

Jesus On (3):

The Law (Mt. 5:17-20)

Introduction

I googled two words this week, just for fun. I typed in "DUMB LAWS" and found that there are entire sites devoted to them.

One site, that I thought was the most fun, chronicled what they thought was the dumbest law for each state.

Here's a sampler:

In Alabama, stink bombs and confetti are against the law.

In Arizona, you aren't allowed to spit.

In Arkansas, it's against the law to mispronounce the name of the state. So they're obviously secure with themselves.

In California - known for their amazing wisdom -you aren't allowed to own, build or use a nuclear weapon. Glad they spelled that one out!

In Connecticut, you can't sell a pickle unless it bounces. I had to Google that one - apparently it's because that's how you can tell that it's ripe. Now who's going to go around testing that?!

In Florida, no matter how bad the day may have gone, you can't sell your child. You can give them away for free, you just can't sell them.

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In Georgia, you have to use your fingers when you eat fried chicken. It's against the law to use utensils.

In Idaho - and I'm going to say this one slowly so you catch it - it's against the law to engage in nonconsensual human consumption.

Translation: You can't engage in cannibalism unless you have the other person's permission.

The other person is, presumably, dead. But if you had their permission, you can have at it. And since it's not in Georgia, you could even use utensils.

You can't throw a snowball in Topeka, Kansas.

In Maine, you can't advertise on tombstones. I was thinking about that one... like... what ads would you run? Life insurance? Don't text and drive? Have you had your colonoscopy yet?

In Maryland, you can't swear while driving. I don't think I could live there.

In Minnesota, you can't grease a pig. I don't know why you'd want to, but you can't.

In Mississippi, there is a law on the books that soft drinks can be as big as you want and portions of food served at restaurants can be as big as anyone wants. Which is probably why Mississippi is also the most obese state in America.

In Las Vegas, where almost anything goes, you can't x-ray someone's feet to determine their shoe size.

In New Hampshire, you can't collect seaweed.

In Virginia, you can't own a skunk as a pet. Which I personally think really stinks.

You're probably wondering which one was picked for North Carolina.

There was a lot to choose from.

In North Carolina:

It's against the law to sing off-key.

Elephants may not be used to plow cotton fields. (I would love to know the story behind that one.)

I'm going to say this one slowly: Persons in possession of *illegal* substances must pay taxes on them.

So either they're dumb enough to do that or the lawmaker was dumb enough to think they would.

But the one they picked was this: it is a felony to steal more than \$1,000 of grease.¹

No more, no less - so when stealing grease, you have a \$999 cap.

Most of us don't like laws. And not just dumb ones. We don't even like smart, reasoned ones.

At least, when we experience having them enforced on us.

A law by its very definition is something that binds us, constrains us, dictates our actions.

It's a rule of conduct that has been established and then put on us from an outside authority.

And it's not just laws we don't like - we don't like the people associated with navigating the law.

As in, lawyers. Sorry all you attorneys out there, but you know how the populous feels about you.

My brother is a lawyer and one time, he sent me a list of some of the nastier "lawyer one-liners" floating around.

I kept the list so that I could use it against him sometime.

Here's some of what he sent me:

*What is the difference between a tick and a lawyer? A tick falls off of you when you die.

*What do you have when 100 lawyers are buried up to their neck in sand? Not enough sand.

*What is black and brown and looks good on a lawyer? A Doberman.

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*What do lawyers and sperm have in common? A one-in-3,000,000 chance of becoming a human being.

And one more:

*Did you hear that the Post Office just recalled their latest stamps? They had pictures of lawyers on them, and people couldn't figure out which side to spit on.

Now, if you think we don't like laws or anyone associated with laws, let me tell you what mixture of that we hate more than anything - the mix of law and religion.

Law and faith. Law and spirituality.

Which is why words like legalism, intolerance, judgmentalism and fundamentalism are some of the most hated words on the planet, and we can't stand anyone or anything associated with them.

We're in a series through the Sermon on the Mount, called "Jesus On," because that's what we get from the Sermon on the Mount - Jesus "on" just about everything.

Jesus on happiness, influence, marriage and divorce, worry, sex, relationships - it just goes on and on.

Today, we come to the part where we get Jesus on the law.

Let me read what He had to say and then we'll unpack it a bit:

"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. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:17-20, NIV)

Now for a lot of you, feeling the way you do about law and, particularly, law and spirituality, Jesus just lost some of His curb appeal.

But let's hear Him out, and see if He means what we think He means.

Or, if there is something about the law that He is talking about that will challenge our way of thinking.

I. The Meaning of "Law"

Let's begin with what Jesus is talking about when He uses the word "law."

The first understanding of the word "law" in the Bible has to do with the first five books of the Old Testament, known as the books of the law because they were based on the commandments God gave Moses.

The five books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The actual Hebrew word most often translated as "law" in the Old Testament, used more than 200 times, was the word "torah."

It's central meaning is that of instruction which has been received from a higher or superior authority on how to live.

"Torah" in the Old Testament came to be viewed as the way of life the people of Israel were to embrace and follow.

The law, or torah, was closely tied to the idea of covenant, for the covenant agreement made between God and the people of Israel was the foundation for the laws God gave.

The people of Israel were birthed into existence by God as a bridgehead of the human scene; to model what it could be like between God and man for the rest of the world to see and as a way of inviting the rest of the world to join in.

Essentially He said: "I'm your God. You're my people. Here are my laws."

The laws were seen as a gift from God to the people - the optimum way to live and the means of His blessing.

In other words, God said: "Everyone else on this planet is running around trying to figure out how to do it on their own. I'm not going to let that be the case for you."

"I'm going to tell you exactly how to do life, so that everyone else can see exactly how to do life. And they'll see how it's so much better, which will open the door to conversation."

The famed Ten Commandments were simply a summary of that law.

Now, there were two basic types of law: broad, categorical laws like the Ten Commandments and then case laws, which attempted to deal with very specific situations.

So you could say that the first kind of law you find in the Old Testament was akin to our Constitution in the U.S. - they are broad statements of law.

And then the second kind of law in the Old Testament is like our case law - the rulings the courts have made over time that have built up into all kinds of decisions for guidance on specific matters.

Some of the laws, when you read the Old Testament, seemed to be for all people at all times across all places - such as the Ten Commandments. While some seemed designed to apply only to specific cultural times and places and individuals.

When we get to the time of Jesus, however, the idea of "torah" not only meant the Old Testament Scriptures - which was the written law.

Something that happened over time. The law was added to. Professional, religious establishment figures decided that the law needed laws.

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And so to the written law, they added what was known as the oral law as well - the unwritten law.

This oral law is sometimes referred to as the tradition of the elders.

The people who brokered in these additions to the law were people known as Pharisees and Teachers of the law.

They were very religious, and considered to be the holiest people of the day.

They had taken the Old Testament and calculated that it contained 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions - and they had vowed to obey every single one of them.

And just to make sure that they didn't break one of those rules, they made rules about the rules and laws about the laws!

In fact, they came up with more than 1,500 additions.

That was the oral law they added to wrap around the written law.

Those of you who may have heard me teach on this before may have heard me give some examples of how this played out in their life - it was crazy.

For example, to avoid taking the Lord's name in vain which was the written law, they refused to even say God's name - even in honor and respect, worship or prayer.

To avoid committing adultery, they would lower their head whenever they passed a woman so that they wouldn't even look at her because, if they looked, they might lust.

Which is why the most holy of all were known as "bleeding Pharisees" because they were lowering their heads so much when they walked that they were always running into walls.ⁱⁱ

They would have gashes and blood coming down, so if you saw a bleeding Pharisee you would say, "Oh that guys' crushing it!"

And when they read that they should rest on the Sabbath and not work, they decided that they needed to figure up how many steps you could take on those days without it becoming work.

For whatever reason, they calculated that to take anything beyond 50 steps on the Sabbath was work, and therefore violated the law.

They also decided that on holy days a person could eat, but not cook.

That you could bandage a wounded person, but not apply medicine.

And, if you were a woman, you couldn't look in the mirror because you might see a gray hair. And if you saw a gray hair, you might be tempted to pluck it out. And plucking out a gray hair was considered work, and you couldn't work on that day.ⁱⁱⁱ

These were not people you wanted to party with.

II. Jesus and the "Fulfillment" of the Law

So that's a bit about the law.

And Jesus said - and this is where you may really misunderstand Him - that He did not come to abolish the law.

In fact, He wanted to uphold it. He wanted to see it front and center in every person's life.

Now before you take that and run with it, look at how Jesus finished that sentence because this is so important.

Let me read it again:

"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."
(Matthew 5:17, NIV)

Bookmark that word "fulfill."

To fulfill something means to make its meaning fully known, to complete it, to bring it to its goal.

Jesus made an incredible claim: He said that He was the end, the crowning completion, of God's revelation to the human race.

That His teaching, His work, His life, His death and resurrection, fulfilled - or brought to completion - what God had revealed up to that point as recorded in the Old Testament.

Every doctrine, every prophecy, every ceremonial system, every sacrifice, every ethic - in Jesus, it was all made complete.

It finally crossed the finish line God had intended all along. Which helps make sense of a lot of the Old Testament.

If you've ever scratched your head over certain things, this will help clear it up.

It means that the reason we don't sacrifice animals anymore is because Jesus was the ultimate and final sacrifice for all of sin for all of time.

It means that we don't worship at the temple through a high priest in Jerusalem anymore because Jesus is our High Priest and He has set up a temple of worship in our hearts.

And on and on it goes.

So everything God said stands, but our relationship to it has changed. Now, we come to it through Jesus' fulfillment of it.

All that the law and the prophets said about God, taught about God, stood for about God, came to its full and deepest meaning - its clearest picture - when God became flesh and walked the earth in the Person of Jesus.

So we read the Old Testament through the life and ministry and teaching of Jesus.

We look at His life and we see the law and the prophets come alive.

We see how God wanted all that He had said brought to bear on a life - fulfilled.

Which helps us see how Jesus could both support the law and also condemn the way people were screwing up in applying it.

He was so critical of the oral law, the traditions and teaching of the elders that had built up around what God had originally given.

He hated the way the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law had made up rule after rule after rule based on the law.

They had made it what it was never intended to be - which was something heavy and binding and burdensome and weighty, instead of something light and free and liberating. Designed to show us true North.

They were into the letter of the law, not its spirit.

They had made it a legalistic set of dos and don'ts, rather than something that directed you to a life with and for God.

Jesus hated that.

But He loved and lived the law itself - the written law - in it's full spirit and full principle.

In fact, His life was the perfect picture of it being fleshed out.

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Because, you see, the law is God and God is the law!

The law was nothing but a reflection of everything good and right, perfect and true, noble and holy.

The law was the transcendent standard of how things were meant to be.

This is how we should treat each other.

This is how we should think.

This is how we should treat the weak, the widow, the orphan, the poor.

This is what a marriage should look like.

This is what a functional family looks like.

This is what parenting is about.

This is how we treat those who work for us and how we should treat those we work for.

This is how countries should interact, debts should be handled and arguments should be solved.

This is all about what is straight in a really crooked world.

All that is light, so you know what dark is.

All that is true, so you know what is a lie.

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So no wonder Jesus loved it.

The law was God and God was the law and Jesus was God in human form.

But Jesus also initiated a new day, He inaugurated a new era, where the law would no longer be the guiding principle for the Kingdom of God.

Not because it wasn't valid, but because it had been fulfilled.

Jesus moved it fully and finally away from its external, legalistic base to its internal, spiritual base.

This was God's plan all along.

Jesus moved the law from outward observance to inward motivation, which was always the law's intent and meaning.

It was always meant to be written on our hearts.

That's why, when asked to summarize the law...

And, by the way, teachers of the law were always so threatened by Jesus but amazed by Him at the same time (talk about a love-hate relationship), so they would always try to trick Him by asking the big Pharisaical questions to see how He would answer them.

One day, He was asked to summarize the law. In essence, they were baiting Him to see what He would have to say. Would He add to the 1,500? Would He take away from the 1,500? They were trying to find a "gotcha moment."

So this is what Jesus said when they asked about His take on the law: "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength - and your neighbor as yourself."

Love God. Love people. That's the law. That's it.

That's why the great Christian theologian Augustine, in the 5th century, said "love God, and do what you will."^{iv}

Meaning, if you truly love God, you are free to do nothing but follow that love. You don't need a set of spelled-out laws because if you truly love God, you would never do anything that would betray that love.

Is there a greater law than that? A greater guidance than that? Love God, and then do what you will from that love.

And you would never think of betraying the love of your life, would you?

III. Living the Law

Which helps makes sense out of what Jesus said at the end.

Take another look at His words:

"I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20, NIV)

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Okay, soak that in.

Jesus said, "If you don't do better than the legalists - the law-keepers, the rule-followers, the sin-patrol people - you won't even catch a glimpse of heaven."

Jesus didn't mean to get sucked up into out-DOING them.

You know, like maybe taking 49 steps instead of 50 steps on the Sabbath. Or instead of lowering your head when women passed, you should just move out into the desert and become a monk.

He wasn't saying people should exceed the righteousness and obedience and holiness of the religious establishment in DEGREE - to DO more - but to get past their level in KIND.

To be different spiritually altogether!

Because all that God was to them was a set of dos and don'ts - something that determined what you DID - not who you WERE.

And we're all so vulnerable to this.

It's so easy to fall into a legalistic set of rules and regulations to try and appear spiritual and gain acceptance from God.

To care more about appearance and how our reputation is perceived than about what's really inside our lives, our hearts, our attitudes.

When it comes to our spiritual lives, it's easiest to think like a Pharisee - to make our spiritual lives about how we look or how we conform.

So we make sure we listen to the right radio stations,
... talk in spiritual buzz-talk,
... follow extraneous moral codes,
... wear certain Christian messages on our shirts or bracelets,
... and participate in certain activities,
... and abstain from various things,
... and think we're being spiritual or engaging in a personal relationship with God.

Some of that may be all well and good. But that's what we *do*. It is not who we *are*.

Because spirituality is not about religion, but a relationship.

The truly spiritual life, the one that really lives by the law, goes beyond the righteousness of the Pharisees -

... beyond the spirituality of identity or boundary markers, beyond dos and don'ts.

Because here's what we do: we tend to order our lives like we do our Facebook page or Instagram feed.

Saying: "Let me present to you this mythical world that doesn't exist about my life. Let me make sure I look really happy, really polished, really popular.

"I'll make sure I look really spiritual and get all the right Instagram stuff, but then I'll go home at the end of the day as if I pulled off spirituality."

It's crazy. And Jesus was so frustrated that the people didn't get it, particularly the Pharisees.

One time it seemed as though He just had enough. He essentially said: "John the Baptist came eating locusts and wearing skins and living out in the desert and you didn't like Him. I came eating and drinking and hanging out with people and you don't like me.

"So... who do you like?"

What Jesus was after was for people to live out the PURPOSE for which the law was given for their life.

And not in some external, superficial, legalistic way, but through a transformed heart.

Jesus was saying that the spirituality of the Pharisees was no spirituality at all!

It was dead, lifeless and empty.

It made life with God all about doing, rather than being.

Because you can set up your lists, your policies, your procedures, your rules and regulations, and follow them to the tee, and have no intimacy, no life-change, no transformation, no connection with God at all!

Because authentic spirituality is not about dos and don'ts.

It's not about whether you can have a glass of wine or a craft beer (or whether you think someone else should).

It's not about whether or not you watch *Walking Dead*,

... or go to Vegas,

... or get a tattoo,

... or have cosmetic surgery.

If you make *not* doing those things what it means to follow Christ,

... even when there's freedom in Christ to do them,

... then you've missed what life in Christ is all about!

If there was one person on this planet who got this, it was a man named Paul - who began following Christ after trying to quell the movement through violence.

And He was passionate about it because he once went the legalistic route. And his world got rocked by Jesus.
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Let me read his words:

"Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more! I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin – a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault." (Philippians 4b-6, NLT)

Now stop there.

Paul says: "You want to talk about going the religion vs. relationship route? I used to out-religion everybody!

"You want a pedigree that went the works route - the legalism route - I was your guy."

So what was his verdict on all that?

Let's keep reading.

"I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith." (Philippians 3:7-9, NLT)

According to Paul, everything connected with legalism was just worthless. Garbage.

Only he didn't really say garbage.

He must've been pretty exercised, because he actually used a very earthy term - at least in the Greek language.

Translating it garbage fits... kind of... but it's actually pretty tame.

The word Paul used was "skuvala," and it was the term for manure or dung.

And not just any word for manure or dung.

"Skuvala" was the street slang for manure or dung.

Back in Paul's day, there would have been bumper stickers on the back of camels that said, "Skuvala happens."

Or in answering a dumb question, they would have said, "No skuvala."

Or if something bad happened, it would have been, "Oh, skuvala."

Let's just say that when it came to that word, there was a "skuvala-load" of applications.

And that's a powerful indictment, but Paul wants the essence of spirituality to reign supreme - He wants what Christ brings to a life to ring true.

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Let's give Jesus one more shot at this - this isn't from the Sermon on the Mount, but from a later address:

"[Jesus said] 'The religion scholars and Pharisees are competent teachers in God's Law. You won't go wrong in following their teachings on Moses. But be careful about following them. They talk a good line, but they don't live it. They don't take it into their hearts and live it out in their behavior. It's all spit-and-polish veneer. Instead of giving you God's Law as food and drink by which you can banquet on God, they package it in bundles of rules, loading you down like pack animals.'" (Matthew 23:1-4, Msg)

IV. Keeping the Law

But don't forget where we started.

If Jesus went on the warpath against legalism, remember He never went on the warpath against the law itself.

The life we are to live and the life that is to live in us.

So there's two big ways to screw this up: you make everything about external laws and rules - which is legalism -

... or you say there are no laws, there is no objective truth, there is no transcendent standard, by which we are to live.

In essence, we make up our own law. Our own sense of "rightness."

Jesus would have none of that, either.

Conclusion

What Jesus put forward was the law made alive.

The law fulfilled.

The law realized.

A dos and don'ts approach would say, "Do not murder. Hate all day long, but don't cross the line to draw blood."

Jesus said, "Let's start with do not hate. I want to talk about what's in your heart."

A dos and don'ts approach would say, "Do not commit adultery."

Jesus said, "Let's talk about lust. Let's talk about where adultery acts begin. Let's look at your inner world."

Jesus is after an "inside-out" faith.

An "inside-out" spirituality.

The law, written on the heart. Telling the heart what do in the best of ways.

And that's not a set of dumb law, that's a life-giving set.

Let's stand for a closing prayer.

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- i. <https://www.rd.com/funny-stuff/dumbest-laws-america/>
 - ii. Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 132.
 - iii. Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, p. 198.
 - iv. <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/augustine>