

Sermon on The Lawgiver God, February 12, 2023

Deuteronomy 5:1-22 Psalm 19:7-14 Mark 12:28-34

Someone new to the Bible, trying to read it through for the first time, often gets bogged down after Genesis. The Bible begins with God creating all that there is, including creating a people for himself. Last month, Les spoke about God the Creator, who has given us this good creation that we live in.

Then, after all the stories in Genesis, the first part of Exodus is pretty exciting. Using Moses, God rescues his people from slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea. God takes Israel into the desert, to form them into a people for himself. And then you get the Ten Commandments, which are familiar. But then there's all these other laws.

After a few chapters full of instructions and regulations, the first time reader thinks, "Well, God is all about laws, laws, laws. What kind of God is this?"

The Bible at this point does seem to be all about laws and commandments. From the middle of Exodus to the end of the Torah in Deuteronomy, we are given seemingly endless regulations, laws, and commandments, about every conceivable detail of making sacrifices, which part of the animal was given to the priest, clean and unclean foods, skin diseases, and so forth and so on.

Why? What we need is some context for these laws. What's God up to?

God was leading Israel to the land promised to Abraham in his covenant. Long before God takes them there, he teaches the people how to live once they get there. It took forty years!

A couple of weeks ago, Lynne gave us an overview of covenants. In these covenants, God is creating a holy people. His laws are not just to

make them miserable slaves again, but to make them distinct from all the other peoples of the earth.

You can hear God's purpose in a repeated saying, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people."

So, again, "Why are there so many laws in the Bible? Is God obsessed with rules? Is that what God is all about?" And a good part of the answer is that God is creating a people, a distinct family of tribes called Israel, who will represent the living God to the rest of the earth.

God the law giver is not obsessed with laws as such, but with creating something new on the earth, a holy people. Therefore, God gives Israel detailed instructions on every facet of life.

The law giving God gives the law both as gift and demand. 'Choose this day. Will you live the life I show you,' asks God, 'or will you insist on going your own way?'

God gives his people a choice, relationship or rebellion.

In today's reading from Deuteronomy, decades after the people left Egypt, Moses repeats the Ten Commandments. Why? Because Israel is finally about to move into the promised land.

The 40 years of the Exodus is like one long training camp before the team plays a single regulation game. That's a lot of practice before the real thing!

So, now we have some context for all these many laws: God is creating a holy people.

The Jewish rabbis counted 613 commandments; 248 positive commands, one for each part of the body, they said; and 365 negative commands, one for every day of the year.

Do Christians have to obey all 613 of them? No, not all. But there are some that endure, the Ten Commandments being the core.

What about the laws around worship, the sacrifices, and the priesthood? No, we need not obey those. Since Jesus came and made his perfect sacrifice for sins, the entire sacrificial system is gone.

What about the food laws? Do we have to keep kosher? No. That changed in the early church. You can actually read about how the Holy Spirit changed that in the Acts of the Apostles.

What about all the civil laws that governed the civil society of ancient Israel? No, Christians need not obey these.

Well, then what about the rules around clean and unclean, the holy and the unholy? Many laws in the Torah had to do with avoiding pagan practices. There are lessons for us here, but these laws are not imposed on us. Clean and unclean, holy and unholy, this food and that food, circumcision, these are laws of the previous covenants. They are not laws for us in the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

What Old Testament laws, if any, do we still have to obey? The short answer is the Ten Commandments.

Set forth simply in the Ten Commandments we have our relationship with God, and our relationship with our neighbours, neatly summed up for us today.

In the gospels, Jesus repeats and teaches the Ten Commandments. Jesus deepens their meaning, extending their reach into our hearts. Remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount? “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.”

In Christ, a full scale renovation is under way in our lives. The Lord is recreating us through and through.

External obedience is not enough. Legislation does not make us better people, any more than the highway traffic act makes us better drivers.

How many laws do we need? Not 613. The 10 commandments are enough. And Jesus makes it even simpler for us. He gets it down to two laws. We heard that in today's gospel.

A teacher of the law, no less, asks Jesus, "Which law is the most important?" Jesus gives a two part answer.

"The most important one is this: 'Hear O Israel: The Lord your God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Just two laws. Love God completely, love neighbor fully. Can we do that?

Let's notice that Jesus' answer echoes the Ten Commandments, which easily break down in two parts: our relationship with God, and our social relationships.

But someone will say, but its almost all negative, all those Thou shalt not's.

Let's instead think of the Ten Commandments as God's snapshot of a good and holy life, in a holy and good society. Let's think of them as the Ten Responsibilities.

An American once said that along with the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor, in San Francisco Bay there should be the Statue of Responsibility.

Picture this: a world where people honour and respect and fear God as the Holy One. Making idols would not even occur to us. God's name is holy, never misused. A weekly Sabbath day of rest is a gift from the Lord, for all of society, every worker. People treat other people with respect: parents are honored, marriage is honored, truth is held up in high honor, no more murder, no more lying, no more stealing. We respect rather than envy our neighbor's family and goods.

Imagine if the whole world knew and obeyed the Ten Commandments. As God's people, our task on earth is to live this out in front of others.

God is offering us more than just a good life. God wants to make a people on earth that are his people, who will represent him to the world. The church is, in the words of Rowan Williams, a pilot project for a new humanity.

In today's reading from Deuteronomy, years after the people went into the wilderness, Moses is repeating the Ten Commandments, just before Israel finally moves into the promised land. So, the Exodus is like 40 years of training camp before the team plays a single regulation game.

Our own Egypt, from which we have been rescued by Christ, is a life ruled by sin, and as we know, sin is a real slavedriver. We were slaves to sin. We need rescuing, and we need clear direction, lest we bow down to the idols of today.

Who are the idols of today? Insane greed and consumerism, the violence of war, the gods of sex and money and power; all these idols want us to worship them. If we love and obey the one true living God, we will see these do-it-yourself gods for what they are.

Here is what God says right from the middle of Leviticus, right in the middle of a bunch of laws around clean and unclean foods: "I am the Lord your God, consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. I

am the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God, therefore be holy, because I am holy.”

That rings true now. We are God’s redeemed people, saved by Christ, empowered and consecrated by the Holy Spirit.

With God’s grace, we can live a good, moral, generous, joyful and holy life. We can give God the first place in all things, and love the neighbours around us in a way that glorifies God.

What is the outcome then, for those who are in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit? Galatians 5 sums it up: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

Our law giving God has given us his laws as a gift. Let’s use them for God’s glory.