

“So... how ‘bout Them Other Commandments?”

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Scripture:

Scripture Leviticus 19 (Selected Verses)

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord your God. Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves... When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God. You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord. You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin... You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself... When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity. You shall have honest balances, honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall keep all my statutes and all my ordinances, and observe them: I am the Lord.

Sermon

Now I am pretty sure you have all heard about the “Ten Commandments.”

And I wouldn’t be all that surprised if many of you would be able to recite at least half of them.

Of course we all know about the big ten, but there are many, many more commandments listed in the Old Testament.

Certainly the commands in Leviticus seem pretty clear, especially regarding the importance of acting justly towards others.

But why were they not included in the big ten?

Why are they not considered as important as those others?

In fact, the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are filled with “Laws” that God gave to the Hebrews to follow.

Those four books also contain long and often repetitive narration of the exploits of Moses and the events that took place as Hebrew slaves fled from oppression in Egypt.

Those Four books, 137 chapters, begins on page 48 and goes all the way to page 191, in my Bible, that’s 143 pages in all of very dense text.

All Biblical history up until this point, from the creation up to and including the stories of the great Patriarchs and matriarchs, manages to take up less than 50 pages (Only a third as much).

Need I state the obvious that something very important is happening here? Need I remind you that in the ancient world, writing things down and then duplicating documents was an extremely expensive and laborious endeavor?

Few could read let alone write and so this huge amount of documentation would have truly been immense! Unnecessary repetition would then have been avoided.

But repetition can be important in order drive home the really important stuff or in those later situations when crucial information is forgotten.

The fact that in some of these repetitive scenarios details vary or that certain names (especially for God) and places also differ leads scholars to conclude that other things are perhaps happening here. And just what that it is may not exactly be clear.

Maybe there is more than one group or clan or sub-group that shares the same stories and who bring their own derivations to complement the stories of others?

Perhaps the one people, or the one nation called by God originated from several places or tribal groups who finally became unified under one story over a longer period of time?

And maybe some of these laws and stories were edited at a later time when a more established confederation or nation had time to reflect and begin to codify the past in new ways?

Perhaps these multiple sources grew out of a variety of unique sets of circumstances and experiences?
And we also know that stories can change over time as new situations require reformation at times as well as restoration at others.

Frankly I find this fascinating! For me it brings long, dry and quite repetitive lists of rules and regulations to life. With additional social and historical research one can begin to see that more is happening here than what is merely on the surface. Differing factions; priests, prophets, kings and even regular ole folk are all trying to get their voice heard and promote their vision.

Truly life and death struggles are taking place. Often with those whose ideas win living and death to those who lose. All are literally fighting for not only their lives but for the very soul of the religion and their people.

So, how 'bout all them other rules/commandments, especially the many, many more that we are not so familiar with?

What's a good Christian supposed to do?

Well, one easy response is to simply ignore them!
Yep, just ignore that 100 pages or so of Holy Scripture.

After all, and I am serious here,
Since, as Christians we do, supposedly, follow Jesus and not Moses.

Our faith claims that Jesus fulfills the Law of Moses.
In fact Jesus, at least according to Matthew, is THE new Moses.

Hopefully your ears caught a point of agreement between Moses and Jesus.

"Love your neighbor as yourself" is also repeated in several of those law books in various permutations of course.
"Hear O Israel, the Lord Your God is one and you shall love God with all your heart and all your soul and you shall love your neighbor as yourself!" is another.
In other places it is actually called the "Greatest Commandment."

And so this is why Jesus' interrogator claims his answer was correct!
Jesus knew what the most important commandment was.
He did not add to it because no addition was necessary.
But maybe repetition was necessary?

Perhaps this commandment was not included in the big ten for the simple reason that it could stand alone and on its own! And so I guess, with this last point perhaps I'm giving you at least one good reason to not ignore Moses completely?

Another response comes from some Christians who claim we should still follow all the rules of Moses.

More likely, and maybe you too have encountered a variation of this, the actual practice is to follow only certain laws of Moses, even when they come into conflict with the teachings of Jesus. The laws most strenuously promoted usually have something to do with sex, or more specifically; when, where and with whom or with whom not to have sex with.

And let's admit it folks, most of Moses' rules just do not fit our context. Many just do not make any sense at all.

Now when someone tries to convince me that I should condemn homosexuality because the Law of Moses condemns it, I usually respond that as a Christian I follow Jesus and not Moses.

And then, if there is further protest, I usually inquire if they also refuse to wear mixed fabrics, cook any meat with dairy and agree that children should be executed for talking back to their parents? (Yep, according to Moses, all are against the law!)

And for the very few in our society who actually still own livestock, I'm not sure I would agree that they should be put to death if one of their domesticated animals kills someone? Heck, I don't think that the animal should be put to death either since in my limited experience, when a domesticated beast kills someone, its most likely due to either the stupidity of that humanoid or it is due to the mistreatment of the animal by what is considered a more intelligent species.

I do still think that there is value in those old law books, but I also believe it is important to be selective. I would also challenge some of my most conservative friends to accept the fact that they are doing the same thing.

And since so many Christians are running around misusing those old law books it probably behooves us (pun intended) to know a bit more of what is actually in them.

Our Anabaptist fore-parents taught and Mennonites have usually agreed that the Bible is not “flat.”

What I mean is that there is a hierarchy in scripture.

We start of course with Jesus, both his life and his teachings.

If Moses or even Paul or anyone else is in conflict with Jesus wellwe gotta' go with Jesus.

Leviticus 19, in my opinion, fits well into what Jesus preached.

And since Jesus more or less quoted from it,

let's go ahead and use it with our flat Bible friends!

But that is not what makes it so important.

What is more important is the fact that from those 100 pages of rules, regulations and commandments -

this is one Jesus chose to highlight.

And if you think about it, pretty much the rest of the chapter

is all about how we do it - how in very practical ways,

we actually go about loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Its pretty simple actually. If you love your neighbor,

then don't lie to them, or steal from them or cheat them.

You also do not envy them or wish you had their land,

or their cattle or that you could sleep with their partner.

But Leviticus 19 also tells us who your neighbor is.

Your neighbor is not just your family, or your clan

or even a member of your tribe or nation.

Your neighbor must also include those who are poor,

those who are weak and the sick and who need your help to survive.

Your neighbors are also those who are from different and far away places

and who might have different beliefs and religion than you do.

As I mentioned earlier the Old Testament is a product of a variety of groups and these groups were often in tension with each other.

Probably the greatest tension was between purity and inclusion.

This is why, especially in those old law books,

we often find numerous contradictions.

Some saw the law as a way to maintain individual and group purity to the one God whom only they belonged to.

And so this meant excluding those who could not fit in.

Others saw the law as something that set them apart,
like a city on the hill, which could compel those around them
to believe in their ways and their God.

Still others saw the law as an instrument of justice - a great equalizer
that would keep the rich from becoming too rich
and keep the poor from becoming too poor.

Throughout Israel's history we see that the more powerful groups
too often got their way leading to exclusion purity and oppression.

But we also encounter, in spite of those triumphs,
through it all, other traditions that still managed to prick
and to prod and to prophesy for a more complete and egalitarian vision.

It was no doubt discouraging when those traditions that emphasized justice
were subordinated to those seeking to locate power
with the priestly elites or royal thrones.

But it can also be a source of encouragement, for us at least,
to see that the desire for a religion and society based upon justice
never seems to die out but just keeps popping up all the time!

And in the end that is why we also call what we are a part of "a faith."

For it is faith that sustains us and keeps us going
especially when the going gets tough.

In the end it is a faith we are called to follow
not merely to the adherence of rules and laws.
It is a faith that we also have in Jesus
and it is something we also share with good old Holy Moses!