

## What has the law of Moses to do with me?

### Bibliography and resources for further study

#### Learning how to better understand the Bible

- Andrew Sach and Nigel Beynon, *Dig Deeper* (a brilliant and simple book)
- Andrew Sach and Richard Alldritt, *Dig Even Deeper* (brilliant! the same principles applied to the book of Exodus)

#### Understanding and applying the law of Moses: two sermons, a booklet, and two books

- *The law of perfect freedom* (sermon by Vaughan Roberts, St Ebbe's Church, Oxford); free online at <http://www.stebbes.org.uk/talks/2011/jul/vaughan-roberts/law-perfect-freedom>
- *Law and promise: Galatians 3:15-20* (sermon by Andrew Sach, St Helen's Church, Bishopsgate); free online at <http://www.audiop.org.uk/search/talk/53536>
- William Philip, *The law of promise – the law as it functions within the world of God's grace* (a 35-page booklet mainly designed for pastors and teachers); free online at [http://www.proctrust.org.uk/dls/promise\\_paper.pdf](http://www.proctrust.org.uk/dls/promise_paper.pdf)
- Vern Poythress, *The shadow of Christ in the law of Moses* (fairly large and technical); free online at <http://www.frame-poythress.org/ebooks/the-shadow-of-christ-in-the-law-of-moses/>
- John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian life* (very large but mainly readable work of Christian ethics including a brilliant exposition of the Ten Commandments)

### Introduction

A learned professor was expecting a delivery of books. But he faced a crisis. There was not enough room in his library. So, he instructed his assistant to remove to storage all books published more than 10 years ago. That is a simple story for our times. We are not impressed by the old - traditions and customs, values, old music, old people. It's into the category of "old-and-out-of-date" that the law of Moses is often placed.

Certainly, most *non-believing people* today would say that the law of God as recorded in the Bible is out of date and should be removed to storage. At best it is an interesting historical artefact. Very few younger people can list any of the 10 commandments, which are the centre of God's Old Testament law. Even the idea of divine "law" or of "commandments" sounds out of date. Our culture does like "top ten" lists – they litter the internet. But the idea of a "command" sits very badly with most of us. Ten "suggestions" might be better. What might be our culture's nearest approximation to the ten commandments? Maybe it's don't drink and drive, practice safe and consensual sex, and be tolerant.

But even *Christian people* are puzzled by the law of God. Some parts are confusing. Sometimes it seems that Jesus and the New Testament says something different. Some parts feel out of touch and even embarrassing. What do we make of these examples?

Exodus 21:23, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth"

Leviticus 18:22, "do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman, that is detestable"

Leviticus 19:19, "do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material"

Our question here is simply, "What has the law of Moses to do with me?" And what do I "do" with the law of Moses when I read it in God's Word the Bible? Here are three important starting principles:

Firstly, *we can't ignore it*. If we believe that "all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16) then the law of Moses is God's Word to us. (If you're on the outside of the Christian faith and considering the claims of Christ you'll want to read and understand the *whole* Bible, even if there are bits you find hard to understand or troublesome).

Secondly, *we won't interpret one bit of the Bible in such a way as is repugnant to another bit of the Bible.* There are no contradictions in the book of God. It all fits together. So we'll want to approach the different parts of the Word with a conviction that they *do* fit together. (See Article XX of the 39 Articles of Religion).

Thirdly, we need to *be clear what we're talking about.* When we say "law" what do we mean? The Bible uses that word in different ways. And even when we're talking about the law of Moses we might one of two different things:

(i) "law" has a narrow meaning, speaking simply of commands, promises and punishments given by God to Moses at Mount Sinai in about 1500BC;

(ii) "law" has a broader meaning, describing the first five books of the Bible which the Jewish people knew simply as "the law" and which contain a range of literature including the story of the formation of God's people, the tabernacle, the priesthood, the sacrifices and the promised land as well as the commands themselves.

In what follows we're going to look at what the Bible says about:

1. The non-believer and the law
2. Jesus and the law
3. The Christian and the law

### **1. The non-believer and the law**

Let me address you specifically if you'd consider yourself a non-believer. Perhaps through personal reading of the Bible you have bumped into the ancient laws of God. You wouldn't call yourself a Christian. You're intrigued or puzzled or horrified by some of the things you've read.

What should YOU do with the law of God?

Let me make a huge and sweeping statement (which I'll then try to justify). You don't know what's right and wrong unless God tells you. In fact, you have no morality without the law of God.

- **you have no morality without the law of God**

Probably the biggest question (and crisis) facing our country today is, "Where do moral values come from?"

For centuries everyone believed that right and wrong was obvious, because it was built into the nature of things. Often this was spoken of as "natural law." Just as human beings all breathe air and have blood, so all human beings were thought to share a common morality.

But when you reject God there is no longer any firm foundation for what is right and what is wrong. And that's where we find ourselves now as a culture.

Think of an moral issue which we'll call "X." Suppose I believe that X is right, but you believe that X is wrong. Which of us is right? And how do we decide?

Of course, Christian people need to be honest and acknowledge that terrible things have been done in the name of God's law (e.g. the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, etc). And we need to acknowledge that non-believing people can do great good.

But for now our point is simply that "[i]t is pretty hard to defend absolute morals on anything other than religious grounds" (as Richard Dawkins himself admits). The so-called new atheists (like Dawkins) have in recent years become increasingly sensitive to this charge (hence the attempts of Sam Harris in *The moral landscape* to find a basis for morality in an atheistic universe).

Further, a glance at history reveals that the most extraordinary wickedness has been carried out in the name of militant non-belief. E.g. the Nazis killed the mentally ill in the name of the greater good (or give it a more respectable name, “utilitarianism,” pursuing the greatest good for the greatest number), whilst the secular creeds of Stalin and Mao encouraged them in starving millions to death. And lest we think that such evils lie wholly in the past we would do well to remember that eugenics, euthanasia and infanticide are all now being justified by reputable ethicists who believe that there is no ultimate definition of good and bad in a godless universe.

I take it that you believe infanticide to be utterly wrong (and indeed wicked). But why is it wrong? Why are you right?

I trust that you (like me) believe every person has dignity and rights which are to be protected. But on what basis do you say that? Science cannot tell you that a person has value. Human rights flow from being made in the image of God.

For 50 years or so western Europe and north America has been getting rid of Christian belief – and yet for most of that time we have hung on to an agreed basis for ethics. We’ve broadly agreed about what is right and what is wrong. We’ve assumed that it’s built into us. But it isn’t. It flows from the Bible and from the teaching of the Bible. Without God and without the Bible there is simply no agreed basis for what is right and what is wrong. Personally, I find that situation terrifying.

It seems very unlikely that we will live in this moral vacuum for long. But where will our society go? Will we descend into *outright anarchy*? Will we actually *pursue totalitarianism*, looking to the state to aggressively impose moral values? Will we look to *Islam*, which offers strength and clear lines to chaotic lives that have known no boundaries.

Personally, I find each of those alternatives equally terrifying. But there is another option. Will we *return to the God of the Bible*?

Life is very complicated. But the words of the God of the Bible speak with wonderful clarity. They offer a firm foundation. And they offer you a firm foundation. They hold out a God of right and wrong, who sent his Son to die for us. This God, we will see, can capture and change our hearts – such that we can know him, love him and even love his good and holy law.

But that’s to get ahead of ourselves a little. For now we need to ask this question: where do you stand with respect to the law of Moses? (And here I’m still speaking specifically to someone outside of the Christian faith). The answer you may give is, “Nowhere – and that’s the way I like it!”

But the Bible would disagree...

- **you are under God’s law – and its penalty (Galatians 3:24, Romans 7:5, 1 Timothy 1:9)**

Imagine yourself on the top of a tall building. You meet a man about to launch himself to oblivion. “Stop – you’re going to fall”, you cry. “No, I’m not,” he replies. “Err, what about gravity?” you suggest. To which he offers you the memorable parting words, “But I’m not the gravitational type.”

We all have a relationship with the laws of gravity whether we like it not. Similarly, the Bible insists that we all are bound to the law of God – like it or not. We are made by God. And his laws govern all people everywhere. Simply, everyone must obey God

My guess is that you will find that thought highly objectionable. Naturally, we all want to live independently of God. We don’t want him to constrain us.

But the Bible calls that “sin.” It says that until you become a Christian (and Jesus changes you from the inside out) you are controlled by your sin – by a “sinful nature.” Further, it says that when we encounter the laws of God those sinful passions are actually aroused or enflamed.

But what does that mean in practice? Here’s a simple illustration. Normally, I would never dream of walking across the grass. That is, until I see a pristine lawn and a little sign which says “Keep off the grass.” At that point I desperately want to walk across the grass.

That is something like the situation in which a non-believing person finds themselves. They are bound to the law of God, but at this stage the effect of God’s law upon them is to further inflame rebellion against Him. (See Romans 7:5-8). You might hear the command to “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength” (Mark 12:28), but the very words make you feel like ignoring God and putting yourself first instead.

And what is God’s response to that? It is death and judgement. The law of God contains a penalty for lawbreakers. It is separation from God, climaxing in judgement and hell.

But let me tell you of the turning point in the life of a non-believing person. Perhaps this is you? You’re listening to God’s standards, as they’re set out in the ten commandments (see Exodus chapter 20). As you listen you realise what you are really like, and what the God of the Bible has to say about you. You’ve stopped sitting in judgement on God’s law. And you’ve realised that the law is now sitting in judgement on you. You stop thinking, “How dare God address me in this way.” You realise, “I break God’s laws and I am in desperate trouble.”

That doesn’t sound a very positive experience. But it is. It is essential. When we see our sinfulness we’ll stop thinking God loves us because of our goodness. God’s law should leave us all utterly brokenhearted. In fact, that’s what God wants his law to do for us. Here’s how the apostle Paul expresses this truth:

Galatians 3:24, “So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”

1 Timothy 1:9-11, “We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers,<sup>10</sup> for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers-- and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine<sup>11</sup> that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.”

The Bible describes God’s law as being like a spiritual child minder. Its job is to expose our sin and show us our need of Jesus. In a sense, the law has nothing to say to “righteous” people. Rather, it is given for the sake of lawbreakers and rebels.

In the Old Testament, the law of Moses functioned as a schoolmaster or child minder for the whole nation of Israel until the coming of Christ. And what happened in the life of a whole nation is paralleled in the experience of a non-believing person as they encounter the law of God.

- **you cannot be saved by obeying the law (Galatians 3:10)**

This is a critical warning that all must hear. Many, many, many people assume that we can be friends with God by being good (or at least by being good enough).

Our approach to God is often like the exam technique beloved by all students. It’s called “question spotting.” Suppose I were to take a history exam. I might think to myself, “I’m not very good at the First World War, so I’ll learn everything I can about Victorian Britain. That’ll be enough to get me through.”

Don't we often adopt the same approach to God and his law? E.g. "I'm not very good at honouring God. But I'm pretty good at not murdering. So I'll major on that. And that's bound to get me through – to make me OK with God." But in response God's word says:

Galatians 3:10, "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.""

The key word there is "EVERYTHING." Every command. Every single one. That's the reach of God's law into our lives. And not just the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law. He bids us to love Him and to love our neighbours – and to do so wholly, entirely and perfectly.

Many of the people Jesus spoke with got this badly wrong. They were religious people, who thought of themselves as good enough for God. Yet none of us can meet the perfect standards which God's law demands. You cannot be saved by obeying the law.

And no-one has ever been saved by obedience to the law of God. Some Christians get a bit confused here, imagining that in the Old Testament people were saved by obedience to the law. But NO-ONE... EVER... has been saved by good works or obedience.

So, may I challenge you? Write out each one of the 10 commandments. For one week honestly assess your life and your motives against the standards of the Law. My prayer for you is that you would experience what sometimes is called "the conviction of sin" – the deep sense that you fall short of God's standards and that you need Jesus to save you from the penalty of breaking God's law. And it's to Jesus that we now turn.

## **2. Jesus and the law**

- **the law points forward to Jesus (Matthew 11:13, Luke 24:44)**

Jesus says that the whole Bible is about him.

Luke 24:44, "He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." [Also Matt 11:13]

What does that mean? It means, for a start, that the books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) are all about Jesus. These Bible books and their story of how God took a special people for his very own are ultimately all about Jesus.

Here we read about the Tabernacle – a portable meeting place between God and his people. And the NT says of Jesus that He is the true tabernacle.

We read of priests – human intermediaries between God and the people. And the NT shows us that Jesus is the true priest.

We read of sacrifice – for sinful people cannot draw near to God and find atonement without blood. And the NT shows us that Jesus is the true Lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

We read of the promised land – a place of blessing. And the NT tells us it's a pointer to a new creation ruled over by King Jesus.

One implication is that we must read the books of the law (and their trickier parts) with Jesus and the gospel in mind. They may be tricky. But they are given to us by God in order to lead us in different ways to Jesus and to encourage us to trust in Him.

But what about the laws that are contained in the law of Moses? Jesus claims that they are about him too. In fact they "prophesy" of Him:

Matthew 11:13, “For all the prophets and law prophesied until John.”

Perhaps you don’t think of the law like that. One of its jobs was to “prophesy” – to point forward deliberately to the person and work of Jesus. And as we come to the gospels we do indeed see the law of God fulfilled by and in Him.

- **Jesus deepens and obeys the law (Matthew 5:17-20)**

One of the brilliant things about Jesus is that he practices what he preaches. So many non-believing people are kept away from Christian faith because of the hypocrisy of Christian people. So often we find ourselves needing to say, “I’m sorry. Christians sometimes give Jesus a really bad name.”

But Jesus is the very opposite of a hypocrite. What he says, he does. He lived as a perfect keeper of God’s law. What the law described... and prescribed... and prophesied... is fulfilled in the person of Jesus. He loved the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind, strength. And he loved his neighbour as himself.

This is the beautiful and extraordinary righteousness of Jesus. Just as we fall short of the law written in the ten commandments, so we see ourselves falling short of the law embodied in the Lord Jesus. But as Christian people we praise God for the perfect obedience of his holy Son who is everything that we are not.

But not only does Jesus obey the law and fulfil it in his own life and ministry, he also teaches us the law and deepens our understanding of it.

Matthew 5:17-20, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> I tell you the truth, 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. <sup>19</sup> Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same 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. <sup>20</sup> 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.

Here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives us the standards of his kingdom. What are they? They’re the standards of God’s OT law. Jesus is clear that he has “not come to abolish it.” This is a message some Christians need to hear. Jesus is not “antinomian” – he is not opposed to law. He and the apostles include commands or imperatives in the NT. And specifically he reiterates the OT law, from which “not the smallest letter” will be erased. Christ has nothing to do with the cheap grace which says “trust in Christ and do what you like.”

But in teaching us God’s law Jesus does something else. He deepens and extends the demands of the law of God. We see that particularly in the second table of the 10 commandments (e.g. “Don’t murder? Actually, don’t even be angry. Don’t commit adultery? Actually, don’t even look lustfully”).

And a terrible warning follows in Matthew 5:19 – for those break God’s commandments and who teach others to do the same. Holiness and righteousness matter to Jesus. And this holiness is shaped by God and determined by His law.

But what of the Christian and law of Moses?

### **3. The Christian and the law**

- **I am clothed with Jesus’ righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21)**

Here we come to the heart of the gospel. The Christian person is joined to Jesus; they are in union with him. Are you trusting Christ? Then you are “in Him.” And those two little words make the difference between heaven and hell:

2 Corinthians 5:21, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

If you are "in Him" then there is something that Jesus takes from you and something which Jesus gives to you.

He *takes from you* the curse of God's law. My sin becomes his. So completely does he bear the Christian's sin that Paul can say of Jesus that he was "made sin" for us. What's the result? Here's how Augustus Toplady puts it in his wonderful old hymn *A debtor to mercy alone*:

The judgments of God's holy law  
with me can have nothing to do  
My saviour's obedience and blood  
hide all my transgressions from view

And he *gives to you* his righteousness. He clothes the Christian with his perfect, law-keeping righteousness. Just as my sin is imputed to Christ, so his righteousness is imputed to me. Toplady goes on to describe the difference that Jesus' righteousness makes:

Nor fear with his righteousness on  
my humble offering to bring

But that's not all.

- **God's law is written on my heart (Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrews 8:10)**

In the Old Testament the prophets looked forward to a new covenant – to a new sort of relationship between God and his people. Here the writer to the Hebrews picks up on one key aspect of the new covenant promise:

Hebrews 8:10, "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

The new covenant promises an intimate relationship between the Lord and the Christian. Notice two dimensions of this relationship. Firstly, it brings an intimate experience of God. He will say of us, "my people." How extraordinary and wonderful to be owned and possessed in this way by the God of the universe.

Secondly, it brings an intimate experience of God's law. This may be a surprise to some. But this is indeed one of the chief blessings of the new covenant. Simply, if you're a Christian then God's law is written on your heart. To the Christian, the law of God is no longer merely words on a page. Rather, by the powerful work of the Spirit in regeneration the law of God captures a person's heart, such that they are moved to a new and heartfelt obedience and a delight in the law just like that of the Psalmist of old (e.g. "how I love your law."). That's the experience of every new covenant believer.

- **the law helps me understand how to live (2 Timothy 3:16)**

In writing to his friend Timothy the apostle Paul speaks about the origin and the purpose of the Bible:

2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness..."

Paul's claim here is that the whole of Scripture is "inspired" or "breathed-out" by God. That's why we speak of the Bible as "God's Word." It originates with and in God. And when Paul speaks of "all Scripture" he's speaking of the whole Old Testament – including the law of Moses.

But what is the Bible's purpose? One of its aims is to "train in righteousness." That means one key aim of the law of Moses is to "train in righteousness" or to help us grow in godliness.

Listen to some words from the American minister Kevin De Young:

“It sounds really spiritual to say God is interested in a relationship, not in rules. But it’s not Biblical. From top to bottom the Bible is full of commands. They aren’t meant to stifle a relationship with God, but to protect it, seal it, and define it... God’s commands are given as a means of grace so that we might grow in godliness and show that we love him.” (*The Hole in Our Holiness*, page 45)

There’s much more to say about God’s call to holiness than space here permits. However, for now we simply note that listening to the law of Moses will help train us in righteousness.

But how does that work in practice?

- **Three concluding questions**

Firstly, as a Christian **am I “under” the law of Moses?** Not as “covenant” – for the Christian is a new covenant worshipper. But we are under the law of Moses as “Scripture,” because “all” Scripture is God-breathed. Every page of the Bible has something to say to us, including the commands, promises and warnings that were given to Moses.

Secondly, **is it possible to distinguish moral, ceremonial and civil laws?** Traditionally, Reformed Christians have looked at the laws given through Moses and divided them into three parts that, following the coming of Christ, were to be understood and applied in different ways:<sup>1</sup>

*Moral laws:* they are eternally binding upon all people everywhere;

*Ceremonial laws:* these spoke of priests and sacrifices, and are wholly abrogated or done away with by the work of Christ upon the Cross;

*Civil laws:* these specifically governed the life of Israel as a nation and as a geographical entity.

Since the kingdom of God is no longer restricted to a specific nation state (but is multinational and non-geographical) these laws (e.g. to do with boundary markers) no longer bind the conscience and practice of the Christian.

This is an ancient distinction, held by most of the Reformers and even predating them (cf. Thomas Aquinas). And it is a helpful distinction to draw, since the Bible itself suggests that these kinds of categories apply.

For example, the book of Hebrews clearly explains that laws for sacrifice and priesthood were indeed only temporary in nature, pointing to Christ whose fulfilment means we need no longer use animal sacrifice or human priest to atone for sin.

And elsewhere the NT tells us that all foods are now clean. Those OT dietary restrictions which helped delineate Jew from Gentile and preserve a holy nation are abolished, because new covenant worshippers are drawn from all nations.

However, when we read through the OT law it isn’t always so clear into which category we should place a given command. (Is it moral? Or ceremonial? Or civil? Or is it a mixture?).

Further, we would do well to remember that the Spirit of God continues to speak to us through the whole Bible. Every verse in God’s word calls us to understand, to believe and to obey. Of course, “obedience” doesn’t always mean literal obedience. In fact, if a Christian were to read Leviticus chapters 1-7 and

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<sup>1</sup> Article 7 of the Anglican 39 Articles of Religion puts it like this: “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.”

perform an animal sacrifice in response to their sin they would in fact be disobedient and disbelieving, for the NT tells us that we don't need so to do! Nevertheless, we need to have the conviction and confidence that every command from the mouth of God still addresses the Christian, even if we struggle to discern its application to us now.

Thirdly, **what about specifics?** As we grow as students of the whole Bible we will (or should) grow in competence and confidence in understanding and applying the OT law. For, the Bible contains its own rules for interpretation. We're not left on our own to decide "what it means for me." Here are a few principles:

We would do well to remember the *purpose of the whole OT law* even as we grapple with difficult specifics. The whole law called on Israel to copy a holy God. The law's heart is summed up in this phrase: "be holy for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44-45, etc). Since the Lord is holy his people are to be utterly holy and distinct from the world around them. Some expressions of this holiness are puzzling to our ears. (Laws governing cleanliness and bodily emissions? Rules about mixing fabric in clothing? Food laws?) But whatever else we do with those laws we must conclude that God cares deeply about our holiness.

We would do well to learn from the *NT's careful nuancing* as it reflects on the OT law. From the NT we learn that the Mosaic law is both *elementary* and *deep*. In Galatians Paul stresses its elementary quality – that is, its temporary function was to prepare for and lead to Christ. But elsewhere he alludes to its deep or timeless quality (e.g. in writing to Christian children in Ephesians 6 he repeats the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment). So, in application, we'll sometimes be encouraged towards continuity and sometimes towards dis-continuity.

We would do well to let *the whole Bible* inform us about which expressions of the holiness laws are abiding, which are "time-expired," and what are the timeless principles that lie beneath them. Here are three examples:

Example 1: the law's prohibitions of certain sexual behaviours are entirely consonant with the whole Bible's picture of sexual morality, as given both before and after the Mosaic law. We conclude that homosexual or adulterous conduct is permanently prohibited because of the broader whole-Bible picture to which the OT law contributes.

Example 2: there are many passages within the OT itself that point to the limited function and duration of some Mosaic regulations (e.g. see Isaiah 1:15-17, Hosea 6:6, Isaiah 66:17). Arguably, the OT worshipper would not have been surprised at the NT's abrogation of parts of the law.

Example 3: there are deep connections between the instructions for the Tabernacle and the "lay-out" of the Garden of Eden. Similarly, some of the more esoteric cleanliness laws seem to reflect certain patterns and distinctions from the creation order in Genesis 1-3. Awareness of these connections is helpful. It means that we can look at an odd-sounding rule such as one of the food laws and perceive both its elementary or temporary nature (it doesn't endure) *and* the deep principle that lies behind it (which does endure, e.g. God's love of order and his love of life rather than death). For much more detail on these connections see the extract from Vern Poythress' book below.

Being aware of these connections brings great depth and fuller understanding of the NT's call to holiness and order. Note Paul's instruction and encouragement:

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? <sup>15</sup> What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? <sup>16</sup> What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." <sup>17</sup> "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." <sup>18</sup> "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." <sup>7:1</sup> Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify

ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”

Paul cites the OT law in his appeal to Christian people (he alludes to Deuteronomy 7:3 and quotes Leviticus 26:12, as well as citing Isaiah 52:11). Notice that he thinks the OT prohibition against touching unclean things reinforces the general principle of separation from sinfulness.

How does this make sense? In the OT unclean things symbolically indicate the disorders of sin itself, which is the root of uncleanness. This symbolic and physical distinction was appropriate during the time when God’s salvation plan was expressed only in shadowy form. Christ had not yet come and he had not yet accomplished his work of pardoning lawbreaking and transforming the heart.

Nevertheless, the OT commands still speak to us and help us understand the seriousness of sin and the call to holiness. In fact, we can’t understand the NT properly without them.

## **Extract from Vern S. Poythress, *The shadow of Christ in the law of Moses* (pages 80-86)**

Online at <http://www.frame-poythress.org/ebooks/the-shadow-of-christ-in-the-law-of-moses/>

*In the following extract Poythress shows how the law of Moses reflects God's orderly character and love of life, even in its most puzzling aspects – namely the laws for diet and for cleanness and uncleanness. He then discusses NT application of the laws of cleanliness.*

### **The law articulating God's order**

The law of Moses sets forth a detailed order for Israel's existence and life. Orderliness is a characteristic of God, since he is in fact the source and creator of all the order of the universe. Any people who live in his presence as Israel did must submit to his order and reflect in their own lives the order and righteousness of God. They must be imitators of God. Their moral behavior must conform to the purity and righteousness of God. Thus the ten commandments set forth the basic features of God's moral order, an order required as part of our submission to God.

We also see the order of God reflected in a striking way in those more puzzling aspects of Mosaic law, namely the laws for diet and for cleanness and uncleanness. Many people have seen nothing but arbitrary commands in the distinctions between clean and unclean foods and in the instructions for cleansing from ceremonial defilements. But a closer look at these commands shows their inner rationale.

To begin to understand the special distinctions between clean and unclean, we must keep clearly before us two basic facts. First, God as the creator of the universe is the origin, standard, and life-giving creator of all order in the universe. God by creating the separations between heaven and earth, sea and dry land, divided the universe into "rooms," analogous to the separations within the tabernacle. God also populated the universe with plants and animals that reproduce "according to their kinds" ([Gen. 1:11-12](#) <sup>L</sup>, etc.). Thus he produced an order among living things, and gave to those living things a limited ability to spawn further production of order as they reproduce other living things having the same orderly pattern. Human beings as the crown of creation embody the order of God in a most special way. Of course, like the animals they have capability of reproducing further order according to their kind. But in addition they are made "in the image of God" ([Gen. 1:26](#) <sup>L</sup>). In a special way they replicate on earth the order of God their designer. They are the unique representatives of God on earth. The unique ability of human beings to know God, to respond actively to him, to use language, to think, to exercise dominion over the lower creation—all these things imitate God's original knowledge, language, thought, and dominion, and contribute to human ability actively to represent God's presence on earth.

Second, the original created order of God described in [Gen. 1-2](#) <sup>L</sup> has been disrupted by the fall. In God's acts of salvation he undertakes to restore and advance his order. Salvation thus takes the form of renewal or re-creation. We see hints of this language in the Old Testament (e.g., [Isa. 65:17](#) <sup>L</sup>), but the fuller realization comes in the New Testament. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" ([2 Cor. 5:17](#) <sup>L</sup>). The Old Testament naturally represents this renewal not in its final form but by way of foreshadowing. The land of Palestine is a kind of new Eden; but of course in many respects it remains a land like all other lands, and becomes subject to curse when the people of Israel disobey God. The people of Israel themselves are a kind of small-scale version of a renewed humanity; but their disobedience shows how they fall short.

The laws for cleanness and uncleanness fit into this picture in a natural way. They signify and foreshadow the way in which God cleanses sin. They show that a renewed or recreated people are characterized by renewed behavior, behavior conforming to God's order and separating them from sin. A close look at the classification of things into categories of holy, clean, and unclean shows a pattern of order.<sup>2</sup> God the ultimate creator of order is supremely holy. He is the origin of life with its order-producing potential. By contrast, death is associated with sin and disorder. Hence things associated with death or producing

disorder are unclean. Created things that are closely associated to God or the initiation of life are counted holy. Thus the tabernacle as the center of order is holy. The first-born human being or animal is holy and belongs to God in a special way.

Dead bodies are unclean both because of the immediate connection with death and because they degrade the order of living things back to the relative disorder of the nonliving earth. Birds that feed on carrion (dead bodies) are unclean. Things that are somehow defective or deviate from a paradigmatic order are also unclean. Fish with scales are the paradigmatic form of water creature; hence all water creatures without scales or fins are deviant and unclean. Animals with “real” legs functioning in a familiar way are normal; but all kinds of crawling animals and insects are unclean. Grasshoppers and other hopping insects with “normal” legs are clean. Defective animals, with disease or an injured part, are not acceptable for sacrifice, even though they are not literally unclean. Animals that chew the cud and have parted hoofs are regarded as normal, possibly because these are the most common herd animals; but animals that do not have these two key features deviate from the norm and are reckoned as unclean.

It may be that the classifications are also related to the curse in Genesis 3.<sup>3</sup> In Genesis 3 the snake and the ground are cursed because of sin. Hence all the things that creep on the ground like a snake are unclean ([Lev. 11:41-45](#) ). Animals that have no hooves but walk in direct contact with the ground are also unclean ([Lev. 11:27](#) ). Animals that part the hoof and chew their cud are clean ([Lev. 11:3](#) ). Possibly chewing the cud suggests a greater separation in taking in the food that comes from the ground, and the cloven hoof suggests a greater separation with respect to contact with the ground.

We do not know for certain which kind of connection may have been uppermost in the mind of an Israelite. But in a sense it does not matter. The two themes—the theme of order and the theme of separation from death and the curse—are in fact complementary, since death and the curse bring disorder and frustration.

Mixtures are usually regarded as deviant, though in some cases (e.g. the special fragrant incense and the priestly garments) they are holy. Thus Israelites are told not to mix two kinds of seed in sowing a field, and not to mix two kinds of cloth in a garment ([Lev. 19:19](#) ).

A spreading skin disease makes a person unclean because it is producing disorder.<sup>4</sup> When the disease has covered the whole body, it is no longer producing more disorder and the person can be pronounced clean ([Lev. 13:12-13](#) ). Spreading mildew in a house is creating disorder in the house and makes the house unclean ([Lev. 14:33-53](#) ). Any abnormal bodily discharge is creating disorder and makes the person unclean ([Lev. 15:1-33](#) ).

In the light of modern medical knowledge we can appreciate the hygienic value of some of these laws. The instructions concerning infectious skin disease are similar to modern quarantine procedures, while the prohibitions with respect to dead bodies, carrion birds, and pigs guard the people from sicknesses transmitted through contaminated food. God promised to deliver the people from “every disease,” especially “the horrible diseases you knew in Egypt” ([Deut. 7:15](#) ). Doubtless God fulfilled his promises partly through the natural means involved in the dietary and quarantine procedures, though he was also free to employ special supernatural protection when appropriate. When the people disobeyed, they would experience the diseases of Egypt as part of God’s curse ([Deut. 28:60-61](#) ).

Yet our modern medical knowledge must not become the most basic framework through which we read the Old Testament laws. Their own context says nothing about hygiene but stresses the need of Israel to “be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy” ([Lev. 19:2](#) ). The entire system is a pervasive expression of the orderliness and separation required of a people who have fellowship with God the Holy One, the creator of all order. As Gordon Wenham says, “Theology, not hygiene, is the reason for this provision.”<sup>5</sup>

## The law expressing the way of life

The theme of order is closely related to the theme of life. God is the source of both order and life. In creation God not only brings order out of chaos but life out of nonlife. The world is created not only to express the order and beauty of God, but to serve as a suitable arena for human life. The disorderly watery chaos of [Gen. 1:2](#) cannot sustain life, and a return to watery chaos in Noah's flood extinguishes life. Moreover, the life of both plants and animals manifests itself preeminently in their powers of reproduction, which enable them to replicate order "according to their kind."

The fall exhibits the stark contrast between life and death. God is the source of life, and disobedience to him fittingly results in death ([Gen. 2:17](#)). Life means first of all spiritual life, real life in communion with God. On the day when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they died in a real and spiritual sense. But physical death is a fitting concomitant to this deeper spiritual death. Because human beings have renounced and destroyed their true life with God, their own physical life is in turn destroyed. Physical death is thus simultaneously a punishment and a symbol of deeper spiritual loss.

In the Exodus God gives Israel new life. They are redeemed not only from the physical oppression of Egyptian slavery but the spiritual bondage and deceit involved in worship of the Egyptian gods. God commands them to worship himself alone as their true life ([Exod. 20:2-3](#)). Accordingly, the law in its total scope sets forth the way of life. True life comes from God and involves fellowship with him. If the Israelites obey the commandments, they will live ([Lev. 18:5](#); [Deut. 28:1-14](#)), and if they disobey they will die ([Exod. 19:21-22](#); [32:9-10](#); [Deut. 6:15](#); [28:15-68](#)). The ten commandments embody the core of this life. They express what true life is like in our relations directly to God (primarily commandments 1-4) and in our relations to fellow human beings (primarily commands 5-10).

The laws concerning clean and unclean also embody the themes of life and death, often on an indirect, symbolic plane. Contact with the dead body of a human being is of course direct contact with human death, the primary curse of the fall. It creates maximum defilement, requiring seven days for cleansing ([Num. 19:11-19](#)). An animal that has died by itself is a more distant mirror of the curse of death; accordingly, it requires only part of one day to become clean again ([Lev. 11:24-40](#)). Creatures that crawl on the ground are indirectly associated with the curse on the ground and the curse on the serpent. Hence they are unclean and unsuitable for food ([Lev. 11:41-45](#)).

All the things described in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 are unclean *for Israel*. But [Deut. 14:21](#) explicitly allows Israelites to sell carcasses to aliens and foreigners. What is prohibited to Israel is not prohibited to others. Rather, the prohibition rests on the fact that "you [Israelites] are a holy people to the LORD your God" ([Deut. 14:21](#)). The world has been contaminated with curse and uncleanness originating in the fall. The Gentile nations participate in this uncleanness through their contact with unclean animals. But such uncleanness is not in itself sin. It is merely *symbolic* of sin. And separation from uncleanness accompanies *symbolic* holiness. Israel alone is required to observe a special ceremonial cleanness, because they are the holy people. Their special access to God makes it necessary for them to maintain special distance from the fall and its curse. At the same time, all these special observances serve to reinforce their consciousness of being a unique nation. They are thereby reminded not to participate in the idolatry and moral corruption of the surrounding nations.

## New Testament application of laws of cleanliness

In the light of the New Testament we know that the distinctions between clean and unclean were temporary in nature. Jesus' teaching while he was on earth already pointed to the fact that all foods were to be reckoned clean ([Mark 7:19](#)). The Apostle Paul explicitly confirms this teaching ([Col 2:20-23](#); [1 Tim 4:3-5](#)). Thus on the level of literal observance the Old Testament foods laws are obsolete.

But such laws still have their symbolic value. The general principle of separation from what is unclean is still valid. For example, Paul counsels us not to compromise with unbelief or commit ourselves to unnatural alliances with unbelievers:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? . . . As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." ([2 Cor 6:14-17](#))

In v. 17 Paul invokes the Old Testament prohibition against touching unclean things in order to reinforce the general principle of separation from sinfulness.

Paul's use of the Old Testament here is quite in line with its real meaning. The disorders of unclean things in the Old Testament symbolically indicate the disorders of sin itself, which is the root of uncleanness. Israel's separation from unclean foods also proclaims its obligation to be a uniquely holy nation, a kingdom of priests. In the Old Testament the principles of holiness and separation were temporarily expressed on a symbolic, physical level in the distinction between clean and unclean foods. Such a symbolic distinction was appropriate during the time when salvation as a whole was expressed in a symbolic and shadowy form. Salvation had not yet come in its definitive and final form, namely, Christ himself and his sacrifice on the cross. The sacrifices of the Old Testament cleansed copies and shadows of heavenly things, but they did not permanently cleanse the heart. The earth itself and all its creatures had not been cleansed definitively through the power of Christ's blood.

Hence it was appropriate that the need for cleansing the heart be expressed in external ways through food distinctions. It was appropriate also that these distinctions be related to separation from the curse of [Gen. 3](#). Thus these distinctions foreshadow the need for a recreative work of God that will affect the curse on the lower creation.

The orderliness of the distinction between clean and unclean, and the rejection of the disorder of unclean things, signify beforehand the comprehensive character of the order of Jesus Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords, who rules all things ([Heb. 1:3](#)) and to whom all authorities in heaven and on earth are subject ([Eph. 1:21](#)). All order in the original creation derives from him who is the Word of God and the wisdom of God ([John 1:1](#); [Col. 2:3](#)). The distinction between life and death in Old Testament cleanliness laws signifies that Jesus Christ is the originator of life and the overcomer of death.

Now in the time of fulfillment in the New Testament we see clearly the meaning to which these distinctions pointed. Sin and righteousness are shown forth fully in the cross. Life and death are shown fully in Christ's death and resurrection. All foods are cleansed by the word of God and by prayer now offered in the name and power of Christ ([1 Tim. 4:1-5](#)).