

2 August 2020

What Do We Do with the Law?
Psalm 119:97-104; selections from Torah

The story that we heard last week, bringing the Israelites through the desert to the edge of the Promised Land, covered three whole biblical books: Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The reason we could cover so much ground in one sermon is because those books have very little story in them. Most of them are collections of laws. Now probably none of us minded skipping over the law codes, but not everyone feels that way about the law. Our scripture today is Psalm 119:97-104:

⁹⁷ *Oh, how I love your law!*
It is my meditation all day long.
⁹⁸ *Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,*
for it is always with me.
⁹⁹ *I have more understanding than all my teachers,*
for your decrees are my meditation.
¹⁰⁰ *I understand more than the aged,*
for I keep your precepts.
¹⁰¹ *I hold back my feet from every evil way,*
in order to keep your word.
¹⁰² *I do not turn away from your ordinances,*
for you have taught me.
¹⁰³ *How sweet are your words to my taste,*
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
¹⁰⁴ *Through your precepts I get understanding;*
therefore I hate every false way.

The psalmist here speaks from a deep sense of the justice and goodness and holiness of the Law of Moses. So let's look at it. Here's one. Deuteronomy 25, verses 11-12: *If men get into a fight with one another, and the wife of one intervenes to rescue her husband from the grip of his opponent by reaching out and seizing his genitals, you shall cut off her hand; show no pity.* Really? Let's take that apart to point out all the different ways we find that law abhorrent. First, it's cruel. This is Taliban-level cruelty – cutting off a woman's hand for not being careful where she put it when trying to break up a fight. Second, it's sexist. The Torah contains no comparable punishment for men who grope women. And third, among all the possible laws that can be imagined, why does *this* one make the cut and get into scripture? Who decided that? Was this a major problem in ancient Israel? When Ancient Near Eastern politicians ran as “law and order” candidates, was this the sort of crime wave they warned about?

Today I'm setting out to explain why the psalmist and I both love the Old Testament law, but I'm not going to pretend it's easy. To get to the point of loving the law, you have to wade through an awful lot of – I'll just say it – rubbish. Some parts are useless; other parts are actually harmful. First, some examples of useless. Most of the second half of the book of Exodus consists of God's instructions for making the Tabernacle: what sort of fabric, in what colors and what

size pieces, hung over tent poles of what length, fastened in what way, containing what articles of furniture, and the dimensions of each of those articles. It's mind-numbingly dull to read, and there's no payoff. Our faith is not made stronger by knowing the measurements of a sanctuary that hasn't been used in 3000 years. It's no longer of the slightest use to us, and it's half a book.

A lot of the pointless stuff consists of rules that refer to social and religious customs that no longer exist. The clearest example of this is worship by animal sacrifice. Much of the book of Leviticus consists of sacrifice instructions for the priests. What animals are to be slaughtered on which holy days, who is to perform the sacrifice, and what they are supposed to do with the blood, the fat, the hides, and the innards. At one time this was important. Sacrifice was how everyone worshiped their gods in the Ancient Near East, and the Israelites simply adopted the practice from their neighbors. It wouldn't have occurred to them not to. But that doesn't mean it matters to us. We don't sacrifice animals as part of our worship, and we don't plan to. Yes, those instructions are in "God's law," but we all agree that they reflect an ancient culture, not of the mind of God.

Some parts of the Mosaic law reflect their time even more directly: some of these laws – supposedly handed down by God on Mt. Sinai – are direct copies of earlier Ancient Near Eastern law codes. For instance, many of the Old Testament laws are lifted directly from the Code of Hammurabi (a Babylonian king who lived centuries before Moses). The law that says "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was Babylonian half a millennium it was biblical. In fact, a lot of the biblical laws that make us cringe actually come from those other law codes. Among these are the laws with the harshest punishments: like cutting off hands, gouging out eyes, or executing children who sass their parents. (Yes, that's in the Bible.) Other borrowed laws are the ones that affirm and regulate slavery; still others are the ones that devalue women. For instance, in the Bible and the other law codes, we read that the punishment for a man who rapes a young woman is that he has to pay a fine to her father (who is, apparently, the injured party) and then has to marry the girl. (Oh, that solves everything, right? Who could object to that?)

I want to mention one more difficulty that we have today with the biblical laws. Most of the law codes were compiled by priests – that's why we have so many chapters devoted to Tabernacle measurements and sacrifice procedures – so the laws reflect a priestly mindset. What is a priestly mindset? It's a focus on purity, holiness, and avoiding contamination. The Levitical priests were sort of spiritual germophobes, with a dash of obsessive-compulsive disorder. To them, everything had to be in its correct place and to be kept separate from everything else. You know how some people mix their food together on their plate, while others try to keep all the foods from touching? Well, the Levitical priests would have wanted everything on separate plates. This attitude appears in a lot of the laws. For instance, Israelites were not permitted to bake bread with two different kinds of grain. (Wheat and barley together? No, that's wrong!) Or to weave cloth with different fibers. (Cotton and linen in *one fabric*? You can't do that!) Everything had to be separate. This priestly mindset helps to understand the laws of kosher, too – which animals are "clean" and which are "unclean." It's an oversimplification, but basically, any animal that is *weird* is unclean. Like eels – they're fish, but they don't have scales. That's not right. Or ostriches, birds that don't fly. Or bats, they fly but don't have feathers. Or shellfish, which are like huge underwater bugs. They're all wrong! Basically anything that deviates from a precise and limited idea of "normal" is unclean. Given our modern understanding of biology, this

emphasis on fixed categories makes little sense. All our categories are in the process of changing. Hybrids happen naturally. (I wonder what the priests would make of the platypus.)

By the way, this fixation on maintaining “normal” helps to explain the priestly sexual laws, too. There, too, Leviticus has a limited range for “normal.” Homosexual relations are called an “abomination,” using the same word that Leviticus uses to describe eating shellfish. I don’t subscribe to the rigid ancient priestly worldview, so I don’t accept that. Some of the most committed, most dedicated, followers of Christ that I know eat lobster. And are gay.

And so, once again, we find whole sections of the Old Testament law that feel as if they’re from a different world, one that has no relationship to our own. Or in fact any discernible connection to Jesus Christ, who was not worried about social customs or religious sensibilities or what the priests called unclean. His ministry was all about breaking down barriers, not setting them up. So, again, we have to ask, what’s the point of the Old Testament laws? Why not just trash them and be done with it?

Before we take that drastic step, though, I want to raise two questions. First, given that we can trace many of the Old Testament laws to Ancient Near Eastern cultural sources, are there specific ways that the Old Testament changes those inherited sources? That would be significant. Second, is there anything in the Law that is unique, that stands out *against* its context? These should be the things that we pay attention to.

First, does the Torah change any of its borrowed sources? Yes. Maybe the best example is the whole animal sacrifice thing that we find so appalling today. The Mosaic law accepts sacrifice – the standard worship practice of the time – but only with new rules. First of all, animals only. No children. Ever. You see, the other Ancient Near Eastern religions that practiced sacrifice also had a place for human sacrifice. God said no. Second, in the Torah, there is no *quid pro quo* for a sacrifice. In all the surrounding nations, you sacrificed to the gods in order to buy their favor. Not in our Bible, though. The God of Abraham, Jacob, and Moses can’t be bought. The Hebrews were to bring sacrifices as expressions of thanksgiving. God let Israel worship according to contemporary practice, but within new limits and with a very different meaning. And while we don’t sacrifice animals today, that new meaning is still valid: our gifts to God are to be given in thanksgiving, not in expectation of a return.

And the second question? Is there anything in the Law of Moses that is unique? Yes, yes, and yes. All the other ancient law codes, at heart, were rules designed for protecting the property of property-owners. They are silent on protecting those who have nothing. But the Torah speaks on that issue, emphatically. In Exodus 22, as we read through a list of typical laws, we suddenly come upon a unique passage where God speaks in the first person. Here’s what God says: You shall not wrong or oppress a resident foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans (Ex. 22:21-24). What is so important that God breaks in and speaks to Israel personally, with such passion? “You will not take advantage of the poor or the defenseless; I’m on their side.” Here are some of the other biblical laws that are found in no other contemporary culture. You will not lend money at interest. When you plow your fields you will leave some of the grain behind for the poor. The same goes for your grape

vines and fig trees: if you have enough, you have enough to share with those who have nothing. Your laws shall be enforced equally, and yes that includes foreigners.

There are more, but I think you get the point. The books of the law are a wild mixture of borrowed Babylonian rules, priestly instruction manuals, useless measurements and census data, OCD fever-dreams about things that are icky, and . . . firm and unequivocal instructions by God to care for the weak, the marginalized, and the oppressed. It would appear that the God who introduced himself to Moses at the burning bush as the God who hears the cry of the oppressed is still the same God in the books of the law. Behind the borrowed cultural stuff, which 3000 years later is of little or no value, the Law of Moses sets out to encode mercy and compassion and fairness as the foundation of the community of God. This is why I join the psalmist and say:

Oh, how I love your law!

It is my meditation all day long. Amen.

Final word: Sometimes people puzzle about how the rigid legalistic God of the laws could possibly be the same God and Father of Jesus Christ. But if you follow the process I've presented today – stripping away the ancient cultural and cultic accretions – then what you end up with in the Law is a God who vehemently says, “I hear the cry of the oppressed, and I am on their side. When you construct a community, care for the poor and helpless needs to be your first concern.” If that's the God of the law, then there's not a hair's difference between God the Father and God the Son, and we can actually understand Jesus' saying, “I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.”