

God's Design for Community (Part 1)

Laws for Living

St Paul's—10th September 2006

There is a moment ... each month ... when I approach my email program with a combination of fear and excitement. It is the moment when Ken sends me the monthly preaching roster.

As I move my mouse towards the email attachment, I have to resist the temptation to fall to my knees in prayer that the Almighty will save me from an impossible preaching assignment. I usually resist the temptation to fall to my knees, but the prayer has already escaped from my mind, "Dear God, let my preaching assignment, should I accept it, be not a mission impossible."

I have to say that this month was no exception. I opened the email attachment and, as I read the title of today's topic, I began to relax. "God's Design for Community. Part One. Laws for Living."

"God's Design for Community." Sounded interesting. I could get my teeth into that.

"Part One." Part One? Let me see, who's got part two? Oh, Ken's got part two. That's good. If I screw up part one, Ken can fix it in a couple of weeks.

"Laws for Living." Now I liked that. Laws for Living. Undoubtedly, Ken was going to give me some simple thing to preach on. I would just have to read up the Bible texts. Undoubtedly there would be a list of rules or laws there. I would just have to regurgitate them to all of you, sprinkle in a story and a joke or two, and job's done.

Let me see, what are the Bible readings. Exodus 19:1 to 40:38. Sorry? Exodus 19 to 40. That's Chapter 19 to Chapter 40? That's like, 21 chapters. That's like 719 verses.

How do I know there are 719 verses? Well, I counted them. You see, on seeing that I had 21 chapters to preach on this morning, I said a little prayer, "Help."

And while I waited for that prayer to be answered, I decided to fill in the time by counting the verses.

After a little while of meditation and calculation, inspiration had not come. So I thought I had better count the laws. After all, the topic is "laws for living" – so perhaps I should count the laws in these 21 chapters. I thought that God might reward my diligence by stopping me after 15 or 20 with a flash of divine insight.

So I began to count and I waited on the Lord to stop me.

I can tell you that there are 254 rules or laws in these 21 chapters. If you don't believe me, you may inspect my notes.

So what divine insight did I glean from my analysis. Well, the most obvious thing is that there is a lot of rules. And we're just talking about these 21 chapters in Exodus. The next book in the Bible is Leviticus. It has 25 chapters. It is wall-to-wall rules.

What is the Bible trying to tell us? Are we to follow all these rules? Do we even know half of them?

We heard today, perhaps the most famous of these rules. The ones we call "The Ten Commandments." Although in the Greek they are called the Decalogue which means "the ten words" which shows either that the Greeks didn't have Microsoft Word so they couldn't do a word count, or they didn't know the difference between a word and sentence. Although I suppose in a language like German where they combine 16 words into one, they might get the ten commandments down to ten words. I suppose "Thou shalt not kill" could be written as one long word in German.

But do we even know these ten commandments? Could all of us recite every one of them? Let's put all the brains of this room together right now, and see if we can come up with the list, without cheating, and in the right order. What's first?

1. No God before me.
2. No carved images.
3. Take the Lord's Name in vain.
4. Keep Sabbath holy.
5. Honour Mum and Dad.
6. Kill.
7. Adultery.
8. Steal
9. Bear false witness against neighbour.
10. Covet.

OK, ten down, 244 to go. What's the next rule after these ten?

No, we have no idea about these rules. The next one actually is an implied rule, namely a rule that required ordinary people to have a mediator between them and God. In this case, Moses.

So, if these are the laws for living. Why don't we know them? Did you know there is the anti-witch law? Exodus 22:18 "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." There is the anti-bank law: Exodus 22:25 "Don't charge interest on loans to poor people." There is the anti-

populist law: Exodus 23:1 “Don’t follow the crowd in doing wrong.” And there is the anti-teenager law: Exodus 21:17 “Anyone who curses their father or mother must be put to death.” How did anyone in Moses’ time live to be an adult, is what I’m thinking.

There’s even an anti-mini-skirt law in Exodus 20:26 “Don’t go up steps, lest your nakedness be exposed.”

You think I’m making these up, right. No, these, apparently, are the laws for living that God gave to Moses and it seems we don’t know them. Let alone follow them.

Of course, not all of the laws sound as strange as these. There’s the borrowed donkey law in Exodus 22:10 and following which says that if you borrow your neighbour’s donkey and someone steals it you have to pay your neighbour the value of the donkey. The context seems strange, but the idea isn’t too strange. If you borrow somebody’s car and it gets stolen, it seems reasonable that you might be asked to accept some responsibility. Unless of course the car is torn to pieces by a wild animal. The Bible says you can show the pieces to the neighbour and get off.

And there are some laws in Exodus that seem just as relevant today as ever. Don’t accept a bribe. Don’t spread false reports. Don’t mistreat an alien or oppress them.

Some of these might usefully be applied in 21st Century Australia.

So how are we to respond to this motley collection of Do’s and Don’t’s? Mostly don’t’s.

To understand the place of these Old Testament laws for living, we need to fast forward a couple of thousand years to hear what Jesus says about the law. And also, as we heard this morning, to hear how the Apostle Paul discussed the place of the law in our lives.

But first, some light relief from all this heavy intellectualising. While researching this topic, I was looking through John Mark Ministries website and found a list of extensions to what we commonly call Murphy’s Law. Incorrectly, as I discovered, but that’s another story.

The Law of Self-Sacrifice: When you starve with a tiger, the tiger starves last.

The Law of Probability: The probability of being watched, is directly proportional to the stupidity of your act.

The Law of the Telephone: When you dial a wrong number, you never get an engaged signal.

The Law of Variation: If you change traffic lanes, the one you *were* in will start to move faster.

The Law of Bio-mechanics: The severity of the itch, is inversely proportional to the reach.

The Law of Product Development: As soon as you find a product you really like, they will stop making it.

OK, back to work. How are we to understand God's laws for living? What was God's purpose in giving these laws to the Hebrew nation as they tramped around the desert towards the Promised Land?

You know, I've got to tell you this story. I was once taken up to Mount Nebo on the east side of the Jordan River by a Palestinian Christian priest. Mount Nebo is the place from which Moses finally got a glimpse of this "promised land." The land of Canaan.

I have to tell you the view from Mount Nebo is just a view of bare, rolling hills. There is hardly a tree, or bush to be seen as far as the horizon. It hardly looks like any kind of Promised Land.

The priest accompanying me said, "Not much of a view, is it?" and then he added "You know that Moses had a stutter?"

I said that I agreed this was a possibility. And the priest explained what the Bible left out of the story.

"You see when God asked Moses where he wanted to go, Moses said "Ca, Ca, Ca, Ca" and God was a bit impatient and said "OK, Moses you can go to Canaan."

And Moses replied, "Oh, I meant Canada."

Now the real reason I am telling you this story is that I want to put off trying to explain what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans. Because it is perhaps one of the most complicated things he wrote. One commentator has said we "should try to forget what Paul says, and try to work out what he means." But let's have a try.

First of all, let's remember that Jesus had something quite important to say about this question of the law. On one occasion, recorded in Matthew 22:36ff, the Pharisees came to test Jesus about the law. So they asked him:

"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

In a way, Jesus created a new hierarchy. He put love above the law. He did not say, *Reject the Law* but he did say *put it into its right place*. Love God, Love your neighbour. All the law hangs on these two main laws.

In a way, Jesus put law and love together. A former colleague of mine, Rev Rowland Croucher, puts it very neatly. He says, "God offers us both his law and his love. To ignore his laws is to be permissive; to be without love is to deny the gospel. Law is to love as railway tracks are to a train. Both are important. All the propulsive power is in the train (love), but the tracks (law) give the train direction."

When Paul writes to the Romans on this topic he tries to make the point that the law has a different role to love. The role of the law is to help us understand where to draw the line. The law shows us right and wrong.

The basic idea is that if there are no rules, there can be no sin. If you're playing Aussie Rules, there are rules. Hello, maybe that's why it's called Aussie RULES. If there were no rules about how many players could be in the centre square at the bounce of the ball, then everyone would just run in and create a melee. That would be OK. But because, once upon a time there was no centre square rule, and a few teams in the 1980s used to all gather around the ball bounce and turn it into a scrum, they made up a rule. Now, if there are too many players inside the square, it's a footballing sin, and a free kick is awarded.

In a sense, when the centre square rule was created, it created a new sin. The sin didn't exist before, the law had created it. And that's what Paul means. The law, in this sense, defined the sins and made us all aware of them. Once the law was made, the sin was clear.

The great Scots preacher, William Barclay, offers another example. He says "What is pardonable in a child, may be allowable in a mature person."

Parents create rules and laws for their children, and until the rule is created, we cannot say the child has sinned.

Judy and I were visiting our grandchildren a couple of weekends ago and I invented a law for my grandson, Zachary, who is 18 months old. It was "Thou shalt not bite Grandpa". The first time Zachary attempted to bite me, I forgave him because he was unaware of this law. In fact, the law had not been created. But when he tried to bite me a second time, I informed him, in a God-like voice, that there was a law against biting grandpa. He bit me anyway.

So the first thing Paul is saying in Romans 7 is that the law defines sin and in a sense, creates sin for us.

The second thing that the law has done for us is that it has created desire. The desire for forbidden fruits. Adam and Eve were forbidden from eating the fruit of the tree in the garden. Then this prohibition became a temptation. The fact that the tree was forbidden made it desirable.

This is part of our human nature. God made human beings with strong desires. His goal was that we would desire to “love God and love our neighbour” as Jesus puts it. But mostly, we allow our desire to lead us into temptation and then into sin.

The 10th Commandment actually speaks about this. It is no coincidence that the ten commandments begin with our need to love God first, and end with a command against covetousness. Covetousness is just the desire for what the other person has.

Between the 1st commandment to love God, and the 10th commandment to avoid desire for what others have – between these two pillars – lie all of the sins of humanity. It is no coincidence that Paul, here in Romans, refers specifically to the tenth commandment. He says “I would not have known desire if the law had not said ‘You must not covet’.”

So one of the roles of the law is to reveal our nature to ourselves. The tenth commandment is God revealing to human beings, that our desire can be a bad thing. That desire for the wrong things leads us into sin. And sometimes into theft, adultery and murder.

So the role of the law is to give us a sense of direction. It’s the train tracks from which we must not deviate, lest we crash and burn.

But the role of the law is not, as the Pharisees thought, the power source for living. Simply following the rules will not get us to heaven. Jesus urges us to look elsewhere for that. The train is not powered by the law, but by love. Love God. Love our neighbours. And stay on the tracks.

A-men