

Of Transvestites and Birds Nests

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 November 1996

Preacher: Paul Barker

- [0 : 0 0] Please be seated. And you may like to have the passage open in front of you, page 155.
- It's amazing to see how many people come for a sermon on transvestites. Because that's one of the parts of this odd collection of laws that was read for us a short time ago.
- I doubt that anyone's ever heard a sermon on this passage. And doubt that you ever will again for that matter. There's a little rhyme or reason in these laws.
- Things about neighbours' property that's lost. Transvestites, building a parapet around the roof. What to do with birds' nests and eggs. Tassels on cloaks.
- How to sew your field. What sort of clothes material you're to wear. A very odd collection of laws. They don't seem to have a relationship with each other.
- [1 : 0 0] It's a real miscellanea of laws that are put together here. There's little obvious reason why we should even follow these laws. And I guess for many of us, our approach would naturally be to just dismiss them and say, this applied then, three and a half thousand years ago, but it's nothing to do with me now.
- For many of us, that's our basic approach to Old Testament laws. No longer relevant. I'll put them aside. For some of us, we perhaps might think one step further.
- And our approach would be that many of the Old Testament laws, indeed most of them, are really superseded by the New Testament. So if we want to find out the laws for us as Christians, we look to the New Testament and not to the Old.
- A slight variation on that would be that we obey what we recognize that the New Testament changes some laws of the Old Testament. But where the New Testament doesn't change the Old Testament, then we would keep the Old Testament laws.
- The difficulty is what happens with an Old Testament law that the New Testament is silent on. There are some Old Testament laws that the New Testament reinforces.
- [2 : 1 7] Thou shalt not murder. We don't just obey that because it's in the Old Testament and part of the Ten Commandments, but we obey it also because it's reinforced in the New Testament. But what about the Sabbath law?
- It's very important in the Old Testament that Jews or Israelites keep the Sabbath day commandment. It is one of the Ten Commandments. But the New Testament is, in effect, silent on that law.
- Oh, it's there when Jesus is doing things on the Sabbath day, but as far as a law that's applied for Christians, you shall keep the Sabbath, the New Testament is, in fact, silent. So do we keep it because the New Testament doesn't reject it?
- Or do we not keep it because the New Testament doesn't reinforce it? You see part of the difficulty. What do we do? And, of course, Christians dispute over how to respond to the Sabbath law.
- The Seventh-day Adventists keep it, and other Christians don't or do so in different ways. Well, the laws here, in one sense, may look fairly trivial. But, in fact, I've chosen this passage deliberately because they are trivial on the surface, but because they illustrate, I think, the way in which we need to understand Old Testament laws generally.

- [3 : 31] And that is that we need to understand the principles in the Old Testament and reapply the principles to our current situation. Every law, or almost every law in the Old Testament, is a combination of two things, a principle and a particular application.
- The principle reflects God's standards. The particular application into a particular culture or situation changes. And so, for us, we recognise in the Old Testament laws two things.
- A principle, which is an abiding principle about God's standards. But also that in the Old Testament laws, there is a particular cultural or religious situation.
- We're in a different situation. What we need to do is identify the principles, but reapply them to today, to our own situation. Not to throw out everything in the Old Testament laws.
- That's throwing the baby out with the bathwater. But not to keep everything either, because how many of us have neighbours that have oxen and ass? How many of us have flat roofs? And so on. But rather to see a principle and apply it to our new situation today.
- [4 : 46] Now, I hope that doesn't sound too daunting. It's actually fairly straightforward. But I say that because that's the method I shall use as we read these laws and apply them to today. And I think we'll understand some of the principles about how we as Christians ought to live in the world today.
- So the chapter begins, chapter 22. You shall not watch your neighbours' ox or sheep straying away and ignore them. You shall take them back to their owner.
- If the owner does not reside near you, or you do not know who the owner is, you shall bring it to your own house, and it shall remain with you until the owner claims it.
- Then you shall return it. You shall do the same with a neighbour's donkey. You shall do the same with a neighbour's garment. You shall do the same with anything else that your neighbour loses and you find.
- You may not withhold your help. Well, there's the first laws to deal with in this section. The animal that's fallen... Oh, I've got to keep going to verse 4, sorry.
- [5 : 51] You shall not see your neighbour's donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it. You shall help to lift it up. Now, presumably in that verse, verse 4, the ox or donkey that's fallen by the road is laden.
- That's why it can't get up. The owner is presumably with it, but a heavily laden ox or donkey would need more than one person to get it back on its feet. And indeed, if you need to unpack it and get the animal up and then repack, quite a deal of time is required, even for a couple of people to do that.
- The neighbour that's being spoken of is a fellow Israelite, a fellow person of the people of God. But we shouldn't limit ourselves to applying this law to fellow Christians only, because elsewhere in the Old Testament in Exodus, these laws about looking after your neighbour's oxen or donkey that have gone astray also applies to your enemies.
- The way to look after our enemies, lost property and animals as well. The principle here is that it's not finders keepers. It's not that if somebody loses something and you find it, then it's yours.
- It still belongs to the person who's lost it. But the principle also is a principle of don't ignore lost property. Don't ignore lost sheep or oxen or ass or whatever it is.
- [7 : 07] Don't turn a blind eye to other people's misfortune or loss or difficulty. Turning a blind eye is not good enough. Indeed, these first four verses are a call to action.
- They tell us that doing nothing is doing wrong. Sins of omission are as serious as sins of commission. That is, there are things that we don't do that we ought, and by not doing them we sin.
- As well as there being things that we do that we shouldn't do, and those also being sin. Sins of omission are sins as well as sins of commission. Doing nothing is doing wrong.

Very often people say to me, Oh, I live a good life. I don't harm anybody. Paul Eddington, who was the Prime Minister in Yes Prime Minister, who died about a year ago, I think. He was interviewed shortly before he died of skin cancer.

And he said that he wanted to be remembered as a person who never harmed anyone. I felt rather sad at that because it's very weak. It's relatively easy to live life without harming somebody.

[8 : 15] But this is a call to positive good. It's not that we're just to refrain from acting and thereby harm nobody, but we're actually positively called to act for other people's good.

Turning a blind eye, in one sense, might be not harming somebody, but doing nothing in this situation of lost property, lost goods, etc., is doing sin.

Good men doing nothing results in the triumph of evil, said Edmund Burke. And it's true. The world is full of evil, more so because good people refrain from doing good.

They live their own lives privately and don't act for good and therefore evil triumphs. There are many reasons why we don't heed this sort of law.

There are many reasons why we refrain from acting. Some of us feel private. We don't like to get involved in other people's affairs.

[9 : 17] For many of us, we think, oh, I'm too busy. I haven't got time to look after this lost property or this lost sheep or broken down car or whatever it is. For many of us, it's the fact that in our urban society, we are more anonymous.

We don't know our neighbours as well as we used to. And so there's an inbuilt pressure not to be involved in other people's affairs. If we see some lost property or a lost animal or a broken down car or something, we think it's somebody else's problem.

It's not my problem. But this is telling us that it is our problem. That if somebody loses something and we find it, or if somebody's car breaks down or their ox breaks down or whatever the application is today, it is our problem.

It's their problem as well, but it's our problem because we are fellow Christians with them. We are fellow neighbours with them. Sometimes we don't act because it's safer to not act.

If we are at night driving along and somebody's car is broken down, it can be fairly dangerous to actually stand out and act and help somebody for fear that it's a hoax, that they might be out to bash us or rob us.

[10 : 27] Sometimes I think our lack of acting shows a lack of trust in God's protection, that if God calls us to act for somebody else, he'll protect us as well. Sometimes we don't act because it's costly.

For an Israelite to look after somebody's ox or ass, maybe for some days or weeks before an owner found it, would cost a lot of money in feeding, watering it, caring for it, providing shelter for it.

And yet that's what we're called to do. Be prepared to give up time, energy, cost or whatever for somebody else to ease their misfortune, to return their property and so on.

Christians are not exempt from this law. The parable of the Good Samaritan makes that clear as well. Even if it's somebody we don't know, we are called to act and not to hide ourselves, not to ignore their misfortune.

I must say, reading this passage made me think more about how do we deal with lost property in this church. It made me feel a bit guilty that there's a blue coat that's been up in the office for weeks or months, so if it's yours, please take it.

[11 : 32] There's a couple of sets of glasses out there and most weeks there are umbrellas and handkerchiefs and things like that. I think there's some earrings in the vestry and also somebody's keys and probably a pen or two.

So please, if it's yours, take it. Ease my guilt. I must say, at least we are looking after them until they're claimed. These laws then are showing the principle of the fact that we have to act.

Not acting is sin, not doing good. Well, what then about these transvestites in verse 5? A woman shall not wear a man's apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord your God.

Some say that this is arguing that women should not wear jeans or trousers. Some have told me that it means that clergy shouldn't wear women's robes like this.

Some suggest that it's about women in war because literally it says a woman shall not have what pertains to a man and that includes weapons as well as clothes. But I think it's stronger than that.

[12 : 45] It's not really about wearing the same sort of clothes, but it's about the underlying motives, the deceit of women dressing as men and vice versa.

But it's also even stronger than that because the verse says that whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord your God. To be abhorrent is a very strong term and it's usually applied to things that pertain to other religions and the practices of other religions and idolatry.

That is what is abhorrent or in other translations an abomination to the Lord. Something that applies to another religion. The Canaanites who lived in the land that Israel is about to possess in Deuteronomy practiced all sorts of sexual deviation and often did so in the name of their religion.

Their gods were fertility gods. That is, they were gods who were called upon to produce rain, crops and children. And one of the ways in which you would gain the favour of your God to produce rain, crops and children was to engage in sexual activity at the shrine and often with people whose jobs were to be sexual prostitutes or temple prostitutes.

Their job was to engage in sexual activity with whoever came for it, male or female. Often they would be transvestites. Sometimes the people going would not know which sex the person was at first.

[14 : 14] This is a law prohibiting that sort of practice. It's prohibiting the practice of other religions. There is no place for the people of God, whether Old or New Testament, to engage in the religious practices and sexual deviation of other religions and idolatry.

That's what this law in the end is all about. We could also say though that it's about the confusion of God's order. God has ordered this world and made female, female and male, male.

And we'll see this principle coming up in some later laws as well. God's order is to be maintained and adhered to. And so this law is against those who are transvestites or transsexuals, I think.

That it's confusing the order of God and ought not to be practiced. Then follow verses 6 and 7.

We jump from one thing to a completely different thing, from transvestites to bird's nests. If you come on a bird's nest in any tree or on the ground with fledglings or eggs, with the mother sitting on the fledglings or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young.

[15 : 30] Let the mother go taking only the young for yourself in order that it may go well with you and you may live long. Why? It's a law that seems to be about conservation, really.

That food is given to us by God but don't destroy the source of food or the source of life. The young and the eggs are food that are legitimate to be eaten but take the mother with the young and the eggs and you not only take the food but you take the source of food as well.

Take the mother with the young and you take away the resources for production of further eggs and young as well. Yes, it's true that God has given to humanity the stewardship of this world and all things for eating but it is also true that we are to be good stewards and exercise conservation and care in our use of the resources of this world.

That's the principle that applies here. It's applied to one particular situation but it's not just applying to birds or to mother birds but what it is is the principle of conservation and care of energy, resources and food.

It's illustrated here with one example but the principle goes far beyond that and we can readily apply it to all sorts of situations today about how we use the resources of this world for our food and for our energy to take care in that to be good stewards in this world.

[17 : 09] From birds nests to houses when you build a new house you shall make a parapet for your roof. I guess most of us have never done that otherwise you might have blood guilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.

Of course houses in ancient Israel were flat roofed. People would sleep on the roof because it's cooler. People would entertain on the roof because it's easier and also cooler. Roofs were used for all sorts of things.

We don't have roofs like that generally speaking today but this is saying that safety precautions must be taken. Roofs that are used often needed a little parapet a fence if you like around it to protect people from rolling off in their sleep or falling off during the day.

Negligence is a sin. We are called not to be negligent. We're called to take safety precautions not only for ourselves but for others as well and if we have people come to visit us then we are responsible for their safety.

The same with church property and church buildings. We are to be responsible for the safety of those who come here. Safety regulations are our responsibility. Protection of human life is our concern.

[18 : 20] Negligence is wrong. Then come three laws that actually do seem to have some relationship with each other. Verse 9 You shall not sow your vineyard with a second kind of seed or the whole yield will have to be forfeited both the crop that you've sown and the yield of the vineyard itself.

Well why? What does it matter? Some suggest that this is prohibiting an Egyptian magical practice where vineyards would also be sown with other crops but it's not clear that that is the case.

What it's against seems to be the combination of two different crops in the one area and that sort of combination goes into verse 10 You shall not plough with an ox or a donkey yoked together.

Again two things that are being mixed together or held together. In the first it's two different types of seed now in verse 10 it's a donkey and an ox. Maybe this is just pragmatic for if you yoke a donkey and an ox together it's the ox that's the strongest and will do all the work.

The donkey will be dragged along. Some suggest that if you yoke an ox or a donkey together because the ox is strongest he will actually force the donkey and itself to go round in circles rather than to go straight ahead.

[19 : 37] Of course in the New Testament this is applied to Christians who ought not to be yoked in marriage to non-Christians but that's beyond the scope of this law here in Deuteronomy 22. Some suggest that it's the ox that's clean and the ass that's unclean and therefore it's about the mixing of those together.

One of the puzzles is we're not given a reason for this law or the one before. It's actually hard to determine what the principle is here. The same with the next verse. You shall not wear clothes made of wool and linen woven together.

Do we extend that to the prohibition of polyester cotton shirts? I mean if we took away clothes that we wore that are mixed materials well it would probably be a bit embarrassing this morning I should imagine.

Some think that the idea of mixed material in verse 11 is also to do with some other Egyptian magical rite or practice. Well we're left a little bit in the dark I think here.

It may be the prohibition of religious mixes from other cultures so therefore it's prohibiting Israel from dabbling in the magical practices of Egypt or other nations. Of course ancient Israel would have understood some of these laws better than we do.

[20 : 49] Just because they're obscure to us doesn't mean they're obscure to the original hearers who may have been given the reasons or understood the reasons. But also many suggest that what really is being prohibited here is again the confusion of the created order.

God in Genesis 1 when he made the universe made everything according to its kind the seeds and the animals and so on. Everything had a place everything had an order everything had a purpose and so perhaps the mixing of materials and seeds and animals like the mixing of clothes in the law on transvestites is a denigration of God's order a rejection of God's good order or a confusion of it.

Maybe what these laws are hinting at is that we should keep to God's order of things and not use things for purposes for which they're not made. Well verse 12 to finish this section.

You shall make tassels on the four corners of the cloak with which you cover yourself. Well I imagine if I were to ask you to hold up your cloak with four tassels on it there wouldn't be many demonstrations of that.

I doubt that any of us keep this law. Does that matter? Should we wear clothes or cloaks rather with four tassels on it? In Jewish history later on the inner garment or an inner garment came to have the tassels because for Jews having tassels on their outer cloaks rendered them susceptible to persecution and so they transferred it to inner garments and now today you'll see some strict Jews with tassels coming out the side pockets or out of their belt from an inner garment.

[22 : 32] Also this law is now applied in part to the tallet the prayer shawl that Jews wear. The reason for this law is actually given to us in Numbers the book preceding Deuteronomy for there the tassels are like knots in handkerchiefs the tassels are to remind Israel to keep God's commandments that's what they're there for we're told that elsewhere.

The cloak is really like a blanket sort of a poncho or blanket it's something that would be worn at day and used as a blanket at night and therefore it's an appropriate garment to have tassels in because it is reminding Israel that they live under God's commandments day and night all the time in everything they do and think and in their sleep they are to be under the commandments of God all the time.

But what about us? God's commandments apply to us and yet we don't have tassels on our cloak. It seems to me that in the New Testament the reminder the reminder of God's laws is given to us internally as Christians.

God's Holy Spirit is in each Christian and part of the function of God's Spirit is to remind us of God's law. It seems to me that cloaks with tassels are unnecessary for Christians because God has made the reminder of His laws internal for us.

But having said that I don't think there's anything fundamentally wrong with having tassels on our cloaks if they remind us of God's law. If they're a stimulus to us to keep faithful and obedient to God's law.

[24 : 10] Well let me draw some of this to a close. Firstly to say that God's law transcends culture. Many people reject the Old Testament or reject God's laws Old or New Testament as saying they're culturally bound.

They're irrelevant today because they apply to a society far removed from our own. And yes they do apply to a society of ancient times. But the principles abide.

The principles of God's standards and holiness abide today. We reapply them for our own society for our own culture. That requires work. It's not easy.

We don't have a case book that tells us how to live and respond in every situation. But that's because God wants us to use our minds. He wants us to think about how we live as Christian people.

He wants us to apply ancient principles which still apply to modern situations. He wants us to think about everything that we do and think and say in this world.

[25 : 10] He doesn't want us to be robots who automatically do this and that. He wants us to apply our minds in the way we live as Christian people in this world. We're not free to choose what is right and wrong.

But we are called to exercise our minds and we need to distinguish the principles as I've said and illustrated. Not to just throw out the baby with the bathwater.

So we're to reapply principles for things like food conservation, for caring for people who've broken down in their cars, for caring for our neighbours' property, for making sure our property is safe and secure for those who visit us as well as ourselves.

We also need to remember that we read the Old Testament through the New, that the Old Testament laws do get transformed in the New. The laws of sacrifice no longer apply because Jesus was the one true sacrifice for all and so on.

So we need to be careful in our reading of laws of the Old Testament. But one thing this odd collection of laws does do for us is to show us just how comprehensive God's laws are.

[26 : 19] nothing in life is too insignificant to be out of God's concern. God is concerned for birds' nests, he's concerned for parapets, he's concerned for clothes and gardening and property and so ought we be as well.

God's demands are not just vague principles of love though they can be summed up by those two great commandments we heard before. But God's laws are for the everyday mundane nitty gritty daily living.

Everything we do is to be done in obedience to God's laws and principles. How we do the dishes, how we treat our neighbours, how we treat their property, how we react to Zaire, how we respond to France dropping bombs in the Pacific, how we respond to the government's health system and education system if indeed it is a system, how we respond to litter in the streets and on church property, how we respond about the clothes we wear, the pollution from our cars, how we do our gardening, how we care for our pets, how we show generosity for those who are in need, what we do with lost property and so on.

All of those things and everything that we do and think and say is to be done in response to God. For our relationship with God is to be 168 hours a week, seven days a week, 52 weeks plus a day of the year.

Every year, everything we do is to be done for God from the mundane and the boring to the very important. Christian morality is also not just about what we do but also what we do not do but also about what we do do.

[28 : 00] It is a call to action not a call to hiding ourselves from the world and from being concerned with the world and our neighbours. and in the end the laws in the Bible Old and New Testament are really about God.

They are a little portrait of the perfect standards of God. They are extremely demanding but they are pointing us to the perfection of God himself and in the end that perfection of God is lived out, fleshed out uniquely by Jesus Christ.

The only one who perfectly fulfilled the laws of God and the demands of God. In the end, Christian obedience is about imitating Jesus, about being like him and becoming like him in every aspect of our life, in everything we do, no matter how trite or mundane or everyday it is.

All that we do is to be done for God, in obedience to God and in the imitation of his son Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Our God, we pray that you will make us more aware of how we live our life, how we behave as Christian people, that we may bring everything that we do and think and say into conformity with your perfect standards in the imitation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, that we may be truly holy people for the sake of him who died for us.

[29 : 41] Amen.