

# ***BIBLICAL ETHICS***

*2 Timothy 3:16-17*

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## **New Testament Endorsement For The Old Testament Law**

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In previous studies we have traced numerous lines of biblical thought which teach and require the validity of God's commandments -- all of them throughout Old and New Testaments -- and their continuing authority in our lives. Because we live in an age which is so antagonistic to God-given directives, and because such vast portions of the current church is likewise disinclined toward God's revealed stipulations, it is crucial that we pay close attention to the precise teaching of God's inspired, unerring, and authoritative word. Biblical ethics is not opposed to the law of God; rather, that law is essential to Christian morality.

The wise men will establish his moral perspective on the rock-foundation words of Christ in Scripture. Therein we are instructed that God is unchanging in His standards for righteousness, not altering them from age to age or from person to person. Since God's law defined righteousness in the Old Testament, it continues to define righteousness for us today. God has no double-standard. Whether the Christian strives to imitate the holiness of God, to model his behavior after the life of Christ, or to be led by the Spirit, he will invariably be directed by Scripture to heed the law of God; the law is a transcript of God's unchanging holiness, the standard of righteousness followed by the Savior, and the pattern of sanctification empowered by the Spirit. The continuing authority of God's law today, then, is inherent to a biblically based theology. Time does not change or wear out the validity of God's commands, and a change of geography or locality does not render them ethically irrelevant. With the coming of the New Covenant and the spreading the church throughout the world we still read in Scripture that the law of God is to be written on our hearts, and we are to disciple all nations and teach them to observe whatsoever the Lord has commanded. The Biblical doctrines of God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Covenant of Grace all harmonize in pointing to the abiding validity of God's inspired law.

If one takes a normative approach to ethics, a motivational approach to ethics, or a consequential approach to ethics, he is always brought to the same con-

clusion: God's law is authoritative for contemporary ethics. The norm which God has given to direct our lives and to define our sin is revealed in His law, a law from which we are to subtract nothing; since the Lawgiver has not altered His law -- indeed, the Son of God has confirmed that law for His followers -- it must remain valid for us today. If we turn to the motivational approach to ethics, our concern will be to live in a way appropriate to our gracious salvation; we will want to be the kind of people who are characterized by faith and love. Scripture shows us that those who are grateful for God's grace will strive to live in obedience to His commandments; rather than cancelling the commandments of God in ethics, faith establishes the law, and love is a summary of the law's requirements. So then, a motivational approach to ethics -- like the normative approach -- declares the current validity of God's law. Finally, the consequential approach to ethics evaluates actions and attitudes according to their beneficial results or comparative lack thereof. Christ teaches us in His word that the primary goal of our moral behavior is the kingdom of God; when we make it that, every temporal and eternal blessing will be ours. The righteousness of this kingdom is defined by the law of the King, and thus Scripture promises that obedience to the law of God will eventuate in outstanding blessings for ourselves, our neighbors, and our society. In short, the law of God was revealed for our good. Therefore, the validity of God's law has been substantiated in previous studies by the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith and by all of the major perspectives on ethics. The present authority of the Lord's commandments is inescapable or any honest reading of God's word.

Moreover the validity of God's law extends to all of His righteous commandments. None can be subtracted from the stipulations which bind us without His authority and such subtraction has no biblical warrant. Both Old and New Testaments teach God's people to live by every word from God's mouth, for God does not alter the words of His covenant. Every one of His ordinances, we are taught is everlasting. Accordingly Christ emphatically taught that His advent did not in the least abrogate one jot or tittle of

the Old Testament law; according to His teaching, even the minor specifics of the law were to be observed -- as a measure of our standing in the kingdom of God. Paul maintained that every Old Testament scripture has moral authority for the New Testament believer, and James pointed out that not one point of the law was to be violated. Reflecting the unchanging righteousness of God, every commandment has abiding validity for us. To subtract even the least commandment is to transgress God's explicit prohibition and to be least in the kingdom of God. Hence the morality of the Old Testament is identical with that of the New.

There are many ways in which the New Testament undergirds the summary statements which have been rehearsed above. Attention to the teaching of the New Testament will disclose the emphatic endorsement it gives to the Old Testament law of God. For instance, the New Testament is concerned that men who are guilty of sin be redeemed by Christ and learn to live without sinning by the power of the Holy Spirit; because sin is defined as transgression of God's law (1 John 3:4; Rem. 7:7), the thrust of the New Testament message presupposes the validity of God's law for today. Then again, throughout the New Testament the believer's perpetual moral duty is that of love, and yet love is defined by the New Testament in terms of God's law (Matt. 22:40; Rem. 13:10; 1 John 5:2-3). Consequently the New Testament message and morality are squarely founded on the validity of God's law. Without that foundation, the gospel would be expendable, and the Christian walk would be aimless and self-serving.

We can briefly summarize a number of other ways in which the New Testament indirectly but forcibly indicates the authority of all of God's laws for this age.

Oftentimes the people who are introduced in the New Testament as blessed or favored by God are characterized as obedient to God's law in particular -- for instance, Elisabeth, Zacharias, Joseph, and Mary (Luke 1:6; 2:21-24, 27, 39). During his ministry on earth Christ often appealed to the law of God to bolster his teaching (John 8:17), vindicate his behavior (Matt. 12:5), answer his questioners (Luke 10:26), indict his opponents (John 7:19), and give concrete identity to the will of God for men (Matt. 19:17). He taught his disciples to pray that God's will would be done on earth (Matt. 6:10), and after his resurrection He directed them to teach all nations to observe whatsoever He had commanded (Matt. 28:18-20). In all of these ways -- without elaborate introductions or explanations for departing from a general principle or perspective -- the New Testament simply assumes the standing authority of every command of the Lord found in the Old Testament. If the Old Testament law were invalidated by the advent or work of Christ, the preceding examples would be incredibly out of character and call for some convincing explanation. Yet none was needed.

Jesus affirmed with solemn authority that not even the least commandment of the entire Old Testament was

to be taught as without binding validity today (Matt. 5:19), for according to his perspective "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Accordingly Christ reaffirmed elements of the decalogue, for example "Thou shalt not kill" (Matt. 19:18). He also cited as morally obligatory aspects of the Old Testament case law: for instance, "Thou shalt not defraud" (Mark 10:19), and "Thou shalt not test the Lord thy God" (Matt. 4:7). He even cited with approval the penal code of the Old Testament with respect to incorrigible delinquents (Matt. 15:4). He expected the weightier matters of the law to be observed without leaving the minor details undone (Luke 11:42). He was concerned that His own behavior be correctly seen as in accord with God's law (Mark 2:25-28), and He directed others to live by the law's regulations (Mark 1:44; 10:17-19). None of this could make sense except on the obvious assumption that all of the Old Testament law continues to be an authoritative standard of morality in the New Testament era. Because that law is indeed our standard of ethics, Christ the Lord will one day judge all men who commit lawless deeds (Matt. 7:23; 13:41).

The apostolic attitude toward the law of the Old Testament parallels that of Christ. The keeping of the law is greatly significant (1 Cor. 7:19), for the believer is not without the law of God (1 Cor. 9:20-21). Law-breaking is not to have dominion over the believer (Rem. 6:12-13; 1 John 3:3-5), for the Holy Spirit fulfills the ordinance of the law within him (Rem. 8:4). The law is written on the New Covenant believer's heart (Heb. 8:10), so that those who loyally follow Christ are designated by John as those "who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 12:17; 14:12). The apostles often supported their teaching by appealing to the law (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:34; Jas. 2:9) -- its general precepts found in the decalogue (e.g., "Thou shalt not steal," Rem. 13:9), the case law applications of those details (e.g., "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treads," 1 Tim. 5:18), the penal code (e.g., "If I am an evildoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I refuse not to die," Acts 25:11; cf. Deut. 21:22; Rem. 13:4), and even "holiness" requirements in the ceremonial law (e.g., 2 Cor. 6:14-18).

We must conclude that anyone whose attitude toward the Old Testament law is informed by the teaching and practice of the New Testament must maintain the law's full and continuing validity today. Those who, in the name of a distinctive "New Testament ethic," downgrade or ignore the Old Testament law are sternly warned by the Apostle John: "He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4). In genuinely Biblical ethics the Old Testament will not be pitted against the New at any point.

(For further reading along these lines, see *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, esp. chapter 12. The book may be ordered from me for \$10.50 at 1219 Pineview Dr., Clinton, MS 39056; enclose check and address.)

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