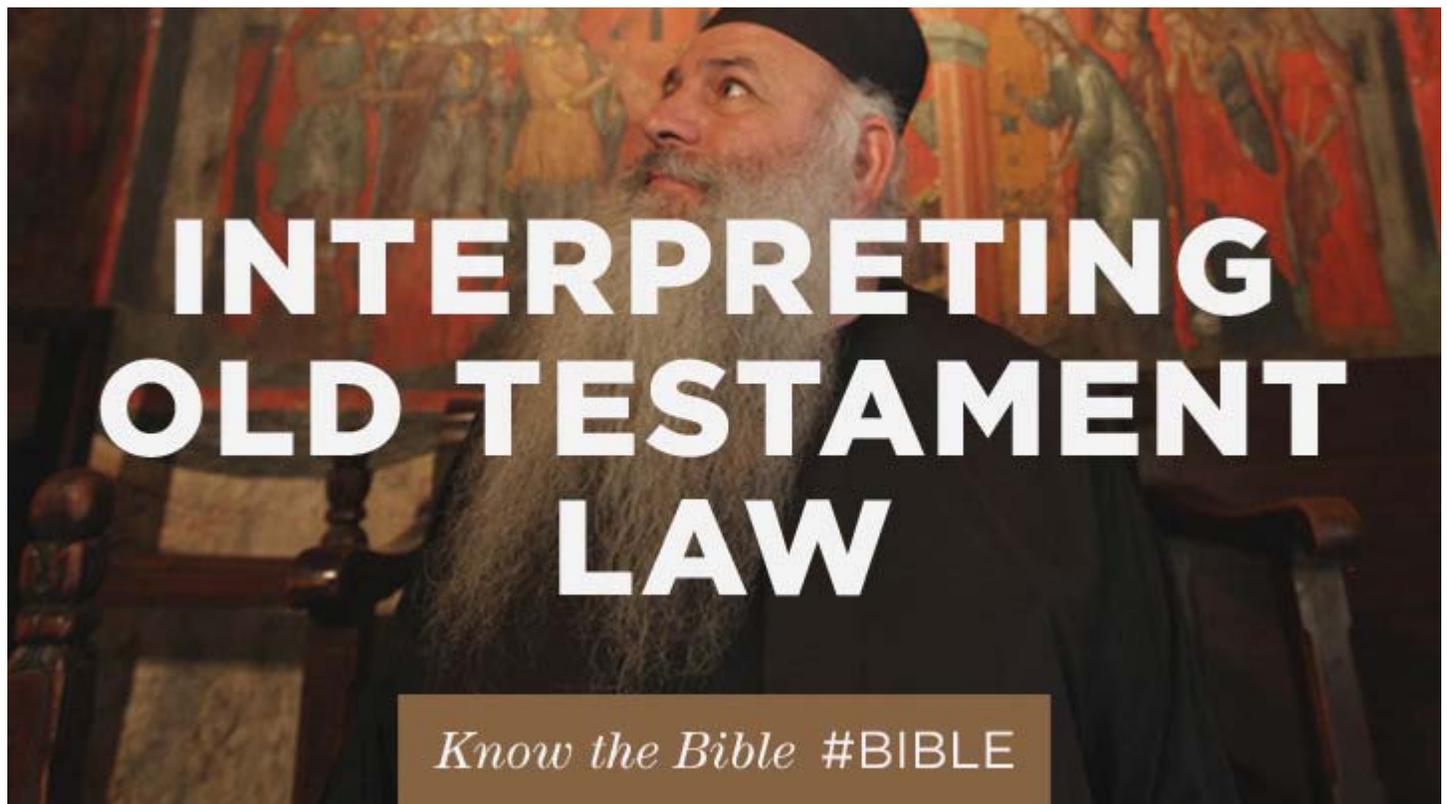


THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO INTERPRETING OLD TESTAMENT LAW

Resurgence » God Biblical Theology Study Books of the Bible



The Old Testament law is much more than a list of dos and don'ts. How we interpret it makes a world of difference—it affects the entirety of our life.

The Old Testament law is important. Like, really important.

It's probably more important than you think.

How we interpret the various laws will influence what you eat, how you dress, and your worship of God. Think about it this way.

It determines whether or not you can buy that poly/cotton blend jacket you've had your eye on (**Lev. 19:19**), play football with an actual "pigskin" (**Lev. 11:7-8**), how you style your hair, and shave your face (**Lev. 19:27**).

It determines whether or not you can eat a pulled pork sandwich, shrimp on the barbie (**Lev. 11:10**), or rare steak (**Lev. 17:10**).

And it also determines whether or not you have to worship God at a specific location, wear priestly garbs, or sacrifice animals to atone for your sins.

As you can see, accurately interpreting the Old Testament law is no laughing matter. It speaks into every area of our life.

So, what Old Testament laws should Christians obey?

A DIFFICULT TASK

Answering this question is no small task. It's difficult to answer and has caused tremendous discussion from the start.

It began with Jesus and the Pharisees, was picked up by the Council of Jerusalem (**Acts 15**), hashed out by Paul, Peter, and the **Judaizers** (**Gal. 2:12; 5:12; 6:12**), and emerged throughout church history in varying degrees.

Jonathan Edwards had this to say about the difficulty:

"There is perhaps no part of divinity attended with so much intricacy, and wherein orthodox divines do so much differ as stating the precise agreement and difference between the two dispensations of Moses and Christ."

But before we can dive into these deep waters, it's important for us to lay some initial groundwork.

IT BEGINS WITH JESUS

For Christians, the interpretation and application of the Old Testament law doesn't begin with the law—it begins with Jesus. The law points us to him (**Luke 24:44**). The law is fulfilled in him (**Matt. 5:17**). And the law takes on a new meaning for us today in him (e.g., "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you..."). For us to interpret the law rightly, we need to understand it in light of Jesus.

Easy enough, right?

Well, not necessarily.

This is where things start to get hairy.

There are a ton of Old Testament laws—613 to be exact—and some of them have been abolished and have no bearing on our lives today (see **Rom. 10:4**; **Gal. 3:23–25**; **Eph. 2:15**).

So, exactly which laws, or category of law, have been abolished?

There's no one perfect way to answer this question, but there is one really helpful way found within the history of the church.

3 CATEGORIES OF LAW

For hundreds of years, the Reformed tradition taught that the Old Testament law was comprised of three different categories: ceremonial, moral, and civil. Though this view is far from comprehensive, it helps us to understand, interpret, and apply the law to our lives.

1. CEREMONIAL

God gave the ceremonial laws to the people of Israel as a means of guiding them in their worship of him. These laws include the various sacrifices for sin, circumcision (**Gen. 17:10**), priestly duties (**Lev. 7:1–37**), rejection of certain foods (e.g., pork (**Lev. 11:7–8**) and shellfish (**Lev. 11:9–12**)), and the cleanliness code (i.e., on cleansing lepers (**Lev. 14:1–32**), and the like).

The ceremonial laws served a temporary purpose and foreshadowed the coming of Jesus (**Dan. 9:27**; **Col. 2:17**; **Heb. 10:1**) until they were fulfilled and abolished in him.

Today, we are no longer required to follow them and are free to eat bacon wraps and wear clothes made with multiple fabrics. In other words, we don't have to ceremonially purify ourselves for God; he does that for us through faith in Christ.

2. CIVIL

God gave the nation and theocracy of Israel civil laws to guide their daily living, political affairs, and judicial system (**Exod. 21–23:9**; **Lev. 19:35**; **24:17–23**). Today, these civil laws and their punishments are no longer applicable. They expired when the people of God were no longer determined by their ethnicity or geographic location, but rather through faith in Jesus Christ (**Gal. 3:7–9, 29**).

Today, God's people assemble together as a church from every nation, tribe, and language (**Rev. 7:9**). His church is not a nation-state like Israel or identified by a particular political party.

Today the church does not deal with sins the same way as Israel once did. The penalties have changed. The church deals with sin “**by exhortation and, at worst, exclusion from membership**” (e.g., **1 Cor. 5**), not stones and fire.

3. MORAL

God not only gave us moral laws like the Ten Commandments (**Exod. 20:1–17**), but he wrote them on our heart (**Rom. 2:14–16**). And these laws have not been abolished in Christ (**Matt. 5:17–19**).

While the moral law of God does not provide salvation (**Rom. 3:20;6:14; Gal. 5:23**), it does **continue to be** used as a mirror reflecting the perfect righteousness of God, a means of restraining evil, and a way to reveal what's pleasing to God.

Today the moral law of God is still in force and it has much to say about loving our neighbor (Lev: 19:18; cf. **Matt. 19:19**), taking care of the poor (**Deut. 15:4**; cf. **Acts 4:34**), and staying sexually pure (**Exod. 20:14**; cf. **1 Cor. 6:9**).

A HELPFUL GUIDE TO INTERPRETING THE OLD TESTAMENT

When looking to interpret and apply the Old Testament law today, here are two simple steps to take to help you walk in the right direction.

1. UNDERSTAND THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW IN ITS OWN HISTORICAL SETTING

Here, you want to ask questions like:

- Who wrote it, when did they write it, whom did they write it to, where did they write it, and why did they write?
- What does this verse mean in the context of the paragraph, chapter, or book?
- Is there a specific need or concern the author is addressing?
- What does this passage reveal about God? About his will for his people?

2. UNDERSTAND THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW IN RELATIONSHIP TO JESUS

Since the Old Testament law points to Jesus and is fulfilled in him, we need to ask some basic questions about the Old Testament law we're studying, such as:

- How does this passage complement the entire Bible?
- What does this passage mean in light of Jesus' life, death, burial, and resurrection?
How does Jesus fulfill it?
- Is this law directly carried over into the New Testament? If not, why not? If so, how? (e.g., Is it reinforced or reinterpreted?)

Source: Resurgence