

# BIBLICAL ETHICS

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## God's Law In New Testament Moral Judgments

(Part II)

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### Illustrative Texts

An examination of some of the texts wherein New Testament speakers and writers made moral judgments can illustrate how they took the Old Testament law as a valid ethical standard. Specifically we can see how the current authority of the law was not viewed by them as restricted to the decalogue.

We can begin for convenience with the discussions of Jesus with His opponents and inquirers. Of course His greatest opponent was Satan, the tempter who had led Adam astray from obedience to God. Christ, the second Adam, directly encountered Satan in a forty day period of temptation in the wilderness. Satan repeatedly tempted Jesus to depart from the course of redemption laid down by the Father, and each time Jesus overcame the temptation by citing the authoritative word of God. For instance Satan tried to entice Jesus into a test of God's care and fidelity, challenging Him to leap from the pinnacle of the temple. Now many years earlier Israel -- also in the wilderness -- was lured into testing the care and fidelity of God (Exodus 17: 1-7). As a result the law of God recorded: "You shall not put Jehovah your God to the test, as you tempted Him at Massah" (Deut. 6:16). Such a law would surely seem conditioned by its historical setting and restricted to its Jewish recipients, if any law does. Yet in the face of the Satanic temptation Jesus cited this very commandment to thwart His adversary: "Jesus said unto him, 'Again it stands written, You shall not make a test of the Lord your God'" (Matt. 4:7). Clearly the law of God was deemed valid and was not restricted to the ten commandments.

Of course Jesus also deemed the ten commandments to be authoritative -- but not uniquely so. When He was asked to judge which commandments should be kept in order to enter eternal life, He made use of a portion of the decalogue (Matt. 19:16-19; Mark 10:17-19). However at the same time He included the relevant case law, "Do not defraud" (Mark 10:19, from Deut. 24:14), and the summary command, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:19, from Lev. 19:18). He used the extradecalogical

commands just as authoritatively as the decalogue's own requirements. Indeed, when asked to judge which was the greatest commandment in the entire Old Testament, Jesus did not go to the ten commandments at all, but chose rather two laws outside of the decalogue: love God with all of your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12: 26-31, from Deut. 6:4-5 and Lev. 19:18).

Distilling the Old Testament's moral demand into these two particular extradecalogical laws was apparently already known and discussed in Jesus' day (Luke 10: 25-28). It was a commonplace among the rabbis to distinguish between "heavy" and "light" commands in the Old Testament, the heavier laws being those from which more commands could be deduced than others. Such rabbinic efforts can be traced to the Old Testament itself, where its 613 precepts are summarized in a different number of principles by various writers: eleven by David (Ps. 15), six by Isaiah (Isa. 33:15), three by Micah (Micah 6:8), and one by Amos (Amos 5:4) and by Habakkuk (Hab. 2:4). According to Jesus the "greatest" commandments -- the "first of all" -- on which "the whole law hangs" were the extradecalogical love commandments (Matt. 22:33, 36; Mark 12:28, 31). The problem with the Pharisees, said the Lord, was precisely that they attended to the minor details of the law (tithing) and "have left undone the weightier matters of the law -- justice, and mercy, and faith" (Matt. 23:23), that is, "the love of God" (Luke 11:42). It is important at just this point that we pay attention to Jesus' words, for He does not encourage exclusive attention to the weightier, love commandments of the Old Testament law. He says quite precisely, "these you ought to have done and not to have left the other undone." Our obligation to the weightier matters of the law does not cancel our obligation to the minor details.

Consequently, the practice of Jesus does not encourage a disregard for the details of God's law, as though New Testament moral duty is circumscribed to a small sub-section of the Old Testament law. Jesus was often challenged by the traditionalists (who took their authority

from outside of the Scriptures) about His activities on the Sabbath. In His defense He would response, "Have you not read in the law . . .?" (**Matt. 12:5; John 7:23**), citing the Sabbath activity of the priests. Were the law outmoded by His coming, of course, such a vindication of His behavior would have been baseless. Over and over again Jesus could show that the traditionalists -- whose boast was in the details of the law -- were actually violating and twisting the law's demands (e.g., **Matthew 5:21-48**). On an occasion when Christ's disciples were accused by the Pharisees of violating their traditions, Christ replied that the traditionalists actually transgressed the commandment of God in order to preserve their traditions instead (**Matt. 15:3, 6-9**). It is striking to note the specific illustration which Jesus chooses to use (among many available ones) in this particular moral judgment. He says that while the law of God requires honor for one's parents and death for those who dishonor them, the Pharisees allow a subterfuge by which one can withhold financial aid to his parents (**Matt. 15:4-5**). The Mosaic law which Christ holds up as valid -- the standard by which to judge the Pharisaical performance -- is the detail of the law (commonly ridiculed today) which requires the death penalty for cursing one's parents!

Another illustration of Jesus' use of the Old Testament's moral standards (outside the decalogue) can be found when He lays down instructions for the new organization of the people of God. As the church replaced national Israel in the plan of redemption it needed its own operating instructions, for instance regarding discipline. In the moral judgment delivered by Christ regarding this matter He asserted the demand of the Old Testament law: "at the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established" (**Matt. 18:16**, cf. **Jn 8:17**, based on the law at **Deut. 17:6** and **19:15**) -- the same Old Testament law of legal evidence promoted by Paul (**1 Tim 5:9**).

The use of the Old Testament law in matters of sexual relations, payment to workers, and revenge toward enemies further substantiates the New Testament dependence on the law's validity. When Paul prohibits marrying an unbeliever, he cites the Old Testament requirement that unlike animals are not to be yoked together (**2 Cor. 6:14**, from **Deut. 22:10**). "Be not unequally yoked together" is a well-known verse used by many pastors to discourage their young people from marrying outside the faith, and yet many of these same pastors will elsewhere insist that the believer is not under the requirements of the Old Testament law! When Paul was confronted with the wicked situation of incest within the church, his moral judgment on the matter was taken from the Old Testament prohibition (**1 Cor. 5:1**, based on **Lev. 18:8** and **Deut. 22:30**). Ask just about any evangelical pastor today whether incest is immoral from a biblical standpoint, and he will surely insist

that it is -- thereby enlisting the moral standards of the Old Testament, even if he proclaims elsewhere that they are repealed and invalid. Or ask him about homosexuality. When Paul delivered an apostolic judgment as to the immorality of homosexuality he specifically reiterated the Old Testament standard (**Rem. 1:26-27, 32**, from **Lev. 18:22** and **20:13**).

Turning from sexual to economic ethics we again find that the New Testament makes unhindered use of the Old Testament commandments in Christian moral judgments. Paul's argument that congregations should pay their pastors is especially enlightening as to the extent of the law's validity. He argues from the case law principle of the Old Testament that "You shall not muzzle an ox as it treads" (**1 Cor. 9:9**, from **Deut. 25:4**), thereby revealing the assumed contemporary authority of the laws outside the decalogue.

An invalid rule would be useless here. But even more striking is Paul's willingness to appeal to the moral principle embodied in one of the ceremonial laws! Pastors should earn their livelihood from the gospel ministry because priests derived their sustenance from the altar (**1 Cor. 9:13-14**, based on such texts as **Lev. 6:16, 26; 7:6, 31ff.**; **Num. 5:9-10; 18:8-20, 31; Deut. 18:1**). Pastors who wish to teach consistently the invalidity of the Old Testament law might accordingly stop drawing pay from their congregations. In a related economic matter James delivered a moral judgment regarding the rich who fraudulently withhold their workers' pay, basing his judgment on the Old Testament law requiring prompt pay for workers (**James 5:4**, from **Lev. 19:13** and **Deut. 24:14-15**). In financial matters, no less than in sexual matters, the New Testament practice was to utilize the Old Testament moral standards of God's law.

The same is true for interpersonal matters. Few Christians will dispute the New Testament standard that we ought not to avenge ourselves but rather go to the one who wrongs us and show him his fault (**Rem. 12:19; Matt. 18:15**), and yet this standard is taken over directly from the Old Testament law at **Leviticus 19:17-18**. Another commonly endorsed New Testament ethical judgment which is in fact based on the Old Testament law is the injunction to care for one's enemies (**Matt. 5:44; Rem. 12:20**, rooted in the illustration of **Ex. 23:4-5**). As often as Christians condemn private vengeance and hatred of one's enemies, they reaffirm the continuing authority of God's law (even if unwittingly).

One cannot escape the authoritative use of the Old Testament law in New Testament moral judgments. Upon reflection, one should recognize that such a use teaches the full validity of God's law today. Invalid rules might be used in fallacious moral judgments, but not in inspired ones.