

Welcome

Is there a skill you've learned you're really proud of? For me, it's writing - that's probably no surprise, right? I consider myself a really good writer. I have a book out, I sell articles. I work with other writers to edit and improve their works. I love it.

I love putting words together to figure out what sounds best.

Or take Jake. He's an amazing guitar player. Jake, a couple of questions:

How long have you been playing guitar?

What advice do you have for someone who wants to learn to play?

Can you describe what guitar practice looked like the first few years you played?

Learning to play the guitar isn't particularly glamorous. Neither is becoming a writer - when people ask, "How do I become a better writer?" I always give them the same answer: read a lot and write a lot.

Anyone who has a skill you're really proud of (not a talent - something that comes more naturally but something you've worked to cultivate and hone) knows this is how it goes. It's the "wax on, wax off" from the *Karate Kid*. To become a master requires practice that can seem boring, irrelevant, taxing. But it's worth it.

Today, we're going to explore the legal codes of the Bible. And we're going to discover that, much like other forms of practice, these laws were designed to shape us into a people who are masters of God's way, people who not only embody God in the world but help others to learn to follow God's way. Far from being irrelevant, taxing and dull, these legal codes are invitations for us to know God in a deeper way.

Message

This summer, we've been talking about "How the Bible works." The goal of reading Scripture isn't to become experts on ancient literature. It's to know God. We read not to become informed but to be transformed.

We began this series with the Gospels, those ancient biographies of Jesus. After that, we explored prophecy and apocalypse - two genres that are less about predicting the future than they are about learning to live faithfully in the here and now. Last week, we explored the Acts, the story of how the Holy Spirit is at work in the world.

Today, we're diving into everyone's favorite Biblical genre - legal code. You know legal codes: you decided to read the Bible through. Genesis is creation stories and patriarchs. Lots of action. Exodus is about freedom from an Evil Empire... at least the first half is. Then they get to Sinai, get the 10 Commandments and then... a whole bunch of weird laws. It's okay. You got through them. Then comes... what? Leviticus? A whole book of laws? And then Numbers and Deuteronomy are largely more of the same?

That's right. Today is the Legal Codes, the texts that have sabotaged innumerable plans to read the whole Bible. Which of us today sits around reading legal codes for fun? I don't think even lawyers *like* doing it - they just have to for work. So why in the world would we read the laws that comprised a society 3,000 years removed from us?

And yet, these texts are part of our Scriptures. The Church has insisted that these texts too - just like the Gospels and histories and prophecies - are fruitful for our spiritual formation. If we will read them.

How does Legal Code help us be transformed TODAY?

[Scripture Slide] Reading legal code for spiritual formation is challenging. So today, we're going to practice together. Turn with me to Leviticus 19.

As we read, our first principle is **START WITH WHAT'S CLEAR**.

The Lord also said to Moses, "Give the following instructions to the entire community of Israel. You must be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.

"Each of you must show great respect for your mother and father, and you must always observe my Sabbath days of rest. I am the Lord your God.

"Do not put your trust in idols or make metal images of gods for yourselves. I am the Lord your God.

"When you sacrifice a peace offering to the Lord, offer it properly so you will be accepted by God. The sacrifice must be eaten on the same day you offer it or on the next day. Whatever is left over until the third day must be completely burned up. If any of the sacrifice is eaten on the third day, it will be contaminated, and I will not accept it. Anyone who eats it on the third day will be punished for defiling what is holy to the Lord and will be cut off from the community.

"When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. It is the same with your grape crop—do not strip every last

bunch of grapes from the vines, and do not pick up the grapes that fall to the ground. Leave them for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the Lord your God.

“Do not steal.

“Do not deceive or cheat one another.

“Do not bring shame on the name of your God by using it to swear falsely. I am the Lord.

“Do not defraud or rob your neighbor.

“Do not make your hired workers wait until the next day to receive their pay.

“Do not insult the deaf or cause the blind to stumble. You must fear your God; I am the Lord.

“Do not twist justice in legal matters by favoring the poor or being partial to the rich and powerful. Always judge people fairly.

“Do not spread slanderous gossip among your people.

“Do not stand idly by when your neighbor’s life is threatened. I am the Lord.

“Do not nurse hatred in your heart for any of your relatives. Confront people directly so you will not be held guilty for their sin.

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.

“You must obey all my decrees.

“Do not mate two different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two different kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven from two different kinds of thread.

There’s a lot in here that’s really clear: don’t steal, don’t have dishonest courts, stand up against injustice you see happening, don’t harbor grudges. Don’t cheat other people.

And while we often think legal code is irrelevant to today’s culture, imagine, for a minute, if we insisted on taking Leviticus 19 literally as a culture. Pretty relevant, don’t you think?

Of course there are plenty of bits in here that AREN’T clear, and that brings us to the next principle:

FOR WHAT’S NOT CLEAR, CONTEXT MATTERS

Take that part about harvesting fields:

“When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. It is the same with your grape crop—do not strip every last bunch of grapes from the vines, and do not pick up the grapes that fall to the ground. Leave them for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the Lord your God.

None of us farms for a living. And we’re far removed from an agrarian society where *everyone* farmed for their livelihood. So this law feels irrelevant to us. Why would God say this?

As the reapers harvested grain, they missed some stalks. Farmers intent on maximizing their harvest would go back through in a second sweep and make sure to get every last bit they missed the first time. But God said no, “leave it for others”. Then, going even beyond what the sickles missed, God insisted Hebrew farmers leave the outer edges of their fields or the undeveloped grapes for foreigners and the poor - people who didn’t have their own fields, and therefore no reliable source of food. And through this we can see the attitude of God towards material things. One, that we are not to be concerned with making sure we get every last bit of what we feel is owed to us and two that we are to be intentional about taking care of others. God expects us to live on less than 100% of our resources. God expects us to trust that God will take care of us as we take care of others.

That helps us ask the next question: **IS THIS TEXT VERTICAL OR HORIZONTAL?**

In other words, does this legal code revolve primarily around our relationship with God or our relationship with our community? This passage is pretty obviously horizontal. It’s almost wholly about how we relate to each other - our parents, our neighbors, our legal and economic systems. In Leviticus 19, holiness is measured by how we live together.

That helps us ask the next question as well: **IS THERE A THEME?**

Laws weren’t recorded willy-nilly. Rather, the authors and editors grouped them according to some logic. If we can discern the larger logic at play in the text, it can help us interpret the more confusing or difficult laws.

Again, in this text, it’s pretty clear - this is a passage about how God calls us to live together. This law is concerned with justice, with care for protecting the vulnerable.

That helps us make sense out of the last passage I want to read with you this morning. A heads-up: this passage is about what we would today consider sexual assault. And this passage is troubling to our modern sensibilities. So as we read it, it’s okay to be disturbed. We’re *right* to be offended by what we read here. We’re going to read it and then ask how it could possibly be in the same law code as all that stuff about fair courts and not cheating people:

“If a man has sex with a slave girl whose freedom has never been purchased but who is committed to become another man’s wife, he must pay full compensation to her master. But since she is not a free woman, neither the man nor the woman will be put to death. The man, however, must bring a ram as a

guilt offering and present it to the Lord at the entrance of the Tabernacle. The priest will then purify him before the Lord with the ram of the guilt offering, and the man's sin will be forgiven. -- Leviticus 19:1-22

First, there are two major cultural institutions present in this text that we find repulsive today. The first is the practice of slavery, which we here in America have a particularly strong aversion to due to how we institutionalized it. The other is patriarchy, where women were considered closer to property than full humans (hence the 'compensation' in the text).

Some cultural context makes clearer the purpose of this law: the law allowed Hebrew men to sell under-aged daughters into slavery to other Hebrew men. This, along with selling their allotted land, was an act of last-resort, reserved for when the family had no other resources. But that same law also provided protections. Israel was supposed to celebrate a Jubilee year once every 50 years, when all slaves were freed and all land reverted to its original owners.

And those underaged daughters didn't have to wait until a Jubilee year to be freed. Once they came of age, their master had to either marry them, arrange for them to be married to someone else, or allow their family to purchase them back.

(And I know *that* doesn't sound like a sweet deal but that's literally the same deal every other woman got. That's that evil patriarchy.)

None of that is in this law. This law is meant to be a supplement to that cultural practice (which, again, today we find abhorrent). What if a slave girl was sexually assaulted? It happened - as a slave, she had even fewer rights than other women. Slaves can't offer consent. And in a patriarchal culture, this rendered her much less valuable - she wasn't marriable at that point.

The nations around Israel didn't care about slaves. Such a girl would be discarded - left to fend for herself, abandoned by her family and her master. As a non-person, she had no rights, no way to advocate for herself.

So what we see in this law is a provision: the act against this girl is criminalized. It's named as sin. And the offender must take steps to ensure the girl is not left defenseless.

From our perspective today, this is still barbaric, even monstrous.

But from the perspective of the nations around Israel, this was a radical law. To insist slaves are persons, that a man cannot treat women however he wants with no consequences, was a significant challenge to the patriarchal culture around them.

That helps inform our last principle: **WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT GOD?**

God is the God of slaves, nameless and forgotten by everyone else. God cares for the poor, the foreigner, the slave. They are all part of God's holy community. We cannot claim to be like God unless we are working for justice for the most vulnerable among us, too.

This is progressive revelation. Today, we rightly condemn patriarchy, which treats women as second-class humans. Today, we rightly condemn slavery as an evil, unjust institution. But rather than feel superior to those ancient Hebrews, might we ask how Leviticus still speaks to us, today?

Are we doing more to care for the most vulnerable in our community than those around us? Are we a shining example of God's holiness the way God called Israel to be? Or could it be that Leviticus 19 still has something to teach us?

Friends, reading the Bible's legal code is a daunting task. But as we've seen today, it has so much to teach us if we will listen. Let's review those guiding principles: books.

1. Start with what is clear
2. For things that are less clear: the context matters!
3. Is this vertical or horizontal?
4. Is there a theme?
5. What does this say about God's character?

The Bible's legal codes are invitations to know God's way in our own lives. They are instructions on how we should treat each other. They are about improving the relationships we have with each other. They're guidelines on how to become more godly, loving, and empathetic.

It's obvious that these passages can be a bit heavier and take more time to work through but there's no rush. Take your time. Talk to other people about what you are reading. Start working through a chapter in your small group. We can grow closer to the heart of God by understanding how God loved and treated God's people in their infancy. We can start to see the bible as one long love story and the development of a lasting relationship. It was no accident that the Torah was kept in the Bible. And we don't have to be afraid of it. Think of it as the everlasting gobstopper that reveals more and more about God the more time you work through it.

The Torah is an invitation to practice, to work at what it looks like to be God's people in our homes, in our church, in our city, in our nation. It's not something that happens all at once. It happens over time, as we persist in learning God's way.

Communion + Examen

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1. When in the last week have I shared God's concern for those at the margins?
2. When have I ignored those on the margins?

3. When in the next week might I be tempted to ignore those seeking justice?
4. How can I stand with those on the margins this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Leviticus 19