

Which Old Testament Laws Should We Obey?

Which of the laws given by God at Mt. Sinai are binding on Christians today? Quite a number of laws were given at that time – the Jews have traditionally said there are 613 laws, 365 of them being prohibitions (= the number of days of the year) and 248 of them being commandments (= the number of parts of the human body.)

Which of the 613 laws are binding today? Do you think none of them apply – they are all replaced by the law of Christ? Or do all still apply? Including the sacrifices? Of course they no longer apply, so maybe the answer is that some still apply and some don't? In the latter case, how do you know which is which?

Let's have a look at a few for example...

Leviticus 19:1-2 "The LORD said to Moses, ²"Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.'"

"Be holy": that's a good law – I think we'd all agree that still applies.

Verse 3a "Each of you must respect your mother and father." Clearly that one still applies too.

Verse 3b "and you must observe my Sabbaths. I am the LORD your God." Does that apply now?

Verse 4 "Do not turn to idols or make metal gods for yourselves. I am the LORD your God." That one still applies.

Verses 5-8 ⁵"When you sacrifice a fellowship offering to the LORD, sacrifice it in such a way that it will be accepted on your behalf. ⁶It shall be eaten on the day you sacrifice it or on the next day; anything left over until the third day must be burned up. ⁷If any of it is eaten on the third day, it is impure and will not be accepted. ⁸Whoever eats it will be held responsible because they have desecrated what is holy to the LORD; they must be cut off from their people."

There's one that obviously doesn't apply nowadays. So we might conclude that maybe all the laws apply except the sacrifices? What about the next verses then?

Verses 9-10 "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God."

Which of us does that when harvesting our garden? If you did, how would the poor people know to come and get the gleanings?

Dropping down to Verse 18 "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD."

Verse 19: "Love your neighbour as yourself" – most of us would agree that is binding on Christians. But what about the next verses? I plant different kinds of seeds in my garden, and sometimes mix them. I'm sure we all wear clothes with two kinds of material: polyester and cotton, etc – but maybe this doesn't apply to modern fabrics?

What about laws regarding slavery?

Verse 20: “If a man sleeps with a female slave who is promised to another man but who has not been ransomed or given her freedom, there must be due punishment.”

Verses 23-25: “When you enter the land and plant any kind of fruit tree, regard its fruit as forbidden. For three years you are to consider it forbidden; it must not be eaten. ²⁴ In the fourth year all its fruit will be holy, an offering of praise to the LORD. ²⁵ But in the fifth year you may eat its fruit. In this way your harvest will be increased. I am the LORD your God.”

Is this how we should treat our fruit trees? Should we observe this law or not?

Verse 27: “Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.” I think many of us men disobey that one.

Verse 28: “Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves.” Does this rule out all tattoos today?

Verse 31: “Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them.”

Verse 32: “Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God.” Should we all stand up for older people?

Deuteronomy 22:8-12 ⁸ “When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof. ⁹ Do not plant two kinds of seed in your vineyard; if you do, not only the crops you plant but also the fruit of the vineyard will be defiled. ¹⁰ Do not plough with an ox and a donkey yoked together. ¹¹ Do not wear clothes of wool and linen woven together. ¹² Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear.”

(Similarly the Jubilee and land Sabbath laws of Leviticus 25.)

What should we obey and what shouldn't we? Does the New Testament give us the answer?

Acts 15:5: “Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.”

Some said Christians should obey all of the laws of Moses. But notice in verses 10-11 that the Church decided this was wrong!

Verses 10-11 ¹⁰ “Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

Verse 20: “Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.”

They selected just a few laws the Gentiles should keep.

Hebrews 9:10: “They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.”

This shows that the sacrifices no longer apply.

Hebrews 8:10 “By calling this covenant “new,” He has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.”

The Old Covenant is obsolete. Yet on the other hand Paul said the law was “holy, righteous and good.” (Romans 7:12), and “spiritual (Verse 14). He said faith didn’t make the law void, but rather it established the law (Romans 3:3).

So there seem to be some discrepancies here, and this has given rise to much debate and many arguments among theologians down through history. Some have argued that all the Old Testament laws are totally done away in Christ. Others have said the laws fall into 3 categories, moral, ceremonial and civil, and only the moral laws are now binding. Seventh Day Adventists teach the moral laws, including all of the 10 Commandments, are binding, plus the dietary laws.

We used to teach that only a few of the laws, such as the sacrifices, are no longer valid because they have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, that most of the other laws including the Holy Days, dietary laws etc still were binding on spiritual Israel.

What is the answer? I believe the answer is that none of the laws of Sinai are binding in a legal sense on Christians, but at the same time all of the laws, including the ceremonial and civil laws, are binding on us in a spiritual sense.

Firstly, let’s prove that none of the laws are binding on us now, legally (or physically) speaking:

The body of the laws of the Old Covenant were designed to regulate the lives of people living in the distinctive geographical, climatic and cultural conditions found in the Middle East.

There are laws about cultivating the Mediterranean olive tree, laws on ploughing, sowing, plucking, threshing, gleaning wheat, a law in Exodus 9:22 regulating the offering of the “fat tail” of the ram – relating to the fat-tailed Palestinian sheep, found nowhere else in the world, regulations regarding pomegranates, dates, acacia, hyssop etc.

The laws of clean and unclean animals refer to dozens of animals found only in the Middle East area – 40% of those listed are unknown to modern scholars. A lot of laws are seasonal in nature – e.g. the commandment to begin harvesting the standing grain 7 weeks after Passover, and the Feast of Tabernacles to be held at the end of harvesting of crops – these things are impossible for us to accurately fulfil in a different climate zone.

Deuteronomy 22:8 “When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof.” This is meaningful in Israel where roofs were flat (and still are as I understand) and functional as extra accommodation for guests, but is pointless here where people don’t often walk on the roof!

There are regulations about slavery, polygamy, bride price, concubines, stoning, tasselled garments, special rights for the firstborn son, the priestly ephod (we don’t even know what an ephod is), the horned altar, incense, cherubims, the Nazirite vow, etc. Over 95% of the laws are so culturally specific that they are inapplicable and unfulfillable by Christians today! Surely this indicates they aren’t binding on modern Christians? The covenant was made between God and the people living in Palestine. They broke it, so God abrogated it, and established a new covenant. Jeremiah 31:31 “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.” It is a new covenant, not a renewed version of the old one.

Verse 32 “It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the LORD.”

It is nothing like the old one. It was made when Jesus died – He said “this is the blood of the new covenant, poured out for you.”

When a new treaty or contract replaces an old one, the terms of the old one are no longer binding! The new covenant is called “a better covenant”, “a superior covenant,” it is made with “a new people” and involves “a new order,” and it has made the old covenant “obsolete.” The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) rejected the view that the Gentile Christians had to keep the law of Moses – various scriptures show the Old Covenant is no longer in force (Colossians 2:16 etc.)

What about the idea that some Old Covenant laws are “moral” and therefore should be kept?

Remember that a new covenant totally replaces an old one. But maybe some Old Testament laws – e.g. “Thou shalt not kill” are eternal moral and ethical principles? Which laws in that case are not moral? The law about building parapets around a roof saves someone from death, so isn’t it a moral, ethical principle too? The 5th Commandment “Honour your mother and father so your days may be long in the land of Canaan” – is that an eternal, moral principle, or just the first part of the Commandment?

The Bible nowhere suggests some of the laws were civil, some moral and some ceremonial. They’re all lumped in together: Galatians 5:3 “Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law.”

Gal. 3:24-25 ²⁴ “So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. (What “part” of the law is this referring to?)

James 2:10 “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”

Matthew 5:17-18 ¹⁷ “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. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

Doesn’t this mean the law is still in full force? If that’s what it means, then we have to build parapets on our roofs, refrain from mixed fabrics, continue to offer sacrifices, worship at the tabernacle, kill anyone who dishonours his parents, live in houses made of branches at the Feast of Tabernacles, etc. Because not one jot or tittle of the law is to be changed!

This is talking about the whole law (and the prophets). If it is only talking about the 10 Commandments, or the need to keep the Feast of Tabernacles (but not the rituals associated with it) – that would have to be proved, and nowhere does it indicate that in any way, or attempt to show what part of the law should be kept and what shouldn’t.

What this is saying is that Jesus came to fulfil the law and the prophets – in other words, to bring them to their full meaning, to accomplish and embody what they looked forward to. They all pointed forward to Him. Romans 10:4 says He is the end of the law – the purpose, goal, meaning of the law –

the reality that was foreshadowed by the law. All the sacrifices pointed to Him. The parts of the temple pointed to Him. The Holy Days pointed to Him. All the prophecies point to Him. The 10 Commandments point to Him. He is love, holiness, righteousness, personified! He is our rest.

Every jot and tittle of the law points to Christ, so it hasn't been destroyed, it has been fulfilled, and will be there to teach us and show us God's mind, forever. It's not necessary to work out which laws are binding today and which aren't, thankfully, because in fact all of them are binding on the Christian in a spiritual and teaching sense. Having said none of them are binding legally, now we see that all 613 of them are binding in the spirit.

2 Timothy 3:16 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness". Surely this refers to every one of the 613 laws.

Each of the laws is inspired by God and is valuable for determining theological truths, for correcting misconceptions, for exposing and redirecting wrong behaviour, and for training and equipping the Christian in practical, personal righteousness.

Paul said the law was good, holy and righteous, spiritual. It was good for showing what sin is – Romans 7:7 "What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."

But notice Romans 7:6: "But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."

The Mosaic laws, though not legally binding, comprise a treasury of insights and information regarding the very mind and ways of God. They are binding on Christians in precisely the same sense as are all other portions of the Old Testament, e.g. God's messages to Israel in the books of Prophecy or Kings, Chronicles and Samuel.

They're not rules for us – they were designed for the nation of Israel in Palestine thousands of years ago, but they were designed by our God, who does not change in mind and character, so they teach us about Him. They were tailor-made for another people in another situation, but they were tailored by the God we seek to know and serve.

So they are very applicable to the Christian today. They reflect the mind, the personality, the priorities, values, likes and dislikes of God – so they are great treasures for us, and they will affect what we do if we are patterning our lives after our heavenly Father and modify our behaviour and thinking in response to our knowledge of Him and His ways!

We see that this is the right way to approach the Old Testament laws by noticing how the New Testament writers used this approach!

1 Corinthians 9:9-10 ⁹ "For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever ploughs and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest."

That law was a physical law for the benefit of the oxen in Moses' time, but it reveals deep theological principles for us under the spirit of the law – and accordingly affects our behaviour – although we don't follow it in the letter as Israel did, because that part doesn't really apply to us now.

That's the way for us to look at all of the laws of the Old Testament. It involves a bit of Bible study, to consider what was the original meaning, significance and purpose of the law. What were God's motives in giving it? What is the theological significance of it – what does it reveal about God and His ways? What does it reflect about God's mind, His qualities, attitudes, values, likes and dislikes, and kinds of attitudes and standards He wants to see in those who love Him etc. What should it mean as far as my actions are concerned?

Let's look at another example:

Exodus 22:25 "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender, charge him no interest."

This isn't our law, it was tailor made for Israel. It is possible to be a modern banker and still be a Christian! But it shows that God is generous and helps the needy. We need to have the same attitude towards the needy. There are many ways this can be applied in our lives today – many ways we can help needy people we know of. I heard of a Christian banker who graciously granted a needy person a loan, with interest. She had been turned down by many other banks, and this was a way of fulfilling the theological principles behind this law, even though not obeying it to the letter.

We don't have to offer sacrifices now, but we can learn a lot about Jesus Christ by studying the sacrifices. We don't have to keep a day or days, but we learn about the rest we have from our sinful works, in Jesus. Are sacrifices binding now? No, not legally. But yes – spiritually – or else we have no Saviour. If there's no law saying a sacrifice will pay for sin, then Jesus' death doesn't apply. All the laws are like this!

1 Peter 1:15-16 "But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶ for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy." Peter picks out a law we can certainly apply nowadays.

Ephesians 6:1-3 "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ² "Honour your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise— ³ "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." This picks up a law we should still keep, and the chapter continues to expound on it.

John 8:5 "In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" An Old Testament law we can't really keep in the letter today!

Verse 7 "When they kept on questioning Him, He straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." The New Testament equivalent is quite different. Jesus is telling them not to do what the Old Testament commanded!

In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus said "You have heard it was said to the people long ago..." and then brought out the spiritual understanding behind each of the laws He chose as samples. Some of them were from the 10 Commandments, some were from other parts of the law. With God's Holy Spirit in us, we are to take on the mind of Jesus Christ and to learn about His love and righteousness in a way that goes far beyond any set of laws and rules. How can God's love and righteousness be encapsulated in any set of rules anyway?

So which of the laws given by God at Sinai are binding on Christians today? We don't have to try to work out which ones were fulfilled in Jesus and which weren't! That is an impossible quest. All of the laws including the sacrifices, the 10 Commandments, the laws of the Tabernacle, and statutes and judgments, pointed to Jesus Christ and were fulfilled in Him. None of them are legally binding on us now, but all of them are binding in a spiritual way. We have the chance to apply to our own lives the

very heart and spirit of each and every one of the 613 laws! And they will change our conduct accordingly. There are many we will observe in the letter, e.g. not killing, stealing, committing adultery. But more than this, we will get to the very attitudes and spirit behind them, and God's Holy Spirit in us will help with this.

We can truly fulfil each and every law, in the new way of the spirit, so that we can say like Paul, "Do we then overthrow the law? By no means! On the contrary, we establish the law!" In the Old Testament laws we do find after all, the principles on which we base our modern Christian lives!