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## How Do We Know Which Commands in the Bible Apply to Everyone?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Question about how we can know when commands and instructions given in the Bible are meant to apply to everyone and when they only apply to a specific people group at a specific time in history.

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### Transcript

#STRask How Do We Know Which Commands in the Bible Apply to Everyone? #STRask How Do We Know Which Commands in the Bible Apply to Everyone? This is Amy Hall and you're listening to Stand to Reason's #STRask podcast. With me today is Greg Koukl. Hello Amy.

Hello Greg. Alright, here's a question from Tom Pointer. Some commands and instructions given in the Bible are meant to apply to everyone.

While others were written to a specific people group at a specific time in history and only apply to them, how do we know when to think universally versus locally? That's a good question and it's a hard one to answer in some cases. Other cases it's actually somewhat simple. Think of the Mosaic Law for example.

The Mosaic Law is a contract. It's a contract between God and the nation of Israel. So strictly speaking, there is nothing that a Gentile is obliged to do that is in the Mosaic Law because it's in the Mosaic Law.

In the same sense in this illustration we've often used, as a resident of the state of California, while I'm in California, I have no obligation to keep Illinois's laws. Those apply to people in their state, not in our state. Okay? And the Mosaic Law was given to form a

theocracy with a group of people.

And that law has a number of different functions. And some people make a distinction between the moral law and the civil law and the ceremonial law. It turns out though, for the Jews all of those areas were morally obligatory for them to keep.

If they did do the ceremonial stuff or the civil stuff, the way God told them to do it, then they weren't doing the right thing. Okay? Now, so there's an example. Nothing in the law, and I'm choosing my words carefully here, nothing in the Mosaic Law in virtue of being in the Mosaic Law applies to Gentiles at any time.

And since Jesus, and clearly after the book of Hebrews and the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, nothing in the Mosaic Law as such applies to Jews either. Okay? Now, we can learn things from the Mosaic Law, and Paul tells us that. But then somebody's asking, "Wait a minute.

You mean we can murder and we can steal and all these other things that seem to be proscribed by the Mosaic Law?" And my answer is some things that you find in the Mosaic Law, which applies to the Jews, are in the law that applies to the Jews because they have a universal quality. So you're going to find homicide statutes in the state of California. You're also going to find homicide statutes in the state of Illinois.

That's because homicide statutes are required because murder is not a parochial kind of concern. It's a human concern. And so there are universals that we see reflected in every state, and there are certain moral obligations expressed in the Mosaic Law because they stand above Mosaic Law.

They should be in every law. They're universals. Okay? And you know this to some degree by reflection.

You just think about it and you realize, "Yeah, well, this isn't like thou shalt not murder." Yeah, that sounds -- it comports with our moral common sense that this is a universal. Okay? When it says, "Don't eat shellfish," I don't have any sense that that's a universal. That seems to be something just for the Jews.

Jesus clarified that later. And so sometimes I'm reflection. And the way that it's described in the Mosaic Law helps you to know whether the thing is a universal.

One of the biggest things, though, is that all the universals that are moral obligations to the Jews under the Mosaic Law turn out to be repeated in the New Testament where the Mosaic Law is not intact in the way it used to be for Jews. So these are universals. Now, notice what I'm doing.

I have to make, in order to distinguish here, I have to acknowledge a contextual concern. This is the big picture of the Mosaic Law. What is the nature of that law where these

other laws, all these individual laws show up? Okay.

Well, given the nature of it, that is a contract with one group of people, we realize that it's going to be limited in its application to other people. When we look at some of those things, we also reflect on them and say, "Well, this seems like it's bigger than this for the Jews." And then when it's repeated in the New Testament, that affirms that. So there is a contextual issue that I'm trying to put into play here that helps me to decide.

But at the same time, there is moral reflection that helps out. Now, I think sometimes there's going to be ambiguities. There's a mixed bag on Sabbath, for example.

My conviction is that Sabbath is for Jews as a law. And by the way, Sabbath can't be changed to Sunday because that's not what the law says. "Sun down Friday to Sunday Saturday." People who worship God on Sunday are not keeping the Sabbath.

So that seems to be, especially with comments made in the New Testament about the Sabbath, something that is really, even though the principle of rest is really important, we can employ it, like other principles there, it's only law for the Jews. Okay, so on the one hand, sometimes we can figure these things out pretty quickly. On the other hand, it's more difficult on some things.

And there may be differences of opinion, and we have to be charitable to those who disagree. The important thing are the reasons that we can gather for the view that some particular thing is applicable morally to that group of people, and not to us, or vice versa. So that's why I said, you know, some things are kind of easy, but other things are a little bit more difficult, and it's a matter of moral decision-making.

Well, first of all, it takes looking at the context, so you have to read it in context to figure out, I mean, there could even be individual commands God gives a specific individual to do a specific thing that applies only to them. And that becomes clear as you read the context, and you see, oh, just because God told, I'm trying to think of an example now. Jesus told Peter to throw the net in the deep side of the lake.

Right. So that's not an instruction for us. Yeah, right.

So some of this is common sense with reading, but in terms of the Mosaic Law, the Mosaic Law Paul explains, and this is in Galatians, he explains that Galatians and Romans, the promise made to Abraham, it says the promise that made to Abraham that he would be heir of the world was a promise made by grace. That was a promise. And the reason why it was by promise is so God could guarantee it, because if it depended on our works, he couldn't guarantee it.

Good. So then Paul says the law was added later because of sin, and it was to reveal our sin, but it was also to direct their culture in a way that would reflect God. So what we see in the Old Testament commands is a reflection of God's character.

So the main thing now for us to do is to look at those laws to find out what God's character is in order to know how we ought to act. And sometimes it is precisely in the way they did it, and sometimes it isn't. So you mentioned, for example, rest, and I know people will disagree on this, but Colossians explains that the Sabbath was a... Here's what it says, "No one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day, things which are a mere shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." In other words, there were some things in the Old Testament that were meant to point to Christ, and that was the things like the sacrificial system, that were meant to point to Christ, so they were only shadows.

Now that we have the real thing, we don't do those other things anymore. And again, just in case people are concerned about this, that doesn't mean that the principle of resting in God is not a good principle that reflects his character, and that is a good thing to engage in. Well, the Hebrews talks about the rest in God part, but that's resting from work, so there's kind of an allegorical or analogical kind of feature to the Sabbath.

Right, so even in the case of the Sabbath, it was pointing to our resting Christ from our works. And it's still a good thing today to rest one day of the week. There's nothing wrong with doing that.

It's just not part of our law, or two days. So, but there are a couple of things I want to note because how this plays out, Paul is really clear. It's amazing to me how much of the New Testament talks about the issue of law and why we don't sin.

If you're not reading all the way through, you can miss this, but the more you read it, the more you understand what he's talking about. But he says in Romans 7 that it's just, you know, if they were under the law, but just as when a woman's husband dies, then she's released from the law. In the same way, when we're in Christ, we die in Christ.

Release from that legal relationship with the husband. Right, release from the law of marriage. In the same way, when we die with Christ, we're released from the Mosaic law and we're raised in Christ.

And he says the purpose of that is so that we can bear fruit for God. And this is because we have the Holy Spirit now to enable us to act in ways that reflect God. That's right.

And in chapter 6, he gives a couple of reasons why we do this. Before I even get there, one more thing about Second Timothy, it says that the law is there to ensure that the law is there. The law is there to instruct us in what is good.

So even though we're not under it as we are under any sort of statute or anything like that, we are still looking at the law to be trained in who God is. And then we're supposed to reflect that. So there are a couple reactions to this that people might have and Paul actually addresses them.

So the first one in chapter 6, what should we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be? How shall we who died to sin still live in it? In other words, we have died to our sinful nature and now we should act in ways that reflect God. And then he says again, what then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace may it never be? Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death or of obedience resulting in righteousness. So the second reason is that we're not to be slaves to sin.

So we're supposed to reflect God, we're supposed to die to our sin, we're supposed to reflect God to the world. And again in Colossians, Paul talks about how we're supposed to set our eyes on things in heaven, not on earth, and consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and on and on. So the idea is that we have died to that old way and now we're living not because the law is requiring us to live this way, but because we've been regenerated and we are new creatures because of Christ's death and resurrection and our death and resurrection in him, we are new creatures who now have the ability, because of the Holy Spirit, to bear fruit for God and to reflect God to the world and live in ways that reflect him.

Now we learn what that is by looking at the law, the law is there to instruct us in who God is and what love looks like. It's another thing Paul says that for the sake of love, that's why we don't commit adultery or murder or all those things. So that's there to instruct us to what it means to love.

So I think those are ways that you can look at this in the commands and what our goal is. It really helps to think about what our goal is. God's goal is to make us like Christ.

So knowing that, look at the commands and apply all these things to it and read through the New Testament over and over, because this was a huge deal. This was a huge thing for them to figure out at that time when they were Gentiles and Jews in the church. They had to figure out how this worked out and so it's addressed over and over and there.

And so this is one thing I bring up questions about this probably more frequently than any other, because I think it's a huge problem that Christians don't understand our relationship to the law. And because of that, we're vulnerable to people who come and say, well, if you're against homosexuality, why aren't you against eating shrimp? Yeah, shrimp. Like what's the problem? You're not being consistent.

And then what happens is if Christians care about the Bible, what I'm seeing is instead of them saying, oh, then homosexuality must be okay. What they're saying is eating shrimp must be wrong. And so there's this move by Christians who care about the Bible to take on the commands of the Mosaic Covenant that don't apply because they were shadows of what was to come.

And that's where the gospel's in danger. Especially since Jesus explicitly addressed that issue, declared all foods clean. But this, it won't spend a lot of time on this, but, and I think that to get more detail on this, we have a course called the Bible Fast Forward.

And that's, is that what we call it? Yeah. The Bible Fast Forward. Over the years it's had different titles, so I get confused.

It's eight 50-minute sessions with a workbook of about 150 pages, which is a complete syllabus of all the material that you can get from standard reason. You can print out the workbook, whatever. But it goes into much more detail on these particular things.

But notice that I said that there are things in the Mosaic law that reflect universals. And so our appeal to the Mosaic law with regards to homosexuality isn't an appeal to the law as the authority because that law we're not under. But rather to the law as an expression of a universal, which condemned homosexuality, because as the text says in Leviticus, it, that a man should not be lying with a man the way he lies with a woman.

Okay? That's an abomination. So the language there is pretty strong. But notice that what, the way the sentence is constructed, it identifies that this is not a natural or appropriate kind of thing.

It's not the way God made things. That takes us back to the beginning. So that's a wicked thing.

And wicked things are still wicked, even in the New Testament time. And that's the distinction. We're not just picking and choosing.

We're acknowledging that there are different kinds of things in the Mosaic law, things that pertain uniquely to Jewish culture and other things that reflect universal morality. And like we said earlier, sometimes it's not easy to separate one from the other. But in many things, it is.

I mean, clearly to me, tithing is part of the Jewish law because it served a function under the theocracy. Tithing is not a New Testament teaching. And even when Jesus said you should tithe, mint, dill, and come in, in addition to doing the greater things like justice, etc.

He was saying that in an Old Testament economy. In fact, the beginning of that discourse, he says, do everything that Moses tells you to do. Well, that's not applying to us.

Jesus was speaking in that context. So now it's different. But that doesn't mean that nothing that was condemned under Moses applies as sinful behavior now.

It certainly does because there are universals there. Anyway, the the course makes

these distinctions in a very clear way, I think. And you made a good point, Greg, that there are certain things that are talked about in moral terms, such as saying it's an abomination or saying this is, I don't know, terrible in God's eyes or whatever.

And then there are there are things like the way you do the sacrifices where it's not if you if you do it in a wrong way, the problem isn't that you've you've broken a moral law in itself. But rather you're rebellion against God and and him is the authority. So you're you're not following his authority, but it's not because there's a moral nature to it, except in some other way, or something inherently moral.

What makes that activity in morals, because God said, do it this way and not that way. And he had reasons for that, of course, simply in virtue of his command. That's just like the other thing you're saying, he gives a particular individual a command.

Well, if God says to do it, you just that person is supposed to do it. That's different than God identifying a universal like thou shalt not commit adultery or the bare fault with false witness or murder and all that. Those are universals and they seem to be obvious on reflection.

And that's why they're repeated in the New Testament. And the less you read around that command, the harder it's going to be to understand. By that, I mean, if you're just picking out little if someone says, what about this command and you look at it.

Well, it might be harder to understand what is meant there than if you were actually reading through these things and getting a sense for the sections and the types of laws and all those sorts of things. I cannot stress enough that Christians need to be reading their Bibles in from start to finish. Yes, and over and over.

Yeah, because we we need to shape our minds more than ever now. And part of shaping our minds is not just knowing specific laws. There's a whole culture.

There's a whole ethic that comes through as you're reading the story of what God has done as a whole that you don't get just from reading one verse here and one verse there or even from somebody teaching specific ideas. There's something about reading the whole thing. I mean, think about any favorite book that you have or favorite series.

The more you read it, the more you understand the world as a whole and you have a sense for it. And the more, let's say, if somebody wrote another chapter and stuck it in there, you'd be able to tell because you know you recognize what the truth is from this particular author. You recognize what fits in there and what doesn't.

So what happens when you're shaping your mind this way is that when someone comes up to you and says, "Well, the Bible says such and so," and it doesn't sound like it matches with the whole that you've been reading, then you know to look deeper and you're not completely flummoxed or disturbed by this claim that somebody makes. Well,

an example of that kind of in the micro is the passage in Leviticus 17 where it condemns homosexuality for the reasons I gave. It's a violation of the natural order.

You're lying with a man the way you should be lying with a woman is the point there. Just above it, for someone who takes exception, well, that's the Old Testament doesn't apply. Well, what about this verse just above it that condemns child sacrifice? What about the verse right below it that condemns bestiality? Are you okay with bestiality and child sacrifice now for the same reason you want to sanitize homosexuality in this passage? So that's the context again.

You read the larger flow just even in that chapter and you realize that this is not just a disposable moral principle that applied in the unique circumstances of the theocracy. And then when you broaden it out even farther, Greg, you go back to the beginning of Genesis. Like Jesus did.

You see it in Genesis and you see it with Jesus, the idea that God created the male and female. And now you find the greater framework for understanding who we are as human beings. And all of these other things will make more sense in the light of that framework.

You know, I know this could sound like self-promotion, but this is genuinely a good reason people should start with big picture, at least have that part of the reading. This is where story of reality comes in. It's the most broad way of characterizing the Christian worldview.

And once you kind of got that down, God, man, Jesus cross resurrection, you've got to have that picture of how it all flows together. Between man and Jesus, that's Genesis 3 all the way to the Gospel of John, right? Or Matthew, I should say. That's a lot of time and a lot of material.

This is where the Bible fast forward will come in and fill in what's going on in that interim between man and Jesus that makes sense of Jesus. Okay, so I just want to recommend that material called the Bible fast forward. And when I was a fairly new Christian within the first couple of years, I had a course like that.

Not in the detail that we have, but I had a course like that at the place that the Christian community that I was at, by a guy was very clever in the Old Testament, who had knew the Hebrew and everything, Mark Earington. And I remember thinking, boy, this has really helped me to hold it all in a conceptual framework that made sense of the whole, because I had the big picture, and then I could do the smaller things. I knew where to insert them and how to understand them.

In fact, Greg, you just reminded me a couple of weeks ago, we had a donor event, an event with donors, and one of the donors there told me that that teaching changed his



life, the Bible fast forward. He said that completely, it changed the way he looked at the Bible. And now, obviously, I would love it if people got your teaching, but just in general, this idea that we can get the big picture, all of these things will make more sense.

Another ministry called Walk Through the Bible was really helpful to me. Same concept, right? Yeah, that was really helpful to me. Way back when I was at Biola in grad school, we were required to go through this presentation.

And it was fun. They teach you to remember, they give you all these memory aids and things, and you learn all the major points of the Old Testament, so you have this framework to hang everything on. That's right.

And it was amazing to me. I had read the Bible by that point at least once. And I had no idea that the Kingdom of Israel split into two.

Because I read it so slowly. And then I'm going through this thing, and they just give you this outline. It was so helpful.

Anyway, it's called Walk Through the Bible. You can go on there and see if there's an event near you, or you can invite them to your church, and they will come. It's a lot of fun.

It is a lot of fun. I mean, it sounds like it could be boring, but it's really a lot of fun. I don't know how to explain it to you.

The one that I remember right away is Saul Halfhart, David Holhart, and also Saul, Sarah Abraham-Lott, and Tara. You know, they give you these little demonic devices, and you go through these motions, you're all standing up doing all these things. And it sticks with you.

It's very sticky, but it gives you this big picture overview that is absolutely necessary to understand the parts properly. And by the end, you can all say all those things together. That's right.

It's amazing. It's a great thing. So however you do it... Do it.

Do it. Yes. All right.

Thank you, Tom, for your question. Send us your questions on Twitter with the hashtag #STRAsk or go through our website on our hashtag #STRAskPodcast page. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.

[Music]

(upbeat music)