

*Introduction to Christian Ethics*  
Course Developed by Ron Habinski

**Unit #5 The New Testament “Solution” to the Problem  
Solutions, Good and Bad - Pulling the Doctrinal Evidence Together**

- The unit we are beginning today is the most important one of this course.
  - Up to now we have been studying the roots or feet of Christian ethics, or exploring its fringes.
  - In this unit we will identify and describe its trunk or backbone.
- But first, let's review what we have already covered together.
- This course is supposed to be an introduction to Christian ethics.
  - In the first unit we defined basic terms and what we mean by Christian ethics.
  - Then we explored some secular ethical theories.
  - But in units 3 and 4 we spent most of our time exploring Old Testament passages.
  - First, we examined the evidence that God's ethical revelation to our race has been progressive in nature.
  - We saw that God revealed His will to mankind gradually and in stages.
  - ***The progressive nature of God's ethical revelation teaches us that there is room for a higher ethical revelation the one given through Moses.; there was room for the ethics of Jesus.***
  - The ethical teaching of Jesus did not interrupt an ethical status quo that began in the Garden of Eden.
  - Instead, it represents the final and highest stage of God's ethical revelation.
  - Last week we examined the ethical system usually referred to as the Mosaic Law, or simply, the Law.
  - It was the highest, fullest and most complete revelation of God's will available to mankind **before Jesus began to teach.**
  - But what we found when we examined the Law closely was that there seem to be many serious problems with it.
  - Unbelievers object that much of it is irrelevant or obsolete, lacking any apparent rationale, much too severe in its punishments, or ethically questionable for various reasons.
  - They point to its apparent endorsement of slavery, polygamy and the taking of personal vengeance.
  - There are arguments to respond to such criticisms of the Law.
  - And as people of the Book, we try to defend or explain the Law as best we can.

- But the fact is that as Christians we agree that there are problems with the ethical teaching of the Law.
- We would have difficulty going back to observing the Law.
- Of course, we would have even greater difficulty going back to the skimpy ethical teaching of the Garden of Eden, or the very limited ethical teaching given by God in the centuries preceding the giving of the Law through Moses.
- ***We have seen that the basic problem raised by the Law of Moses for Christians, is the Christian's relationship to the laws of Moses as a whole, as an ethical system that is an expression of God's nature and His will.***
- The weaknesses and shortcomings of the Law are easy for us to see, because we have had a better teacher than Moses, a second Moses whose greatness eclipses that of the first one.
- ***Christians do not feel obliged to obey all the commandments of the law.***
- We act as if many of them had never been given.
- There are dozens of laws that we ***could*** obey if we chose to, but we ***choose not to*** (e.g. dietary laws, clothing and hairstyle laws, agricultural laws, sanitary laws, laws governing inheritance, and so on).
- Of course, there has been a lot of disagreement among believers over the centuries as to ***which commandments we must obey***, and ***which we can ignore***.
- But that does not change the fact that Christians have consistently agreed that many of the laws may properly be disregarded or ignored by followers of Christ.
- At the same time, we have had very great difficulty agreeing upon ***which parts*** can be ignored.
- ***The many weaknesses of the Mosaic Law have something important to teach us.***
- The progressive nature of God's ethical revelation taught us that there was **room** for a further, better revelation of God's ethical will.
- ***In the same way, the weaknesses of the Mosaic Law teach us that there was a need for a higher, fuller, more principled ethic than is found in the Law; there was a need for the ethics of Jesus.***
- **The practical problem that we have to struggle with in this lesson, is understanding the relationship between the Mosaic Law and the ethical teaching of Jesus.**
- **Or stating the same point another way, we need to understand the Christian's relationship to the commandments of the Mosaic Law.**
- We **need** this, because we believe that the Law was given by God through

Moses for God's people, Israel.

- And because we believe that we have been adopted into the people of God, we need a good reason for ignoring many of the commandments of the Law, commandments which Jesus obeyed during His lifetime.

- The fact that Christians have been unable to agree on which laws we do and don't have to obey is *a challenge and an embarrassment* that should provoke us to seriously consider our relationship to the Law.

**Q: So how do we decide which Mosaic Laws we do and don't have to obey?**

- We have to answer this question somehow, because we have to decide which of those laws we must obey and which we can disregard.

- **This is a fundamental issue for Christian ethics.**

- Up to now, we have been examining the feet or roots of Christian ethics.

- We have to answer this question if Christian ethics is to have a **trunk** to hold up its branches, or a **backbone** to give it structure and support its flesh.

**A: The usual unthinking answer to this question is that we must obey only those Mosaic laws that our parents or our Church teach us that we must obey.**

- The problem with this answer is that it is not an answer; it just pushes the question back one or more generations.

- And it leads to an obvious follow-up question.

**Q: How did our Christian parents decide, or how did our congregation or our denomination decide which laws of Moses we do and don't have to obey?**

- Our congregation, as a gathering of believers, or our denomination is just our parents in the plural.

- We have a very compelling reason for refusing to be guided by our parents or our congregation when deciding which Mosaic laws we should and should not obey.

**Q: Can you think what that reason is?**

**A: A congregation or a denomination is a specialized social group.**

- If we accept the judgment of our parents or our congregation as to what is right or wrong, we do exactly what secular ethics does; we define right and wrong as what our social group says is right or wrong.

- In doing this, we abandon the idea of an ethical code that is revealed by God.

- We urgently need, and in fact we must find, a clear and defensible answer to the question we are struggling with, or we will find ourselves with a Christian version of secular ethics, an ethic without a Christian backbone.

**A: Some attempt to deal with our moral dilemma by stating that we only have to obey those ethical or moral laws in the Mosaic Law.**

- ***What they seem to mean by this is that we must obey the laws that have a distinctly ethical point or principle embodied in them; and so, we do not have to obey the sacrificial laws or the dietary laws or the ceremonial laws, or the seasonal laws, or the financial laws, or the administrative laws dealing with punishments for various offences, or the inheritance laws, and so on.***

- ***The problem with this answer is that it assumes that the vast majority of the Mosaic laws are not ethical or moral in nature.***

- ***But, in fact, they are all ethical in nature, because they all come to us as God's commands, and we are committed to obeying Him to the extent that we can.***

- ***For example, we can obey the dietary laws, avoiding pork, shellfish, duck, rabbit, carp and chocolate-coated ants, so why don't we?***

- The Scriptures never group the Mosaic laws into different categories, and they never suggest that some categories are ethical while others are not and so can be ignored.

(The Law is an indivisible unit (**James 2:10; Gal 5:3; Josh 1:8**))

- If there is a solution to the puzzle of our relationship to the Law, it will not be found by segregating the laws of Moses into ethical and non-ethical categories and arguing that ethical commands still have authority, and non-ethical commands do not.

- The idea that some of God's laws are ethical and others are not ethical is ***not Biblical teaching.***

- The division of commands into ethical and non-ethical categories is ***not a legitimate theological distinction.***

- In addition, ***it involves making ourselves judges of God's Laws.***

- In practice it would mean that any of His laws that we think do not have a high enough ethical purpose or point attached to them can be ignored.

- So we would be deciding for ourselves what to obey and what to disregard.

- Let me point out that ***this is precisely the approach of unbelievers who speak about finding the diamonds hidden in the trash of the Old Testament.***

- But even if we accept this ***so-called solution***, our troubles are far from over.

- Dividing the laws into ethical and non-ethical types is not all that easy to do.

- Applying this approach, many believers have concluded that we should, *at the very least*, continue to obey the Ten Commandments.
- But other believers have objected that the Sabbath law, about not working on Saturday, seems much less ethical in nature than the other nine commandments.
- In fact, it seems like a calendar-related command rather than ethical one.
- Then again, many Christians believe that God still wants us to tithe, to give a tenth of our income to Him, but I think they would have difficulty proving that tithing is an *ethical law*, like the laws against murder, stealing, adultery and idolatry.
- These examples show that even if we accept the highly questionable idea of obeying only the so-called “ethical” laws in the Mosaic Law, the selection process will not be easy to apply or lead to unanimous agreement among Christians.
- The problem of what makes some laws ethical and others non-ethical is a very slippery question, because **the principle involved in such judgements is nowhere taught or explained in Scripture.**
- There would be endless debate about how to categorize many of the laws, including those concerning homosexual behaviour and polygamy.
- In fact, there has been unending debate among believers about which Old Testament laws still apply to us, and how they should be applied.
  
- **Another approach** that some people would suggest that we take to the problem we are struggling with is to ask the spiritual-sounding question, **“What would Jesus do?”**
- This is a very slippery principle to apply, because the way people use it seems to tell more about where they are coming from than it tells about what Jesus taught and did.
- For example, social activists think Jesus would like us to become crusaders against oppressive governments; revolutionaries paint Him as one of their number; existential philosophers make Him sound like a German academic; homosexuals assure us that Jesus did what they do, sexually speaking, while Mormons have alleged that Jesus practiced polygamy.
- **The “What would Jesus do?” principle** is difficult and dangerous to apply, unless we let our thinking be very rigidly controlled by what the Scriptures say He did and taught.
- **But the Scriptures tell us plainly that Jesus was born under the authority of the Law, and all the evidence available to us indicates that He obeyed it fully and completely during his lifetime.**
- We can be sure that He never ate pork or shellfish.

- He did not exempt Himself from any of the laws, but kept the Law perfectly.
- If He had not kept the law perfectly He could not have been a perfect substitute for sinner like us.
- Clearly, the “*What would Jesus do?*” principle does not seem to be the answer to our problem.

**- If we start to feel a little desperate about how we are supposed to relate to the Mosaic Law, we can always go to Jewish scholars for advice.**

- But we would find that Judaism is *much divided* concerning the proper approach to the Mosaic Law, and how to decide what parts of it we do and do not have to obey today.
- Get five Jewish scholars together for a while and a question that previously seemed difficult will not seem difficult any longer, it will seem impossible.
- Judaism has no easy answer to give us concerning the Christian’s proper relationship to the Law, since they are still struggling with its application to them, even without the extra complication of the authority of Jesus.

**Q: How are you feeling about our quest?**

**Are you getting a bit tired and fed up with what seems to be a problem without a solution?**

**- I think it has been absolutely essential for us to clear away the rubble and unmask all the usual indefensible answers before examining the Biblical solution to our problem.**

**- Let me state simply and plainly what I think is the only acceptable and defensible Biblical approach to the Christian’s relationship to the Mosaic Law.**

**- Afterward, we can examine what the Scriptures say and you can decide whether the solution I have proposed is what the Bible actually teaches.**

**- By the way, this solution is not something I discovered.**

**- If it were my brainwave you would have good reason to be suspicious about its correctness.**

**- I first heard it presented many years ago in a Christian ethics course, and I am sure my teacher did not invent it.**

**- Here it is:**

**- *The Christian is free to ignore all the commandments contained in the Mosaic Law because he is not under the Law in any way.***

**- *There are apparent exceptions to this principle, but they are not really***

*exceptions, because they are not based on the continuing authority of any part of the Law.*

*- Our only ethical authority is found in the teaching of Jesus, and the teachings of the apostles and prophets of the new covenant, teachings that come to us on the authority of Jesus.*

**Q: Just how does this work out?**

**A: It gives us three principles to consider:**

- ❖ If it is commanded in the Law, *and Jesus taught it too*, then it must be obeyed by Christians.
- ❖ If it is commanded in the Law, *and Jesus said nothing about it, but His apostles and prophets taught it*, it must be obeyed by Christians.
- ❖ If it is commanded in the Law, *but Jesus did not teach us to obey it, and His apostles and prophets did not teach us to obey it, then we are completely free to ignore it.*

- These three principles boil down to one key principle:

**If Jesus or his apostles and prophets taught it in the New Testament we must obey it; if they did not, we are free to ignore it.**

- You will note that this one key principle does not even mention the Law of Moses.

- Nevertheless, this approach amounts, coincidentally, to an endorsement of the continuing validity of some of the laws and principles taught in the Law, because some of them are taught to us in the New Testament on the authority of Jesus.

- As we will see in future lessons, this approach has very interesting and helpful implications in many areas, such as the observance of the Sabbath and tithing.

**- Q: Before we examine the abundant Biblical evidence for this approach to the Christian's relationship to the Law, do you have any questions about what it means or any general comments or concerns about it?**

**[DISCUSS]**

**Lines of Biblical Evidence Supporting this Solution to the Christian's Relationship to the Law**

- The view I have just outlined rests on two strong legs:

- 1. Our separation from the Mosaic Law and**
- 2. Jesus' unrivalled moral authority**

### **Our Separation from the Mosaic Law**

**Line of evidence: Christians are not under the authority of the Law (Rom 6:14f; 10:4), because they are mystically identified with Christ who fulfilled the law (Rom 7:4).**

- Our debt under the law has been paid by Jesus (Rom 8:2; Col 2:14); and we are legally dead because we have participated, legally speaking, in his death (Rom 6:3f, 8, 14).
- The law has no authority over a dead person (Rom 7:1, 4 Gal 2:19).

**Line of evidence: If we agree that we are under the authority of even one statute of the Law, we are under the whole Law, and we are severed from Christ (Gal 5:1-4).**

- In other words, the Law is a unity, and we must accept that Jesus has completely and finally severed us from its authority over us.
- Circumcision is the example that Paul uses to explain this principle.
- To be under the Law (or under any part of it) is to be under its curse according to Gal 3:10, so the last thing that a prudent person would want is to be under the authority of the Law.

**Line of evidence: The Jerusalem Council, acting on behalf of Christ, asked believers to respect only four provisions of the Law, namely, avoidance of things contaminated by idols, sexual impurity, animals killed by strangling and consuming blood (Acts 15:5, 10f, 13, 19-22).**

- A major consideration leading to this decision seems to have been a wish to avoid shocking and repelling devout Jews by doing things they considered filthy.
- **This is an example of consideration for the feelings of others, and not an indication that some parts of the Law remained in force.**
- These four points were treated as exceptions to **the general rule, namely, exemption from all the requirements of the law, including circumcision.**
- Because the Jerusalem council was understood to speak with the authority of the apostles, and so of Jesus, Paul informed people of its decisions as he travelled from town to town, so that they could obey it [**READ Acts 16:4**]

**Line of evidence: Hebrews tells us that the covenant made through Moses is fading away.**

- [**READ Hebrews 8:13**]
- This verse says that the Mosaic covenant is becoming obsolete and growing old and is ready to disappear.

- The Law was a fundamental component of that covenant.
- **The comment about the covenant's obsolescence seems to support and confirm the conclusions of believers and unbelievers concerning the weaknesses of the Law.**
- Hebrews explains the superiority of the new covenant by saying that it was provided **through a son** (1:2), while the Law was provided **through an angel** (2:2).

**Line of evidence:** The laws of Moses do not bind us [**READ Col 2:16f, 20f**].

- This seems to be what Paul had in mind when he wrote the words, "*All things are lawful for me.*" (1 Cor 6:12; 10:23).
- All things are lawful in the sense that, for a believer, the Law no longer has authority to forbid things, making them unlawful.
- The laws written on stone have faded away [**READ 2 Cor 3:7, 9, 11**].

**Line of evidence:** Believers are not servants **of the letter of the Law** but of the Spirit of God. [**READ 2 Cor 3:6**].

[**READ Rom 7:6**]

- We have been released from the Law, by dying to it, but we have not been left without guidance in an ethical vacuum.
- A new principle or force has come alive within us, so that now we serve in newness of the Spirit, or in spiritual newness [There is no definite article before the word *spirit* in the original Greek of this verse, and the capital "S" was added by the translators].
- We no longer serve in the old way according to the letter of the Law.
- Jesus described the beginning of our new spiritual life as a rebirth [**READ Jn 3:3-6**].
- **The new spirit in us is brought to birth or life by the Holy Spirit.**
- The old way to obey God was to give attention to the specific wording of hundreds of commands.
- The new way is to be responsive to the new spiritual life within us, which comes from God and wants to please Him.
- **The letter of the Law no longer controls or commands us.**
- **Instead, we are free to live according to the new dynamic spiritual nature that God has implanted in us.**
- **By nature, our new spiritual nature is responsive to God's Spirit, so it is free to please God, and does not need to be constrained and commanded to do so by a multitude of detailed rules.**

**Line of evidence:** The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel predicted the future

establishment of a new covenant.

- According to Jeremiah, God's people **would no longer be governed by the commandments of the Law** under the new covenant. [**READ Jer 31:33-34**]

- **The implication in these words is that under the new covenant God's people would have an inborn desire to please Him.**

- Ezekiel also predicts this giving of a new obedient heart, and conveys the idea that it will involve an inborn desire to please God [**READ Ezk 36:26f**].

- **Ezekiel explains this new heart in terms of the placing of God's Spirit within His people.**

**Line of evidence:** The theme of the indwelling of God's Spirit is developed in the New Testament.

- *Where the Spirit is there is liberty* [**READ Gal 5:18; 2 Cor 3:17**].

- The liberty in question is an inner freedom to obey God.

- In Romans 8:7f Paul says, *"the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God."*

- By His Spirit, God indwells those that He has brought to spiritual rebirth, and He encourages the new spirit in each of us to freely choose to please God and live for Him.

- **But those in whom the Spirit of God lives are able to submit to God and please Him** (Rom 8).

- When James speaks of our being **judged by the law of liberty** (2:12), he is referring to how we choose to exercise our new spiritual liberty, the liberty created by the end of the authority of the Law over us.

- We ought to use our liberty to try to please God, being responsive to the Spirit's leadership.

- We are now free to do this, but to what extent will we choose to do it?

- Earlier in this unit, I pointed out that the approach I am proposing to the Christian's relationship to the Mosaic Law rests on two strong legs, our severance from the authority of the Mosaic Law, and the ethical authority of Jesus, which includes the authority of the apostles and prophets, who speak to us on His behalf.

- We have looked at the evidence for the first of these two legs, our severance from the authority of the Mosaic Law.

- Now we will examine the evidence for:

### Jesus' Unrivalled Ethical Authority

#### Lines of evidence demonstrating that our ethical authority is Jesus, not the Law

- The crowds who heard Jesus teach, “*were amazed at His teaching, because He taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*” (Mt 7:28f; Mk 1:22)
- They were also impressed by the authority with which he commanded evil spirits and they obeyed Him. (Lk 4:35-37)
- His teaching was so characterized by the assumption and exercise of personal authority that **His critics asked Him to account for His authority and explain where He got it** (Mk 11:28ff; Mt 21:23-27; Lk 20:2ff), but Jesus refused to explain what should have been obvious from His deeds.
- **Our understanding or knowledge of ethics is fundamentally based on a single person and the authority of His teaching.**
- A *Christian* is one who is a follower and pupil of the Christ, one who accepts the teaching authority of Jesus, one for whom the personal authority of Jesus is paramount.
- We believe that our eternal destiny is dependant on our personal relationship to Him.
- And this is no misunderstanding on our part, for Jesus said many things to convey in words the supremacy of His authority in this world (e.g. **Jn 3:35f; 13:3; 17:1f**)
- Jesus said, “*If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love.*” (Jn 15:10) and “*You are my friends, if you do what I command you.*” (Jn 15:14)
- Can you imagine anyone else making such a statement without being laughed at.
- Jesus’ claim to ethical authority over others is implicit in such statements.
- Moreover, **Jesus explicitly claimed, in the great commission to have been given all authority in heaven and on earth,** and on that basis **He commanded his followers to make disciples of all the nations and to teach those disciples to observe all His commands (Mt 28:18-20).**
- **Paul says that we have been made to die to the Law that we might be joined to Christ (Rom 7:4).**
- In Romans 7, Paul uses the illustration of a woman who upon the death of her husband is free, under the Law, to be bound to another husband.
- Similarly, our death to the Law has left us free to be bound to Christ.
- **The point of this binding to Christ is that His authority in our lives replaces the authority of the Law.**

- In other words, He has authority to command and direct our conscience, and the Law no longer has this authority.
- God the Son has supreme ethical authority for us.
- **The rule of life for the believer is Christ (1 Cor 9:21; Cf. 1 Cor 7:22; Eph 6:5-9)**
- Those who stoned Stephen to death made two charges against him that they believed merited the death penalty. [**READ Acts 6:10-14**]
- **One of the two charges made against him was that he had said that Jesus would change the ethics/ customs <ethé>given to Israel by God (Act 6:14).**
- This statement was true, whether or not Stephen actually taught it.
- But this was not blasphemy against Moses or the Law.
- It was a simple matter of fact.
- The other charge, that Stephen taught that Jesus would destroy the temple, seems to be a distorted version of what Jesus actually said, and Stephen is likely to have said, for *Jesus said that the temple would be destroyed, and not that He would destroy it.* (Mt 24:1f)
- Incidentally, God Himself permitted literal obedience to many of the laws of Moses to become impossible, when He permitted the Romans to destroy Jerusalem and the temple.
- As we have seen, **Paul taught that Jesus displaces the law for believers and replaces it with His personal authority.**
- Paul's Jewish opponents understood this, and so they tried to charge Paul with **persuading people to worship God in ways contrary to the Law (Acts 18:13).**
- They laid this charge against Paul before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, which we know as Greece.
- But even before Paul had a chance to defend himself, Gallio gave his decision on the charge.
- It is a very interesting one [**READ Acts 18:14-17**].
- What Gallio was saying was that offences against the laws of the Jews were of no consequence to him, and he refused to let the Jews in his jurisdiction bother him with such things.
- Some might wonder whether the view we have been examining is taught only in the writings of Paul.
- **Peter makes the same point in 1 Pe 1:1f, "*Peter, - - to God's elect - - who have been chosen for obedience to Jesus Christ - - .*"**
- The teaching of the New Testament assumes that we want to be like our heavenly Father, and want to please Him [**READ Ephes 5:8-10**].

- When Paul refers in His teaching to *the Lord*, he almost always means Jesus.
- So in this passage *the Spirit in us that wants to obey God is directed to Jesus, and instructed to try to find out how to please Him.*

### Conclusions

- We have now completed our examination of the Biblical teaching that:
  - ❖ *The Christian is free to ignore all the commandments contained in the Mosaic Law, because he is not under the Law in any way; and*
  - ❖ *The Christian is required to live by the ethical teachings of Jesus, and, by extension, the ethical teachings of His apostles and prophets.*

### QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS