

Christian Ethics: Lesson 1 The Law and the Christian

I. Introduction:

While working at restaurant you strike up a friendship with Steve, a flamboyant waiter who is openly gay. Through the months you have known him you have become burdened for his soul and desire to see him repent from his homosexual lifestyle. So finally, you work up the courage to talk to him about Jesus Christ and his need to turn away from sin, particularly that of homosexuality. His answer surprises you, he tells you that homosexuality is not a sin.

- A. At this point in the conversation what do you say?
- B. Wisely you quote **Leviticus 18:22** which states, *"You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination."* To this Steve instructs you that if you keep reading you come across **Leviticus 19:19** *'You are to keep My statutes. You shall not breed together two kinds of your cattle; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor wear a garment upon you of two kinds of material mixed together.'* Then he asks you, "Are you bound by this law?" What would you say?
- C. Why would we find the homosexuality command binding and not the mixed cattle and seeds?

II. The Purpose of this Study:

The Old Testament contains certain laws which in no way are applicable today (animal sacrifice, eating kosher, building railings on our roofs, etc.) for a number of reasons. Further, in this day and age we are confronted with moral and ethical decisions (i.e. cloning, euthanasia, abortion) which are not specifically mentioned in the Bible. Therefore, today we are going to learn how to extract principles from the Bible so that we might apply them to the formation of a Christian Ethic and worldview.

III. The Formation of the Covenant:

In order to understand whether or not the Law is applicable today, we must go back in time to the formation of the Law. In doing so, we will gain some insight into how the original audience understood the Ten Commandments.

A. Background:

Since the time of the Fall God has promised hope to fallen man. This initially transpired through the promised seed of Eve (**Gen. 3:15**) and then through the descendents of Abraham, who the Lord swore would become a “**Great Nation**” and a blessing to “all the families of the Earth” (**Gen. 12:1-3**). As time progressed, God sovereignly preserved Israel, by sending them into Egypt to survive the famine. Now God has triumphantly brought them out of Egypt and is on the verge of leading them to the promised Land so that they can fulfill their duties as the nation of God. In order to be a Holy Nation, God offers a special covenant so that they might be a blessing to all mankind and be blessed themselves. In **Exodus chapter 19**, we read an incredible account of how the God of the Universe binds Himself to a covenantal relationship with the nation of Israel. Within the promises exchanged the Ten Commandments surface - ten declarations regarding how God desires His people to treat Himself and each other.

B. The intent of the Covenant (Ex. 19:4-6)

1. In your own words, what is the function of a covenant?
2. How has God previously obligated Himself to the Israelites (**Gen. 12:1-3**)?

*Long ago, before the God rescued the Jews from Egypt He made a covenant with their forefather Abraham. In that covenant Yahweh promised to bless Abraham’s descendants, build him into a great nation, and bless the nations through him. God was faithful to maintain this promise to Abraham’s ancestors. When starvation threatened his grandson’s clan, God sent Jacob’s son –Joseph– to Egypt ahead of time so that he might rescue Abraham’s descendents from famine. Thus, God fulfilled His promise to protect and multiply the nation. In His covenant with Abraham, Yahweh also promised Abraham a parcel of Land. Consequently, the Lord sent Moses to deliver the Hebrews from Egypt and take them to the Promised Land, the land granted to Abraham via the covenant (**Gen. 13:14-15**). Finally, God pledged to bless the nations through the seed of Abraham. **Exodus 19: 5-6** expands upon this as God heralds:*

⁵ ‘Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; ⁶ and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.”

3. What benefits does the Lord offer to Israel? And what must they do in order to receive them?
4. As a Holy Nation how will Israel distinguish themselves from the surrounding nations? Why do you suppose God wants them to be different?
5. What does it mean to be a priest? And in the case Israel, who were they to serve as a Kingdom of Priests? (Compare **Exodus 19:6** with **Genesis 12:3**)

Note: A priest is a mediatory agent between man and God. In other words, he represents God to men, and intercedes on behalf of men to God.

6. Why would holiness be an important characteristic for the kingdom of Priests? Especially since they have been given the charge of facilitating the worship among the nations.

C. The acceptance of the Covenant (vs. 7 – 9).

In Exodus 19:7-9 we find that the Israel agrees to be bound by this covenant. From this point on, they will be assigned the task of becoming the Holy Nation – the Kingdom of Priests who will be intermediaries for the Nations. Now, with the acceptance the stipulations of the covenant (i.e. If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant) are expanded.

1. Who were the intended recipients of the Mosaic Covenant?
2. In light of this, are we bound by the same stipulations?

D. The Stipulations of the Covenant.

In order to insure that Israel will fulfill their calling as a Holy Nation and a Kingdom of priests God issues the Ten Commandments. These stipulations form the core of the larger corpus of the law which expands upon each of the Ten Commandments. Now if the Israelites fail to live up to the standards of the Mosaic Covenant, God promises to smite them with

disease, famine, and bloodshed. Yet, if they were to obey the commandments, they would prosper both spiritually and materially (**Lev. 26**).

1. Why is it a loving thing for God to punish Israel when they are unfaithful to God (for both the Israelites themselves and the other nations)?
2. In what sense is the Mosaic Covenant conditional?
3. In what sense is the Mosaic Covenant unconditional? When does it end?

E. Conclusion:

The Ten Commandments are the center piece of the Mosaic Covenant. God, through Moses, promised to make Israel a chosen nation set apart for service to Him. They were to be the agency by which the nations would come to know God. The Ten Commandments served as the means in which they would maintain their faithfulness to God through their worship and their conduct with one another. Sadly, as the story goes, these stipulations were largely disregarded and/or distorted. Thus, Israel lost its light among the nations. Yet, there will come a time in the future in which God will ensure their faithfulness by doing what the law could not do by itself. He will infuse them with the Holy Spirit and circumcise their hearts so that they might be inclined to obey the Lord. As one scholar notes:

Even though Israel today is not behaving as a holy nation and a kingdom of priests, a generation of Israelites will yet do so in accordance with God's irrevocable promise. The same observation applies to the Abrahamic Covenant and its ultimate fulfillment.¹

IV. The problem:

With the background established we return to the original problem: Why must we obey some of the commandments of the Mosaic Covenant and not others? To answer this question we must answer two more:

- 1. Is the Mosaic Covenant still in effect?**
- 2. To what laws if any are we bound by God?**

V. Is the Mosaic Covenant still in effect?

Some theologians contend that all Christians must obey the Mosaic Law. In other words, we are currently under the Mosaic Covenant –of course the work of Christ mandates several adjustments. In their view, there exists a three fold division of the law –ceremonial, civic, and moral. The ceremonial dimensions of the law (i.e. animal sacrifice) have been fulfilled in Christ. The civic laws (i.e cities of refuge) which were specifically designed for the nation of Israel have been abolished with the birth of the church- the new habitation for God’s holy people. Yet, the moral laws (i.e. the ten commandments – with the exception of the Sabbath) are still in effect. Thus, in order to determine which laws we need to obey, we simply sift the commandments and extract the moral laws.

This point of view sounds great initially, but it is uncertain whether or not the Bible supports such a scheme.

- A. According to the following verses, does the Bible teach a threefold division in the law? Why or why not?

1. Galatians 5:3

And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.

2. James 2:10

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.

- B. Given that the Bible does not make a threefold division, what would be the danger of attempting to assign laws to ceremonial, civic, and moral categories in order to discern which ones to obey?

Note: Not only does the aforementioned law system assume a threefold division, but it also assumes that the Mosaic Covenant is still in effect (albeit with some adjustments). It was a covenant not simply intended for the people of Israel, but God’s holy people throughout the ages.

- C. In light of the following passages, should we conclude that we are in any way under the Mosaic Covenant? Why or why not?

1. Matthew 5:17

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.

- a. The word “fulfill” usually points to future **fulfillment**. In other words, it’s the language of prophecy. How did Christ fulfill the Law and the Prophets? How does the Old Testament anticipate Christ?

2. Romans 10:4

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

- a. Let’s say congress passed a law to build a large dam. After much engineering and construction they finished the dam. At that point what happens to the law?
- b. In a similar way, when Christ came to earth, how did the Law end?

3. Galatians 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE”—

- a. Under the Mosaic Law what happened to those who disobey and sin?
- b. When a Christian sins, what are the consequences (Gal. 3:13)?

4. Hebrews 9:15

¹⁵For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

- a. According to this passage, which covenant are we currently under?
- b. According to this verse, what blessing does the New Covenant offer which the first one did not?

- D. Finally, who were the recipients of the Mosaic Law? And should we conclude that they were intended for us?

Note: From these texts it is quite clear that we are not in any way under the Mosaic Covenant. The rules and stipulations of the covenant were for another people in another era. Yet, there still is some relevance as we shall see in the next section.

VI. To what laws if any are we bound by God?

Although the Mosaic Covenant has been abrogated, the New Testament authors still speak highly of it.

A. The New Testament Still Speaks Highly of the Mosaic Law:

1. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

- a. To what parts of Scripture does Paul refer with “All Scripture”?
- b. In His mind what is the benefit of the Old Testament?

2. Romans 7:12

¹² So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

- a. What does it mean to be holy?
- b. What does the term “holy” signify about the character of the Law?

Note: Although we are not currently under the Mosaic Law, the New Testament writers revered it as the Law of God.

B. A New Law System is in Place:

In **John 14:15** Jesus states, ***“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”*** In doing so, He makes it clear that our love for Him must be expressed through obedience. This prompts the all important question, “What commandments must we obey?” Well, as previously stated, we are not bound by the Mosaic Covenant, but we are constrained by other laws.

1. Consider the following passages:

a. **Galatians 6:2** *Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.*

- What does it mean to "fulfill" a law? What does this suggest about our obligation to it?

b. **James 2:8** *If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well.*

-What is the essence of this law? Are there any similarities between this law and previous ones (cf. **Lev. 19:18**)?

2. What do you suppose are the crucial differences between the Law of Moses and the Law of Christ? Consider their origins?

3. As we just saw, this new law is remarkably similar to the Old Law. Why would they have such striking similarities?

C. The New Law System has the same Essence:

As we will see, the new law system, like the old centers upon how to love the Lord your God. What are the actions, words, and thoughts which please Him.

1. According to the follow passages, what are the two greatest commandments?

Matthew 22:36 *"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"*
37 *And He said to him, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'* **38** *"This is the great and foremost commandment. 39 "The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."*

2. How is it that the whole law hangs on those two commandments? Which of the two great commandments apply to the following Ten Commandments?

- a. Polytheism:
- b. Graven Images:

- c. Swearing (taking the name of the Lord in vain):
- d. The Sabbath:
- e. Obedience to Parents:
- f. Murder:
- g. Adultery:
- h. Theft:
- i. Lying:
- j. Coveting:

Note: As you just saw, the ten commandments are an extension of the two great commandments. Further, the 613 stipulations of the Law are an extension of the 10 commandments (thereby an extension of the two great commandments).

3. Consider the following chart, why do you suppose the essence of the Law spreads across these different epochs? What would account for the differences?

The Ten Commandments			
Commandment	Pre-Mosaic	O.T. Statement	N.T. Restatement
1 st Polytheism	Gen. 35:2	Ex. 20:3	Acts 14:15
2 nd Graven Images	Gen. 31:19	Ex. 20:4	1 John 5:21
3 rd Swearing	Gen. 24:3	Ex. 20:7	James 5:12
4 th Sabbath	Gen. 2:3	Ex. 20:8	Col 2:16 nullifies
5 th Obedience to parents	Gen. 27:41	Ex. 20:12	Eph. 6:1
6 th Murder	Gen. 4:9	Ex. 20:13	1 John 3:15
7 th Adultery	Gen. 39:9	Ex. 20:14	1 Cor 6:9,10
8 th Theft	Gen. 44:4-7	Ex. 20:15	Eph. 4:28
9 th False Witness	Gen. 39:17	Ex. 20:16	Col. 3:9,10
10 th Coveting	Gen. 12:18; 20:3	Ex. 20:17	Eph. 5:3

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²MacArthur, John Jr. *The MacArthur Study Bible*. electronic ed., Ex 20:3. Nashville: Word Pub., 1997, c1997.

Note: The Old Testament Law perfectly applied to the people of Israel who were about to venture into the promised land. It showed them how to worship God and love their neighbors. The Law also pointed forward to a future time in which God would change their ability to obey the law through the transforming work of Christ. As Christians, we do not look forward to the manifestation of Christ, rather we look back upon His finished work. Thus, as we look at Old Testament law we must view it through the lens of Christ. The work of Christ radically did away with the old law and implemented a new law in its stead. We no longer have Levitical priests as He is our high priest. We are not condemned when we break the law because He was condemned. We can mix and match oxen because we are not impersonating a pagan practice in doing so. Yet, for those dissimilarities the two law systems show a striking resemblance as they have the same Law Giver.

VII. How do we go about obeying the Old Testament laws? Especially when they are not repeated in the New Testament?

- A. Realize that the Mosaic Law is not binding for Christians.
- B. Determine the original meaning of the command.
- C. Identify the theological significance of the command. What does it suggest about the Law Giver and or the relationship between God and man?
- D. Determine some of the practical considerations of the Old Testament command.

VIII. Examples:

In this section we will look at two ways for deriving ethical commands from the Law of Moses. One is by the aforementioned method. Another is by incorporating the New Testament.

A. Lending:

To take an example from the civil laws, **Exod. 22:25** states: ***“If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.”***

1. This law is not my law. It was part of Israel’s covenant with God (Christian bankers can relax—for a moment).

2. As far as the point of the law is concerned, it forbids the charging of interest when lending to a poor person, presumably to assist the person who is in a financial crisis in such a way that his recovery will be possible and the repayment will not be overly burdensome. A second purpose is undoubtedly to encourage the individual Israelite to be openhanded and generous, to be sensitive to the needs of the poor, and to be ready and willing to help needy people in practical ways even when it will not result in one's own financial gain.

3. What theological insights come from this law? The Person who issued this law is obviously concerned about the physical and emotional well-being of the poor. Moreover he apparently wants his people to have a similar sensitivity toward the poor, to be willing to help the needy sacrificially.³

4. In light of the first three steps what are some practical considerations?

Note: This method works for all laws even the religious ones. We learn of the holiness of God and how He wants to be worshipped.

- B. Homosexuality: For Homosexuality we will take a different bent, as the law is clearly repeated in the New Testament.

1. The Law Stated in the Old: **Leviticus 18:22** "***You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination.***"

2. The Law Repeated in the New:

³David A. Dorsey, The Evangelical Theological Society. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 34*, Vol. 34, Page 333, The Evangelical Theological Society, 1991; 2002.

1 Corinthians 6:9

⁹ Or 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 effeminate, nor homosexuals,

Romans 1:26-27

²⁶ For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, ²⁷ and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

3. Theological Considerations: There seems to be no clear cut contextualizing factors in the Old Testament. This sin is condemned across the epochs, including pre-Mosaic times with the debauchery of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Romans, God provides the reason for the insidiousness of the sin, as it demonstrates how mankind rejected God's created order.

4. Practical Considerations: With what degree of certainty can you teach that homosexuality is wrong and why?

IX. Conclusion:

The Ten Commandments were not written to us, but for us. The Law was a unit, part of a covenant for a different people, in a different time, at a different place. Therefore, some of the laws could not possibly apply to us. With that said, we should realize that we still worship the same Law Giver, who gives us insights upon how to love Him through that sacred corpus.

As you study the Ten Commandments realize that you are learning about how God wants to be loved by the Israelites. Thus, as you consider the weight and merit of each law think about how God wants to be loved now. Yet, as you study the law, realize that you are now residing in the age of grace. As partakers of the New Covenant any curse which you might incur due to your disobedience has been applied to Christ.

Romans 8:1

¹ Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.