

# Christians & the Old Testament Law – Part 3



*“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God..”*

*Acts 15:19*

## Which parts of the Old Testament Law do Christians keep and how do we decide?

We have seen in Part 2 that Christians are not under the Old Testament legal system. To be right with God we put our faith in Jesus and his death for us on the cross. This faith is sufficient, just as it was for Abraham who lived 400 years before the law was given.

## Implications for us today

It is important to understand that we do still need rules and we still need laws to regulate our lives, even if law-keeping cannot make us righteous. Paul was often misunderstood on this point and was sometimes accused of promoting sin (see Romans 6:1). But we still need rules to guide us in our daily lives and in our society. We must still obey the laws of our country. The government does need to raise money through taxes, for example. And for good order in the church, there needs to be some rules about church meetings, how to become a member, and what is acceptable conduct.

So of course, we do need rules, but not the Law of Moses as a system. The fact is that many of the Laws of Moses are simply not relevant to our situation. They were framed in times past for a *particular* people (the Jews) in a *particular* land (Canaan) with a *particular* vocation (God’s covenant people).

So today, we don’t *express our faith* by the keeping of the Law of Moses. We live by trusting God, that is by faith, and this is *expressed* by the **law of love** which often sets a much higher standard than the Law of Moses. Some of the *rules* in the Law of Moses are carried forward, but others are not.

Some of the elements of the Law of Moses were designed to preserve the **separateness** of the Jewish people, and these are the ‘*works of the law*’ that Paul had particularly in mind, because they are so contrary to what God was doing in Paul’s day. We don’t keep those laws. No circumcision and no kosher food, for example. Yes, we are different, and we are separate, but *our* separateness (our holiness) is of a different kind to that of the Jewish people. Ours is rooted in devotion to Jesus, an inward matter of the heart. So, we can mix with all sorts of people. Indeed, we must mix with other people if we are to show them the love of Jesus.

Some laws are clearly **inappropriate** today. Not putting any twigs of mint or cumin in the offering bag, for example. Laws relating to the temple do not apply; in 70 AD the Jerusalem temple was destroyed. The one supreme and sufficient sacrifice for sin has been made. There is no need to fund a special class of people. We have access to God’s presence through Jesus. The language of temple has been reapplied. Our bodies are *temples* of the Holy Spirit. As believers we are a *royal priesthood*.

For some commandments, Jesus set a higher **standard**. With *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus raised the bar from killing to *ungodly anger*. He raised the bar on adultery to *cultivating lustful thoughts*. He raised the bar on *who is my neighbour* by talking about *any* vulnerable person on your path.

Some commandments have been **transposed**. We don't do circumcision; we do baptism. We don't do the Passover; we do the breaking of bread.

These are the considerations we apply when we read Old Testament Laws. They help to filter out those that do not apply. And we need to ask whether keeping them would be an expression of our love for Jesus and Jesus' love through us to others.

If we go back to Eric Liddell's refusal to run on a Sunday, was he right? Today, Sunday is not *the Sabbath* and a Sunday shutdown is not appropriate in the 21st century. But we would do well to consider what the commandment was aiming to achieve and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit adjust our lifestyle accordingly.

## Returning to the examples in part one...

Eric Liddell, who refused to run on a Sunday, was a man of his times. Now the Sabbath is a Saturday, not Sunday. It became the custom of Christians to set aside a Sunday as a special day, because Jesus was raised from the dead on a Sunday. But even suppose he understood that he did have liberty to run on a Sunday, it could have been the case that many in his circle would not have appreciated this. Could it just be that he wanted to avoid sending out a signal, so easily misunderstood, that he didn't want to cause those of weaker faith to stumble? Could it be that he wanted to send out a signal that pleasing God is the most important thing in life? Paul uses a very similar logic in one of his letters in connection with eating meat that might have unknowingly been dedicated to idols. He taught that out of love, we should not exercise our liberty if it risks causing someone of weaker faith to stumble. So, this is not simply a matter of black and white, and we should probably respect Eric Liddell for his position, even if we might not come to the same conclusion.

What about the plot to kill Hitler we touched on in part one? The fourth commandment probably envisaged a personal situation of revenge-taking. The Children of Israel did not consider it applied to the situation at Jericho or Ai. It's not so simple as a binary choice. Dietrich Bonhoeffer took part in a plot to assassinate Hitler contrary to *thou shalt not kill*. Was he right? Does this commandment really include the judicial execution of a tyrant who was responsible for millions of deaths? Probably not. And yet, it is very clear in the book of Revelation that the saints who overcome are the martyrs. They overcome not by killing others but by following the example of Jesus who laid down his life.

Likewise, tithing. Should Christians give 10% of their income to the church? Some would say 'yes'. Others don't feel they can. Some would say 'no', but feel rather vague about why not. The New Testament teaches proportionate, generous, sacrificial giving. For wealthy people, a tithe may be too small. For people struggling on benefits, it may be too much. We live by the Spirit who leads each person into a bespoke programme of giving. That may indeed be a 10% tithe on gross income or net income. It could be more, or it could be less. It could change. God's bespoke giving guidance could feature a generous bequest in a person's will or legacy.

*These examples give something of a feel for how we should think about the Mosaic Law. Often, we need to balance different considerations, and always with the help of the Holy Spirit.*

## To summarise

As Christians today, we are not under the Old Testament Law of Moses. It was never intended to be a list of rules that help us to achieve righteousness. Righteousness is a gift from God in response to faith. This is how it was when the Galatians turned to Christ, experienced the blessing of the Spirit, and saw God's power among them. This is how it was for Abraham. The Old Testament Law was a temporary provision for the special people chosen by God—the Jews.

For Christians who follow Jesus, we do live under a law, but it is the **law of love**.

As for the Old Testament Law:

- Some elements of the Law of Moses are retained.
- Some elements are transposed.
- Some are discarded.
- Some have been amplified.

*May God help us to walk by faith in the power of the Spirit and in the law of love.*

## Postscript: some questions for discussion

Having read Galatians and considered the points raised in these reflections, I would like to pose two questions for you to discuss. My thoughts on the answers are laid out below:

1. Could the Galatian problem have been avoided?
2. How was it resolved?

I think answers to these two questions could be useful to you in this, your church life.

### 1. Could the Galatian problem have been avoided?

Yes, in an ideal world, but the fact is that seasons of transition are generally very messy and challenging. It applies when there are changes in leadership. It applies to people who lose a loved one. And this was a huge transition from Judaism to Christianity. On so many levels it was an enormous challenge. There was no blueprint to follow, no handbook. There wasn't a New Testament at this point either. But yes, if the members of the circumcision party in Jerusalem had been prepared to go and talk to Paul first about what was happening in his churches in Galatia; and if they had been prepared to listen respectfully, with an open heart and mind to Paul; and if Paul had been prepared to give them time and patiently explain, perhaps the problems could have been avoided. After all, it was quite an astonishing situation that a leading Pharisee, schooled under Gamaliel, who had started out persecuting Christians and destroying churches, had turned around and started proclaiming the very Messiah he denied.

There is no record that they did seek out Paul with their list of questions. No doubt it would have been very difficult for them to have accommodated the new thinking. I wonder if we'd been in their situation, with their experience, and starting from their position, whether we would have done any better. But perhaps we can learn from their experience should a similar situation arise.

### 2. How was it resolved?

Praise God that it was. No doubt there was a lot of prayer. But in terms of practical action, it was resolved at a meeting in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15. At that meeting, the interested parties shared their perspectives and listened to each other. Peter had his say, so did Paul. The meeting was chaired by James, the brother of Jesus, regarded as the senior apostle. James, having listened to the contributions, was able to discern what it was that God was doing in their day and he spoke out accordingly. His conclusion was that the Gentiles should not be burdened with keeping the Law of Moses, the law that God had given to Jews. But he added some words of wisdom. He instructed Gentiles to avoid immorality. He also told them to avoid eating meat with blood in it or food dedicated to idols. No doubt he was telling them to be *aware* of Jewish sensitivities. But that was it. They spoke and they listened with open hearts and minds. It's a beautiful example of the grace of God that this was accepted.

The decision was clearly communicated. It was set out in a letter which was taken around all the churches so that they would know the outcome. And we, together with countless other people who call themselves Christian, are the beneficiaries.

**Chris Moffett**