

How to Interpret and Apply Scripture to Ethical Decisions

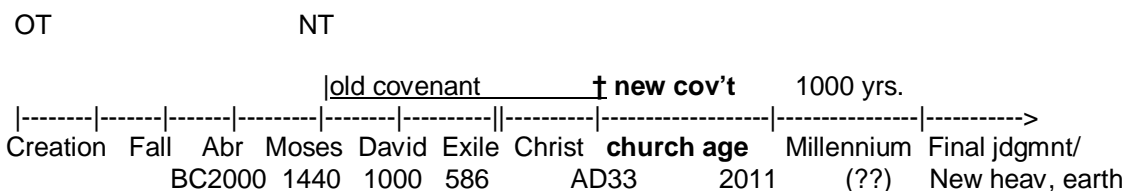
A. We can see every ethical question from three perspectives

1. Actions
Examples: Exod. 20:12-16; Rom. 13:7
2. Attitudes
Examples: Exod 20:17; 1 Sam. 16:7; Gal. 5:22-23; Prov. 21:2
3. Results
Examples: 1 Cor. 10:31; 1 Cor. 14:26
a. Intended b. Actual
4. → A life pleasing to God will be obedient to Scripture in all three ways
5. Most of our actions are mixed (a great help in evaluating various events/ actions)

B. How can we know which ethical teachings of Scripture apply to our situation today?

1. All of Scripture is “breathed out by God” and “profitable” for us *in some way* (2 Tim. 3:16-17)
2. **We are not under the “old covenant”**: Jer. 31:31-33; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6, 14; Heb. 8:8, 13 (see all of Heb. 8-9) [**The old covenant was from Exod. 20 to the death of Christ**]

→ Keep in mind where we are in “salvation history”



We are at the same point in salvation history as the people in the early church.

Therefore there are large differences between the way the Old Testament laws applied to Jewish people during Jesus' earthly ministry (30-33 AD) and the way it applied to the church in Corinth or Thessalonica or Ephesus a few years later. (For example, on tithing, or Sabbath and festivals, or food and dietary laws). But we today are at the same point in salvation history as all Christians have been from Pentecost (Acts 2) until today, and we will be at that point until Christ returns. Therefore Acts and the Epistles are the easiest and most direct to apply to us today (and also the Gospels with Jesus' teachings, many of which anticipated life in the new covenant, and all of which seemed to be applicable to God's people at any point in salvation history, not limited to specific provisions unique to the old covenant). In addition, many ethical teachings in Gen. 1 – Exod 20, and Psalms, Proverbs (wisdom literature) are generally applicable to all ages.

→ But we can still gain wisdom from pondering the Mosaic covenant commandments today (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

One common Protestant categorization to help in this (as in Westminster Confession of Faith):

1. ceremonial laws – fulfilled in the work of Christ (no longer for us today): sacrifices, clothing, food, etc.
2. civil laws – for government of Israel only: death penalty for lesser crimes, cities of refuge, etc.
3. moral laws – still should be obeyed today (most of 10 Commandments, for example)

3. Some commands apply only to an individual person or group in that situation at that time

“bring the cloak...and above all the parchments” in 2 Tim. 4:13; “no longer drink only water” in 1 Tim. 5:23; “go nowhere among the Gentiles” in Matt. 10:5

→ A helpful question: Did all of the original readers of these books think this applied to them?

4. Some commands: We need mature wisdom (from the context and the rest of Scripture) to know how broadly they apply

“Do not refuse the one who would borrow from you” Matt. 5:42) must be interpreted in the light of the whole of Scripture. Also “if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Mat 5:39 ESV)

5. Some historical accounts may be reporting the actions of God's people but not approving or recommending them

Samson, Solomon's later life, Jephthah's vow (Judg. 11:30), probably Rahab's lie (Josh. 6)

→ does the overall context of this passage and of Scripture view this with approval?

6. For many commands, it is easy to see a modern application that is very similar
- “The wages of the *laborers who mowed your fields*, which you kept back by fraud” (James 5:4)→“the wages of the *employees who work in your factory*, which you kept back by fraud.”
 - “Honor the *emperor*” (1 Peter 2:17)→“honor *government officials* who have positions of authority over you.”
 - “Masters, treat your *bondservants* justly and fairly”(Col. 4:1)→“Employers, treat your *employees* justly and fairly.”
 - “*Bondservants*, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord”→“*Employees*, obey your employers”
 - “Food offered to idols” (1 Cor. 8:10)→Things that encourage Christians to violate their conscience.
 - “You shall not covet your neighbor’s...*ox*” (Exod. 20:17)→“You shall not covet you neighbor’s *car or boat*.”

7. Culturally relative commands? For a few commands concerning physical actions with symbolic meaning, we should obey with a different kind of physical action that would carry the same or similar symbolic meaning (sometimes called “culturally relative” commands): Probably just these five:

- (1) Holy kiss (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14)
- (2) Foot washing (John 13:14; compare 1 Tim. 5:10, which is not a command) – for dusty roads
- (3) Head covering for women or wives in worship (1 Cor. 11:4–16) – indicated being married
- (4) Short hair for men (1 Cor. 11:14) – the point was to look like a man, not a woman
- (5) Lifting hands in prayer (1 Tim. 2:8) – (perhaps)

- These are outward, *surface-level manifestations* of the deeper realities that we should demonstrate today (e.g. greeting one another in love, serving one another, avoiding dressing in such a way as to signal that a man is trying to be a woman, or a woman is trying to be a man).
- *Only the physical, surface manifestation is culturally relative*, and the underlying intent of the command is *not culturally relative* but is still binding on us today.

(6) What about braided hair and jewelry for women?

→ I do not think these verses prohibited braided hair and jewelry even at the time they were written.

“women should *adorn themselves* in respectable apparel, with modesty and self control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire” (1 Tim. 2:9).

Do not let your adorning be external – the braiding of hair, the wearing of gold, *or the putting on of clothing* – but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious (1 Peter 3:3–4).

- If this passage forbids braiding of hair and wearing of gold, then it must also forbid “the putting on of clothing”!

- He was saying that those external things should not be what they look to for their source of attractiveness to others. It should rather be the inner character qualities which he mentions.

(7) Conclusion: → Some physical actions with symbolic meaning are culturally variable in how we obey them.

I say “some physical actions” because two are not culturally variable: baptism and the Lord’s Supper

8. Which commands apply today? With these guidelines, it should not be a difficult question in most cases.

All of the class lessons and outlines are posted on the class website www.christianessentialsbc.com.