

The question of how the Mosaic Law relates to the Believer today

Luther's perspective was that the Mosaic Law was not relevant for the believer. This was based on a couple of key passages in Paul's epistles, where it sounds like Paul is pitting the Law against grace.

Similarly, Classic [e.g. Chafer, Schofield, 1900-1940s] and Revised [e.g. Ryrie, Walvoord, 1950s-1970s] Dispensationalism has believed there is complete discontinuity between Israel and the church – that the church is a whole new entity which does not interrupt what God is doing with Israel – and so they have advocated a method of interpreting scripture that essentially concludes, “if it is not reiterated in the NT, then don't worry about obeying it.” This means you should focus on the commands of the NT for obedience.

The Reformed view [deriving from Calvin] has been to see almost complete continuity between Israel and the church – that the church has replaced Israel as the people of God in every respect forever – and so they advocate a method of interpreting scripture that essentially concludes, “if it is not removed in the NT, then keep obeying it.” Mainstream Reformed theologians would admit to some changes because of Christ's first advent: there is no longer any need for the cultic laws [like in Leviticus] or ceremonial laws [like sacrifices], because Jesus fulfilled their purposes. But they would advocate teaching and obeying the moral laws from the OT and some of the civil laws [enforcing the Mosaic criminal code]. There are more extreme versions of this school of thought, but they do not bear consideration.

Let's leave Luther aside [for I don't think the issue is quite as he saw it, grace vs. law, for there was grace in the “era of the Law” and there is obedience to the law of Christ [morality] in the this “era of grace” (which was also partly misunderstood by the earliest Dispensationalists)]; and let us consider the essentials of the Classic/Revised Dispensationalism view. While it is true that the church is not Israel – it does not automatically assume all the aspects of Israel in God's eyes, it is not a nation, it has no centralized land [centered on Jerusalem], it has no king, etc. – there is also some continuity, particularly in the identity and work of Christ, justification by faith, etc. Certainly, if the Law's morality reflected God's character, we know that morality cannot have changed because God's character does not change. So, while what God demands of mankind [how God interacts with mankind] might have changed, the moral underpinnings will not have changed. If we believe it is a sin to have sex with animals, we must ask why we believe this, for it is not reiterated in the NT; but surely we think it is included in the NT injunctions against sexual immorality; but why do we believe this? because it is mentioned in the Law. So while the believer does not have the system of the Law as a whole to live by in his/her nation, and – more importantly – while his/her earthly rewards/curses are not tied to obedience, he/she is still expected to reflect God's image [be Christ-like], which means having the character of God, which means in part being transformed into the morality of God, which is reflected in the Law.

However, critics of the Reformed view point out that the Mosaic Law was an integrated system and we should not pick and choose among its parts. Also, how do we know which laws to ignore today, when all the cultic and ceremonial laws had some morality inherent in them and the moral laws often had ceremonial or cultic aspects? Even some Reformed churches – such as some Presbyterian PCA churches – have given up the effort and focus now on the Ten Commandments. This view has its own problems, however, even beyond the issue of picking and choosing. First, It seems obvious there is some question about one of those Ten Commandments, the Sabbath: it not only is not reiterated in the NT, but the church within just a few years of Christ's ascension had given up meeting on the Sabbath to focus on celebrating the resurrection on Sunday [for a while, they celebrated on both days, but there was no injunction against working on Sundays; and they gave up the Sabbath readily enough when facing increasing persecution in Israel and becoming increasingly Gentile elsewhere]. Also, the rest of the Law in Exodus and Deuteronomy is seen by some to be an elaboration on those ten principles, so if you still are following the principles, why wouldn't you follow the detailed explanations of them? Whether one

believes in following the whole moral code or just the Ten Commandments, one has to explain why the Council in Acts did not even enforce circumcision on the Gentile believers, let alone the rest of the Law. Circumcision was the sign of God's people, predating the Law, begun with the Abrahamic Covenant! If this was no longer necessary for the church, then certainly there is some discontinuity which must be reflected in how we look at the rest of God's law. The Council wrote to the Gentile churches in Acts 15.28-29 [NASB], "*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: ²⁹ that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.*" That certainly is less than the whole of the Law; and it is picking and choosing from it! So whatever view we take, we should try to explain these things [which is another topic for another day].

So, what is the truth? Somewhere in the middle, I suppose. The Progressive Dispensationalists [e.g. Bock, Wallace, Johnston, 1970s-2010] have a view that combines continuity and discontinuity, and there are some progressive [or "New"] Covenant theologians who are also moving toward the middle. The problem is that these theologians have not written a lot about the Law, rather focusing at first on issues of hermeneutics [how to interpret scripture] and eschatology [end times, future for Israel vs. future for the Church], and then moving on to other issues entirely [for Bock, apologetics; for Wallace, manuscript evidence, e.g.]. Gordon Johnston hopes to publish a book in the next year or two, and he was my professor for a class on this subject, but the class raised as many questions as it answered, and this is why I struggle to give a definitive answer here.

Let me share an approach that might work for you and for me, until we can study this further.

- † First, do not take the perspective that you live under a system of laws [of "dos and don'ts"], but rather think of yourself as growing to be like Christ in values, priorities, and character [desire intimacy with God and to represent him well out of love and respect].
- † Second, whatever passage you are reading in the Bible, try to adopt the attitude or morality you find there if you think it accurately reflects God's character, taking into account any reasons why that attitude or morality might have changed with the coming of Christ [this is tricky].
- † Third, remember that Jesus told even Jews of his day who were under the entire Law that the entire Law could be summarized into two commands: love God with all of yourself and love your neighbor like yourself, so if you can do these two things purely you are in good shape, and you can use the rest of the commands in scripture to flesh out what those two things look like. Let me give you an example: the OT says to tithe; the NT says to give cheerfully and sacrificially; thus I would say the believer should grow such that he/she is giving increasingly to the ministry of his/her time, effort, and financial resources, eventually to the point that every aspect of his/her life is focused on ministry [worship, service, evangelism, spiritual growth of others (fellowship/teaching), spiritual growth of self; note I said "eventually," for this is a progressive sanctification issue, and none of us can be perfectly Christ-like yet, but we can grow toward it]; so I would teach new believers to start giving and say that 10% of gross income [before taxes] for the church is a good initial benchmark to work toward, but we should not be legalistic about this, because it is not a magic number, it is not reiterated in the NT church writings, and really God wants more!
- † Fourth, I would emphasize to you again the wonders of grace: that every one of us sins every day, and God does not want us to punish ourselves with guilt or otherwise, for Jesus took our punishment; what God wants is for us to come to the conviction and desire that we should not sin, and thus cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work in us to purify us and make us Christ-like; and so when we sin we go before God and confess our error, repent and ask God's help to sin no longer in this way, thank God for his forgiveness and unconditional love, and then rejoice! instead of grieve [i.e. while God wants you to continue to think through what it means to be obedient and Christ-like, he does not want you to become legalistic in your approach to him or to life].