

Part 12: God in the Details

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A couple years ago, John Luhmann and I flew to a conference in Oregon, and I was my job to reserve a rental car. So I called the rental company and talked to a lady who sounded like she was talking to me on a phone that was on the opposite side of the room from where she was sitting. There were a number of times where I told her, "I can't hear you." After three or four times of her trying to resolve the issue the reservation continued.

I was reserving a car from the Portland airport, and through the audio issues I heard her say something like, "The Portland main airport?" Now I've flown into Portland a number of times and I also know that there are a number of smaller municipal airports in the area, so I said, "Yes the main Portland airport, PDX."

So when we arrived at the airport, I proceeded to go the check in counter where they told me that they had indeed reserved a car for me, and it was waiting for me at the Portland airport, in the state of Maine. I'm sure you've all had moments like this in your life where you are reminded of the old idiom, "The devil is in the details."

The phrase is meant to express the ways in which small details, such as the word "main" being heard as an adjective or a noun, have the ability to make or break whatever it is you're working on. While most researches aren't certain where the phrase came from they think it actually came from a German proverb which said, "God is in the details."

Today we are looking at seven chapters in the book of Deuteronomy. Seven chapters of laws. Some of these laws regulate the types of fabric one can wear, one regulates the ways in which soldiers on the battle field are to use the restroom, another law regulates the use of just scales and weights in the marketplace, another one prescribes capital punishment of children who obstinately rebel continually against their parents, another law limits the kinds of trees which Israel is to use when they make siege works.

In the ESV translation the word, "shall, you shall, they shall, he shall" is used 179 times. These divine "shalls" together form to my count at least 64 individual laws, spanning six primary areas of Israelite life. All of which confirms the truth that for God's people, God is indeed in the details.

This is something that we've been alluding to since we started chapter 12 of Deuteronomy: when God delivers you everything changes. As Paul says, "Whether you eat or whether you drink do it all for the glory of God."

The basis of these laws are the holiness of God and our response to it. Four times in this sermon Moses reminds God's people that they are holy to God. They are set apart for God. That's what the law exists to do, protect and preserve their set apart nature so that they might enjoy God.

So in light of all of this we are going to look at three aspects of the Law: **The Problem of the Law, The Principles of the Law** and the **Priority of the Law**.

Because of the vast scope of our text today, I'm going to be summarizing a lot of what is in these seven chapters. But for a basic breakdown, our first two points are going to deal with the content in chapters 19-25, and the last point is going to pick up with chapter 26 of Deuteronomy.

First we are going to start with **The Problem of the Law**. In summary the problem is, we can't keep it.

This tension provides both an internal and an external challenge, both of which need to be resolved in Jesus Christ.

Internally, we wrestle with guilt and conscience in all sorts of places because regardless of what you believe, our hearts are always comparing themselves to something. We were built to measure up to God's standards but Israel failed to do it, Paul in the New Testament talked about the challenge of it, and we feel it in places in our lives too.

But externally the law presents a unique challenge in that it often allows for people, secular and Christian, to leverage the law against Jesus. To use God's word of the law to discredit or distance other parts of God's word.

Consider this law in **Deuteronomy 22:12**. For many secular scholars or religious studies professors, its passages like this which arm them with the argument that you can't claim to keep any of the Bible's moral codes if you're not willing to keep all of them.

In our passage today we see hard laws prescribing death penalties and violent warfare. And in light of this many Christians try to drive an artificial wedge between the Old Testament and the New. Instead of learning the role of the law, they miss the beautiful picture of God in the law and instead try to convince us that God has some mid-eternity crisis in between testaments and now we know a completely different God in the NT.

But actually the Bible helps us understand the Bible. Turns out it never works out to use God's word against him. But to answer both the internal and the external issues of this problem we need to see how Jesus interacts with the law.

First, how does Jesus talk about the Law?

Was the law a problem for Jesus, did Jesus see the law as legalism that needed to be destroyed? What's interesting is that Jesus used the law as a weapon against the legalism of the Pharisees. Look at **Matthew 12:1-5**.

Or consider this scene: **Luke 10:25-28**. Jesus affirmed the goodness and the role of the law. Jesus loved the law, and specifically he loved Deuteronomy. It was the book he quoted most in his teaching ministry. But more than loving the law, Jesus kept the law.

Jesus kept the law. He was circumcised to keep the law, he was presented at the temple to keep the law, he observed the Sabbath to keep the law, and he celebrated the Passover to keep the law.

But in keeping the Law Jesus did far more than you or I would. Because Jesus, who was fully God and fully man, kept the law, he fulfilled the law. Look with me at **Matthew 5:17-20**.

What's Jesus' point here? The point is that for anyone to meet the standards of righteousness in the law, they had to be more righteous than the Pharisees. God made a righteous standard and to meet it you had to meet the law perfectly.

But not one person could. Not even the Pharisees. That's why Moses included in our text today cases of punishment. All throughout Deuteronomy Moses gives guidelines for punishment because he knows that people are going to break the law. Look at what Moses says regarding this **in Deuteronomy 21:22-23**.

Here Moses tells God's people that those who have broken the law are under the curse of God. And for some people, their punishment is to be public so that everyone sees the weight of it.

But look at how Paul uses this text in **Galatians 3:10-13**.

Why did Jesus die? Jesus died on a tree to show us first-hand the weight of breaking God's law. Breaking God's law demanded death. The greatest commandment Moses gives, the greatest commandment Jesus gives is to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And to have failed at that even for a moment is to break the whole of the law.

Seeing the cross of Jesus should cause us to stand in fear of what the wages of our sin is. But more than simply reminding us of the penalty, Jesus became the curse for us.

When ISIS moved into Syria a group of local journalists began to post the atrocities of ISIS online. When ISIS forces discovered a journalist like this, they would execute them and hang them in the public square. They did this so that the other journalists would stand in fear and stop their resistance.

Which meant for all the other journalists they knew the weight of their rebellion, and they spent their lives in the shadows boldly trying to avoid the same sentence. They still lived as cursed men. But when Jesus became the curse for us, and was hanged on a tree in our place, he removed the sentence from us, and calls us out of the shadows of sin into safety.

Jesus is not just a reminder of the punishment of law breaking, he is actually the substitute for your law breaking. That's what the gospel is. The gospel is that Jesus never broke the law, but instead kept it. In doing so he takes your punishment and gives you his perfect obedience.

Brothers and sisters, that freedom from sin's curse comes not when you see the punishment of the cross, but when you see the substitution of it. The gospel is not just that sin demands punishment, the gospel is that Jesus loved us enough to take our punishment.

And because of that the law didn't just disappear. We fulfill the law, all the perfect standards of it, through Jesus. That's how perfect Jesus is. The gospel doesn't lower God's standards for perfection, it transforms our imperfections through Jesus.

So why do we not need to worry about the tassels on our clothes or the bacon in our bellies? Because Jesus already met those demands in himself. We are declared righteous by the standards of the law in Jesus. To speak derogatorily of the law is to speak derogatorily of how much Jesus loved you.

So we see how Jesus spoke of the law (he loved it and he kept it), we saw how Jesus fulfilled the law (because no one else could do it), but now the question is, "How do we read it?"

What do we do with seven chapters of law? Well first, we recognize that this is still God's holy and inspired word. Jesus didn't uninspire the Old Testament.

But under the banner of God's word we learn to read the Old Testament as Jesus did. Meaning we read it in light of its historic context (God's real people going into God's real land, obeying God's real law) but we also read it in light of Jesus. We learn to read law redemptively, that is to read it backwards from the cross. This is what Jesus himself did with two men after he was resurrected: **Luke 24:25-27**.

Jesus wants us to read the Old Testament, but he wants us to read the Old Testament in light of the ways in which it points to him. And this is where we look at our second point today: **The Principles of the Law**.

Because Jesus fulfilled the law, and also called us to go back to the law, we need to rightly recognize the redemptive principles of the law.

If you sit down and read Deuteronomy 19-26, you'll find some laws which are remarkably liberal for its time. Moses prescribes some laws for the sake of protecting nature. He prohibits Israelites from returning escaped slaves to their masters to protect them from being abused. He seeks to protect the rights of women in marriage and in divorce and calls for the courts to be unbiased towards the vulnerable and neglected.

But there are other laws which would seem more conservative. There are places even inside of difficult marriages where Moses prohibits divorce. He prohibits cross-dressing and prostitution. He requires *lex talionis*, eye for an eye, and in some cases enforces the death penalty on those caught in adultery.

But as we read each of these laws, even the ones that make our modern sensibilities squirm, we see glimpses into God's character. God takes justice, equality, community and family seriously. We also see the perfection of Jesus in each of these as Jesus really obeyed all of them perfectly.

But more than that, we don't just read these laws in terms of God's righteousness and Jesus' perfection. We also read them in terms of what they mean for us. Certainly we don't need to fulfill the letter of the law, Jesus has already done that, but does this mean that the principles behind the laws no longer have any meaning for us?

I imagine that just because Jesus fulfilled the law we don't stop caring about widows or sojourners, or the family. But instead of following the letter of the law we can, and we should look at the heart and motivation behind these laws and check them in our own thoughts and actions. Paul himself models this by quoting a rather obscure law: **1 Timothy 5:17-18**.

So hear Paul quotes **Deuteronomy 25:4**. What is Paul doing with this text? Is he calling all preachers dumb oxen? More importantly, Moses certainly didn't have New Testament elders in mind when he preached Deuteronomy, so does this mean that it's ok for us to take the Old Testament out of context and make it all metaphorical? No.

Instead Paul is recognizing the thrust behind the text. In Deuteronomy 25 Moses start a series of laws like this: don't withhold wages from a worker, give him his due. Don't punish a father for his son's sin, each gets what they owe. Don't pervert justice, everyone is due it. Don't overharvest your fields, but leave some for the homeless because they too deserve to eat, and your harvest is enough. If a man needs to be punished, punish him, but don't punish him beyond what he needs. Don't muzzle an ox when treading out grain.

Now in 1 Timothy, Paul is using the text to make sure that churches are paying their pastors who labor in preaching and teaching. It would have made complete sense for him to just quote the part where Moses says, pay the worker. But Paul realized that this entire portion of Deuteronomy focused on people getting what they are owed, and so he quotes the part about the ox so as to say, "If an ox gets what he is owed while he works, don't you think your elders should as well."

While Christ fulfilled the letter of the Law, Paul models how we can apply the heart of it still today. So for us, when we read Old Testament laws, they should have an effect on us. The law always outlines Israel's response to God's grace. And for New Testament believers, we have seen the fullness of God's grace in Jesus Christ which means we of all people should have the details of our lives changed.

What does this mean, and where does this show up? The New Testament prescribes all sorts of places, but here again Deuteronomy helps us know where the change of our redemption shows up as most of Moses' laws rotate around four spheres of life.

Redemption changes our civil life, our religious life, our family life and our sexual life.

In other words following Jesus changes how you live in society, it changes how you relate and respond to God religiously, it changes how you view dating, marriage and parenting, and it even changes how you view gender and sexuality.

And it changes all these things by reminding you of the one big truth we saw a couple weeks ago: "You are children of the Lord your God." This means that when it comes to how you view life in public, in private and in the confines of your own bedroom you think differently because you have been set apart as a child of God. You view your life forever through the lens of God's love for you. Paul stresses the same priority in **Ephesians 5:1**.

Now this never happens all at once, but slowly we begin to think differently. My wife and I at various points in life have read, watched or heard about all the ways in which plastic bags are hurting the environment. And we are now to the point that if we've got a small order at a grocery store and they ask us for a bag, we pause. And we consider in light of what we know.

This is the way in which the gospel begins to leak into every area of our thoughts and lives. When it comes to our business deals, our degrees, or our relationships and parenting, the re-creative effect of the Jesus grant us pause so that we can think to ourselves, "The gospel has something to say about this."

That's how Jesus wants us to read these laws in chapters 19-25. They show the beautiful righteousness of Jesus, but they also show the spheres in which our redemption changes and influences the seemingly ordinary details of our lives.

The primary principles of the law stress Jesus righteousness and our response to grace. Grace changes us. But we can't lose sight of the priority of grace. And this is what Moses turns to in chapter 26: **The Priority of the Law.**

After Moses has spent the last hour preaching to his people about laws, this is how he begins to button up this section. **Deuteronomy 26:1-11.**

Do you see what Moses is doing? He knows that we are human, and that after hearing an extended lecture on laws, we might be prone to view law-keeping and covenant obedience as a burden. They might be looking over that Jordan River with eyes glassed over thinking, "This will be fun..." So what does he lighten the mood with? A lecture on tithing.

But if we read this carefully we see the miracle of this tithe right? Moses is telling God's people that one day they will tithe from the Promised Land. You are not harvesting tithes as a wanderer. You are not getting fruit from Egypt. You are in the Land, the Land which God promised you, the Land which time after time your sinfulness kept you from, but look, God kept his covenant to you.

And they are to remind themselves, "My father was a wandering Aramean. He started with nothing. His people grew up on slavery. But you heard our cries, you brought us out. You carried us to this land. And now we have cities of our own produce of our own and a God of our own. You have fulfilled our wildest dreams."

Moses wants to remind God's people that keeping the law is a response to what God has already done. And he knows they need to be reminded of it constantly. They are so forgetful of this. And so are we.

But look at how Moses steps out of law giving in verse 16 and actually begins in this moment, with Israel and God, to reaffirm the covenant together: **Deuteronomy 26:16-19.**

Now do you see the wonder of this? Stop everything if you don't see this. To those people who want to disregard the Old Testament. Look here. To those who see the moral and societal commands of the Bible and think, all I'm going to do is fail, how can I ever have peace. Look at what this covenant was in two parts.

Part one (vs. 17): Israel says, "You are our God, and we will walk in your ways and will keep your statutes and will obey his voice." Part two (vs. 18): God says, "And you are my people as I have promised you."

Did you see the wonder! God's people say, we are your people and we will do this and this and this. In response to this God did not say, "When you have done these things then you will be my people."

No. Here, Moses says, this day, you are God's people according to his promise. With a lifetime of law keeping yet ahead, God reveals to his people his grace which has already chosen them.

You see the priority of the law is not what we have done for God, but what God has already done in saving us. That was true for Israel, and it is true for those who are found in Christ Jesus. Why would God accept you? Because of what Jesus already did for you.

Yet, in tension with this wonderful grace, God does call them to obey, and the obedience looks wonderful: **Deuteronomy 26:18-19.**

I want to say this in closing. It's often said because of God's grace that you don't have to do anything. And that's true. But where you put that truth statement matters. Because if we always are reminding people of what we don't "have to do" as Christians, we can actually belittle God's grace in Jesus Christ.

You don't have to do anything to be saved because you can't do anything to be saved. Jesus did all the things, what you get to do is believe. That's it. But once you're saved your relationship to doing and obedience is different.

My wife and I have started talking about taking our kids to Disneyland. The problem is that Disneyland and the cost to get there is expensive, especially with four kids. But now imagine if someone came to me, right now, and said, "I want to pay for your family to go to Disneyland, airfare, hotel and everything."

What did I do to deserve that? Nothing? How do I get access to that offer? By simply accepting it. That's salvation. It's too costly on your own but is a free gift offered to you to be accepted in Jesus Christ. And I can say with joyful heart, "I didn't have to do anything!"

But now imagine if you get into Disneyland by that free and costly gift. If as soon as my kids got in there I turned to them and said, "You don't have to do anything."

Imagine if every time they went and stood in a long line, I ran up to them and told them, "This is a long wait, you don't have to do this? It's hard to stand here for such a long time, let's just go back and sit on the bench and appreciate that we are here."

There would be some confusion. Because they wouldn't see their response as an obligation. Instead it would be the natural response. They would want to incur whatever cost of the lines because it brought with it the promise of joy.

And more importantly, to treat the free gift of admission like this would be to make so little of not only the cost of the gift, but of the giver himself. Why? Because the gift was given by the giver so that you would have joy. Even if it involved the demands of sometimes long and hot lines.

When God's gospel in Jesus Christ saves us through his costly sacrifice on the cross, our response to it is often hard and difficult, but the end of all our obedience is the joy of God himself.

That's the gospel lifestyle. Obedience to God's commands is part of our joy of being in the park. It's often hard and it's often scary, but at the end we bring back to God gifts which only he can bring us and we say, "I'm so grateful for this opportunity."

If obeying God in the moment of faith brought you an eternal joy of this size, imagine what joy a lifetime of obedience will also yield.

Brothers and sisters, the law of God reminds us that God is in the details. He died for the detailed weight of your sin, and now his grace gives us the joy of changing the details of our life.