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SHOULD WE OBEY THE LAW?

By David Phillips

What should Christians make of the Old Testament law? The Lord Jesus said plainly: “*not one jot or one tittle will pass from the law till all is fulfilled.*” Matt 5.18. But does this mean we should obey all the laws of the Old Testament?

This is not an academic question, it concerns all Christians because it concerns what is conduct acceptable to God. But it is also a question that rears its head in many contemporary issues. People will ask why it is that Christians say we should obey some laws but not others. What is irritating about this is that those who ask this question usually ought to know better. They act as if they had discovered some deep problem with Christian teaching which no-one had ever thought of in the last 2,000 years. Yet clearly in all that time Christians have considered that some Old Testament commands are still binding whilst others are not.

One statement which accurately summarises genuine Christian teaching is Article 7 of the Church of England’s Thirty-Nine Articles:

Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral.

This article follows the classical three-fold division of the law into ceremonial, civil and moral.

- The ceremonies and rites - do not bind Christian men.
- The civil precepts - do not need to be followed, though they may be.
- But, we ought to obey the moral commandments.

It is not difficult to understand why this is so. The ceremonial law has been fulfilled by Christ, that is why the Temple worship came to an end within the lifetime of the Apostles. Therefore we obey the law if we are in Christ, because He fulfilled it. These laws still have great practical value because they teach us about sin and righteousness. They convict us of sin and drive us to Christ, but they do not bind us, we are not required to follow them.

The civil law was given for the nation state of Israel. But no nation today can claim the same status before God. Therefore these laws are not things we need to follow, but it may be that as a nation we choose to do so.

But the moral law is to be obeyed from the heart.

It has to be admitted that sometimes it is not easy to decide whether a command is ceremonial, civil or moral though in general it is clear. When we are in doubt, obedience is always the wiser course.

Ceremonial law

An example of a ceremonial law is the commands regarding the Feast of Ingathering. The original command is in Exodus chapter 23 verse 16:

Celebrate the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in your crops from the field.

This command had to be repeated when the law was given again in chapter 34 verse 22. In Leviticus details of the celebration are given (now called Tabernacles) whilst in Numbers 23 there are details of the offerings to be made. In Deuteronomy Moses teaches the command and gives it a new aspect - all the people are to keep it.

Even if we are not to follow this command, yet we know that all Scripture is profitable (2 Tim 3.16) so we must be able to learn from it.

We learn the importance of giving back to God, as a means of showing our gratitude and recognition of all He has given us.

We learn the importance of celebrating the goodness of God - which we ourselves do at harvest and Christmas for example. It is something which should involve everyone.

So, whilst these commands are not something we follow by the letter, yet we can and should read them and learn from them.

Civil

Below we will consider the moral commandment - you shall not commit adultery - which is still binding. But the civil commands concern what should be done when this command is broken: *If a man is found lying with a woman married to a husband, then both of them shall die—the man that lay with the woman, and the woman; so you shall put away the evil from Israel. Deut. 22:22*

This is an uncomfortable command for us yet there are still societies where people are put to death for adultery. We cannot read this command without remembering the incident when a woman caught in adultery was brought to Jesus. Jesus showed her compassion but this does not mean he necessarily cancelled the command. Indeed, in the Old Testament we see that David committed adultery but was not put to death (though the consequences were horrific and long-lasting).

Nevertheless, we see clearly in the New Testament that the death penalty still stands: *Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6.9)*

Spiritual death, the exclusion from the kingdom of God is still a consequence of adultery. But, the note of mercy is sounded again as Paul continues: *And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.*

This is one of the great uses of the law; it teaches us in stark terms just how unrighteous we are and therefore how much in need of a saviour we are. This is why as Christians we do still need to make it our habit to read and to teach the Old Testament law, even those bits we feel uncomfortable with, because they show us our sin and our need of a saviour.

All this teaches us that adultery is serious. It destroys the good gift of God in marriage. It undermines the stable family as the basis of human society and it cheapens the great blessing of God in sexual union. All these things are lost in our modern society where adultery as with all other forms of sexual relationships outside marriage, is so common and often exalted in books, television and film.

What you see in the Old Testament is that adultery threatens and damages the great purpose of God in human relationships. We can see that today in damaged lives. Therefore, whilst we do wish to

show mercy in our treatment of this sin, yet we must not lose our sense of disgust at how hideous this sin is.

Moral

The moral commandment concerns our own personal behaviour rather than the response of the community, whether it be civil or the Church.

Of course, if everyone abided by the moral law there would be little need for civil law. The problems of civil law arise mostly from the fact that people do sin and break God's commands.

The particular command, *do not commit adultery*, is clearly still relevant. When a young man asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus pointed him first to the Ten Commandments, including repeating this command; *do not commit adultery*. Of course, as you know, Jesus also told the young man to leave all and follow Him. But he reiterated the importance of this command.

And on another occasion Jesus said:

Matt. 5:27 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

This is a stark saying which drives home the fact that the root of sin is in our hearts. It leaves no room for doubt that Jesus expects us to obey the 7th commandment.

It is important to stress this point because sometimes people have argued that Christians are no longer under law and so are not bound by the moral law, yet Jesus never taught this. Jesus rather tightens the law by saying obedience must come from the heart, though it is also something taught in the Old Testament, not least in the words of some of the prophets.

Three-fold division

The division of the law into ceremonial, civil and moral flows from the Bible itself.

- The ceremonial law is not binding on us.
- Nations may follow the civil law, but not out of necessity.
- We are to obey the moral law.

All these commands teach us about God, about what is good in His sight, about sin and about our need of a saviour.

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