

Jesus And The Old Covenant Laws

1. Did Jesus ever break God's law?

Hebrews 4:15 [NIV] *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.”*

Did Jesus' parents obey the law regarding circumcision?

Luke 2:21 [NIV] *“On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.”*

Did Jesus' parents observe the rules about purification after childbirth?

Luke 2:22-27 [NIV] *“When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.” Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required,”*

Did Jesus' parents keep the annual festivals?

Luke 2:42 [NIV] *“When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom.”*

Did Jesus continue in this pattern of doing the Father's will?

Luke 2:49 [NIV] *“Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?”*

2. Did Jesus teach people to obey everything God had commanded?

Matthew 5:20, 48; 7:21 [NIV] *“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.” ... “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” ... “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”*

Did Jesus encourage people to obey the ritual laws?

Matthew 5:23-24; 8:4 [NIV] *“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.” ... “Then Jesus said to him, “See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.”*

Did Jesus come to destroy the law?

Matthew 5:17 [NIV] *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.”*

Comment: The purpose of Jesus' life and work was to fulfil both the Law (the books of Moses) and the Prophets (other Old Testament books). **He did not destroy the Old Testament. But that doesn't mean that Christians have to keep all the old laws.** As we know, Jesus' ministry caused many changes in the law, changes so dramatic that laws were "*set aside*" or declared "*obsolete*".

Hebrews 7:18; 8:13 [NIV] "*The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless" ... "By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear."*

Some laws remained the same, some were changed, and others were "*abolished*".

Ephesians 2:15 [NIV] "*by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace,"*

When Jesus said, "*I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets,"* **He did not mean that each specific law would stay exactly the same. He meant that the purpose and message of the Law and the Prophets remain exactly the same. The Law and the Prophets pointed to Him and were intended from the beginning to be fulfilled by Him.**

Some of the specific laws of the old covenant are still valid, but many of them were set aside when Jesus came and fulfilled them by his life, death and resurrection. **Matthew 5:17** is not a "*proof*" of any particular law, because this verse does not tell us which specific laws are still valid or which have been changed or set aside.

Old covenant laws (such as the laws of sacrifice) have been set aside precisely because Jesus has fulfilled them. He did not come for the purpose of destroying those laws, but for fulfilling their meaning. However, by fulfilling their meaning, He made it unnecessary for Christians to keep those laws. **They are unnecessary because they have served their purpose by pointing to Jesus.** He is the reality to which they could only point. Now that He has come, they are no longer legally binding.

Yet because they point to Jesus Christ and show how God interacted with a group of people at one time and place, the old covenant laws continue to give us insights into God's will. Even the laws of sacrifice are "*useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*".

2 Timothy 3:16 [NIV] "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."*

Jesus also fulfilled various laws about ritual cleanliness. That did not mean that he never became unclean, of course, because anyone with normal bodily functions would occasionally become unclean.

Deuteronomy 23:10 [NIV] "*If one of your men is unclean because of a nocturnal emission, he is to go outside the camp and stay there."*

Jesus also touched dead people, lepers and other causes of uncleanness. It was not a sin to be unclean. However, Jesus fulfilled the purpose of the purity laws: He was *morally* and *spiritually* pure. He had an internal holiness, set apart to do the work of God.

Jesus fulfilled the purpose of God's laws. **He did not destroy the need for people to obey God,** even though his crucifixion brought a change in some of the details of *how* they obey God.

3. Did Jesus criticise the law of Moses as not being strict enough?

Matthew 19:7-9 [NIV] "*Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."*

Did Jesus teach that a stricter standard of righteousness was necessary?

Matthew 5:20-22, 27-28 [NIV] *“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. “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.” ... “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*

4. The Pharisees were very strict about the small details of the law. What did Jesus say about their carefulness?

Matthew 23:5, 23-28 [NIV] *“Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long;” ... “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices, mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law, justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”*

Are some parts of the law more important than others?

Matthew 9:13; 12:7 [NIV] *“But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” ... “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.”*

5. Did Jesus teach the same things Moses did, or was there also a contrast between these two?

Matthew 11:13 [NIV] *“For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.”*

John 1:17 [NIV] *“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”*

2 Corinthians 3:15-16 [NIV] *“Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”*

When the disciples saw Jesus with Moses and Elijah, who were they told to listen to?

Matthew 17:1-5 [NIV] *“After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, **“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”***

Acts 3:22 [NIV] *“For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you.’”*

Comment: Jesus did not emphasise the same things Moses did. Moses wrote many chapters about the tabernacle and the “*place*” in which God put his name. Jesus said the place did not matter.

John 4:20-24 [NIV] *“Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”*

Moses wrote many chapters about ritual uncleanness; Jesus was much less concerned about it. Instead, Jesus gave much more emphasis to the way people should treat each other.

The law of Moses required many animal sacrifices, but because of the sacrificial death of Jesus, the sacrifices are no longer required. Moses wrote that sins could be atoned for through the performance of rituals, but this was a temporary and external atonement; Jesus simply forgave people as a permanent gift and a cleansed conscience. **Jesus often told people to obey God, but Moses is not the standard by which obedience is now measured.**

6. Who is the final authority for Christians?

Matthew 7:21-29; 10:32-33, 39; 19:29; 28:18-20 [NIV] *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.” ... “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.” ... “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” ... “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.” ... “Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

John 3:25-26; 6:29; 14:21-23; 17:2-3 [NIV] *“An argument developed between some of John’s disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan, the one you testified about, well, he is baptising, and everyone is going to him.” ... “Jesus answered, “**The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.**” ... “**Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.**” Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, “But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?” Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” ... “For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”*

Comment: Jesus, as the Son of God, has more authority than Moses had.

Hebrews 3:1-6 [NIV] *“Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honour than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honour than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a son over God’s house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.”*

Jesus is the standard by which Moses is judged.

Jesus could quote the law of Moses when it supported his point, and he could also criticise the law of Moses as not being strict enough. In some cases the law of Moses requires too much, and in other cases it does not require enough.

Jesus said: Moses said one thing, but I say another.

Matthew 5:21-45 [NIV] *“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”*

Jesus presented himself as the greater authority, the perfect authority, the basis on which people will be judged. Our lives should conform to the standard Jesus set, not the imperfect standard Moses wrote.

In Christianity, some of the laws of Moses are still valid, and others are not (for an example of each, the law about murder and the law about tassels). The New Testament is the authority by which the old covenant is to be understood.

Although the Old Testament is inspired Scripture and part of the Word of God, its purpose was to point to the coming and work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, when it comes to understanding what is

required for Christian behaviour, the Old Testament must be interpreted in light of what the New Testament says, and the New Testament says that the old covenant is obsolete.

Hebrews 8:13 [NIV] *“By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear,”*

But not until all humans have used it to accept we are sinners and need the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as their Saviour, [**Romans 7:7**].