

# WHICH OLD TESTAMENT LAWS APPLY FOR TODAY?

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If Jesus told you not to think something, would you believe Him? Or would you continue to suppose that something were true when Jesus told you plainly it was not? For example, if Jesus said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets," would you assume that Jesus came to do away with the law?

Surprisingly, many Christians think that Jesus came to destroy the law when He said specifically that He did not. He said: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).

The word "fulfill" does not mean abolish. Nor does it mean merely "to obey"; obey is an entirely different word. Jesus is saying that He came to "fill up" the law, implying that the law was not "all there." It was not yet "full."

What did He mean by this statement? The best way to find out is to read on: "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18, NIV).

Far, then, from destroying the law, Jesus would not even diminish it—not a jot or a title was to be removed. On the contrary, more was to be added.

If we had any doubt about Jesus' intent, it will be dispelled as we continue to study the Sermon on the Mount. For Jesus proceeded to illustrate what He meant by the preceding statement. His illustration is found beginning in verse 21: "You have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment..."

"Thou shalt not kill" is one of the Ten Commandments. Did Jesus relax this requirement, or did He make it even more strict?

How about another illustration? In verse 27, He cites another of the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Then He expands on the Commandments by saying, "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart."

Did Jesus take something away from the law, or did He add something to it?

What Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount is moving from the letter of the law into the spirit of the law. Instead of dealing with technicalities of law, He is emphasizing the meaning of the law. Far from destroying the law, Jesus is developing the law.

Understanding that the law is not abolished is a powerful key to understanding the Bible. All sorts of obscure scriptures suddenly become crystal clear.

Yet, if some questions are made clearer, new questions are raised. If neither jot nor tittle were to pass from the law, what do we do with those Old Testament laws which have no discernible application in the 20th century?

Take for example the instructions found in Numbers 15:38-40: "Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout

their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue: And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring: That ye may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God.”

We know many Christians believe in keeping the Sabbath on the seventh day; know Christians who follow the Old Testament dietary laws; but is there any Christian in the 20th century who actually places a cord, tassel or ribbon of blue on the fringes of his garments in response to this command?

Why, then, would a person keep one of these laws and not the other?

There are, of course, those who simply abolish all the Old Testament laws and handle the problem in that way. The idea of the total abolition of law may be convenient, but it doesn't satisfy most Christians. It leaves too many unanswered questions. The difficulty is that there are so many Old Testament laws that a Christian clearly should obey. There are too many New Testament references to Old Testament laws still in effect. No, the question must be approached from another angle.

Writers and commentators have been most ingenious in their efforts to discern the difference between various Old Testament laws. Some have thought they perceived a difference between the law of Moses and the law of God. Another may put a difference between moral and ceremonial law. Someone else will see a difference between “commandments” and “ordinances.” Yet another feels that both commandments and statutes should be kept, while ritualistic or ceremonial ordinances should not.

But, for some reason, none of these theories has gained general acceptance. The reason is relatively simple. None of these ideas finds sufficient support in the Bible. The biblical writers do not observe the nice legal distinctions we attempt to make. They seem almost careless in the use of terms like “the law of Moses” and “the law of God.” Or they use the expression “the law” to refer equally to the Ten Commandments, the ceremonial law, the law of Moses, the law of God. And even the entire Pentateuch.

Even though the biblical writers do not observe the distinctions we would like, a definition of terms might be helpful. There are three terms that need to be understood. The first is “commandments.” Most of us consider these to be absolutes. They are fundamental principles of divine law which apply to all men in all circumstances in all generations. They are fundamentally rooted in the nature of man, the nature of things, and the nature of relationships, and cannot change. For example, it always has been, it is, and it always will be, destructive to human relationships to lie to one another. It is firmly rooted in the nature of things.

The second term is “statute.” A statute anticipates future problems and attempts to render judgment on them in advance. A statute is “applied” law.

The third category is “judgments.” Judgments are also applied law, but there's an important difference between statutes and judgments. Statutes are enacted before the fact. Judgments are rendered after the fact. Suppose, for example, a man appeared before the judges in Moses' day alleging that his new bride was not a virgin. He wants a divorce. The girl, on the other hand, claims that she was a virgin at the time of their marriage. What were they to do? The law contained no specific instructions prior to this moment in time as to precisely how such a matter was to be handled. Moses commonly consulted God on these matters, and you will find God's decision on just such a case in Deuteronomy 22:13-21.

Once a judgement is written, it becomes a permanent part of the law. It may be cited in future cases as a “precedent.” Even though the specific situation may never arise again, a judgment will remain in the law books for generations influencing numerous related cases. They become a permanent part of law.

Even though the author of Deuteronomy does not specify that the law cited in Deuteronomy 22 is a “judgment,” it seems highly unlikely that such a law would have ever been made without a specific case to deal with. Much Old Testament law is comprised of “judgments,” even though the fact may not be directly noted.

In this simple fact lies the key to understanding Jesus’ statement in the Sermon on the Mount. He did not come to destroy a law like the “tokens of virginity” of Deuteronomy 22. He came to emphasize the meaning of the law. Not one jot or one tittle of this law is to pass away or be abolished—even for a society that no longer observes the tokens of virginity. The law is there to be consulted, to be cited as a precedent in any applicable case involving human relations.

For example, this law teaches us that if a person is accused of a crime or sin, he or any interested party, has the unalterable right to submit any evidence of his innocence.

This law also makes it plain that it is a sin to falsely accuse another person and bring an evil name upon him. The law justifies the awarding of damages in such a case.

But perhaps the most important thing to be noted in this passage is that the judgment on the “tokens of virginity” is not a law about virginity, fornication or even false accusation. It is probably the oldest illustration known to man of one of the greatest principles of God’s law: No man (or woman) shall be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law. Sound familiar? It should. It’s one of the cornerstones of the Constitution of the United States of America.

What we see for the most part in the Old Testament are illustrative applications of a spiritual law to a physical people.

This is why the letter of Moses’ law was inadequate in Jesus’ day. The social structure had changed. Consequently, it was necessary for Jesus, not to destroy the law, but to fill it up. This is why in the Sermon on the Mount He repeatedly referred to what had been said to them of old time and emphasized “but I say unto you.” The letter of the law could not pass away, for it served as a permanent and valid illustration of God’s will as applied in given circumstances. But the letter of the law was not enough for the Christian to live by.

This is why Jesus, after making it clear that He had no intention of abolishing the law, said, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).

This is why Paul said of the Christian ministry, “But our sufficiency is of God; who also hath made us able ministers of the New Testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: For the letter kills, but the spirit gives life.”

Paul is speaking of the administration of death—that administration which required the death penalty without mercy at the hands of two or three witnesses. But the New Testament ministry does not administer the death penalty. We administer mercy.

It’s important to realize that while the law itself does not change, the application of the law must change in different circumstances. For example, there are Old Testament laws designed to protect the rights of women which, if applied literally in the 20th century, would have exactly the opposite effect. The Old Testament laws protecting women were given at a time when society considered women as chattel.

For example, study carefully Exodus 21:7-11. This law begins: “And if a man sell his daughter to be a maidservant, she shall not go out as the menservants do.”

What a shocking statement! Does this mean God approves of a man selling his daughter? In that society, and under the conditions described, yes, He did. Notice that the maid in this case is being betrothed either to her master or her master’s son. What it amounts to is a sort of “reverse dowry” process. The man doing the selling is quite poor, and the man doing the buying is quite wealthy. The girl is moving into a wealthy marriage.

The law is designed to protect the rights of the woman. The man who “bought” a maiden in these circumstances had very specific responsibilities. Without this law, he may have done with her as he pleased. He may have sold her to a strange nation or he may have simply thrown her into the street.

For a man to sell his daughter in our society would be abominable and completely contrary to the spirit of this law, even though within the letter of the law. Instead of protecting the rights of women, it would be destroying the rights of women in our society.

This is what we mean when we say that some Old Testament laws, if applied literally in the 20th century, would have exactly the opposite effect of that intended by God.

How does all this answer our original question, “Which Old Testament laws should we keep today?” First of all, for a Christian to attempt to keep the letter of the law without understanding its meaning is to do no better than the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day. But Jesus said that except your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

The letter of the law is critically important in understanding the meaning, purpose, intent, the spirit of the law. That’s why not one jot or one tittle is to pass from the law. But the blind, literal observance of the law can conceivably accomplish exactly the opposite of God’s intent.

How, then, should one proceed? In most cases there is no difficulty. The meaning and intent of the law presents itself with such obvious clarity that one would have to be a willful fool to miss it.

In other cases, however, the meaning is not so obvious and one is often left wondering what, exactly, to do.

The answer lies in understanding the linguistic, historical and social context in which the law was given.

Take, for example, the scriptures we mentioned earlier regarding fringes in the borders or corners of one’s garments (Numbers 15:37-41). In the May-June 1983 edition of *Biblical Archaeology Review* there appeared a fascinating article entitled “Of Hems and Tassels” by Jacob Milgrom (page 61). The author translated the passage in question as follows:

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves tassels (*tsitsit*) on the corners of their garments throughout the generations; let them attach a cord of blue to the tassel at each corner. That shall be your tassel; look at it [the blue cord] and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and your eyes in your lustful urge. Thus you shall be reminded to observe all my commandments and to be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I the Lord your God.”

This passage serves as an excellent illustration of the importance of linguistic, historical and social studies in the interpretation of difficult biblical texts. The commandment to the Israelites to put fringes or tassels on the corners of their garments was not a new concept. It reflected a style of dress already in use among other ancient peoples.

Milgrom includes an illustration with his article of a temple wall relief at Medinet Habu. The temple was built by Rameses III in the first half of the 12th century B.C. Captives of different nationalities are depicted on the relief, among them a Semite and a Philistine both wearing kilts slightly scalloped around the bottom forming “corners” and on the corners of these garments are numerous tassels.

Milgrom points out that the tassels were in fact extensions of the hem and continues, “To understand the significance of the tassel, we must first understand the significance of the hem. The hem of an ancient Near-Eastern garment was not simply a fold sewed to prevent the threads of the cloth from unraveling. The hem of the outer garment or robe made an important social statement. It was usually the most ornate part of the garment. And the more

important the individual, the more elaborate and the more ornate was the embroidery on the hem of his or her outer robe. The tassel must be understood as an extension of such a hem" (page 61).

What becomes abundantly clear when we study ancient Near-Eastern texts is that hems and tassels were a sign of a man's rank and authority—an ancient "status symbol."

Milgrom continues, "In Mesopotamia we find early Akkadian texts (for example, in 18th century Mari) which frequently use the phrase "to cut off the hem" (*sisikta bataqu*). When the hem is cut off, a part of the person's personality is removed. In exorcizing an evil spirit, the exorcists cuts off the hem of the garment worn by the person invaded by the evil spirit; the exorcist then pronounces an incantation over his patient's detached hem. In a Mesopotamian divorce, the husband effects the divorce by cutting off the hem of his wife's robe.

"In Mari a professional prophet or diviner would enclose with his report to the king a lock of his hair and a piece of his hem. Both the hair and the hem served to identify the prophet, but more important, the piece of hem served to guarantee that the prediction was true. Sometimes the hem was impressed on the clay tablet as a kind of signature."

Since the hem of the garment was handmade, and included much elaborate embroidery, each hem was naturally unique. Therefore by impressing part of one's hem on a clay tablet, one insured its authenticity.

This adds enormous significance to an incident that took place between Saul and David. When Saul was pursuing David through the wilderness, Saul turned aside into a cave to relieve himself, unaware that David and his men were hiding in that same cave. Instead of killing Saul, David cut off the hem of Saul's garment. David seems to be protesting that he could easily have killed Saul but that he refused to harm God's anointed.

Milgrom points out that there is a far deeper significance to this passage—that it conveys almost the opposite significance:

"The hem that David cut off was an extension of Saul's person and authority. David did in fact harm the Lord's anointed; that is why David immediately felt remorse for what he had done... Although protesting that he had not lifted a finger or a hand against the Lord's anointed (I Samuel 24:10), David had in fact committed a symbolic act—cutting off Saul's hem—of enormous significance. This significance was not lost on King Saul; he understood full well: 'Now I know that you will become king'" (I Samuel 24:20).

Milgrom summarizes this part of his article by stating, "Thus, the significance of the tassel (as well as the elaborate hem) is this: It was worn by those who counted; it was the 'I.D.' of nobility. The requirement of a blue cord in the tassels lends further support to the notion that the tassels signified nobility because the blue dye used to color the threads was extraordinarily expensive" (page 62).

He includes an interesting technical discussion of the methods of obtaining blue, red and purple dyes in early times. The dye was obtained from the hypobranchial gland of the murex snail. Twelve thousand snails were needed to provide 1.4 grams of dye. During the reign of Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon (555-539 B.C.), purple wool was 40 times more expensive than wool dyed with other colors.

"In 200 B.C. one gram of the dye cost \$84, or \$36,660 per pound. Diocletian paid the equivalent of \$8,460 for 328 grams of purple silk from Sidon, or \$11,724 per pound. In 300 A.D. the demand raised the price of this Sidonian silk to \$98,700 per pound (all figures are in 1983 dollars)."

Apparently, God assumed that even the poorest of the Israelites could afford at least one blue thread for each of his tassels. It was, in a sense, symbolic of the fact that Israel was a noble people, a chosen race, a royal priesthood. It also served a similar purpose to the tartan

so familiar in Scottish kilts. It was a clan identifier. All Israelites had a blue thread in their tassel.

Apparently, however, a tassel with a thread of blue signified more than royalty or nobility. Milgrom points out that it also signified the priesthood. "We may assume that the thread of blue was made of wool. The ancients had great difficulty in dyeing linen because the colors would run, so all dyed garments are assumed to be wool. A poor man's garment was commonly made of flax, that is linen—not the fine, expensive linen worn by the priests but the coarse, inexpensive type spun on home looms... The Bible contains a general prohibition against cloth that combines wool and linen, which is referred to by the untranslatable term *sha'atnez* (Deuteronomy 22:11; cf. Leviticus 19:19). Some of the early commentaries (for example Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Deuteronomy 22:12), however, indicate that *sha'atnez*—this combination of wool and linen—was sanctioned and even required in priestly garments. And this rabbinic suggestion has now been confirmed archaeologically. Tassels dating to the Bar Kokhba period (c. 135 A.D.) were found in the Dead Sea caves. These tassels were made of white cords of linen and blue cords of wool, demonstrating that the rabbinic teaching was not speculative abstraction but actual practice. Thus the reason for the prohibition against *sha'atnez*—cloth combining wool and linen—is clear: it would resemble some of the priestly garments made from a blend of linen and wool (e.g., Exodus 28:6; 39:29; Mishna Kilayim 9:1). Thus the combination of wool and linen (*sha'atnez*) is forbidden to the lay Israelite because it is a holy mixture and reserved exclusively for the sanctuary (e.g., Exodus 26:1) and the priest. By using the combination of wool and linen in the tassel, the ordinary Israelite was, however, in a small way, wearing a priestly garment."

This gives us an important insight into the laws regarding mixed fabrics found in Deuteronomy 22:11 and Leviticus 19:19. Some, in attempting to adhere to the letter of the law, have eschewed anything from wool and dacron suits to wool socks with nylon-reinforced heels and toes. It would appear that they have utterly missed the point of those laws, not understanding the historical context. Notice in Exodus 28:8 that the priest's garment was made of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine-twined linen. The dyed fabrics would have been wool, whereas the linen would not have been dyed. The Israelite was prohibited from wearing a priestly garment just as he was prohibited from using the holy anointing oil (Exodus 30:22-33).

Look again at Numbers 15:37-41. What is the 20th century Christian to do about this law? Certainly, to keep the letter of the law would be meaningless in a society where tassels are purely decorative and convey no concept of status, rank or authority. Indeed, for a banker to turn up at work on Monday morning with a tassel at each corner of his garments would almost certainly convey the wrong meaning to everyone in sight. Therefore, merely observing the letter of the law would utterly fail to convey the meaning of the law.

Does this mean the law is done away? No, Jesus said plainly, "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished."

So we must retain the law of Numbers 15:37-41, but it is the meaning of the law that we must especially note. What did the law mean? What was the purpose of the law?

It was to make a public statement that the Israelites were a commandment-keeping people. The Israelites were to look at the tassel and "recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and your eyes in your lustful urge."

Thus, the Israelites reminded themselves and stated to the whole world that they were a commandment-keeping people. They did not follow the designs of their own heart in the method of worshiping God, nor did they follow what they saw with their eyes in pagan religions around them. They adhered to the customs and commandments of God rather than someone else. It is as simple as that.

The 20th century Christian has the Holy Spirit to bring all things to his remembrance—to remind him of the commandments of the Lord that he can observe them and not follow his

heart or his eyes. It is a reminder to all men in all generations that there is a right way to serve and worship God—His way.

Then which Old Testament laws should we keep today? All of them. We keep—retain—every stroke of the pen of God's law, and we study that law to discern the meaning and intent of that law. We then carry out the spirit of the law in our daily lives.

We recognize that the law of Moses is a perfect expression of the will of God as it applied to those people in that time and in those circumstances. It would be the height of folly to treat that law with disdain or to ignore it, for it forms the foundation of the way of life Jesus enjoins on all of His servants.

Jesus Himself developed that law—moved it to a higher standard. He not only developed the spiritual concept of the Ten Commandments in the Sermon on the Mount, He restored original aspects of the law such as divorce and remarriage, and the observance of the Sabbath. He looked forward to the future and adjusted the Passover so that it might be properly kept when there was no temple. He reaffirmed tithing, but made it clear that meticulous tithing was not enough (Matthew 23:23).

Jesus' administration of the law in no way lowered the standards of human conduct. On the contrary, He raised those standards (Matthew 5:20-22, 27-28). At the same time, He introduced the element of mercy (John 8:3-11).

Jesus today administers the law in three important ways. First, we have His teachings as recorded in the gospels. These are full of revelations of God's intent in giving the law.

Second, Christ administers the law personally, as He lives in each of us. As we answer questions for ourselves, Christ in us leads, directs, and teaches. He promised that the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth.

Third, Christ administers the law collectively through the ministry. The ministry does not interfere in our private lives, but they are authorized to interpret the law where it affects our actions as a group.

When we understand these things, we can fully grasp the meaning of the New Covenant promise: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people" (Hebrews 8:10).

Small wonder David sang:

Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law...O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day. Thou through thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are even with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep thy precepts. I have refrained my feet from every evil way, that I might keep thy word. I have not departed from thy judgments: for thou has taught me. How sweet are thy words unto my taste! Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way...Deal with thy servant according unto thy mercy, and teach me thy statutes. I am thy servant; give me understanding, that I may know thy testimonies. It is time for thee, Lord, to work: for they have made void thy law. Therefore I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold. Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be right, and I hate every false way. Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them...Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever...I rejoice at thy word, as one that findeth great spoil. I hate and abhor lying: but thy law do I love. Seven times a day do I praise thee because of thy righteous judgments. Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them [Psalm 119:18, 97-104, 124-129, 160, 162-165].

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Ronald L. Dart (1934–2016) — People around the world have come to appreciate his easy style, non-combative approach to explaining the Bible, and the personal, almost one-on-one method of explaining what's going on in the world in the light of the Bible. After retiring from teaching and church administration in 1995 he started Christian Educational Ministries and the *Born to Win* radio program.