

## APPLYING THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW TODAY

J. Daniel Hays

HOW SHOULD CHRISTIANS APPLY the Old Testament Law? Obviously commands in the Mosaic Law are important, for they make up a substantial portion of God's written revelation. Yet the Old Testament contains many laws that seem strange to modern readers (e.g., "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk," Exod. 34:26; "Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material," Lev. 19:19; "Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear," Deut. 22:12).<sup>1</sup>

Christians violate a number of Old Testament laws with some regularity (e.g., "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing," Deut. 22:5; "Rise in the presence of the aged," Lev. 19:32; "The pig is also unclean; although it has a split hoof, it does not chew the cud. You are not to eat their meat or touch their carcasses," Deut. 14:8).

Furthermore, while believers tend to ignore many Old Testament laws, they embrace others, especially the Ten Commandments, as the moral underpinnings of Christian behavior (e.g., "Love your neighbor as yourself," Lev. 19:18; "You shall not commit murder," Exod. 20:13; "You shall not commit adultery," Deut. 5:18).

Why do Christians adhere to some laws and ignore others? Which ones are valid and which are not? Many Christians today make this decision based merely on whether a law seems to be relevant. Surely this haphazard and existential approach to interpreting the Old Testament Law is inadequate. How then should Christians interpret the Law?

J. Daniel Hays is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology, Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, Arkansas.

<sup>1</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

## TRADITIONAL APPROACH

Many evangelical scholars interpret the Mosaic Law by emphasizing the distinction between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws. They define moral laws as those that deal with timeless truths regarding God's intention for human ethical behavior. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is a good example of a moral law. Civil laws are those that deal with Israel's legal system, including the issues of land, economics, and criminal justice. An example of a civil law is Deuteronomy 15:1, "At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts." Ceremonial laws deal with sacrifices, festivals, and priestly activities. An example is in Deuteronomy 16:13, which instructed the Israelites to "celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress."<sup>2</sup>

In this traditional approach the distinctions between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws are critically important because this identification allows believers to know whether a particular law applies to them. Moral laws, according to this system of interpretation, are universal and timeless. They still apply as law to Christian believers today. Civil and ceremonial laws, on the other hand, applied only to ancient Israel. They do not apply at all to believers today.<sup>3</sup>

However, the traditional approach has numerous critical weaknesses, and does not reflect sound hermeneutical methodology.<sup>4</sup> This approach is inadequate for the following reasons.

## THE DISTINCTIONS ARE ARBITRARY

The distinctions between the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws are arbitrary, imposed on the text from outside the text. The Old Tes-

<sup>2</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright suggests five categories: criminal, civil, family, cultic, and charitable (*An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983], 152-59). Wright does not consider any of these as a universal, moral category.

<sup>3</sup> Using this distinction as a guide to moral behavior dates back to John Calvin. He distinguished between moral and ceremonial laws, arguing that while the gospel has nullified the ceremonial laws, the moral laws, on the other hand, continue as law for the Christian (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge [reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 2.7-8). For a current defense of this approach see Willem A. VanGemeren, "The Law Is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective," in *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian*, ed. Wayne C. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 13-58.

<sup>4</sup> Other evangelicals have become uncomfortable with the traditional approach as well. For example see David Dorsey, "The Law of Moses and the Christian: A Compromise," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991): 321-34.

tament itself gives no hint of any such distinctions. For example "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) is followed in the very next verse by the law "do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material" (19:19).<sup>5</sup> Should verse 18 be applied as binding, while verse 19 is dismissed as nonapplicable altogether? The text gives no indication that any kind of hermeneutical shift has taken place between the two verses. On what basis can one decide that one verse is universal and timeless, even for believers in the Christian era, while the commandment in the very next verse is rejected? Many of the so-called moral, civil, and ceremonial laws occur together like this without any textual indicators that there are differences between them.

In addition it is often difficult to determine into which category a particular law falls.<sup>6</sup> Because the Mosaic Law defined the covenant relationship between God and Israel, it was by nature theological. All of the Law had theological content. Can a law be a theological law but not a moral law? For example Leviticus 19:19 commands, "Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material." One of the central themes running throughout Leviticus is the holiness of God. The discourse by God in Leviticus 19 is prefaced by the commandment "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy." Part of this theme is the teaching that holy things must be kept separate from profane things. While the significance of these commands against mixing seed or mixing cloth material may not be fully understood, it is clear that they relate back to the holiness of God. In fact all of the levitical laws regarding separation seem to relate to the overarching principle of God's holiness and the separation required because of that holiness. How then can this law not be moral?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "The arbitrariness of the distinction between moral and civil law is reinforced by the arrangement of the material in Leviticus. Love of neighbor immediately precedes a prohibition on mixed breeding; the holiness motto comes just before the law on executing unruly children (19:18-19; 20:7-9)" (Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 34).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Another good example of a law that is difficult to classify with this system is in Numbers 5:11-31. This passage describes how a woman suspected of adultery is to be tried by the priest. Surely adultery is a moral issue. Is this law then a timeless universal law for today? Should suspected adulterers in America be tried by the method described in this passage? To determine her guilt or innocence, the priest was to make her drink some bitter water. If she became sick, then she was guilty. If she did not become sick, then she was innocent. Should this be practiced today? Obviously not. On the other hand, if it is not practiced, does this mean it is not a moral law, that adultery is not a moral issue?

Even the Ten Commandments, the clearest examples of so-called moral laws, present problems for the moral, civil, and ceremonial distinctions. For example is the Sabbath law moral or ceremonial? If content is the criterion, then the Sabbath law, which was clearly part of Israel's worship system, is a ceremonial law and not a moral one. But if content is not the criterion for distinctions, then what is? If location within the Ten Commandments becomes the litmus test for moral law, then there exists a simple system with only two categories: (a) the Ten Commandments, which are universal and timeless and which apply to Christians as moral law, and (b) all the rest of the Law, which is not applicable today. Of course this is likewise unacceptable for it does not allow believers to claim Leviticus 19:18, "love your neighbor as yourself," which Jesus identified as the second greatest commandment. To pull Leviticus 19:18 away from the verses that surround it and to identify it as a moral law requires that content play the major role in the distinction. If content becomes the criterion, then the Sabbath law ought to be classified as ceremonial.

Furthermore, although many Christians claim that the Sabbath law is a moral law, practically none of them obey it. Going to church on Sunday, the first day of the week, can hardly be called obedience to the Sabbath law. Moses would not have accepted the first day of the week as a substitute for the seventh day. Also obeying the Sabbath regulations was much more involved than mere church attendance. In the Book of Numbers a man was executed for gathering wood on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36). So the distinctions between civil, ceremonial, and moral laws appear to be arbitrary and not textually based. Should Christians use these arbitrary distinctions to determine such a critical applicational issue?

#### THE LEGAL MATERIAL IS EMBEDDED IN NARRATIVE TEXTS AND MUST BE INTERPRETED ACCORDINGLY

The Old Testament legal material does not appear in isolation. Instead, the Mosaic Law is firmly embedded in Israel's theological history. It is an integral part of the story that runs from Genesis 12 through 2 Kings 25. The Law is not presented by itself, as some sort of disconnected but timeless universal code of behavior. Rather it is presented as part of the theological narrative that describes how God delivered Israel from Egypt and then established them in the Promised Land as His people.

For example the main legal material in Exodus is recorded in chapters 20-23. This section also contains the Ten Commandments. However, the narrative context of these chapters must be noted. The first nineteen chapters tell the story of the Israelites'

bondage in Egypt and their deliverance by the mighty works of God. This section describes the call of Moses and his powerful encounters with Pharaoh. It presents the story of the plagues on Egypt, culminating in the death of the Egyptian firstborn. Next Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the Sea. The narrative describes their journey in the desert until, in the third month after the Exodus, the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, where God called them into covenant relationship (Exod. 19). The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and the laws that follow in Exodus 21-23 are part of this big story.<sup>8</sup>

The Book of Leviticus is also painted on a narrative canvas against the backdrop of the encounter with God at Mount Sinai (Lev. 26:46; 27:34). The Law in Leviticus is presented as part of a dialogue between God and Moses. Such use of dialogue is a standard feature of narrative. The book begins, "The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting." The phrase "The LORD said to Moses" occurs repeatedly throughout the book. In addition Leviticus includes numerous time sequence phrases,<sup>9</sup> an indication of storyline time movement, another characteristic of narrative.

The Book of Numbers picks up the story in the second year after the Exodus (Num. 1:1) and describes the Israelites' journeys and wanderings for the next four decades (33:38). Central to the book is Israel's rejection of the Lord's promise in chapters 13 and 14. This disobedience resulted in the years of wandering recorded in the book. At various points during the story God presented Israel with additional laws. As in Exodus and Leviticus the laws in Numbers are firmly tied into the narrative material.

The narrative setting for the Book of Deuteronomy is the eleventh month of the fortieth year of the Exodus (Deut. 1:3), just before Israel entered Canaan. The place is specified--just east of the Jordan River (1:1, 5). Israel had completed the forty years of wan-

<sup>8</sup> For example the Ten Commandments are listed in Exodus 20:1-17, but the text flows immediately back into narrative in verse 18, which reads, "When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear." Likewise God presented numerous laws to Israel in Exodus 21-23, but these too are part of the narrative, for they are part of the dialogue between God and Israel. The people responded to God's presentation of the Law by saying, "Everything the LORD has said we will do" (24:3).

<sup>9</sup> "Then Moses took" (Lev. 8:10), "He then presented" (8:14), "Moses then said" (8:31), "On the eighth day Moses summoned" (9:1), "So Aaron came to the altar" (9:8), "So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them" (10:2), "The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron" (16:1).

dering as a punishment for refusing to enter the land. Now a new generation had grown up and God gave them a restatement of the covenant that He had made with their parents forty years earlier. Most of Deuteronomy consists of a series of speeches that Moses delivered to the Israelites on God's behalf. These speeches are connected to the narrative because they refer to the same time, place, and main characters as the narrative does. Also the end of the book contains some nonlegal, narrative material: the appointment of Joshua as leader (31:1-8), the song of Moses (32:1-47), a blessing of Moses on the tribes (33:1-29), and the death of Moses (34:1-12). Furthermore the events of Deuteronomy flow into the Book of Joshua, where the story continues without interruption.

The Law, therefore, is clearly part of the Pentateuchal narrative and is firmly embedded into the story of Israel's exodus, wandering, and conquest. One's interpretive approach to the Law should take this into account. Connecting texts to their contexts is a basic tenet of proper interpretive method. The Law is part of a story, and this story thus provides a critical context for interpreting the Law. The method for interpreting Old Testament Law should be similar to the method used in interpreting Old Testament narrative, for the Law is contextually part of the narrative.

Does this diminish the force and power of the text? Do Christians have to put themselves under the Law before they feel called to obey the Scriptures? Is not narrative in the Scripture as authoritative as Law? To give the Mosaic Law a greater authority over the Christian's moral behavior than that of the other parts of the Old Testament narratives is to create a canon within a canon. Likewise to say that the legal material should be interpreted in the same manner as the narrative material certainly does not diminish the divine imperative of Scripture. When the disciples picked grain on the Sabbath, the Pharisees accused them of violating the Sabbath Law (Mark 2:23-28), for reaping on the Sabbath was prohibited in Exodus 34:21. However, Jesus justified this apparent Sabbath violation by citing a *narrative* passage in 1 Samuel 21:1-9. In essence the Pharisees criticized Him with the details of the Law, but Jesus answered them with principles drawn from narrative.

#### THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH OVERLOOKS THE LAW'S THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

God clearly introduced the Law in a covenant context, saying, "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession" (Exod. 19:5), The people agreed to keep the terms of the covenant (24:3), and Moses sealed the agreement in blood (24:8).

A critical part of this covenant was God's promise to dwell in Israel's midst. This is stressed several times in the latter half of Exodus (25:8; 29:45; 33:14-17; 40:34-38). Associated with God's presence are the instructions for constructing the ark and the tabernacle, the place where God would dwell (Exod. 25-31, 35-40). Leviticus is thus the natural sequence to the latter half of Exodus, for it addresses how Israel was to live with God in their midst. How should they approach Him? How should they deal with personal and national sin before a holy God who dwelt among them? How should they worship and fellowship with this holy, awesome God in their midst? Leviticus provides the answers to these questions, giving practical guidelines for living with God under the terms of the Mosaic Covenant.

After Israel refused to enter the Promised Land (Num. 13-14), God allowed that disobedient generation to die. He then led the people back toward Canaan. Before they entered, however, He called them to a covenant renewal. Deuteronomy describes this renewed call to covenant that God made with Israel just before they entered the Promised Land. Deuteronomy describes in detail the terms by which Israel would be able to live in the Promised Land successfully and be blessed by God.

Obviously, then, the Law is tightly intertwined as part of the Mosaic Covenant. Several important observations about the Mosaic Covenant, therefore, merit discussion.

*First, the Mosaic Covenant is closely associated with Israel's conquest and occupation of the Promised Land.* The Mosaic Covenant is neither geographically neutral nor universal. It provided the framework by which Israel was to occupy and live prosperously with God in the Promised Land. The close connection between the covenant and the land is stressed repeatedly in the Book of Deuteronomy.<sup>10</sup> This connection between Law and land cuts across the distinction between so-called civil, ceremonial, and moral laws. Furthermore the loss of the land in 587 B.C. has profound implications for the way the Law is to be viewed, precisely because the Law defined the terms for blessing in the land. In addition, when Israel was taken captive to Babylon, the Israelites lost the presence of the Lord in the temple (Ezek. 10). Possession of the land and the presence of the Lord in the tabernacle and temple are two critical aspects of the Mosaic Covenant. When the exiles returned to their

<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew word for "land" occurs almost two hundred times in Deuteronomy. A representative selection of passages that directly connect the terms of the covenant with life in the land include 4:1, 5, 14, 40; 5:16; 6:1, 18, 20-25; 8:1; 11:8; 12:1; 15:4-5; 26:1-2; 27:1-3; 30:5, 17-18; and 31:13.

land, they did not return to the way things had been. The blessings described in Deuteronomy 28 were never again realized in any significant fashion--political independence, regional economic domination, regional military domination, and so forth--nor is there any statement about God's returning to the temple, in contrast to earlier passages that focused on His presence in the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-38) and the temple (1 Kings 8:9-10; 2 Chron. 7:1-2). Things were certainly not the same as they were before the Exile.

*Second, the blessings from the Mosaic Covenant were conditional.* In Deuteronomy God informed Israel that obedience to the covenant would bring blessing, but that disobedience to the Covenant would bring punishment and curses. Deuteronomy 28 is particularly explicit regarding the conditional nature of the Law. Verses 1-14 list the blessings for Israel if they obeyed the terms of the covenant (the Mosaic Law), and verses 15-68 spell out the terrible consequences for them if they did not obey the terms of the covenant. Also the association of the covenant with the land and the conditional aspect of the covenant blessings are often linked in Deuteronomy (30:15-18).

*Third, the Mosaic Covenant is no longer a functional covenant.* The New Testament affirms the fact that the Mosaic Covenant has ceased to function as a valid covenant. Hebrews 8-9 makes it clear that Jesus came as the Mediator of a covenant that replaced the old one. "By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete" (Heb. 8: 13). Thus the Mosaic Covenant is no longer functional or valid as a covenant. This has important implications for one's understanding of the Law. The Old Testament Law specified the terms by which Israel could receive blessings in the land under the Old (Mosaic) Covenant. If the Old Covenant is no longer valid, how can the laws that make up that covenant still be valid? If the Old Covenant is obsolete, should not also the laws in that Old Covenant be seen as obsolete?

Paul stated repeatedly that Christians are not under the Old Testament Law. For example in Galatians 2:15-16 he wrote, "A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ." In Romans 7:4 Paul stated, "You also died to the law through the body of Christ." In Galatians 3:25 he declared, "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law." Paul argued vigorously against Christians returning to the Old Testament Law. If there was a distinction between civil, ceremonial, and moral laws, it was unusual that Paul ignored it. Furthermore, if the moral laws were to be understood as universally applicable, one would expect Paul at least to use them as the basis for Christian moral behavior. However, as Goldingay points out,



Paul "does not generally base his moral teaching on this foundation but on the nature of the gospel, the guidance of the Spirit, and the practice of the churches."<sup>11</sup>

How, then, should Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17 be understood? He said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Did Jesus and Paul contradict each other? Not at all. First, the phrase "the Law and the Prophets" refers to the entire Old Testament. So in this verse Jesus was not speaking of only the Mosaic Law. Also the antithesis is not between "abolish" and "observe," but between "abolish" and "fulfill." Jesus did not claim that He came to observe the Law or to keep the Law; rather He came to fulfill it. The word **plhrow** ("to fulfill") occurs numerous times in Matthew, and it normally means, "to bring to its intended meaning." Jesus was not stating that the Law is eternally binding on New Testament believers. If that were the case, Christians today would be required to keep the sacrificial and ceremonial laws as well as the moral ones, and that would clearly violate other portions of the New Testament.

Jesus was saying that He did not come to sweep away the righteous demands of the Law, but that He came to fulfill its righteous demands. As the climax of this aspect of salvation history, Jesus fulfilled all the righteous demands and all the prophetic foreshadowing of the Law and of the Prophets. In addition Jesus was the final Interpreter of and Authority over the Law and its meaning, as other passages in Matthew indicate. Jesus restated some of the Old Testament laws (19:18-19), but some He modified (5:31-32). Some He intensified (5:21-22, 21-28), and others He changed significantly (5:33-37, 38-42, 43-47). Some laws He abrogated entirely (Mark 7:15-19). Jesus was not advocating the continuation of the traditional Jewish approach of adherence to the Law. Nor was He advocating that the Law be dismissed altogether. He was proclaiming that the meaning of the Law must be interpreted in light of His coming and in light of the profound changes introduced by the New Covenant.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 103.

<sup>12</sup> For similar views on Matthew 5:17-47 see D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:142-44; R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 194-95; and Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1993), 104-6.

## CONCLUSION

The Law is tied to the Mosaic Covenant, which is integrally connected to Israel's life in the land and the conditional promises of blessing related to their living obediently in the land. Christians are not related to that land, nor are they related to the conditions for being blessed in the land. Also the Mosaic Covenant is obsolete, having been replaced by the New Covenant. Therefore the Mosaic Law, a critical component of the Old Covenant, is not valid as law over believers in the church age.

So the traditional approach to the Mosaic Law, which divides it into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories, suffers from three major weaknesses: It is arbitrary and without any textual support, it ignores the narrative context, and it fails to reflect the significant implications of the change from Old Covenant to New Covenant. This approach, therefore, is inadequate as a hermeneutic method for interpreting and applying the Law.

## A SUGGESTED APPROACH

What approach should believers follow in interpreting the Old Testament Law? In accord with sound hermeneutical method, it should be an approach that (a) is consistent, treating all Old Testament Scripture as God's Word, (b) does not depend on arbitrary nontextual categories, (c) reflects the literary and historical context of the Law, placing it firmly into the narrative story of the Pentateuch, (d) reflects the theological context of the Law, and (e) corresponds to New Testament teaching.

The approach that best incorporates these criteria is referred to as *principlism*. A number of evangelicals have employed this approach on a regular basis as the method of choice in interpreting the Old Testament.<sup>13</sup> The advantage of this approach is that it enables Bible students to be consistent when interpreting Old Testament passages. There is no need to classify the laws arbitrarily into applicable and nonapplicable categories.

<sup>13</sup> See Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1991), 286-89; Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*, 92; and Robert Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 223-24, 255. Wright uses the term "paradigmatic" instead of "principlism," but he describes the same basic approach (*An Eye for an Eye*, 162-63). William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard Jr. cite Wright and state that the Law serves as "a paradigm of timeless ethical, moral, and theological principles," and that the interpreter therefore must strive to "discover the timeless truth beneath its cultural husk" (*Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* [Dallas: Word, 1993] 279). A similar view is taken by Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 33-35; and John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1992), lxxiii.

This is not a theoretical approach, but rather a practical method that can be used by scholars, lay people, and students alike. Its strength is that it is fairly simple and consistent. As for a weakness it may tend to oversimplify some complex issues. Is there room to refine and improve this approach? Absolutely. Nonetheless it is a step forward from the traditional division of Law into arbitrary moral, civil, and ceremonial categories.

Principlism, an alternative approach to applying the Law, involves five steps.

#### IDENTIFY WHAT THE PARTICULAR LAW MEANT TO THE INITIAL AUDIENCE

Identify the historical and literary context of the specific law in question. Were the Israelites on the bank of the Jordan preparing to enter the land (Deuteronomy) when the law was given, or were they at Mount Sinai soon after the Exodus (Exodus, Leviticus)? Was the law given in response to a specific situation that had arisen, or was the command describing requirements for Israel after they moved into the Promised Land? What other laws are in the immediate context? Is there a connection between them? How did this particular law relate to the Old Covenant? Did it govern how people were to approach God? Did it govern how they were to relate to each other? Did it relate to agriculture or commerce? Was it specifically related to life in the Promised Land? What did this specific law mean for the Old Testament audience?

#### DETERMINE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE INITIAL AUDIENCE AND BELIEVERS TODAY

Delineate the theological and situational differences between Christians today and the initial audience. For example believers in the present church age are under the New Covenant, not the Old Covenant. Thus they are not under the laws of the Old Covenant. They are not Israelites preparing to dwell in the Promised Land, nor do they approach God through the sacrifice of animals. Also Christians live under secular governments and not under a theocracy, as did ancient Israel. In addition Christians face pressures not from Canaanite religions but from different non-Christian worldviews and philosophies.

#### DEVELOP UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES FROM THE TEXT

Behind the Mosaic commands for the original audience lie universal, timeless principles. Each of the Old Testament laws had a meaning for its first audience, a meaning that is related to the Old Covenant. But that meaning is usually based on a broader, universal truth, a truth that is applicable to all God's people, regardless

of when they live and under which covenant they live. In this step one asks, "What universal principle is reflected in this specific law? What broad principle may be applied today?"

The principle should be developed in accord with several guidelines: (a) It should be reflected in the text, (b) it should be timeless, (c) it should correspond to the theology of the rest of Scripture, (d) it should not be culturally bound, and (e) it should be relevant to both Old Testament and current New Testament believers. These universal principles will often be related directly to the character of God and His holiness, the nature of sin, the issue of obedience, or concern for other people.

#### CORRELATE THE PRINCIPLE WITH NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING

Filter the universal principle through the New Testament teaching regarding that principle or regarding the specific law being studied.

Some of the Old Testament laws, for example, are restated in the New Testament as commandments for New Testament believers. When the Old Covenant was abrogated, the Old Testament Law ceased to be a Law for Christians. However, when the New Testament repeats a law it thus becomes a commandment for believers, to be obeyed as a commandment of Christ. But this validity and authority as a *command* comes from the New Testament and not the Old Testament. In addition occasionally the New Testament qualifies an Old Testament law, either modifying it or expanding on it. For example for the command in Exodus 20:14, "You shall not commit adultery," the universal principle relates to the sanctity of marriage and the need for faithfulness in marriage. As this principle is filtered through the New Testament, Jesus' teaching on the subject must be incorporated into the principle. Jesus said, "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28), thereby expanding the range of this law. He applied it not only to *acts* of adultery but also to *thoughts* of adultery. Therefore the commandment for Christians today becomes "You shall not commit adultery in act or in thought." But Christians should seek to obey this command because it reflects a universal biblical principle reinforced by the New Testament, and not simply because it is an Old Testament law.

#### APPLY THE MODIFIED UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLE TO LIFE TODAY

In this step the universal principle developed in the previous step is applied to specific situations in believers' lives today. Evidence of principlism can be found in the New Testament. As noted earlier,

Jesus' citation of 1 Samuel 21 to rebut the Pharisees follows a similar pattern. In 1 Corinthians 9:9 Paul cited Deuteronomy 25:4 ("Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain") in defending his right to receive material support from the Corinthians (1 Cor. 9:4, 11-12). In the traditional approach this deuteronomic law would probably not be classified as 8; "moral" command, yet Paul cited it as applicable. Since Paul clearly emphasized elsewhere that Christians are not under the Old Testament Law (Rom. 6:14-15; 7:1-6; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 2:15-16; 5:18; Eph. 2:15), he was not citing Deuteronomy 25:4 as a law that was binding on the Corinthian church. Instead he used this law paradigmatically or analogically.<sup>14</sup> The apostle cited a command whose principle can be applied to situations other than that of the initial, historical incident.

Leviticus 5:2 provides an example of how the method of principlizing can be used by believers today to apply legal passages without being under the Law. The verse reads, "Or if a person touches anything ceremonially unclean--whether the carcasses of unclean wild animals or of unclean livestock or of unclean creatures that move along the ground--even though he is unaware of it, he has become unclean and is guilty." The action required to correct one's ceremonially unclean status in this verse is described a few verses later. So verses 5-6 should also be included: "When anyone is guilty in any of these ways, he must confess in what way he has sinned and, as a penalty for the sin he has committed, he must bring to the LORD a female lamb or goat from the flock as a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin." The traditional approach simply classifies these verses as a ceremonial law that no longer applies to believers today. However, using the principlizing approach, one can interpret and apply this text in the same manner as one would narrative.

*What did the text mean to the initial audience?* The context of Leviticus discusses how the Israelites were to live with the holy, awesome God who was dwelling in their midst. How were they to approach God? How should they deal with sin and unclean things in light of God's presence among them? These verses are part of the literary context of 4:1-5:13 that deals with offerings necessary after unintentional sin. Leviticus 4 deals primarily with the leaders; Leviticus 5 focuses on regular people. Leviticus 5:2 informed the

<sup>14</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 408. See also the discussion on this verse by Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 263-65.

Israelites that if they touched any unclean thing (dead animals or unclean animals), they were defiled ceremonially. This was true even if they touched an unclean thing accidentally. Being unclean, they were unable to approach God and worship Him. To be purified (made clean), they were to confess their sin and bring the priest a lamb or a goat for a sacrifice (5:5-6). The priest would sacrifice the animal on their behalf and they would be clean again, able to approach and worship God.

*What are the differences between the initial audience and believers today?* Christians are not under the Old Covenant, and their sins are covered by the death of Christ. Also because they have direct access to God through Jesus Christ, they no longer need human priests as mediators.

*What is the universal principle in this text?* The central universal principle in these verses relates to the concept that God is holy. When He dwells among His people, His holiness demands that they keep separate from sin and unclean things. If they become unclean, they must be purified by a blood sacrifice. This principle takes into account the overall theology of Leviticus and the rest of Scripture. It is expressed in a form that is universally applicable to God's people in both the Old Testament and the New Testament eras.

*How does the New Testament teaching modify or qualify this principle?* According to the New Testament, God no longer dwells among believers by residing in the tabernacle or temple; He now dwells within believers by the indwelling Holy Spirit. His presence, however, still calls for holiness on their part. He demands that they not sin and that they stay separate from unclean things. However, the New Testament redefines the terms "clean" and "unclean." "Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.' . . . What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'" (Mark 7:15, 20-23). Believers under the New Covenant are not made unclean by touching dead animals. They become unclean by impure thoughts or by sinful actions.

The New Covenant also changed the way God's people are to deal with sin and uncleanness. Rather than bringing a lamb or goat to atone for sin, a believer's sins are covered at the moment of salvation by the sacrifice of Christ. The death of Christ washes away sin and changes the believer's status from unclean to clean. Confession of sin, however, is still important under the New Covenant (1 John 1:9), as it was under the Old Covenant.

So an expression of the universal principle for today's New Testament audience would be, "Stay away from sinful actions and impure thoughts because the holy God lives within you. If you do commit unclean acts or think unclean thoughts, then confess that sin and experience forgiveness through the death of Christ."

5) *How should Christians today apply this modified universal principle in their lives?* There are many possibilities, but one specific application relates to Internet pornography. Many Christians now have easy access to pornographic material in the privacy of their homes or dormitory rooms. This text teaches that the holiness of God, who dwells within believers, demands that they lead clean lives. Viewing pornography clearly falls into the category that the New Testament says is unclean. Such action is a violation of God's holiness and it hinders one's ability to worship or fellowship with God. Therefore believers are to stay away from Internet pornography, realizing that it makes them spiritually unclean, offends the holiness of God, and disrupts fellowship with God. However, if one does fall into this sin, he must confess it, and through the death of Christ he will be forgiven and fellowship with God will be restored.

#### CONCLUSION

The traditional approach of dividing the Mosaic Law into civil, ceremonial, and moral laws violates proper hermeneutical method, for it is inconsistent and arbitrary, and the Old Testament gives no hint of such distinctions. This approach errs in two ways. On the one hand it dismisses the civil and ceremonial laws as inapplicable. On the other hand it applies the so-called moral laws as direct law. In addition the traditional approach tends to ignore the narrative context and the covenant context of the Old Testament legal material.

Principlism, an alternative approach, seeks to find universal principles in the Old Testament legal material and to apply these principles to believers today. This approach is more consistent than the traditional one, and it is more reflective of sound hermeneutical method. It also allows believers to see that all Scripture is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary  
3909 Swiss Ave.  
Dallas, TX 75204  
www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [thildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:thildebrandt@gordon.edu)