

What Did Jesus Say about the Law?

What Jesus said about the law was totally consistent with the Law of Moses and what it said about righteousness and moral purity. Jesus regularly supported the provisions of law in his teachings.

Jesus attacked hypocrisy, but he didn't attack the law itself. He criticized those he saw who were living by the letter of the law while violating its intentions. He emphasized that internal commitment to the intent of the law was as important as external actions. Jesus did not criticize the law itself, but he did attack those who claimed to live by it but were not really doing it.

People can assume that Jesus was somehow against the law because he often argued with scribes and Pharisees. Nothing could be further from the truth. In those days, it was normal for teachers to argue among themselves, especially about how the law worked in different situations. The questions that the legal authorities bring to Jesus are the same questions they discussed and argued about with each other. These interactions actually show that Jesus was treated like a colleague in their conversations, not that he was an outsider or an enemy.

Jesus was born into Jewish culture and his teachings are built on that foundation. He accepted its scripture and the way relationship with God should be lived out. His teaching was not meant to create a new religion or a new way of life. Instead, he interpreted the provisions of the law given to Moses to bring human practices closer to the will of God.

What about Sabbath regulations?

When Pharisees were thinking about a principle, they usually looked for an example to explore their options. Whether or not you can heal on the Sabbath was one of the questions they were thinking about at the time. They were worrying about what kinds of things you were allowed to do to help someone who's sick. The problem came from things you shouldn't do on the Sabbath because of the Sabbath regulation for rest (not walking far, not carrying things, etc.). What could you do when a sick person needed help?

When Jesus picked out a man to heal on the Sabbath, he entered a conversation that the Pharisees were having with each other. When Jesus asked those around him, "Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath, or not?" He was asking them a question they were working on, but which they hadn't come to a decision about yet.

I found out about this quandary in seminary, when I was in a class that had half Christian and half Jewish students. My study partner was a rabbi, and he told me about the place where the rabbis recorded their decision about healing on the Sabbath. It's in the *Mekilta* of Rabbi Ishmael, written around the year 150 CE.

I want to show it to you so you can hear the way the rabbis talked with each other. This is from Jacob Neusner's translation of the *Mekhilta According to Rabbi Ishmael*:

Rabbi Ishmael, Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Aquiba were going along a road, with Levi the net maker and Ishmael, son of Rabbi Eleazar going after them.

They asked this question before them, "How do we know that danger to life overrides the laws of the Sabbath?"

Rabbi Ishmael answered, saying, “Scripture says, ‘If a thief is found breaking in’ (Exodus 22:1).

“Of what sort of case does Scripture speak? It is a case of doubt whether or not the burglar came only to steal or to kill. ...

“If the matter of bloodshed ... overrides the prohibition of the Sabbath, all the more so the saving of life should override the prohibitions of the Sabbath!”

Rabbi Eleazar responded, saying “If circumcision, which concerns only one of the limbs of a man, overrides the prohibitions of the Sabbath, all the more so the saving of the rest of the entire body!”

They said to him, “The very evidence you present proves the weakness of your proof. ... the prohibitions of the Sabbath will be only overridden only in the case of certainty, if we are sure that someone will die if one does not take action.”

Rabbi Aquiba says, “If the penalty for murder overrides the Temple service, which overrides the Sabbath, all the more so the saving of a life should override the Sabbath.”

Thus the matter is decided. Rabbi Aquiba has the prevailing position. You can and should help a person in trouble, even if you don’t know for sure that he’ll die without your intervention.

This rabbinic decision, only reached after the time of Jesus, was that yes, one may heal on the Sabbath. Although Jesus only represented one voice in the discussion with the Pharisees, he turned out to be on the side that ultimately won the day. In joining these conversations, Jesus wasn’t breaking or rejecting the law. He was working on establishing its boundaries and priorities. Jesus was using the kind of discussion and argument that was expected among his peers.

When he healed a man in the middle of a group of experts who were still arguing about what was the right thing to do, Jesus made a very strong statement. Yes, you should heal on the Sabbath. You should heal whoever you see who needs help, not waiting to check his bank account or his attendance at church. You should heal and you should help anyone who is at risk or in danger on the Sabbath. Jesus took this even farther, by expanding it to include even animals that are at risk of their lives, with those who can be helped or healed on the Sabbath.

What about purity and impurity?

In his doctoral thesis, Jonathan Klawans, now a professor at Boston University, examined the various causes of purity and impurity in the Torah. In his book based on that work, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Israel*, Klawans describes the two clusters of kinds of impurity he found. He presents the two kinds as “ritual impurity” and “moral impurity,” and he describes how situations fall into each of the two groups.

Ritual impurity has to do with the religious status of the affected person, because you are excluded from rituals and from entering sacred places. Ritual impurity, in some cases, can be transmitted directly to other people. You can recover ritual purity by some form of ritual, e.g. sacrifices, sprinkling, washing, and bathing, or by letting a period of time pass, e.g. until evening or for seven days.

Ritual impurity comes from contact with different natural substances—childbirth, scale disease, genital discharge, the carcass of an impure animal, and human corpses—and can also be caused by some kinds of purification procedures. What the different forms of ritual impurity have in common is that

- they come from natural causes which are not completely avoidable
- it is not sinful to be in a condition of ritual impurity
- the impurity can be addressed and removed.

On the other hand, moral impurity is the result of committing sins that are described in the law as “defiling” or “abomination.” Impurity that is morally but not ritually defiling has its effect on the person who has committed the sin, on the land itself, and on the sanctuary of God. The effect of the moral impurity created by sexual sins is described in Leviticus 18:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the aliens living among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you. Everyone who does any of these detestable things—such persons must be cut off from their people. Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 18:24–30)

This kind of moral defilement created by sin applies specifically to a citizen who is a member of the people of Israel and also to a resident alien, a non-Jew who lives among the people.

There are several differences between ritual and moral impurity. While ritual impurity is usually not sinful, moral impurity only occurs as the result of sins like idolatry, incest, and murder. While many kinds of ritual impurity have a contagious effect—one can “catch” ritual impurity from a person who is ritually impure—there is no passing of moral impurity from the person who committed the sin to others.

Although ritual impurity is temporary until a purification ritual is performed, moral impurity has a long lasting effect on the sinner and ultimately on the land as well. Moral impurity can’t be removed by ritual cleansing but requires a process of punishment, repentance, and atonement.

Forceful terms like “abomination” and “pollution” are used for sources of moral impurity but not for sources of ritual impurity. The kinds of severe sins that are identified as creating moral impurity—idolatry, bloodshed, and sexual immorality—are specified as applying equally to both Israelites and to the non-Jews living among them.

What did Jesus teach about law and purity?

Jesus did not oppose the provisions of the Mosaic law. He argued with those who claimed to be following the law yet were breaking it themselves, and with those who imposed the law on others while not complying themselves.

Speaking specifically about the law, Jesus said:

I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:18–20)

This reference to “one stroke of a letter” in the law also appears in Luke’s gospel:

The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law. (Luke 16:16-17)

Brad Young, in his book *Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thought and the Teachings of Jesus*, relates an early rabbinic story in which the books of law object to the removal of the tiny letter yod from the word *yarbeth* in Deuteronomy 17:16-17. King Solomon had acquired many horses and many wives by ignoring this tiny letter, but the Holy One reaffirmed that even Solomon could not remove a single letter from the law. Jesus, in his affirmation of the full content of the law, was thinking very much like a rabbi.

Jesus changed the priorities of the commandments

When Jesus is asked which of the commandments in the law is the greatest, he responded with the words of Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 as they appear in the Septuagint. His response was one most Jews, including his opponents, would have agreed with.

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-31)

When the Pharisees heard that he had said this, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked Jesus a test question about which commandment is the greatest.

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:34–40)

The listeners might have been surprised that he included a second commandment into his response. The command to love neighbors actually comes from the middle of the purity code in Leviticus 19:18, just before regulations about interbreeding animal and plant species. Jesus rearranged the priorities of the provisions of the law, raising love of neighbors to the second place, right after love of God.

“Do unto others” as the heart of the law

It would be hard to say who first invented the “Golden Rule,” but Jesus affirmed the importance of treating others the way one would want to be treated.

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

The great Pharisee sage Hillel, who lived the generation before Jesus, made a similar comment about the importance of the Golden Rule to someone who wanted to learn the whole law quickly. Yitzhak Buxbaum quotes the Talmud in *The Life and Teachings of Hillel*:

A certain gentile once came to Hillel and said, "I'm ready to become a Jew, but only if you can teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Hillel answered him, "What is hateful to you, don't do to your fellowman; that is the whole Torah, and the rest ... is just a commentary. Go then and learn it!" (Shabbat 31a)

For Jesus, the law to love others came from the part of the law which said that the duty to love applied to all people, Jew and non-Jew. In the Levitical law, aliens and members of the people of Israel are to receive equal treatment. The verses which command love for others are similar, whether the other is a citizen or an alien residing among the people:

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:18)

The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God. (Leviticus 19:34)

When he stressed the consistency of love and treatment of all neighbors with the law, Jesus stood solidly in the traditions of his time.

Obedience from the inside out

Jesus had little patience for those he saw focusing on less important aspects of the law while breaking parts of the law which were critical.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. (Matthew 23:23–28)

The issue in these criticisms is not of law itself, but the lack of compliance with the law.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. (Matthew 23:1–3)

Jesus does not criticize the law itself, but the behavior of some of those who claim to living by it.

What is morally defiling?

One of the most important teachings of Jesus about the law is one that is often overlooked. It is found in a question about the importance of ritual purity. Jesus turns the question from whether one should or should not do a particular thing to the relative values of different kinds of purity and impurity.

Jesus is confronted by the fact that his disciples have not washed their hands before eating as is required in the law. He responds first with an illustration of the way making a donation to the temple can excuse a person from caring for their aging parents required by the commandment to honor father and mother. Then he makes a policy statement:

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'" (Mark 7:14-15)

To the disciples he gives some additional explanation:

He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'" (Mark 7:20-23)

Matthew's gospel has a slightly different version of these sources of defilement.

But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.' For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. (Matthew 15:18-19)

The moral defilement of sin is, for Jesus, far more important than the ritual defilement from eating with unwashed hands.

Jesus did not come to eliminate or change the Mosaic law, but to complete it. He said

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (Matthew 5:17)

All his work within the law was to establish the priorities of the prohibitions and practices of the law, so that the living out of the law could be more closely aligned with the will of God for the people.

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