

Study Guide #16: God's Moral Law and the New Covenant

Introduction

In the previous Study Guide, we examined the major aspects of God's Law. In this Study Guide we focus on His Moral Law, the Ten Commandments, and in particular how they relate to the new covenant.

Question #1: If Jesus fulfilled the Ten Commandments, then why do Christians need to keep them today?

Answer: In Matthew 5:17, Jesus said that He came to “fulfill” the “**Law or the Prophets**” (NKJV). Then in verse 18 He declared that “**till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled**” (NKJV). Finally, in verse 19 He warned that “**Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven...**” (NKJV). Heaven and earth have not yet passed away, so evidently the “**law**” is still valid. And in the next several verses, Jesus included the Ten Commandments in His examples of laws that wouldn't pass away (vv. 21-28). In the context, Jesus *fulfilled* the law by amplifying its meaning beyond the mere external letter of the law. Moreover, the Ten Commandments did not typify any future event or experience, so it's difficult to see how the cross would have abolished them. [NOTE: See Explorer II, Study Guide #15 for a discussion of Typical Ceremonial laws.]

Question #2: What positive reasons exist for keeping the Ten Commandments?

Answer: There are at least 7 basic reasons for the fact that the Ten Commandments are still valid for everyone:

- **They were written by God Himself**—Exodus tells us that God Himself wrote the Ten Commandments on 2 tables of stone (Exodus 24:12; 31:18; 32:15-16; Deuteronomy 4:13). The only other time God wrote anything in Scripture was when Jesus wrote something in the dirt to the accusers of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:6). So when God writes something, we ought to pay close attention.
- **They were written in Stone**—Of all the ancient materials used to write on—papyrus, leather, parchment, vellum, clay, and stone—stone was the most enduring. Even today we say that something is written in stone, meaning that it's *permanent*.



Ten Commandments

- **They are a reflection of God’s Eternal Character**—Note that the Ten Commandments are given the same character traits that are ascribed to God Himself:

<u>God</u>	<u>Character Trait</u>	<u>Ten Commandments</u>
Isaiah 5:16	Holy	Romans 7:7, 12
Deuteronomy 32:4	Just	Romans 7:7, 12
Luke 18:19	Good	Romans 7:7, 12
I John 4:8, 16	Love	Romans 13:8-10
John 4:24	Spiritual	Romans 7:7, 14
Malachi 3:6	Unchangeable	Matthew 5:18

- **Jesus Upheld them**—See Question #1 for the evidence that Jesus upheld the Ten Commandments.
- **Existence of Sin proves they are valid**—In Romans 7:7 the apostle Paul says that he would not have known sin except through the law. Then he quotes from the Tenth Commandment. If the Ten Commandments show us what sin is (Romans 3:20), then they must still be valid.

- **Existence of the Gospel proves they are valid**—See Explorer II, Study Guide #4 for evidence that Jesus became our Substitute, lived a perfect life for us, and died the death we deserve to die. This is the heart of the gospel. He had to do this precisely because God’s character and His Ten Commandments are immutable (can’t be changed). Thus, the gospel proves that the Ten Commandments are still valid.



- **Existence of Grace proves they are valid**—In Explorer II, Study Guide #5 we showed that salvation is by grace through faith alone. Grace refers to a gift that we don’t deserve and can’t earn. When a traffic judge dismisses a ticket against a person, he gives him grace. But he doesn’t abolish the traffic law. In fact, you wouldn’t need grace if the law had been abolished. Therefore, the existence of grace also proves that the Ten Commandments are still valid.

Question #3: If the Ten Commandments were given to Israel under the old covenant, why do Christians need to keep them?

Answer: The Ten Commandments were all known to God’s people long before Israel existed in the book of Genesis. Thus, they’re not exclusively part of the old covenant:

<u>Ten Commandments</u>	<u>Genesis References</u>
First Commandment	Genesis 35:1-4 (cf. Joshua 24:2)
Second Commandment	Genesis 31:19-35; 35:1-4
Third Commandment	Genesis 12:3 (cf. Hebrews 12:14-17)
Fourth Commandment	Genesis 2:1-3

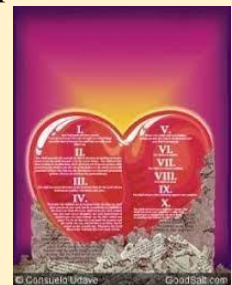
Fifth Commandment	Genesis 9:20-27
Sixth Commandment	Genesis 4:8-11, 23-24; 9:5-6
Seventh Commandment	Genesis 20:5-9; 34:1-2, 31; 38:24; 39:7-9
Eighth Commandment	Genesis 27:35-36; 30:33; 31:19, 30, 32, 39; 44:8
Ninth Commandment	Genesis 27:12, 17-24
Tenth Commandment	Genesis 3:6 (must be broken before 8 th one can be)

Genesis is a book of “origins” or “beginnings” since that’s the meaning of its name. The Ten Commandments were formally given to Israel in the book of Exodus at Mt. Sinai because they were just beginning to be a separate nation.

Question #4: But doesn’t II Corinthians 3 teach that we don’t keep the Ten Commandments since they’re part of the old covenant that kills?

Answer: II Corinthians 3 contrasts “**tablets of stone**” with “**tablets of...the heart**” (v. 3, NKJV) as representing the old and new covenants respectively (v. 6), and it calls the former “**the ministry of death**” (v. 7, NKJV). As a result, the argument is that those Ten Commandments (written on tables of stone) have passed away (v. 11). However, after contrasting the 2 different tablets, Paul refers to the fact that Moses’ time with God on Mt. Sinai caused his face to shine with God’s reflected glory so that he had to cover it with a veil (v. 7). He then figuratively applies the Israelites as having been blinded ever since to the gospel (vv. 14-15; 4:3-4). In other words, Paul teaches that the old covenant was the Jewish misunderstanding of the one covenant that God intended for Israel all along—that the Ten Commandments would lead them to recognize their need of a Substitute. But since it didn’t do that, it killed them spiritually because of their insistence on seeing only the *letter* of the law and thus keeping it in an *external* way.

The new covenant experience, however, allows God’s true people to have the Holy Spirit write the *same* Ten Commandments on their *hearts*, where it’s internalized as an expression of love for God. This was God’s desire for national Israel, for the new covenant was first promised to it as the writing of the Law on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-33). It’s the *same* Ten Commandments, but the issue concerns where they are written—only externally on tablets of stone or internally on the heart. Therefore, the Ten Commandments are upheld under the new covenant. In other words, the new covenant doesn’t affect the *terms* of the covenant with God, which are His Ten Commandments, but allows Him to write them on our hearts.



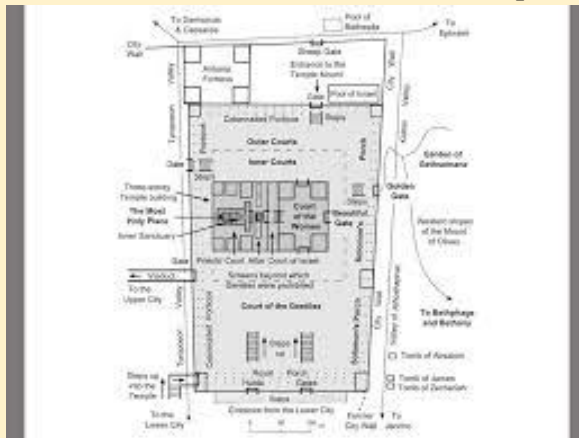
Question #5: But doesn’t Hebrews 8:7-13 teach that the old covenant Law was replaced by the new covenant?

Answer: Hebrews 8:7-13 speaks of the new covenant as replacing the old covenant. But note that those verses quote Jeremiah 31:31-34, where the concept was that Judah needed to have a different experience with *internalizing* God’s Law. It had nothing whatever to do with replacing that Law. As for the Ceremonial Law, Hebrews 9:9-11 teaches that this part of the Law was designed from the beginning to be temporary until Jesus came and became our Sacrifice and high priest. Therefore, the common idea among

many modern Christians that the Old Testament is *descriptive* while the New Testament is *prescriptive*—so that only those parts of the Old Testament Law that are specifically repeated in the New Testament are necessary for Christians to keep—is simply based on a faulty understanding of the old and new covenants.

Question #6: Doesn't Ephesians 2:15 teach that the Law was abolished at the cross?

Answer: Ephesians 2:15 declares that Jesus “**abolished in His flesh...the law of commandments contained in ordinances**” (NKJV). *First*, the context of verses 11-22 is about creating one new people by reconciling Jews and Gentiles into one body-temple, the Christian Church (vv. 19-22). To do this, Jesus “**has broken down the middle wall of separation**” (v. 14, NKJV), defined in verse 15 as “**the law of**



Herod's Temple with Court of Gentiles

commandments contained in ordinances” (NKJV). *Second*, the literal “**middle wall of separation**” was the wall for the Court of the Gentiles, beyond which Gentiles couldn’t go in Herod’s Temple—a wall that God never instructed to be built. Thus, the Jews has used “**the law of commandments**” to separate themselves from Gentiles to erect an unbiblical barrier to God, something God never intended. Therefore, “**the law of commandments**” represented the Jewish misuse of God’s Law, and in the context, was thus a symbol of Judaism itself. Paul is thus declaring that Jesus abolished Judaism at the cross and replaced it with the Christian Church. But this says nothing

whatever about the Moral Law being abolished as God’s standard of right and wrong. [NOTE: The attempt by some who uphold the Ten Commandments to teach that the word “**ordinances**” here refers only to the Ceremonial Law is misguided because the Greek word for “**ordinances**” is a broad word that means any judgement, law, or decree that is expressed with authority.]

Question #7: Doesn't Colossians 2:14 teach that Jesus nailed the Law to the cross?

Answer: Here’s what Colossians 2:13-14 says:

God has made us alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us...And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (NKJV).

We should *first* note that the context of the chapter is a warning against “**philosophy, empty deceit, the tradition of men, the commandments and doctrines of men, and the basic principles of the world**” (vv. 8, 20, 22, NKJV). So whatever Paul meant, he certainly can’t be including any part of God’s Law. *Second*, the immediate context just prior to verse 14’s phrase “**having wiped out the handwriting**” is how God forgives us. Abolishing law is never the means to forgive someone. *Finally*, the Greek word for “**handwriting**” appears only here in the Scriptures, but it was frequently used in Jewish literature of Paul’s

day to describe a certificate of indebtedness (an IOU) or a record book of sins. Arbitrarily removing evidence against someone isn't the means of forgiving them anymore than abolishing a law forgives someone. But a certificate of indebtedness, or an IOU, describes sin as a debt—just as Matthew 6:12's version of the Lord's Prayer does. We owe a debt of perfect righteousness because the Law points out our sin. Jesus could nail our IOU to the cross because He lived a life of perfect righteousness and then paid our debt at the cross as our Substitute. [NOTE: See Explorer II, Study Guides #4 and #5 for evidence of this truth.] Therefore, this passage is a beautiful picture of the gospel, not the abolition of any part of God's Law. [NOTE: Some who uphold the Ten Commandments see II Chronicles 33:8's "**ordinances by the hand of Moses**" as being this "**handwriting**" in Colossians 2 as a reference to the Ceremonial Law. But this is a very weak argument. Besides, how is it that the Ceremonial Law is "**against us**" (Colossians 2:14, NKJV)?]



Question #8: Is there any specific evidence in the New Testament to show that the Ten Commandments are an indivisible whole?

Answer: The theory behind this question is that the New Testament (allegedly) teaches that the Ten Commandments were abolished as a unified code of laws at the cross, and that only the specific individual commandments that are repeated in the New Testament must be obeyed by Christians. See Questions #5-#7 for this popular attempt and why it fails. It also fails from the testimony of James 2:10-11. Verse 11 of that chapter quotes from 2 of the Ten Commandments. In that context, verse 10 emphatically declares that "**whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all**" (NKJV). This passage, then, is clearly talking about the Ten Commandments. And in that context, it plainly teaches that the Ten Commandments is one indivisible whole unit, so that if a person violates any one of those commandments, he is guilty of breaking them all.