

John Piper Answers: Does the Bible Say to Kill Homosexuals?

Podcast listener Luke writes in: "Dear Pastor John, I want to first thank you for the Ask Pastor John podcast and for your obedience and love for the Lord. One thing I have always struggled to communicate is the difference between the Old Testament Law and the fulfilled Law after Christ. I have many atheist friends who press me here, specifically when it comes to homosexuality. Why do we as Christians not believe practicing homosexuals should be killed for their sin if that is exactly the prescription in our Bibles in Leviticus 20:13? How would you answer this objection?"

This is huge and absolutely crucial. And we need an answer for it to those who ask. It is such a common response for somebody that has a smattering of knowledge or has just read that there are these verses in the Bible like that. And it is not difficult to answer this problem. It just takes a little willingness on the part of people to listen for a few minutes as we describe the nature of the Christian Bible.

So you have to ask for a few minutes. It might be helpful to start with an analogy. I think, right off the bat, this might be helpful. You might say to the person who is asking that question: Suppose a book is written for the military and in Chapter 1 it deals with how soldiers should relate to each other during basic training stateside. Chapter 2 deals with how soldiers should relate to each other and to their captured enemies on the battlefield. Chapter 3 deals with how soldiers should relate to each other and to their captors if any of them is taken captive and imprisoned. And the fourth chapter deals with how they should relate to each other and to the enemy if they are infiltrated behind enemy lines. Would anyone

accuse a soldier of disobedience if while he is captured as a prisoner of war he obeys the instructions in Chapter 3 rather than the instructions in Chapter 1? No. Nobody would. That is the way the book intends to be used.

Now that is the kind of book the Bible is. It was written under God's inspiration over a period of 1,500 years or so through various periods when God dealt with His people in different ways. Not everything that the Bible designed for God's people Israel under the judges or under the kings or that God designs for Christians under the apostles in the New Testament is the same. Putting to death adulterers, putting to death homosexuals, putting to death the sons who curse their parents, all these penalties belonged to a particular season in the history of God's dealings with His covenant people, and those dealings have changed dramatically with the coming of God's Son Jesus Christ into the world. That is the basic nature of the Bible and of redemptive history that we need to get across to our critics.

Then if they are willing to take a few more minutes with us to examine the Bible, we can point them to the very places in the Bible where this becomes plain. So maybe it would be helpful if I just gave a few of those and this would be a guideline for what texts you could use if you sat down with your atheist friend who said: No, I think you Christians are inconsistent because you are not putting homosexuals to death, because it says right here in Leviticus that that is what you are supposed to do.

So here are a few. We see the first pointer of how things have changed dramatically in Matthew 5:17, where Jesus says, "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." So all the Old Testament finds its completion and fulfillment in Jesus—and that is a basic truth that a person needs to understand. Everything in the Old Testament was pointing toward Jesus as the Son of God incarnate, dying and rising to

save His people. And, therefore, in His person, in His ministry, the whole Old Testament reaches a climax and is dramatically altered.

Second pointer: The Bible spells out many of the specifics of this dramatic alteration. For example, the book of Hebrews is probably the classic place for showing how the Old Covenant has become obsolete with the coming of the New Covenant. Hebrews 8:13 says, "In speaking of a New Covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." And, for example, the death of Jesus is the once-for-all sacrifice for sins so that the entire Old Testament sacrificial system of offering animals comes to an end.

Hebrews 7:27 and 9:12 say Jesus is the final Lamb of God. The whole Old Testament sacrificial system is over. It doesn't apply anymore. Another example from Hebrews is that Jesus Himself offers the sacrifice of Himself and therefore Jesus is the final Priest. And you don't need any more priests. And so the entire Old Testament priesthood is removed. It is over. We have one, new, final, eternal High Priest, Jesus Christ.

A third example is that Jesus saw Himself as the new temple. "If you destroy this temple, I will build it in three days" (John 2:19). And He meant, "I will rise from the dead in three days." So when the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, the place of worship for Christians was not destroyed, because we don't have a place for worship that is limited geographically. We have Jesus. And any place Jesus is, we can worship.

So all of those specifics are how the Old Covenant was becoming obsolete. And dramatic changes came about and hundreds of commands in the Old Testament don't apply to Christians anymore, because this new phase of redemptive history has come.

A third pointer to this dramatic alteration between the Old

and New Testament is that the Christian life is put on a completely new footing from the law. Romans 7:6, "Now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code."

A fourth pointer is that Jesus said about the people of Israel in Matthew 21:43, "I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you"—political, ethnic Israel—"and given to a people producing its fruits," that is the Christian church. And what that marks is a dramatic change from the old theocratic, ethnic orientation on one people group, namely Israel, to a new kind of people who are not a political entity. They are not an ethnic entity ruled by a political or governmental leader, but they are a people scattered like exiles away from heaven, their homeland, on the Earth, mingling among all the ethnic groups of the world with a king in heaven not on earth, so that Jesus says to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But My kingdom is not from the world" (John 18:36). And so the church doesn't function any longer like Israel did as a national or political governmental agency and, therefore, does not coerce its beliefs with the sword.

A fifth pointer is the way that Christians are freed from the old theocratic, ethnic orientation that needed all kinds of cultural distinctives, which the Jews had in order to set it apart from the nations. For example, in Mark 7:19 Jesus declared all foods clean. So the entire dietary law system of the Old Testament is wiped away because we don't need to distinguish ourselves from all the nations of the world. We are part of the nations of the world. We eat whatever we are offered, because we are on an evangelistic mission to win people from all the peoples of the world among whom we are a part. Another example would be circumcision. Circumcision was

the defining trait of Israel among the nations. And in Galatians 5:6, we are told it does no longer count for Christians. It is not required for Christians anymore.

And a sixth pointer to this dramatic alteration between Old and New Testament is Matthew 5:38–39, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

Or another example of changing moral expectations is where Jesus talks about divorce. Matthew 19:7–8 says this: They ask Him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and send her away if you say we shouldn’t divorce?” And here is what He answers. He said, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” In other words, even though Moses made this provision, I don’t anymore. So you can see change is coming to the world with Jesus in the moral expectations upon the people of God.

Now, finally, directly to the point about homosexuals being executed in the Old Testament is that the New Testament, when it is presented with an executable offense, dealt with it differently. For example, 1 Corinthians 5, the early church was confronted with a man who was having sex with his stepmother evidently. It might have been his mother-in-law or it was an intrafamily horrendous sexual sin that even the nations around the church thought was evil. It goes like this: “It is actually reported that there is a sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among the pagans, for a man has his father’s wife” (1 Cor. 5:1). When Paul dealt with that—which was in the Old Testament an offense so egregious it would have been dealt with by stoning, killing, execution—Paul did not, of course, prescribe stoning or execution. He prescribed church discipline. And that is a clear example of how dramatic the changes have become between Chapter 1 in the military book and Chapter 4 in the military

book.

So our overall aim in dealing with our critics who don't know their Bibles is to direct them to Jesus, who is the goal of everything in the Bible and to try to help them see that God has been moving through history in different ways at different times to bring us into a relationship with Jesus for the salvation of our souls.