

## Applying God's Laws Under the New Covenant

Rod Reynolds

Some may wonder why we teach an obligation to keep some laws of the Old Testament, such as the ten commandments and the law of clean and unclean meats, but not some other laws of the Old Testament, such as the “ritual after childbirth.”

The purification regimen following childbirth (Leviticus 12:1-8) was part of the service of the physical temple and Levitical priesthood. They, and the entirety of the Old Covenant system, were a “form of... truth” (Romans 2:20). That is, they established the “form” or general pattern of God’s way of life based on the precepts of his spiritual law. They, and in particular the tabernacle and the ordinances of divine service under the Levitical priesthood, served as “the copy and shadow of heavenly things” (Hebrews 8:5; 9:1, 24; 10:1).

A shadow or model may provide an outline or convey a sense of what the object it pertains to is like, but it is not itself the object. The physical temple and priesthood, and the ordinances of divine service pertaining to them, were symbolic (Hebrews 9:9). The means of purification and reconciliation, in particular, under that system were symbolic, being “concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation” (Hebrews 9:10).

That does not mean a heartfelt, truly spiritual approach was not possible under that system, as there are many examples of such in the Old Testament itself. But the emphasis in the ordinances of divine service under the Levitical system was, as Paul implies, on the food and drink offerings involved in the sacrificial system (Leviticus 1-6; 23:13, 18, 37; Numbers 6:13-17; 15:1-29, etc.), on purification by physical sacrifices and washings (as in the case at hand), and related “fleshly ordinances.”

These were not an end in themselves, but served as a model or illustration of a greater spiritual reality, as Paul explains in Hebrews 7-10. The Old Covenant, with its physical temple and priesthood, served several purposes, but among them was an educational purpose. As Paul wrote elsewhere, “the law [meaning the Old Covenant system, which is what Jews often meant by the term “*torah*” or law (Greek: *nomos*; cf. Galatians 4:21-24)] was our tutor to bring us to Christ” (Galatians 3:24).

The physical washings, animal, plant and drink offerings of the Temple service are illustrative of the necessity of spiritual purification, but are not sufficient of themselves to accomplish that end (Hebrews 9:1-4). Under the New Covenant God has established a more perfect way, namely, sanctification through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:10), and purification of the heart through faith (Acts 15:9). Hence, the physical

washings and sacrifices of the Levitical system are not required to be literally applied under the New Covenant, although the principles behind them do apply.

The death of the Messiah, at the end of his three and a half year ministry, brought an end to the necessity for the Levitical sacrifices and offerings (Daniel 9:27; Hebrews 10:9). And the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. ended even the practical possibility, for the time being, of a literal application of most of those ordinances involved in the Temple service, including the “ritual after childbirth.”

### Law Magnified

The introduction of the New Covenant brought about certain changes in how the precepts of God’s spiritual law are applied. But it should be understood that the New Covenant does not do away with those precepts given limited expression in the Old Covenant. In reality, the basic precepts of God’s law are actually broadened under the New Covenant. And the New Testament (which would be better termed “New Covenant”), was largely written not to codify God’s statutes — as that had already been accomplished in the first five books of the Bible — but to show how the law had been changed (magnified -- Isaiah 42:21) under the New Covenant.

While there are numerous examples of this in the New Testament, we are not given details of how every known law of God is to be applied in its expanded form. But we are given enough that with careful attention to the instructions of God’s word, along with the guidance of God’s Spirit (John 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:11-13), we can come to an understanding of how all are to be applied. Thus Paul wrote to Timothy, “... from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:15-17; cf. Proverbs 1:23; 2:1-9).

A sizable portion of the New Testament consists of quotations or paraphrases of the Old Testament. Paul and the other writers of the New Testament continually referred to the law of the Old Testament as the source or authority behind what they were teaching.

As a case in point, in 1 Corinthians 9 Paul shows that he had authority to take use Church funds (tithes and offerings) for his support. To prove his point, he says “For it is written in the law of Moses ‘You shall not muzzle the mouth of the ox that

treads out the corn.' Does God take care for oxen? Or says he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written..." (1 Corinthians 9:3-10). Notice that Paul used a specific law from the Law of Moses, the Old Covenant, as his authority to receive support as a minister of the gospel under the New Testament. Note that this specific law is a very minor one, at least seemingly. Surely if any laws of the Old Testament are to be ignored, this one would be. Yet from this apparently minor law of the Old Covenant Paul has induced a tremendous spiritual principle giving him authority to receive support -- living expenses -- from the Church.

The principle behind this law of the Old Covenant, taught by Christ as well as Paul, is that "The laborer is worthy of his reward" (1 Timothy 5:18; Luke 10:7). And this principle applies with equal force to oxen, ministers, plumbers, or what have you. And Paul says this law was specifically written for our sakes! This could as well apply to the entire Law of Moses. It was all written for our sakes!

Paul's enemies of his own day accused him of teaching against the Law -- just as his modern ones do (Acts 21:21, 28). Note Paul's answer to his accusers, "Neither can they prove the things whereof they now accuse me. But this I confess until you, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the prophets" (Acts 24:13-14). Notice Paul had not cast away the Old Testament, but said he believed all of it, though called an heretic because he actually lived by its precepts as magnified in the New Covenant. To the end of his life, Paul still "expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the Law of Moses, and out of the Prophets, from morning till evening" (Acts 28:23, KJV).

Paul wrote that the gospel "now is made manifest, and by the *scriptures of the prophets*, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations, for the *obedience of faith*" (Romans 16:26, KJV). There are countless places where principles revealed in the Old Testament are shown being applied in the New Testament -- not in some ethereal, *so-called* "spiritual" sense -- but in concrete, everyday situations. Just a few for reference are: Romans 12:19-21; Ephesians 4:28; 6:1-3; Colossians 3:9.

### Unchanging Purpose

The fundamental *purpose* of the ten commandments is to define godly love in concrete terms. That purpose has not changed (Matthew 22:36-40; John 14:21; Romans 13:8-10; 1 John 5:3). The ten commandments not only apply literally, but

even more broadly in their full spiritual force under the New Covenant (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28).

Now why were the laws concerning clean and unclean meats given? It's clear that these laws predated the Old Covenant, although they were incorporated into it (Genesis 6:21; 7:2, 8; 8:20). The purpose for the statutes concerning clean and unclean meats is stated very clearly, "... to distinguish between the unclean and the clean, and between the animal that may be eaten and the animal that may not be eaten" (Leviticus 11:47). Although there are a few New Testament Scriptures that are twisted out of context in an attempt to prove the opposite, there is no credible evidence that the purpose of these statutes, or their application, has changed under the New Covenant.

The nature of animals did not change with the introduction of the New Covenant, nor with the destruction of the Temple and the suspension of the Levitical system, nor has the nature of physical human beings changed. Today, as in ancient times, eating unclean animals is a frequent cause of disease and death.

Under the New Covenant there is still a contrast between that which is spiritually clean on the one hand or unclean on the other (1 Corinthians 7:14; 2 Corinthians 7:1; Ephesians 5:5; 26). There is also a difference between clean and unclean animals (Revelation 18:2). The lesson in Acts 10 is not that unclean animals were somehow cleansed, but that no man should be regarded as inherently unclean because of his Gentile descent (contrary to prevailing sentiment among Jews of the day, Acts 10:28, 34-35; 11:1-18). Isaiah prophesied of the time of the Messiah's return (Isaiah 66:15), when he will consume with fury and indignation those consuming idol sacrifices, and unclean animals (Isaiah 66:17). Thus it is clear that the laws forbidding the consumption of these things apply literally under the New Covenant.

Although there is a spiritual facet to the laws regarding clean and unclean meats, they have a very strong, practical application in terms of preventing disease, as well. "Nearly all the food laws have their hygienic aspect" (*Encyclopedia Americana*, 1949 edition, vol. 16, "Jews and Judaism -- Food and Health Laws," p. 123). The spread of numerous parasites and diseases can be effectively prevented by observing the food laws of Scripture, including avoiding the eating of unclean animals or food defiled by them, as well as avoiding eating blood and avoiding cooking with or eating animal fat (except as occurs naturally in lean cuts of meat).

Paul warned of some in the latter days "... commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:3-5). Note that Paul speaks of foods, including animal foods, created to be eaten with thanksgiving by those who *know and believe the truth*. He is writing of foods *sanctified by the word of God!* Sanctified means to be set apart. Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 tell us which animals are set apart, or sanctified, by God's word from the others as being suited for human food.

Many commentators, though they may make excuses for ignoring these laws, recognize them as identifying animals that are not fit to be used as food for humans. For example, *Matthew Henry's Complete Commentary on the Whole Bible* states in commenting on Leviticus 11, "Most of the meats forbidden as unclean are such as were really unwholesome, and not fit to be eaten...." Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown (JFB) in their commentary state on Leviticus 11, "...there is no doubt that the flesh of many of the animals here ranked as unclean... is less wholesome and adapted for food than those which were allowed to be eaten." John Gill in his commentary points out in commenting on Leviticus 11:2, that a reason the laws were given was "for the sake of their health, and to preserve them from diseases." *The Treasury of Scriptural Knowledge* states on Leviticus 11:45 as a reason for the giving of these laws, "Because those [animals] prohibited were innutritive and unwholesome; as the swine, the flesh of which being strong and difficult to digest, affords a very gross aliment, and produces, especially in hot climates, cutaneous, scrophulous, and scorbutic disorders, as the itch, leprosy, etc."

"Scripture and medical research agree that modern lifestyles lived without reference to God's laws and design shorten life and hasten death" (Rex Russell, M.D., *What the Bible Says About Healthy Living*, p. 31). In discussing various technical details about the health qualities of clean animals for human consumption, Dr. Russell states, "The flesh of clean animals such as beef, and fish that have fins and scales, is ideal for the health of humans -- just as we would expect from the hand of a loving Creator" (p. 145). In commenting on a study done at Johns Hopkins University on the toxic effects of various kinds of animal flesh, Dr. Russell summarizes, "Note that the flesh of animals and fish given to us by God for food are all nontoxic, but all forbidden animals lie in the toxic range" (p. 150). Dr. Russell comments further on the many diseases associated with the consumption of unclean animals, as well as the breeding of such animals for food. In commenting on swine for example, he says,

"The 1942 Yearbook of Agriculture reported that 50 diseases were found in pigs, and many of these diseases were passed on to humans by eating the pig's flesh" (p. 155).

As Christians we are to separate ourselves from unclean practices (2 Corinthians 7:1; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 4:17-20; 5:3-5; Colossians 3:5). We are to take care of our bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:17). We are to be holy as God is holy (Leviticus 20:25-26; 1 Peter 1:15-16).

Some have been confused by false teaching concerning another New Testament Scripture: "He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks" (Romans 14:6). Dr. Russell explains, however, that this Scripture has nothing to do with the subject of clean and unclean meats as discussed in Leviticus 11 and other passages of Scripture defining which animals were created to be eaten. "The argument in Romans 14 was about 'clean' meats some Christians considered to be defiled because it had been offered to idols. The fact is, early Christians observed the biblical distinctions between clean and unclean meats at least until A.D. 70" (pp. 144-145).

Actually the question in Romans 14 has to do with the idea of some that they must not eat meat at all (Romans 14:2), as even "clean" meat purchased in a market, for example, may have been contaminated by idols without their awareness (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:25). Eating food one positively knows has been offered to idols is still forbidden to Christians (1 Corinthians 10:18-22, 28). But a fuller discussion of that aspect of the subject is for another article.

The prohibition against eating the blood and hard fat (marbled fat in lean tissue is of a different composition and is not forbidden) of even clean animals also remains in force for Christians (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 7:23-27; 17:10-14; 19:26; Acts 15:20, 29). Dr. Russell and other health researchers have explained very clearly the health implications behind these laws.

It's noted that certain aspects of the purification rituals also have a general hygienic or health aspect, even though the literal application of them is no longer binding. There are health benefits to both mother and baby, for example, in remaining away from crowds for several weeks, or even two to three months, after a baby's birth, even though she is not regarded as "unclean," and she does not need to offer a sacrifice at the end of what would under the Old Covenant have been her period of uncleanness (Leviticus 12:1-8). There are also health benefits to male circumcision.

But being physically circumcised does not of itself change one's character (Romans 2:25-29).

In summary then, the sacrifices and purification rituals of the Levitical priesthood and physical Temple in their literal application have been replaced by the reality of which they were symbols. However, the ten commandments and related moral requirements, law of clean and unclean meats, and similar laws continue to have a literal application under the New Covenant.

Copyright © 2013 by Rod Reynolds

[cogmessenger.org](http://cogmessenger.org)

Unless otherwise noted Scripture taken from the New King James Version™  
Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission.