

“THE GOOD BOOK – 2: IT’S THE LAW”
Galatians 3:15-25

Over these few Sundays up to the summer holidays we’re having a look at the Bible. We’re not looking at it, as we usually do, in small chunks, a few verses at a time, but in its entirety, thinking about how it holds together and how we approach certain parts of it. Not all the books of the Bible are to be viewed in the same way, of course: just as we approach a cookery book differently from a novel or a poetry anthology differently from a history book, so we need to recognise that the various books of the Bible contain different kinds of writing and need to be read and interpreted in different ways. That doesn’t in any way detract from the conviction that it is all inspired by God and that it is all true in some way or other. (I mentioned last time the book *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart as being well worth getting hold of on this subject. Thanks to the person who confessed to having my copy of it. Dudley Budge would like to hear from the person who’s got his copy!)

If you were to go out into the street and ask passers-by about their view of the Bible, I’m sure you’d get a lot of very interesting answers. Among the things that many people say about it is that it is a book full of “thou-shalt-nots”. It’s all full of laws and rules that you’re supposed to keep if you want to go to heaven. Well, a fair bit of the Old Testament is, indeed, taken up with laws. In the time of Jesus, you may remember from our reading of Mark’s gospel, his contemporaries referred to their scriptures, our Old Testament, as “*the Law*” or “*the Law and the Prophets*”. The first five books of the Bible, which are often given the overall title “The Pentateuch” are called by the Jewish people “The Torah”, which means “Law”. Some of the contents of those five books are history, but much of it is certainly law.

In *Exodus* we read the story of how the Law was given to Moses. The centrepiece of that was the episode on Mount Sinai when Moses was given the Ten Commandments on two tablets of stone (and we’ll be considering the Ten Commandments and their contemporary significance during the autumn this year). But there’s an awful lot more in that book about the wider implications of the Law and the details of how it was to be put into practice. The book of *Leviticus* is pretty well exclusively taken up with laws. The title means “*To do with the Levites*” – they were the priestly clan in Israel and there are very detailed laws about the conduct of worship. And then *Deuteronomy*, which means “*Repeating the Law*” goes through it all again with a few extra comments and challenges from Moses. There are a few more bits about the Law in *Numbers*, too, but that’s not the main point of the book.

If you take time to read through any of these books – and, on the face of it, it’s not a particularly thrilling evening’s reading – you will find that the laws are arranged according to their theme and with the appropriate penalties and sanctions given with them. Should you have access to the *Code of Hammurabi*

or *The Law Code of Sargon* or the ancient law books of the Egyptians or Babylonians (I sense some of you beginning to yawn!), you will see that all ancient civilisations had their law codes and they were just as formalised and just as detailed as the Law of Moses. There are similar patterns in the way the laws are set out and similar sanctions for many of them. But it has to be said that the Law which we find in the Bible is considerably more humane than other law codes and there are far more regulations about worship and sacrifice. One thing that is missing from most of them is the penalty of imprisonment. In the Law God gave Moses the emphasis is clearly on restorative justice – on making the punishment include some kind of restitution to the victim. Of course, the people who first received these laws were a rural, nomadic people so imprisonment would have raised a few logistical problems, but when you hear politicians loudly asserting that “Prison works” (when it quite clearly doesn’t), you wonder why they don’t spend a bit of time looking at the way God suggests.

Anyway, as you look through the many different laws that can be found in *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers* and *Deuteronomy*, you will find that they fall into various categories, all of which have their relevance today. There are many laws which deal with what we might today call “Health and Safety”. Many of the dietary laws fall into this category – the foods which are banned are those which can most easily cause health problems, as can some of the methods of cooking them. There are laws about putting parapets around the flat roof of the house, so people don’t fall off and instructions about what to do if people have contagious diseases or unhygienic bodily emissions. And remember, in a world where there weren’t so many cleaning products and antiseptic creams, where the weather was usually hot and water might be scarce, quite a lot of things we cope with today would have caused far more problems to them.

Some of the laws deal with morality – and mainly sexual morality. There are rather lengthy passages in *Leviticus* about who you can’t sleep with and what must happen if you do. There are prohibitions on adultery and same sex relationships. And there are severe punishments for those who break such laws.

A great many of the laws deal with justice. Those who would otherwise find themselves in very vulnerable positions can find a great deal of protection in these laws – orphans, widows, foreigners, the very poor, the disabled and so on. The whole system of Jubilee was an attempt to ensure that the gap between the very rich and the very poor did not grow too wide, so that every fifty years all property was to return to its original owners and all debts were cancelled. It had an environmental aspect too, in that the land was to be rested regularly in order to ensure that it produced enough food for the people.

Some of the laws, which now seem rather enigmatic to us, are reckoned to be a way of ensuring that the people of Israel didn’t try to emulate the practices of the pagan peoples who were their neighbours. There are some which are quite obvious – not sacrificing your child to Moloch, for example – but others, such

as not wearing cloth made of two different kinds of yarn, are thought to be a prohibition on trying to dress like the pagans. So those of you who are wearing cotton and lycra or polyester/cotton this morning are up the creek!

And there are many laws which govern the worship of God's people in the Tabernacle – the portable worship centre they carried with them in the desert – and later the Temple. These laws govern everything from the clothes the priests wear to the bits of the sacrificed animals which were to be burned and the ways in which the priests were to move around the sanctuary.

In all, there are hundreds of regulations – and by the time of Jesus the leaders of the people who dealt with the legal and religious aspects of their national life had added many, many more in an attempt to legislate for pretty well every aspect of daily life. It was the complex nature of this law code that prompted one of the teachers of the law to ask Jesus what he considered to be the most important (*Mark 12:28-33*). Jesus replied, as many of the rabbis had replied before him, that the law could really be summed up in two sentences, themselves quoted from *Deuteronomy* and *Leviticus*: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. [And] love your neighbour as yourself.*” If you do take the trouble to read through the parts of the Bible which are concerned with law, that's the clear impression you will get. God wants his people to live together in community as neighbours who love one another – in order that they can help each other to get the best out of life. And there is an overwhelming sense of holiness which pervades the whole thing. God is a great and holy God and he wants his people to be holy – to be unsullied by pagan influences and by things which might otherwise mean they were offering him less than their very best.

Fair enough – but that seems all very “Old Testament” in emphasis. Didn't Jesus come to transform all that rules and regulations mentality? Didn't he come to offer a different way of looking at the world? Why is all this stuff in the Bible – and how do we react to it? Some people react to it by ignoring it completely (unless there's a bit that is to their advantage): and other people go to the opposite extreme and say that we need to keep to pretty well all of it, so we should stone rebellious children and adulterers and homosexuals (although they often tend to wear polyester/cotton suits and their wives don't go and live at the bottom of the garden once a month!). What's it all about?

Paul grapples with all that in the passage we've just read from *Galatians 3*. I know some of you have been looking at this letter in your housegroup recently, so you can probably tell me what it's all about in far more detail. For the purposes of what we're thinking about this morning, though, let me sum it up like this. Paul says (in v24) that the Law was there “*to lead us to Christ*”. In other words, the whole point of it was to show us just how much we needed Jesus. There were all these rules and regulations which, it

became obvious, no-one could really keep and so their relationship with God was going to suffer. Jesus provided the solution to that in that he died on the cross to enable the relationship with God to be put right through faith in him rather than through the keeping of the law. And once we put our faith in him, we are “no longer under the supervision of the law”. The law is no longer the most important way of trying to get right with God – Jesus is.

Now Paul had to write that to the Christians in Galatia because some of them were insisting that new Christians had to keep to all the rules and regulations of the Jewish law before they could be proper followers of Jesus. He had to write to the Christians in Corinth because they were going to the opposite extreme and saying that, once you’d put your faith in Jesus, you didn’t have to keep to any laws: you could do what you like. That’s an attractive suggestion and there are plenty of Christians today who adopt that attitude – just as there are plenty who still insist on a whole checklist of rules and regulations which don’t have a great deal to do with faith in Jesus. What are we to do? Can we now ignore the laws of the Old Testament for all practical purposes?

Well, no – not really. Jesus came to demonstrate a new way forward, but he also kept to the principles of the laws as he summed them up for the man who posed the question in *Mark 12*. Firstly there is the principle of loving God with every part of your being – it’s all to do with respecting the holiness of God and, as Peter reminds us in his letter (*1 Peter 1:16*), trying to emulate that holiness in all that we do. We need to show that we are people who take the holiness of God seriously – approaching him with an appropriate attitude of worship, trying to live in a way that is as close to what he wants as possible, ensuring that we keep ourselves free of unhelpful influences and attitudes. And that should then be apparent in the ways in which we relate to other people: that’s the second principle of loving our neighbours as ourselves.

Underneath all that is the need to see all the law in the context of God’s will for creation. There are some laws which, I would suggest, are redundant now. We don’t feel the need to abstain from eating pork or shellfish, or wearing mixed fibre clothing because the dangers of bad food are not the same as they were then and the messages we are giving out by wearing clothes made of a particular cloth are not as they were for the early Jewish people. Indeed, we may re-interpret them by not smoking or eating too much fatty food, and by not wearing T-shirts which have unhelpful slogans or advertisements for topless bars on them!

But there are other laws which are very much framed within the context of God’s will for all creation at the very outset. For example, his original command to be good stewards of this earth will have some effect on the way in which we treat the environment. And his words from the first chapters of *Genesis*

about male and female becoming “*one flesh*” I would take to be mirrored in the prohibitions against adultery, fornication and the practice of same sex sexual activity. Those are things which God “built into” creation and which he, if you like, underlined when he gave Moses the Law.

Now, of course, there are many different views on all that. But it boils down to one thing, really. God gave his people, the law so that they could get the best out of life, so that they could function as he intended them to be. And that still holds good today. Jesus still kept to the principle of the law as he came to offer men and women “*life in all its fullness*”. He still lived a life that was holy, a life that revered God as holy, and a life that demonstrated in every way a deep love for his fellow human beings. We, who call ourselves his followers, are called to follow his lead. To make that possible, he died for us and we now give thanks for that in our next song and in our communion.

THE GOOD BOOK – 2: IT’S THE LAW ***Galatians 3:15-25***

Many people see the Bible as simply a rule book – and a fairly oppressive one at that! That’s by no means the whole story, but there are books in the Old Testament which do contain a good deal of law. The Jewish people refer to the first five books of the Bible (The Pentateuch) as “Torah”, which means “Law”. *Exodus* tells the story of the giving of the Law; *Leviticus* (meaning “To do with the Levites”) is mainly taken up with the Law; *Deuteronomy* (“The repetition of the Law”) goes through it again, with comments from Moses; and *Numbers* also contains parts of the Law.

The laws are very similar in many ways to other contemporary law codes (The Codes of Hammurabi and Sargon, The Babylonian and Egyptian Codes), but tend to be more humane. The patterns of the law codes have a lot in common and they mostly deal with “restorative justice” (not imprisonment). In the Bible, the laws tend to be arranged in various categories:

- Health & Safety, including dietary laws and regulations about diseases etc.
- Morality, particularly sexual practices
- Justice, for the disadvantaged and vulnerable
- Laws which emphasise the distinction between God’s people and the pagans
- Regulations to do with worship, sacrifice and priestly functions.

Jesus summed up the Law for one of his questioners in *Mark 12:28-33* by quoting from the Old Testament that we should love God with all our being and love our neighbours as ourselves. God wants his people to live together in community and to try to emulate the holiness that is the essence of his being.

But the mission of Jesus was to restore our relationship with God without the need for rules and regulations, so why is the Law still in our Bibles? Paul grapples with that issue in *Galatians 3:15-25*. The Law was there to lead us to Christ, to show us how much we need Jesus, and it is no longer the most important way of trying to get right with God. But just as Jesus followed the principles of the Law, so should we as his followers.

Some laws may well be redundant now because they were formulated for a particular people (nomadic, tribal) at a particular time (many centuries ago). These are laws to do with, for example, food hygiene in the desert. Other laws are still valid as they were formulated to underline creation principles (e.g. environmental stewardship, monogamous heterosexual relationships).

Questions for discussion

1. How do you respond to those who say the Bible is just a long list of rules and regulations?
2. The Law does not mention imprisonment as a sanction. What do you feel about the value of imprisonment?
3. Look through *Leviticus 19*. Which are laws that we need to keep today and which can we safely ignore? Why? (Don’t feel you have to deal with them all!)
4. What difference does Jesus make to all this?
5. At the heart of the Law is holiness. How can we live up to Peter’s command in *1 Peter 1:15,16* (quoting from *Leviticus 11:44,45* etc)?
6. In the light of this discussion, what’s your view of the Law?