

Study Guide #17: Objections to the Ten Commandments

Introduction

In Explorer II, Study Guide #16 we introduced God's Moral Law, the Ten Commandments, and how that part of God's Law relates to the old and new covenants. In doing so, we answered some objections that many Christians have to the Ten Commandments. In this Study Guide, we discuss a potpourri of *other* objections that different Christians raise in opposition to the idea that Christians need to keep the Ten Commandments.

Question #1: Did the Jerusalem Council in the first-century Church decide that Gentile Christians didn't have to keep the Ten Commandments?

Answer: The very first Church Council occurred in the New Testament Church and is recorded in Acts 15. Its decision was to require Gentile converts to Christianity to observe 4 prohibitions given by Moses. Many Christians have therefore concluded that Gentile believers don't have to keep the Ten Commandments as such or any of the other Old Testament laws.

The Jerusalem Council was a response to certain Jewish Christians who were teaching that Gentile converts should be **"circumcised"** (v. 1, NKJV) and **"keep the law of Moses"** (v. 5, NKJV) in order to be saved. The key question concerns what is included in the term **"law of Moses"** in this particular chapter. According to Acts 15:10, the Judaizers' demand that Gentile converts (a) be circumcised and (b) keep the



Jerusalem Council

law of Moses constituted **"putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear"** (NKJV). Yet there's nothing elsewhere in Scripture that even hints that God put an unbearable yoke with any part of His Law on Israel. However, verse 11 hints that this yoke was the belief that people are *saved* by keeping these things (circumcision and the law of Moses). That belief certainly makes *any* portion of God's Law an unbearable yoke because no one can be justified/saved by the Law (Acts 13:39). The term **"law of Moses"** may well have included the Oral Law (Oral Torah), which was the body of strict Jewish oral traditions placed on both the Moral and Ceremonial aspects of the Law in order to keep themselves ritually pure/clean and to prevent them from disobeying any portion of the *written* Moral Law. Nevertheless, the expression **"law of Moses"** in Acts 15

seems to particularly emphasize the Ceremonial Law. *First*, there's the fact that the law of circumcision is the only explicit controversial part of the Law mentioned at this Council (vv. 1, 5). And circumcision is a matter of the Ceremonial Law because it's a ceremony signifying that a male is part of the covenant community of God. *Second*, verse 9 emphasizes the evidence that God had already purified the Gentile converts' hearts, which was an issue of purification. *Finally*, verses 8-9 also emphasize that God **"made no distinction between us [Jews] and them [Gentiles]"** (NKJV). Taken together, these clues tell us that

the *essential* issue at the Jerusalem Council was whether it was necessary for Gentile converts to become Jewish in order to join the Church. And it was the Ceremonial Law that especially distinguished Jews from Gentiles.

Question #2: What is the significance of the 4 Old Testament prohibitions that Gentile Christians were supposed to observe?

Answer: The official decision of the Jerusalem Council only required Gentile converts to observe 4 things from the Law: to abstain from (1) food offered to idols; (2) food strangled; (3) blood; and (4) sexual immorality (vv. 20, 29). These were the same 4 things Moses required of Gentiles who lived among the Israelites (Leviticus 17-18). Remember that the entire conflict behind the Jerusalem Council was a matter that threatened the unity of the Church. Likewise, Moses had required Gentiles who lived among the Israelites to keep the same 4 prohibitions in order for peace to exist between Israelites and Gentiles. It was, therefore, a *diplomatic* decision rather than a theological one.

However, for those who wished to actually become a part of the covenant community in the Old Testament, Sabbath-keeping was required (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14; Isaiah 56:2, 4, 6). And that was part of the Ten Commandments. Surely, therefore, Gentiles who lived with Israelites in ancient times must have been required to keep *all* of the Ten Commandments. Likewise, it's perfectly safe to assume that the Gentile converts to Christianity were already keeping the Ten Commandments also. This is the reason, then, that the Jerusalem Council said nothing about keeping any of the Ten Commandments, because they were not an issue. [NOTE: It's a common-sense rule that one should never derive an answer to a question that was not asked by the text.]

Question #3: If Christians are under grace and not under the law, why do they have to keep the Moral Law of the Ten Commandments?

Answer: Romans 6:14 declares that **“sin shall not have dominion [power, authority] over you, for you are not under law but under grace”** (NKJV). Then in Galatians 5:4, 18, Paul wrote that **“You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace...But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law”** (NKJV). The passage in Galatians makes clear that being **“under the law”** is attempting to be **“justified by law,”** which is the opposite of grace. Since the law points out sin (Romans 3:20; 7:7), it condemns us. Being under grace, then, means allowing Jesus to save us by His life, death, and resurrection. Paul teaches that when we are under the law, we were slaves to *sin* (Romans 6:17). But now being under grace makes us slaves to *righteousness* (Romans 6:18).



In another metaphor, Paul teaches that being under grace delivers us from a marriage to *sin* so that we are free to marry Jesus (Romans 7:4). In this way, **“we have been delivered from the law”** [that bound us in marriage to sin] so that we are now married to Jesus and **“serve in the newness of the Spirit”** (v. 6, NKJV). In the very same context, Paul also declares that the Ten Commandments (v. 7) **“are holy and just and good”** (v. 12, NKJV). So he's not saying that we had previously been married to the Ten Commandments,

but to the Law that bound us in marriage to *sin*. Thus, he's saying that the Ten Commandments were a *drudgery* when we were married to sin, but they are now a *delight* when we are married to Jesus. It's the same Ten Commandments, but our *attitude* is different.

Question #4: Doesn't Galatians 3 tell us that since we're justified in Jesus, we no longer have to keep the Ten Commandments?

Answer: Galatians 3:23-25 states, "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith came, we are no longer under a tutor" (NKJV). The Greek word for "tutor" refers to a family servant, who, among other things, was responsible for taking children to school. So Paul's point is that the Law was partly designed to take us to Jesus, where we would be justified by faith in Him. However, the Law points us to Jesus precisely because it condemns our violations of it as sin and worthy of death. By condemning our violations of the Law's demands, the Ten Commandments are thereby shown to still be valid as showing us the way to live. The point is that once the Law has delivered us to Jesus, and we have accepted Him, we no longer need the Law *for the purpose of leading us to Him*.

Question #5: What does Romans 10:4 mean when it says that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness"?

Answer: The Greek word for "end" used here can point either to a termination point for someone or something and/or to a "goal." It appears that Paul has both meanings in mind in this verse. That is to say, Jesus is the goal (or purpose) of God's Law in that it was designed to point to Jesus the Savior. And in doing so, Jesus then becomes the termination of the believer's efforts to earn righteousness by keeping the law. The next two verses emphasize that righteousness doesn't come through the law, but through faith (vv. 5-6). Note that the text says nothing about the Law having been abolished as a standard of conduct.

Question #6: When Jesus said in John 8:36 that we are free, does that mean Christians are free from having to keep the Ten Commandments?

Answer: In the context of verses 34-35, Jesus says "whoever commits sin [habitually and willfully] is a slave of sin...Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (NKJV). In this context, Jesus plainly teaches that He can make us free from bondage to sin, which enables the believer to freely serve and obey Him. Christian freedom is freedom from the control and domination of sin, not freedom from law-keeping.



Question #7: If the Ten Commandments are associated with spiritual bondage, why do we need to keep them as Christians?

Answer: In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul associates Mt. Sinai with the old covenant, bondage, Jerusalem, and the bondwoman (Sarah's Egyptian servant Hagar, who conceived Abraham's son Ishmael, Genesis 16). In contrast, he praises the free woman (his wife Sarah), the new covenant, and Jerusalem above (in heaven). Because Mt. Sinai was the place from which the Ten Commandments were given, it's *alleged* that Paul was saying that Christians are not associated with the Ten Commandments as a codified body of Law.

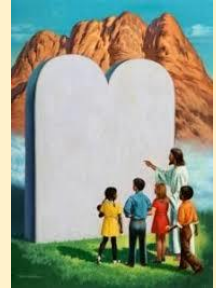
First, it's true that Christians are not in bondage to the Ten Commandments. As noted under Question #3, such bondage enslaves us to sin's power and to a marriage with sin. Note that Paul begins his allegory in Galatians 3 by referring to those **"who desire to be under the law"** (v. 21, NKJV), which we learned is to attempt to be justified by one's law-keeping. But when you do that, you are condemned by the Ten Commandments into being in bondage. *Second*, here Paul argues that his own people—**"Jerusalem which now is"** (v. 25, NKJV)—are in this state, as is anyone who seeks salvation by his own works. *Finally*, when we accept the gospel promise that Jesus saves us, we are both the spiritual children of the promise and the free woman. Once again, this passage says nothing about ignoring the Ten Commandments as the standard of conduct for the Christian.

Question #8: But hasn't the Law of Love replaced the Ten Commandments?

Answer: Jesus did say that love for God and love for one's fellow man is on what **"hang all the Law and the Prophets"** (Matthew 22:40, NKJV). Paul says the same thing in Romans 13:9-10, when he says that to love your neighbor as yourself **"is the fulfillment of the law"** (v. 10, NKJV). *First*, note that Paul was quoting from Leviticus 19:18, so there was nothing new about the command to love God and one's neighbor. *Second*, since the command to love in the Old Testament obviously didn't abolish the Law then, it shouldn't do so in the New Testament either. *Finally*, the New Testament never teaches that love *replaces* obedience, but rather that love leads to *genuine* obedience for the right reasons. Paul's statement in Romans 13, in the very context of the Ten Commandments, tells us that love is the manner in which those commandments should be kept. This truth is reflected in Jesus' command that **"If you love Me, keep My commandments"** (John 14:15, NKJV) and in the apostle John's statement that **"By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments"** (I John 5:2-3, NKJV). Therefore, the principle of love leads to keeping God's commandments out of love for Him and for our fellow man.

Question #9: Since God wants us to serve Him in spirit and not in letter, shouldn't Christians keep the spirit of the Law rather than the letter of the Law?

Answer: II Corinthians 3:6 teaches us that the believer should keep the spirit of the Law rather than *merely* the letter: “...ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (NKJV). *First*, it's certainly possible to keep the letter of the law without the spirit, as in doing so as an obligation rather than as a privilege to honor God by showing our love to Him. *Second*, however, one can't keep the spirit of the law (any law) if you ignore the letter of the law. That would be like committing murder and justifying it by saying that you did it without malice in your heart. In fact, the loving Lawgiver will cause the person to go beyond the mere letter of the law and obey it with both pleasure and in a deeper, loving sense, not limiting his obedience to the actual words of the law.



Question #10: Aren't the “royal law” and the “law of liberty” different from the Ten Commandments?

Answer: James 2:8-12 mentions the “royal law” (v. 8) and the “law of liberty” (v. 12, both NKJV). According to verse 8, the “royal law” is the law of love for one's neighbor because it quotes from Leviticus 19:18: “...but you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (NKJV). It's a *royal* law because it expresses the supreme principle of God's kingdom. James then illustrates the royal law by referencing 2 of the Ten Commandments, which then is immediately followed by the statement, “So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty” (v. 12, NKJV). Technically, the royal law and the part of the Ten Commandments that deal with one's relationship with his neighbor (Commandments #5-10) are distinguished from each other. However, the last 6 Commandments *apply* the royal law in specific ways. Therefore, they are not opposed to each other at all. The law of liberty refers to the Ten Commandments because the believer finds his true freedom in obedience to God as an act of love rather than merely as an obligation. The conclusion is that there's no basis on which to argue that Christians keep the royal law, but not the Ten Commandments.

