

## There is No Bible Trivia

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“And the Lord spoke to Moses saying...

“You shall keep My statutes. You shall not let your livestock breed with another kind. You shall not sow your field with mixed seed. Nor shall a garment of mixed linen and wool come upon you.

“You shall not shave around the sides of your head, nor shall you disfigure the edges of your beard. You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor tattoo any marks on you: I am the Lord.” (Leviticus 19:1, 19, 27-28).

There are many laws and statutes in the Old Testament – and some teachings in the Gospels as well – that seem so oddly irrelevant to our lives today that they make some people wonder about the value of the entire Bible. In fact, critics are often inclined to seize on them to condemn the Bible and ridicule believers. What’s more, even among those who say they believe in the Bible there are some who declare that what they read there just isn’t true, that we know things today that nobody knew thousands of years ago and that trying to hold to these old ideas is, well, silly.

An example of this is the verse about tattoos. What difference does it make to your spiritual life if you get a tattoo? Another is the teaching, reiterated in the Epistles, that intimate homosexual relations are strictly forbidden. While the Heavenly Doctrine supports and explains this law, cynics point to the statutes about not having mixed linen and wool clothing, and not trimming one’s beard, saying that because it’s all part of the same outdated, irrelevant list of prohibitions there is no reason to adhere to those old teachings about sex.

It’s a real challenge – especially because a lot of these laws occur in the same context as other very important moral and spiritual laws, like not stealing and not telling lies. So seeing truly how to understand or interpret the “odd” ones can be quite significant, not to mention valuable for instruction in the spiritual things they represent. This doesn’t mean there’s no *value* in the original laws as such. For example the strictures against eating pork had the major benefit of avoiding trichinosis, a very common disease in Bible times, and circumcision, while it has a very clear metaphorical and spiritual meaning, also had the benefit of preventing genital disease in an environment where personal hygiene was often problematic.

### Correspondences

Essentially these things are all explained by the principle of correspondences, that is, the manifestation of spiritual goods and truths in natural forms or effects, such that the natural represents the spiritual, even though the natural may not be either practical or important *per se* in today’s environment. For example, linen in the Word represents truth, specifically truth that looks to and prepares a person for the good of life. But wool represents good, and specifically the good of life that looks to truth for support. At any given time we are inspired by one of these principles or the other (either the truth is leading us to good, or goodwill is leading us to seek the truth), but we can’t really do both at once. In fact one is what we call a spiritual state and the other a celestial state, and these two states are distinct and separate, even to the point of having separate kingdoms in the heavens.

Another curious teaching in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, practiced throughout the Old Testament, was that of anointing people and things with oil, specifically olive oil, often mixed with rare and expensive spices. For instance, all the furnishings of the Tabernacle were anointed with oil, stone pillars as monuments were often anointed, and of course priests and kings and people's wounds and even dead bodies were anointed. Why? Well, apart from any natural benefits the oil may have imparted (and we know pure vegetable oil contains important healing vitamins), we're taught in the Heavenly Doctrine that natural oil corresponds to the spiritual oil that is the good of love: - good that heals and soothes and reduces friction in human relationships just as oil does in the working parts of natural life. Still, anointing a stone pillar? Yes – because that would correspond to the application of good to the expression of some truth.

But there's more – a lot more! In Exodus 23:19 we read, “The first of the firstfruits of your land you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God,” and then *in the same verse*, as if it related to these offerings, “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk.” Huh?

Well, in fact the two statements ARE related – but only in their spiritual sense. It is all explained in the *Arcana Caelestia* no's 9300-9301, where the first of the firstfruits is the acknowledgment that everything good and true in our lives comes from the Lord. This is something we can't really do until we begin to grow and mature spiritually; before this we are inclined to think that the good we do and the truth we know are somehow our own.

But what about the young goat and its mother's milk? This requires some deeper thought.

First of all, mother's milk is a liquid, and so represents something to do with truth – in this case the truths inspired by good because of the fat that is in it, animal fat representing what is good (AC 2184). A mother also represents the affection for truth, so again, mother's milk is the truth we learn, or know, or share, from an affection, looking to support what is good. This milk, or truth, nourishes the first innocent states of our spiritual life (the innocence of ignorance) by providing the knowledge we need to do what is good: knowledge that there is a God and that He is one; that His Word teaches us how to live, that we ought to do as He teaches, and so on.

But once we start to *do* that good we move into a different state, that is, a state of *good informed* by the truth. This is the young goat, or kid, its youth representing innocence and distinguishing it from “an old goat” which stands for the annoying characteristics of faith without the tender qualities of goodness or charity.

Finally, to boil food in preparation for eating is to prepare for its reception by means of truth. (This is distinguished from cooking by fire, which is to prepare it by means of love.) So the point of this verse in the spiritual sense is that once we have begun to live a good life according to our faith we must not go back and dwell only on the truths that got us started. Having attained a more advanced state of *living* according to the truth we must not revert to the previous state of learning without living, thinking that is all we need to receive or appropriate the good of faith.

Bringing the two teachings together, then, we can see that a real acknowledgment of the Lord, represented by the first of the firstfruits being offered to Him, involves a process of learning the truths of His Word and then living according to them, *doing what is good*; and that once we get to that state – that way of living – we must not turn back to merely acquiring knowledge.

In short, the good of faith, we read, or “innocence that dwells in wisdom, consists in a person’s knowing, acknowledging and believing that he can understand nothing and will nothing from himself, and consequently in his not wishing to understand and will anything from himself, but only from the Lord” (AC 9301:2). This is the state represented by the young goat.

### Details, Details

Teachings like these illustrate the significance of what otherwise would seem to be utterly insignificant, irrelevant laws and statutes in the Old Testament. But even when we know the spiritual sense of these things we may not fully appreciate their value in our lives. What does it really matter, we might say, if we turn back from doing good to learning truth? Obviously we go through alternations of state throughout our lives, learning preparing us for doing, and doing inspiring us to learn even more. But the point is we can’t be in both states at once, and we can’t be conjoined with the Lord by mere learning. That said, the second phase of learning is specifically dedicated to the good that we have come to love and so is represented by a completely different kind of truth than that suggested by mother’s milk: for example, wine.

Besides, even if we don’t entirely “get” the importance of a particular principle in our lives it is critical to know and acknowledge that it IS important *and holy* because it is in the Lord’s Word. Long lists of genealogies or tribal head counts in the book of Numbers also illustrate this. Reading all these names and numbers can be tedious at best, not only because there’s no obvious story line but also because the names are often hard to pronounce. And yet the truth is that if we knew the stories of the whole Word really well we *would* recognize a story line at least in the genealogies, and in any case, understanding that every name carries a spiritual significance, and that the people named all represent specific qualities that manifest in our own lives can deepen our respect for the Word. In addition, it’s pretty cool to be aware of the fact that whole societies of angels associate themselves with details like this in the Word because *they* get the spiritual significance of them even if we don’t.

So let’s go back for a moment to not shaving the sides of your head or disfiguring the edges of your beard – or making any cuts in your flesh for the dead, or getting any tattoos. Probably the first thing we need to know is that the details of these statutes are not exactly right in most of the translations we use. Shaving, for example, is not actually mentioned; the idea is not to “round” the “corners” of your head. So really, what does that MEAN? Tattoos aren’t mentioned either, but rather printing or “making any marks” on yourself. Although the translations we have make sense, the correspondences are based on the actual words used, so in order to get the meaning we have to be careful. (And by the way, this is *often* the case with obscure or strange sounding teachings in the Word: if it doesn’t seem to make sense you may be looking at a translation problem, in which case a variety of translations can be very helpful.)

To round something in the spiritual sense is to focus on the good, whereas corners or angular shapes represent the strength drawn from truth. And the head of anything is the highest or inmost principle. Now you might think rounding the corners of your understanding, for example, would be a good thing, as in the common expressions about “smoothing” or “knocking off” a person’s “rough edges.” But in the context we are talking about a list of laws and statutes that are not to be compromised, meaning we need to be clear and firm about the truth internally, and stick to it. As for disfiguring the edges of one’s beard, remember that hair corresponds to the most external aspects of our spiritual lives, and so not to mess with one’s beard, the hair of one’s

face, means that we need to behave well, to keep our external lives – our thoughts, speech and actions – in order. (And by the way, one nice thing about this spiritual meaning is that it doesn't just apply to men, but to both men and women.)

Finally, for now, the tattoo, or mark impressed on a person, particularly in the context of cutting one's flesh for the dead, pretty clearly represents some sort of marring or disfigurement, or what the Catholics used to call mortification of the flesh, as if this would be pleasing to God or have some useful purpose in worship. In fact it's just the sort of thing the prophets of Baal did in their contest with Elijah at Mt. Carmel, and it's not good. Cutting in this case has to do with the truth of faith, and flesh with the good of love, but to cut and damage one's flesh (the actual root meaning of the word, sarcasm) is to do harm to the good of life by perverting the truths of faith, and to suffer from a hurtful application of those truths. In the same context, to stigmatize, or put a mark in one's flesh is to believe that we can be saved by our own ideas of what is good when what we really need to do is to acknowledge the Lord and recognize how HE inspires and provides for us. So the lessons of the whole verse, like the one just above it, are about maintaining order in our natural lives from the spiritual principles the Lord teaches us in His Word.

### In Conclusion

Again, it's not really about mixing wool and linen garments, or anointing anything with olive oil; it's not really about boiling a young goat in its mother's milk. (Who among us has a goat today, anyway?) It's not really about a person's head, or beard, or cuts or other markings on the flesh of our bodies. It's all about the truth of faith and the good of love, and how they work together and what we need to do to avoid the falsities and evils of our own imagination leading us to worship ourselves and the world rather than the Lord in His Word. After all, the whole sequence of teachings in the Exodus passage about boiling the young goat, and the whole context of the prohibitions in Leviticus 19 is about honoring the Lord, either in worship or in the uses of daily life, and every one of these verses has a special application to the practice of spiritual principles as we endeavor to cooperate with Him.

Do we have to know the details of every one? No, of course not: the two great commandments cover everything! But is it important to *recognize* that there is profound love and wisdom in each of these details? *Yes!* Even if in our reading it is all we can do to marvel at the strangeness of it all and reflect on how incredibly deep and powerful the Word is, whether we understand it or not, it will be sufficient to connect us with the Lord and with the angels of heaven *who do understand it*, and whose influence upon us is strengthened through it.

So let's be careful not to simply brush all these things off, or imagine that we can pick and choose from the Word, cafeteria-style, according to what makes sense to us at any given stage of our social and intellectual development. To do that would be to make ourselves Gods, loving ourselves and our own intelligence more than the Lord – *which is exactly what He is urging us not to do*. Rather let's renew our faith *in* the Word – the whole Word – and remember that it is given for no other purpose than to teach and inspire our spiritual lives.

Amen.

Lessons:     *Exodus 23:14-19, Leviticus 19:15-19 & 27-28*  
                   *John 5:31-47, and Doctrine of the Word #1-2 & 4*