

Session 6: The Law & the Epistles

*A reminder that we have to read the Law and the epistles as if they were *gasp* written to someone other than us!*

When Moses wrote down the Law (and the Pentateuch,) the Jews had just escaped hundreds of years of life as a slave in an Egyptian culture. They needed help forging their own identity based on their covenant with Yahweh (see: burning bush Exo 3-4.)

The Jews needed rules to tell them how to:

- Interact with _____
- Interact with _____

So God gave them the gift of the Law to establish how they would live with each other, cultures around them and with Him.

The Law can refer to the 10 Commandments, but actually there are 613 different laws in Exodus to Deuteronomy.

The word “Law” can also be used to refer to the Pentateuch (see Matt 5:18).

New Testament writers referred to the old covenant (Old Testament) as the “Law” (see 1 Cor 9:20).

We will refer to the Law in this class as the series of rules that the Jews lived under, because, frankly, those are the ones that can cause confusion in modern minds.

To understand the Law and why God gave it to Moses and the Jews, we have to understand in terms of story – the narrative – of Scripture.

Check out the picture below that you already checked out. (*From the Bible Project: The Law*)

If you look closely, you’ll find that there is an ongoing story in the Law and the Prophets where Israel is given rules to help them live life in covenant with God and then they screw it up by rebelling.

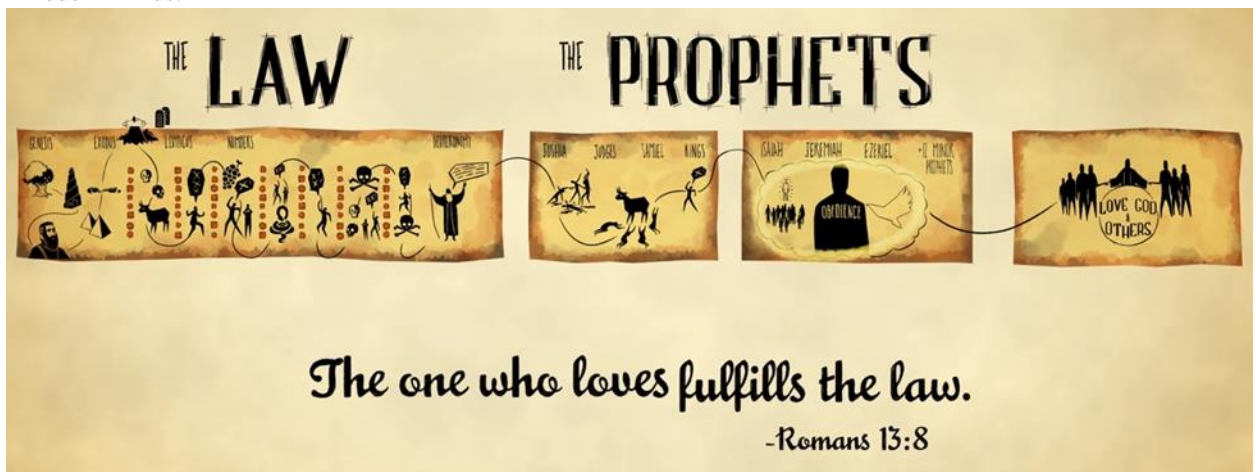
From the Tree in the Garden to the Golden Calf to the fall of Israel and Judah to the rejection of the prophets, Israel’s history is one failed (or lack of) attempt at living in God’s covenant after another.

(It’s your story as well. Mine, too, and probably worse!)

In the narrative, we see that the Law points humanity to a clear understanding of our nature: we are all sinners and fall short. We really are naughty by nature.

And that’s why we needed a savior who could come and help us by changing our very nature. Someone who could actually live the whole Law without failure. Someone who could fulfill the Law, not destroy it (Matt 5:17).

Ok, great, but what are we non-Jews supposed to do with the Law?



**READING SOMEONE
ELSE’S MAIL**

Christians & The Old Testament Law

First, let's be really clear here: Christians are NOT expected to keep the Old Testament Law.

That Law is no longer in affect.

So go kill people! Yay! 

The Old Testament Law is a covenant – a legal agreement between a Lord and a servant(s). The Jews were expected to follow the Law that Yahweh gave them in order to keep the agreement valid. If they didn't keep their end up, the Lord would have to levy punishment up to and including termination of the contract/covenant/testament.

(This happened, and is why Israel and Judah were defeated and then the Jews taken into exile – out of the land they were promised.)

But this covenant is not our covenant. We have a New Covenant that replaced the Old Covenant.

A great example that Fee & Stuart give to illustrate this, and I take all their good stuff for this class, is that of a labor contract.

Workers may have a labor contract with an employer and then renegotiate and have a new labor contract. Many things will stay the same, like they would still need to work, get paid, have health insurance, etc., but a lot of stuff could change as well.

That's what happened with Jesus: he renegotiated the Covenant between God and humanity.

We are still expected to show unadulterated loyalty to our Lord and be His servant, but HOW we do that is different now.

And the 613 Laws have been condensed into the two they always were:

OK, we have a new Law. But what are we supposed to do with the Old Law? Just throw it out?



No. Even the parts we don't follow are still valuable because they are a part of God's story and speak to God's character.

But some parts we don't do.

There are three types of Law:

- **_____ Law** – these are the rules for the state of Israel. We don't follow these, just like we don't follow the laws of Uruguay. Only Uruguayans do. Is that a word? I think it is.
- **_____ Law** – these are the rules for the temple worship for Jews. We don't follow these rules because we don't have to sacrifice for our sins anymore. We had a perfect sacrifice who took care of our atonement for all time.
- **_____ Law** – these are rules for right living that reflect God's character. We still follow a lot of these. You know why? Because they were reaffirmed in the New Testament.

The only laws Christians living under the New Covenant have to follow are the ones that are explicitly renewed by New Testament writers/characters.

The 10 Commandments, for instance, were reaffirmed (see Matt 5 for examples). Jesus and Paul reaffirmed some of the natural moral laws as well, regarding taking care of the poor/helpless, avoiding immorality (including sexual immorality), and so on.

But if the New Testament writers do not explicitly reaffirm a law then Christians are not required to follow it.

So yes, you can wear your blended shirts, eat bacon or shellfish, work on Saturday and so on. But if you stop loving people, not only are you a resounding gong (1 Cor 13,) but you may also be breaking your covenant.

When you read the Old Testament Law exegetically, we can see clearly that it is beneficial to us to know God and His plan, but it is not for us to model our lives upon.

And that's a huge relief!

The Epistles

Like the Law, we need to read the epistles – the letters that the Apostles wrote – exegetically.

We have to start with is to recognize that the letters were not written to us.

Fee and Stuart recommend two rules when exegeting epistles that will help us to understand what, if anything, we should take from these letters that weren't written to us.

First, remember that a passage cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or readers.

Example: 1 Corinthians 14

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 14 to seek after spiritual gifts, including speaking in tongues.

Some Christians, called Cessationists, believe that once the canon of Scripture was complete then the spiritual gifts, like tongues also ended. They sometimes use 1 Corinthians 13:10, “but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.”

But can Paul mean that in chapter 13 tongues would disappear but then immediately in chapter 14 – remember these were not chapters when he wrote them, but a complete thought – tell us to seek after this thing that would disappear? I don't think so. Paul clearly didn't think spiritual gifts would end based just on context alone.

So 1 Cor 13 cannot mean to us what it never could have meant to Paul and the Corinthians.

Second, Fee & Stuart say, whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e., similar life situations,) with the first-century hearers, God's word to us is the same as His word to them.

Have we all sinned? (Rom 3:23) – _____

Should we clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, etc (Col 3:12) - _____

Should we eat meat sacrificed to idols? (1 Cor 10) – _____

Should women be silent in church? (1 Cor 14) – _____

That seems easy. But the questions we run into are in applying things that may not be a universal – rather than cultural – application.

Understanding cultural differences rather than universal moral laws can be difficult outside of biblical context. That's why it's important to read all of scripture – to zoom out.

The Law Informs the Epistles

Paul, who wrote most of the epistles, followed the Law. Really well (Phil 3). So when he writes churches to tell them how to live he is fully aware of what parts of the Law still apply and which don't. He is doing hermeneutics.

He knew which laws were moral and reaffirmed and which were not. (See the moral laws around sexual immorality passages reaffirmed, while civil and ritual laws around what to eat be discarded.)

Our job is to do the same. We must read the passages in context. Then zoom out and see the big picture.

Moral laws are based on God's character. They don't change.

We aren't Jews living in Israel 3000 years ago and we aren't first century Greek Jews or Gentiles either. We need to keep rules or laws into their own context – what did the rules mean to them and why were the law-givers giving these commands?

If we know that, we can better understand if the life situation matches our current one and thus applies to us.