

# Old Testament Law and the Charge of Inconsistency

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by Tim Keller

I find it frustrating when I read or hear columnists, pundits, or journalists dismiss Christians as inconsistent because “they pick and choose which of the rules in the Bible to obey.” What I hear most often is “Christians ignore lots of Old Testament texts—about not eating raw meat or pork or shellfish, not executing people for breaking the Sabbath, not wearing garments woven with two kinds of material and so on. Then they condemn homosexuality. Aren’t you just picking and choosing what they want to believe from the Bible?”

It is not that I expect everyone to have the capability of understanding that the whole Bible is about Jesus and God’s plan to redeem his people, but I vainly hope that one day someone will access their common sense (or at least talk to an informed theological advisor) before leveling the charge of inconsistency.

First of all, let’s be clear that it’s not only the Old Testament that has proscriptions about homosexuality. The New Testament has plenty to say about it, as well. Even Jesus says, in his discussion of divorce in Matthew 19:3-12 that the original design of God was for one man and one woman to be united as one flesh, and failing that (v. 12), persons should abstain from marriage and from sex.

However, let’s get back to considering the larger issue of inconsistency regarding things mentioned in the OT that are no longer practiced by the New Testament people of God. Most Christians don’t know what to say when confronted about this. Here’s a short course on the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament:

The Old Testament devotes a good amount of space to describing the various sacrifices that were to be offered in the tabernacle (and later temple) to atone for sin so that worshippers could approach a holy God. As part of that sacrificial system, there was also a complex set of rules for ceremonial purity and cleanness. You could only approach God in worship if you ate certain foods and not others, wore certain forms of dress, refrained from touching a variety of objects, and so on. This vividly conveyed, over and over, that human beings are spiritually unclean and can’t go into God’s presence without purification.

But even in the Old Testament, many writers hinted that the sacrifices and the temple worship regulations pointed forward to something beyond them. (cf. 1 Samuel 15:21-22; Psalm 50:12-15; 51:17; Hosea 6:6). When Christ appeared he declared all foods ‘clean’ (Mark 7:19) and he ignored the Old Testament clean laws in other ways, touching lepers and dead bodies.

But the reason is made clear. When he died on the cross the veil in the temple was ripped through, showing that the need for the entire sacrificial system with all its clean laws had been done away with. Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice for sin, and now Jesus makes us “clean.”

The entire book of Hebrews explains that the Old Testament ceremonial laws were not so much abolished as fulfilled by Christ. Whenever we pray ‘in Jesus name’, we ‘have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus’ (Hebrews 10:19). It would, therefore, be deeply inconsistent with the teaching of the Bible as a whole if we were to continue to follow the ceremonial laws.

The New Testament gives us further guidance about how to read the Old Testament. Paul makes it clear in places like Romans 13:8 that the apostles understood the Old Testament moral law to still be binding on us. In short, ***the coming of Christ changed how we worship but not how we live.*** The moral law is an outline of God’s own character—his integrity, love, and faithfulness. And so all the Old Testament says about loving our neighbor, caring for the poor, generosity with our possessions, social relationships, and commitment to our family is still in force. The New Testament continues to forbid killing or committing adultery, and all the sex ethic of the Old Testament is re-stated throughout the New Testament (Matthew 5:27-30; 1 Corinthians 6:9-20; 1 Timothy 1:8-11.) If the New Testament has reaffirmed a ment, then it is still in force for us today.

Further, the New Testament explains another change between the Testaments. Sins continue to be sins—but the penalties change. In the Old Testament things like adultery or incest were punishable with civil sanctions like

execution. This is because **at that time God's people existed in the form of a nation-state and so all sins had civil penalties.**

But in the New Testament the people of God are an assembly of churches all over the world, living under many different governments. The church is not a civil government, and so sins are dealt with by exhortation and, at worst, exclusion from membership. This is how a case of incest in the Corinthian church is dealt with by Paul (1 Corinthians 5:1ff. and 2 Corinthians 2:7-11.) Why this change? Under Christ, the gospel is not confined to a single nation—it has been released to go into all cultures and peoples.

Once you grant the main premise of the Bible—about the surpassing significance of Christ and his salvation—then all the various parts of the Bible make sense. Because of Christ, the ceremonial law is repealed. Because of Christ the church is no longer a nation-state imposing civil penalties. It all falls into place. However, if you reject the idea of Christ as Son of God and Savior, then, of course, the Bible is at best a mish-mash containing some inspiration and wisdom, but most of it would have to be rejected as foolish or erroneous.

So where does this leave us? There are only two possibilities...

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*Note by Joel Olhava: Consider also these verses. **Romans 7:3-6**; "...dead to the law through the body of Christ that you may be married to...Him...". **Hebrews 10:16**; a new relationship; Christ in you; the law written on our hearts...love (love does not steal, deceive, practice immorality, etc.). **Galatians 3:15-29**; the law was added till the Seed (Jesus) came. **Hebrews 7:14-19**; the priesthood of Jesus (Melchizedek), an endless life, replaces the incomplete Levitical priesthood. The whole theme of Hebrews is the perfection of Jesus fulfilling and superseding the shadow, the ceremonial provisions and laws.*