

Sermon Series: The Gospel & Justice

#2 A vision of a just community – Deuteronomy 15:4-5/Luke 6:20-26

1. If you were king or queen

Imagine you are made the king or queen of the nation today. Imagine there was such upheaval in the political system, that you are **handed a clean slate** – forgetting all the current civic laws and needing to make new ones.

What 2 laws would you come up with to ensure peace and justice in the land?

Think of our new Prime Minister's first week of parliament– Uluru statement, Domestic Violence Leave bill, Climate Action targets. What might you take action on first?

Now, imagine you are just **8 years of age** when you are made king or queen. That was the case for **King Josiah** of Judah in the 7th Century BC. 2 Kings 22:2 tells us

Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign; he reigned for thirty-one years in Jerusalem... He did what was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of his ancestor David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left.

The Assyrian superpower was waning. Josiah came to power and broke the run of rulers who had been complicit with Assyria's evil ways for some 55 years before. Josiah cut ties with Assyria, and established a **new treaty**ⁱ - renewing the **covenant** between the people and Yahweh¹.

Josiah's **first new law** called people to **show allegiance to the one, true God**. His **second** law called them to put aside the gods of other nations. **Would either of those 2 laws have made your list?**

Josiah's inspiration came from the Old Testament Book of **Deuteronomy**.² Its title literally means "**second law**" (the repeat of the Laws of Moses). Josiah

¹ The self-revealed name of God before Moses, the Tetragrammaton - Hebrew name of God transliterated in four letters as YHWH or JHVH and articulated as *Yahweh* or *Jehovah*. It is often translated in our English Bibles as "the LORD" to respect the Hebrew preference in some times and places of not speaking the name of God.

² Construction workers at the temple in Judah found a long-lost book of the Scriptures. Many believe it was *Deuteronomy*. Some scholars think this book was written in Josiah's era, though the traditional view is that the book was written after and about the occasion of Moses' death. In many periods of history Deuteronomy has been used as a basis for re-forming society.

read what was originally intended for those who entered the Promised Land. This long-forgotten vision of Deuteronomy **inspired Josiah** to **withdraw the people of God from the world** as it was and put the Word of God to work to shape his kingdom with justice and mercy at its core.³

2. Seeking a more just world

History is replete with examples of groups and communities **that withdrew from the “world”** to build a new world characterised by peace and fairness:

- The **Amish**, formed in the 17th Century, practiced Christian **pacifism**. One Amish proverb says, “It is better to give others a piece of your heart than a piece of your mind.”
- 19th Century **Bohemians** freed themselves from society’s laws. But some re-entered society using their creativity to challenge it. American activist **Dorothy Day**, for example, grew up in a Bohemian family and went on to form the **Catholic Worker Movement** defending rights of victims of inequity in the early 20th C. Day said, “I firmly believe that our salvation depends on the poor.”
- During the 2nd World War German theologian Dietrich **Bonhoeffer** withdrew from an oppressive society for a time to form **underground seminaries** to train Church pastors how to make **peace-loving communities**. Bonhoeffer said, “Things do exist that are worth standing up for... To me it seems that peace and social justice are such things, as is Christ Himself.”

They never **realized their Shangri-la** or “heaven on earth.” But in each case above, the laws of the Old Testament had a part to play in **shaping** their vision of a more just society. One Old Testament professor says of the Book of Deuteronomy, for example, says:

[The civil] laws emphasize **human dignity** and the **value of human life**... especially the plight of orphans, widows, sojourners, and poor people. Their concern is the protection of individuals, primarily those whose means of subsistence were limited... reflecting the **humanitarian concern** of the Deuteronomic reform.⁴

³ Josiah sent members of his new cabinet to a well-known prophetess named Huldah to seek God’s confirmation that the book found was authoritative. Many think it was the Book of Deuteronomy.

⁴ Claude Mariottini, professor of Old Testament at Northern Baptist Seminary, Lombard, Illinois.

3. God's concern for the poor

In our brief reading from Deuteronomy chapter 15 today we see this goal:

“There should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, God will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the LORD your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.” (Deut. 15:4-5)

Scholar Christopher Wright points to the implications of Deuteronomy for us today, saying,

“...it is so clear that the LORD is especially attentive to the needs of the marginalized (see Deut. 10:18–19) that it would seem to be the very nature of justice, on God's terms, **for humans also** to have such a prioritized concern.”⁵

Deuteronomy Chapter 15 is something known as “**the year of release**” – a seven-year cycle of **resetting** the **equity** of the community, releasing the poor from any debts and servants from their bonds; and also giving **relief to the land** for its refreshment. In verse 11 we see that there is an expectation of poor people in the land, but the statement in vs. 4 is conditional upon the people's trust in the good God who “richly” blesses His covenant people (see vs. 5).

Josiah, in his day, came to understand that it was **trust in this good God** that had been abandoned in the past. The laws of Deuteronomy helped him to shape a just society – but the **grace of God was the key** to any blessings.

4. Reading the Old Testament Laws Today

Many of us are **reluctant to navigate** the **Laws of the Old Testament** in our setting. “It's all too difficult,” we may say. But two sayings of Jesus may help us to navigate the civil laws of the Old Testament:

- i. **Firstly**, in Matthew 5 Jesus says he came “not to abolish the law and the prophets [a way of saying in our time “the Old Testament”] but **to fulfil it**” (Matt. 5:17)

We often hear in Scripture how Jesus fulfils the Old Testament **ceremonial laws**. For example, Romans 12:1 urges us to offer ourselves

⁵ Christopher J.H. Wright, Old Testament Ethics for the People of God

to God as **living sacrifices** in thankfulness. The Apostles teach us how Jesus fulfilled the old sacrificial system and the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament by his “one, true, and sufficient sacrifice for sins”⁶ in his death on the cross.

But for some reason, we often don’t make the same connection that Jesus fulfilled the **civil laws** and their intention. Think of his example in the Gospels, giving grace to the outcast, the foreigner, the poor, and lifting up the lowly. Jesus is the embodiment of Old Testament laws such as the year of release, gleaning, The Year of Jubilee, the Sabbath, and more. Knowing this truth helps to **inform our study** of the Old Testament and helps **transform** our understanding of our role as agents of justice by God’s grace today.

- ii. **Secondly**, in Matthew 22:21 Jesus says, “**render to Caesar** the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Jesus was being tested by religious leaders⁷ who sought to trip him up regarding the importance of the Laws of Moses. They sought to discredit him. Though they didn’t directly quote the Laws of Moses to Jesus, they questioned Jesus as to whether God’s people should be subject to Roman laws or the laws of Scripture. But Jesus’ retort **reset** their understanding, and ours, of the **relationship between church and state**. His words challenge deeply our thinking about how the Laws of Scripture interact with our lives and our contemporary forms of governance as we seek a more just society.

- Firstly, as Jesus implied in his reply to the Pharisees, the people of God should **get their own house in order** and display a commitment to just and godly living.⁸ We *can* put the hard word on political leaders of states and nations, but we must surely show that justice for the marginalized and needy **genuinely matters to us**; that the Laws of God are taken seriously in our dealings with one another.

⁶ From the prayer of thanksgiving in an Anglican service of Holy Communion

⁷ Matt. 22:15-17

⁸ Jesus challenged the misguided understanding of the Pharisees about the Laws of Moses on many occasions

- Secondly, Jesus' response to the Pharisees' question prompts us to **compare** the **political context** in which the Old Testament laws were originally received to our own. Even in King Josiah's case, a **theocratic dynasty**, the laws of Deuteronomy were received into a very system of governance than when they were first delivered. Josiah would have taken care to interpret and apply the Deuteronomic laws to his own setting. Jesus clearly identified this principle in 1st Century Roman times in his retort to the trick question of the Pharisees. Similarly, the Laws of Moses should not be read into our times as if "this is that". We too must seek to carefully understand how the Old Testament laws address us in our political context. Author Craig Blomberg wisely points out that...

“...the Bible's attitude to wealth and possessions **doesn't fit neatly** with either modern **capitalism**, monarchical **feudalism**, or state **socialism**.” Instead, he suggests, the laws of the Old Testament strongly critique all systems of governance on the basis of God's justice and mercy.

Both sayings of Jesus above remind us to **take care** when reading and responding to the laws of the Old Testament writings:

- I. We should consider them in their **original context first**.
- II. Then, we can seek an understanding of their **intention and wisdom** in relation to God's character and purpose for humanity.
- III. We can then **look to the New Testament** for any relevant reference to those laws in the example of or teaching of Jesus and any teaching of the Apostles. This will help us in our application of the laws to life in the light of the Gospel.
- IV. Then, weighing up our findings together in community, we should **seek the Holy Spirit's guidance** as to how we might live more justly as a result, to God's glory.

Conclusion

There's no need to **withdraw** from the world today. In fact, Jesus called us to live **in the thick of it** by God's grace, with a bold understanding of God's vision for a new, just humanity. Let's **not put the Old Testament aside** as we do this. Instead, we should see its **connectedness** to the age of justice and peace **Jesus**

ushered in. But **be warned**, to do so may change your bank balance. It may mess up your diary and disturb your comfort aplenty. But I guarantee it will also bring you closer to Jesus, the one who fulfils the Law and the Prophets.

Deuteronomy chapter 10 tells us justice runs through the Lord's veins. We read:

¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸ who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing.

DISCUSSION –Deuteronomic laws and their influence today

QUESTION 1 – What do laws about “gleaning” say about generous opportunity for the poor today?

- READ Deuteronomy 24:19-22 (see Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:22)

Why was it that landowners were not permitted to harvest out to the margins of their fields?

Gleaning laws were not an act of charity or handout. Instead, they enabled the poor among the community to provide for themselves and their households in a form of work till their day of release from debt would eventually come or until they were able to rise out of their poverty (note that Deut. 23:24-25 gave insurance to the landowner).

What wisdom or example did Jesus give towards generosity and provision for the needy? What warnings can you find in the Gospels about hoarding wealth or selfish gain? How might these influence our reading of the gleaning laws?

What would people today think about voluntarily limiting their profit-taking from their land or business for the sake of those who have through misfortune found themselves below the “poverty line”?

Tim Keller says, “The bible is not a classist tract that sees the rich as always the villains and the poor as always virtuous.” How does this statement resonate with what you know of Jesus’ example and teaching in the Gospels?

QUESTION 2 – What do laws concerning “slaves” suggest for our attitudes to workers today?

- READ Deuteronomy 23:15-16

An Old Testament Israelite slave in this original setting was more like an “indentured servanthood.” Instead of our view of brutal slavery, this was a form of work for a living in ancient times, and the laws of Scripture sought to ensure fairness and opportunity. Being bound to a household or business as a worker was to be a temporary condition in Israel. The laws of release (e.g. Deut. 15) and others like it made it so. But sometimes if the “slave” was mistreated, another rule was applied, such as the one here in chapter 23 (compare Deut. 15:16 where a person chose to stay with their household as a worker).

What examples or teachings of Jesus come to mind with regard to those who were mistreated or outcast and without opportunity or provision? How did Jesus treat such people? How does God want us to regard them?

What might such laws say to our own society and treatment of workers, particularly those in the service industry or casual workers or those with temporary visas? What attitude do these laws promote towards those without employment or opportunity today?

ⁱ Many scholars have compared the structure of biblical covenants with reform treaties of other nations in the ancient world – e.g.

- i) A preamble
- ii) A historical prologue
- iii) Stipulations
- iv) A document clause
- v) A list of gods witnessing the treaty
- vi) Curses and blessings

Deuteronomy contains:

- i) 1-3 Historical prologue
- ii) 4-26 Stipulations
- iii) 27 Document clause
- iv) 28 Blessings and curses

Gordon Wenham, *Handbook of the Bible*, p.198