Law

June 14, 2020

Many of us hear the word, “law” and shudder… especially when used alongside the Bible. We interpret the New Testament to mean that we don’t need to wrestle with the Old Testament law anymore – we just need to love other people and trust in Jesus’ grace. And, whereas there is truth in that need for grace and love, we cannot forget that Jesus stated that He came to fulfill the Old Testament law, not get rid of it!

Over the summer, we are going to be discussing the Sermon on the Mount. In both our Wednesday videos and our weekly family devotionals, we’ll explore a few sections of the famous sermon in a bit more detail. But before we get into Matthew 5-7 deeper, we first have to understand that Jesus loved the law of Moses. Matthew 5-7 is a way of looking at the same law differently, because the people in Jesus’ time were looking at those laws in a way that hindered them instead of helped them.

Author Carmen Joy Imes, in her book *Bearing God’s Name*, reminds us that the law given to the Israelite people – the 613 “rules and regulations to live by in order to please God” looked a whole lot different to them than it does to us. In ancient Israel, where different cultures and religions aimed to serve gods they did not know how to please, the God of Israel offered grace, love, and freedom in revealing to His people what they could do to serve Him. So, instead of offering more uncertainty to those people in the ancient times, God offered clarity. That’s freedom!

Imes also made it clear in her book that God rescued His people from the clutches of the Egyptians *before* He gave them the law. In other words, He did not say to Moses and the Hebrews, “Okay, follow these rules, and I’ll rescue you from your oppression.” No, this law was given in grace just as much as the teachings of Jesus were. God frees, and then He guides. It’s the same thing we teach and learn from the New Testament, we are not saved by what we do, but by grace.

A final note – in our confirmation classes, we begin our conversation on the law by playing a game. We give the kids a ball and say, “okay, there are no rules, just play the game.” What happens next is confusion, followed by just tossing the ball around, then some questions like, “what do we do now?” and possibly frustration and annoyance at me, the one who is supposed to tell them what to do. In a way, that “freedom” to do whatever they want is restricting and frustrating. It’s why playgrounds have fences, why many sports have boundaries, and why foods have serving sizes. Without guidelines, we experience confusion, frustration, and in some cases, danger. The law was designed to protect, to offer guidance, and to fully enjoy life. We think of it as restricting, when in reality, it offers freedom and peace.

We could go on and on for days and weeks about the law. But it is important for us to establish it as something to be celebrated as part of our Biblical story, not something that should be tossed aside. It is something that invites us into God’s family, not something that prevents us from being a part of it. It definitely creates many questions, but it first provides more answers. As we talk about the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount this summer, maybe we should begin by looking at the Old Testament law in a different light. All of Jesus’ teachings and everything He did in His life was in accordance and obedience to that law.

*Questions for Reflection and Discussion*

1. Have you ever played a game that doesn’t have any rules? How does that go? It’s nearly impossible, isn’t it? (If you’ve never tried before, try now! Just remember, you can’t make up any rules!)
2. When you hear the words, “Old Testament Law”, what immediately comes to mind? Why do many of us view the law with a negative connotation?
3. When we believe that the law itself rescued us, and we are saved by our own actions in following the law rather than by the God who created and gave us the law, that is called legalism. Why is it so easy for us to fall into that trap when looking at the law? Is it possible that these Israelites, who lived almost 3,500 years ago, understood “law” and “rules” differently than we do?
4. Jesus often accused the Pharisees of this legalism, and that they weren’t understanding the true essence of the law. What do you think the law was originally intended for? Why did the Pharisees so often “get in trouble” with Jesus, even though they thought of themselves as following the law?
5. Read Matthew 22:34-40 together. What do you think verse 40 means? Jesus, in His ministry, did not change any Old Testament laws, but in many ways He clarified and simplified them. This wouldn’t work for every law in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but try sometime to look at some of them and put it one of 2 categories: does this law show love and devotion to God? Or does this law show love and care for other people?
6. This is certainly a dense topic – it’s something that I (Collin) have personally been exploring and learning about since I was a Freshman in college – so I know this won’t resonate with everyone at first. But I do believe it is important for us to understand what the law is designed to do before we can fully appreciate what Jesus did for us. But it’s not going to happen overnight – it’s a lifelong journey. What is just one thing you can take away from this devotional about the law that will help you see it in a different light?