How should Christians interpret the Old Testament Law?

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Christians should interpret the Old Testament Law through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Law remains God's inspired Word and continues to reveal His character, His holiness, and His purposes, but believers read it through the lens of the New Covenant established by Christ. Rather than asking, “Is this command still binding on Christians?” the better question is, “How has this command been fulfilled, transformed, or reaffirmed in the New Testament?”

This Christ-centered approach is the pattern established by Jesus and the apostles themselves. After His resurrection, Jesus explained that the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms all pointed to Him (Luke 24:27, 44–47). The New Testament consistently interprets the Old Testament as a unified story that reaches its climax in Christ (Rom. 10:4; Heb. 1:1–2).

> You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that bear witness about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life. (John 5:39–40 LSB)

The Law was given for a purpose

The Law of Moses was given by God to Israel as part of the Sinai Covenant. It established Israel as God's covenant nation, governed its worship, civil life, and moral conduct, and pointed forward to the coming Messiah.

Paul describes the Law as a guardian or tutor that prepared God's people for Christ (Gal. 3:24–25). Hebrews calls its sacrificial system “a shadow of the good things to come” (Heb. 10:1). The Law was never an end in itself; it was always designed to point beyond itself to God's greater work of redemption. This means the Old Testament Law should not be viewed as either obsolete or permanently frozen in its Sinai-covenant form. It was a covenant with a God-given purpose that finds its fulfillment in Jesus.

Not every command functions the same way today

The Law of Moses contains many different kinds of commands. It includes moral commands (such as prohibitions against murder and adultery), ceremonial regulations (such as sacrifices, priesthood, and ritual purity), and laws governing Israel's civil life as a nation.

While these categories can be helpful, Scripture itself does not formally divide the Law this way. The Law was given as one covenant to one nation. Rather than separating the Law into artificial categories, the New Testament shows us which aspects continue unchanged, which have been fulfilled, and which belonged specifically to Israel under the old covenant.

For example:

- The sacrificial system is fulfilled by Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice (Heb. 10:1–18).
- The Levitical priesthood is fulfilled by Christ's eternal priesthood (Heb. 7).
- Circumcision gives way to the circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:28–29).
- The food laws and ritual purity laws no longer define God's covenant people (Mark 7:19; Acts 10; Col. 2:16–17).
- Many moral commands are reaffirmed and even intensified by Jesus and the apostles (Matt. 5:21–48; Rom. 13:8–10).

The question, therefore, is not whether the Old Testament matters—it absolutely does—but how each command relates to believers living under the New Covenant.

The New Testament interprets the Old Testament

One of the most important principles of biblical interpretation is allowing the New Testament to explain how Christ fulfilled the Old Testament. For example, the New Testament teaches that believers no longer offer animal sacrifices because Christ's sacrifice is complete (Heb. 10:18). Likewise, Christians do not seek forgiveness through the Levitical priesthood because Jesus is our great High Priest (Heb. 4:14–16).

This same principle applies throughout the Mosaic Law. Rather than deciding on our own which commands continue and which do not, we allow the inspired apostles to interpret the Law in light of Christ's finished work.

The Law still teaches Christians

Although Christians are not under the Sinai Covenant as a covenant administration (Rom. 7:4–6; Gal. 5:18), the Law continues to instruct God's people.

It reveals God's holiness, exposes human sin (Rom. 3:20), demonstrates our need for a Savior, provides wisdom for righteous living, and helps us understand the work of Christ. The sacrifices reveal the seriousness of sin. The priesthood points to Christ's mediation. The festivals anticipate God's plan of redemption. Even laws that are no longer binding continue to teach profound theological truths.

As Paul writes, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable” (2 Tim. 3:16). That includes every page of the Old Testament.

Christians obey Christ

The New Testament never presents the Christian life as lawless. Instead, believers are called to obey Christ.

Jesus summarized the Law by commanding us to love God and love our neighbor (Matt. 22:37–40). Paul likewise teaches that love fulfills the law because genuine love naturally produces the kind of life God desires (Rom. 13:8–10). Christians therefore seek holiness not to earn God’s favor but because they have already received His grace through Christ.

The believer’s obedience flows from the New Covenant, empowered by the Holy Spirit, rather than from the covenant made with Israel at Mount Sinai.

Key Scriptures to Study

- **Matthew 5:17–20** — Jesus fulfills rather than abolishes the Law and the Prophets.
- **Luke 24:27, 44–47** — The entire Old Testament points to Christ.
- **Romans 7:4–6** — Believers have died to the Law through Christ.
- **Romans 10:4** — Christ is the goal (*telos*) of the Law.
- **Galatians 3:23–25** — The Law served as a guardian until Christ came.
- **Hebrews 7:11–19** — Christ's priesthood brings a change in the covenant order.
- **Hebrews 10:1–18** — Christ fulfills the sacrificial system once for all.
- **Colossians 2:16–17** — Old covenant observances were shadows fulfilled in Christ.

- **2 Timothy 3:16–17** — All Scripture remains profitable for teaching and training.

Objections & Misconceptions

If Christians aren't under the Law, why read the Old Testament?
Because the Old Testament reveals God's character, explains His plan of redemption, and points to Christ. It remains essential Christian Scripture, even though believers live under the New Covenant.

Doesn't James say that whoever breaks one part of the Law is guilty of breaking all of it?
James is emphasizing the unity of God's moral standard, not teaching that Christians remain under every regulation of the Sinai Covenant. The New Testament consistently distinguishes between the Mosaic covenant and the believer's life under Christ (Rom. 7:4–6; Gal. 5:18).

Who decides which Old Testament laws still apply?
Christians do not decide this arbitrarily. We allow Jesus and the apostles to interpret the Old Testament. The New Testament explicitly teaches which institutions have been fulfilled in Christ and which moral principles continue to govern Christian life.

Why This Matters

How we interpret the Old Testament Law shapes nearly every area of Christian theology, including salvation, sanctification, worship, and biblical interpretation.

Reading the Law through Christ protects us from two opposite errors. On one side is legalism, which seeks to place believers back under the Sinai Covenant. On the other is antinomianism, which wrongly concludes that God’s moral will no longer matters. The New Testament avoids both extremes by teaching that Christ has fulfilled the Law while calling His people to joyful obedience empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Ultimately, the Old Testament is not merely a collection of ancient rules. It is God’s revelation pointing us to His Son, who fulfilled its promises, accomplished its sacrifices, embodied its righteousness, and established the New Covenant through His death and resurrection.

Recommended Resources

- Thomas R. Schreiner — *40 Questions About Christians and Biblical Law*
- Douglas J. Moo — *Galatians (BECNT)*

- D. A. Carson — *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14*
- O. Palmer Robertson — *The Christ of the Covenants*
- R. L. Solberg — *The Law, the Christ, the Promise*