

Donkeys, Transvestites and Tassels

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. You may like to have open the Bibles in the pews at page 155 to the first of our two Bible readings.

As I said at the beginning, we're having sermons through this Old Testament book of Deuteronomy and today from the beginning of chapter 22. And I'll pray for us as we begin.

God our Father, speak to us from your word in the Bible today. With these obscure laws, we pray that you will not only give us understanding, but help us also to obey you so that we bring glory and honour to you and to your Son, Jesus Christ.

Amen. What an odd lot of laws that we heard read. It's interesting that it includes a law that women should not dress in man's clothing, but Karen, who read the reading for us, was wearing trousers. And there are some Christians over the centuries who, on the strength of this verse, have argued that women, Christian women, should not wear trousers. And what about if I find my neighbour's ox?

[1 : 14] Well, my neighbour doesn't have an ox, so I'm relieved of obedience to this law. But a few years ago, my neighbours, as they then were, their dog got out. And those who know me know that I don't particularly care for dogs and would have been quite happy, personally, for the dog never to have reappeared.

It was a very ugly dog. Most dogs are. Theirs was particularly ugly. A Staffordshire Bull Terrier. And at great cost to myself, and I'm still in therapy for this, I actually grabbed hold of the dog down the neighbouring street and brought it all the way back home.

As I say, that's a great cost. And I'm still sort of trembling at the memory. Is it right that I am wearing a shirt of cotton and polyester when these laws include a law that you shall not have a mix of clothes that are wool and linen woven together?

What about cotton and poly? Why isn't that mentioned? Is that okay? Or maybe it's not. What an odd collection of laws. And in some ways, these typify what many people think about the Old Testament, that it's obscure, odd, ancient, irrelevant, outdated, culturally foreign and alien to us. There doesn't seem rhyme or reason in this law, this set of laws. We jump from laws to do with neighbours' animals to what people should wear. And then there's comment about birds' nests and eggs.

[2 : 49] And then building houses. And then ploughing your field. And what clothes you should wear again. And tassels on our cloaks. I mean, it's such an odd collection.

Most of them seem very foreign, far removed from where we are today. And for many people, their reaction to this sort of thing, this sort of Old Testament as a whole for some people, or certainly large slabs of it for others, is to say, ignore it.

Basically, tear it out from our Bibles. Well, if not physically, at least, basically only look at the last bit of the Bible. I mean, really, this is so culturally foreign to us.

So out of date. So irrelevant. And surely it's no longer even worth paying attention to. To be honest, I doubt that any other church in Australia today has had this reading and a sermon on this passage in Deuteronomy.

I'd be astonished if I found another church that did it today. In fact, for the whole year. Probably the whole century, to be honest. What do we make of it? What do we do with it?

[3 : 54] Why do we bother, or should we bother, with this sort of collection of laws? I mean, for many of us, we know that there are some laws in the Old Testament that are pretty important. Don't murder, for example.

Well, that'd rate fairly highly on the list. And there's a few others as well, being generous to the poor and things like that. We might say, well, that's okay. They're good common sense. But this is part of

the same sort of collection.

So who gives us the right to say, let's follow that law, but not this one? So what do we do with this? Do we say, well, because the New Testament doesn't actually reiterate these laws, we're at liberty to ignore them because we're Christians and the New Testament is more important?

Or do we say, as some Christians would, well, the New Testament actually doesn't cancel out these laws, so we're still bound by them? Some people have that view. Seems to me that what we ought to be doing with any part of the Old Testament, for that matter, is working out what are the principles that are guiding these laws?

What are the moral or the theological principles in the middle of these laws? These laws, of course, are expressed in an ancient culture. They're expressed for a largely agricultural society, ancient Israel.

[5 : 10] These are dated about 1400 BC, thereabouts. So in a sense, there's laws that are suited to that situation. But behind the laws are principles that may or may not still be significant.

And it seems to me that our job is to try and understand the principles behind the laws. Some of those principles may be reinforced, strengthened, adapted in some way through the New Testament.

But then to work out, well, how do we reapply them back into our own society and our own lives? So let's take chapter 22, verses 1 to 4, for starters.

You shall not watch your neighbor's ox or sheep straying away and ignore them. You shall take them back to their owner. If the owner does not reside near you or you do not know who the owner is, you shall bring it to your own house and it shall remain with you until the owner claims it.

Then you shall return it. You shall do the same with a neighbor's donkey. You shall do the same with a neighbor's garment. You shall do the same with anything else that your neighbor loses and you find.

[6 : 18] You may not withhold your help. You shall not see your neighbor's donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it. You shall help to lift it up. Well, a few comments.

I don't think we're excused from this law simply because our neighbors don't have ox or sheep or donkeys. After all, verse 3 goes on to expand it to include your neighbor's garment or anything else that your neighbor might lose and that you find.

So clearly this law is not simply about those animals. Though those animals would have been very significant. They would have been a major part of the livelihood of a person in the ancient world.

They may have had a few animals but not thousands and thousands in ancient Israel. And so these animals would have been a significant part of their potential income, maybe for later sale or possibly for food.

But even so, it's not just because they're valuable. The garments may not be valuable or anything else that your neighbor loses. You are to return to your neighbor or keep it until it's claimed.

[7 : 25] The neighbor is a fellow Israelite. But not strictly limited to that either. Indeed, in an earlier book of the Old Testament, in the book of Exodus, neighbors actually include enemies.

So there's a fairly wide compass for what is a neighbor here. Notice that it's a neighbor whom you may not even know, verse 2 says. That challenges our view of neighbors.

We tend to think of neighbors either as the people who live next to us or over the road from us, whether or not we know them. Or neighbors being people who live close to us but whom we know. But here the neighbor may be somebody you don't know.

And yet, it reflects the fact that we belong in some form of community together. For this, it was ancient Israel. For us, it's our own world society.

But also our Christian community as well. The animal that's fallen in verse 4 may need help to get back up because presumably it's laden with goods.

[8 : 25] And so rather than unpack all the load, get the animal up on its feet and then repack the load, the person is asked to help in lifting the animal back up. Now, the key theme in all of this is don't ignore or don't withhold help.

In verse 1, it says, You shall not watch and ignore and literally don't hide yourself. Crossing by on the other side of the road or hiding yourself away and closing the curtains of your house so that you are not seen to have observed whatever's happened, the stray animal or lost garment.

And then at the end of verse 3, you may not withhold your help. And verse 4 at the end, you shall help to lift it up.

This is a call to get involved, basically. We often think of doing nothing might be okay. That somehow my aim in life is not to harm anyone.

But on the other hand, this command is telling us we have to get involved to do good for people. That is, doing nothing here is not an option.

[9 : 36] And yet for many of us in the way we live in the world, doing nothing is our preferred option because we think, well, it may not do harm to anyone and I just don't want to get involved. As Edmund Burke, a political philosopher of a couple of hundred years ago in England, said, When good men do nothing, evil triumphs.

Well, here an animal might stay fallen on the ground or somebody's lost animal may disappear elsewhere. That may not quite be the triumph of evil, but it's just a small microcosm of what ultimately could be the triumph of evil.

That is, this law is calling us to action. Sometimes we think of sins as being things that we do that are wrong. But sins are also things that we don't do that we ought to have done.

The right things that we refrain from doing. And that is what this is about. What we might call sins of omission rather than sins of commission.

Now, there are many reasons why we may not want to get involved. We may not want to get involved because we live in a city and we live in a city that therefore means urban anonymity.

[10 : 50] We don't know our neighbours like the country folk do. If you live in a little village, everybody knows everybody. And you're much more likely to expect to rescue somebody's cat or dog or whatever it is that's been lost because you know people.

But this law says you've got to do that even if you don't know people. It applies in a city as much as in a country's society. And in a city, of course, when we don't know people, we tend to want to keep to ourselves.

There's an element of privacy. I just mind my own business. I'm not going to do anyone any harm. But I'll just keep to myself. Very common way we think. This law doesn't allow us to do that. We might say, oh, I'm just too busy to get involved with all these problems.

I mean, after all, they should have looked after their dog or cat or ox or ass or sheep better. It's their fault, not mine. This is not saying it's not your fault, but it is your responsibility.

We don't know why the animal's gone astray or why the garment's been lost, whether it's their fault or not. That's not the issue. We are called to be involved. To love our neighbor means being involved in protecting, caring, returning or looking after in the interim their lost property.

[12 : 01] In a sense, this runs parallel with Jesus and the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's so easy to pass by on the other side, to ignore the need, to turn a blind eye, not to be involved.

It's, after all, safer in our society not to be involved. We don't want to be sued if we touch somebody else's property. We don't want to be at risk if we stop to help somebody by the way and then find that it's a sham and they're out to rob us or something like that.

But actually, they're not excuses not to be involved either. So we're not exempt from this law. The principle of loving our neighbor is actually very demanding. Loving even people whom we don't know.

Maybe because of their folly, we've got to look after their property. Maybe it's not their fault. It would actually be costly to look after a sheep or an ox if you don't know the neighbor and you wait for it to be claimed.

Because you've got to feed it and house it and care for it. Maybe for a long period of time. Now, hopefully, a neighbor in their thanks would make some financial recompense when they get their animal back.

[13 : 08] But nonetheless, it could be a costly exercise in obeying this law. Well, we're not exempt from it, it seems to me. We can't just toss this law out and say, well, ox and ass, we don't have.

The law itself expands to include everything. It means that as a church, we ought to be aware of people's lost property. We have a lost property bin where we've got a huge collection of umbrellas and glasses and all sorts of stuff.

Maybe we should be more deliberate in trying to return them to people. Or having a display of all the lost goods or something like that. It certainly means that we've got to take action.

We've got to accept responsibility even for other people, even if we don't know them. That's the demand of loving our neighbor. Well, then we move on to the next verse, verse 5, and we come to a completely different topic.

Quite a disjunction. A woman shall not wear man's apparel. Well, does that mean that all the women shouldn't wear trousers? Does it mean that the Scottish men shouldn't wear kilts? I mean, it's a slightly odd thing in a way when you translate it like that.

[14 : 15] Because in Jesus' day, the men would have worn long flowing robes after all. So whose sort of apparel is this? Maybe we should all be men in long flowing robes.

Maybe like the women. Well, I'm not sure that this is simply about what clothes to wear at one level. The language at the end of the verse is, whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord your God.

Now, the word that's translated there, abhorrent, or in other translations, abomination, is a very strong word indeed. And it's usually reserved for things that are associated with other religious practices.

And that's probably what's behind this. Behind this, a couple of things. It's not simply wearing trousers for women or wearing a dress for a man.

It's probably the issue of being a transvestite. The element of deceit. The element of mixing sexuality. The element of ambiguity about whether you're male or female.

[15 : 17] And maybe that's associated with religious practices. For we know that the Canaanite religions round about Israel in these days practiced a religious prostitution where you would have a sexual activity with a religious prostitute in order to somehow get the gods to produce children for you or rain or crops or something.

And those prostitutes may well be, and often were apparently, transvestites. So probably that's what's behind it. Hence the name transvestite in the title of the sermon today. Certainly it's not prohibiting, I think, women simply wearing trousers.

But rather it's prohibiting the transvestitism or the religious transvestitism that was part of the world of ancient Israel. And so for us, there's still principles that apply there about what we wear.

I mean, it's not right for Christian people to go around dressed in drag trying to somehow confuse our sexuality or deceive whether we're male or female.

I don't think there's necessarily something wrong with that by way of a sort of entertainment thing. I don't think Barry Humphrey's a sort of guilty of sin in a sense here for that in the element of obvious comedy.

[16 : 32] But by way of life and lifestyle, I think certainly that's what this law is prohibiting. Then we move on and we find again something quite unconnected.

In verse 6, Now the issue here, I think, I'm sure, is food, something to eat.

And there are three options, I suppose. Well, probably four. You don't need to take anything, perhaps. And that's fine. You're not being commanded to take something. You certainly wouldn't want to take the mother and leave the young, vulnerable, unprotected, to die.

I mean, that's an obvious thing that you wouldn't do. So therefore it is, do you take it all? Or do you take the young but leave the mother? Now this law commands that in this case you would take the young but leave the mother.

Why would that be? Rather than take the whole lot. Or we might argue that taking the whole lot might just be greedy. But more likely there's a bigger principle behind this, it seems.

[17 : 49] That is, the mother is able to keep reproducing more eggs, more fledglings later down the track. There's an element of sustainability of food here. That you don't simply sort of wipe out all your food sources, whether or not that's being greedy.

And therefore I think the principle of the law here applies beyond taking mothers and young from their nests. I mean, for us, of course, we go to Coles anyway and we just buy the eggs, I suppose. Or you go to a butcher and buy a chicken or something already killed and ready to eat. So we live in a different culture, of course, than this. But in a sense the principles apply to bigger and other areas.

That is, we're not to just ravage the earth's resources. The earth's resources have reproductive possibilities that we're not at liberty to take away.

And so in one sense this applies, yes, to the slaughter of animals at large, but also to our use of water, to issues of food waste probably, to our issues of logging forests and things like that.

[18 : 57] Our treatment of the world's resources, where to be environmentally sensitive actually, I think is a principle behind this law. We're responsible stewards for the resources of our world.

Well then again you move on to verse 8 and again the issue changes abruptly. When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof. Now I wonder how many of you, when you've built your house, have built a parapet on your roof.

When we built the church extensions five years ago, we don't have parapets on this roof. Are we breaking God's law? Well remember that in the ancient world of this day, roofs were flat and they were used for sleeping in hot weather, they were used for entertaining, for cooking, for doing all sorts of things.

Depending on the weather. They were used for sleeping. A parapet was an essential safety measure to stop people falling off. Now if you built a house with a flat roof and you could say, well you know it's your responsibility, you're going to be on my roof, you're not to go near the edge. But no, this law actually tells us that we the owner must take responsibility for safety for anyone who visits us. Now in this case, it's a roof and a parapet.

[20 : 14] We don't use our roofs like that. But the principle of us taking responsibility for the safety of others is a principle that applies in all avenues of life in a way.

For those who are employers, you have an obligation, not just under our governmental laws, but you have an obligation under God for providing a safe workplace. in whatever forms that might require. For us as a church, we are under obligation, not just to government laws about buildings, but we're under obligation to God for providing safe property here.

Safety in buildings, safety in paths, and so on. And for those who own homes, there is an element of safety that I think is our responsibility as home owners or even renters to an extent that our paths are safe, the steps are safe, to walk up to the front door, those sorts of things.

That's our responsibility. And that I think is the principle undergirding this law. It's again about your love of neighbour, even if it's somebody whom you don't know. Well moving on, we again jump topic, again abruptly.

[21 : 28] You shall not sow your vineyard with a second kind of seed or the whole yield will have to be forfeited, both the crop that you've sown and the yield of the vineyard itself. Now there may be some of you who've got your own little vineyards and have come in from the Yarra Valley today to church and so maybe this law applies to you in some way, but it doesn't mean that if you own a vineyard that you can't sort of plant a carrot in between or something like that.

Does that forfeit carrots and grapes? Now this is a slight puzzle in a way, but there does seem to be some ancient literature that suggests that in Egypt of the time of Moses, and it's from Egypt that Israel has come in the years before Deuteronomy, that the mixing up of crops was actually done as a superstitious and religious practice.

Not entirely clear why that was the case, but maybe that's what's being prohibited in this law. But also behind this law and maybe too behind verse 5, the law about transvestites and maybe behind the laws that follow for a bit, is the sense that God has created everything in its order.

Every plant according to its kind, every animal according to its kind, Genesis 1 talks about. Male and female, distinct and different. So maybe wherever there is this sort of compromise of type, there is some prohibition.

Especially, I think, if it's associated with another religious practice. Well, verse 10 also has a mixture of things that is prohibited. In verse 10, you shall not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together.

[23 : 06] Maybe because one's a clean animal and one's an unclean animal. Although we're not told the reason. Certainly Paul, when he writes about Christians and whom they should marry, says that Christians ought not marry non-Christians or unbelievers.

You shall not be unequally yoked, is the expression he uses in 2 Corinthians 6. Maybe it's the care of the weaker animal.

If you have a strong animal and a weaker animal, a donkey and an axe, and an ass, sorry, an ass and a donkey. What is it? An ox and a donkey. Then the strength of one will actually make life difficult for the weakness of the other animal.

Maybe it's just a care of an animal that's behind it as well. In verse 11, you shall not wear clothes made of wool and linen woven together. One level, that may simply be pragmatic.

You throw them in a washing machine and they're not going to actually work well together, wool and linen. So people tell me. Does it mean, though, that it's simply wool and linen?

[24 : 08] Are there other mixtures that are prohibited? Is this, again, the mixing up of what God has made distinct according to its kind that may be prohibited here? Apparently, the language that's

used at the end of the verse, woven together, mixed material, is used in some Egyptian writings about magical proceedings and so on.

So again, maybe it's prohibition of association with pagan practices or magic or superstition. Maybe it's prohibiting the blurring of the distinctions in God's creation.

Israel, after all, is to be different from other nations in its practice. That's what being holy is part of. It's not to practice its life like the Egyptian pagans or the Canaanite pagans, for example.

And then finally, in verse 12, you shall make tassels on the four corners of the cloak with which you cover yourself. Now here it is, a coldish morning, a few coats in church today.

Haven't seen them for a few months and dusted off. Have your tassels rotted in the last few months? Because I don't see many. So what's happened to them? Should we have tassels on our cloaks and coats?

[25 : 21] Well, we're actually told the reason for this. Back in the book of Numbers, thankfully, we're given a reason why Israelites were to have tassels on their cloaks and that was because it was to be a reminder, a sign, a visible memory of obeying God's commandments.

So the tassels on their cloaks were to remind them to obey God's commandments. The cloak was something you would wear by day in cold weather and you would sleep under by night. It doubled as a blanket in the ancient world.

It was your basic garment that you basically needed to keep warm by day or night. So in a sense, all your life was to be a reminder of keeping the covenant commandments of God.

What does that mean? That we should have tassels on our cloaks and coats. Well, we could argue that and there's probably nothing wrong with that either. Jesus condemns the Jewish leaders of his day for boasting about their long tassels as somehow they were showing off and saying, we're more obedient than you.

Well, that sort of behavior of arrogance would be condemned and should be. For Christians, of course, the need to remember God's commandments still applies. If tassels help us with that, maybe it's fair enough.

[26 : 42] Maybe a what would Jesus do bracelet is serving a similar sort of purpose or a fish symbol on the car if it helps you drive better, which is why I don't have one on mine. But actually, of course, as the Old Testament itself acknowledges, it's not simply a sign to remember the covenant commandments that matters.

What God wants is the commandments on their hearts and Deuteronomy chapter 6, for example, argued that quite persuasively. In the New Testament, the same demand is there, that the commandments of God are on our hearts and God promises to do that by his Holy Spirit.

If tassels help us, then I suggest you put some tassels on your coat. Well, some concluding remarks. Whilst all these laws are culturally expressed in a culture three and a half millennium away from us in a world and society vastly different from ours, these laws are not culturally bound.

And that's an important distinction. That is, whilst they may be expressed to do with a society that's got ox and ass and vineyards and flat roofs, which is foreign for most of us, the principles of the laws are not bound by that culture.

God accommodates himself, in a sense, by expressing his standards in practical, down-to-earth, culturally relevant ways. For us who live so distant from that society, yes, we have a harder job to work out how to apply them.

[28 : 19] We have to, in a sense, look at the principles within the laws and then reapply them as Christian believers. The care for our neighbour's property, not mixing up created order, not being associated with pagan or religious or superstitious practices, the responsibility of providing safe homes and workplaces, the responsibility of remembering God's commandments.

commandments. They're the sorts of principles that are coming out of these verses, out of these laws, and they still stand. They still stand today.

What these laws also remind us is that there is no part of our life that is outside the domain of God's rule. Nothing is too small for God to be concerned about it.

See, sometimes we think of laws as being the big things. Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't commit idolatry, don't steal. But in everyday life, the little things that we do or don't do, all of them come under God's domain.

For all of them, there are right ways of behavior and wrong. How we view the broken down car as we driving along a road. Do we stop and help?

[29 : 39] Perhaps we ought. How we view our neighbor's dog, that's got lost, even if we don't know the neighbor, or their lost pair of glasses or diary.

How we build our houses or how we look after our workplaces and so on. Every little thing that we do comes under the domain of God. And there are right and wrong ways of doing.

These verses also guide us with one important principle and that is we can't hide, we can't withdraw, we can't say that the goal of my life is not to harm anyone and so I'm not going to get involved.

We don't have that option as Christian people. So often people tell me this was a good person, they've never harmed anyone. But have they done any good?

These laws command us to act, command us to be involved with our world, with our neighborhood, society, with our community, even if we don't know those people.

[30 : 43] And of course in a global world like we live, our neighborhood is actually vast. It's not simply the local street, the municipality or even the city or even the nation.

When the world's needs are brought before us, how we act has got global consequences. And so the global politics and international situations, the global poverty that we're confronted with and wars, the global climate issues, are things that we as Christians actually need to confront and think through and respond to in godly ways.

But finally, these laws direct us to the law giver. God's purposes for this world are for a world of harmony and generosity, a world of mutual responsibility and love for our neighbor and for God.

They are for a world for holy living, far from what we actually experience these days. These laws then reflect something of the character of God himself.

In a sense there are means of God communicating what he is like. He is a loving God, a generous God, a God of order, a God of commands that we are to remember, a God who wants life to be safe, and so on.

[32 : 03] God's character, a reflection of God's character, and therefore they become a, if blurred, portrait of God's own son, Jesus Christ, the perfect human being.

And so the law is therefore a means for us to develop the character of God within us, to appropriate the divine nature to be more like Jesus, to grow in being a loving person to our neighbor and loving to God.

But also as we hear and read these laws, and of course this is just a small section of several chapters of laws in Deuteronomy, we realize that we don't make the grade.

When I think of neighbor's property that's lost and so on, I'm not sure that I'm as diligent and thorough in trying to return and protect neighbor's property that I perhaps ought to be.

I'm not sure that I quite meet the standard of providing safety that verse 8 demands of us, etc. And as we read other chapters of laws, we will all find ourselves falling short of the perfect standards that these laws require.

[33 : 20] They expose our weakness and therefore they expose our need for forgiveness and mercy from God. God. These laws therefore drive us to Jesus as the model of perfection but they drive us also to God's Son Jesus Christ as the means of forgiveness as well.

You see, the Christian faith is not simply about doing good and being good and that if we're good enough, God will accept us. The Christian faith as the laws of the Old Testament as a whole themselves reflect acknowledge our need for forgiveness and mercy.

They drive us to our knees asking for God to forgive us and he does through his Son Jesus Christ. Christ. We respond to these laws not by trying to meet them and therefore win God's favour. We respond to these laws as people already accepted by God and forgiven by God and in seeking to honour him, we seek to obey his laws.

That's what the Christian faith actually is about and that's what even the Old Testament laws are about. they're premised on a relationship that God by his grace has already established with Israel.

[34 : 48] They provide the means within the Old Testament laws for forgiveness and mercy through sacrifices but all of that is a prototype of the New Testament and of the giving of God's Son Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice for our sin.

Let's pray. God our Father we thank you that you make your standards so clear to us in the laws of the Bible. We pray that we may come to you for forgiveness and mercy knowing that we fail to reach your standards.

We thank you that in giving Jesus your Son you provide the means for forgiveness and the certainty of a life with you forever.
we thank you in Jesus name. Amen.