

New Covenant Theology



Questions Raised by New Covenant Theology



Are OT Laws Binding on Christians Today? (Review)

- We are still looking at the first question that I raised concerning New Covenant Theology: Are OT laws binding on Christians today?
- Last week we began looking at a passage where Jesus addresses this very issue: the second half of the “Sermon on the Mount” as it is laid out in Matthew 5:17-48.

Jesus Applies OT Law to NT Believers (Mat. 5:21-48)

- What we have seen so far is:
 - Jesus tells us that he has **not** come to set aside the OT scriptures as though they were of no value or importance.
 - The purpose of the OT scriptures – and even the commandments within them – was to **point** to Jesus as the one who **fulfills** them.
 - Jesus then, takes us through a series of six examples, where he shows us how to “keep” the OT commandments by listening to **him** and doing what **he** says.
- In each of the six examples Jesus follows the same pattern:
 - He begins by saying: “*You have heard that it was said to those of old...*”
 - Quotes or paraphrases an OT command(s)
 - Then says: “*But I say to you...*” at which point he adds to, upgrades, and, in some cases, even **does away** with the OT command.

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Command #1 (Mat.5:21-26): You Shall Not Murder (Exodus 20:13)	He extends it	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Murder often begins in the heart as anger, therefore in the New Covenant Jesus extends the prohibition against murder to a prohibition against unrighteous anger.

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Command #2 (Mat.5:27-30): You Shall Not Commit Adultery (Exodus 20:14)	He extends it	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Adultery begins in the heart as lust, therefore in the New Covenant Jesus extends the prohibition against adultery to a prohibition against lust.

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Command #2 (Mat.5:27-30): You Shall Not Commit Adultery (Exodus 20:14)	He extends it	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Adultery begins in the heart as lust, therefore in the New Covenant Jesus extends the prohibition against adultery to a prohibition against lust.
Command #3 (Mat.5:31-32): Give Her a Certificate of Divorce (Deut. 24:1-4)	He upgrades it	<ul style="list-style-type: none">The restrictions in Deuteronomy pointed to the sanctity of marriage, but allowed too much.Therefore in the New Covenant Jesus upgrades the OT restriction on divorce to something much stricter:<ul style="list-style-type: none">No divorce allowed (except for infidelity on the part of the spouse)Re-marriage after an improper divorce is considered by Jesus to be adultery.

Command #4: You Shall Not Swear Falsely (Mat. 5:33-37)

³³ *"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'*

³⁴ *But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply "Yes" or "No"; anything more than this comes from evil.*

- Here Jesus is probably summarizing a couple of OT commands:
 - *You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.* (Lev 19:12)
 - *If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.* (Numbers 30:2)
- The Mosaic Law forbade irreverent oaths, light use of the Lord's name, and broken vows.

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- Later on in the book of Matthew, Jesus gives examples of how the scribes and Pharisees would often **abuse** the giving of oaths:
 - *Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "If anyone swears by the **temple**, it is **nothing**, but if anyone swears by the **gold** of the temple, he is bound by his oath"* ¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸ And you say, "If anyone swears by the **altar**, it is **nothing**, but if anyone swears by the **gift** that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath." ¹⁹ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? (Matthew 23:16-19)

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- Laws concerning the taking of oaths pointed to the importance of truthfulness.
- In this case, Jesus forbids what the OT law allowed (taking an oath) and commands the New Covenant believer to simply tell the truth (*Let what you say be simply "Yes" or "No"*).
- Should push what Jesus says here to the point that we can never swear to **anything** (for example in a court of law)?
- Jesus himself testified under oath (Matthew 26:63-64), the apostle Paul swears by God as his witness in a number of NT texts (Rom 1:9; 2Cor 1:23), God himself “swears” (Luke 1:73; Acts 2:30) not because God sometimes lies, but in order to help men believe (Heb. 6:17).
- Where an oath (or sworn testimony) is not being used evasively and we are telling the truth, I believe a good case can be made that we are keeping the spirit of what Jesus commands here.

Command #5: An Eye for an Eye (Mat. 5:38-42)

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

- Here Jesus cites a command that is repeated a number of times in the OT:
 - ²³ *But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.* (Exodus 21:23-25; see also Lev. 24:19-20; Deut. 19:21)
- This OT command, known as *lex talionis* (the law of retaliation), was not given to encourage vengeance. Other OT passages prohibited revenge. For example:
 - *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.* (Lev. 19:18)
- The intent of *lex talionis* in its OT context was primarily to provide judges with a formula for just punishment and to prevent those who had been wronged from going too far in their effort to seek retribution.

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- Some have argued that Jesus' only objective here was to correct people who sought to take the law into their own hands, rather than allowing for such matters to be settled in a courtroom.
- So, by this interpretation Jesus would be saying: "Do not use the principle of 'an eye for an eye' for personal revenge. Rather, when you are abused, have the authorities punish them instead." I don't think this is what Jesus has in mind!
- It is clear from the examples that he uses, Jesus is saying that, as New Covenant believers, we should respond with kindness and generosity to people who try to take advantage of us or treat us badly.

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- Clearly there is a certain amount of hyperbole in Jesus' examples. For example:
 - **Verse 40:** No first century Jew would go home wearing only a loin cloth.
 - **Verse 42:** Cannot mean, for example, that Jesus' disciples should give money to able-bodied beggars who are unwilling to work for a living (see 2Thes. 3:10)
- Having said all that, we must not miss the fact that Jesus is calling us to (at times) be willing to suffer personal loss as a principle of Christian virtue and thereby forgo the kind of legal justice that was provided by the *lex talionis*.
- I believe we see the Apostle Paul applying this principle in his correction of the Corinthians for taking one another to court:
 - *To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?* (1Cor 6:7)

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- What Jesus is saying is reasonably clear: the OT, including the *lex talionis*, points forward to Jesus and his teaching.
- But just as the OT laws permitting divorce were enacted because of the hardness of men's hearts (Mat. 19:3-12), the *lex talionis* was instituted to curb the overreach of evil men because of the hardness of their hearts.
- In the New Covenant age, where hearts of stone have been replaced by hearts of flesh, Jesus restricts the use of *lex talionis* and calls us to respond to our enemies in love.

Command #6: Love Your Neighbor (Mat. 5:43-48)

⁴³ You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

- Jesus quotes two commands from the OT. The first command he cites, “*You shall love your neighbor*” is a direct quote of Leviticus 19:18.
- The origin of the second command, “*and hate your enemy*” is a little more difficult to determine, but there are a couple of OT texts that talk about **hating** the enemies of God and counting them as our enemies:
 - *Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies.* (Psalm 139:21-22)
 - The words of the prophet Jehu to King Jehoshaphat “*Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD? Because of this, wrath has gone out against you from the LORD.*” (2Chron. 19:2)

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- Of course, there are also a number of OT passages that say not to mistreat your **personal** enemy but treat them with kindness:
 - *Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles, lest the LORD see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him.* (Proverbs 24:17-18)
 - *If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.* (Prov. 25:21)

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- Here Jesus makes several changes to these commands that are in the direction that these OT Laws pointed towards:
 - We are no longer to hate – even the enemies of God. God will deal with his enemies as well as ours in the final judgment if not before (see how Paul develops this idea in 2Thes. 1:6-8)
 - Instead we are to actively love our enemies (there is no direct OT command to “love our enemies”) and pray for them – even the ones who directly persecute us.
 - We are to model our behavior towards our enemies after the behavior of our heavenly Father who is perfect.

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Command #6 (Mat.5:43-48): Love your Neighbor (Leviticus 19:18) Hate your Enemy (Psalm 139:21-22)	He ends the second part by extending the first part	<ul style="list-style-type: none">In the New Covenant Jesus ends the OT practice of hating the enemies of God by extending the command to love your neighbor to a command to love your enemies and pray for them – even those who persecute you.

Questions?

