

BIBLICAL ETHICS

2 Timothy 3:16-17

Vol. I, No. 3

c Institute for Christian Economics

November, 1978

God's Uniform Standard of Right and Wrong

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If something was sinful in the Old Testament, it is likewise sinful in the age of the New Testament. Moral standards, unlike the price of gasoline or the changing artistic tastes of a culture, are not fluctuating. In this country there was a time when driving your car at 65 miles per hour was permissible; now any speed above 55 is illegal. But God's laws are not like that: just today, unjust tomorrow. When the Lord makes a moral judgment He is not unsure of Himself, or tentative, or fickle. Unlike human lawmakers God does not change His mind or alter His standards of righteousness: "My covenant I will not violate, nor will I alter the utterance of My lips" (Ps. 89:34). When the Lord speaks, His word stands firm forever. His standards of right and wrong do not change from age to age: "All His precepts are trustworthy. They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness" (Ps. 111:7-8).

Accordingly Jesus spoke with unmistakable clarity when He said, "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of the law to fail" (Lk. 16:17). The coming of God's righteous Son surely could do nothing to change the righteous character of God's laws, even the least of them, for then they would be exposed as unjust and less than eternal in their uprightness. So Christ issues this severe warning: "whoever annuls one of the least of these commandments and so teaches others shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:19). The advent of the Savior and the inauguration of the new age do not have the effect of abrogating the slightest detail of God's righteous commandments. God has not changed His mind about good and evil or what constitutes them.

We can be very glad that God sticks by His word in this way. The authority of His word for human life is as permanent as that word by which He created and governs the world (cf. Ps. 19:1-14; 33:4-11). If God's word to us were not as stable as this, if He were subject to moods and changed His mind from time to time, then we could not rely on anything He told us. If God's law has a fluctuating validity, then so might His promises! If we say that a commandment given by God in the Old Testament is no longer a standard of righteousness and justice for today, then we can equally anticipate that a promise of salvation given by God in the New Testament will in some future day no longer be a permanent guarantee of His favor toward us. But praise the Lord that His word is stable! He never lets us down as did our human parents and human rulers with commands that are unfair and promises that are not kept. Whatever God says endures and cannot be emptied of validity (cf.

John 10:35). God's gracious salvation and the justice of His law shall not be abolished but endure forever:

Hearken unto me, my people; and give ear unto me, O my nation: for a law shall proceed from me, and I will make my judgment to rest for a light of the people. My righteousness is near; my salvation is gone forth, and mine arms shall judge the people; the isles shall wait upon me, and on mine arm shall they trust. Lift up your eyes to the heavens and look upon the earth beneath: for the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment, and they that dwell therein shall die in like manner: but my salvation shall be forever, and my righteousness shall not be abolished. Hearken unto me, ye that know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law; fear ye not the reproach of men, neither be ye afraid of their revilings. For the moth shall eat them up like a garment, and the worm shall eat them like wool: but my righteousness shall be forever, and my salvation from generation to generation (Isa. 51:4-8).

The righteous law of God which condemns our sin is as permanent as the good news from God which promises salvation from sin's judgment.

It is important to remember this, especially when some would tell us that the coming of the New Testament does away with our obligation to the Old Testament's commandments (or many of them anyway). The division of the Bible into two "Testaments" is better understood in the biblical sense of two "Covenants." Prior to the coming of Christ men lived under the Old Covenant which anticipated the Messiah and His work of salvation; after the coming of Christ and His saving work we live under the New Covenant (cf. Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). Within the "old covenant" scriptures we find a few particular covenants, such as those made with Abraham and with Moses. The Abrahamic covenant is often characterized in terms of promise, and the Mosaic covenant is remembered for its strong element of law. Now some people would say that New Covenant believers are under the Abrahamic covenant of promise today, but not the Mosaic covenant with its laws. However that is far from the outlook of the scriptural writers. In Galatians 3:21 Paul addresses this question to those who speak of being under one or the other covenant: "IS the law contrary to the promises of God?" And his inspired answer is "May it never be!" The fact is that all of the covenants of the Old Covenant (that is, all of the Old Testament covenants) are unified as parts of the one overall

covenant of grace established by God. Paul spoke of Gentiles who were not part of the Old Covenant economy which included the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants as "strangers to the covenants of the promise" (Eph. 2:12). There were many, progressively revealed aspects to the single promise of God in the Old Testament: many administrations of the one overall covenant of grace. Thus the various covenants of the Old Covenant were all part of one program and plan. Not only were they harmonious with one another, but they are unified with the New Covenant which was promised in Jeremiah 31 and is enjoyed by Christians today (cf. Heb. 8:6-13). There is one basic covenant of grace, characterized by anticipation in the Old Covenant and by realization in the New Covenant (cf. John 1:17).

Given the unity of God's covenant throughout history and the Bible, then, is it true that Christians living under the New Covenant are not obliged to keep the Old Covenant law (the commandments of the Old Testament, especially those given by Moses)? Every covenant established by God not only declares His gracious work on behalf of His people, but lays down stipulations which they are to observe as a sign of fidelity and love to Him. For instance, the giving of the law at Sinai (Ex. 20-23) was preceded by God's gracious deliverance of Israel from bondage (cf. Ex. 19:4; 20:2). God identified Himself as Lord of the covenant and rehearsed His gracious dealings with His people (Deut. 1-4), and then with that foundation and background He delivered His law (Deut. 5ff.). We see illustrated here that even the Mosaic covenant characterized by law is a gracious covenant. The law which we read in the Old Testament is a provision of God's grace to us (Ps. 119:29, 62-64). Every covenant carries stipulations which are to be kept, we have seen. But prior to that we saw that all of the covenants of God are unified into one **overall** Covenant of Grace, fully realized with the coming of Christ in the New Covenant. So if there is one covenant enjoyed by the people of God throughout the ages, then there is one moral code or set of stipulations which govern those who would be covenant-keepers. Therefore, we must answer that of course New Testament believers are bound to the Old Testament law of God. His standards, just like His covenant, are unchanging.

This perspective is confirmed by the word of God. When we inquire as to what is now about the New Covenant under which Christians now live, we must allow the Lord to define the proper answer. We cannot read into the idea of a "New Covenant" just anything we wish or can imagine. The revealed terms of the New Covenant are given to us in both Jeremiah 31:33-34 and Hebrews 8:8-12, and when we look at them we find that the New Covenant is far from suppressing or changing the law or moral standard by which God's people are to live! Just the opposite is true. Contrary to those who think that the Mosaic law is not applicable to the New Testament

believer, Scripture teaches us: "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds and I will write them upon their hearts" (Heb. 8:10). The establishment of the New Covenant does not imply the abrogation of the Mosaic law or its depreciation in any sense! The idea of a new law is ruled out altogether, for it is the well known law of God which He says He will write upon the hearts of New Covenant believers. Unlike the Old Covenant where God found fault with the people for breaking His commandments (Heb. 8:9), the New Covenant will give internal strength for keeping those very commandments. It will write the law on believers' hearts, for out of the heart are the issues of life (Prov. 4:23). The Holy Spirit of God will indwell the heart of believers, writing God's law therein, with the result that they will live according to the commandments. "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances" (Ezek. 36:27). As Paul writes in Romans 7:4, those who now walk according to the Spirit have the requirement of the law fulfilled within them. As J. Graaham Machen said, "The gospel does not abrogate God's law, but it makes men love it with all their hearts" (What is Faith?).

Psalm 89:34 was cited above: "My covenant I will not violate, nor will I alter the utterance of My lips." God's covenant law is one, unchanging moral code through Old and New Testaments. Once God has spoken His law and expressed His righteous standards He does not alter it. Indeed He pronounces a warning and curse upon anyone who would dare tamper with His stipulations in the slightest. Times may change, and human laws may be altered. But God's law is an eternally just and valid standard of right and wrong. One of the requirements of His law, which reflects His holy character, is the prohibition of using a double-standard (Deut. 25:13-16; Lev. 19:35-37). It is ungodly to use one measure or yardstick with some people, and then use an altered measure with others. "Divers weights and diverse measures, both of them are alike abomination to the Lord" (Prov. 20:10). Accordingly God requires that we have but one standard or moral judgment, whether it be for the stranger or the native (Lev. 24:22; Deut. 1:16-17; cf. Num. 15:16). He abhors a double-standard of right and wrong, and we can be sure that He does not judge in such a fashion. Something that was sinful in the Old Testament is likewise sinful for us in the New Testament, for God's standards are not subject to fluctuation from age to age. He has one uniform standard of right and wrong.

(For further reading along these lines see **Theonomy** in Christian Ethics. Craig Press, 1977, esp. chapter 8 and appendix 1. The book may be ordered from me for \$10.50 at 1219 Pineview Dr., Clinton, MS 39056; include check and address.)

Biblical Ethics is published every month by the Institute for Christian Economics, a non-profit, tax-exempt educational organization. [It is mailed free of charge to those who ask to be put on the mailing list. Subscriptions: 713 W. Cornwallis Rd., Durham, NC. Donations are fully tax deductible; checks should be made out to Institute for Christian Economics.]