

Shrimp and Sideburns - Defending Bible Morality

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Everyone has a moral code: our thoughts about right and wrong that steer our personal choices and the way we treat others. As a Christian, my moral code comes from the Bible. But the Bible presents a problem for some people. They ask how God can expect you to follow a book that says to stone adulterers, grow your sideburns and never eat bacon.

Sceptics love to ask if we still obey the laws of not wearing mixed fibres or eating shellfish. It's understandable that many Christians are flummoxed – most of us are quite happy wearing polycotton and eating shrimp.

So why do Christians do things the Bible forbids?

Using the Old Covenant as a foundation, Jesus built on and refined our understanding of God and what He expects.

Promises and Expectations

Since creation, God has talked to man in many ways. At times He made covenants, which consisted of promises and expectations. Many of these expectations were specific to particular people or nations. The Bible records many of these.

When Jesus came, He fulfilled every expectation from each previous covenant. He then ushered in a New Covenant between God and man, for all people, sealed with His own blood. The New Covenant did not bring a brand new moral code. Using the Old Covenant as a foundation, Jesus built on and refined our understanding of God and what He expects.

For example, when Jesus was brought a lady caught in adultery, He didn't stone her, as the Old Covenant demanded. Rather, He told her to stop her adultery and forgave her. So we see God still hates adultery, but He no longer expects all adulterers to be stoned. At the same time, Jesus also

raised the bar in some ways. In the Old Covenant, adultery meant physical sexual intercourse. In the New Covenant, Jesus said even looking at a woman with lust is adultery. A much tougher standard.

The Purpose of The Law

Though not all the expectations of the Old Covenant were brought into the New, they all remain useful in helping us to understand God.

God doesn't change. So when the Old Testament says to stone adulterers, it still shows us how awful God thinks adultery is. When it says not to cut your sideburns, it still reminds us that God calls us to be different. When it says not to eat bacon, it continues to teach us that God wants us to be holy, and that sometimes that means forgoing certain things that the rest of the world thinks are awesome!

The Old Testament law also serves to show us how utterly incapable we are of making ourselves acceptable to God. Even if we dodge the "big" sins like murder and adultery, we get caught out on "little" sins like lying or coveting our neighbour's cool stuff. The Bible tells us that if we break one part of the law, we've broken it all.

That means we all deserve death.

The Law of Liberty

The good news is, though I deserved death, Jesus died in my place, to set me free from the law of sin and death. In Christ's death, I am freed from the Old Covenant and brought into the New. However, just because God no longer requires me to forgo polycotton shirts and shrimp cocktails, it doesn't mean I am free from His expectation of holiness. God still wants me to live a morally perfect life. He says, *'...be holy, for I am holy'*. And if I truly love Him, that's what I'll want too.

When I first met my wife, she had this cool, surfer vibe going on. I was more a suits and pocket watch kind of guy. As we grew closer, how I dressed began to change. I asked a surfer friend to take me shopping. I didn't change because I feared her judging me; she had already shown me her approval. I changed because my love for her made me want to be more like her.

James calls this the Law of Liberty. I don't act holy because I must, but because I want to, out of love for God. And what a joy – that which was once impossible for me, is now made possible by His Spirit that lives in me!

The Law of Liberty requires me to forgive liberally, honour others humbly, be at peace universally, and give generously, especially to other saints.

The Way of Love

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, I can follow The Law of Liberty, which is The Way of Love. Jesus said

that first, we must love God. Second, love our neighbours. *'On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.'*

Jesus defined loving God as obeying God. Unlike worldly morality that places man at the centre, the Bible acknowledges the Creator has a purpose for His creation. The clay does not get to tell the potter how to shape the pot!

Like our love for God, loving our neighbours cannot be limited to just words. The Law of Liberty requires me to forgive liberally, honour others humbly, be at peace universally, and give generously, especially to other saints.

It says not to judge unbelievers, but to address sin in my Christian family (after first checking myself). There are no rules about what I can eat, unless what I eat causes my brother to stumble. I can drink, but not get drunk. I can enjoy sex, but only with my spouse. There are no festivals or special days I have to observe, but I mustn't abandon meeting with the other saints when they gather.

Free To Be Slaves

Because of Christ's death, God is faithful to forgive us whenever we stumble. But let us not choose to stumble. When we sin, it's like giving back our freedom and returning to our previous slavery. We can use our freedom to say, *'All things are lawful for me,'* but what we're really doing is placing our neck back into the yoke of sin.

As we get to know Jesus, as we allow the Holy Spirit to fill us with knowledge and wisdom, and as we listen to the encouragement of fellow saints, we can live lives worthy of God.

'Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.' (1 Peter 2:16)