

Key Moral Precepts: OLD TESTAMENT

The OT, passed down orally and in writing over a period of about 1500 years, consists of three main sections: the Law, the Wisdom Writings, and the Prophets. Overall, these reveal to us what God's way of dealing with his people is: the plan that He has for them, his expectations of them, and what this therefore reveals about who He is in Himself. The following texts illustrate the moral demands that God makes on his people.

GOD'S CHARACTER: MERCIFUL

Understanding what God is like, helps us to live in a way that reflects His own character. In Exodus 34:6-7 God appears to Moses on Mount Sinai. This is called an "epiphany" (a manifestation of God's character and presence)

*The LORD passed in front of him and proclaimed,
"The LORD, the LORD God,
**compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger,
and filled with[a] gracious love and truth.**
He graciously loves thousands,
and **forgives** iniquity, transgression, and sin.
But he does not leave the guilty unpunished,
punishing the sins of the ancestors on their children,
and on their children's children
to the third and fourth generation."*

GOD'S ACTS FOR HIS PEOPLE: SAVING

These reveal **who God** is for His people. Samuel was an OT prophet, who anointed the first King of Israel (Saul). Like other prophets, he reminded the people about what God wanted from them, based on the Covenant He made with them. God kept His part of the Covenant, in freeing them from slavery: "**Only, fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart. Indeed, consider what great things he has done for you...**" 1 Samuel 12:24

God's greatest act for Israel, was in the events of the Exodus. These events are the foundational story of the Jewish people, and marks their liberation to be God's people and follow His laws, given through Moses. The Psalms are full of references to the Exodus, reminding the Jewish people of how God is their creator, and after the age of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Jacob, Joseph), led them out of Egypt where they had settled, drowning the Pharaoh's army, and giving them the promised land of Canaan to be their own. He increased their tribe to become a nation - Israel - and continued to give them prophets to remind them of His ways.

eg. Ps.105 "*Remember the wonders of God...the covenant he made with Abraham, He confirmed with with Jacob as a decree "I will give you the Land of Canann as your inheritance.."*

GOD'S EXPECTATIONS: JUSTICE

Apart from the 10 Commandments, the Prophetic Books (eg Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, Isaiah etc) are full of God's concern **for justice** for the poor, needy and oppressed. The Prophets also typically remind the people, that God is always willing to forgive their sin, but warning them as well of the consequences, if they do not change their behaviour. Some prophetic books also express God's care for non-Jewish nations, showing his guidance of as well.

- Micah 6:8 "**What does the Lord demand of you, o man? Only this: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.**
- Amos 5:24 " *But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.."*

- Amos 3:2 *You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.*"
- Joel 2:12 *"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "Return to Me with all your heart, fasting, weeping and mourning..." For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in loving-kindness **and relenting of evil**....(this is partly re-quoting the Epiphany to Moses)*

GOD'S EXPECTATION: CARE FOR OTHERS

Leviticus 19:34: A book of laws for the Jewish people, derived from the teachings of Moses (aka = Mosaic Law, includes the 10 C's) Included Laws about diet, worship, sexual relations, dealing with diseases eg leprosy, care for the poor, orphans, widows, strangers:

*'When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and **you shall love him as yourself**, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God. 'You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measurement of weight, or capacity....*

Negative aspects of God in the OT:

It is problematic for some Christians, that certain passages of the OT seem to present God as bloodthirsty, vengeful, wrathful, and to advocate genocide and mass slaughter. He seems to be a God who "changes His mind", in response to human actions and sin, or repentance. This makes him appear too much like a human being (anthropocentrism). Remember also McFague's points about patriarch, dominance and submission in the OT picture of God.

Eg "The Lord is a jealous and vengeful God; the Lord is vengeful and strong in wrath. The Lord is vengeful against his foes; he rages against his enemies. The Lord is very patient but great in power; the Lord punishes".

Examples of God's vengeance: destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, for their dissolute and licentious behaviour – approx. Firstborn of Egypt died in the 10th plague & whole Egyptian army. Israelites complaining against God in the desert swallowed up by an earthquake. God ordered others to be slaughtered for rebelling against Moses. 50000 killed for looking into the Ark of the Covenant. Mass slaughter of Israel's enemies commanded through prophet Samuel. Plague for King David's sin, thousands Israelites died.

Summary of God & moral precepts in the OT

The OT teaches us that God shows His loyalty and faithfulness to His people, and expects his people to show faithfulness to him, in obeying His laws, and honouring him in worship, and in their manner of their life (diet, behaviour). He is also presented as a God who hates sin, and punishes it, ruthlessly in some cases, although He is also known as the one who shows mercy, and does not punish us as we deserve. Most notable in the OT, is God's care **for justice** – he keeps in mind the poor, the weak and helpless, strangers, widows and orphans, and demands that His people show concern for them. The Jewish people stand in obedience and holy fear before God, who is Almighty, and yet chose to establish a personal and permanent covenant with them, despite their sinfulness.

Moral Precepts:

- Mosaic Laws – covering a range of issues eg proper worship, not just moral commandments. Care for poor/ strangers, rules for punishments against specific sins/ immoral behaviour. "eye for an eye", stoning.
- Ten Commandments – basic moral commands
- Prophetic reminders about justice, God's willingness to forgive, but unwillingness to put up with sin.

Key Moral Precepts: NEW TESTAMENT

Christianity teaches that Jesus is the full revelation of God, as the second Person of the Trinity taking to himself a particular human nature and living on earth as that human nature. According to St. Athanasius' formulation of the Doctrine of the Trinity, **"whatever can be said of the Father, can be said of the Son, except that the Son is not the Father"**. Jesus' own character and actions show us what living as the image of God means, particularly in his **total, unconditional love** for us, shown in his self-sacrificing death: something the OT does not fully reveal.

God's acts in Jesus are greater than God's acts in the OT: because they concern the salvation and restoration of all creation in God. They more truly reflect God's greatness, faithfulness and love. Jesus' teachings also tell us further truths about what God is really like, and the meaning and purpose of life.

Christians would also argue that some elements of the OT God, eg his vengefulness, wrath, anthropocentrism (God imagined as a powerful male) are corrected in the NT: Jesus himself bears the justice and hatred of God against sin, shows God's unchanging nature as unconditional love, mercy and forgiveness, while still condemning sin at a deeper level (Sermon on the Mount). Jesus is not a patriarchal, domineering role model, but shows tenderness and mutuality in his relationships.

The moral precepts of the NT can be identified by looking at Jesus' own example, his attitude to the Jewish law, his view of what is most important, and to match this with our own experience of conscience, informed by the teachings of the Bible and the Holy Spirit.

1. JESUS' EXAMPLE

- **In forgiving:**

- In the Our Father prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to say – *"and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us"*. ... *"Because if you forgive people their offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive people their offenses, your Father will not forgive your offenses."* **Matthew 6:14-15**
- *"Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?"* **22** Jesus answered, *"I tell you, not just seven times, but seventy-seven times!"* Mt 18:22
- *"Just as the Lord has forgiven you, you also should forgive."* Col 3:12-13

- **In loving:**

- *"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends"*. Jn 15:13
- *"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* Rom 5:8. It is because God loves us first, that we can love God. We received love from God – so we can show God's love to others.

- **In his character:** Colossians 3:12-13
 - *“Therefore, as God’s chosen ones, holy and loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Be tolerant of one another and forgive each other if anyone has a complaint against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, you also should forgive.”*
 - *“Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to satisfy the desires of the flesh”. Rom 13:14*
 - *“put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness”. Ephesians 4:24*
- **In creating a new fellowship,** of love, truth and forgiveness:
 - *“Therefore, stripping off falsehood, “let each of us speak the truth to his neighbour, for we belong to one another. “Be angry, yet do not sin.” Do not let the sun set while you are still angry, and do not give the Devil an opportunity to work”. Ephesians 4:25-27*

2. JESUS’ TEACHINGS:

A. THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Jesus summarises his own teaching, and that of the Mosaic Law, by two commandments, which together make up the Greatest Commandment.

*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’This is the greatest and most important commandment. **The second is exactly like it:** ‘You must love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments.”*

Jesus puts these two commandments as equivalent in importance. But the fact that love of God comes first, leads some people to wonder **if love of God comes before love of others.**

Several texts suggest that loving others in fact brings us into the light of God, and into His presence. The Commandment to love God can perhaps only be made sense of, by loving others, since no-one really knows who God is, so as to love him.

- 1 Jn 4:19-21 *“Whoever says, “I love God,” but hates his brother is a liar. The one who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love the God whom he has not seen. And this is the commandment that we have from him: the person who loves God must also love his brother”*
- 1 Jn 2:10 *“Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble”.*
- Parable of Sheep and Goats Mt 25:40 *‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’* Loving others is equivalent to loving God.

Putting the commandment to love God first, with all our heart/ mind/ strength/ soul, is perhaps to remind us, that we cannot take anybody or anything on earth, **as being of absolute value.** When we do love others, we do it “for the sake of God’. This makes our love unselfish and true. Although some people would say that this

suggests we do not love people for themselves, in fact, we do, but not with an absolutising, smothering love, that could end up focussing on them in an unhealthy way.

B. LOVE OF NEIGHBOUR – no matter who

The Good Samaritan Luke 10:25-28

Just then an expert in the Law stood up to test Jesus. He asked, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered him, "What is written in the Law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind. And you must love your neighbour as yourself." Jesus told him, "You have answered correctly. 'Do this, and you will live.'" But the man wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

The Parable shows the Samaritan, whom Jews were usually hostile and rejecting of, as the hero of the story, helping regardless of the fact that injured man is probably a Jew. He shows love for the man, as if he was the man himself. Jesus extends this teaching, in the Sermon on the Mount, where he says that his followers must "*love your enemy as yourself*". God makes his sun to shine on all (Mt 5:45) **indiscriminately, and without judging** – so must we.

C. JESUS' ATTITUDE TO JEWISH LAW

- Jesus sees his own teaching as a confirmation and perfection of the Mosaic law "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. No, I came to fulfil them*" Mt 5:17
- In his Sermon on the Mount, which is the great summary of his teaching, Jesus compares what the Jewish law teaches, with the way that he wants it to be understood: it is not enough simply to avoid sinful acts – Jesus expects his followers to root out tendencies to sin from their hearts:
- "*You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'* But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.
- "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'* But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

3. OUR EXPERIENCE: CONSCIENCE

The moral teaching of the NT is not a system of laws, or an ethical theory, although some have tried to see it in this way (Situation Ethics). This is because of the Holy Spirit: Jesus promises that after his ascension, his disciples will receive the Holy Spirit, **and then** they will be able to live as the Father wants, worshipping in Spirit and in

truth (Jn 4:24), and coming to understand everything that is still to be revealed to them, by Jesus, in the Spirit (Jn 14:26, Acts 1:4).

Jesus said that “everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them, will be like a wise man who built his house on rock”, yet he told parables, which could have multiple meanings, and spoke in exaggerations (“turn the other cheek”; “if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out”). He also gave general commands, such as to “love others”. Therefore **following Jesus is not a simple matter of obeying laws** . Christians need to learn how to understand the spirit of His words, and how to apply them. This is more of an art and a skill, than a matter of obedience and disobedience to laws. It requires understanding and wisdom, and it is difficult to do, because people can become too scrupulous in their conscience (suspecting any action can be a sin), or too insensitive, if they ignore sins that they do commit, and excuse them to themselves.

A mature conscience comes from allowing the Bible to shape our perspective, reading it as a whole. The Holy Spirit aids Christians in developing this kind of understanding of the Bible. The Holy Spirit also helps us to make sense of our life experience, and to understand it when we do sin. Conscience, as the innate sense of right and wrong , comes from being in the image of God, and avoiding sin, helps to keep this image, and this conscience, clear. A clear conscience sensitises, and reassures Christians about what God would want, and what would be right to do.

- *“whenever non-Jews who don’t have the laws in Moses’ Teachings, but do by nature the things that those laws contain, they are a law to themselves”. Rom 2:14*
- *“The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith.” 1 Tim 1:5*The teaching of the Apostles should help people to train and develop a good conscience.
- The Apostles themselves relied on a good conscience, to know that they were doing the work that God required : *“We can be proud of our clear conscience. We have always lived honestly and sincerely, especially when we were with you. And we were guided by God’s wonderful kindness instead of by the wisdom of this world.” 2 Cor 1:12*

SUMMARY OF NT MORAL PRECEPTS

Key difference from OT is revelation of God’s love in Jesus; movement away from legalism of the law, towards following the example of a **person**– especially in unconditional love of others and forgiveness. Moral decision making is informed by a mature conscience, enlightened by the Holy Spirit and bible teaching. Love of neighbour emphasized as of equal importance of love of God, and its true expression. Love replaces the emphasis on justice in the OT.