

Chapter 1

The Strange Variety of Old Testament Laws

Someone once asked Jesus, Out of all the laws in the Bible, which is the most important? (Matthew 22:36). Jesus quoted two laws from the Old Testament: “Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (verses 37-40).

Jesus says that our most basic duty is to love — and those commands are found in the Old Testament — in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, to be exact.

But if we go to *the very next verse* in Leviticus, we find some unusual commands: “Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” (Leviticus 19:19; also found in Deuteronomy 22:11).

In other words, the Bible tells people not to wear fabric made of two kinds of fiber. In ancient times, it might have been a mix of wool and flax. In modern times, this might mean a wool-polyester blend, or a cotton-polyester shirt. What is a Christian supposed to do with a law like that? Should we say, The Bible says it, so I will do it whether or not I understand it? Or should we say, That doesn’t sound anything like Jesus?

The good news is, that we *can* understand why this law is not part of Christianity. And the good news is, that when we understand *why* a law is or isn’t valid, then we know how to evaluate *other* laws, such as tithing and Sabbath. That’s our goal. But first, let’s look at a few more laws.

Civil laws

The Law of Moses says, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain” (Deuteronomy 25:4). Animals should be treated humanely, and should share in the results of their work. Paul quoted this verse with

approval, using it as a principle that human workers ought to be paid (1 Corinthians 9:9-10).

Another principle regarding animals is found in Deuteronomy 22:6-7: “If you come across a bird’s nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go.” This is a good principle of wildlife conservation — but is it part of Christian duty?

Should Christian churches lobby for laws like this?

A good economic principle can be seen in Deuteronomy 20:19-20: “When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them?

However, you may cut down trees that you know are not fruit trees and use them to build siege works until the city at war with you falls.” In other words, you can chop down as many trees as you want, but save the fruit trees for your own benefit.

A safety rule can be seen in 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.” In ancient Israel, roofs were usually flat, and people used them as part of their living and working area. It made good sense to build a short wall around them so people wouldn’t accidentally fall off. But is this law required for Christians today? Wouldn’t it be enough to simply keep people off of the roof in the first place?

It is not always easy to discern the purpose of some of the laws of Moses. For example, the next verse: “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” (verse 9). We do not know why the grapes would be “defiled” if the owner planted a little barley and beans in between the grapes. If there’s plenty

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of room between the rows, what's wrong with using the space for something else?

Another clothing law

Verse 12 has another rule: "Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear." Another law is even more specific: "You are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel" (Numbers 15:38). What was the purpose of these tassels? "You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes" (verse 39).

Every time the Israelites saw these tassels, they were to remember their responsibility to obey God. Orthodox Jews still wear prayer shawls with blue tassels (the modern blue-and-white Israeli flag was modeled after a prayer shawl). If Christians want to obey God, should they wear blue threads in tassels on their garments? If not, why not?

Agricultural and festival laws

At the risk of being tedious, let's notice a few more laws. God commanded his people to kill Passover lambs each year (Exodus 12:1-8, 24-27). He claimed ownership of every firstborn male, both human and animal (Exodus 13:1-2). The animals were to be given to the Lord, and payment given for every firstborn son (verses 11-15). God gave these laws, and Christians need to ask, Are these laws important, or not? Do we have to keep them in order for them to be useful for instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16)?

An interesting agricultural law was given at Mt. Sinai: "For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may

eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove" (Exodus 23:10-11).

Every seven years, the land was to have some rest. This sabbatical year might have been good for Israel's soil and climate, but is it still God's law for farmers in America or in tropical countries? Are we willing to trust God on this — or does he even tell us to do this? If God doesn't want us to obey these laws, why did he put them in the Bible? Should we obey his command to set aside every 50th year as an additional land-sabbath? (Leviticus 25:8-12).

If we can ignore these laws, should we also ignore "You shall not steal" (Deuteronomy 5:19)? Why one and not the other? That's what this book is about.

God commanded his people to observe three annual festivals — and they weren't Easter, Labor Day and Christmas (Exodus 23:14). They were the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Harvest, and the Festival of Ingathering (verses 15-16). He commanded all men to appear before him at a designated site in the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 16:16). He told his people to make shelters out of tree branches and live in them for a week (Leviticus 23:39-43).

He commanded Abraham to circumcise himself, and all his children were to be circumcised (Genesis 17:11; Leviticus 12:2-3). The early church dealt with this specific issue in Acts 15, and they concluded that non-Jewish

Christians do not have to be circumcised (we'll cover that in more detail in chapter 3). Paul explained that physical circumcision was not necessary (Romans 2:28-29). Uncircumcised people can be righteous in God's sight (Romans 3:30). But if God gave this law, why shouldn't we try to keep it?

"Why" is the key question. When we understand why, then we will be able to evaluate other laws.

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Review 2

- We do not have to obey all the commands God gave Abraham — for example, circumcision.
- We do not have to obey all the commands God gave his people through Moses — for example, blue tassels.
- Even if a law isn't *required*, should Christians try to keep Old Testament laws if we can? For example, it is not *difficult* to wear blue tassels. Should we recommend it?
- What is wrong with the logic of saying, "God said it, so I'll do it"?
- Some people teach this principle: "A law remains valid until it is specifically revoked." Is this principle true?

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