

**The Church of God, International
Bible Correspondence Course**

LESSON 6

**The Law
and the Christian**

In the last lesson we asked how a person can know the difference between right and wrong. We all have a generalized idea of right and wrong, but rarely give a thought as to where the idea comes from or what authority lies behind it. Who says that stealing is wrong while honoring your parents is right? The Ten Commandments, of course. But what about the rest of the law? Are all those Old Testament laws relevant to the Christian? If not, how do we tell the difference?

A PRIMER ON BIBLICAL LAW

It may be useful at this point to analyze the structure of the law as we find it in the Bible. We have already seen that the law has two great divisions: Love for God, and love for neighbor. If a man had perfect love for his neighbor then he might need no law, because he would naturally do the things contained in the law. But how can a man come to perfect love of either God or man without perfect knowledge of what that love requires?

So the one side of the law teaches us how to love God, while the other side teaches us how to love our neighbor. It is that simple. The law then is not so much to regulate behavior as it is to teach. Some of the law teaches, some of it disciplines, but discipline is also a form of teaching. Within both branches of the law there is a rather complex structure—a structure that requires some definition. In any discussion or debate about the law, many lean heavily on the definitions of certain key terms and attempt to categorize the law according to these terms. Then they may tell you that it is not the commandments that are abolished, but the ordinances. So you will better understand what the argument is all about, here are the important terms we will encounter: Law (Hebrew: torah; Greek: nomos): This is the general catch all word for law. All judgments, statutes, ordinances, etc., are "law" but not all law is a statute. Biblical writers use the word law rather loosely, and often one can only tell by the context which law is under discussion. The word torah comes from a root of the Hebrew verb that means "to teach" (or, oddly, to shoot or throw—as a teacher would shoot concepts at their students like arrows from a bow or throw them like rocks).

Commandment (Hebrew: mitsvah): Commandments are the rock solid core of the unchanging law of God. The Ten Commandments form the foundation upon which the whole law is built. They divide into two sets—the first four dealing with love of God and the last six with love of neighbor. Also translated as "commandment" is the Hebrew word

peh, or "mouth." Something is done according to the "mouth" of God. In other words, if God says it, it is our command. The Greek equivalent of "commandment" is entole.

Precept (Hebrew: tsav): a command.

Testimony (Hebrew: eduwth): The Ten Commandments are called "the testimony of God." The Ark of the Covenant is at first called "the Ark of the Testimony."

Statute and ordinance (Hebrew: choq or chuqqah): For all practical purposes, "statute" and "ordinance" have the same definition. They are decrees, enactments, or prescriptions—often to clarify underlying law.

Judgment (Hebrew: mishpat): A judgment is the application of the law to a life situation. It is an answer to the question, "Lord, what do we do in this situation?" Judgments are the most changeable part of the law because life situations change. They also change because of a change in administration.

Administration: The governing body that at any given time is charged with making decisions relative to the law. These can either have to do with administering punishment, or with interpreting the application of the law.

Tradition: The accumulated judgments of administrations over time. There is a distinction between a judgment rendered by God and one rendered by a human administration. Those rendered by human administrations can be wrong. The term Jesus used for the judgments of human administrators was "tradition." However, one should bear in mind that those traditions could have all the force of divine law upon the community to which they were delivered.

Matthew 5:17-20

1. Does Jesus seem to feel that people are likely to mistake what He is saying about the law?
2. What were they likely to think that He did not want them to think?
3. What might Jesus have meant when He said He came, not to destroy, but to fulfil? (See Matthew 13:48, where the same Greek word is used for a net full of fish. Also see Luke 2:40 and 3:5.)
4. If Jesus did not come to destroy the law, what part of the law might we expect to survive His ministry?
5. At what point in time will it become possible for the smallest punctuation of the law to pass away?
6. Is verse 18 listing two conditions for the law to pass away, or just one?
7. If there are two conditions, does only one of them have to prevail for the law to pass away, or do both of them have to prevail?

Note: The Authorized Version is misleading in this passage. It cites Jesus as saying first, "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." Then in the next verse, "one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled." From this, some have assumed that since Jesus "fulfilled" the law, then part or all of it could pass away. But the word

translated "fulfilled" in verse 18 is unrelated to the word translated "fulfil" in verse 17. It means, quite literally, "come to be." In most occurrences in the New Testament, it is translated, "It came to pass." Thus, we really do not have two conditions for the law to pass. What we have is a couplet with a middle:

Till heaven and earth pass
Not one jot or tittle shall pass from the law
Till all has come to pass.

Note also that there is a play on words here with the word pass. The first two occurrences are the same Greek word:

Till heaven and earth pass,
Not one jot or tittle shall pass...

Jesus has taken a rather complex and colorful way of saying that the law is as permanent as heaven and earth. "Do not," says He, "assume from anything I say that I am against the law, plan to do away with the law, or any such thing."

8. Did Jesus, then, consider it permissible to break even the least of the commandments?
Note: All this is easy enough to understand, but it also poses a problem. Does this mean that modern man has an obligation to keep even the most obscure of Old Testament laws? At first blush, this seems a difficult question, but as we will soon see, it is not all that hard to understand.

Deuteronomy 17:8-13

9. In the nature of things, is possible to write a law that will cover every variation of human conduct?

10. Is a man likely to have to make judgments relative to any given law?

11. Are there some judgments that are relatively easy to make?

12. Are there some judgments that are too hard for some individuals to make?

13. If one needed help with a judgment, where, and to whom could he go?

Note: The place was "the place which the LORD thy God shall choose," and the judiciary was "The priests the Levites, and the judge that shall be in those days." There are two important things to know here. First, it did not designate the place as Jerusalem, because there might be several courts, and even the supreme court might not always be in the same place. The Tabernacle would move. Second, it was the set of judges that would exist "in those days." Man would always need a judiciary, but it would have to change with circumstances. It might not always be priests-there were judges as well. The exact structure of the judiciary was itself a subject of judgment.

14. Could a man make judgments for himself?

15. Who decided if a matter of judgment was "too hard" for the individual to make?

16. What was the judge to use as the basis for his decision? (verse 11)

17. Was the judge allowed to make an arbitrary decision, or was he required to explain it?

18. Was a man allowed to ignore the decision of the judge if he did not like it?

19. How is the man's attitude described who ignores the decision of the judges?

Note: In the Authorized Version, it is the word presumptuously. The Hebrew word implies arrogance and insolence.

20. Was the decision and its implementation public knowledge?

21. Would the decision pass into law for others to do as well?

Note: Over time, a body of judicial decisions passes into the law of the land and advises future judges-it sets a precedent. No two cases are exactly alike, but the decision of one case may affect the outcome of another. A judgment is the application of law to a life situation. Life situations change, but the underlying law does not. How did this all work in practice?

Exodus 18

22. At the time of this incident, how many judges were there at the first?

23. When Moses "sat to judge" (hence the expression "to sit in judgment"), what were the standards by which he judged?

Note: A significant part of Moses' role as judge was to explain or teach from the law. The decisions he rendered were judgments, and included explanations of the Torah and statutes.

24. Did Jethro think that what Moses was doing was efficient?

25. Did God hand down the solution to this problem, or was it a humanly reasoned solution?

26. Were the judges in the new system necessarily priests or Levites?

Note: The system of judges set up at Jethro's suggestion was hierarchical in structure. Diagrammed on paper, it would form a pyramid. It worked, but was it the only way to resolve the problem? Remember, this system was only permitted by God; He did not design it. There is no suggestion that God revealed it to Moses-the idea came from Jethro. God seems to have allowed considerable latitude in such matters. However, the pyramid style still leaves one man sitting on top of the pyramid. Was this the way God would always want it to work?

Numbers 11:11-30

27. Was Moses still overburdened at a later time?

28. Who gave the solution this time?

29. How did this solution differ from Jethro's?

30. What sort of qualifications did these elders have to meet?

31. Who selected them, Moses or God?

32. How did God empower them to do their job?

Note: There is a myth that the Holy Spirit was somehow not with these people or empowering them as it did in the New Testament. This occasion calls to mind the empowering of the disciples of Jesus on Pentecost. Notice that this broadened the top of Jethro's pyramid considerably. As an aside, there is no hint in the New Testament that the church should be governed by Jethro's hierarchy.

Matthew 23:1-12

33. Did Moses' seat of judgment still continue in the years of Jesus' ministry?

34. Did Jesus recognize, at least for that time and that community, the authority of that seat?

35. As judges, were they corrupt?

36. Were the people to follow them in everything?

Note: The seat of judgment did not necessarily affect everything in sight. They judged on cases brought to them, and because they were in authority, those judgments were binding upon the people who brought them. It is like saying, "Your county courts are corrupt, but they are in authority and you are bound by their decisions. You have to obey their laws, but don't follow their morals."

Matthew 16:13-20

37. In what way is the authority here granted to the apostles similar to that granted to the judges under Moses?

38. Were the judicial decisions made by the apostles to take on full divine authority?

Note: Jesus did not say He would build His church on Peter. He called Simon Petros (a stone), but then went on to say that He would build His church on "this Petra" (a rock). Jesus Himself is the Rock upon which He built His church (see I Corinthians 10:4, etc.). What follows is one type of judicial process in the church:

Matthew 18:15-20

39. What is the purpose of taking two or three witnesses the second time you go to your brother about an offense?

40. Is this passage referring to any kind of trespass, or a particular circumstance of trespass?

41. Is it indicated whether the two witnesses will exercise any judgment, or make recommendations?

42. If the second step fails, before whom do the witnesses testify?

43. To whom was this passage addressed? (See from verse 1.)

Note: Bear in mind that the Greek word commonly translated "church" means "assembly." The assembly was expected to hear the case, render judgment, and the parties concerned were expected to abide by the judgment. It is rather like a case of binding arbitration.

44. Who, then, had the power of binding and loosing in such cases?

45. With a church of 3,000 in Jerusalem, was it more likely that the whole church heard a case, or that a designated judge or judges heard it?

46. Study carefully verses 19 and 20. Is this more likely to be talking about prayer requests, or about rendering decisions in the church with divine backing?

47. What was the effect of a man ignoring the judgments of the assembly?

48. Would one speak to or associate with a publican? Remember Jesus' example.

49. Did one trust a publican or heathen as one might a brother?

50. What, then, was the effect of treating a man as a heathen or publican?

I Corinthians 6:1-8

51. Should a member of the church take a brother to court?

52. Are we, as converted people, allowed or even expected to judge in some circumstances?

53. Is there any suggestion here that it is wrong to go to court with an unbeliever-a heathen, if you will?

54. What sort of person should the assembly designate to hear a case?
55. In a case where a man has caused great monetary loss to a brother, and refuses to hear the church, does the brother have no other recourse?

56. If a man who will not hear the church is to be treated as a heathen man and a publican, does this mean that one might now seek redress in court?

Note: Surely, a circumstance like this must be very rare-especially in small assemblies. Most grievances are settled on the first visit. Most of the remainder on the second. This is all included here to demonstrate that the process of rendering judgments was a part of the lives of Israel and the church. But bear in mind that even if a brother turns out to be a heathen, it is better in most cases to suffer wrong than to take him to court. This becomes a matter of personal judgment.

THE CHIEF JUDGE

57. Moses was the one at the top of Jethro's pyramid. Who is the one at the top for the church? (See Ephesians 1:22 and Colossians 1:18.)

58. Was there to come another prophet like Moses? (Deuteronomy 18:15-19)

59. Who fulfilled that prophecy? (Acts 3:18-24)

Matthew 20:20-28

60. What were the presumptions of the disciples relative to the structure of Jesus' administration?

61. Was Jesus prepared to allow authoritarian rule in His kingdom or church?

62. Is there any hint that Jesus was prepared to have, under Himself, one-man hierarchical rule over the whole church? (If convenient, take a look in your dictionary at the meaning of "hierarchy.")

Returning to the Old Testament, how did judging work in practice?

Numbers 15:22-36

63. Is there such a thing as a sin of error or ignorance?

64. Is there such a thing as a presumptuous or arrogant sin?

65. Would you expect them to be dealt with in the same way?

66. Was this instance of gathering sticks on the Sabbath a sin of error, or a presumptuous sin?

67. Was it clear to Moses and the other judges what should be done?

68. Who rendered judgment in this case?

Note: This particular example does not fall in an historical account, but in the midst of a set of laws. It is offered, as judgments commonly are, as an example of what to do with a given law under specific circumstances. In this case it is an illustration of a presumptuous sin, and how its treatment might differ from that of an ignorant sin.

69. Can you think of instances where the same act might be committed, but with a different attitude and intent, and where a different judgment might be made?

70. Might there be a difference in the administration of judgments when one does not live in a society governed by God?

71. Does the fact that a different judgment might be made in other circumstances mean that this judgment is abolished?

72. Does this judgment teach us anything about the application of the Fourth Commandment, or its importance?

Note: A judgment, once rendered, becomes a permanent part of law. This law did not require Israel to have Sabbath police, or to stone everyone who picked up two sticks of firewood on the Sabbath from that date on. Exceptions could have been made for emergency or hardship. But the law served to illustrate that for a community to have any discipline, high handed, flagrant sin had to be dealt with by the community. In this case, there were two problems. One was the breaking of the Sabbath, and the other a deliberate flouting of the commandments of God and the leadership of Moses.

There may be reason to believe that infractions were dealt with more harshly in the wilderness because of the harsh circumstances under which they lived. An army deals with insubordination more severely on a battle ground in time of war than on a parade ground in time of peace. But insubordination is still insubordination in either case.

A great deal of Old Testament law (more than you might think) is in the form of judgments. Failing to take this into account has led many to wrong conclusions about the law. Many of the laws you read are God's judgments handed down to Moses in answer to a question or problem. Others are the judgments made by human judges of one administration or another. It is not always clear which is which.

By the time Deuteronomy was written, many years had passed since the giving of the original law. Israel had faced many life situations and had accumulated quite a lot of case law. Some of it was written, some of it was in oral tradition. What follows is an exercise in biblical judgments.

Deuteronomy 22:1-30

73. Does the old saw "Finders keepers, losers weepers" find any support in God's law?

74. Verses 1-3 contain judgments applying to specific instances. Write for yourself a short paragraph describing the underlying law or principle.

75. Can you suggest a modern incident in an urban environment which would be covered by the underlying law, though not specifically mentioned here?

76. Your neighbor, whom you don't like very much, has gone off and left his sprinkler on. The water is gathering and is about to run into an area that will cause costly damage to your neighbor. The handle that will turn it off is in plain view a few steps away. Should you turn it off or let it run and damage his property? Which judgment in this chapter would apply?

77. Does the law prohibit "cross dressing"?

78. What might be the underlying purpose of this law?

79. In your judgment, would that underlying purpose prohibit a woman from wearing her husband's parka to the grocery store?

80. Where does the Bible define "that which pertaineth to a man" in the way of clothing?

81. If the Bible does not define it, what does?

Note: This is a classic illustration of how human custom can affect the application of God's law. What pertained to man in terms of clothing of that day is hardly the same in the twentieth century. But the underlying law and purpose is the same. Only the

judgments of application will change.

82. What is the underlying concern expressed by the judgments of verses 6 and 7?

83. Can you think of a different illustration of the same principle?

84. Verse 8 has a very specific requirement. In your judgment, how would it apply to a man building a house with a pitched roof in a modern community where no one but workers will ever be on his roof?

85. Suppose a man builds a deck behind his house that is high on a slope at the back. A person could fall from this deck and be hurt. Is he not bound by this law because the law does not mention a deck?

86. Describe, in a short paragraph, the underlying principle behind this judgment.

87. Verses 9-11 seem to be related. How would you describe the underlying principle?

Note: We encounter some judgments in the law for which the underlying principle is either dimly seen or entirely obscured. In such a case one makes his own judgment and carries on. No one makes garments of linen and wool mixed anymore, so there is no direct application. Does it apply to wool and dacron? Probably not. In any case, it is not done to please God, but to protect man. Verse 10 has sometimes been cited to suggest that some workers are incompatible and you should not require them to work together.

The meaning behind verse 12 has been lost in antiquity. It probably has its roots in customs long past and has no meaningful application. Remember that the law does in some cases address human customs which can change (as in the law pertaining to men's and women's clothes). It is also advisable to use common sense in applying these judgments. Since God created human reason, you can use that too.

None of this means that any of these laws have been abrogated. However, some of them have no discernable or meaningful application outside of the culture in which they were given. The law requiring fringes on garments probably made a statement in that culture, but the meaning of the statement has been lost. Scholars may someday tell us what it meant. When that happens, we probably will still not need to put fringes on a garment, but we will understand an underlying principle that applies nonetheless.

88. What was to be done to a man who went around grumbling that his wife was not a virgin when he married her-if the charges were false?

89. Was virginity at marriage a serious matter?

Note: The "tokens of virginity" were a custom of the time that could be incorporated into a judgment. They are still a custom in some societies, but not in most. There is no way to apply this law directly where the customs are different. The law does describe certain values, however, that should not be ignored.

The remainder of the examples in this chapter we will leave for you to explore on your own.

Psalm 119:97-104

90. Now can you understand why David found meditation on the law so profitable?

Note: The difference between right and wrong is not always so easy to see. Life is complex, and the variations in life situations are endless. A law that could tell us what to do at every turn in the road would fill all the libraries in the world. Instead, what we have

are basic laws, necessary statutes, and a selection of explanatory judgments. These are given to be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

Which of these old laws do we still keep, and which are no longer in effect? To answer the question, we started with Jesus words in Matthew 5:17-not one jot or tittle has passed from the law. But we can see that no code of laws can cover every possible nuance of human conduct and that judgment is necessary as to how to keep the law. In the Old Testament, we have judgments rendered by God, by Moses, by priests, Levites, and judges. In the New Testament we have judgments rendered by Jesus, the apostles, the bishops, and the elders of the church.

All these judgments tell us how God's law should be applied to life situations. Some of these laws we can keep, and some we cannot. Some of them applied only to priests in the line of duty. Some of them we could only do with the help of a priest (an animal sacrifice, for example, which can only be offered in the Temple or Tabernacle). Some of them depend on human custom and the culture of the time-they would not make the same statement today, and hence have no meaning or significance.

A key, then, to understanding which laws we keep today and which we do not, lies in the making of personal and collective judgments. It does not lie in abrogating certain laws while keeping others. Nor does it lie in throwing out the whole law, along with the Old Covenant, and starting over. Another key lies in the fact that the law was not given to control man, but to teach him. Later, we will take a close look at the law in the New Testament.

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