God's special covenant people. It gave them a great deal to think about!

Of course, the Jews had always envisaged Gentiles coming to God, as taught by their prophets, but *only by adopting Judaism*. Isaiah had spoken about the ingathering of distant peoples being drawn to Jerusalem and coming to the mountain of the Lord. For Jews, as we have seen, Gentiles were basically unclean, which is why eating together was such an issue unless Gentiles had first cleansed themselves by converting to Judaism and submitting to its laws. But God was doing things in a very different way to that which they had been expecting. The idea that you could become one of God's people *without* becoming a Jew first was out

of the question for devout Jews. Even for some Jews who had become followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, it was a bridge too far. These were the people who went to the Galatian churches, believing that they were instruments of God, to *stop the rot*.

In the next part of our series, we see from Galatians chapter 3 how Paul tackled the problem and this gets to the heart of our question concerning the Old Testament laws.

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