

I. Set Up

A. Last week Mike did a fly over of the last 3,000 years – all against the backdrop of God's Moral Law, which finds its most basic and famous expression in the Ten Commandments. Before last week's sermon, we read Exodus 20 – the Ten Commandments. Mike then closed the sermon by reading Psalm 19:7-12, which is a celebration of the Ten Commandments. Let's start there today. READ

II. Introduction.

A. It's popular to say that we can do anything we want – anything we put our mind to. And there is some merit to that claim. Those who say 'they can' and those who say 'they can't,' are often both right. Our attitude makes a big difference. Positive people get more done. But there are limits.

B. I can flap my arms as hard and as long as I want to and I am not going to fly, no matter how much I might believe otherwise. I can set my mind to accomplish something - and work and work and work at it - without it ever coming to pass. It looks unlikely that I'll ever quarterback a team in the NFL.

C. Last week I argued that there are universal moral laws in place.¹ Today I want to tell you what your options are as it relates to them. They are not unlimited.

D. Last week I argued that there is a set of divinely established spiritual absolutes that are every bit as real as gravity, just not as immediate in their effects.²

1. I claimed that: these laws are organic to God's nature, not arbitrary add-ons. Not hoops he sets up for us to jump through just to see if we'll jump through them – and so he might punish us if we do not.

2. I claimed that His willingness to share these laws with his people - which is what is recorded in Exodus 20 - was a gracious, loving gift. I went so far as to suggest that The Ten Commandments are something like a divine cheat code.

3. I also argued that, far from being restrictive – far from being an ugly list of negatives designed to rob us of fun – they were just the opposite. I said – indeed, I believe - that the laws of God are liberating. I even ended the sermon by reading Psalm 19 – which talks about The Law as a wonderful, precious blessing.

E. There is much more that could be said:

1. It's worth noting that "Thou Shalt Nots" are less restrictive than the Thou Shalls. Being told what we can't do means we're free to do lots of other things.

2. It is worth noting that there is a grand positive behind every negative. Being told not to commit adultery is because He wants to help us craft a marriage that thrives.

3. It is worth noting God's laws are from God. They are not wisdom from below - not simply the rules of the tribe that won all the battles.³

4. It's worth noting that we do not break God's laws, we break ourselves against them – which is what you find when you read the Bible. We get to read how things play out.⁴

5. It is worth thinking how helpful these laws were to slaves who had had no freedom – and who might have been rebelling against everything, or who – more likely – were paralyzed by not knowing what they could do.

F. There is not only much more that could be said about the law, there are many other places to study. This sermon focuses on Exodus 20 and 21. The books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy are full of laws. The books of Romans and Galatians have much to say about the Law. If we were going to do a systematic study of the topic of law, we would need to start in the earliest chapters of Genesis and go deep into Revelation.

1. We would need to note the different types of Old Testament law: the civil,⁵ the ceremonial and the moral.⁶
2. We would need to study the concept of Natural Law – which refers both to the universal moral codes found in most societies and the rules we can deduce via design.
 - a) Most use Natural Law to refer to what Paul is saying in Romans 1:18f,⁷ when he writes that God can hold us accountable for our lives, because everyone knows that He exists and they know the basic rules. God has written certain things on our heart. There are things we cannot not know. We can suppress the truth. We can deny it. But we know about right and wrong.
3. C.S. Lewis famously opens *Mere Christianity* by noting that people know there is right and wrong. And we can see them appealing to it once we pay attention.
 - a) When people quarrel they appeal to some higher law. “You can’t cut in line. I was here first.” “I helped you so you should help me.”
 - b) In his book, *The Abolition of Man* – which he writes for a conference for secular academics, he calls it the Tao, and in the appendix of that book he notes how the basics of right and wrong are found in every culture.

G. Of course, any systematic study of the Law would need to include what Jesus says about it.

1. In Matthew 5 where he makes it clear that he is a fan of the law. **“Do not think I have come to abolish the law. “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. For truly I tell you, 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.**
2. Or later in the Sermon on the Mount where he explains the Law, stating that we do not just need outward compliance with the rule of Law – to not murder. We need to not become un-righteously angry. Or, we do not need to simply avoid adultery, we need to avoid lust.

H. There is a lot to learn about the Law

1. We have a pretty narrow focus today.
2. I am not commenting on:
 - a) Our cultures growing focus on the law - the fact that the news is full of reports from the courts;
 - b) or that there are big debates about how the laws – or the constitution - are to be interpreted.
 - c) I’m not going to marvel that there are ongoing discussions about legal theory – about whether we should be originalists or critical theorists.

d) We are not going to pay any attention to the growing movement by Muslims to get Shariah Law in place, or the growing movement by the international courts to have precedence over national laws.

I. I am going to focus on the limited options before us.

J. Last week I water skied over three thousand years of Western Civ. After starting with the Greeks philosophers and then unpacking the Bible, I noted that our culture moved through the Roman Empire, Middle Ages, Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment and Modernity before arriving at this Postmodern moment.

K. I went on to note that, among other things, postmodernity is characterized by the rejection of universal norms. What we hear is that there are no meta narratives, no absolutes, no universal truths. You do you and I'll do me.

L. Last week I did what I could to note that the Bible claims that God has established universal moral laws, and our culture claims that this is not true. There are no universals. "You do you."

M. What I want to do today is help you see your options as it relates to the Exodus 20 and the moral law. You have three to choose from.

III. Option A: You can Reject the law.

A. Some who do not believe in God press their thinking to its logical conclusion and argue that there are no absolute moral standards.

B. There are not many in this camp. Not as many as think they are in this camp.

C. Many say they reject the idea of a moral law, but they hold on to aspects of it.

D. The name most often associated with consistently rejecting God and the moral law is Friedrich Nietzsche, the "God is Dead" German philosopher, who told the advocates of Modernity that the 20th century was not going to be the Utopian fairy tale they were expecting. He said "if there is no God then there are no rules. There is no reason to value humans or celebrate kindness and humility. Those are bad ideas for weak people foisted on us by Jesus. Those ideas may stick around for a bit. There will be a halo effect after people reject Christ but cling to the Christian ethic. But once you remove the cornerstone it's only a matter of time before the building collapses. Eventually people will come to realize that all that matters is power, and when that happens you will have war.

E. Back at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th – when everyone was saying, with just a bit more time and education, we are going to fix all our problems and then everyone will be nice to everyone else. Nietzsche not only said, "it's not going to happen." He said, "Only a fool bothers with widows and orphans. The poor are losers. What you want is power so you can take what you want."

F. To be clear, very few people think this way. Very few people live consistent with this ethic. I would argue that that is because God has written his law on our heart.

G. There are not many willing to consistently follow the logic here. Nietzsche did. Richard Dawkins tries. One of the reasons the New Atheism movement collapsed is because they divided over ethics.

1. Dawkins said, there is no reason to say all people have rights. We cannot say “rape is morally wrong. Or murder is inherently wrong.” There are no overarching ethical standards. There is only the cosmos and it doesn’t care about you at all. Finding rules that help ensure some order is a good thing. And it might be in our best interest to agree on some laws. But at the end of the day, there is no right or wrong.”

2. Yuval Noah Harari, the massively influential Jewish intellectual - he is the author of *Sapiens* and other books, which have sold over 35 million copies - is in this camp. He argues that human rights are a good thing. And we are better off if we can all agree to them. But they are not based on anything. And he certainly doesn’t think we are all created equal or that we all have equal value.

H. There is more that could be said here. I have been noting that some who were previously on the secular left – Tom Holland, Douglas Murray, Ayaan Hirshi Ali, Jordan Peterson – have moved toward Christianity after realizing that the things they like - the things they think are true and beautiful such as human rights and humility, caring for the widows and orphans – come from Jesus. Best I can tell, most have stopped short of confessing Jesus as Lord in an orthodox manner, but they are moving in that direction. We should pray for them. They have looked at what is involved in rejecting Moral Law in a consistent way and do not like it.

IV. Option Two: You can Replace the Law

A. Option two involves rejecting Divine Law – e.g., The Ten Commandments - and writing our own.

B. This is the main camp in the West today. Indeed, many who say they sign up for Option A actually sign up for Option B. But there are two categories in Option Two.

1. The first is those who replace the divine law with their own law but deny they have done this. They often say there is no moral code, but then act like there is.

a) Sometimes they embrace aspects of the Ten Commandments, e.g., murder is wrong; and most don’t like lying or stealing – especially if they are the ones being lied to or stolen from).

b) Often they add a bunch of new laws that they not only advocate for but often demand everyone else follows.

2. The second is those who are very open about what they are doing.

3. When I was a College Pastor, I was always bumping up against university personnel – Deans and the like - who claimed: 1) that the university was neutral and that if we wanted to work there we needed to be neutral; 2) that they did not have a moral agenda; and 3) that all worldviews were equal. And this would lead to discussions where I would try (unsuccessfully every time) to explain to them that:

a) That they had a moral agenda – and that even claiming to be morally neutral (whatever that even meant) was a moral claim.

b) And that they did not believe that all cultures were equally valid.

4. The second group is more self-aware. They say, “yes, we are rejecting the old laws and putting in our new. Your laws are bad. Ours are enlightened. And we are in charge. And if you violate our laws you will be expelled or arrested or whatever.

C. Let me pause here to note that this camp can be hard to make sense of:

1. Not everyone understands their own position or applies it consistently.

2. The rules keep changing – what was right last week might not be right this week;
 3. Let me also note that we could pause here and explore Relativism – also called Subjectivism
 - a) I'm not going to. Last week I gave you a history lesson. I'm not going to do a philosophy lesson this week.
 - b) A smart student in Intro to Philosophy can defend relativism for a while. Most who operate in the real world see through it quickly.⁸
 - c) I linked to some helpful articles in my notes and you can sign up for the CS Lewis class.
 4. A fourth reason this is a confusing camp is because we are not very good at seeing our own hypocrisy.
 - a) We are good at seeing the hypocrisy of the other side but not the hypocrisy in our own camp.⁹ (Let me remind you, we need to learn to see the hypocrisy in your own heart).
 5. Let me also note that I am not giving much time to becoming a Pharisee, although that is an option some embrace.
- D. So – Option A: Reject God's Law in a consistent way; Option B – Replace God's Law with a new set of laws – either knowingly or unknowingly. (which is a fool's errand. We get rid of
- E. There is a group who makes too much of the law.
1. Starting in the Intertestamental Period you have the rise of the Pharisees – 1st century Taliban - who think that the law is wonderful and that they are wonderfully following it.
 2. In the New Testament we have legalists (who lack all grace) and Judaizers (who demand that Gentiles keep Jewish ceremonial law if they want to be a Christ-follower).
 3. In Les Miserables - a novel that celebrates grace, there is a major character who represents the law. His name is Javert. He is the police officer that chases John Val Jean his entire life. He ends up ending his own life when Valjean extends grace to him. When he realizes he can't keep the law.

V. Plan C: You can Rejoice in the Law.

- A. You can embrace the Law and let it lead you to Christ
- B. The Westminster Confession recognizes three purposes of the law: it helps individuals know the right way; it creates healthier societies;¹⁰ and it helps us see that we fall short and need a savior.
- C. If we let it, the law helps us see ourselves more clearly because it gives us an objective standard.¹¹ It helps us realize that we do not just fall a bit short of the standard, we are under sin's power and not able to work harder and fulfill the law. If this isn't clear to you right now, that is because you either haven't read the Sermon on the Mount or you have never tried really hard to be really good.
- D. Jesus makes this as clear as can be in the Sermon on the Mount. He was going right after the Pharisees

VI. There is more to be said:

A. I feel like one of those football commentators who shows the play and says, “notice what happened. The Guard lined up like he was going to shift left, but he shifted right and that freed up Tight End to go freeze for two second and then drift a few yards past the first down. This was not the play when they broke the huddle, but the Quarterback audibled it when he saw they were in Cover two. (And I think, I didn’t see any of that, but I do now).

B. I need to make it clear that there is no option by which we can Escape the Law - last week I argued that it’s every bit as real as gravity just not as immediate.

C. I also need to say that the way forward is not simply about trying harder. We need to see our hearts changed so we become different people. That involves trying harder. I also involves the Holy Spirit changing us so we love the right things.

VII. Question

A. How much would you pay for the Law if it wasn’t available?

B. Mike lists four options. Which camp are you in?

C. In option two, Mike talks about those who replace God’s law with new laws. What do you think would be on the list for today’s Ten Commandments based on current societal

D. Are you proud of your efforts to be good? If you are, you need to repent!

¹ The term law is confusing in English. It is used to describe everything from a bill passed by Congress to city regulations, to observations about nature – the Law of Gravity – to the Police. (“Look out, here comes The Law.”) In the Bible, “the Law” refers to: the first five books of the Bible, the Ten Commandments, and to all of the things Moses got from God.

² If we step out of a window we immediately fall to the ground. If it possible that we will not be caught in a lie for some time, and the way it distorts our soul and ruins our reputation takes longer.

³ It is worth noting that in John 3: Jesus said something offensive and Nicodemus was offended. But at that point Jesus claims the truth is from above. He makes an appeal to authority from heaven. We try to show reasonableness of them. I don’t believe these b/c they are reasonable, but b/c they are from God, who sent his son who rose from the dead

⁴ The Bible not only tells us what will happen, it also shows us. We see how sin undoes people, warping them or leaving them with circumstances they would never choose if they could have seen it coming.

⁵ Civil Laws: Between the time the Jews were slaves under Pharaoh until Nathan appointed Saul to be their first human king, God was their king, and Israel was a theocracy that He ruled through prophets, priests, judges and the law. Some of what we find in the Old Testament are civil laws for Israel that do not apply to us.⁵

⁶ Note: the moral / civil/ceremonial/civil divide that has been common since Luther is a bit of an artificial division of OT law. For starters, these categories do not exist in the OT text itself of the Pentateuch. Secondly, it can be hard to neatly parse them – e.g., there are often moral components to the civil and ceremonial laws. A classic example to reflect on is Paul’s use of the law in Deut 25:4 in both 1 Cor 9:9 and 1 Tim 5:18—where Paul applies the law on not muzzling an ox when it treads the grain (which could be defined as a civil law) to the value of financially supporting Gospel workers. Clearly a deeper God-centered principle from Deut is at work in the NT

uses (and what that principle is exactly is of course debated!) and, after the cross, Paul applies this to a church leadership context.

⁷ Romans 1:18: The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

⁸ I had a friend who was teaching an intro to philosophy class, and a sharp student maintained the merits of relativism throughout the class. So the professor gave him a C in the class. And when the student came in to protest he said, “He screamed that what he did was not fair.” And the professor said, I decided to only give A s to those who wrote in purple ink. The student objected and then realized what was going on. The professor handed him an already filled out grade change card.

⁹ I initially had two examples. On the left I was going to point out the hypocrisy of the college presidents re: antisemitism on campus. They were defending calls for genocide b/c of free speech while they had previously had all kinds of restrictions in place in the months prior. And on the right, the legislator who was arguing that the Ten Commandments need to be enforced, but couldn't name them. (He came up with seven, only two of which were actual commandments).

¹⁰ This doesn't deal with the root problem – which the Law cannot do. Our problem is not that we do the wrong thing, our problem is a heart that wants to do the wrong thing. But the law can keep us from doing the wrong thing that pulls us further down.

¹¹ We have all kinds of challenges assessing ourselves. And for the most part, we grade higher. We think we are better than we are. Not everyone, but we tend to judge ourselves on our intentions not our deliverables. The Law helps us see God's standard – and it helps us realize that we fail.