

If the Law is an Apple, is Grace an Orange?

By Dr. Dave Neale

Moses and the Law

First, let's talk about the Law of Moses and how it relates to the gospel.¹

Or, as I say in my title this morning, if the Law is an apple, is grace an orange?

I'm holding my rock from the top of Mount Sinai.



When Moses came down from Mt Sinai with the Law, the relationship of God to his chosen people was in a primitive state.

They knew *nothing* of this God who calls himself I AM.

They have seen the awesome power in their deliverance, but are more *terrified* than *knowing*. Just imagine the shock and trauma of it all. Illiterate slaves set free three months ago into a terrible wilderness with no food or water.

The first thing God does is give this primitive tribal entity a set of 10 *proscriptions*.

Law, in its nature, is entirely precautionary in principle. Its purpose is to constrain behaviour that is destructive to the community. That's why eight out of ten of the commandments contain the words, "thou shalt not."

Proscriptive law is what this primitive tribal entity *had* to have, given the birth pangs of their independence.

I'll speak briefly to two of the ten, the first and the sixth; they are all pretty straightforward. But there are cultural considerations of course.

#1 *You shall have no other gods before me* (Ex 20:3)

It doesn't actually assert that there *is* only one god, just that no god or gods shall be held in esteem above this god. For the Egyptians and Israelites were thoroughgoing polytheists. At this point, it is a matter of loyalty.

That is first law is about *shifting* the community of Israel from polytheism to monotheism. Next week we talk about the Golden Calf incident, and you can see that the people go right back to idols and polytheism when Moses doesn't come down from the mountain.

This was a concept so radical that it marks a great turning point in human consciousness.²

So, the idea of one god was not new to history. See my footnotes online on our website if you want to learn a bit more. But what *was* new was that for the first time in history the moral nature of God, the one God, was expressed in a moral code for the people.

Because of this great leap forward in human consciousness, Moses, as the Law Giver, stands as the first citizen of all modern civilization. The father of modern civilization.

How about this one, commandment #6: ***You shall not murder.***

The word here is רצח , *ratsat*, meaning to “murder, slay.” It has the connotation of premeditation, to slay as an avenger (as in Num 35:27, 30; Ex 21:12-14), and “assassinate.”

In tribal-based societies there was no shared law *between* tribes. Each tribe was in independent entity.

In order to ensure the survival of your tribal unit, if another tribe *bonked* one of your men on the head, the laws of retribution required that your tribe *bonk* one of their men on the head for revenge. This kept things fair and in balance. If you don’t, your tribe will be eliminated.

The commandments united all of the tribal entities of Israel under a single moral code. So, the proscription against murder was intended to break the custom of tribal revenge killing within Israel. The commandments were created to bring peace to Israel.

While retribution does not pass entirely away, right away (read Exodus 21, and eye for and eye), the seed for peace is planted.

Jesus and the Law

Do you remember what Jesus said about the law? (Mind you... there have been countless books and articles on the subject in the last 150 years; ‘what was Jesus’ relationship to Jewish law?’. I should know, I wrote one.³

Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. (Matt 5:17)

He rejects retribution entirely, especially Exodus 21, to bring the Kingdom of God to the world. Jesus rereads the Law and says that was then, but now the Law is fulfilled! What was in seed form is now in flower form.

And he says, ***“You have heard about the commandment to not murder, but I tell you break the cycle of violence and insult with your brothers and sisters, in your mind...”*** (Matt 5:21-22).

Because that is what the commandment means. Or the indelible saying of Exodus 21:24, ... ***life for life, an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth...*** (Ex 21:25). Jesus quotes it in Matthew 5; reinterprets it for its true principle of the Kingdom, ***I tell you, turn the other cheek*** (Matt 5:39).

From the Text

How does this apply in our own culture? The *principle* of the sixth commandment teaches us that it is God’s will that we stop the cycle of violence and retribution first in the community of God.

And when we think about our social context today, be it Truth and Reconciliation, advocating for the oppressed in any way, the growing problem of income inequality, we understand that harming others is forbidden by God. It is wrong.

Its different when one country invades another sovereign country? I make a distinction. The topic of 'just war' is a theological inquiry all on its own.

But closer to home, within our society, we have to stop harming each other. That is the true teaching of the gospel.

Even though the cultural setting is different, the principle still applies.

And... and... the driving force behind it is God's will. We don't have to ask, 'What is God's will?' We know what God's will is because it is revealed. Love one another.⁴

How does all of this relate to the grace of God which we see in Jesus?

Think of the revelation of God through history as unfolding like a flower, as from a seed in its primitive state at its emergence in the Wilderness of the Sinai, to its fulfilment in the coming of the Christ and his resurrection from the dead.

From seed to flower. Not apples turning into oranges, but one fruit, from seed to ripeness.

From a hardened bud on the east side of the Red Sea, to a tender rose in the fullness of time. It is all of one substance. The rose is latent in the bud. But the glory of the flower is the last stage. So it is with God in history. We stand in the full glory of that rose today.

We as Christians, aren't asked to believe in a God of apples and also a God of oranges. So, we don't see the Law as an apple and Grace as an orange – two different things. We see them as two points on a continuum of God's ever evolving relationship to humankind.

We don't believe in disunity and confusion. We don't have two theologies, we have oneness.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. (Deut 6:4)

[Musicians come]

At this denouement of history where we stand, in the fullness of time, the fullness of the rose of this gospel, God fulfills the law by molding our hearts to his ways. So that none need be taught. For the Holy Spirit is at work among us shaping us and teaching us.

As we turn to the Lord's table this morning, we remember that in his last supper with his disciples Jesus alludes to Jeremiah 31:31 when he says, holding the cup, **...this is the new covenant in my blood.** (Luke 22:20).

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah... But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:31-34; cf Hebrews 8:10; 1 Cor 11:25)

Thanksgiving indeed. What an appropriate time to come to the Table of God.

Amen

Communion Liturgy

Benediction:

And now may the God who does not simply lay out commandments, but writes on our hearts the very Law of God, stir up the Holy Spirit in you to attend to his voice in the week to come.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

¹ By the way, the cache of greatest ancient manuscripts ever found in history, in the caves of Qumran on the Dead Sea, were preserved untouched since 70 CE until 1946. All of the books of the Bible were found among the caves, with the exception of Esther. In the various caves of Qumran were found 18 copies of Exodus. None of the manuscripts contained significant differences to the modern Hebrew text as it has come down to us through time.

As we have been reading the Genesis and Exodus stories these past couple of months, questions arise about how the God of the Old Testament, severe, punishing, demanding obedience to the law, is seemingly so unlike the God of Jesus and grace in the New Testament.

² Monotheism, the belief that there is only one god, was brand new on the stage of history, but Moses was not its first proponent. That status probably goes to Akhenaten, The Egyptian pharaoh who lived shortly before Moses (1353-1336 BCE). He abolished traditional polytheistic religion in Egypt in favour of the worship of one god, Aten.



Unlike all other visages of pharaohs in Egyptian art and sarcophagi, his image is not stylized. He is the only pharaoh that we know what he really looked like.

Not long after he died all his monotheistic innovations were reversed and his reign expunged from the ancient Egyptian historical record. Modern historians knew nothing of his existence until, in the late nineteenth century, we found the city he established to Aten in Amarna.

³ *None but the Sinners: Religious Categories in the Gospel of Luke*. Sheffield Academic Press, 1991.

“The law succeeds only in making people aware of their condition. That indeed was God’s purpose in giving it” (OSB, NT p. 212). In other words, knowing the law doesn’t make us obedient. The second purpose of the law is to show us how badly we fail in our responsibilities. **Then Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.”** (Ex 20:20). ... **for through the law comes knowledge of sin.** (Ro 3:20).⁴ **Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith.** (Gal 3:24)