

The Role of The 10 Commandments in Christian Ethics

How are Christians to evaluate the laws of the Torah?

How are we to use these writings, some of which the NT calls "obsolete" (Heb 8:13) and yet 2 Tim 3:16 tells us all Scripture is "useful for...training in righteousness"?

The NT, of course, does not say that the OT *Scriptures* are obsolete, rather, it says that the Old Covenant is obsolete.

This distinction is important, and in this sermon we will explore a way in which both thoughts may be taken seriously.

Some Christians tend to emphasise the obsolescence of the OT; others stress the continuity and discontinuity between the old covenant and the new, including continuity and discontinuity between the Ten Commandments and Christian behavioural expectations.

Some Christians take the permanence of the Ten Commandments so seriously that they keep the Sabbath on the seventh day of each week, as it commands.

And of course this used to be the position of the WCG.

And the Sabbath is a useful test case to help us clarify a Christian approach to the Ten Commandments, and thus to other OT laws.

Because before we comment on the role of the Ten Commandments in Christian ethics, we must take the Sabbath command into consideration.

Invalid arguments regarding the Sabbath leading to incorrect answers are common, and they create many hazards for Christians.

Proof texts of continuity

Many Christians, for example, teach that the Ten Commandments were:

- ◆ **Spoken by God himself**
- ◆ **Written in stone**
- ◆ **Are the major expression of the moral law**
- ◆ **And are based on the unchanging character of God and therefore permanent.**

Many teach that Christians should keep the Ten Commandments — yet often the same teachers say that the Sabbath command is changed or obsolete.

But we cannot have an unchanging moral law that has a change in it.

There is little to be gained by claiming to uphold Ten when only Nine are meant.

The question of the Ten Commandments is really intertwined within the larger question of covenant continuity and discontinuity, and is not an issue to be viewed in splendid isolation.

Now our approach to the Ten Commandments may be undertaken in two basic ways:

- 1) **A proof text approach and**
- 2) **A more sophisticated approach that views the old and new covenants as two aspects of God's covenant of grace.**

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The proof text approach may use these points:

- ◆ **God himself spoke the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-22).**
- ◆ **He wrote the words himself (Exod 34:1)**
- ◆ **He commanded that they be stored in the ark in the holiest place (Deut 10:2).**
- ◆ **Jeremiah describes the new covenant not as a new law, but as the same law written in the heart (Jer 31:33).**
- ◆ **Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law of God (Matt 5:17), and all of it would remain as long as heaven and earth remain (v. 18).**
- ◆ **Jesus advocated righteousness (v.20), quoted commandments as authoritative (Matt 19:18-19), and obeyed OT laws (Heb 4:15).**
- ◆ **Paul said the law was holy and good, and he quoted commandments as authoritative (Rom 7:12; 13:9).**
- ◆ **OT scripture is God-breathed and a good source of Christian teaching (2 Tim 3:16).**
- ◆ **James quoted commandments as authoritative for Christians (Jas. 2:11)**
- ◆ **And Revelation tells us that the saints are commandment-keepers (Rev 14:12).**

From all this some draw the conclusion that:

"Our attitude must be that all Old Testament laws are presently our obligation unless further revelation from the Lawgiver shows that some change has been made."

However, everyone agrees that some OT laws are obsolete.

Therefore, we cannot conclude that Jesus meant the continuing validity of all OT laws, nor did Paul mean that all OT laws are normative ethical standards for Christians.

Since exceptions exist, even the most conservative person must ask which laws are valid for Christians today — and the verses of continuity do not answer the question.

And since exceptions exist, all verses of continuity need careful qualification, which is not easily done with a proof text approach.

Because the proof texts of continuity may be countered with another series of texts:

- ◆ **Jesus argued that OT ethical requirements were not strict enough (Matt 5:21-32)**
- ◆ **The most important ethical principles (justice, mercy, and faithfulness) are not even laws in the traditional sense (Matt 23:23).**
- ◆ **Christians are not under the law that Moses brought (Acts 15; Gal 3).**
- ◆ **The old covenant is obsolete, faded, and set aside (2 Cor 3:11; Heb 8:13).**

From this we can conclude that OT laws are not the best laws, and some are no longer required for Christians.

They are inspired and can be educational without being requirements today.

We cannot assume that every God-given law reflects God's character equally, or that every law is as eternal as he is.

Some are temporary such as circumcision, the wearing of tassels, or the offering of sacrifices.

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And because exceptions exist, we cannot make blanket statements about the law as if they applied to all OT laws.

We cannot assume that every law is still valid, nor that every law is obsolete.

And since ethical, civil, and ceremonial laws are mixed together in the Torah, we cannot judge a verse by its neighbours.

For example, we cannot assume that Lev 19:19 which speaks of “not mating different kinds of animals, planting your field with two kinds of seed or wearing clothing woven of two different kinds of material” is the Christian standard even if we believe that all the other verses in the chapter such as:

- ◆ Not stealing, lying or deceiving one another (v11)
- ◆ Not defrauding (v13)
- ◆ Not perverting justice (v15)
- ◆ Not spreading slander (v16)
- ◆ Not hating (v17)
- ◆ And not seeking revenge (v18)

are the Christian standard and based on God’s holiness (v. 2).

Each law must be judged on its own merits – by standards given in the NT.

Even in the Ten Commandments we cannot assume that all the commands are equally permanent.

Questions about the Sabbath in particular force us to examine this assumption.

And further doubt arises when we note that the Ten Commandments are equated with the old covenant.

Ex 34:28

Deut 4:13

This is a covenant that the NT calls temporary and obsolete.

It is not just the sacrificial laws that are obsolete — the stone tablets themselves, a clear reference to the Ten Commandments in 2 Cor 3 (which we will look at later) are contrasted with a covenant that is permanent.

This suggests the possibility that at least part of the Decalogue may have changed.

Covenant theology

A more thorough case for continuity is developed in covenant theology.

For example O. Palmer Robertson, in *The Christ of the Covenants* argues from Jer 31:31-34 that in the new covenant, “the substance of the law will be the same” as in the Sinaitic covenant.

While William J. Dumbrell in *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* also argues for continuity in his analysis of Jer 31.

He asks, “What is the place of ‘law’ in the New Covenant framework?”

And answers by saying that v. 33 refers to the Sinai law — “specifically, one presumes, to the decalogue by which the Sinai covenant was primarily expressed.... God is returning to the original intent of the Sinai covenant.”

Covenant theologians stress continuity between the covenants, and, as part of this continuity, they stress the validity of the Ten Commandments.

Robert Knudsen says, “It is also inconceivable that there will be any changes in the meaning of God’s law as expressed in the Ten Commandments.”

However, Houston we have a problem, if the Ten Commandments are eternally valid laws, what are we to make of the Sabbath command, which specifically states that God’s people should rest on the seventh day?

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An eternally valid law cannot be changed or abrogated, so if these theologians are consistent, they should keep the seventh day as a Sabbath, as a day of rest.

Most covenant theologians do not, of course, and a variety of explanations are given, all claiming that the NT changes the Sabbath command in some way:

1. The Sabbath is changed to the first day of the week, and is still a day of rest.

Some NT examples of believers meeting on the first day of the week are cited to support this view.

However, these examples do not show that the day of rest was changed. The Ten Commandments forbid work on the seventh day; the fact that believers did something else on the first day is logically irrelevant.

It is quite possible to keep the seventh day as a Sabbath *and* to meet on Sunday. The NT does not give any imperative about the first day that could correspond to, counter, or change the imperative of the Ten Commandments about the seventh day.

Nor can church tradition overrule a biblical command. This approach, by claiming the permanent validity of the Ten Commandments yet claiming a change within it, creates an internal contradiction that Sabbatarians find easy to exploit.

2. Another alternative to Sabbatarianism is to argue that the day is changed to the first day, and its focus shifts from rest to worship.

This approach at least acknowledges that the NT verses are about something different than the OT command.

But it fails to show that the command to rest is abrogated, nor that there is a command (not just an example) to gather for worship on a specific day of the week.

The resurrection of Jesus on a Sunday does not *ipso facto* (by that fact) abrogate a command regarding the seventh day.

3. A third approach is to argue that the Sabbath command was moral and eternal in requiring people to rest one day each week, but ceremonial in specifying that it must be the seventh day.

This approach may note the ethical value of requiring rest for servants and animals, but it admits that part of the Ten Commandments is ceremonial and temporary.

Now whether these arguments are valid or not, they all involve a change in the Sabbath command and therefore imply that the Ten Commandments is not an unchanging moral law.

It would then be misleading to call the Ten Commandments the moral law, as if the entire package were moral law.

Individual commandments may well be moral and unchanging, but it is misleading to call the Ten as a unit "the moral law."

It is therefore vital for us to explore the authority by which the Ten Commandments might be changed, and so we'll briefly examine the question of the Sabbath in the NT.

And ask the question "has the Sabbath been changed"?

The Gospels describe several incidents involving Jesus and the Sabbath.

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Although Sabbatarians often cite this as evidence that "Jesus kept the Sabbath," the text never makes this point.

It never uses the word "rest" or "keep" — instead, it describes Jesus' activity on the Sabbath.

Jesus' example is always one of liberty, of breaking traditional restrictions.

Jesus never affirms any Sabbath restrictions, and is never portrayed as supporting the focus of the Sabbath as found in the OT, that is, the avoidance of work.

Moreover, Jesus treated the Sabbath as a ceremonial law, not a moral law.

In the grainfield incident, Jesus defended the activity of his disciples by pointing to David breaking a ceremonial law and the priests keeping a ceremonial law.

Matt 12 : 1 – 6

The priests are said to "*break* the Sabbath" by their ceremonial work.

The text is not saying that the Sabbath command permitted such work; rather, it is saying that the Sabbath command was violated by the work, but that the ceremonial work was so important that the Sabbath could be broken in order to do it.

I can't imagine Jesus saying that a moral law could be broken because a ritual had to be performed!

Rather, he is putting the Sabbath on the same (or lower) level as ceremonial laws.

He does this also in

John 7 : 22 – 23

Here Jesus says that the requirement to circumcise was more important than the requirement to avoid work on the Sabbath.

Now further evidence that the Sabbath law is ceremonial rather than moral is that it is patterned after what God did only once, not on his eternal nature.

God does not live by a six-one cycle of activity and rest, nor do the angels.

The Sabbath command says that behaviour that is good one day is forbidden the next, merely because it is a different day of the week. But God's morality does not change with the rotation of the earth.

The apostles preached on the Sabbath, but they preached on other days, as well.

Their example is not a command. More important than the apostolic activity on the Sabbath is the apostolic teaching — and the Sabbath was not an important part of their teaching.

The word "Sabbath" is found only once in the epistles:

Col 2 : 16.

Here, Paul puts the Sabbath into the same category as other ceremonial laws (food, drink, festivals and new moons) and says it is not a matter on which Christians should be judging one another.

Allusions to the Sabbath may also be seen in Gal 4:10, where Paul disapproves of the Galatians observing special days, and Rom 14:5, where Paul seemed to be unconcerned about special days.

These statements support the conclusion that the Sabbath command does not apply to Christians.

The evidence throughout the NT is that the Sabbath command was abrogated, without being replaced by any comparable commands.

The day that the Ten Commandments had specified is now unimportant.

The Rest that the Ten Commandments commanded is no longer required.

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It is therefore misleading to call the Ten Commandments the moral law, as if all ten commandments were moral and permanent.

Some are, but the Ten as a unit are not.

As Douglas Moo has said "I am not denying that the Mosaic law, especially the Ten Commandments, contains principles and requirements that reflect God's eternal moral will. My point, rather, is that the Mosaic law is not identical with this eternal moral law"

And because there are differences of applicability to Christianity, it is misleading in Christian ethics to treat the Ten Commandments as a unit.

It is a unit within the old covenant, but it does not function as a unit in the NT.

Now if we were to just focus on the Ten Commandments, we might wonder why a command would become obsolete.

But if we view the Torah as a whole, we see hundreds of laws that are no longer in force.

The Sabbath is not an isolated case, but a representative case.

After we see that the NT sets aside hundreds of biblical commands, it is less of a surprise that the list of obsolete laws happens to include the Sabbath, as well.

Early Christians may have been surprised that *any* biblical command (including the sacrifices and circumcision) could become unnecessary.

If God had given these laws, what human could say that they were done away?

Only one authority could do away with canonical commands: God.

So we look to the NT to see whether it has overturned OT laws, and this will help us clarify the role of the Ten Commandments in Christian ethics.

The NT does not itemise all the valid OT laws, nor all the obsolete ones.

Some laws (unclean meats, sin sacrifices, washings) are mentioned; others (tassels on garments, grain offerings) are not.

The NT quotes some OT commands (even ones that are now obsolete) with approval; others are quoted as being inadequate or in need of replacement such as those regarding murder, adultery, divorce, giving oaths, and an eye for an eye in Matt 5.

Commands from the Ten Commandments, the Holiness Code, and Deuteronomy are quoted as valid; other commands from those same codes are treated as obsolete.

Some are moral and eternal; others are not, and in this, the Ten Commandments is no different than other OT laws.

The Ten Commandments should not be given special treatment. As Moo says "There is no evidence that Jesus isolated the Ten Commandments from the rest of the Mosaic law and put them in a separate category"

Commands from the last half of the Ten Commandments may be quoted together, or they can be quoted with another law of similar authority, an example of which is Jesus quoting them to the Rich Young Man in Matt 19:18-19.

But although the NT appropriates most of the Ten Commandments, it does not cite the Decalogue *as a whole* - as a moral authority for Christians.

It uses the last half several times, but never uses the whole. It never even refers to it by name.

When the NT quotes the last half together, there is no reason to assume that it is endorsing any larger group, such as the Ten, the Book of the Covenant, or the old covenant as a whole.

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Although the NT cites many individual OT laws as valid, it does not specify a general category as permanently valid.

However, when it declares laws obsolete, it uses large categories:

- ◆ In Acts 15, it is "the law of Moses."
- ◆ In 1 Cor 9:20, it is "the law."
- ◆ In Gal 3:17, it is "the law" that came 430 years after Abraham, that is, at the time of Moses.
- ◆ In Eph 2:15 it is "the law with its commandments and ordinances," the law that separated Jews from gentiles.
- ◆ In Heb 8:13 it is the Sinai covenant.

Although various terms are used, there is a consistency in what is meant. A large category of law is being declared obsolete.

That does not mean that every command within the category is obsolete, but the package itself is.

Now what's the NT explanation for this significant change in divinely given laws?

It is a change in covenants.

The book of Hebrews makes this clear in chapters 7 to 10. Although the focus in Hebrews is on the ceremonial laws relevant to the priesthood, the conclusion is more broadly stated:

Heb 8 : 13

It is the covenant itself that is obsolete.

A new covenant has replaced the Sinai-Moses covenant.

The Sabbath, which was a sign of the Mosaic covenant (Ex 31:16-17), is obsolete, and so is the covenant itself.

The new covenant has some similarities to the old, but it is a new covenant.

Hebrews uses strong terms: laws are set aside, changed, abrogated, abolished, because one covenant has ended and another has begun.

Of course, since the old and the new covenants were given by the same God, we should expect some continuity. We should expect truly moral laws to be found in both covenants.

It should be no surprise that laws against adultery, which predated Abraham, should also be included in Sinai, a later and larger package of laws. But we accept those laws as moral not because they were given to Moses (the fact that a law was given to Moses does not automatically make it moral), but for other reasons.

Paul tells us in that the law of Moses was a temporary to the Abrahamic promises.

Gal 3 :16 - 25.

The Sinai covenant, which includes the Ten Commandments, civil laws and ceremonial laws, came 430 years after Abraham, and it was designed to come to an end when Christ came.

Paul does not mean that the Hebrew scriptures are annulled. Indeed, his argument that the law is annulled appeals to these scriptures. But he does assert that they are no longer binding as law.

And the Bible makes no exception for the core of the Sinai covenant, the Decalogue.

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Paul deals with the Ten Commandments directly in:

2 Cor 3 : 7 - 9

Here Paul describes laws written on stone tablets and Moses' face shining with glory.

It is clear that he is talking about the Ten Commandments, and he calls them "the ministry that brought death".

He is not talking about the administration of the Ten Commandments — he is saying that the "ministry that brought death" itself was chiselled on the stone.

The word "ministry" in this verse refers not to administration, but to the Ten Commandments themselves.

That is what was chiselled on stone, and that is what was fading.

Paul is talking about Moses' glory because it parallels the Mosaic covenant.

It once had glory, but no longer does because it has been eclipsed by the new covenant.

V 10 - 11

Here Paul says something that "came through glory" has no glory now in comparison and is fading or "set aside" as the New Revised Version says.

It is the stone tablets that came in glory, and it is these stone tablets that have been set aside, replaced by "the permanent" (the new covenant), which came in greater glory.

In other words, the Ten Commandments have been set aside, and we should expect at least some change in it.

We do not look to the stone tablets as the standard of godly living. Every moral law within the Ten Commandments is also found outside of the Decalogue.

And one of the Ten has specifically been abrogated in the NT.

The Ten Commandments are neither sufficient nor necessary for Christian ethics.

Saying, "It's one of the Ten Commandments" is no more proof of current validity than saying, "It's in Deuteronomy."

An OT law's validity cannot be assessed by its location — it must be assessed by new covenant criteria.

Theft is immoral not because God happened to forbid it in the Ten Commandments, but because by new covenant principles we can see that it was immoral long before God gave this law to Moses.

Love is moral not because it was written on stone (it wasn't), but because it was moral long before the Torah was written.

The Ten Commandments are not the standard of comparison we need; its role in Christian ethics is ambiguous. It proves nothing in itself.

Now in showing that:

- ◆ **The Sabbath command has been abrogated**
- ◆ **That the Ten Commandments as a package have been set aside**
- ◆ **And that it should not be our primary point of reference**

I do not mean to argue that Christians have no moral standards, no ethical duties.

The NT has hundreds of commands, hundreds of behavioural expectations for how forgiven people should respond to their Saviour.

Some of these commands are also found in the Ten Commandments, but their validity does not rest on the fact that they were on the stone tablets.

As shown by the Sabbath command, we cannot equate stone with permanence.

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The validity of such laws rests on moral principles that transcend the specific situation of Sinai.

Now for example Jesus affirmed the validity of the first commandment (Matt 4:10), and of five more (Matt 19:18-19).

But the two most important commandments were not even in the Ten Commandments

Matt 22 : 37 – 40

Jesus also said that true morality went beyond the wording of the Ten Commandments

Matt 5 : 21 - 28.

Jesus was not claiming to be simply a better interpreter of Moses — he claimed to have more authority than Moses.

He allowed what the Law of Moses did not (John 8:1-11) and forbade something that Moses allowed

V 33 - 34

He was setting a new standard for right conduct.

In Jesus' last instructions to his disciples, he told them to teach people to obey, but the standard he gave was not the Ten Commandments, but his own teaching.

Jesus' teaching is a better basis for ethics than the Ten Commandments, and it is unethical for us to refer people to an inferior standard when a better one is available.

The Ten Commandments, when isolated from its historical context in Exodus (as it often is in Christian moralising), easily becomes a mere list of rules, a legalism.

What then are we to do with the Ten Commandments?

How are we to approach it as Scripture inspired by God, "useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16)?

I suggest that we approach it as it is written – as a report of what God gave his people in the time of Moses. We read it as a narrative first, before jumping to conclusions that we are supposed to obey every imperative within it.

The Ten Commandments, like other OT laws, were given as a norm for Israelite behaviour.

That was its original intent.

However, the NT tells us that the OT is informative but not normative.

If we approach the Torah as law, as command, then we quickly run into erroneous conclusions about what Christians are required to do.

A different model for reading is needed, and the narrative model takes the text seriously yet without necessitating erroneous conclusions.

Even the imperatives must be read as part of a narrative.

- ◆ **When we read in Gen 17 that the males among God's people were to be circumcised, we do not assume that we should do so today.**
- ◆ **When we read in Ex 13 that God's people are to have a festival of matzos, we do not assume that we should do so today.**

Those commands were given for a specific people.

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So also the commands we find in

Ex 20

They begin with this preface:

V 2

This gives a historical context to the situation: it was a multitude of just-escaped slaves, in a desert, surrounded by polytheistic nations.

And God gave them laws that would compensate for their lack of civic experience, laws that would help them resist polytheism, laws that would help them become a distinct nation, laws that would help them structure society in a new land.

These laws were good for their situation, but it is another question as to whether those same laws are good for us today in our situations.

This is to be explored, not assumed.

Much of the OT is narrative.

Nevertheless, 2 Tim 3 can say that this type of writing, since it is part of Scripture, is "useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

Stories can help inform our ethics. They can illustrate consequences, misunderstandings, deficiencies and flexibilities.

The story of Abraham and circumcision is useful for teaching and for training in righteousness without requiring us to practice circumcision.

The commands about sacrifice are to be read as story, not as commands for us today. The details may be useful typologically, but they are read first in the context of a story, not as currently valid law.

Even the civil laws of the OT are useful illustrations of how moral principles may be fleshed out in a specific culture.

Genesis is a story, and in that story God gave certain commands and implied other commands. Some of them apply to us today and some do not.

Exodus continues that story and gives more commands, commands about how people should worship, how to behave with one another and what to do when someone disobeys. Some of these commands apply to us today; others do not.

So we must see them first in the context in which the books give them: a covenant or arrangement God made with a specific people at a specific time in history, a covenant God has now revealed to be obsolete.

The commands that God gave them *are* instructive but not necessarily imperative for us.

They may have exemplary value, and may be reinterpreted for different contexts. But their ethical value must be cautiously explored, not assumed, and in our evaluation we must give greater weight to the NT revelation, the part of the canon that has the authority to abrogate and alter the laws of the OT.

In summary then the NT says that:

- 1) **Certain laws are moral, holy, just and good**
- 2) **Certain OT laws are obsolete**
- 3) **The Sinai covenant and the Sinai Decalogue are obsolete in their legal authority**
- 4) **However, specific laws remain valid and**
- 5) **We can learn something about righteousness even from laws that are no longer valid.**

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When we study OT ethics, the Ten Commandments is an important law code. It tells us basic ethical rules of what God gave those people back then, it is a major statement of the ethic that the OT presents.

But that is descriptive for ancient Israel, not prescriptive for Christian ethics.

Christians have been told to look to Jesus Christ as a greater authority, a better ethical example and a better teacher of righteous living.

What then are the practical implications for us today?

Well since the Sabbath command has been abrogated in the NT, no one should preach or imply that the Ten Commandments is a valid ethical standard for Christians.

It is not.

It has an important exception right in the middle of it, and it is confusing to say Ten when only Nine are meant.

It is inaccurate and misleading. Moreover, Christians have a better ethical standard in the NT — a bigger body of literature with better ethical balance.

We have the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Of course, the Christian church has used the Ten Commandments for centuries, from the second century onwards.

But it is also clear that affirmations about the Decalogue have been turned into Sabbatarianism and legalism, and this shows that the traditional veneration of the Ten Commandments is a theological error that should cease.

Let's conclude in:

Matt 17 : 1 – 8

The clear message for us here is:

- ◆ **Jesus is the one with whom the Father is well pleased.**
- ◆ **We are to listen to Him.**
- ◆ **Moses, representing the Law and Elijah, representing the Prophets, have faded, disappeared, been set aside.**
- ◆ **We are to see only Jesus.**

The conclusion to this whole matter:

Is that we should point people to Christ, and not to Moses, for instruction on how to live as a Christian.