

Understanding the Old Law

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Introduction.

- A. A couple of weeks ago, as Lauren and I so often do as we're getting ready for church, we found ourselves watching a denominational preacher on TV. For me, it's one of those small guilty pleasures, like taking a second helping of pancakes when I'm already full: I know I probably shouldn't do it, but I enjoy it so much I just can't resist. Besides, denominational preachers are really good for helping with sermon topics!
- B. In this case, the denominational preacher didn't disappoint. We didn't have to listen very long before it became clear to us that he was preaching on tithing. Indeed, he was apparently in the middle of a sermon series on tithing. The one we heard was Part 5 of the series. Now, that's pretty impressive in a horrifying sort of way. I have to hand it to the preacher: he was surely a man who put his mouth where his money was.
- C. In this particular sermon, the preacher was discussing the curse that people who didn't tithe would incur. For example, he said that mental illness was a result of failure to tithe properly, which, in light of our recent sermon on depression, was also pretty horrifying. To justify his points on tithing, he was all over the Old Testament, from Genesis to Malachi. It was evident that he thought the Old Law, or at least the tithing part, was still binding today. Of course, we in the Lord's church do not teach tithing at all, much less preach five-part sermon series on it, because we believe that the Old Law cannot be used to justify our religious practice.
- D. Who's right? Are Christians today still bound to keep all or even part of the Old Law? If we're right, and the Old Law cannot be used as authority for what we do today, what's it still around for? Is the Old Law good for anything? This is an important question, and it shapes the way we deal with the majority of what we find in our Bibles. Let's answer it today. Let's turn to God's word for help in understanding the Old Law.

I. The Old Law Does Not. . .

- A. This process of understanding must begin by recognizing what the Old Law does not do today, and one of the things that the Old Law does not do any longer is **BIND** us to obey it. This is actually one of the most common themes of the New Testament epistles. Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews all devote a great deal of time to explaining why Christians are not under the Law of Moses. We see another explanation, though, in Colossians 2:13-14. Paul here describes the Old Law as a "handwriting of requirements," a list of things that God expected us to carry out perfectly. However, because no man but Jesus has ever carried out the Law perfectly, the Law became the enemy of everyone, condemning us for the sins we committed. That's why Paul says it was against us. However, when Jesus died, His death wiped out the Old Law. It became obsolete, and it was replaced by the law of Christ, which is contained in the New Testament. The Old Law is no longer a stumbling block for us, because Christ has taken it out of the way and nailed it to the cross. It's done with.
- B. Because the Old Law no longer has the power to bind us to follow it, we cannot use it any longer to **SHOW AUTHORITY** for some religious practice. Now, this is something that almost every religious group in the so-called Christian world around us gets wrong, and generally, they get it wrong in two areas: tithing and use of musical instruments. They want to make the members of their church give 10 percent, and they want to have everything from pipe organs to electric guitars in worship. To defend both of these practices, they cite passages from the Old Law that undeniably tell the ancient Israelites to tithe and use instruments.
- C. The problem is, the New Testament tells us that we cannot, and indeed must not, follow the commandments of the Old Law. Look at what Paul writes in Galatians 5:2-4. Here, Paul is dealing with a somewhat different problem: Judaizing teachers who are telling new Gentile converts that they must carry out the Jewish ritual of circumcision as commanded in the Old Law if they want to be right with God. What Paul tells the Galatians is that the opposite is actually true. When the Galatians start carrying out this ritual from the Old Law, a number of very bad things happen: First, Christ becomes of no effect in their lives. Second, by attempting to keep one part of the Old Law, they become obliged to keep it all perfectly, which no man can do. Finally, once they attempt to please God by justifying themselves according to the Law, they fall from grace.
- D. All of these terrible things happened to Christians in the first century who attempted to return to just one part of the Old Law, and if we do the same thing, if we attempt to return to just one part of the Old Law, we will suffer the same consequences. It's not some small insignificant matter for us to justify tithing or instrumental music using the Old Law. It is spiritually deadly. Once we take that step of returning to the Law of Moses, we are the ones who make Christ of no effect in our lives. We are the ones who are bound to keep the whole Law, animal sacrifices and everything. We are the ones who fall from grace. Let's not even start.
- E. Now, practically speaking, how does all of this play out? Let's use the example that started this whole thing off—tithing. As I've been saying, tithing was certainly part of the Old Law. Among other passages, Deuteronomy 14:22 makes that clear. If there were anything in the New Testament that said something similar, we would have an open-and-shut case for tithing. But there isn't. Along with everything else in the

Old Law, from the Ten Commandments on down, tithing was nailed to the cross with Christ. It's been taken out of our way, and there is no commandment in the teaching of Jesus or the apostles that re-establishes it. Instead, we are to offer to God whatever amount we feel is appropriate, which is what Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 9:6-7. That amount can be five percent, it can be fifty percent, or it can be anything else we want. Christ doesn't browbeat His church into giving 10 percent; instead, He trusts us to give both to express our gratitude to Him and to lay up treasure in heaven. That's what God wants, not tithing.

II. The Old Law Does . . .

- A. All right, so we don't obey the commandments of the Old Law anymore. So . . . why's it still around? Why are 39 of the 66 books of the Bible filled with commandments we're not supposed to keep? There's a good reason for this. Even though the Old Law is not the law we obey today, it still does many useful things.
- B. First, the Old Law still does **TEACH US ABOUT GOD**. Remember, friends, God has changed the law under which His people live, but He is still the same God. He has known everything from the beginning, so it's impossible for Him to grow in wisdom and understanding. Also, since before the foundation of the world, God has been the perfect expression of every good attribute, and the opposite of every evil attribute. It's impossible for Him to change in personality. The way God interacts with man has changed, but God Himself has not. Thus, even the oldest stories in the Old Testament teach us about the same God we serve today.
- C. This is the point the Hebrews writer makes in Hebrews 10:30. In context, the writer has been discussing the incredible danger that waits for Christians if they choose to abandon God and go back into the world. He argues that God will surely destroy the backslider, and one of the bases for his argument is that the God of the Christian is the same God who spoke of vengeance and judgment in the Old Law. Thus, we can look at what God did in the Old Testament and logically draw conclusions about what kind of obedience He expects from us now and what He will do on the day of judgment. We learn critical things about God from the Old Law.
- D. Similarly, the Old Law does **PROVIDE US WITH EXAMPLES** of people who both pleased and displeased God. Let's start with the good side of this and look at Hebrews 11:1-2. This passage calls us to consider the lives of the righteous men who pleased God under the Old Law. The point here is that they did not gain God's approval by keeping His law perfectly, but by trusting in Him even though they could not see Him, and then ordering their lives accordingly. Indeed, the rest of Hebrews 11 is filled with example after example of people who pleased God by having faith and then acting on it, all examples drawn from the Old Testament. From this, the Hebrews writer concludes that if we imitate the example of these men of faith who lived under the Old Law, then God will be pleased with us too. Thus, the Old Law teaches us the priceless lesson that if we want to please God, we need to live lives of obedient faith. The law has changed, but the process has not.
- E. Sadly, however, the Old Testament does not just tell the story of men who by faith pleased God. Instead, it also provides us with negative examples, examples of disobedience, and these examples are equally valuable to us today. This is what we see in 1 Corinthians 10:11-12. In this section of 1 Corinthians, Paul's big argument is that even though the Corinthians have liberty in Christ, they need to take care not to become entangled with sin. To prove his point, he goes back to the stories of the children of Israel. Even though God had saved the Israelites by bringing them up out of the land of Egypt, once they began to sin against Him in the wilderness, He destroyed almost all of them. Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 10:11-12 is that the story of the Exodus isn't just a myth. It's history, and it's history written to teach us a lesson. We need to pay attention to what happened to the Israelites, so that history doesn't repeat itself. Like the Israelites, we too have been saved from slavery, and we too are journeying to our Promised Land—heaven. On our spiritual journey, though, we need to be careful not to sin as the Israelites sinned; otherwise, we too will be destroyed. Once again, the Old Law is being used to teach a valuable lesson. We are to look at the negative example of the Israelites that is recorded in the Old Law, learn from it, and be steadfast in our pilgrimage toward heaven.
- F. Finally, though, and perhaps most importantly, the Old Law is still important today because it does **LEAD US TO CHRIST**. Look at what Jesus says about the Old Law in John 5:39. All of it testifies of Him.
- G. Now, this testimony is carried out in two main ways: prophecy and antitype.
 1. One of the most striking features of the Old Law is how filled it is with prophecies concerning the future, and how many of those prophecies concern Jesus. By my count, at least 13 books of the Old Law contain significant Messianic prophecies. Indeed, some of those books have Jesus as their primary subject. These prophecies, written hundreds of years before the coming of the Christ, yet extremely detailed and extremely accurate, are critical to our faith. They establish that Jesus was the Messiah, that His life on earth was not a hoax. They prove that His life was the culmination of a plan made before the world.
 2. Along the same lines, the Old Law leads us to Christ by means of types and antitypes. In Bible terms, a type is a true story that God set up to tell us something significant about Christ and His church, which are the antitypes. For example, the story of Abraham almost sacrificing Isaac is a type of Christ. When Abraham was willing to kill his only son because of his faith in God, it foreshadowed God's own willingness to sacrifice His only Son to save all of us. The Old Law type teaches us about Christ.

Conclusion. If you've learned about Christ and want to serve Him, come to Him now.