

The Laws of God

T

A Short Essay on Christian Duty in Relation to the Old Testament Laws

By Eugene Prewitt. You may contact the author at adventexpositor@gmail.com

Introduction

The New Testament seems, to some persons, to contradict itself in relation to the Law of God.

It advocates, they observe, that the “doers of the law” will be “justified.” It teaches that faith “establishes the law.” It adds that while the “carnal” mind is “not subject to the law of God,” yet the spiritual mind “delights in the law of God.” Ro 2:13; 3:31; 8:7; 7:22.

And on the other hand, the New Testament teaches that we are no longer “under the law.” The law has been “nailed to the cross.” It was a collection of “carnal commandments imposed on them until the time of reformation.” False teachers taught that “it was needful to command [new believers] to keep the law....” Gal 5:18; Col 2:14; Heb 9:10; Ac 15:5.

But there is no contradiction between these passages. All but the last one were written by the same author, a man well versed in the Old Testament. And when one understands just a few facts about the Old Testament laws, it becomes easy to harmonize the references above.

The Old Testament Laws

The Old Testament had several types of laws. These included the following primary categories:

Moral Laws These defined right from wrong, defined righteousness and sin.

Ceremonial Laws These illustrated truths, usually truths related to the gospel.

Civil Laws These set limits that were to be enforced by human government.

Hygienic Laws These curbed disease by imposing scientifically advanced restrictions on a society that was incapable of grasping germ theory, digestion, etc..

These laws are not difficult to identify in the Old Testament. Civil Laws, for example, are all laws that come with a punishment. The Ten Commandments may say “Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery.” But the civil law adds that the adulterer should be stoned by the congregation.

Civil laws do not define right and wrong. The government, for example, may permit anger, divorce, lust. The government does not mean to say that these things are righteous behavior, but merely that these behaviors are not within the realm enforceable by the state.

Hygienic laws, which have their modern counterpart in the sanitation and food and drug laws of our day, dealt with infectious diseases, fungal infections of buildings, sewer disposal, bathing, undertaking, and diet.

Ceremonial laws centered around the Hebrew sanctuary services. Oil, water, blood, wool, lambs, leaven, etc., all became symbols of profound spiritual truths. A large portion of the rituals pointed forward to the work of Jesus as the Messiah, the Lamb of God.

Moral Laws differed from civil laws in that they extended even to the thoughts and, as they were to be enforced in the future judgment, included no civil penalty. They extended beyond the realm of civil law.

No one, for example, could make an enforceable civil law regarding coveting. And while civil laws could punish murder, the moral law extends to the thoughts and condemns hate.

Moral Laws can only be punished by a court that can read hearts and this is why Solomon connects the moral law with the idea of judgment.

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil. Ec 12:13-14.

Which Laws Should We Keep Today?

Civil and Hygienic Laws

Civil and hygienic laws were binding in Israel as long as Israel had its own sovereignty as a nation. But when Babylon subjected the nation, the Jews were obliged to keep the civil laws of the nation in which they found themselves. Paul taught that we should obey the laws of the land. And when he taught this, Israel was still in subjection to a foreign power – Rome.

And so Christians today are not obliged to honor the civil laws of a no-longer existing civil power. We obey the powers that “be” (Romans 13:1), not the powers that “were.” But we would do well to study the ancient laws none-the-less. Only today has science advanced to the extent of recognizing the wisdom in many of the laws regarding diet. Those who pattern their personal diet choices after the national hygienic laws of the Jews will, generally, live longer and more productive lives than those who do not. They access the wisdom of the Creator through the laws He gave to His favored people.

Some of the civil laws were useful as a source of moral instruction. Often called “judgments” and “statutes”, these laws helped explain the Ten Commandments and to apply the principles of the Ten Commandments to individuals, enforcing the principles with civil penalties.

So we learn, for example, that God forbids pre-marital sex. See Ex 22:16. The statute helps explain the breadth of the seventh commandment. Not only are we to be faithful to our marriage

commitment while we are married, we are to be faithful in saving ourselves for our marriage commitment.

Ceremonial Laws

There is no reason to keep the Old Testament ceremonial laws. This is not to say that there are no more ceremonial laws for man to keep. But the Old Testament ceremonies that pointed forward to the Savior have been replaced by New Testament ceremonies (baptism and the Lord's Supper) that point backwards to the Savior. As circumcision was the sign of Abraham's covenant, so Baptism has become the sign of the New Covenant. See Col. 2:10-13.

This last point was not well understood in the first century church. The result was that many converted Jews urged Gentiles to be circumcised and to keep other of the Jewish ceremonies as being "necessary" to salvation. This first-century doctrinal crisis led to the writing of Acts 15, Romans 14, I Corinthians 8, Colossians 2, Ephesians 2, the book of Galatians, Hebrews 9, and many smaller passages.

Ceremonial laws are not optional laws. Men are not excused if they simply choose to refrain from baptism and to forego communion. But ceremonial laws differ from moral laws in significant ways.

First, when their symbolic meaning is not understood, they do more harm than good. This is why God could ask Israel, "who asked you to keep the feasts and to sacrifice the animals?" Isaiah 1:10-14. The ritual of killing lambs has no moral value unless it deeply impresses the sinner with his need of a savior. In the same way, the New Testament rituals of communion, when conducted by thoughtless persons, incriminate those persons. 1 Co 11:27-29.

The entire ritual system of the Jews came to an end at the cross.

Moral Laws

But moral laws are always binding. Unselfishness is always good. Selfishness is always bad. Sin is defined, in scripture, as the transgression of law. Where there are no moral laws, there can be neither sin nor righteousness.

Moral laws have always been the center around which all other laws revolve. The ceremonial system illustrated how a person could be forgiven. Forgiven for what? Forgiven for sin. But what is sin? It is the transgression of the Law. 1Jo 3:4. The ceremonies were given to illustrate how men could be forgiven for their violations of the moral law.

The moral laws are those that are summed up by the words "love God" and "love man."

For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Ro 13:9

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Mat 22:37-40.

Moral laws are as enduring as eternity. It will never be sinless to bear false witness.

And moral laws are as ancient as sin. How did Lucifer fall? He became a “liar” and a “murderer.” John 8:44. How did demons come into existence? Angels “sinned” and lost their first estate. 2Pe 2:4. They fell by disobeying the moral Law of God.

Summary: We are obliged to keep moral laws, civil laws and ceremonial laws. The moral laws have never changed. The ceremonial laws have changed dramatically. And the civil laws vary from nation to nation, and have always varied that way. We are not obliged to keep the civil laws of the deceased theocracy of Israel.

The New Covenant, Law, and Grace

The New Covenant includes a promise by God to write the moral law into our minds.

But now hath [Jesus] obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises. . . . For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: Heb 8:6, 10.

The miracle of the new birth is this writing of God’s law in our hearts.

Some persons, when they see how highly God’s Law is exalted in scripture, suppose that the Law can justify them if they only obey it carefully enough. But this was never the purpose of Law.

Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. Ga 3:21

Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. Ro 3:20

The Law points out sin. The gospel shows us how to be freed from sin’s power and sin’s guilt.

Why do we need the law? Don’t we already know right from wrong? The truth is that the law is not intuitive. Paul said, for example, that he would not have known that coveting was wrong if it hadn’t been for the Tenth Commandment.

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for

I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. Ro 7:7.

So men who seek to earn righteousness by the law are condemned by the law. But Christians, profiting by the moral instruction in the Law, submit to have that law written into their hearts. Only this way can a mortal man hope to obey.

For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. Ro 8:6-7

Where can one find the content of that Law that is to be written into our minds?

The Ten Commandments

God gave Moses an application of the eternal moral law to the conditions of man. The Ten Commandments encompass the whole duty of our race. These commands are the “royal law” – not of an early nation, but of the King Jesus.

If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors. For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all. For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law. So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty. James 2:8-12.

These Ten Commandments are the law that pointed out the sin of coveting to Paul in Romans 7. These are the commands listed by Paul in Romans 13 when he says that we owe “love” to each other. These are the commandments of which Jesus said:

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Matt 5:17-18

And then Jesus went on to show the spiritual nature of this law, showing that cherished thoughts of lust and hate are sinful violations of the Law of God.

When Revelation speaks of the end of time, it points out that men will be keeping the “Commandments of God.” Rev 12:17; 14:12; 22:14.

The Sabbath

Interestingly, only one of the Ten Commandments is typically repudiated by Christians in our day. And even more interestingly, it is the one commandment that begins with the word “remember.”

Some justify their Sabbath-breaking by saying that the Law has been abolished.

But these have forgotten that:

Not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. Ro 2:13

Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law. Ro 3:31

Jas 1:25 But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

The passages where Paul discusses the abolition of the ceremonial law they misunderstand.

And this is despite the fact that there are several tell-tale differences between the Ten Commandments and the ceremonial laws. These enable the observant reader to correctly identify when the ceremonial system is being discussed.

For one thing, the ceremonial laws were hand-written while the Ten Commandments were carved in stone by God's own finger. (Ex 31:18). So when we read of the "handwriting" in Col 2:14, we have a hint that it is speaking of the ceremonial laws.

For another thing, the ceremonial laws involved....ceremonies or, as Paul calls them, "ordinances." So when we read of the "handwriting of ordinances" we have a hint that we are reading of the ceremonial laws.

For another thing, the ceremonial laws were kept in the side of the ark as a "testimony against them." De 31:26. (The Ten Commandments, by way of contrast, were contained inside the ark.) So when we read of ordinances "against" men, we have a hint that we are reading of the ceremonial laws.

For another thing, the ceremonial laws were "types" or "shadows" or symbols of future events. When we read of laws that are shadows of a reality, we know that we are reading about ceremonial laws.

These are enough hints to help us understand Col. 2:14-17.

Blotting out the *handwriting of ordinances* that was *against us*, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; . . . Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: *Which are a shadow of things to come*; but the body is of Christ. Col. 2:14-17.

While Paul speaks of the moral law of Ten Commandments as being "spiritual", he speaks of these ceremonial laws as being "carnal."

Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. . . . For we know that ***the law is spiritual***: but I am carnal, sold under sin. Ro 7:12, 14

Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience; Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and ***carnal ordinances***, imposed on them until the time of reformation. Heb 9:9-10

Part of the Jewish ceremonial system included feast days that were symbols of the Christ's death, of Christ's resurrection, of the day of Pentecost, and of other significant events in Christian history. These were ceremonial "sabbaths" and were distinguished from the Seventh-day Sabbath. And being ceremonial, they were not to last past the cross.

When John wrote his gospel, he called them "Jewish."

Joh 2:13 And the Jews' passover was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem,

Joh 5:1 After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Joh 6:4 And the passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh.

Joh 7:2 Now the Jews' feast of tabernacles was at hand.

Joh 11:55 And the Jews' passover was nigh at hand: and many went out of the country up to Jerusalem before the passover, to purify themselves.

These ceremonial "sabbaths", (See Lev 16:31; 23:24, 32; 25:4) particularly the Passover, were the sabbaths "which are a shadow of things to come" and were a "figure for the time."

The most confusing of the Jewish Sabbaths, for the early Christians, was Passover. On one hand, it seemed that it was a ceremony fulfilled and now pointless. Jesus, the Passover, had been crucified.

On the other hand, Jesus had instituted the Last Supper, with rituals in some ways parallel to the Paschal rituals, at the very time of the Passover.

This led to a widespread belief among Jewish Christians that the Passover should be kept, but without eating the lamb. Passover without lamb is the eating of bitter herbs. (Ex 12:8; Nu 9:11).

And this is the reason for Romans 14. Paul refused to condemn Passover keepers. But he also refused to condemn those who recognized that the Passover was no longer binding. Both parties were trying to honor God by their relation to the day; both were trying to honor God by their relation to the eating of herbs.

Unlike the feasts, which are called Jewish in the five passages quoted above from John, the

Sabbath needed no introduction to Gentile believers reading John's gospel, or the other gospels for that matter. The Sabbath is always called "the Sabbath."

Jesus calls himself the Lord of the Sabbath (Mr. 2:28; Is 58:13) and so shows that the "Lord's Day" of Revelation 1 was none other than the Sabbath. Gentiles who wished to hear the gospel after the Jews waited, not one day to Sunday, but a week until the "next Sabbath." Ac 13:32-34.

Even when taking the gospel to the Gentile nations it was Paul's normal manner of work to teach on the Sabbath (Ac 17:2). Rather than undermining the truth of the gospel, he used this habit as a manner of persuading "both Jews and Greeks" "every Sabbath." Ac 18:4.

How the Christian world came to observe Sunday is simple matter of history. The Roman Church sought to distance itself from Jews, and to encourage the conversion of Pagans (who had been worshipping on Sunday for a long time....this is how it became known as the "sun day"). So it adopted the day. Alexandria joined the city of Rome in this plan. And after Rome gained the ascendancy over other churches, its tradition became general.

Much more could be written on this topic.

But the short of it all is this: God said don't kill. We shouldn't. He said to honor our parents. We should. He said not to forget the Sabbath. We did. Shame on us. We ought to make it right.

Jesus said:

Joh 14:15 If ye love me, keep my commandments.

— Prepared August 17, 2008, at the request of Rachel Hyman

FAQ

1. You keep the Sabbath. Why don't you stone Sabbath breakers?
2. Jesus was resurrected on Sunday, making that day honorable.
3. We are not "under law."
4. You can't earn salvation by obedience to the law.

ANSWERS

1. In relation to the question about stoning, moral laws are enforced in the judgment. Civil laws are enforced by the state.

But many times the state enforces moral laws with civil laws. When we incarcerate a thief, we

are enforcing a moral law with a civil law and penalty.

The Jews did the same. They stoned Achan, at God's direction, for an aggravated case of stealing and for lying. Josh 7:11. The stealing and the lying were violations of the Ten Commandments. The stoning was a civil penalty.

Today we must neither lie nor steal, but neither should we stone liars. The civil penalty ended with the civil government's demise. The moral law continues today.

The Sabbath stoning is precisely the same scenario.

Since the end of the theocracy, where judicial appeals could even be taken to the Living God for final sentencing, human government has been restricted morally from enforcing the first four commandments. (Incidentally, this is the reason that the Ten Commandments listed by Paul in Romans 13, where he discusses human government, are all from the last six.)

The idea is simple. I have obligations to God, commands 1-4, and obligations to man, commands 5-10. Human government may regulate and restrict my relations to my fellow men. But it has no jurisdiction over my relations to God. So Seventh-day Adventists would not only oppose a Sunday law, we would solemnly oppose even a Sabbath law. Worship laws are not appropriate for states.

2. First, we agree that our Savior was resurrected on the first day of the week. And we agree that this tremendous event ought to be commemorated. When we attend a baptism we are attending a ritual that reminds us of the resurrection of the Lord.

But when the Bible speaks about the first day of the week, it never mentions any sanctity ever being conferred on that day.

We find that the disciples once met on the first day of the week "for fear of the Jews." John 20:19. We find that Paul once preached all Sabbath long, then through Saturday evening, with the intent of traveling on what we call Sunday morning. Ac 20.

Some, reading this passage, are confused because they do not understand that the Jewish day begins at sunset. So when they read that it was dark, on the "first day of the week", they are thinking Sunday night. But Jews understood "Saturday night."

We find that men in the New Testament times were paid daily. It was a good question to converted ex-pagans whether they ought to wait until Friday to see how much money that had left over for offerings.

But Paul didn't leave generosity to chance. We are to honor God with the first-fruit of our increase. And so Paul instructed the believers to "lay" up in "store" from the very "first day of the week." Some reading this have thought that an offering was taken on the first day of the week. But a simple reading of 1Co 16:2 will show that the offering was stored with each

individual in view of a future collection.

These three incidents, along with Christ's resurrection, are the entirety of the New Testament references to the "first day of the week." It is never called anything more special than that. And this contrasts with the Holy Sabbath which is named 55 times in the New Testament (compare to 61 in the Old).

There is no Biblical evidence that the Sabbath has been changed. And in view of the fact that it was given before sin entered the world, in view of the fact that it was written in stone, in view of the fact that it says "remember", and in view of many other facts, there is no reason to conclude that it has been changed by the Creator.

3. Regarding being "under law," Christians should agree that we are not "under law." Ro 3:19; 6:14-15; Gal 3:10, 23; 4:21.

But this phrase has been poorly understood. It means "depending on the law for righteousness." If Christians are trying to earn their way to heaven, they are "under the law." If they believe that their obedience today can atone for their disobedience yesterday, they are "under the law."

Since the law was given to show us sin and to condemn our sin, anyone who depends on the law for justification will be condemned by the law. In that since, those that are "under the law" are condemned by the law.

We obey because sin should not have dominion over us, because we are risen in newness of life. Our obedience is the best commemoration of Christ's resurrection. But we do not expect any merit from our obedience.

Lu 17:10 So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.

4. Amen. This objection against our position is no objection at all. We agree heartily. Obedience is commanded, commended, rewarded. But never does it atone for a past wrong. Never can it save us. Never do we deserve a good thing from heaven. Any reward we receive for right doing is undeserved.

Conclusion:

There is still much more that could be written on this topic. We could study into the covenants, into the books of Daniel and Revelation, and find a rich collection of beautiful truths that explain how it came to be that the church was confused on the issue of Sabbath and Law.

But for now, we have seen that the Law of God is the standard by which men are to regulate their lives. Our love is shown by our obedience. And we learn about love through obedience.

While the ceremonies of the Old Testament have passed away, they have been replaced by a few ceremonies of the New Testament. While the civil laws of Israel have no land over which they have jurisdiction, every land does have civil laws that Christians should obey.

While the health and sanitary laws were part of the civil laws that no longer have a civil state, we still have bodies that are the temples of the Holy Ghost. And with utmost respect and care for these temples we should gather all we can from those ancient laws that could help us live more productive God-honoring lives.

But the moral laws are for all time and all places. Christians outside of Rome's influence kept the Ten Commandments for many centuries before falling under her influence. She claims to have modified those Ten Commandments, eliminating the third and adjusting the fourth.

But mere men have no such authority. And those who wish to "make the law honorable" and to be faithful to their Creator and Redeemer, will concur. Standing for the right makes a gospel light.