

Chapter 3

How does the Law Reflect God's Character?

As people have contemplated the Biblical Law, a number of questions have arisen. Scholars have addressed those questions in a number of ways with various theories. Among the more common questions are:

- Is the Old Testament Law applicable to Christians today?
- What parts of the Old Testament are applicable today?
- What is the justification for accepting parts of the Old Testament as binding, but not others?

In considering the various answers and positions of people to these questions, a great number of those answers are inadequate and even unbiblical. Look at several of these positions:

Position: “The Law doesn’t apply to Christians because it was nailed to the cross.”

This position comes in various forms, all centering on the premise that the Old Testament doesn’t apply today. These people believe that the New Testament has taken the place of the Old Testament as God’s word. Some even believe the Old Testament isn’t worth a great deal of study. A famous preacher spoke of the church’s need to “unhitch” itself from the Old Testament.

This position doesn’t reflect what the Bible itself says of the Old Testament and the Biblical Law. Statements of Paul, teachings of Jesus, examples of the early church in Acts, as well as God’s comments in the Old Testament through prophets and the Psalms, all confirm truths contrary to the idea the Biblical Law is irrelevant to the church today.

At the time Paul was writing, the Old Testament was the “Scripture.” While he had written several letters, they were not yet accumulated into a body of Scripture. The Gospels hadn’t yet been written. The epistle of James was likely written fairly early, but John’s epistles and the Revelation were composed long after Paul’s martyrdom.

So, when Paul wrote that,

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17),

Paul was clearly talking about the Old Testament. Understanding the context of Second Timothy makes this point beyond question. Paul had already encouraged Timothy reminding him that he had known the “holy writings” since childhood (actually the Greek term Paul uses – *brepheos*/βρέφος – typically references infancy). Timothy’s upbringing was steeped in the Law and Prophets, those scrolls that made up the “holy writings” of Judaism.

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:14-15).

These are not the writings of one who believed the Old Testament to be irrelevant, or that the Laws of the Old Testament were nailed to the cross, not to be used in the Christian life. Paul expected Timothy to recognize that the Old Testament Scriptures could make people “wise for salvation through faith in Christ.” The Jewish Scriptures were “beneficial” or “profitable” (Greek - *ophelimos*/ὀφέλιμος) for “refuting error” (translated “reproof” from the Greek - *elegmos*/ἐλεγμός). They were useful for “correcting” and “training people in righteousness.” These are powerful statements that weigh heavily in responding to those who believe the Old Testament was “nailed to the cross” or moved to second tier status in the Christian era.

Paul’s instructions to Timothy are fully consistent with his language in his letter to the believers at Rome. In explaining the advantages that Jews had over Gentiles, Paul’s seminal example is the truth that the Jews were “entrusted” with Scripture. When Paul makes that claim, he uses an interesting way to refer to the Old Testament. Paul calls it the “oracles” or very words of God! Even in referencing the Old Testament as “Old,” a phrase that didn’t come for well over a century after Paul, runs the risk of antiquating it not only in date, but in relevance. Paul didn’t use that term!

One needn't look only to Paul for this truth. Jesus made it equally clear that the Biblical Law maintained relevance. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus boldly proclaimed,

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. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Mt. 5:17-18).

Some might assert that once Jesus bowed his head on the cross stating, "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30), then "all was accomplished" in the sense that Jesus spoke in Matthew 5:18. There is undoubtedly an element of truth to that, but what exactly was then "passed" from the Law is the question to be addressed, not whether the entirety of the Law was finished.

Illustrative of this is the lesson Luke write up in chapter 16 of his gospel. Jesus is enduring ridicule from self-righteous Pharisees and responded with their failure to understand the prophetic voice of John the Baptist, the one who pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. The passage presents Jesus saying,

The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void (Lk 16:16-17).

In this passage, Jesus isn't saying that the teachings of John the Baptist supplanted the Law and Prophets. Jesus is saying that the Jews had the Law and Prophets up to the time of John, then they ALSO had John (as well as the Law and the Prophets), and John was proclaiming the all-important Kingdom of God. Then for good measure, Jesus emphasized that heaven and earth would more easily pass away than one dot of the Law to become void.

In addition to the teachings of Paul and Jesus, one might consider the history of the first decades of the church, detailed in the Book of Acts. The early church continued to attend the temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1.) As Peter and John were speaking of Jesus in the temple courts, Peter quoted not only the prophets, but also a promise in the Law, referencing a passage from Deuteronomy 18:15-19 saying,

Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you (Acts 3:22).

Perhaps Acts’s most compelling illustration of the Law’s role is found in the events recorded in Acts 15. Paul had sought out from the church leaders and apostles what should be done about a new predicament. The predicament arose from large numbers of Gentiles becoming Christians in the mission fields. A number asked the very relevant question: Must a Gentile first become a Jew in order to then become a Christian?

That such a question was even asked shows that the early church, well past a decade since its inception, had no believe or theology that the Old Testament had been nailed to the cross with Jesus. Biblical Law was still recognized by the church. As some of the Christians on one side of the debate put it,

It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:5).

The issue needed prayer, debate, and study. After “much debate,” Peter stood up and proclaimed that the yoke of the Law was something even the apostles couldn’t keep, and therefore it was not to be placed on the necks of the Gentiles. This wasn’t a wholesale dismissal of the Law. To the contrary, some of it was emphasized as important for the Gentiles to follow. It shows how important the Law was for those Jewish Christian leaders of the church.

Not surprisingly, Acts includes an account of Paul returning from the mission field to Jerusalem. The church leaders were concerned because of rumors that Paul was teaching Jews in the greater Roman kingdom to disregard the Law. The leaders told Paul to go to the temple with some of the brothers who had taken a Nazarite vow under the Law. Paul was to pay the sacrificial payment that signaled the end of their vow. In doing so, the leaders hoped that,

Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law (Acts 21:24).

Not one of the leaders, nor Paul, said, “We must unhitch from the Law,” or “The Law is nailed to the cross.”

One finds verses that speak of the truth that the believer is, “not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14), but passages like that must find their meaning in ways that do not contradict what has already been set out. In fact, the truth behind Paul’s Romans 6 passage runs much deeper, as I will set out later.

Similarly, when one reads this clause in Ephesians 2:15, “abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances,” one might think the Law was nailed to the cross immediately becoming irrelevant. However, that clause in its context is proclaiming a greater and more nuanced truth. Here is the fuller context:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:13-22).

In context, Paul was setting out the way that Christ consolidated the distinction between Jew and Gentile in the fellowship of God’s people. In Christ, there are not two camps – Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Rather, there is one camp – Christians – made up of people who are genetic descendants of Abraham and people unrelated to Abraham by DNA. The Law contained “commandments expressed in ordinances” that were abolished by Christ and made irrelevant such that God has one people among the nations.

Accordingly, Paul can write firmly that,

the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7:12).

Needless to say, throughout the Old Testament, one finds passages that emphasize the importance of the Law as well as its place in the life of those following God. For example, Psalm 119 is an anthem to importance and beauty of the Law. This Psalm contains the motto my friend Kevin used to say repeatedly while we were in law school,

Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day (Ps. 119:97).

Much more could be said through examining scriptures, but careful examination should bring one to realize that the church is not being Biblical if it asserts that the Old Testament Law no longer has any place in the life of a believer.

Position: “The moral section of the Old Testament Law is binding on believers, but not the ‘other’ sections.”

This position has a certain appeal to it. It allows one to take the antiquated sacrifice instructions of the Biblical Law and shift them to irrelevancy, because Christ fulfilled the sacrifices, and those no longer apply. Similarly, one can take the Laws that seem superseded by the ministry of Christ, like keeping the Sabbath on Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, and remove them from practice, while maintaining that one still cannot commit adultery, kill another, or commit some other “immoral” practice found in the Biblical Law.

The position is plagued by problems, however. The main problem is how one classifies a Law as moral or ceremonial. Some Laws seem easy to classify. Using the examples I set out previously illustrates my point. Killing a goat to atone for sins is no longer relevant because Christ has fully atoned for sins. Killing another person in cold blood is a moral wrong that continues today.

Yet some of the Laws seem to be more difficult to define as “ceremonial” or “moral.” Is this “ceremonial,” and hence, not followed today? Or is it “moral” and binding?

You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall be with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me (Ex. 22:29-30).

Furthermore, some moral Laws no one wants to follow and so are excused as “antiquated” moral Laws. Consider this instruction:

You shall not permit a sorceress to live (Ex. 22:18).

How many Christians believe it right to kill a sorceress? Does it help to know that the word in Hebrew (*kashaf* /כַּשַׁף) can include one who reads fortunes or astrology?

One of the most notable problems with dividing the Law into these sections of “ceremony” (disregard!); relevant moral law (follow!); and, irrelevant moral law (disregard!) is it is really what is termed “*post hoc*” analysis. From the Latin phrase denoting something that is “after this,” *post hoc* analysis should always be viewed with suspicion. It is particularly prone to being incorrect.

Post hoc analysis is where one makes decisions about what is what afterwards. An example would be if I wanted to determine who was the best rock band in history. Knowing ahead of time that I think the answer should be U2, I might devise my test to where the conclusion is U2. Rather than using a measurement of how many other musicians cite a band as “most influencing,” which might lead one to answer, “The Beatles,” I might instead rely on criteria of who played the most concerts attended by the most fans over the most number of years. Then I would get U2.

In other words, if one fashions a test or criteria *after* one already has a position, one can easily craft criteria to justify one’s position. In the case of the Law being grouped into applicable buckets and inapplicable buckets, one is almost always engaged in this *post hoc* analysis. One can get the result one wants.

Assigning buckets in a *post hoc* fashion to determine what Law is binding and what isn’t can lead one to accept that murder is still wrong. Similarly, it can let one uphold the Old Testament laws against bestiality. But one doesn’t need to worry about the injunction against wearing clothes made from blended fabrics, nor having a vegetable garden with two types of veggies.

You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material (Lev. 19:19).

Looking at these approaches that I think are inadequate for understanding Scripture as well as for living a holy life, should cause one to consider another alternative

approach to the Biblical Law. I have already set out the premise of that approach in the previous chapter, but here I begin to go into more detail.

The Alternate View: The Biblical Law reflected God’s holy ethics in a way that would guide Israel in its time and place of history to fulfill God’s purposes by walking in God’s holiness.

This approach recognizes what has already been said but taking it a step further. The Biblical Law should not be understood as an arbitrary list of do’s and don’ts. Nor should it be understood as God’s way for humanity to justify or make oneself right before God in some eternal sense that merits eternal life. The Biblical Law didn’t fail in some mission to enable people to merit eternal life.

Rather the Biblical Law was God telling his people through Moses, “Here is what a covenant relationship with me will entail. Here is what you will need to do to be uniquely my people living under a unique protection and fulfilling a unique purpose. Here is my expression of my morality in this day and age, and you are to walk in it accordingly. This will set you apart as *my people*, and not simply one nation among many.

If one understands Biblical Law as this reflection of God’s character and morality, then one can better assess how to use it today. It will never be used to justify oneself before God. Nor should it be used to draw distinctions in the midst or among those who are God’s people. It shouldn’t be disregarded or disparaged. Rather it can show one what God is like. It can show one how utterly different God is from humanity. In its moral perfection, one can see the moral perfection of God. That means one can see Christ in the Law. The Law can also show each on the compelling need and absolute essentialness of the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

To see the Law in this way, although in what I have written before this might be surprising, I do find it helpful to look at the various Laws in “buckets.” This may fall prey to *post hoc* analysis and so it is worthy of careful and prayerful consideration, but buckets help me digest the Law. I inherently like classifying and sorting things.

Part of why my bucket system isn’t a full mimicry of the *post hoc* analysis I decry earlier is that my buckets are not hard and fast. I find most Laws could easily fit into one or more buckets. I also think the results of a Law being placed in one bucket or another is not the same as the bucketing system I described earlier.

The Laws generally fall into buckets for me based on the *purpose* of the Laws.

- **BUCKET 1:** Some Laws are there to help the Israelites get along with each other. These Laws stop crime (e.g., assault and battery in Ex. 21:12 “Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death.”); promote social justice, setting up peace among the people and honoring individual rights (e.g., Ex. 23:1-3 “You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness. You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit.”); set up treatment regimens for quarantining those with contagious illnesses (e.g., leprosy in Lev. 13-14); and more.

In a modern law school, these would be criminal and civil laws. They would include laws of court, rules of evidence, tort laws, family law, property law, and immigration law. These are the laws that help a society function without anarchy.

- **BUCKET 2:** Some Laws are ceremonial laws explaining the how’s and why’s of Israel’s worship of God. These Laws told Israel when and how to sacrifice, set up the priestly system to oversee and perform the ceremonies, and more.

Israel was called into a relationship with God. They were God’s “chosen people.” They were chosen for a purpose, but because they were chosen, they had a set of rules and processes for relating to God. Israel had a fuller revelation of God than the nations, but part of that fuller revelation was steeped in the ceremonies that helped define God, and align the people with God.

- **BUCKET 3:** I think it useful to analyze “Bucket 2” and its ceremonial laws in a distinct way for those laws related to issues of atonement. Atonement references how one atoned or made right before God the sin one committed. The atonement involved ceremony, so the buckets share common water, but the atonement Laws hold a distinction not found in all of the other ceremonial laws, and hence I give them separate treatment.

The recognition that the Law conveyed the character and morality of God who called Israel into relationship set up a problem that was addressed in the atonement laws. When Israelites (corporately or individually) violated the

Law, Israel didn't simply do a social taboo. The violation amounted to "sin," because the Law reflected God's morality and character. So for Israel to continue in relationship with God, Israel's sin had to be dealt with in some just fashion. The just punishment for sin would ultimately be the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. But in foreshadowing the sacrifice of Christ, God set up a scheme for atonement found in the Law.

- **BUCKET 4:** A host of God's Laws to Israel belong in what I consider the "national bucket." These are Laws that marked Israel as a different nation. It made Israel set apart in obvious ways, distinct from the common nations or people groups around it. The nations ate pork; Israel was to refrain. The nations worked daily; Israel was to have a day of rest each week. Other men went through life uncircumcised. Israelite men were to bear the mark of circumcision.

God was placing Israel in a unique position geographically. Israel was to inherit the land mass that served as the highway from the strong northern nations of Mesopotamia (Assyrians, Babylonians, etc.) and the strong southern kingdom of Egypt. When the Mesopotamians wanted to conquer Egypt, they marched through Israel. When the Egyptians wanted to conquer Mesopotamia, they marched through Israel. Israel was geographic dead center for war, commerce and trade, and much more. This made Israel's existence precarious. Israel could easily become a vassal state for the empires to the north or south. Yet God assured Israel that it had a role it could play in world events. If Israel followed God's Laws, Israel would stand out from the nations. God would place an umbrella of protection over Israel, and through Israel shine his light into the nations. Of course, the obverse was equally true. If Israel ignored these marks of uniqueness, God would not allow Israel to shine as "God's protected." Israel would be treated like all the other nations. (Though God would still work to effectuate his promises to Abraham to ultimately bless all nations through Israel.)

- **BUCKET 5:** The Ten Commandments are given special treatment by many today, and I put them in a separate bucket for that reason. In the Biblical Law itself, these ten injunctions are not singled out for special adherence to the detriment of the other Laws, but they often are today. So while the water from this bucket certainly sloshes into the other buckets I have set out above, I still find the Ten Commandments worthy of special consideration in thinking on the Law.

I will use these buckets as a convenient way to look at different purposes of the Law. I believe that as one is informed of the purposes of the Law, one can better understand and apply the Law where and when it should be applied. This will also enable one to better see God in those Laws, and give him corresponding respect, honor, and glory.

So with that, I begin analyzing the buckets, appreciating the Psalmist who taught that when “The law of God is in one’s heart; one’s steps do not slip” (Psalm 37:31).