

# Should Christians Obey the Law of Moses?

## Introduction

Are Christians to keep the Sabbath, that is, Saturday as a day of rest? Should Christian men be circumcised? Should Christians eat only clean foods and abstain from foods like pork? Should we maintain ritual purity according to the commands of the Law? Should Christians tithe according to the precepts of the Law?

## Jewish Christians continue to submit to the Law

Jesus himself was Law observant and he taught his Jewish disciples to continue to submit to the teaching of Moses (Matthew 5:17-19; 23:2-3; 23:23). Jesus rejected the human traditions which the Pharisees used as their guide for keeping the Law (Matthew 15:1-9). He rather showed how to keep the Law in accordance with the righteousness of the Kingdom of God, which goes even beyond Moses. So Jesus taught his Jewish followers to keep the Law, but to do so according to his teaching and example. For instance, his Jewish disciples should keep the Sabbath, but recognize that mercy has priority (Matthew 12:9-14).

It is clear that the apostles and the other Jewish Christians did keep the Law, including Paul. James, the brother of Jesus, was famous for his strict observance of the Law. And he bears testimony that Paul also kept the Law in Acts 21:20-24. These Jewish believers did not keep the Law in order to be saved by it. They did so because Moses was the authority that God had placed over them, and so they continued to submit to him, knowing that the Law will not pass away until the Kingdom is fully established on earth (Matthew 5:18).

## Gentiles do not submit to the Law

But what about Gentile believers? There was a debate about this because Jesus did not leave any instructions on this point. Jesus' mission was to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:6; 15:24). This is one of those places that Jesus must have had in mind when he said, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:12-13). And, in fact, it is the testimony of the apostles in Acts 15:28 that the Spirit guided them in their decision on this matter.

The book of Acts tells us that some taught that Gentiles must be circumcised and become full blown Law observant Jews before they could be accepted before God (15:1; 5). The apostles gathered together, with the elders of the church of Jerusalem to discuss this issue, and decided that the Gentiles were already participating in the Kingdom of God, for they were righteous Gentiles, following Jesus and had received the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:8). Therefore they should not be forced to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses (Acts 15:13-19). Gentiles are acceptable to God on the basis of the salvation that Jesus brings.

## Three essentials that apply to all people

However, it was also decided that there was one portion of the Law that they should observe. We see this in what is called the apostolic decree:

“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well” (Acts 15:28-29).

This letter lays out three essentials:

- 1) do not eat idol food
- 2) do not eat blood
- 3) do not practice fornication

These essentials refer back to Leviticus 17-18, which talks about these issues in the same order that we find in the apostolic letter:

- 1) Leviticus 17:1-9 - idol food
- 2) Leviticus 17:10-16 - eating blood
- 3) Leviticus 18 - fornication

These three essentials were chosen because they teach a ‘creation righteousness’ that is incumbent even upon the Gentiles. That is, these commands are not Jewish specific, but apply to all people everywhere. They are all rooted in the creation account:

- 1) We are not to eat food sacrificed to idols because God is our creator and our only Lord (Genesis 1:27). Therefore we are to have no participation with idolatry, including idol food (1 Corinthians 10:14-22; Revelation 2:20).
- 2) We are not to eat blood or strangled meat from which the blood has not been drained. In the creation account God allowed only vegetation to eat. God gave permission to Noah to eat meat, but only without the blood (Genesis 9:4). Thus this command applies to all the children of Noah - all people. This prohibition is connected to the teaching that the life is contained in the blood (Leviticus 17:11). The blood therefore is God’s since he is the creator of all life.
- 3) We are not to participate in fornication, for God has established the boundaries between what is right and wrong sexual behavior. The boundaries are set within the relationship of a husband and wife (Genesis 2:24). Leviticus 18 outlines other guidelines, for instance - do not marry close relatives; do not have sexual relations during menstruation; do not participate in homosexuality. These sexual codes were also demanded of the Gentiles because they are rooted in God’s prerogative as the creator of all people to set up the boundaries that he chooses. And God holds the Gentiles to this standard as we see in these passages (Genesis 6:1ff.; Genesis 18:1ff.; Leviticus 18:24ff.).

#### Paul’s teaching

According to the apostolic decree Jewish Christians were expected to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 21:20-24) but Gentiles were not (Acts 21:25). Paul affirms this in his teaching in 1 Corinthians 7:17-20. He says, “Let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which

God called you. This is my rule in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything. Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called.”

The one who is circumcised as a Jew is committed to obey the whole Law of Moses (Galatians 5:3). The one who is uncircumcised has no obligation to obey the Law of Moses. So if you are a practicing Jew when you become a follower of Jesus, do not give up your observance of the Law; do not remove the marks of circumcision. If you are a Gentile when you become a follower of Jesus do not seek to start obeying the Law of Moses; do not seek circumcision. Remain in the condition in which you were called. The Jew remains a Jew, the Gentile remains a Gentile. The only thing that matters is that as a Jew or as a Gentile that you obey the commands of God - the righteousness of the Kingdom that Jesus taught. Paul calls this “faith working through love” in Galatians 5:6.

This is the mystery of God, according to Paul, that was hidden from the foundation of the world (Ephesians 3:1-6). God has chosen to put together both Jews and Gentiles as the people of God. Gentiles should not be forced to become Jews - which is what Paul fought. And Jews should not be forced to be Gentiles - which is what has happened ever since the time of Paul. Both Jews and Gentiles come together in Christ as one, on an equal footing.