

Everything

How the Bible is relevant today

Many people think that the Bible is irrelevant to life in the 21st century. Even Christians can be sceptical about how much attention they should pay to parts of it – especially the Old Testament. After all, what could a book that was written 3,000 years ago have to say to a world of transatlantic flights, financial crises, smartphones and social networking?

We tend to accept sections of the Bible that we feel we can apply to our personal lives and relationship with God, but we are less willing to engage with anything it says about public life and society – particularly where it seems to conflict with today's values.

If we accept the Bible as God's revealed word, it must apply to every area of life. How can we recover confidence in the truth and relevance of the full word of God, and start thinking biblically about everything?



Thinking Biblically About...

What's the problem?

The Bible can be confusing. Most Christians readily accept the teachings of the New Testament but will often have questions about the Old Testament – particularly some of the stranger laws in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible.

There is much there that appears harsh, judgmental or simply bizarre, like the commands to put Sabbath-breakers to death or not to wear clothes made from two different fabrics (Exodus 31:14; Leviticus 19:19). We generally ignore these, partly on the grounds that Jesus has superseded them. Yet, at the same time, there are many laws we *don't* regard as obsolete. Few Christians would argue that the Ten Commandments should be ignored, for example. We therefore tend to assume some laws still stand, but that others are no longer important. In between the most extreme examples, there is still plenty of room for uncertainty about which laws we should keep – and why.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus affirms the importance of the Old Testament. 'Do not think that I have

come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.' (Matthew 5:17) This is followed by a stern warning to continue to observe the Law. However, elsewhere in the New Testament, it is clear that not every law continues to be binding in its *original form*. The food laws are one obvious example (see Mark 7:14-23; Acts 10:9-16).

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In order to understand how we should continue to keep the Law, we have to understand what it was intended to achieve. Without that insight, we have only shifting cultural and personal standards to decide what is right and what is not.



Q: Which elements of biblical teaching do you struggle to apply to your life – and why?

How do you see the world?

We all tend to see the world in a particular way, depending on what our culture prioritises. The 'lens' through which we look at a situation fundamentally affects how we approach it, and the kind of decisions we make.

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For example, our lens might primarily be **financial** – that is, our goal is to maximise our material benefit. Another lens is the **environmental** one, often measured by energy consumption or levels of pollution. There are other lenses that guide our decision-making; an **individualistic**

lens prioritises the self and we do the things that give us the greatest short-term pleasure and fulfilment, without much regard for the impact on other people or the environment.

The relational lens

Whichever lens we use, the reality is that what we do always has effects on other people. Where we live, the career paths we choose, how we spend our time, where we shop – all of these have impacts on the networks of relationships of which we are a part, whether we acknowledge it or not.

This leads to a further, critically important lens: the **relational lens**. If we prioritise relationships, rather than treating them as a secondary concern at best, many of our decisions might look very different.

Buying a house: examples of financial, environmental and relational lenses

Financial

How expensive is it?
How much will it appreciate in value?

Environmental

How efficient is it to heat the house?
How far will I need to commute?

Relational

Is this a good base for family and friends to meet?
Is it well-placed to be a part of the local community?

What does the Bible say?



'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 neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'"

(Matthew 22:34-40)











In these verses, Jesus states that everything in the 'Law and the Prophets' (a phrase his listeners would have understood to mean the whole Bible at the time, our Old Testament) is about one or both of two things: loving God, and loving one another.

Rather than being primarily a narrow matter of religious observance, **love is fundamentally a quality of relationship.**

This is the underlying purpose of every law in the Old Testament: to promote and protect right relationships – whether that meant in the Israelites' family life, in business and employment, in their dealings with immigrants, in the way they structured their government, their attitudes to debt and property, or anything else.

For example, the laws around debt and interest were designed to ensure that 'There should be no poor people among you'. This was achieved by banning interest and cancelling debts every seven years, amongst other things (see Deuteronomy 15:1-11; 23:19-20). The type of relationship between borrower and lender determined the

What types of relationships does biblical law cover?

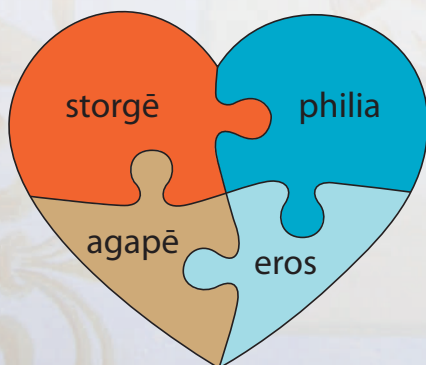
	MARRIAGE AND FAMILY	Exodus 20:14, 12
	PROPERTY OWNERSHIP	Leviticus 25:14-17
	WELFARE AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY	Leviticus 19:9-10
	EMPLOYMENT	Leviticus 19:13
	ECONOMY AND FINANCE	Deuteronomy 15:1-11; 23:19-20
	TRADING AND BUSINESS	Deuteronomy 25:14-15
	GOVERNMENT AND CITIZENSHIP	Deuteronomy 17:14-20
	INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS	Deuteronomy 23:3-4
	MIGRATION	Numbers 15:15-16
	WORSHIP AND RELIGIOUS LIFE	Deuteronomy 12

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outcomes for each. An exploitative relationship kept the borrower in poverty. A fair one gave the borrower the chance of economic independence, and the ability to support his or her family.

Frequently, a single law could cover many different areas of relationship – such as the Sabbath laws that affected

family life, worship, employment practices and business. These laws reflect what constitutes a just and right relationship according to God’s perspective.



What is love?

Jesus himself, mediator of the New Covenant and embodiment of God’s Love, gives us love as the principle by which to understand the Old Covenant, which he fulfils through his crucifixion and resurrection. Prioritising love for God and love for each other in every area of life – in other words, maintaining right relationships – is our proper response to this sacrifice.

Different Greek and Hebrew words are used for love in the Bible, meaning different things. C. S. Lewis described common Greek terms in his book, *The Four Loves*: *storgē* (affection or family love); *philia* (friendship); *eros* (romantic love); and *agapē* (charity or unconditional love). Of the four, only *eros* is not found in any form in the New Testament.

Hebrew, too, has different words for love. The term found in Leviticus 19:18, *ah^abâ*, is used in several different ways in the Old Testament – just like the English word ‘love’. It is used in Song of Songs, for example, to mean the love between a man and a woman; of love between friends in 1 Samuel 18:1-3; and of the love of a parent for a child in Genesis 22:2.

When we look through this lens and consider our lives from a perspective of love, we can see how the Bible is relevant to everything because it is primarily interested in maintaining right relationships across all areas of life – and relationships are relevant to everything. Righteousness, covenant, sin and redemption are all primarily relational terms.

For these reasons, 'love' is an enormously helpful principle to bear in mind when we are trying to understand the Bible's teaching. However, *ah^abâ* is still too broad a term for grasping the *nature* of the relationships that are required by God, in the same way that the English term 'love' could be misinterpreted, or understood too narrowly.









Covenant love

In nuancing this 'love', another Hebrew word, *hesed*, is useful. This is a more specific term than *ah^abâ*. Although it is often translated 'mercy' in English, it means something like 'loving kindness' or 'Covenant loyalty'. It is a key attribute of God's character and of the relationship between him and his creation. It encompasses many different qualities: grace, compassion,

faithfulness, love; as well as embodying or bringing about justice, righteousness and holiness. These are characteristics of the kind of relationships we are called to pursue.

This *hesed* – Covenant love or loving-kindness – is also a key theme in the New Testament, where it is typically translated by the Greek word *eleos*. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus mentions it as one of 'The weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness'. The repeated call by those suffering and in need of healing is, 'Son of David, **have mercy on us!**' As James 2:13 states, 'Mercy triumphs over judgement'. The idea of loving-kindness reflects the relationship that God has with his people and that should be mirrored in our dealings with each other.

How do we typically understand 'love'?

In the Bible	Today
 Considered relevant to whole of society	 Private matter between individuals
 Other-person centred	 Individual focus first – <i>my</i> feelings
 Long-term, unconditional	 May be short-term and conditional
 Applies to all kinds of relationships	 Often a romantic emphasis

Q: How does love look in different relationships – family, marriage, professional, social or political?

Where do we go from here?

Many of us apply the Bible's teachings to only a narrow range of areas in our lives. The problem is not that we wilfully disregard the Bible the rest of the time. It is that we simply don't see how it is relevant. But if we believe the Bible is the word of God, it must influence everything we think and do.

Jesus summarised the heart of the Old Testament as 'Love God and love your neighbour'. He provides a commentary on the Law by indicating the deeper purpose of its commandments. Love summarises the Law, but the individual rules gave the detail of what this should look like in specific circumstances and relationships at that time.

"If we believe the Bible is the word of God, it must influence everything we think and do."

It is less interested in the outcome for ourselves than for the relationship between the two parties, and any others implicated.

Our culture places a strong emphasis on romantic love and personal fulfilment. But God's relationship with us is characterised by *hesed*: faithful, Covenant love or loving-kindness, which is far more outward-looking, longer-term and focused on others.

When we seek to interpret the Bible for our own times, whatever the specific area of application, this underlying principle of right relationships is key. In each case, we need to ask, What was that law trying to achieve, and how? This can inform decisions we make in our own lives, as well as thinking biblically about the big issues that face our culture. For example:

- Is a house an asset of ever-increasing value, or somewhere to raise a family and build community?
- Does our financial system work to strengthen our families and communities, or does it further enrich the wealthy at the expense of those who are already poor?
- Do we pursue a job or profession solely for its material benefits, or for the opportunities it gives us to establish relationships and put down long-term roots?

The Bible, then, is primarily interested in **right relationships with God and with each other**. This means we have to take into account what a given law was trying to achieve – not just for those most directly involved but for society as a whole. This is the key to unlocking and applying biblical wisdom to public life today – and often in our personal discipleship, too.

Q: How does the biblical vision for right relationships inspire you to apply your faith to different areas of life?

Why is the **Bible** still relevant **today?**



- We often see the Bible as irrelevant to many aspects of modern life
- Jesus summarises the Hebrew Bible in terms of love for God and love for neighbour: the Old Testament's laws aimed to maintain right relationships in every area of life
- This emphasis on right relationship gives us a way to understand and apply the Bible in our own circumstances and culture

Thinking Biblically About... is a series of 2,000-word guides that unpack modern-day issues from a biblical perspective. The **TBA** series aims to give Christians a firm foundation for engaging with some of the most difficult questions of our times: money and debt, sex and marriage, how we spend our time, how we treat the environment and what the role of government is.

You can also read our **Long Distance Christian** series, a collection of 10,000-word booklets looking at key issues in more depth.

The Jubilee Centre is a Christian social reform charity based in Cambridge, UK. We are convinced that the Bible's teaching applies to every area of modern life and has enduring relevance for Britain and the world in the 21st century. At the heart of this social vision is a concern for right relationships, expressed by Jesus in his summary of the Old Testament, *'Love the Lord with all your heart... and love your neighbour as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-40)

Find out more at www.jubilee-centre.org/everything