

The Covenant of Law
Exodus 19:1–6, 20:1-16, 24: 4-11, 34:27-28

Well friends perhaps you have caught bits and pieces of Jon Stewart’s recent criticism of American politician Mike Huckabee for holding to the tradition view on marriage.

Huckabee is quoted as saying *"I can't just 'change' with the 'times' if it means deviating from 'biblical law,'" and that asking him to accept same-sex marriage "would be like asking Jewish people to serve bacon-wrapped scallops in their delis..."*

Jon Stewart, who hosts a TV talk show, has responded (oh-so-cleverly- I might add) by pointing out Huckabee’s inconsistent obedience to other biblical laws about wearing mixed fabric (Deut 22:11) and not trimming one’s beard (Lev 19:27).

Thus, concludes Stewart, Huckabee’s objections to same sex marriage based on “biblical law” make no sense – though Stewart was a bit more explicative in his emphasis.

And just like that friends, our sermon topic for today - the Covenant of Law leaps off the pages of scripture and is thrust into the public spotlight, as it is used to comment on issues that are important, relevant and very controversial.

So – if you have been wondering how this current series on the Christ of the Covenants connects to our daily lives – just think this example from the Daily Show.

Because friends, when it comes to the Covenant of Law, the number one question is *“what parts of this biblical law still apply to our lives and how do we make sense of it?”*

And there’s only one thing we can do with regards to that question. We need to focus, concentrate and work at gaining an understanding of the scriptures from the context of the Covenant.

And as we’ve seen in this series so far, one the ways that occurs is highlighting how the transition from one Covenant administration underlies the storyline of the biblical narrative.

So let's look how things transition from the Covenant of Promise with Abraham into the Covenant of Law with Moses.

Last week we left Abraham living by faith and waiting for God to give him a son through his wife Sarah as a start on fulfilling the promise to make him into great nation and give his descendants the Promised Land. Eventually Isaac is born, just as God promised, and God declares that He will inherit all the blessings of the Covenant.

Isaac grows up, gets married and has two sons – Jacob and Esau. Though it is usually the firstborn who receives the inheritance and blessings, in this case God determines He will continue the Covenant of Promise with the younger son Jacob.

Jacob eventually gets married, twice, and he has twelve sons – the family is starting to multiply... but jealousy and favoritism cause Jacobs sons to sell their brother Joseph into slavery.

We know that story well – having just focused on it for our November breakfast theatre series – so we know how Joseph

eventually became ruler over all Egypt and brought his brother and his father to live with him to survive a famine.

So Jacob, or Israel, leaves the Promised Land and lives out the remainder of his days down in Egypt reunited with Joseph, and this is how God's word to Abraham came to pass.

God had said *“your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there.” (Gen 15:13)*

And true enough, eventually the people of Israel became so numerous in Egypt that the Egyptians were afraid of them and forced them into slavery.

But God also said it would be for a limited time and eventually He would *“punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.”*

So God kept his promise to Abraham and sent Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt and bring them to the Promised Land.

But, their first stop on the way to the Promised Land was at Mt. Sinai – because God wanted to established, or re-established, His Covenant with the people of Israel.

Now when we think of the covenant between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai, we usually think about Moses going up the mountain and then dramatically coming down with the Ten Commandments.

But before God gives Moses the Ten Commands on tablets of stone He calls Moses up the mountain to explain why He is about to make a covenant with the people of Israel.

This is important to note because it explains why God makes the Law the distinctive administrative feature of this next phase of the Covenant.

God says he will make a Covenant with Israel because He has carried Israel out of Egypt and brought them to himself, and His intention for them is to be as a kingdom of Priests, a Holy nation. (Ex 19:4, 6)

Now here we must remember that God's promise to Abraham is only two thirds kept; his descendants are numerous, they are on the way to inherit the Promised Land; but God still needs to bless all the nations on earth through them...

So in by setting apart the nation of Israel for Himself - that's what a *Holy nation* means - he can instruct them and teach them and shape them so they can become a Kingdom of Priests who mediating God's to the rest of humanity - that's what Priests do.

God intends to bless the nations on earth by having the nation of Israel acts as His agent of Divine communication, blessings, guidance, and instruction and so on...

Now to be liberated from slavery, and chosen to become God's priests, this is a great honor which demonstrates God's grace and mercy – how should they respond to this, how do they show their gratitude and thankfulness for this?

Friends, maybe you can relate? Perhaps you've been in a situation where something good has happened but you have absolutely no idea how to say thank-you appropriately...

I mean you can say thank-you, but what happened was so amazing that something more significant is needed in response – but you don't know what to do? That's sort of what's going on here...

So, as further evidence of His grace and mercy God gives the people of Israel the Law – so that through their obedience they might properly show Him their gratitude, and also learn how to correctly function as a Kingdom of Priests.

Now friends, if there is only one thing that you remember from this message this morning; and do I hope there's more... but if you remember only one thing remember this...

The Law was given for Israel to appropriately express their gratitude through obedience and to help them properly function as a kingdom of Priests!

And this is important to remember friends because whenever someone tries to apply the idea of “biblical law” to an issue, others will dismiss this by pointing out the inconsistencies and the argument or debate goes back and forth...

And eventually someone will try to resolve the argument by saying something like “*but Jesus came to set us free from having to obey all those rules and from the burden of trying to be perfect in order to go to heaven*”

But friends this isn't true. It wrongly assumes that God gave Israel the Law to demonstrate moral perfection through obedience and achieve salvation or go to heaven, yet we so often imply this as we explain the gospel...

Let me say it again - ***The Law was given for Israel to appropriately express their gratitude through obedience and to help them properly function as a kingdom of Priests!***

Friends the Law is good! Are you with me on this?

Now the majority of what constitutes the Law can be found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and if you were to take some time and read through these books you will see that the Covenant of Law gives God's people instruction and direction on a wide range of topics and situations and applications.

It covers the specific instruction of how to build the Tabernacle, what the High Priest should wear and how to offer sacrifices, what to do in case of an accidental death, dealing with mold and mildew in your home, and of course the more obscure laws about we spoke of earlier such as not mixing fabric or trimming the edges of your beard.

And if you are reading through these laws you will probably ask the question "why?" some seem to make sense – as they line up with laws we might have in our society such as do not murder, do not steal... but mixing fabric, or not cooking a young goat in its mother's milk? (Ex 34:20)

What specific reason is there for such commands? And how would obedience to these Laws show gratitude and help Israel mediate the Divine presence of Yahweh?

Well friends there much that we can learn and understand if we look at how these laws carry forward and develop some of the elements, aspects and emphases of prior covenant administrations... and especially reflect on how they help further God plans to restore the Covenant of Creation.

Let's take a look at how that works with the Ten Commandments, because out of all the specific commands which make up the Law these seem to have special significance, as we note in Exodus 34:28 where it says "*he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments.*"

We see in this verse an implication that what is expressed in the Ten Commandments somehow represents the essence of the Covenant of Law.

Then consider that each successive phase of Covenant administration does not cancel the previous one but carries through and expands them... and then we realize the Ten Commandments actually summarize the whole of God's restorative purposes from all the of prior covenants up to this point!

Look at how each command brings something from a prior covenant forward...

You shall have no other god's before me. This command brings the Covenant of Creation forward re-emphasizing the essence of God's prohibition to eat from any tree but the one. I am God, and neither you nor anything else I have made is like me – do not worship idols or images.

Do not take the name of the LORD God in vain – this has nothing to do with saying "O God or O Jesus" as a swear word – as disrespectful as that is. This is about Covenant faithfulness versus unfaithfulness.

If you've taken Yahweh's name, His Covenant name, then you must be loyal and faithful to Him and not "misuse" that relationship.

This is true for all the Covenant administrations with Adam, Noah, Abraham – and now Moses and Israel... God is always requiring faithfulness and loyalty in His covenants.

Then comes remember the Sabbath, and that's so obviously brings forward the Covenant of Creation. God himself references that Covenant here when He says "*for in six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth but on the seventh He rested...*" (Ex 20:11)

Next is honor your father and mother so that you may live long... (Ex 20:12)

Let me pause there for a moment and remind us how during the Covenant periods of Adam and Noah those who were faithful Covenant partners with God, the "offspring of the Woman" were noted for their exceptionally long life spans.

To me this command brings forward the promise of the Covenant of Commencement, where God says to Satan *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”* and the subsequent naming of the woman as Eve; because She was to become the mother of all the living...

So I’m going to suggest this command is about honoring the Covenantal Father Abraham by living and waiting with the same kind of faith for the Promise to come to its complete fulfilment, and honoring the Covenantal Mother – Eve – as the mother of all the living by living in opposition to the serpent and his rebellious descendants.

Not that we don’t respect and treat our biological parents with dignity and love – but whatever that looks like ought to be informed by faith and faithfulness to God.

Furthermore, if we want our children to honor us we ought to be living examples of Abraham’s faith and Eve’s enmity of the serpent – so that as our children follow our example in this

manner – they honor us, as we honored our parents in this same way.

And the second part of this command which refers to “the Land that Yahweh is giving to you” is obviously bringing forward the Covenant of Promise with Abraham.

Now the remaining five commands are; do not murder, or commit adultery, or steal, or bear false witness, or covet.

I’m hoping that you see the “preservative” nature in them, and how they bring forward the Covenant of Preservation and further expand the ways in which human sinfulness is curbed and human life is preserved to allow humanity to multiply and fill the earth - and in this case to enable Abraham’s descendants to become a numerous as the stars in the sky...

So then, these are not just the Ten Words of the Covenant of Law but they are the Ten Words that represent how God is working to restore the Covenant of Creation through these

successive administrations, and this same dynamic is true for the rest of the content of the Mosaic Law.

Take the Dietary Laws for example. They make complete sense if we understand them to be a sort of covenantal test, not identical to the test of the Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil which Adam faced, but similar in the fact that Israel was not to eat certain foods simply because God said so – would they obey God simply because He was God and they were not?

And what about those obscure laws; about not mixing fabrics, not planting two different kinds of seed, or not mating two different kinds of animals?

Well these “Separation Laws” make complete sense if we understand them as means, object lessons, by which Israel was to learn they were set apart and different from the other nations – not just because they were Priest, but because they were the Line of the Woman - not the line of the Serpent - and

the two should not be mixed; God had set enmity between the two – what God has separated we should not mix!

And we can also see there are lots of Civil laws that continue to expand on the Covenant of Preservation and help to order and preserve society and human life.

Take Deuteronomy 22:8 for example *“When you build a new house, build a fence around your flat roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof.”*

And finally, if Israel is to be a Kingdom of Priests who are to function as a mediator between the rest of the nations and God, if they are to reflect the Image of the God... then they need to be able to speak accurately and truly about God and accurately and truly understand what humanity needs from Him.

So there are all sorts of Religious laws that are designed to teach about Holy and unholy, pure and impure, the difference

between God and humanity, what sin is, how sin can be atoned for and forgiven, what it means to worship and serve God, what to give to God and so on...

In being a Kingdom of Priests, Israel reflects the Image of God to the nations around them – which is why they are not to make any image of God – for God is re-making them into His Image – this is the focal point of His plan to restore of Covenant of Creation.

So – what a difference a Covenant perspective makes in understanding these actual laws?

But the bigger and more important difference is how this same dynamic works to inform our understanding of Jesus.

In the same way that specific elements and promises from the prior covenants are carried forward and given form in these laws, the covenants and their distinctive elements eventually give birth to Jesus.

“But didn’t Mary gave birth to Jesus?” Yes, but is that not born out of the Covenant of Commencement where God pronounces that the offspring of the woman shall crush the head of the serpent...

Friends, in this sermon series we are looking to discover the Christ OF the Covenants, in other words the Christ who comes out of, and is defined by the specific distinctives of these Covenants...

Christ fulfills them because He comes out of them and embodies them - He doesn’t do away with them.

He says that in Matthew 5:17-18 *“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.”*

(I hope you caught the references in that to the Covenant of Law, Preservation, and finishing restoring Creation)

Friends, it's important that we are accurately understanding and correctly representing God's covenants to those whom God is calling to become covenant partners.

And we can start doing this by not pitting Christ against the Covenants - and teaching others to do the same – part of that Priestly function of Israel from the covenant of Law which Christ fulfilled and then passed on to us in His command to go and make disciples...

For example – when we speak of how salvation takes us out of this world, like the hymn “I'll fly away” or that refrain “the cross before me, the world behind me, no turning back...” we are pitting Christ against the Covenant of Creation.

When we contrast our “secular job” against our “ministry calling” we are pitting Christ against the Covenant of Commencement; friends in Christ our work is a holy calling!

When we make the Rainbow into a symbol of no-judgment instead of it reminding us of God's patience and purifying judgment... we pit Christ against the Covenant of Preservation.

When we continue to insist that “the Promised Land” is still limited to who is living in Palestine instead of expanding it to include the renewal of the entire cosmos... we are pitting Christ against the Covenant of Promise.

And finally, when we explain the gospel by saying that “*Jesus came to set us free from having to obey all those rules and trying to be perfect in order to go to heaven...*” we are pitting Christ against the Covenant of Law

Now I know someone is going to wonder – “*well if Christ didn't set us free from that then how does He save us?*”

The Good news friends is that Christ saves us by transferring His covenant faithfulness to us – from each and every covenant - by the Holy Spirit. This is precisely what we must trust and have faith in in...

Now, exactly how Christ fulfills and is faithful in each covenant is what we'll be looking at in two weeks from now - so you won't want to miss that!

But in the meantime – a helpful way to properly relate to “biblical law” as it is fulfilled in Christ, and as we live in Christ, and He lives in us, is to think of norm and form.

For example, the covenantal norm behind the law form of not wearing clothes of mixed fabrics is the enmity which separates of the line of the woman and the serpent.

In Christ, this separation is now achieved by having this covenantal norm written on our hearts internally, and through guidance of the Holy Spirit we have the freedom to express this norm in other appropriate forms, such as demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit in contrast to those who live according to their sinful nature – to borrow Paul's words from Romans 8:5.

The same works for the dietary laws. The covenantal norm behind them is obedience to God regarding what will give life and what will bring death.

Since Christ is formed by the Covenants – he embodies this covenant norm and gives it a new form in His command that we eat his body and drink his blood in the Lord's Supper.

So, what is the Covenant norm – and how does that shape Christ, how does Christ embody it, and how does that guide us to express that covenant norm in new appropriate form?

Friends this requires a bit of effort and work and thinking on our part, lots of openness to the Holy Spirit – however as the writer of Hebrews says *“Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity... and God permitting, we will do so.”*

May God help us to discover the Christ of the Covenants.

Amen

Application for Today

So, knowing what we now know about Covenant – of Creation, of Commencement, of Preservation, of Promise, and Law...

Listen anew to Jesus' words in Matt 5

¹⁷ "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.
¹⁸ 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.
¹⁹ Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least

in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

But Jesus is the Christ OF the Covenants – genitive of... derived from. And we can see that in this statement of His as refers to how he fulfills the Law... and also refers to the Covenant of Preservation and God's plan to restore the Covenant of Creation in vs. 18. Now we also hear about a Kingdom as well – which we will learn more about next week...

- certainly in the way it help us in our ability to determine how any particular law is fulfilled in Jesus and whether or not it takes the same form it took in Law of Moses

First – Christ fulfills the Law and the Prophets – this is a reference to the whole Covenant of Law – not just a specific function of it...

Why - because the Prophets were always there to call Israel back to covenant faithfulness

How does Christ fulfill it - and if we are in Christ what does that mean for how we are to live? We'll get to that...

How does Covenant change our understanding of vs. 20? Well with our old understanding that Law and Grace are opposites and that the erroneous belief that Law was given as

a means to earn salvation – we tend to understand this verse to say that we need to observe and keep more laws than the Pharisees and teachers of the law... and that's impossible, and way to legalistic, discouraging and we end up wondering why Jesus would say something like this.

But with a Covenant understanding framing Jesus word – and defining Jesus himself it's more like - unless you have a better kind of covenant loyalty than the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Righteousness = covenant loyalty

In other words what the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law represent is not the kind of Covenant Loyalty God is looking for – and after saying this Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount which takes the examples of the Law and recasts them in a spirit of Covenant Loyalty instead of the legalistic, morally superior cast it had taken on.

In other words Jesus is once again making the Covenant of the Law a means of Grace for those he was preaching to – because properly understood the Covenant of the Law foreshadows its fulfillment in Jesus.

So was it possible to be a faithful loyal covenant partner under the Covenant of Law and receive the blessings and promises of the covenant – yes it was... we have many examples of those who were faithful under the Covenant of Law and were blessed...

Just get rid of the understanding that obeying the law = being perfect = God accepts you = going to heaven when you die. That's not Covenant, that's moralism.

If we misunderstand the Covenant of Law – we misunderstand Jesus...

Thus Jesus words *“anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”*

So – it's hard to get it wrong that Jesus can save us from sin, but from there we can get into some pretty seriously shallow or twisted representations of who Jesus is – if we don't understand that Covenant background. Just like the Pharisees and teachers of the Law had a twisted view of the Covenant of Law...

In fact they are related to how we already looked setting Jesus against the Covenant(s)
And how often when these distortions get straightened out do people rejoice in the true freedom and are amazed by what the Christian life is actually about! *“called great in the Kingdom of Heaven”*

Now – with all the covenants fulfilled in and by Jesus, and we are in Jesus and as scripture says we get his righteousness – his covenant faithfulness...

How do we live and stay faithful to Christ who is faithful on our behalf? Or as so many want to ask – what rules do we still have to obey....

First change – in Christ the Law is no longer external, but internal (this does not mean Love) it means that the Holy Spirit dwells with-in us as a Seal of the Covenant –

So the question is not what rules do I have to obey – but how does my life reflect the Spirit of Covenant Faithfulness that now lives in me?

And we can look to what God was trying to accomplish in the Covenant administrations for guidance on this – and that’s appropriate because this is what Christ fulfilled – so it’s how we ought to live... does that make sense??

So for the Covenant of Law how do we live fulfilled? Here’s my attempt...

By always seeing this first as a means of Grace...

- i) The 10 Words = These continue to speak against the subtle ways that we wrestle with our sinful nature. It describes what needs to be and will be restored in the Covenant of Creation. If we are faithful to these 10 Words we can be faithful to Christ - if we are unfaithful remember they show us what to confess and ask forgiveness for... and put your faith and trust in Jesus.

- ii) Dietary Law = We eat and drink the Lord’s Supper – unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you have no life in you!

- iii) Teaching Laws = We have the whole Scripture - which illuminated by the Holy Spirit reveals the Covenants – and teaches us about God, humanity, sin, salvation, worship etc...

- iv) Separation Laws = Being set apart by the Holy Spirit, we are those who are in Christ – outside Christ we are covenant breakers. We are in the world but not of the world. We live among the line of the serpent but are not of the serpent. Do not be unequally yoked.

- v) Civil Laws = Christians ought to engage politically to work to preserve society, enrich society, and protect human life in society – with a view towards God’s restoration of the Covenant of Creation. So yes this includes charity work but also your vocation –

Most practical – when you’re reading through the Covenant of Law and you’re going – how does this still apply through Christ, how might the Spirit speak to me through this???

Use Norm and Form....

Human sinfulness twisted the grace of the Law – just as it still
twists the grace of Jesus.