

## SABBATH THOUGHT 2023-01-28—SPIRITUAL LAWS & PHYSICAL CUSTOMS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

Corinth is a town on the isthmus of mainland Greece. Paul spent a fair amount of time there; however, the Corinthians were a particular challenge because of their many gods, sexual immorality, and other evil practices. As a result, the Corinthians struggled with several issues. One particular problem Paul addressed was circumcision:

1 CORINTHIANS 7:18-20 Was anyone called being circumcised? Do not let him be uncircumcised. Was anyone called in uncircumcision? Do not let him be circumcised. 19 For **circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing**; rather, the keeping of God's commandments *is essential*. 20 **Let each one abide in the calling** in which he was called.

The matter of circumcision was originally debated by the apostles at a meeting in Jerusalem. It began, as many disputes did, with a pharisaical approach to law. The Jewish brethren claimed that it "... **is obligatory to circumcise [the Gentiles]**, and to **command them to keep the law of Moses**." (Acts 15:5). At issue was the physical keeping of this statute under the Old Covenant.

The whole matter of physical circumcision brings up a question: by what authority did the apostles eliminate the statute of physical circumcision? None—they had NO authority to eliminate anything from the Law. So, did the apostles sin by telling the Gentiles that physical circumcision was no longer required? No. They recognized that God's salvation had come upon the Gentiles and that the Old Covenant was "a [*physical*] yoke upon the necks of the disciples [*Gentiles*], which neither our fathers nor we [*Jews*] were able to bear" (Acts 15:10). The Gentiles were legitimately part of the New Covenant just like the believing Jews. The fact is that the apostles did *not* change the Law because circumcision is still required in the New Covenant; however, it is now a spiritual fulfillment: "**he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart**, ..." (Rom. 2:29).

Some points of the Law have *changed*, such as circumcision, but *nothing* has been eliminated. Other statutes that changed from the physical to the spiritual include wearing tassels<sup>1</sup> (tzitzits), putting phylacteries<sup>2</sup> (tefillin) on their foreheads or hands, and writing the commandments on their doorposts. What was the purpose of these? Notice:

DEUTERONOMY 6:5-6 And thou shalt **love the LORD thy God** with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. 6 And **these words**, which I command thee this day, **shall be in thine heart**. ... 8 And **thou shalt bind them for a sign** upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. 9 And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

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<sup>1</sup> Num. 15:38-40; Deut. 22:12.

<sup>2</sup> Deut. 6:4-9.

Tassels and phylacteries were meant to remind the people to keep God’s Law in the same way that physical circumcision was supposed to remind them of their covenant promise to obey God. However, the Bible is clear that physical reminders could not change the hearts and minds of the people. No one can have a spiritual relationship with God on a physical level.

That all changed when God gave His Holy Spirit. Only by moving beyond the physical to the spiritual can anyone love and obey God. Ezekiel wrote about this very problem: “**A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.**” (Ezek. 36:26). Physical circumcision, wearing tassels and phylacteries, and doorposts cannot bring people to a relationship with God because “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). That is why those things are no longer physically required.

It is vitally important to realize that none of the changes to the Law were done by the apostles themselves—all changes were from God. How do we know that? God showed the apostles that the uncircumcised Gentiles also received the Holy Spirit. Peter himself witnessed this<sup>3</sup>. Both Peter and Paul recognized that it was the Holy Spirit that determined who was in a covenant relationship with God, not physical acts<sup>4</sup>.

But does that mean that all things are now spiritual? What about unclean foods? Do those statutes still apply? Yes, because physical food has no spiritual proxy—we cannot eliminate physical food. Only things that pertain to our *spiritual relationship* with God under the New Covenant have changed. Those who desire to be in covenant with God according to the physical Old Covenant must do all those things commanded in it—circumcision, wearing tassels and phylacteries, etc. However, those under the New Covenant are not obligated to perform certain physical acts that were meant *TO ESTABLISH GOD’S LAW IN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS*. That is now the result of having the Holy Spirit. But what about matters that pertain to physical appearance? The Bible does not eliminate them even under the New Covenant:

1 TIMOTHY 2:9-10 In like manner also, *let* the women adorn themselves with clothing that shows **modesty and discretion**, not with *elaborate* braidings of the *hair*, or *with* gold, or pearls, or expensive apparel; 10 But *with that* which is fitting for women who profess *to have* reverence for God—with good works.

There has been much discussion over the years about clothes, hair, head coverings, makeup, tattoos, jewelry, etc. How should we approach matters of physical appearance? Generally speaking, these pertain to discretion and modesty; things that are influenced by the *customs* of society. For God’s people, they are also based upon God’s Law, which

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 10; 15:7-11.

<sup>4</sup> Rom. 2:29.

includes statutes against certain hair styles, beard trimmings, cutting the flesh, wearing clothes specifically meant for a man or woman, etc.<sup>5</sup>, that were pagan practices or sexual immorality. God gave a severe warning against such things:

DEUTERONOMY 18:9 When thou art come into the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, **thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations.**

While this verse addressed specific topics listed in the next few verses (vv. 10-14), it pertained to all manner of evil pagan practices. God said numerous times, “I *am* the LORD your God Who brought you out of the land of **Egypt**.” (Lev. 19:36). God brought them out of Egypt because of the influence of pagan idolatry and sexual immorality.

To understand the ordinances pertaining to physical appearance requires a careful reading of Scripture. For example, Paul addressed the matter of marriage to an unconverted spouse and virgins in 1 Corinthians 7. In doing so, he was cautious in his wording to distinguish those things that were his own opinion as opposed to a commandment from God. He said it was *his* judgment four times in 1 Cor. 7:6, 10, 12, and 25-26, not God’s. In verse 9 he makes it clear it was God’s judgment. The lesson here is that we must be careful not to infer a commandment when none was given (even though Paul’s judgment was wise and prudent).

From this we know that Paul was concerned for both obedience to God’s Law as well as maintaining discretion and modesty. (Discretion is being mindful of the sensibilities of others whereas modesty is doing things that do not stand out or are an expression of rebellion.) Paul said he sought to “please everyone in all things, **not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, in order that they may be saved.**” (1 Cor. 10:33)<sup>6</sup>. Did he do this to the extent that he violated the commandments of God? Certainly not! But he did take into account the local customs. For example, when he talked about women’s hair in 1 Corinthians chapter 11, he gave his judgment based upon what was by *nature*:

1 CORINTHIANS 11:14-15 Or does not even **nature itself** teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a shame to him? 15 But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; because the long hair has been given to her instead of a *veil to cover her head*.

What is *nature*? It is the natural order of things; in simple terms, that which is usual, customary, and decent. It was the custom for men ancient times to wear robes but, today, most men wear pants. It is also acceptable for men in Scotland to wear kilts. Someone in the USA wearing a robe or sporting a kilt today would be outside societal norms—it would not be usual, customary, or maybe even decent. In Paul’s day, it appears that men typically did not have long hair and women did not shave their heads. Does that apply

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<sup>5</sup> Lev. 19:19-37; 21:5; Deut. 14:1; 22:5.

<sup>6</sup> Also 1 Cor. 9:20-22.

today? It depends. Read carefully what Paul said in 1 Cor. 11:6: “But **if** *it be* shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered.” Notice the word *if*. Paul said IF it is shameful, then women should not cut their hair to the length of stubble (the result of shearing) or shave their heads bald. What would make those a *shame*? When such conduct or appearance violates the acceptable customs of society. It is important to understand that shame is not sin! It is the result of disregard for the standards of what is usual, customary, and decent in the eyes of society and God. It is **not** something determined by the opinion of one (or even a few) people—it is determined by standards of appropriate behavior. God’s people should have discretion and modesty in all things from the perspective of both the societal norms *and* God. Let me be clear, however, that any physical appearance that is a reflection of pagan idolatry or sexual immorality could certainly be a sin.

Over time, acceptable physical appearance has changed. Among the Body of Christ, it seems to be a recurring controversy. For those reasons, I think it is helpful to point out a couple verses. First of all, Paul told the Corinthians to judge these matters themselves: “**You judge for yourselves.** Is it becoming for a woman to pray to God uncovered?” (1 Cor. 11:13). Then there was his final conclusion: “But **if anyone is contentious over this issue, we have no such custom, neither do the churches of God.**” (1 Cor. 11:16). Above all things, we are not to elevate these matters to contentious strife.

There are diverse opinions within the Body of Christ about hair styles, clothes, makeup, jewelry, and many other such things, but are they worth causing hurt, divisions, and offenses? On the other hand, everyone should evaluate themselves to ensure we do things with discretion and modesty from the perspective of others and God. After all, we are to judge ourselves and not others. Finally, ask yourself: Which is more important—hairstyles or the Kingdom of God?

God’s children are those with His Holy Spirit within their hearts and minds. The reason we have it is so that God’s Law is written inside us. That also means that each of us is personally responsible for keeping it—*all* of it. Some physical statutes have been replaced by a spiritual keeping. Others are left to us to figure out according to the thoughts and intents of our hearts<sup>7</sup> that should be aligned with desiring to fully keep God’s Law and edify one another in agape love<sup>8</sup>. There is no other way to eternal life!

May God’s grace and peace be upon you!

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<sup>7</sup> Heb. 4:12.

<sup>8</sup> Eph. 4:16.