

E100 Block 5.1 The Law and the Land Old Testament Law -- Stoning and Shellfish?

Exodus 19:14 -- 20:17 (Romans 3:21 -- 31) Barrowby March 2011

INTRODUCTION

God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their descendants would be a great nation and God would give them a land and he would give them his laws, God's laws which would make them an example to the rest of the world of how people should live together in peace under God.

Israel ultimately did not fully fulfil its calling, nevertheless the Old Testament laws formed the basis of our Western civilisation -- our present democracies and freedoms.

We read of the 10 Commandments in our first reading, but there are, of course, many more detailed instructions in the chapters which follow. Our E100 readings miss them out, and we jump over the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy and straight into the book of Joshua -- the 6th book of the Bible. (Unless you really want to read all the fill in bits. ! -- a bit heavy going even in the new translation)

2. THE PUZZLE OF OLD TESTAMENT LAW

So, let's look at those other little laws this morning.

And to introduce them, I want to use a clip from the television series "The West Wing"

(A drama series which ran from 1999 to 2007 - set in the White House about a fictional American President and his staff -- insight into life in the White House. Brilliant series which one many awards. This president is a liberal Democrat. In this clip the White House is hosting a reception for radio station broadcasters across the country. The president lets his liberal veneer drop)

(Hope this clip is not too severe -- program is normally light-hearted)

Show clip - Episode 3, Time 31:55 TO 34:49.

(Pause) Those sentiments not confined to fiction. You hear and read those same accusations in this country from people like Stephen Fry, I have even heard or read them from some clergy -- who behave as if they have

discovered some deep problem with Christian teaching which no one had ever thought of in the last 2000 years.

So, is he right -- the President?

No doubt the President -- or the Hollywood scriptwriters who put the words into his mouth, would agree with keeping the 10 Commandments -- even if he makes fun of some of the other laws and instructions.

Now, first if you do read through this part of the Bible you will find that most of the laws are pretty sensible, and way in advance of anything that was around at the time with respect to human rights -- the rights of the widow and the orphan and the stranger and the poor.

Interesting criminal laws -- where the thief has to pay back four times what he stole as the penalty for theft. Restitution rather than vengeance.

3. THE PUZZLE EXPLAINED -- THE THREEFOLD DIVISION

Christian scholars -- who understand this section of the Bible would ultimately say the President was speaking totally out of ignorance.

There is a very good reason why nowadays Christians observe some of the Old Testament laws, but do not feel obliged to keep the others -- the ones he quoted.

Conveniently, It is all summed up -- albeit in old-fashioned language, in Article 7 of our own church -the Church of England's 39 Articles of belief.

OHP -- Article 7 - read

This article follows the classic division of Old Testament Law into three separate categories.

OHP -- 1. The Ceremonial Laws

There were many detailed & odd(!) rules for various celebration ceremonies.

Now while it is still good to celebrate & give thanks to God for his provision -- yet we do not need to celebrate harvest or Easter or Christmas, for example, in quite the same detailed way -- the ceremonial washings & clothes and preparation and slaughtering of animals etc.

Why not -- because the ceremonies and rights -- the whole ceremonial law has been fulfilled by Christ, that is why the temple worship came to an end within the lifetime of the Apostles.

OHP - Matthew 5:17 *"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."*

Jesus' sacrifice fulfilled all those Old Testament ceremonial and purity laws, once for all upon the cross.

OHP -- 2. The Civil Laws

example "if a man is found lying with a woman married to a husband, then both of them shall die -- the man that lay with the woman and the woman; so you shall put away the evil from Israel" Deuteronomy 22:22

I will return to that in a second because it also involves the third category and we will see the distinction --

OHP -- 3. The Moral Law

"you shall not commit adultery" (or CEV translation " be faithful to your family")

You see here we have a moral commandment with a civil law penalty -- do not commit adultery -- the civil law penalty of adultery is death. As was the civil law penalty for quite a few things in those times. But the civil law and their penalties do not apply to us.

That is because the civil law was given for the nation state of old Israel. But no nation today can claim the same status before God. These penalties passed away when the old nation of Israel passed away.

So by the time of Jesus -- Jesus can say to the woman who had committed adultery *"go and sin no more"*

In other words adultery was still a moral sin against God -- but there was no civil penalty of death.

And the same with the practice of homosexuality or ill treating your parents etc.

Summary -- so you see why the President was out of order -- he failed to distinguish between those Commandments which still apply -- the moral commandments -- and those Commandments which have passed away -- the ceremonial and the civil penalties.

So if people try to catch you out with those sort of misquotes -- you now know how to, courteously, reply.

4. NOT UNDER LAW

I cannot really quite leave this topic there. (So bear with me a moment longer)

The New Testament has something much more wonderful to say on this whole subject -- something which we read in that second reading -- which was from St Paul's letter to the young church in Rome. He reminds us of Jesus' teaching that in the end no matter how good we are keeping the commandments -- that is not the way for a person to get right with God.

God is pleased when we try to live good lives -- but unfortunately even the best of human lives contains a fair amount of sinfulness. So, St Paul says, God sent Jesus to do what the keeping of the law could not do. To cleanse us of our sins and to put us right with God the Father when we draw near to Jesus, God the Son. When we desire to love God and follow him and not merely follow his laws.

The New Testament calls all this, as you know, Grace. Instead of just laws and rules we have Grace and forgiveness given to us freely by God, and the promise of his Holy Spirit that can start to change us to be the people who will delight in keeping his commandments and living in peace and love with him and each other.

OHP *"The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came with Jesus Christ."* John 1:17