

Luke 24:13-25

Understanding the Old Testament (YOBL)

Introduction: Good morning - If it's your first time, welcome! We are beginning a New Series within our Year of Biblical Literacy - The God I Don't Understand.

In January when we did our series on the Bible we talked a bit about, especially the OT, having really hard things in it - difficult things for us to get around, not just culturally, but also theologically. We mentioned this back then and at that time we were reading through some interesting narrative in Genesis - some hairy stories and sordid characters. But now we've read through Joshua and Judges, not to mention Numbers and Deuteronomy - And you know what - Reading the OT is startling - there is a whole lot of BLOOD, a whole lot of SEX, and a whole lot of VIOLENCE.. and for many reading it for the first time, or maybe the first time in a while - it's disenchanting, and disturbing. And remember we've been saying this is the story of God - that what the Bible is.

It's no wonder why many Christians just want to stick to the NT or now many pastors are talking about doing away with teaching or even believing in the OT all together.

So now that you've been adequately disturbed by the Bible - let's talk about it. (Disclaimer - for those who have settled these things in their hearts - it's good to talk about this because your children are growing up in this hyper critical culture and also many people around you are struggling with this - so now you can be equipped to help them)

I think for the first time maybe ever - people are leaving the church - not because of spiritual abuse or hypocrisy or any problem they had with their particular local church community being unloving - but plainly because they could no longer believe in the Bible and the God of the Bible - As Richard Dawkins has famously said,

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential,

megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.” - Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion

Some, in order to reconcile this portrait of God in the OT with God in the NT, have gone so far as to return to an early church heresy called Marcionism - teaching that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are actually two different God's - one of judgment and one of Grace.. In that way - we don't have to seriously deal with the OT. Just be thankful that isn't your God. Though the church condemned this teaching long ago as heresy (Totally and completely unbiblical), let's be honest, it's not that hard to see how someone could get there or why they would want to...

Let's be honest if there is even an ounce of truth to what Richard Dawkins said about the God of the OT - we're in trouble. As I've been saying this is the problem in the church at this moment - Christians are rocked by this stuff, and don't know how to answer it - We have a Biblically illiterate culture that is using the Bible to critique a Biblically illiterate Church. Most Christians if anything have a very general understanding of what the Bible teaches and so they simply ignore these things or try to put them out of their mind - but with our deconstructionist culture of #metoo and down with the Patriarchy and other mantras - you can't do this anymore. And that's actually a good thing. It's time for the church to recapture the authority and beauty of scripture and to rediscover the incredible story of God - the most high God who redeems and the cost of his own life - and to find our story in that story.

In this series we'll talk about Violence, Sex, and Judgment and all the other hard stuff - but first I think we need to simply understand in a general sense what is going on in the OT.

We firmly believe that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are the same - So how do we reconcile the two?

Or another way to put it is - Is the OT and especially the Law of Moses God's timeless truth, timeless wisdom, that is to be heeded and obeyed by all subsequent generations??

Some speak of the Law of Moses as God's standard of righteousness for all time and all people -a reflection of God's own righteousness and character.. Is this true?

1. The Old testament is full of Wisdom, not timeless wisdom.

1. Some of you might be familiar with the Jewish radio talk show host Dr Laura - She is a Jew who helps people sort through the complicated issues of life using the wisdom given in the OT - Especially the Law of Moses. A mocking fan wrote into her and here is what they said -
2. Dear Dr. Laura: Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can.
3. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind them that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. ... End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some other elements of God's Law and how to follow them.
4. I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?
5. Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?
6. Lev. 21:20 - states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?
7. I know from Lev. 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?
8. My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? (Lev.24:10-16). Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14)
 1. I know you have studied these things extensively and thus enjoy considerable expertise in such matters, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging. Your adoring fan, Anonymous
 2. It's funny right? Especially reading them in a row like this and thinking of our modern culture - we would all be dead!

3. Let me say again that - The Old testament is filled with Wisdom, Not timeless wisdom.

2. Wisdom

1. As we've been saying - the story of the Bible is a story redemption through Grace. And we see this theme running throughout the scriptures, and repeating itself again and again. After the fall of humanity in the garden, the incursion of the Divine beings in Genesis 6 and the rebellion of the Tower of Babel - God began to move toward his plan of redemption promised in Genesis 3. God, YHWH, chose Abraham. He wasn't special - he was a Pagan, worshipping idols, living in the east near Babylon, and God called him out of his country and promised to bless him, make him a great nation and that through him God would bless the whole world - all peoples and all nations. From here God confirms it with a covenant, and it is after and in light of this covenant, that through Moses, God gives his people the law, only after he has delivered them from 430 of slavery in Egypt - The law is the requirements and regulations of the covenant. The law is a code of how to live as God's distinct people in the world and how to live peaceably with one another.
2. In Leviticus it's put this way - "**Be holy, for the Lord your God is holy.**" Now contrary to what many of us think about the word holy - it simply means dedicated or set apart - so literally Moses is saying be different or set apart - like God, and don't be like the nations that are all around you.
3. "**Be Holy for the Lord your God is holy**" - doesn't mean "we need you to be extra super religious." What God was trying to do in making them holy actually had a lot to do with having this down-to-earth practicality. So, if you read the holiness laws in Leviticus, – and they're hard to get through, they're hard to understand for us – this is what God was doing: God was telling them to be generous to the poor. In there, you see fair treatment and payment of employees. You see practical compassion for the disabled and respect for the elderly. You see the integrity of the judicial process. You see safety precautions to prevent endangering life. You see ecological sensitivity. You see laws about provision and protection for ethnic minorities. You see honesty in trade and business. You see all of that through the codes and the laws of Leviticus for the people of Israel.

1. One Old Testament scholar, named Christopher Wright, says this about all of the Levitical code and laws: *"We call such matters 'social ethics' or 'human right's and we think that we are very modern and civilized for doing so. We go to great lengths to get them written pompously into declarations for this and charters for that and codes for something else. God just calls them 'holiness.'"* - Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*
2. God says to Israel, "Be holy. Be set apart. Be different." And I want to infuse into your nation, into your society as you are becoming a nation, I want to infuse what I am like. Generosity. I want you to be generous to the people who are slaves because, remember, you were a slave. Remember? I delivered you. And I want fair treatment and payment of employees and I want compassion for disabled and respect for elderly."
3. So, God weaves his character (**Exodus 34:6-7**) into their nation. So, there's actually a lot of wisdom in the Old Testament. Jesus, when asked about the greatest commandment, summarized it as Loving YHWH with all of one's being and loving our neighbor as ourself. Jesus wasn't the first to say this - this was a common understanding of the Law at the time - this is what the whole Law is about
 1. In the sermon on the mount Jesus says something similar - **"so the way you want others to treat you is the way you should treat others - this is what much of the Bible is about."** - **Matthew 7:12**
4. There is so much wisdom in OT - its application is deep and wide.

3. Not Timeless wisdom.

1. Now that may sound great to us but we are all reading through some heavy stuff right now - So how does Deuteronomy 21 fit into that?
 1. Deuteronomy 21:10-14 - This is not timeless wisdom - nobody should do this. This does not sound, loving, good or right.. it's abhorrent. But if you step back and consider this for a moment - In every other culture at that time the victor warrior could do whatever he wanted with his captives of war - rape them, kill them, rape them for a season and then throw them away... But here for YHWH's people, God restricts the rights of the victor warrior - If a man desired a woman, he must first

make her his wife - giving her all the legal and social status of a wife and of legal marriage, and if he divorced her later he had to give her all the rights due to her in a divorce.. Also, he must not add one more ounce of shame than she has already received... This was so radical for the day and for it's time.. and here is what we must understand about many parts of the Law and the OT.. **It is God accommodating to human brokenness and cultural norms, but always forward looking - it is progressive.**

2. The Bible even says this - **“See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? - Deuteronomy 4:5-8**
 1. **Wise, understanding, righteous - this is what the nations will see, they will be in awe, when they observe Israel's customs and Laws - sweeter than honey more precious than Gold.**
3. As Modern “Enlightened” progressive secular westerners it's really hard for us to fathom Leviticus as being progressive and forward thinking..But it was radically so.
4. *“This long-winded, unwieldy compilation of assorted prescriptions represents an overall softening—a humanizing—of the common law of the ancient Middle East, which easily prescribed a hand not for a hand but for the theft of a loaf of bread or for the striking of one's better and which gave much favor to the rights of the nobility and virtually none to the lower classes. The casual cruelty of other ancient law codes—the cutting off of nose, ears, tongue, lower lip (for kissing another man's wife), breasts, and testicles—is seldom matched in the Torah. Rather, in the prescriptions of Jewish law we cannot but*

note a presumption that all people, even slaves, are human and that all human lives are sacred. The constant bias is in favor not of the powerful and their possessions but of the powerless and their poverty; and there is even a frequent enjoinder to sympathy: "A sojourner you are not to oppress: you yourselves know (well) the feelings of the sojourner, for sojourners were you in the land of Egypt." This bias toward the underdog is unique not only in ancient law but in the whole history of law. However faint our sense of justice may be, insofar as it operates at all it is still a Jewish sense of justice." - Thomas Cahill, The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels

2. The Law, as a whole, was not and is not God's ideal moral code for all people of all time. Rather, God met the Israelites where they were and began to take incremental steps toward his moral ideal. The Law of Moses was designed to guide a particular nation, living in a particular land, for a specific time and in a specific culture. God's ideals are in seed form (Incrementally instilling his character into his people) here but they find their ultimate ideal, fulfillment and pinnacle in Jesus.
3. God's law through Moses does not outlaw every less than perfect cultural practice; rather the law took the practice as it was and improved upon it.
 1. **One example is Polygamy** - it is never forbidden in Scripture - yet from the Beginning God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Eve and Sarah, or Sarah and Adam and Jacob. God made one man and one woman and blessed them... Well then why didn't the scripture just make a command against it. I don't know. Instead scripture gives us the ideal in Adam and Eve and then every time we see polygamy practiced in scripture it always goes bad for the marriage and for the family - Jacob and his wives; David, Solomon.... these marriages are cautionary tales to the nation of Israel... and by the time we come to the first century the Jews no longer practiced polygamy.. So in a way - Scripture is teaching against polygamy - but not in the way we would like..
 2. **The same goes for slavery** - The old testament law does not condemn slavery outright - even though slavery falls far short of the Edenic ideal. Slavery was part of the ancient societal

structures, yet God doesn't crush these structures immediately - rather he takes incremental steps toward the ideal moral code in which there will be no slavery. God through his law improves the nature of slavery by instilling in his people his compassion, mercy and humility.

1. Slaves were treated brutally in the ancient world. They weren't considered human and didn't have any rights. But not so in Israel - the Law of Moses humanizes and elevates slaves. Israel slaves were largely residential domestic workers, and could hold a high office in households and public affairs. Also, remember in ancient times the whole household worked - Father, mother, sister brother, and servants or slaves - this was not like an American plantation.. Everyone worked.
2. Evidence shows that Israel's slaves had more legal rights and protection than any contemporary society - There was protection of runaway slaves; if you knocked out your slave's tooth or maimed your slave in any way - you had to set them free (an incentive toward non-violent treatment), If you killed your slave you were to be put to death. Surrounding nations killed their slaves if they felt like it with no consequences, beat their slaves without consequence, also, runaway slaves were either killed or sent back to their masters to be killed, or beaten to death... Israel was forbidden to have sex slaves as opposed to the surrounding cultures... of course a huge part of Israel's theological and legal attitude toward slavery was her own history - God often reminded them that they were slaves in Egypt that he rescued, by grace, and therefore this was to form the way thought about and treated slaves - with compassion, mercy and humility - these characteristics are not virtues in any of the surrounding cultures..
3. Slavery is awful of course and we are not condoning or justifying it in any way - we are showing how God moved in history with sinful broken people, and moved them forward to his Ideal in Christ - it was the doctrines of Genesis 1:26 and also of the New Testament teachings about equality in Christ that moved Christians to abolish slavery!
3. **Divorce** - is one of the clearest examples of divine accommodation and God's incremental improvement upon

cultural norms. In Matthew 19:8 - when Jesus is asked about Divorce and why God allowed it - He answers, "**Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.**" Jesus sought to restore the Edenic ideal of marriage...And this is clear in the New Testament teachings that Jesus has brought us into the fulness of what the law anticipated and is the restorer of God's creation and purposes.

1. But it's not just the NT that states this - in Jeremiah 31 - God says, "**“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”**
2. This is clear in Paul's teaching as well - In Galatians 3 Paul likens the Law to a tutor or a guardian - until Christ came. God has done a new work in Jesus and brought us into the fulness of what he always wanted for humanity
3. This doesn't mean the the law is totally irrelevant - again, the law contained the seeds of what would come to fulness in Jesus. Paul and Jesus both show that the law contained the command - You shall love your neighbor as yourself - Paul comments on this in Romans 13 - "**Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,”**

“You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” - Romans 13:8

- 4. God’s consistent character is clearly stated and seen in both the OT and NT. He is indeed Gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and we see this ultimately displayed in the person and work of Jesus.**
- 5. Since we are Jesus’ people we are to walk in the fullness of Gods Moral ethic as seen in him and let us put on love - which binds all things together.**
- 6. And just as Israel was to be a light to the nations - a witness of the wisdom and character of their God that the nations would marvel at - so the world should also do with us. It doesn’t mean they like us, or accept us - but our character and our live should astound people so that they have to ask themselves -who is this Jesus?**

Closing: But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. - 1 Peter 2:9