

Aim

Before the talk those present discussed in small groups which of these OT laws apply to Christians? If not, what if any value do they have to our faith?

Lev. 11:9 “These you may eat, of all that are in the waters. Everything in the waters that has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the rivers, you may eat. ¹⁰ But anything in the seas or the rivers that does not have fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and of the living creatures that are in the waters, is detestable to you.

Lev. 19:17 “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbour, lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD.

Lev. 19:19 “You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind. You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material.

Lev. 19:26 “You shall not eat any flesh with the blood in it. You shall not interpret omens or tell fortunes. ²⁷ You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard. ²⁸ You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.

Lev. 23:3 “Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a **Sabbath** of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work. It is a **Sabbath** to the LORD in all your dwelling places.

INTRO

Welcome to first of a series - of potentially three or four sessions of hard question., prompted by the Crisis in the Church of England, and the wider church in the West over the issue of blessing same-sex relationships.

In our congregational survey you ranked the most frequently asked questions

28 May: Which Old Testament Laws still apply to Christians?

25 June: How we we tell which interpretation of scripture is trustworthy?

23 July: Why can't the church change its mind (eg women's ordination and slavery)?

But do we need a debate? **The bible says no** - doesn't that settle it?

And every biblical text that mentions same-sex activity/intimacy is opposed to it. But the two clearest texts are from the book of Leviticus 18 & 20, and we as Gentile Christians don't keep every law in Leviticus, so why choose some and not others? As is often said:

**If you can eat prawns or black pudding, or wear mixed fibre clothes,
why can't you have gay sex?**

If you have ever walked up Helvellyn in the Lakes, you will know of Striding Edge: beautiful on a clear day, perilous in wind or cloud, precipitous falls on either side. So let us take a careful walk, aware of the dangers on either side



1) These are highly emotive questions, and we need to approach them with great humility, sensitivity and prayerfulness. We are not just talking about theology, but about people's lives- people who want to follow Jesus. No-one in the church is arguing for complete promiscuity or non-consensual sex

2) The church has often got things wrong, and treated people badly -sometimes it has been hypocritical, going easy on some people's sins, (respectable, middle class sins like greed) and treating others with cruelty. We need to remember that we are all sinners, all in need of God's grace and salvation.

3) The issue is not 'homosexuality' - an abstract 19th Century word, initially coined to describe what was seen as a medical condition, but sexual intimacy between people of the same sex. The biblical texts (which we are not studying tonight!) are not trying to describe or even condemn 'same-sex attraction' or 'sexual orientation' - 20th Century terms. We still have much to learn about how to welcome and include people with same-sex attraction. But that is not the same as celebrating or blessing same-sex intimacy.

I've mentioned the OT texts. in the NT, St Paul explicitly mentions same-sex activity three times, and Jesus none. But Paul ministered in the pagan culture of the Roman Empire, where various forms of homosexual conduct were common. Jesus spent his life in Galilee and Judaea, and the Jewish nation was utterly opposed to all forms of homosexual conduct. He did not need to say anything about it, unless he wanted to challenge the Jewish consensus. Jesus was not afraid to challenge the Jewish establishment in many ways, not least the whole question of how the Law works. He challenged the Pharisees about table fellowship ritual, and how they observed the sabbath, and he was regarded as a dangerous law- breaker. His silence on this topic surely means he accepted the consensus against same-sex intimacy.

Peter (Acts 10) was the first to allow Gentiles to be baptised without being circumcised and Paul followed his lead and thought through the issue of the status of the OT Law carefully. Despite fierce resistance, the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 agreed to allow Gentiles to belong without being circumcised, or keeping all the laws.

I say this to show that the relation of the Christian Church to the Jewish Law was a live issue in the first century! There were those who thought that the new Gentile Christians should be circumcised - effectively become fully Jewish, whom the NT calls 'Judaisers', and those who believed that Gentile Christians were set free from the Law. Among them a few believed that Christians were set free from all law, and could do as the Spirit led them.

But St Peter & Paul established the difficult middle way that the church has tried to walk ever since between legalism and Licence.

The same issue has recurred throughout Christian history, over different issues. In the Reformation the C of E addressed it in Article 7

Article 7. Of the Old Testament. (BCP)

The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man. Wherefore they are not to be heard, which feign that the old Fathers did look only for transitory promises.

Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral.

So my basic argument is this. Christ has **fulfilled** the whole Law so Christians are not called to **Keep** the Law (thus staying Jewish)

nor are they Lawless, thus licensing Sin,

but we are empowered by the Spirit to **uphold** the Law.

What's the difference between fulfilling, upholding and keeping the Law? Listen on!

POINT ONE JESUS & THE LAW

Let's look at Matthew 5, from the sermon on the Mount.

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to **fulfil** them.

¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

¹⁹ Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

(Matthew 5.17-20)

Jesus here teaches with astonishing authority. He knows that some people think that he has come to abolish and abandon the law - they think he is dangerously soft on sinners, eating with tax collectors and prostitutes. So he is emphatic: Anyone who sets aside the Law will be least in the Kingdom. Not a jot or tittle, the smallest pen stroke will disappear from the Law until all is accomplished. But what does he mean by **accomplished**?

Nor is Jesus setting easier goals - our righteousness must surpass the Pharisees. We must be perfect,(5.48) as our Father in heaven is perfect!

As Jesus teaches this with authority, he takes several sample laws - on murder, adultery, oaths and far from relaxing them, intensifies them. You think adultery is just sleeping with your neighbour's wife? Even looking at her lustfully is sin! You think murder is just killing someone? Even getting angry with them is sin! Jesus is astonishingly severe, but at the same time, he is marvellously tender with sinners- refusing to throw the first stone.

But I want to focus on v.17

I have not come to abolish the Law, but to **fulfil** them.

He does not abolish OR KEEP, but fulfil.

Jesus summarised the Law as love God and love your neighbour (quotations from Deut and Lev 19 and Jesus challenged the Sabbath rules which hindered loving care of people.

He also challenged the food laws: Mark 7.14

Jesus called the crowd to him and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

(In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)

He went on: “What comes out of a person is what defiles them. ²¹ For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, ²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. ²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

Mark reads this as meaning that Jesus abolishes the food laws, while upholding the moral laws (the ten commandments etc).

Jesus makes a real distinction between ceremonial and moral law, and Christians have sometimes tried to argue that Jesus abolished the first, and upheld the second, but it is not that simple .

POINT TWO: PAUL & THE LAW

What the rest of the NT seems to teach is that Jesus has fulfilled the whole Law, ceremonial and Moral. Paul devoted much energy on this matter in Galatians and Romans, which I can only sketch for you this evening.

In Rom 10.4 he says:

⁴ Christ is the **culmination** (NIV 2011) /**end** (1984, KJV, ESV) of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.(NIV 2011

The Greek word is Telos - end - direction, culmination, purpose.

In other words, The Law was temporary, and was pointing us to Christ

In Galatians, to Christians tempted to return to full observance of the Law, including circumcision, sabbath etc he says:

Galatians 5.1 **Gal. 5:1** It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ³ Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to **obey the whole law**.

Either remain free in Christ has set you free - or obey the whole Law!

Instead Paul argues in Rom 7.1-4, we died to the Law, because Christ perfectly fulfilled the Law for us, and we are united with him by faith. So therefore we **are released from the Law**, and live in the Spirit not the old way of the written code.

This teaching was revolutionary, and Paul was regularly accused of giving Christians licence to sin, which he fiercely denied.

This is difficult to explain without a long study of Romans or Galatians, but when Paul talks about ‘the Law’, he not only means both the moral and ceremonial laws, he is also talking about the law as a temporary gift from God to his people struggling with the flesh, the sinful nature, which the Law as a system was not strong enough to overcome. -

As our second reading showed (Rom 3), Paul sees the Law as God’s gift to show us the power of sin in us, and bring us to faith in Christ. Rom 3.19 which upholds the Law, or fulfils its purpose. He describes it as a schoolmaster, until Christ comes and we grow up.

SLIDE 3

Paul's teaching in Colossians is tackling a different set of problems, but notice how he describes the ceremonial laws as being a shadow of the things to come:

Colossians 2:16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ **These are a shadow of the things that were to come;** the reality, however, is found in Christ.

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

Then Paul describes how being in Christ leads us not into sin, but to things above, while putting to death the immoral conduct of the earthly nature.

Colossians 3.1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.

So let me summarise Paul's teaching on the Law:

- Christ is the end, fulfilment of the whole law - but different parts of the Law are fulfilled in different ways.
- The Law was too weak to overcome sinful nature, but each part of the Law had a function.
- The moral laws showed us our sin- we could not keep them.
- The sacrificial Laws taught us that we needed an innocent substitute to pay a price which we could not afford,
- the civic ceremonies were intended to teach us what purity looks like, to mark out the Jewish people as different, holy, and protect them from being corrupted by pagan society - food laws, sabbath, circumcision -all achieved this end.
- But now Christ has come, paid the perfect sacrifice, filled Jew and Gentile believers with the Holy Spirit's power, so that we do not need distinctive food or dress to teach us the importance of purity, or protect us from contact with corrupting pagan culture, and given us power in the Spirit to resist/put to death the sinful nature .

This is why we can eat prawns, or black pudding, or wear mixed fibres. The Law remains as a permanent witness to what is God's will. We are not **under the Law - we are in Christ**, but Christ still wants us not to steal, murder or commit adultery- he wants us to love God and love our neighbour, and the Law can help us understand what that love looks like.

Where that leave us with the laws against Same-sex intimacy?

There are only two of them - Lev 18 and 20, and the same passages also forbid incest and bestiality. Some have argued that they refer to cultic contexts - pagan worship often involved visits to cult prostitutes. In which case non-cultic bestiality and incest would be OK as well- 'love means love'.

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Are these all ceremonial laws, designed temporarily to mark the Jewish people out as different from the pagan nations around them? Or are they lasting moral laws or principles? St Paul, whose teaching articulated what Jesus and Peter had outlined, is clearest. Same sex intimacy belongs in the moral category, and this has remained the universal testimony of the Church - the Catholic view - that which has always, everywhere been believed by everybody. These are not ceremonial but moral laws, and the universal church has always taught that there are two honourable estates, celibacy and holy Matrimony, the lifelong and exclusive union of one man and one woman.

What I hope I have shown you is that the church has strong theological reason in Jesus's teaching for distinguishing ceremonial and moral law.

Christ has fulfilled the whole Law

so Christians are not called to Keep the Law (thus staying Jewish)

nor are they to be Lawless, thus licensing Sin,

but we are empowered by the Spirit to uphold the Law.

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