

Case Law

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- [0 : 0 0] I don't know if you know this, but after the American Civil War, the veterans would have to come to Washington, D.C. personally to make their claims for their military pensions.
- And when they arrived, they had to wait while the clerk physically went looking through the records for their papers. And they found that all the papers were bound with red tape.
- That's where the expression comes from, red tape. It means an excessive bureaucracy. It means a strict adherence to formalities and regulations, red tape.
- When I was an accountant, we used to have these meetings once a month where we'd be updated on the latest changes to all the tax laws. And in the middle of one of these meetings, the legal consultant, he stopped and he said, Do you know what? Do you reckon there are enough laws already for an island of 26 million people?
- Red tape. Tax returns. Centrelink claims. Medical forms. Medicare. Occupational health and safety. COVID safety laws.
- [1 : 0 6] It's very easy, isn't it, to say, Do you reckon we've got enough laws already for an island of just 26 million people? Laws are burdensome and excessive. They stop us getting things done.
- And they feel like red tape. And that is the attitude that we might have when we come to our passage today. Because what it is, is a chunk of Old Testament laws.
- They don't seem nearly as exciting as golden calf in a few weeks time. And what's more, they're harder to apply to Melburnians in 2022.
- And I don't know if you heard when it was being read, the laws talk about slavery and the death penalty. They're much more controversial to hear. Part of me wants to skip over our passage or put a line through them and to dismiss it as red tape.
- But the practice here in our church is expository preaching. That means we just preach what comes next. We don't pick and choose what we want to look at.
- [2 : 0 9] The Holy Spirit sets the agenda. We just preach what comes next. And the Holy Spirit has assembled these case laws. They're case laws. He's assembled them for our training.
- It's the Ten Commandments applied on a case-by-case basis to the ins and outs of life in Israel. So if this happens, then do that.
- If they do this, then you do that. Case laws keep Israel loving God and loving their neighbor through the sin and messiness of their lives. And that means they're written to a specific time and place, as Andrew said.
- They may seem strange to us, controversial even. We may smirk and squint and laugh at what we hear. But remember, in hundreds of years from now, people may laugh at the idea of mask laws in a church.
- They may laugh at the idea of taking only 100 mls of fluid on a plane. They are case laws. We don't have to obey the letter of them because we are not in Old Testament Israel.
- [3 : 1 6] But nor do we forget that they exist either because God's morality is unchanging. What mattered to God then matters to God today.

Jesus takes the heart of these case laws and he reapplies them for New Testament believers. And so what we're going to do is look at four types of case laws.

And the idea of my aim is that you will see that God's laws are nothing like red tape, but the words of a father who's trying to steer his children through the sin and the messiness of their lives.

So first, we're going to tackle slavery just for something easy. So slavery, your Bibles there call it servanthood or being a servant, but it's the same word slavery.

Can you see 21 verse 2 in your Bibles? Page 76, 21 verse 2. If you buy a Hebrew slave or a Hebrew servant, he's to serve you for six years.

[4 : 19] But in the seventh year, he should go free without paying anything. If he comes alone, he's to go free alone. But if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons and daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master and only the man shall go free.

And these are the laws that make us nervous and squirm. There are sorts of laws we hope our friends don't find out about when they flick through a Bible. How can you believe in a God who condones slavery?

But just because the Bible describes a situation doesn't mean it prescribes it as something we should follow. Slavery, it can be what happened in Egypt.

Forced servitude, bondage to Pharaoh. But it also can be an economic arrangement when you need to pay off debts. Sort of like a form of bankruptcy.

You can see that in verse 2. But in the seventh year, the slave shall go free without paying anything. It was like a financial arrangement, a bankruptcy in ancient form.

[5 : 29] And if everyone kept the Ten Commandments, perhaps you wouldn't need these arrangements in the first place. These laws don't express God's ideal, but what to do when his people act in less than ideal ways.

And that is something the Pharisees got wrong in Jesus' time. Do you remember when they challenged Jesus? They asked him about divorce in Mark's Gospel. They said, well, the Old Testament says we can give each other certificates of divorce.

So surely that's okay. And Jesus says, it was because of your hardness of heart that he wrote you this law. Those concessions don't mean God was pro-divorce.

But he knew how hard-hearted his people were. He wanted a way to limit the damage and provide for them through the sin and messiness of their lives.

Divorce laws were not God's ideal, but what to do when Israel behaved in less than ideal ways. And I wish I knew that about Old Testament laws when all the people I know would challenge me that God condones these controversial things.

[6 : 44] See, I said to you, these laws make us nervous and squirm. But the problem wasn't with God, was it? The problem was with me and my feeble understanding.

All of his word is good and useful for training and rebuking. Andrew said before, we must never be embarrassed by the Bible. When people can't think of a good reason for a controversial passage, they assume that there can't be one.

But why should that be the case? They never assume that the problem lies with them and their understanding. You see, even in slavery laws, God's big concern was for the protection of the slave.

Let me show you what I mean. Verse 2, if you buy a Hebrew servant, he's to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he's allowed to go free. Verse 5, verse 5 envisages a situation where a slave would love their master.

And so God permits him to stay under his master's protection for the rest of his life. Verse 8, it provides for a daughter who's sold into slavery. It talks about the master owing her a duty of faithfulness.

- [7 : 58] That she can marry into that richer family and then be given the rights of a daughter. Verse 20, anyone who beats their male or female slave with a rod must be punished.

While slavery is not an ideal situation, these laws provide for the protection of them under an Israelite roof. They are a million miles away from the whips of Pharaoh.

They're nothing like the brutality of the African slaves in the Americas and the New World. The application for us here, we don't sell each other into slavery.

But as we heard in our New Testament passage in Romans, we owe each other a debt of love. The heart of these laws was God's loving concern for the slaves.

That even the masters were to love them and look after their protection. While slavery is not God's ideal, these laws provide a way through the messiness of a non-ideal situation.

- [9 : 05] They provide a way that God's people can still love their neighbors, even if they're slaves. That's slavery. Let's do what I'm calling next is criminal justice, which is 21 verse 22 in your Bibles.

I'm just going to get some water. Just a sec. I wouldn't survive the end if I didn't.

Sorry. 21 verse 22. These are laws about criminal justice. If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely, but there's no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows.

Look over at 22 verse 1. 22 verse 1. And obviously God doesn't condone hitting pregnant women and stealing livestock.

It's clear that life is precious to him from these commands, but his people won't always have the same ideal as him. And so he provides a way for justice to prevail.

- [10 : 20] Notice firstly with God's justice that a penalty has to be handed down. There are courts and judges, fines and repayments. The impact of the victim is taken into consideration.

Her husband is consulted as to what the damage is. A penalty is handed down. Secondly, notice that God considers how culpable we are.

Look at 21.12. 21.12. Anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death. There's a penalty. However, if it is not done intentionally, but God lets it happen, they're to flee to a place I will designate.

Again, if anyone schemes and kills a person deliberately, that person is to be taken from my altar and put to death. A person's culpability was taken into consideration.

Did they intend to cause harm? Were they reckless and negligent with their standard of care? Were they aware of the risks before they acted? These are the tests of culpability that have made their way into Australian common law.

- [11 : 25] But they find their roots in God's word in our Exodus passage today. Where God brings justice to bear on the messiness and the sin of life.

Thirdly, notice about God's justice. Notice how proportionate it is that the punishment fits the crime. If anyone strikes a person with a fatal blow, that person is to be put to death.

Life really matters to God. It's precious to him. With the pregnant woman, verse 23. If there is serious injury, you are to take life for life.

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. When it comes to God's justice, he says there is a penalty for sin.

That a person is to take responsibility for their actions. And that the punishment must fit the crime. And because God's moral character doesn't change, this is the same standard of justice we can expect on the final day.

[12 : 30] When God says in Romans that he will render to everyone according to what they have done. And just like slavery laws, it's tempting to be nervous and squirm when the Bible seems to condone the death penalty.

The idea that God is a brute or a monster is a common objection to Christianity. But it assumes that our sense of justice is fairer than his.

When terrible things happen on the news, like this week with that terrible shooting in America, don't we cry out that people are held responsible? Don't we want a penalty to be handed down?

And most of all, that the punishment would fit the crime? We all cry out for justice, but people struggle to let God sit in the judge's seat. What's more, sinful people, like us, like the world, we need to be very careful when railing against God's justice as though he was a brute.

When looking at these laws and shaking our fists. Because in God's justice, sinful people get what they deserve. If the punishment for sinning against our creator were to fit the crime, we'd all be in hell.

[13 : 50] We don't want justice, actually. What we really need is mercy. We need mercy and forgiveness and graciousness and kindness. What we need is a savior for that last day.

John 3.16. For God so loved the world that he sent his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish on that final day, but have eternal life.

We don't want justice, really. We need mercy. We need a savior. Here are laws about crime and punishment that make people nervous.

They're hard to understand and controversial to hear, but it's clear that life is very precious to God. It's clear that his sense of justice is as fair as you can get.

And what's more, these laws show that he's not an out-of-control brute, but a loving God who knows how to be merciful and kind, who knows how to be gracious, who has to deal again and again and again with a people who might actually hit a pregnant woman or might actually steal their neighbor's ox, who don't value life the way he does.

[15 : 04] That is criminal justice. We'll look at social justice now, which is the back of chapter 22. The back of chapter 22. In this section, you'll notice lots of laws about poor people and the needy, about widows and orphans, fatherless people.

It's clear that God has a heart for social justice, and many Christians use these verses as a mandate to care for poor people in the world. But the pattern in these verses is that social care begins first within the Commonwealth of Israel.

It's first within Israel. So look at 22.22. Do you not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless? If you do and they cry out to me, in other words, they pray to God, they're Israelites, he says, I will certainly hear their cry.

22.25. If you lend money to one of my people who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal. Charge no interest.

23.6. Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. The idea is that care goes to the Israelites first.

[16 : 25] It's care within the nation. And you can see the same pattern in the New Testament as well. So can I have a slide, please? This is the New Testament. This is the first church.

They shared everything they had. There was no needy persons among them. It was distributed to anyone who had need. Galatians 6.10. So then as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Next slide, please. Next one. In other words, the orphans and the widows, the poor and the needy, they are people who are rich in faith.

They are Christians. Again, next slide, please. Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says, go in peace, keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?

The principle for us today is that social justice begins within the nation, within the church. It's within the church first. And when it comes to those outside, our concern is for the lost.

[17 : 47] It's care for the poor within the church, care for the lost outside the church. Obviously, we care for poor people in the world as well, but we just need to be careful not to dilute our primary concern from saving their souls.

There is so much need in the world that to deal only with people's health and well-being would take away all our resources very quickly and stop us preaching the gospel.

What's more, if the church doesn't prioritize preaching the gospel to the world, no one else will. It's caring for the poor within the church, caring for the lost outside the church.

And so, does our financial giving reflect that priority? Church first, social needs of the world second. When we hear of an earthquake or flood on the news, does our first concern go for the churches that are flattened, for the brothers and sisters in need, or is it just to the world at large?

I've lost count of the amount of times our Bible study groups have rallied around other members when they're in a time of trouble, how regular church members care for one another.

[19 : 03] Bible study groups, for example, they are units of care within the larger church, especially one as large as ours. When we heard about the war in the Ukraine, we all gave money and we bought a bus and it ferries people to this day out of danger.

Great. But we gave money to people who would not only buy a bus, but also prioritize telling those refugees about Jesus, who would buy Ukrainian Bibles and put them in their hands and talk to them about them every day while they're staying in that house.

The pattern of loving others here is caring for the poor and needy within the church, caring for the lost outside the church. That is the model in the Old and New Testament of the Bible.

Just quickly, that's social justice. We don't have time to look at it, but the last group of laws are about worshipping God. I've put it on your handout. The idea is that there are laws about worshipping God before and after our passage today.

In the middle are laws about slavery, justice and social care, the ones that we looked at. The idea is that worshipping God begins with obeying his word in the middle.

[20 : 20] That's how it works. And all those case laws that we looked at, the heart of all of them is loving other people. Loving God, worshipping him. In the middle, loving others.

That's the heart of the case laws. They direct how we treat people and animals, friends and enemies, innocent people, guilty people, slaves, family members.

It shows that God is interested in every area of our lives, that no matter what we do, we keep loving our neighbour as ourselves. The temptation with a passage like this that is difficult to preach, controversial to hear, hard to understand, is that we skip over it.

That we get our pens out and just put a line through it and turn the page and move to something else. Or to assume that the problem is with God, that he is the monster and that we are so right in our understanding.

But I hope you can see from today that God's laws are nothing like what we might have thought before we open the passage today. They're nothing like red tape that get in the way of life, but rather help us navigate through the sin and messiness of the ins and outs of our lives.

[21 : 33] It's a privilege, isn't it, to have God speak to us. We should treasure his words, not just because we love how the old fits with the new or how Jesus is on every page, but because all of scripture is God-breathed.

Even a tricky Exodus passage. It's God-breathed and useful for us, for our training, rebuking, correcting, and encouraging in righteousness so that God's people would be equipped for every good work.

If we don't understand that these are the loving words of a father who are trying to steer us through life, we will be tempted to treat his words like red tape, like burdensome laws that get in the way of our lives.

And even though we make a mess of what we're doing, our passage today shows that he's deeply interested in every aspect of what we do. People, animals, slaves, innocent people, all the like.

His laws guide and protect. They limit our damage and the harm that we cause so that we can look more like his son, even in the Old Testament.

[22 : 43] Speaking of his son, 1 John chapter 5 says this, And so let me pray that we would not treat them that way.

Father God, thank you so much for your words.

Thank you that you are good and kind and loving. We're sorry that you have to deal with the sin and messiness of our lives. But thank you that you try to steer us through, that you want justice to prevail, that you want care for the poor, that you want protection for the weak, and that above all that you want us to love you and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Father, please would we owe a debt of love to one another? We thank you that we are released from your laws, but please would we apply the heart of loving our neighbours as ourselves.

Thank you that all of your word is good for us. Help us to not treat it like a burden. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.