

# Why Bother With Biblical Law?

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Why bother with biblical law? For many of us in our churches it's a rhetorical question. It doesn't need an answer because it's obvious. We shouldn't bother with biblical law because it doesn't matter any more, now Jesus is here. We say: 'The law reveals the character of God, which we now see in the face of Christ, so why bother?' It's a dead letter, a closed book, and frankly irrelevant. The only people who bother about it are academics who obviously have too much time on their hands. Or freaky sects who are trying to clone the red heifer in Numbers 19 because they think it'll speed up Jesus' return!

But there are in fact all sorts of reasons in the New Testament why we should take biblical law seriously.

## **1. Jesus took *Torah* seriously and He expects us to as well**

The place to start, it seems to me, is to look at how Jesus treats Scripture. We must treat Scripture as Jesus treats Scripture. And when we know how He treats it, that must be the paradigm for how we treat it.

There's no question that Jesus treats *all* of the Scriptures, including the Pentateuch, as the Word of God. So when the Sadducees have a debate with Jesus about the resurrection He says: "... have you not read what was said *to you by God*: [and then He quotes what God says in Exodus 3:6] "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"" (Matthew 22:31).

We have a habit of referring to the 'Old Testament.' And that's part of the problem. We live in a neophiliac society, where we automatically privilege what is *new*, simply because it *is* new, so we tend to think 'old' means 'out of date.' But that's not how Jesus sees it. He says: it is the Word of God *to you*. And we are to live by "*every word* that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

So it's all the Word of God for Jesus, and Jesus doesn't renounce it. Look at how Jesus deals with the law in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5. Jesus quotes how other people see the law, and misrepresent it, and says: "Listen to me and I'll tell you the *right* way to interpret that and build on it. Now that you're a disciple, My teaching is normative for you and the benefits of it is that you'll have a life that's going to be built on solid rock and not be in a state of disintegration and collapse." Jesus here is challenging *wrong* uses of the law and saying there is a *right* way of understanding it, under His direction. But He *doesn't* negate it. He is absolutely explicit on that point. He talks about *not* taking away from it:

17 “Do *not* think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have *not* come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever *does them* and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17-19).

Jesus sees Himself as *adding* to what God has said; in an authoritative and definitive way. That was in itself hugely controversial – and still is for people outside the Christian tradition. But it is *adding* to the canon of Scripture: not negating it or replacing it.

And it is applied to the whole world. Everyone in the whole world is called to repent and to become a disciple of Jesus. And if you are following Jesus, this is how you are to live, and it’s normative for everyone. Which is why we go into the entire world! Jesus’ summary of the Law and the Prophets – ‘loving God and loving neighbour’ – covers both Jews and Gentiles.

So it’s ironic that some people argue that we shouldn’t pay any attention to biblical law because we should be focusing on Jesus. But this misses the point. It’s precisely *because* we focus on Jesus that we have to take seriously the things *He* takes seriously. There’s a phrase in the Jewish writings of the Mishnah (roundabout 200 AD) that says: “May you be covered in the dust of your rabbi.” The idea was that you were following your Rabbi so closely that you got covered in his dust as you walked behind.

So, Jesus took *Torah* seriously and He expects us to as well – partly because:

## **2. Biblical law teaches us who Jesus is**

We say: “Jesus fulfils the law” – so we say don’t need to know anything about it! But that’s bizarre, isn’t it? It’s precisely because the *Torah* prophesises about *Jesus* – the Person who we say matters most in our lives – that we need to understand it. Because we are talking about Jesus! **We are talking about one person and one life that is so cosmically and eternally significant that we need the entire history of God’s dealings with humanity and with His people in order to understand who He is.** So if we don’t really know much about *Torah* and if we don’t understand how it relates to Him then we have diminished our understanding of who Jesus is.

It’s like having a statue of someone, and then someone comes along and chips a bit off. It’s not such a good likeness. Or imagine someone coming along with a metal pole and knocking the head off (which happened with a statue of Margaret Thatcher some years ago). I think this is what it’s like when we don’t pay attention to those parts of the Bible which Jesus says talk about Him. Of course we say: “I meet Jesus every day.” I’m sure that’s true! But we have to be careful we’re not just entertaining our own personal vision of who we think Jesus is, which doesn’t match up to who Jesus really is. Or we could be in danger of ending up with a ‘Jesus’ which is a just a version of ourselves. We could end up with ‘Strict Jesus.’ Or ‘Indulgent Jesus.’ The Jesus of our own sinful imaginations.

When we understand biblical law better, we get a better understanding of who Jesus is. If we try to understand Jesus without it, then we're not going to understand Jesus as well as we might. It's a bit like reading a musical score: if we just focus on the top line, it isn't going to sound as good as if it would if we brought in all the other notes as well. God expects us to play the whole thing.

So, Jesus took *Torah* seriously and He expects us to as well – partly because biblical law teaches us who Jesus is. So it's not surprising then that:

### **3. The New Testament takes *Torah* seriously – and expects us to as well**

The New Testament takes *Torah* seriously but, as in the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospels, it's *Torah* understood under Jesus' direction. There's a whole tradition in the Bible, going right back to Moses, about what counts and what doesn't count as a valid interpretation of biblical law. We need to be aware of this. I mentioned a moment ago how Jesus challenged bad interpretations of the *Torah* and put forward His own authoritative interpretation on certain, key, issues. Paul also challenges bad interpretations of the law, and upholds right interpretations. So it follows from this there are two things we have to do, as Christians, in relation to biblical law:

- (a) We've got to oppose the *wrong* use of the law (as Jesus and Paul did); and
- (b) We've got to affirm the *right* use of the law (as Jesus and Paul did).

The fact there are right and wrong interpretations of *Torah* is part of the reason there's difficulty around the subject. We need to recognise that the New Testament's word for 'law' (*nomos*, which has the sense of 'norms') can mean different things in different contexts. So we always have to look at the context to see what's going on when the New Testament talks about 'law.'

There are times when we have to oppose the wrong use of the *Torah*. For example, in the early church it was used by people as a sort of cultic 'badge of honour' to put up barriers between Jews and Gentiles. That was a wrong use of the law. Why? Because Jesus came to abolish ethnic distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, so if we say that obeying circumcision and food laws are necessary for salvation we are denying the Gospel. We see how Paul deals with the false teachers, and their motives, in *Galatians*. He says: the only reason you're requiring the Galatian church to be circumcised is to try and curry favour with the Jewish authorities by converting Gentiles to a form of Judaism. You want to create a pseudo-Jewish sect of which you are the leaders *and* you want to escape any persecution for the cross of Christ. That's a wrong use of the law, and it brings death. There are other examples from elsewhere in Paul's letters.

But to speak of a *wrong* way of using the law is to acknowledge there is also a *right* use of the law. And that is upheld in the New Testament. Paul concludes, in Romans 7:12: "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." Elsewhere in 2 Timothy 3:16 Paul says: "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

We've seen that Jesus took *Torah* seriously and He expects us to as well – partly because biblical law teaches me who Jesus is. We've also seen that the New

Testament also takes *Torah* seriously, and expects us to as well. This is partly because we are risen with Christ. This is my fourth point:

#### **4. We are risen with Christ**

One of our hang-ups about biblical law is that we're scared of sliding into 'legalism.' If you say anything to a Christian audience about biblical law, someone is liable to mishear you as saying: "But you're putting us under the law!" (Of course, as I mentioned a moment ago, that's to interpret *Galatians* without any regard for the problems Paul was addressing). So it's important to say that another reason why biblical law matters is because of the resurrection – which, let's face it, has nothing to do with 'legalism'!

As a Christian, I am saved by grace alone, through faith in Christ. I am raised with Christ, I am seated in heavenly places. God looks on me as He looks on Christ. As Calvin says: "There is no gap in space or time between me and the risen Lord Jesus." If it is the case that I am joined to Christ – the Messianic King – so that what is true of Jesus is true of me, then that has enormous ethical implications. If He embodies the *Torah* in His kingly rule, of caring for the weak, and upholding justice, and all the rest, then these things must be true of my life as well. I am in Christ, and that is what Christ is like. Moreover, Jesus' bodily resurrection affirms our humanity and tells us there must be a right way for all humans to live. It's the future – God's future purposes – announced in the present. And if it is what's going to happen in the future, then it must be true now. Of course there's a 'not yet' dimension. But no Christian can sensibly say: 'I know I'm going to live like Jesus in the future, but I don't need to live in that way now.' It doesn't make sense. Our calling is to live as the people we in fact *are*.

It's not surprising that the resurrection carries ethical authority. Israel's Exodus from bondage in Egypt carried ethical authority for the Israelites: she had to treat slaves and asylum seekers in a certain way because of how she had been treated. It was her new identity. So how much more does our Exodus from the bondage of sin and death carry ethical authority for Christians? Because of what Jesus has done for us – precisely because I *have* been raised to new life – my life can't be the same again. I have a new identity. I have union with Christ.

That's why the New Testament holds together *Christian conversion* and *ethical authority*. So in Colossians 3:1 (which is a great book on the subject of union with Christ) Paul says: "*since* then you have been raised with Christ [which is the case], set your hearts on things above [the command]"). The resurrection carries ethical authority. We see this over and over again in Paul's teaching where he says: if you call yourself a Christian there are certain things that you *must* do; and there are certain things you must *not* do. We have ethical continuity with the *Torah*, because Jesus fulfils it, and we are in Christ. That's our identity. And so all the things which attract the death penalty in the Hebrew Bible are grounds for exclusion from the kingdom of heaven in the New Testament. That's not legalism. It's a basic function of the fact that you have union with Christ. If this is who I am, then I should live like it now.

These are all things which were well understood. Augustine and Luther spoke about the difference between living 'under' law (bad) and living 'in' the law (good). So what stops the slide into legalism? It is the recognition that biblical law is all about

life, and what it means to live life well. Jesus summarises the Law and the Prophets as depending, or hanging on two commands:

“... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself...” (Matthew 22:37-40).

Love is a quality of relationships. So as far as Jesus is concerned the big idea is relationships. It's all concerned with the quality of relationships, human flourishing, what it means to live well. That's the *opposite* of what we fear from legalism. As the Psalmist says: “I run in the path of Your commands, for You have set my heart free.” The idea that biblical law automatically leads to legalism is just absurd. It's not a duty or a burden but a way of resourcing us to enjoy life. They are invitations to life. They are all better ways of doing things. They are like a sachet of plant food which brings out the best in the flowers.

People say, in response to that: “Well, if we ‘love God’ and ‘love our neighbour’, we’re already doing everything that *Torah* requires. So why bother with it?” But that's a bit disingenuous. It seems to affirm what biblical law is all about it but, at the same time, it shuts the door on it because it says that we don't have to pay any attention to the detail. But the detail is important. That brings me to the next reason why we need to take biblical law seriously:

##### **5. It means we can be specific about what it means to ‘love God’ and ‘love our neighbour’...**

We can say things like “love God” and “love your neighbour” and everyone can agree with us because it's warm and fuzzy. We think we can define what those things mean! But when *God* commands us to ‘love our neighbour,’ how do we know what that means? If we look at where the ‘love your neighbour’ commandment is found, for example, we find that it's in Leviticus 19, which is concerned with social justice. And it's very specific! It means being generous towards immigrants, paying people immediately for their work, not exploiting other people's weaknesses for a laugh and so on. Lots of things that would have enormous challenges for our economy and our culture, if we let them out of the box for half a second. It's the context which *shows* us what ‘love your neighbour’ means. It's where we get the substance from.

We can't ignore the detail. We need the detail. It's how we respond to the creative, redemptive, sustaining and sanctifying acts of God. God is a God of order. We don't just respond ‘in the abstract’. It has to be specific and detailed if it's going to mean anything. But of course, it's when we get specific and start talking about sexual behaviour, the use of money and limiting our take from the environment – (all things that Lev. 19 talks about, and that's just one chapter!) – then we start threatening people's interests. It shows us where the rubber hits the road – and what loving our neighbour *really* means.

That applies even to some of the detail we might think ‘trivial’. For example, Paul's teaching regarding the obligations owed to an apostle:

“... For it is written in the law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.’ Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake? ... (1 Cor. 9:7-11; Paul speaking)

I daresay that’s exactly the sort of law we’d be inclined to write off, if the New Testament didn’t keep taking us back to *Torah*.

It’s the same thing in regard to ‘loving God.’ Again, biblical law helps us to be specific about what that means. Not that it tells us everything: its purpose, as the Psalms remind us, is to make *wise*. Which is why we find ourselves in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says: “Of course you shouldn’t murder, but if you really want to be like your Heavenly Father then you won’t even nurse anger against your brother.” The point is that, wherever there’s a tendency to go hazy on what loving God and neighbour requires, biblical law is there to point the way. This is true not only for private but also for public life.

This brings us onto our final reason. Biblical law helps us to be specific about what it means to ‘love God’ and ‘love our neighbour’:

#### **6. ... so we can be a force for good in public life**

If we’re serious about loving our neighbour, sooner or later we have to be concerned with public life and the organisation of our society. It’s not enough simply to be concerned with the victims of, for example, people trafficking. We have to be concerned with the causes of people trafficking and the way our society is organised which allows it to happen. That too is a vital part of what love for neighbour means.

It’s easy to criticise people in power (fun too!). But it’s not enough simply for Christians to criticise those who have responsibility. We are called to put forward a different, positive, agenda. In 1 Peter 2:15, Peter speaks about the importance of ‘doing good.’ He says:

“15 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.”

Bruce Winter, in an important book *Seek the Welfare of the City*, argues that this doesn’t simply mean living an ethical, decent life: it means ‘work for public benefactions.’ In a context where first-century cities would have food riots over lack of food, there was a duty on wealthy members of the church to ensure civic order and cohesion by providing corn and food. By ‘doing good’ – by being a publicly visible part of the welfare system, for example – you are seen as being a good citizen and the credibility and reputation of the church is established. That was all the more important in the context of quite a difficult relationship with the Roman authorities. The same is true today. We are to seek the welfare of the city. It’s a way of saying to the Australian Government: “look at how we are positively able to make a difference in our communities.” It’s another way in which the Resurrection – and the fact that we are raised in Christ – carries ethical authority. Because the Resurrection shows God’s commitment to our world and its restoration.

Where are we going to get it a positive social vision from? Obviously, if we're Christians, we have to get it from God's Word. So we need to be studying *all* of the Word, and we can't afford to neglect any part of it. God doesn't waste His breath! But developing and applying a positive, alternative, social vision is hard work. It's the image of Job 28. The search for wisdom is like a miner who has to crawl down deep tunnels to bring forth jewels from out of the darkness. We work it out in the fear of the LORD.

Some people might ask at this point: Why can't we just draw on Jesus' teachings when it comes to public policy? Why does it help to look at biblical law? Part of the reason is that biblical law is the *genre* of Scripture most obviously concerned with the organisation of civic society. So clearly it is of particular and direct relevance when it comes to developing a biblical social agenda. Of course Jesus' teachings to me as a private individual on turning the other cheek enables me to be salt and light. But it doesn't necessarily tell me what to do when I'm a judge adjudicating in a criminal law case. What do I do then? Or what about Jesus' teaching on the importance of serving God, not Mammon? Clearly, that teaches me where my priorities should lie when it comes to spending my money. But what about other people's money? It doesn't tell me what to do when I'm making day-to-day decisions in my job at the bank. Do I just give all the money away?!

This is where our study of biblical law is of value. It's because *Torah* has a public dimension that we can find out what structures and priorities God values in society as a whole. In fact, I'd go so far as to suggest that biblical law gives us a better sense of what Jesus would do *if* He occupied our job at the courtroom, or in the bank or whatever. And so we might find in *Torah*, for example, that justice is about punishing the oppressor, but it's also about lifting up the oppressed, and that can include the perpetrator as well. And so, because the images of justice are life-giving things, like a river, we should try to have constructive penalties that give the opportunity for putting things right between the parties and giving everyone a fresh start where that is possible. That gives us some ideas how Jesus would act if He had our job as a judge, which we might not work out simply from Jesus' teaching on 'turning the other cheek.' It's not the case that we have to choose between *either* Jesus' teachings *or* biblical law. It's 'both/and' and we need to get into the habit of reading the one in the light of the other. That's all part of what it means to think of Jesus as the 'fulfilment' of *Torah*.

There are those who would try to block off this reading, or teaching, of Scripture. They might say it is a 'flawed interpretation,' or somesuch, because it is not focused on Christ. But, again, we need to remember who Christ is. He is the Cosmic Christ. God plans that all authority should be summed up in Him:

"For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fulness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority" (Colossians 2:9-10).

So if we don't act on that and seek to apply that into every area of life, including public life, we are saying that there is a part of the world over which Christ does not exercise dominion.

It's precisely this sort of thinking that lies behind Paul's image of Christians being "citizens of heaven" (Phil. 3:20). Very often this is taken to mean that, as 'citizens of heaven', we don't have to be engaged in the public square because, after all, we're just waiting to 'go to heaven'. But nothing could be further from Paul's mind. He's writing to the Philippians in Philippi, which was a Roman colony. If someone in that colony of Philippi had said 'we are citizens of Rome' this wouldn't have meant 'so let's lie back and just look forward to living there.' The Roman emperors didn't want the Philippians to come to Rome (because the capital was already overcrowded and underemployed!). What they wanted was for the Roman citizen in a place like Philippi to bring Roman culture and rule to their immediate environment and the surrounding area and so to expand Roman influence. Their job wasn't to go to Rome but to do things in Philippi the way there were done in Rome. This is the picture Paul has in mind when he speaks of 'heavenly citizenship.' We are heavenly colonists and our job is to bring the life and rule of heaven to bear on earth. We are to do our best to order our civic life so that it matches the way things are done in heaven. "On earth as it is in heaven."

Some of you, as Christian lawyers, have incredible actual and potential for influence here in Brisbane, and in Australia, and around the world. It's a deep challenge for all of us to think through and work out what it means for us to give our primary allegiance, not to Rome but to heaven, and not to Caesar but to Jesus. In rising to this challenge – of what it means for us to love God and love neighbour, and to be a force for good in public life, we need to be fully equipped with all the resources God has for us. This includes the wisdom to be found in all the Scriptures, including biblical law.

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