

Part III

Other Laws

Chapter 17

Role of the Ten Commandments in Christian Life

The Sabbath is part of the Ten Commandments. If the Sabbath can be done away, at least in its literal sense, then how should Christians approach the Ten Commandments? Don't Christians worldwide respect the Ten Commandments? What role should the Ten Commandments, also called the Decalogue, have in Christian life and behavior?

Many Christians teach that the Ten Commandments were spoken by God himself, written in stone, and are the major expression of God's moral law, based on the unchanging character of God and therefore permanent. But many of those same Christians say that the Fourth Commandment has been changed. However, it makes no sense to have an unchanging moral law that has a change in it.

Authority for change

If we focus on the Ten Commandments, we might wonder why one command would become obsolete. But if we view the Law of Moses as a whole, we see *hundreds* of laws that are no longer in force. The Sabbath is not an isolated case, but a representative case. After we see that the New Testament sets aside hundreds of biblical commands, it is less of a surprise that the list of obsolete laws happens to include the Sabbath, too.

Early Christians may have been surprised that *any* biblical command (including the sacrifices and rituals) could become unnecessary. If God had given these laws, who could say that they were done away? Only one

authority could do away with canonical commands: God. So we look to the New Testament to understand why old laws are obsolete. We will briefly summarize what we have covered so far.

The New Testament does not itemize all the valid Old Testament laws, nor all the obsolete ones. Some laws (unclean meats, sin sacrifices, washings) are mentioned; others (tassels on garments, grain offerings) are not. The New Testament quotes some Old Testament commands (even ones that are now obsolete) with approval; others are quoted as being inadequate or in need of replacement (Matthew 5:31-37). Commands from the Ten Commandments, the Holiness Code in Leviticus, and Deuteronomy are quoted as valid; other commands from those same groups are treated as obsolete. Some are moral and eternal; others are not, and in this, the Ten Commandments are no different than other Old Testament laws. There is no reason to give the Ten Commandments special treatment, or to require a different method of biblical interpretation for them.

Commands from the last half of the Ten Commandments may be quoted together, or they can be quoted with another law of similar authority (Matthew 19:18-19). Although the New Testament includes most of the Ten Commandments, it does not quote the Ten Commandments as a whole as a moral authority for Christians. It uses the last half several times, but it never uses the whole. It never even refers to it by name. When the New Testament quotes the last half together, there is

no reason to assume that it is endorsing any larger group, such as the Ten, the Book of the Covenant, or the old covenant as a whole.

A change in covenants

Although the New Testament cites many individual Old Testament laws as valid, it does not specify a general category as permanently valid. However, when it declares laws obsolete, it uses large categories. In Acts 15, it is “the Law of Moses.” In 1 Corinthians 9:20, it is “the law.” In Galatians 3:17, it is “the law” that came 430 years after Abraham, that is, at the time of Moses. In Ephesians 2:15 it is “the law with its commandments and ordinances,” the law that separated Jews from Gentiles. In Hebrews 8:13 it is the Sinai covenant. Although various terms are used, there is a consistency in what is meant. A large category of law is being declared obsolete. That does not mean that every command within the category is obsolete, but the package itself is.

What is the New Testament explanation for this significant change in divinely given laws? It is a change in covenants. The book of Hebrews makes this clear in chapters 7–10. Although the focus in Hebrews is on the ceremonial laws relevant to the priesthood, the conclusion is more broadly stated — it is the covenant itself that is obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). A new covenant has replaced the Sinai-Moses covenant. The Sabbath, which was a sign of the Mosaic covenant (Exodus 31:16-17), is obsolete, and so is the covenant itself. The new covenant has some similarities to the old, but it is a *new* covenant.

Hebrews uses strong terms: laws are set aside, changed, abrogated, abolished, because one covenant has ended and another has begun. Of course, since the old and the new covenants were given by the same God, we should expect some continuity. In all his covenants, God proposes to be God for his people. We should expect truly moral laws to be found in both covenants. It should be no surprise that laws against adultery, which predated Abraham, should also be included in Sinai, a later and larger package of laws. But we accept those laws as valid not because they were given to Moses (the fact that a law was given to Moses does not automatically make it valid today), but for other reasons.

Paul tells us that the Law of Moses was a temporary addition to the Abrahamic promises (Galatians 3:16-25). The Sinai covenant, which includes

the Ten Commandments, civil laws and ceremonial laws, came 430 years after Abraham, and it was designed to come to an end when Christ came.

John Goldingay puts it this way: “Paul does not mean that the Hebrew *scriptures* are annulled. Indeed, his argument that the law is annulled appeals to these scriptures. But he does assert that they are no longer binding *as law*.”¹ And the Bible makes no exception for the core of the Sinai covenant, the Ten Commandments.

Paul and the Ten Commandments

Paul deals with the Ten Commandments directly in 2 Corinthians 3, where he describes laws written on stone tablets and Moses’ face shining with glory. It is clear that he is talking about the Ten Commandments, and he calls them “the ministry of death” (verse 7). Let’s look at this chapter in detail.

Paul begins this chapter by pointing out that he, the apostle Christ used to begin the Corinthian church, did not need a “letter of recommendation” from anybody: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody” (verses 1-2). The people themselves served as proof that Paul was an apostle of Christ: “You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God” (verses 3-4).

Paul explains that God is the real source of his authority: “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent *as ministers of a new covenant* — not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (verses 5-6). The new covenant had already been instituted, and Paul was serving God in it.

The new contrasted with the old covenant

Paul has already mentioned “tablets of stone,” and then the “new covenant.” He then builds the contrast between the new and the old. His authenticity as an

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¹ John Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, second edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), p. 44.

apostle of Christ is not built on the old covenant, but on the new — not on the letters engraved in stone, but in the Spirit of God.

Let's see how he develops the contrast: "Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?" (verses 7-8). Paul is talking about something written on stone, at a time when Moses' face shone with glory. It is clear that he is talking about the Ten Commandments. This is what was written on stone. This is when Moses' face shone (Exodus 34:29). Paul is calling the Ten Commandments a "ministry that brought death." Paul was not a minister of the letter (the Ten Commandments), but of the Spirit.

Notice that he does not say, like some people want him to, that he was a minister of "the spirit of the law." Instead of combining law and spirit, Paul equated the law with the letter, and he made a *contrast* between the Law and the Spirit of God. Of course, it was God who gave the Law. Nevertheless, Paul saw a fundamental contrast between the Law and the Spirit, between the old and the new. There is continuity, of course, for both old and new are covenants of the same God. But even though God does not change, and his underlying principles do not change, his covenants do.

Paul explains some differences in the next verses: "If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!" (verse 9). The Ten Commandments were a ministry that condemned people. They had some glory, but not nearly as much as the new covenant. The Ten Commandments cannot bring righteousness, but the new covenant does.

A fading glory

"For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory" (verse 10). The Ten Commandments have no glory now, Paul is saying, in comparison to the new covenant, which brings life and righteousness.

"And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!" (verse 11). What was fading away? Moses' face was fading, but Paul is not talking about Moses' face any more — he is talking about "the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone." That is what "came with glory" (verse 7). That is what was fading away.

The Ten Commandments, Paul is saying, came with glory, but they are fading away, just as surely as the glory of Moses' face also faded. The new covenant not only has much greater glory, but it also "lasts." The Ten Commandments, Paul implies, do not last forever. They were designed as a temporary "ministry of condemnation," designed to lead people to Christ. Notice the contrasts Paul has made:

The Ten Commandments	the new covenant
written on tablets of stone (v. 4)	written on the heart.
the letter that kills (verse 6)	the Spirit that gives life
a ministry that brought death (v 7)	a ministry that brings life
engraved in letters on stone (v. 7)	a ministry of the Spirit
came with glory (verse 7)	even more glorious
the ministry that condemns (v. 9)	ministry that brings righteousness
have no glory now in comparison	the surpassing glory (v. 10)
came with glory (verse 11)	has much greater glory
are now fading away (verse 11)	the ministry that lasts

What has faded?

Paul clearly says that the Ten Commandments, although good, are temporary and fading. But what has faded? Some people say that the Ten Commandments, instead of fading, are now *more* binding. They want to expand the Ten instead of letting them fade.

But there is a fundamental change in the way people relate to God. The old way is a written law that condemns people to death. The new way is the Holy Spirit, and this new way brings forgiveness and life. The Spirit leads us to obey God, but this is a fundamentally different relationship, a different basis of relating to God.

There is some basic continuity between the old covenant and the new. Most of the Ten Commandments are quoted with approval in the New Testament. Those commands reflect aspects of God's law that were in effect long before Sinai — from the beginning. One commandment, however, is not repeated in the New — the Sabbath command. It was a ceremonial law, instituted for a temporary time period. This is where the Ten have faded.

A better standard of conduct

In other words, we do not look to the stone tablets as the standard of Christian living. Every moral law within the Ten Commandments is also found outside of the Ten Commandments, and one of the Ten has been set aside in the New Testament. The Ten Commandments are neither sufficient nor necessary for Christian behavior. Saying, “It’s one of the Ten Commandments” is no more proof of current validity than saying, “It’s in Deuteronomy.”

An Old Testament law’s validity cannot be assessed by its location — it must be assessed by new covenant criteria. Theft is immoral not because God happened to forbid it in the Ten Commandments, but because by new covenant principles we can see that it was immoral long before God gave this law to Moses.

An Old Testament law cannot be evaluated by its location—it must be evaluated by new covenant criteria.

Love is moral not because it was written on stone (it wasn’t!), but because it was moral long before the Torah was written. The Ten Commandments are not the standard of comparison we need.

In showing that the Sabbath command is obsolete, in showing that the Ten Commandments as a group have been superseded and that they should not be our primary point of reference, I do not mean to argue that Christians have no moral standards or ethical duties. The New Testament has hundreds of commands, hundreds of behavioral expectations for how forgiven people should respond to their Savior. Some of these commands are also found in the Ten Commandments, but their validity does not rest on the fact that they were on the stone tablets. As shown in 2 Corinthians 3, we cannot equate stone with permanence. The validity of such laws rests on moral principles that are much bigger than the specific situation of Sinai.

Jesus affirmed the validity of the first commandment (Matthew 4:10), and of five more (Matthew 19:18-19). But the two most important commandments were not even in the Ten Commandments (Matthew 22:37-39; 23:23); Jesus also said that true morality went beyond the wording of the Ten Commandments (Matthew 5:21-28). The Ten Commandments, when isolated from their historical context in Exodus (as it often is in modern teaching),

easily becomes a mere list of rules, a legalism.

Jesus was not claiming to be simply a better interpreter of Moses — he claimed to have more authority than Moses. He allowed what the Law of Moses did not (John 8:1-11) and forbade something that Moses allowed (Matthew 5:33-34). He was setting a new standard for right conduct. In Jesus’ last instructions to his disciples, he told them to teach people to obey, but the standard he gave was not the Ten Commandments, but his own teaching. Jesus’ teaching is a better basis for ethics than the Ten Commandments is, and it is unethical for us to refer people to an inferior standard when a better one is available.

Reading the Ten Commandments

What then are we to do with the Ten Commandments? How are we to approach them as Scripture inspired by God, “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16)?

I suggest that we approach them as they are written — as a report of what God gave his people in the time of Moses. We read it as a story first, before jumping to conclusions that we are supposed to obey every command within it. The Ten Commandments, like other Old Testament laws, were given as a rule for Israelite behavior. That was its original intent. However, the New Testament tells us that the Old Testament is *informative* but not *normative*. If we approach the entire Torah as law, as commands, then we quickly run into erroneous conclusions about what Christians are required to do — thus showing that this method is not valid. We need to read it as history.

Even the commands must be read as part of a story. When we read in Genesis 17 that the males among God’s people were to be circumcised, we do not assume that we should do so today. When we read in Exodus 13 that God’s people are to have a festival of matzos, we do not assume that we should do so today. Those commands were given for a specific people.

So also the commands we find in Exodus 20. They begin with this preface: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” This gives a historical context to the situation: it was a multitude of just-escaped slaves, in a desert,

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surrounded by pagan nations. And God gave them laws that would compensate for their lack of civic experience, laws that would help them resist paganism, laws that would help them become a distinct nation, laws that would help them organize society in a new land. These laws were good for their situation, but it is another question as to whether those same laws are good for us today in our situations.

Much of the Old Testament is history. Nevertheless, 2 Timothy 3 can say that this type of writing, since it is part of Scripture, is “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” Stories can help inform our ethics. They can illustrate consequences, misunderstandings, deficiencies and flexibilities. The story of Abraham and circumcision is useful for teaching and for training in righteousness without requiring us to practice circumcision. The commands about sacrifice are to be read as story, not as commands for us today. The details may be useful symbols, but they are read first as part of a story, not as currently valid law. Even the civil laws of the Old Testament are useful illustrations of how moral principles may be fleshed out in a specific culture, but we do not assume that they are all valid today.

Genesis is a story, and in that story God gave certain commands and implied other commands. Some of them apply to us today and some do not. Exodus continues that story and gives more commands, commands about how people should worship, how to behave with one another and what to do when someone disobeys. Some of these commands apply to us today; others do not. So we must see them first in the context in which the books give them: a covenant or arrangement God made with specific people at specific times in history, a covenant God has now revealed to be obsolete.

Instructive, but not required

The commands that God gave them are *instructive* but not necessarily *imperative* for us. They may have value as an example, and may be reinterpreted for different contexts. Their ethical value must be cautiously explored, not assumed, and in our evaluation we must give greater weight to the New Testament revelation, the part of the canon that has the authority to set aside and change the laws of the Old Testament.

When we study Old Testament ethics, the Ten Commandments are an important law code. They tell us basic ethical rules that God gave those people back then. But that is *descriptive* for ancient Israel, not

prescriptive for Christian ethics. Christians have been told to look to Jesus Christ as a greater authority, a better ethical example and a better teacher of righteous living.

Since the Sabbath command has been set aside in the New Testament, no one should preach or imply that the Ten Commandments are a valid ethical standard for Christians. As a group, they are not. They have an important exception right in the middle of them, and it is confusing to say Ten when only Nine are meant. It is inaccurate and misleading.

Moreover, Christians have a better ethical standard in the New Testament — a bigger body of literature with better ethical balance. We have the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Of course, the Christian church has used the Ten Commandments for centuries, from the second century onwards. But it is also clear that these well-intentioned affirmations about the Ten Commandments have been turned into unbiblical commands for modern Sabbath-keeping. This is a theological error that should cease. We should point people to Christ, not to Moses, for instruction on how to live like a Christian.

Review

- The Sabbath is only one of hundreds of obsolete worship laws.
- Paul contrasted law and spirit; he did not combine them.
- The Ten Commandments cannot bring righteousness.
- We evaluate Old Testament laws by new covenant criteria.
- Question: How are Old Testament commands valuable as part of a *story* of how God dealt with various people?
- Why do people focus on the Ten Commandments in particular?

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