

How Can I Determine What is Right and Wrong? [Slide 1]

We have spent a lot of time talking about the danger of relativism in regards to truth and morals. I've shown how we should not define reality by our feelings, but rather we need to gain God's wisdom and truth. My question today is: How can I determine what is right and what is wrong? The simple answer is that you determine what is right and wrong first from the Bible and when the Bible gives no direction then you ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you what you need to know.

Today, I want to explain how you find out from the Bible what is right and what is wrong. The Bible has a lot of laws and commands in it, but not every command applies to us today. People who want to dismiss the Bible's moral teachings will often pick out one of those commands to justify not obeying any commands. For example, those who want to deny the Bible's commands against homosexual behavior will say that the same Bible also commands us not to eat shellfish, not to mix meat with milk, and not to approach a woman sexually during her period. They question why we don't obey those commands. They will then accuse us of hypocrisy for obeying parts of the Bible and not obeying other parts, assuming we are supposed to obey every command in the Bible.

Not all commands in the Bible apply to Christians, because not all commands were given to Christians. You have two fundamental divisions in the Bible: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament was written to the Jewish nation which operated under a theocracy where God was the ruler of the nation and governed his people through human kings, prophets, and priests. God gave many laws to the Jewish people which he never intended any other nation to obey.

The New Testament was written to the churches that sprang into existence after the resurrection of Jesus. So, the New Testament is not addressed to a nation like the Old Testament is. The New Testament is addressed to believers in Jesus Christ who live in the many different nations of the world. The commands in the New Testament are about how Christians are to live as members of Christ's body and how they are to conduct themselves toward those outside the faith.

Today, I am going to give you guidelines and examples of how to apply the commands in the Bible. I'm going to give you a lot of information, but I have written a lot of it out on your sermon outline for you so that you can take it home and review it. What I am giving you is incredibly valuable information. I wish someone had provided this information to me when I was much younger. It will help you make sense of a lot of things.

[Slide 2] Let's start with the New Testament. I want to give you some guidelines and understanding of how to apply God's commands in the New Testament. First, almost all commands in the New Testament letters, that is the letters beginning with Romans and going all the way to the letter of Jude, almost all those commands apply to believers today. These NT letters were written to Christians in the NT church. We are Christians in the NT church. Therefore almost every command you find in the letters, you are supposed to obey.

There are a few exceptions to what I just said. Sometimes the New Testament command is still valid but the cultural expression of it, must change. The intent of the command still stands but how the command is expressed today needs to change. Let me give you some examples of what I am talking about.

In John 13:14-17 Jesus says, “Read.” So, are we supposed to wash one another’s feet today? A few small groups in Christendom say, “Yes, we are still supposed to wash one another’s feet and they even have foot washing worship services.

I would argue that the principle behind the command, that of humbly serving one another, is still commanded today but that the particular cultural expression of it, foot washing, is not. Back in that day people wore sandals and walked dusty roads and got dust all on their feet. When they entered a house it was customary for the host to provide a foot washing for his guests. Usually a servant did the foot washing. It was a customary and needed practice of that time.

Today in modern America, almost all people wear shoes and walk on paved streets and sidewalks. There is no need for foot washing. I suppose in parts of the world today this might still be a relevant cultural practice, but here in America it is mainly obsolete. Here is the guideline: When a cultural expression has become extinct and irrelevant, you need to replace it with a relevant expression. Jesus still wants us to humbly serve one another, but today we need to pick cultural expressions that actually meet needs and convey meaning in this culture.

Here is another example: head covering or no head covering. In 1 Corinthians 11:4-14 there is a long discussion about how in the worship service the man’s head should be uncovered and the wife’s head should be covered. For the man, his head uncovered indicates he is not under authority to his wife whereas her head covered indicates she is under his authority. Scholars debate whether the woman’s head covering refers to some actual garment like a hat or whether it refers to long hair loosely worn. Some refer to the OT law which had a woman accused of adultery untie her hair and wear it loose. A woman committing adultery is not under her husband’s authority. Others say that prostitutes in Corinth wore their hair loose and so a woman with head uncovered would look like a prostitute, again another picture of not being under her husband’s authority.

We are not sure whether we are talking about garments on the head or a style of wearing your hair and it is because the cultural expression has lost meaning. Neither wearing a hat nor wearing loose hair connotes anything about proper submission in this culture. I would argue that God still wants husbands not to do anything in the worship service which would deny their headship role in the home and women are not to do anything in the worship service that disrespects her husband’s role as head of the home, but how that is expressed in this culture is different.

One final example before we move to another topic. Paul urges in 1 Corinthians 16:20 for the Corinthians to greet one another with a holy kiss. Are we commanded to do that today? In that culture you would kiss someone on the cheek to express warm affection. That practice still occurs in some parts of the world today. It’s pretty non-existent in our culture. The equivalent might be a hug or a warm handshake. God does want us to express affection to our brothers and sisters in Christ, but I think the cultural expression we use needs to be appropriate to this culture.

There are also some commands in the NT letters that were unique to a particular situation or people. In most cases this will be readily apparent. When Paul commands the Roman church to receive Phoebe in a manner worthy of the saints in Romans 16:2, it is obvious that command is limited to a specific situation.

[Slide 3] Let’s move on to the Gospels; Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Almost all the commands that Jesus gives to his disciples also apply to us. There are some occasions when his commands are only for a particular situation. When Jesus commanded the twelve to limit their preaching to only Jewish people and to take no provisions for their trip in Matthew 10, those instructions are only for his disciples, not instructions for his disciples for all time. When Jesus

told the rich young ruler he had to sell all his possessions in order to follow Jesus in Matthew 19:21, those instructions were just for the rich young ruler, not for all believers.

[Slide 4] Moving on to Acts, the commands in Acts need to be evaluated as to whether they are specific to an individual or situation or whether they apply to all believers and all people. In Acts 3:19-20 Peter tells the crowd, “Read.” That command does apply to all people because there is only one way to salvation and repentance is part of it. The same is true for Acts 16:31 where Paul tells the Philippian believer, “Read.” On the other hand the apostles in Jerusalem wrote the Gentile churches commanding that they abstain from food offered to idols, from fornication, and from eating meat with blood in it in Acts 15:19-21. Those instructions were specific to the churches of that time as Jews and Gentiles were learning how to live together and the Gentiles needed to make some accommodations to the Jews’ convictions. Although we are supposed to flee fornication, elsewhere Paul says we can eat meat offered to idols if we don’t cause our brother to stumble and we don’t have to worry about the OT purity requirements for eating meat with blood in it.

Let’s move to the OT where it gets trickier. In general, most of the OT commands were given to Israel and not to the church or to mankind. Therefore you should assume that OT commands and laws do not apply to us unless they meet one of the following criteria:

[Slide 5] One, they are repeated in the New Testament. If they are repeated in the New Testament then you know that command is universal and applies. This is why homosexual behavior is wrong but mixing milk and meat is not. The New Testament repeats the warnings against homosexual behavior but does not repeat the warning against mixing milk and meat.

[Slide 6] Second, OT commands that reflect God’s will for mankind, not just for Israel do apply to us today. Since Israel began as a nation in Genesis chapter 12, commands before Genesis 12 tend to be universal in scope. When God tells man to exercise dominion over the earth in Genesis 1:28, that command still applies to all mankind today. All of us are still responsible for wisely managing the Earth. When God establishes the Divine institution of marriage between a male and a female in Genesis 2:24 that command still applies to all mankind today.

[Slide 7] Third, OT commands that inherently reflect God’s character apply for all time. In other words, if the command is a necessary consequence of who God is, that command will apply to all people for all time. The Ten Commandments except for the Sabbath command are laws that necessarily follow from who God is. They apply for all time. Since God is the holy creator of all people, it necessarily follows that all people must not worship other gods, must not make images of God, must not take his name in vain. Since God is the life giver, no one can murder or kill someone without God’s authority. Since God is truth all lying, deceiving, bearing false witness, and stealing is always wrong. Since God is our provider, all coveting what others have is an offense against him and wrong. Since God is a covenant keeping God, his people must also be covenant keeping in their marriages and not commit adultery. I’ve listed some other examples on your outline of OT laws that necessarily follow because of who God is.

[Slide 8] Some major portions of the OT Law have been explicitly fulfilled by Jesus and the new covenant. All the OT dietary laws have been rendered obsolete because God declared to Peter that all foods are now clean in Acts 10:9-16. That’s why you can now eat shrimp, lobsters, clams and oysters. All the sacrificial laws were fulfilled by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross according to Hebrews 10:1-18. That is why we don’t have to offer the guilt offerings, burnt offerings, peace offerings, etc. All the OT laws regarding Sabbath days and festival days have been fulfilled in Christ. Paul writes in Colossians 2:16-17 the following: “Read.” People can’t

judge you about keeping the Sabbath or any of the OT feasts because those were shadows pointing to Christ. There is no standard you have to meet nowadays. Many of the OT Laws were fulfilled by the life and death of Jesus and no longer have a purpose.

[Slide 9] You might ask the question: Why do we even have to read the laws and commands in the OT if so many of them do not apply to us today? What's the point of having them in our Bible if we don't have to obey them? Paul gives us the answer in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Let's read that. Read. When Paul wrote to Timothy the New Testament, as a book, was not in existence. The separate Gospels and most of the letters might have been written but it took a couple hundred more years before the New Testament was brought together in one book. So, when Paul says that the Scriptures are profitable for teaching, reproof, for correction, and training in righteousness, he is primarily referring to the OT, although what he says is true of the New Testament.

Reproof is telling you what you are doing wrong. Correction is telling you how to do things right. The Law reproofs when it tells you not to do something. It corrects when it tells you to do something. If the Law does not apply to us then it can no longer reprove or correct. However it can still teach us something about God and it can still train us in righteousness as we understand the principles behind the law. We can still learn from laws that no longer apply to us. The dietary laws were intended to teach God's people they were to be distinct from the other nations and they were to keep their lives clean from impurity. That principle is still true. The Sabbath Law taught people that God gave his people rest and that they were to regularly devote part of their week to taking a break from their work to worship God and physically recuperate. That principle is still true.

[Slide 10] In the Year of Jubilee laws, God commanded his people to let the land lie fallow every seventh year and then for two years in the 49th and 50th years. The United States does not have to follow those laws but farmers and those who till the soil would be wise to implement letting the land lie fallow because we know that if you don't you will deplete the soil and destroy its fertility. At the end of every 50 years land in Israel reverted to its original owners. This had the result of not allowing all the assets and wealth of a nation to accumulate in a small percentage of people. It promoted a form of economic equality. That principle is something to consider for the long-term economic viability of a nation.

[Slide 11] The OT law provided punishment in the form either of death or restitution. There was no prison system in Israel. We have the highest incarceration rate in the world. What would life be like here if imprisonment were not an option? If you killed someone you got killed. If you committed property crimes under the OT law you paid back with interest what you stole. If you could not pay it off immediately, you went into slavery until you paid off your debt. There was no one sitting around in prison cells all day, watching TV, getting fed and sheltered for free for committing a crime. You paid off your victim and then you went free. We could learn some things from the OT penal laws.

[Slide 12] Farmers could not harvest the corners of their fields. They had to leave them unharvested so that the poor could come and harvest the leftover crops. You had a different kind of welfare system in Israel. If you could work you either harvested the farmers' left over crops or you sold yourself into slavery until you paid off your debts. The Temple collected donations for the poor who could not work, and for widows and orphans. There was a safety net for the poor who could not work, but most everyone else had to work for their food and shelter. We don't have to obey those laws, but there is a lot we could learn from them.

[Slide 13] Let me show you an example of how Paul took an OT law, derived the principle from it and taught a new application. Look at 1 Cor. 9:7-11. Read. Paul quotes Deut. 25:4, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing” to argue why the church should financially support those who minister full-time. The Law commanded the farmer not to muzzle the ox while it was threshing grain so that the ox could eat the grain while he was turning the big millstone that was grinding the grain. Paul recognized that the principle behind that law was that those who help bring in the harvest should be able to share in the blessings of the harvest. Corinth was a city. There were probably very few farmers in the church, if any. Yet Paul argues that Deut. 25:4 has relevance to them because it teaches a principle which when applied to preachers indicates God wants people to support the ministry of the preacher, who is helping to bring in the harvest. He should materially benefit from his labor.

The fact that you may not have to obey an OT Law does not take away the reality that you can learn something about God and his dealings with man by understanding the reason behind the Law. What was the Law’s purpose? What was it trying to accomplish? It is quite likely that its original purpose is still relevant today, even though its application has changed.

[Slide 14] My goal this morning was to give you some practical guidelines to determine how to apply the commands and laws of the Bible to your life. I realize this is a lot of material and I may not have clearly explained it all, so I am going to take some questions. If you have any, you can either raise your hand and we will bring a mike to you to hear your question or you can text me your question at 979-549-1827.