

Case Law

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- [0 : 00] I don't know if you know this, but after the civil war in America, veterans would have to come to Washington, D.C. personally to put in their claim for military pensions.
- They had to wait for the clerk to look through the civil records until their papers were found. When they found the papers, they were bound up with red tape. That's where the expression comes from, red tape.
- Red tape means an excessive bureaucracy. It means a strict adherence to formalities and rules, red tape. When I was an accountant, we used to have these meetings every month where we'd be updated on the latest tax laws.
- It was very exciting. But halfway through one of the meetings, the legal consultant stopped and said, do you know what? Do you reckon we've got enough laws already for an island of 26 million people?
- Red tape. There's tax returns, Centrelink claims, Medicare, OH&S, COVID safety laws. It's easy for all of us to say, do you know what?
- [1 : 03] Do you reckon we've already got enough laws for an island of 26 million people? Laws are burdensome and excessive. Like red tape, they stop us getting things done, or so we think.
- And that is the attitude that we might bring when we look at our passage today, because really, it's a bunch of Old Testament laws. They're not nearly as exciting as golden calf in a few weeks' time.
- What's more, they're harder to apply to Melbourne in 2022. And what's more, they talk about slavery and the death penalty, and so much more controversial for us to hear.
- Part of me wants to skip over today, you know, get my red pen and just put a line through it and dismiss it as, you know, red tape. But our practice here at this church is expository preaching.
- And that means we just preach what comes next. We don't pick and choose. We let the Holy Spirit set the agenda. And we just preach the next passage which comes along.
- [2 : 05] And the Holy Spirit has assembled these case laws for our training. It's the Ten Commandments applied on a case-by-case basis to the various ins and outs of life.
- If this happens, then do that. If they do this, then you do that. Case laws, they keep Israel loving God, loving their neighbours in the sin and messiness of their lives.
- And that means they're written to a specific time and place. They may seem strange to us. We might, you know, squirm and get nervous about death penalty laws and things like that.
- But hundreds of years from now, people will probably laugh at the idea of mask laws in a church. Or the fact that you can't take 100 mls of fluid on an aeroplane.
- They're case laws. We don't obey the letter of them because we're not in Old Testament Israel. But nor do we forget that they exist either. You see, God's moral principles, what he cares about, are unchanging.

- [3 : 12] And so Jesus takes the heart of these tricky laws and applies them for New Testament believers today. So what we're going to do is look at four types of case law.
- The idea is, my aim is that you will think that these are nothing like red tape, but rather the words of a father who's trying to steer his wayward children through the sin and messiness of their lives.
- So first, let's tackle something like slavery. So can you see in your Bibles, chapter 21, verse 2, slavery. It says servants in your Bible, but it's the same word, slavery.
- Verse 2, 21, 2. If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he should go free without paying anything. If he comes alone, he is 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 or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master and only the man shall go free.
- [4 : 18] And these are the sorts of laws that make us nervous and squirm. They're the sorts of laws we hope our friends don't find out about. How can you believe in the God of the Bible when he quite clearly condones slavery?
- But just because the Bible describes a situation of slavery doesn't mean it prescribes it as something that should be followed.
- Slavery, it can be the situation in Egypt, you know, in bondage and servitude of Pharaoh. But it also can be a social or economic arrangement, which is why verse 2 says, In the seventh year, the slaves shall go free without paying anything.
- It was like a bankruptcy arrangement to work off your debts. If everyone kept the Ten Commandments, perhaps there'd be no need for slavery in the first place.
- But these laws don't express God's ideal. But what to do when the situation of life is less than ideal? And that is something the Pharisees got wrong in Jesus' time as well.
- [5 : 26] Do you remember they questioned Jesus on divorce? They said, Moses wrote us laws about certificates of divorce, so surely that's okay. And Jesus says in Mark chapter 10, it was because of your hardness of heart that he wrote you these laws.
- These concessions, they don't mean God is pro-divorce, but he knew how hard-hearted his people were. So he wanted to limit the damage that their lives cause, that their messiness causes.
- Divorce laws, they weren't God's ideal. But what to do when Israel behaved in less than ideal ways? And I wish I knew that years and years ago when people would insult God for condoning controversial things in the Bible.
- See, I said to you that these laws make us nervous and squirm. But the problem isn't with God, is it? It's with me and my feeble understanding.
- All of his word is good and useful for us. We must never be embarrassed by the Bible. When people can't think of a good reason for a controversial thing, it doesn't mean there isn't one.
- [6 : 41] It's just that they assume that the problem lies with God rather than with them and their feeble minds. You see, even in slavery laws, the big idea is God's love and concern for the slave.
- Follow me through. 21 verse 2. If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years, but in the seventh year he shall go free.
- Verse 5. It envisages a situation where a slave loves his master. And so God permits him to stay forever under the protection of his master's roof.

Verse 8. It provides for a daughter who's sold into slavery, that the master owes her a duty of faithfulness, that she can marry into that richer family and then be granted the rights of a daughter.

21 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 slaves' protection under Israelite rule.

[7 : 49] And for us today, we don't enslave one another to pay off our debts. But our Romans 9 passage, which Sue read for us, it says that we do owe each other a debt of love.

And that was the heart of these slavery laws. You could hear God's desire that we love the slave, even though there's a master-slave relationship going on, that the slaves are protected under the roofs of their masters.

God's laws here are a million miles away from the whips of Pharaoh and nothing at all like the brutality of African slaves in the Americas and in the New World.

That's slavery. Let's do something which I'm calling criminal justice. So laws about criminal justice. Look at 21 verse 22. 21 verse 22, over the page a bit.

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.

[8 : 58] Look over at 22 verse 1. Whoever steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep.

Obviously, God is not condoning hitting pregnant women or stealing people's livestock. It's clear that life is precious to him, but his people won't always have that ideal.

He knows that they are likely to do some of these things. And so he provides a way in their sin for justice to prevail. Notice with God's justice that a penalty is handed down.

There are courts and judges and fines and repayments. A victim impact statement is taken into consideration. Secondly, notice how God considers how culpable we are.

So 21 verse 12. 21, 12. Anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death. However, if it is not done intentionally, but God lets it happen, they're to flee to a place I will designate.

[10 : 05] But 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 account. Did they intend harm to be caused?

Were they aware of the risks before they acted? Were they reckless and negligent with a standard of care? And these are the tests of culpability that have made their way into Australian common law today, but find their roots in our Exodus passage here, chapter 20, 21, where God brings his concern for life and justice to bear on the messiness of his people's lives.

Notice also with God's justice that the punishment fits the crime. If anyone strikes a person with a fatal blow, that person is to be put to death.

Life is precious to God. Notice with the pregnant woman, 21, 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 justice with God, he says that there is a penalty for sin, that a person's culpability is taken into account, and especially that the punishment fits the crime.

[11 : 28] And because God's moral character doesn't change, that is the standard of justice we can expect on the final day. When Romans 2 says, he will render to everyone according to what they've done.

And just like slavery laws, it's tempting to be nervous and squirm when the Bible hands down death penalties for certain crimes. The idea that God is a brute or a monster is a very common objection to Christianity, but it assumes that our sense of justice is more fair than God's.

But when terrible things happen on the news, like this week in America, don't we all want a penalty to be handed down? Don't we want people to take responsibility for their actions and be held culpable?

And don't we want the punishment to fit the crime? We all cry out for justice, God's sense of justice, but we struggle to let him sit in the judge's seat. What's more, sinful people like us and like the world, sinful people need to be very careful when railing against God's justice, when looking at laws like this and shaking our fists as though he was the brute.

Because in God's justice, even sinful people like us get what they deserved. If the punishment for sinning against our creator were to fit the crime, we'd all be in hell.

[12 : 56] You see, we don't really want justice. What we want is mercy. We want grace and kindness and forgiveness. We need a savior for that last day.

John 3.16, We don't all want justice really.

We need a savior. Here are laws about crime and punishment that make people nervous when they hear words like death penalty. They're hard to understand.

But it's clear from this that life is very precious to God. It's clear that his sense of justice is as fair as you can get. What's more, he's not an out of control brute.

He's not blinded by his anger, so much so that he can't remember to love and be gracious and kind and merciful. He's a God who has to deal again and again and again with the sin and the messiness of his people who will do things like hit a pregnant woman or steal their neighbor's livestock.

[14 : 08] That's criminal justice. Let's look at social justice, which is the end of chapter 22. So the back of chapter 22. In this section of social justice, there's lots of laws about the poor and the needy, the fatherless, the widows, and it's clear that God has a heart for social care.

And many Christians use these verses as a mandate to care for poor people of the world. But the pattern here is that social care applies first to the Commonwealth of Israel.

So look at 22.22, which I think is over the page. In your 22.22, do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do, and they cry out to me, in other words, when they pray to Yahweh, it assumes that they're Israelites.

He says, I will certainly hear their cry. 22.25, if you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal.

Charge no interest. 23.6, do not deny justice to your people in their lawsuits. The slavery laws we read about, they were for Hebrew slaves.

[15 : 23] The idea is that care goes to Israelites first. It's care within the nation. And that is the pattern you see in the New Testament as well. So guys at the back, can I have a slide?

Got to wake up. That's it. Back, back one. There you go. This is in the New Testament. Acts, the first church in Acts. They shared everything they had, and that there was no needy person among them.

It was distributed to anyone who had need. Galatians. So the net. Oop. Back one. There you go.

Thank you. 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. Next one. Yep. There he is.

Religion that our God and Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows. My dear brothers and sisters, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith?

[16 : 24] In other words, the orphans and the poor, the needy people, are those who are rich in faith. They're Christians already. Next passage. 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, what good is it? The principle for us today is that social justice begins within the nation, within the church.

When it comes to those outside, it is a care for the lost. Care for the poor within the church, care for the lost outside the church.

Obviously, we care for poor people in the world too, but we don't want to dilute our primary concern of saving souls. There's so much need in the world. There's so much need in the world that to focus on people's health and well-being would take away all our resources from gospel ministry.

If the church doesn't prioritize talking about Jesus, no one else will. It's caring for the poor within the church, caring for the lost outside the church.

[17 : 30] And so does our financial giving reflect a care for the church first and social needs of the world second? When we hear of an earthquake or flood, do we think, what about the churches that were flattened in that area?

What about the brothers and sisters in that area who are in need? I've lost count of the amount of times I've seen Bible groups here rally around someone in the group and care for their needs.

That is what the Bible groups are there for. The units of care within a large church where some of these things are harder to spot. But just on care in the church, on one hand, it's up to us to care for one another.

But on the other hand, it's also up to you to speak up when you're in need. We can only know what we know. If you don't let us know you're in need, we can't help you.

So part of the application for us to care for one another is for you to speak up when you're in need. Let us know that you need some help and then we can rally people around you within the church to help.

[18 : 40] When we heard about the war in the Ukraine, we all gave money, didn't we, to buy a bus. And to this day, it still ferries refugees out of Ukraine into safer countries. But we gave the money to people who were clear about this priority so that those refugees every night they're in these people's houses get to hear about Jesus.

So that the leftover money went to buy Ukrainian Bibles and materials, Christian materials for their children. So they too could learn about Jesus while they're fleeing.

The pattern of loving others is care for those within the church, care for the lost outside. That is the model you see in the Old and New Testament. So that is social justice.

We don't have time to do it now, but the last lot of case laws is about worshipping God. The idea is that the beginning of our passage and the very end of our passage, our book ended with laws about worshipping God.

And in the middle, you get laws about justice and slavery and social care. The idea being that the way we worship God is by obeying his words in the middle. If you want to show that you love God, show that you love his people in the middle.

[19 : 52] That's the idea. All the case laws today, they're about loving others. They direct how we treat people and animals, innocent and guilty, slaves and masters, friends and enemies.

It shows that God is interested in every aspect of our lives, even the nitty gritty situational case by case things. The temptation with our passage today, when it's difficult to teach or controversial to hear, is that we get a pen and scrub it out.

Or we just skip over it to something more exciting. Or assume that the problem is with God, that he is the monster. And I am perfect in my own understanding. But I hope you can see that God's laws are different to what we might have thought.

That they're nothing like red tape. But here are for our good, to teach and correct us, to help us navigate our way through the sin and messiness of our lives.

So that we love our neighbor as ourselves. It is a privilege to hear God speak. To have a Bible in our hands. Not just because we love, you know, how the old meets the new Testament.

[20 : 59] Or how Jesus is on every page. But because God's word is loving and kind and good for us. It's the loving words of a father who's steering his children through the mess of their lives.

It's nothing like red tape. They're here to limit the damage that we do. To chip away the bits of Vijay. To make him look more like the sun.

Speaking of the sun, just to finish in 1 John chapter 5, it says, By this we know that we love one another when we love God and obey his commandments.

Well, this is the love of God that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. So let me pray that we would treat his word like that. Father God, thank you that you are so interested in the ins and outs of our lives.

That even when we make a mess of things like Israel, that you're there to see that justice prevails. That we love one another.

[22 : 05] That we navigate our way safely. That you want us to limit the damage that we do to other people. Father, please forgive us if we treat your word as burdensome.

If we treat it like red tape. That's trying to get in the way of the things we really want to do. Father, help us value your words as the loving guidance of a father who's trying to steer his way with children.

Please, Father, would your words help us to love you and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The golden rules. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.