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PREACHING THE LAW WITH THE GOSPEL

by

JONATHAN SAUR

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2020

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ABSTRACT

Preaching the Law with the Gospel

by

Jonathan Saur

Preaching tools like the Revised Common Lectionary infrequently draw preachers to the legal texts of the Pentateuch, even though the New Testament, and especially the four Gospels, are heavily influenced by the legal texts of the Pentateuch. Congregations are at a disadvantage in understanding the New Testament message when one of the primary sources that shaped the New Testament is ignored. This study addresses this problem by utilizing relevant scholarship focused on New Testament interpretation of the legal texts to develop suggestions for preaching these texts. The four gospels are surveyed to glean insights into how they interpret the legal texts of the Pentateuch. Four scholars are then consulted to present possibilities for preaching derived from the Apostle Paul's letters. Then, the legal texts are addressed more directly, followed by the presentation of six broad suggestions for preaching these texts. The study closes by applying the suggestions to a sermon preached by the author, highlighting ways these suggestions could make the sermon better and ways the sermon already utilized the suggestions well. The hope is that a preacher reading this project can approach the legal texts of the Pentateuch with confidence and preach these texts to a congregation regularly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The congregation of John Knox Presbyterian Church made this project possible, by providing funding for my participation in the Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary. The congregation is also due thanks for listening to multiple sermons on legal texts from the Pentateuch with grace and interest.

"Thanks" are also due to my cohort at Luther Seminary, who put up with my constant jokes, some of which were funny and some of which, I am sure, were annoying.

Professor Eugene Lemcio read early drafts of the chapters and provided needed and critical comments on the exegetical work. His suggestions were immensely helpful.

My gratitude goes to Rev. Dr. Jeff McCrory, who served as my Hebrew tutor initially, but over the years has become a close friend and mentor. In our tutoring sessions, we read the Hebrew text and my fascination with the Pentateuch was born. The knowledge he has shared with me has given me joy in reading the Pentateuch. His friendship, though, has given me confidence as a pastor, husband and now father.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to Emily. I began this project as a bachelor. I finish it married to you, raising our beautiful son and rooming with the two best cats ever. Thank you for the time you allowed me to read, to write and to travel to Minnesota, even when we were planning a wedding and then pregnant. (Not concurrently.) Thank you most for the way you love me and encourage me to pursue the message found in the Gospels. I love you.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The legal texts of the first five books of the Bible can pose significant homiletical challenges. Sadly, it seems that preachers and preaching resources too often respond to these challenges by shying away from these texts. In *An Introduction to Biblical Law*, William S. Morrow lists the readings from Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy in the three-year preaching cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary. As one might expect, the legal portions of these books are dramatically under-represented while the narrative portions are amply sampled. In commenting on this list, Morrow writes, “Evidently, there is nothing of value in Leviticus except the well-known ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ Also, it is apparently sufficient to read the Ten Commandments while most of the other legal traditions in Exodus and Deuteronomy are overlooked.”¹

The writers of the New Testament, however, did not overlook these legal traditions. From just a passing glance at the Synoptic Gospels one can see the influence of biblical law. When tempted by Satan in the desert, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy to counter each temptation. Matthew and Mark both portray Jesus quoting the Covenant Code from the book of Exodus as Jesus highlights the perceived hypocrisy of the

¹ William Morrow, *An Introduction to Biblical Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), 5.

Pharisees.² When Matthew recounts Jesus' instruction on conflict resolution in Matthew 18:16, Jesus relies on Deuteronomy 19:15. When Luke discusses a sacrifice being performed in the temple, he displays a knowledge of Leviticus 12:8.³ And this is only a slight sampling of the reliance of the New Testament on biblical law. The emphasis on this law throughout the New Testament makes clear that the legal traditions reflected in the Torah shaped the understandings and worldview of the writers of the New Testament.

If preachers want congregations to be shaped and formed by the New Testament, it seems critical that one of the key sources for the New Testament writers be presented to congregations via the pulpit. The purpose of this project is to develop faithful suggestions for preaching from the Covenant Code (Exodus 20:18 — 24:8), the Priestly literature, Holiness Codes and Deuteronomy, so that any intimidation in approaching these texts is diminished and so preachers can feel more confident preaching these texts.

This project rests upon a few assumptions. First, it is assumed that readers take the New Testament seriously and seek to preach the message of the New Testament so that communities can be shaped and formed by its witness. Second, it is assumed that readers acknowledge that the New Testament was not dismissive of the Hebrew scriptures, but instead rests its proclamation upon the proclamation of the Hebrew scriptures. Third, this project assumes that the New Testament authors should be trusted as faithful interpreters of the Hebrew scriptures.

Holding these assumptions in hand, this project consults the scholarly conversation around New Testament interpretation of the legal texts in the Torah to glean

² Matt. 15:4, Mark 7:10.

³ Luke 2:24.

insights into how we, as preachers in today's world, can interpret these legal texts and preach them faithfully. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive project. The scholarly literature focusing on New Testament interpretation of biblical law is already immense and seems to be growing by the day. To survey all relevant literature is beyond the scope of this project.

Similarly, this project is not intended to be definitive. The reader will not walk away with all questions answered. Instead of answers, the hope is that the reader will walk away with suggestions, ideas and nudges. The insights gleaned are not meant to be the final word, but instead to be the beginning of a much longer conversation between the reader and the legal texts in the Bible.

Ultimately, the hope is that any reader of this project will be able to approach the legal texts confidently and preach these texts with a hermeneutic that is faithful to the New Testament witness and to the law.

Chapter 2 will discuss key terms, such as "law" and "gospel." These are loaded terms that, without clarification, could introduce ambiguity and misunderstanding throughout the study. Chapter 2 will also contain a brief discussion on what a "faithful" reading of scripture might be. Chapter 3 will examine the four Gospels' interpretation of the legal texts from the Torah. Chapter 4 will continue the conversation by focusing on the Apostle Paul's interpretation of the law. Chapter 5 uses relevant scholarship on the Hebrew Bible to examine legal texts from the law directly, seeking to gain insight on preaching the legal texts in their immediate context. Chapter 6 will summarize insights from the previous three chapters and develop broad suggestions for preaching the legal texts of the Bible in today's world. Chapter 7 will examine one of the author's sermons

from the book of Deuteronomy that was preached while researching for this project, seeing how that sermon utilized the suggestions developed and how that sermon might have been improved based upon insights gleaned from this project. Chapter 8 will conclude the project with some brief closing thoughts.

Even a perfunctory reading of the Gospels makes it clear that Jesus took the legal codes in the Torah seriously. A survey of the entire New Testament makes clear that the authors of the New Testament followed Jesus' example and sought to interpret the legal codes of the Torah. Preachers today should do likewise. The hope is that this study can aid them in doing so, that the New Testament witness might continue to be proclaimed faithfully.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT ARE THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL?

A. Introduction

This study is focused on the interaction of the "law" with the "gospel." While these terms are necessary, they are also loaded. The answer to the question "What is the gospel?" has been debated for thousands of years. The question of what the law is and how it functions in the life of the believer, similarly, has been debated and has not received resolution. Clarity around what readings of scripture are "faithful" and "unfaithful" has eluded the church for centuries.

This chapter will discuss "law," "gospel," and faithfulness in proclaiming scripture and offer clarification on these concepts for the purposes of this project. The thoughts provided in this chapter are not meant to be conclusive. Instead, they are meant to move the conversation at hand along. There will, inevitably, be points over which readers will quibble, or outright disagree. However, the point of this study is not to define the "gospel" or the "law" once and for all. The point of this study is to provide suggestions for preaching specific texts in the Bible faithfully. So, working understandings of these terms for the purposes of this study will be developed. The thoughts provided will help in that endeavor. They will not attempt to conclusively weigh in on centuries-old denominational debates, however important those debates are.

B. "Law"

There are at least two levels at which the law can be discussed. One is a theological level, where questions about the law's function in the life of the believer, or God's purposes in establishing and utilizing the law, are paramount. Many denominational disputes, including the Reformation of the 1500s, have been related to such questions. A theological understanding of the law is critical. However, for the purposes of this study, discussions rooted in denominational disputes about the law, though important, are secondary.

The other level is a practical one, where discussion about the law focuses on the concrete texts in which the law is found. Primarily, this project is a study about texts, how texts interact with one another and how a preacher can interact with specific texts. For the most part, this study opts for this second level of discussion about the law.

Consequently, when "law" is referred to in this study, what is primarily being referred to are specific texts. Those texts are the first five books of the Bible, namely Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. This study will use the terms "Torah" and "Pentateuch" interchangeably to denote these five books, as is common. However, the Torah is greater than the legal texts it contains, though those legal texts are central to the story the Torah tells. This study focuses on the legal texts found in the Torah. So, when the term "law" is used, the reader should think of the first five books of the Bible but with an emphasis placed on the legal sections of these books.

The legal sections of the Pentateuch are the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2-17, Deuteronomy 5:6-21), the Covenant Code (Exodus 20:22-24:8), the Priestly literature (Exodus 25-31; 35-40; Leviticus 1-16; Numbers 1-10:28; 15-20; 25-31; 33-36), the

Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26) and the book of Deuteronomy. These are the primary sections of the Pentateuch that are dominated by imperative statements from God to the people of Israel, through Moses. They structure behavior and dictate specific actions to be performed by the people of Israel, or by individuals within the people of Israel. So, in this study, when the term "law" is applied, a reader should think primarily of these legal sections.

One hesitancy in using terms like "law" and "legal" when describing these sections is that the choice in translation could be misleading, depending on one's context and understanding of legal systems. Readers may jump to their own contextual understanding of legal language. Centuries of case law, regulations and court systems from multiple countries and times may come to mind for a reader. All those referents have the potential to mislead.

In the biblical context, the law contains sets of instructions given by God to the people of Israel at different points in Israel's history. These instructions are, in their narrative context, intended to guide the communal life of Israel and the individual behavior of members of the nation of Israel. Since it was given by God, biblical law contains a relational component that is largely absent from most current understandings of law. The legal texts in the Bible are not fundamentally rooted in a "social compact," or an agreement amongst members of a society. They are rooted in a relational covenant with the God of Israel. This covenant is initiated by God reaching out to the people of Israel. Biblical law lays out a human response to God's acts of salvation that began at creation and continued through Moses and the Exodus. Without an understanding of this

relational covenant and of all that God did to reach out to Israel before the establishment of the law, biblical law makes no sense.

The use of the term "law" is a translation choice. The Hebrew word "Torah," which is translated most commonly as "law," is not necessarily "law." A society's legal structures are culturally derived and are, therefore, dependent on the values and referents available in that culture. In the western world, legal language can be boring. It can conjure images of complicated debates over technicalities. Bureaucratic systems and mountains of paperwork can come to mind. Though not true for everyone, for some legal language can feel abstracted and detached, even monotonous.

Biblical law, sadly, can sometimes feel the same way, but it shouldn't. Perhaps the very use of legal terms to translate these sections of the Bible is at the root of the problem this study addresses. Some scholars and commentators have argued that "instruction" is a better term to translate "Torah" than "law," given that the first five books of the Bible contain more than law and the legal statutes given are placed in larger narratives.¹

Though potentially worthwhile, developing a new English vocabulary for these sections of the Bible would be a massive undertaking, likely lasting multiple generations, and is outside the scope of this project. It is also true that legal language can have its advantages, so long as we recognize its potential short-comings. Therefore, rather than attempt to create a new vocabulary, this study will utilize the legal language commonly

¹ For a discussion on "Torah" as "instruction," see J. Clinton McCann Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 25-40. McCann argues that "Torah" is best understood as instruction and, therefore, the Psalms should also be considered "Torah." This broadening of the understanding of "Torah" emphasizes the possibilities for translating these sections of the Bible with more than legal terms.

used in English to denote the sections of the Bible referenced above, while noting the difficulties of legal language.

So, "law" will be used frequently, as will "legal texts." When these terms are applied, a reader should think of the specific texts in the Torah that contain imperatives given by God for the people of Israel mentioned above. A reader should try to avoid thinking of her own legal context.

A reader should also avoid thinking of his tradition's theological understanding of the law. Different denominational traditions have different understandings of what the term "law" refers to. Some believe it refers to a curse God gave humans. Some believe it refers to a tool God used to highlight human sin. Some believe the law is a mechanism for conviction. Other traditions believe that the law is an expression of God's grace. All these views of the law have been and can be defended well. In this study, however, such debates will be avoided.

Focusing on a textual understanding of the law is helpful in many ways. First, it gives the conversation a concrete basis. The texts under question can be pointed to specifically, rather than forcing one to point to and defend an abstract conception of the law.

Second, everyone in the conversation starts on the same page. By understanding the "law" to be these specific texts, anyone who wishes to participate in the conversation is brought to the same basic, concrete starting point, regardless of theological disposition. This opens the conversation to multiple participants of various traditions.

Third, assuming a textual understanding of the law allows this project to focus on its primary aim - providing guidance for preaching specific texts. Such an understanding

anchors the study in actual texts and the words contained in those texts, which helps to clarify and focus the task of this study. The point of this study is to help the specific texts that recount the law to be preached to specific congregations in specific times and places.

Inevitably, the theology surrounding the law will be discussed. All biblical texts are inherently theological, in that they point us to God and make us aware of God's action in the world. But, providing a conclusive theological understanding of the law, though important, is outside the scope of this project. So, when the law is referred to in the title of this thesis, what is referred to are the specific texts listed above.

C. "Gospel"

Attempts at defining the gospel of Jesus Christ often seek to distil the essence of the New Testament into one or two abstracted lines or to one or two verses taken out of context. For instance, in the United States evangelical tradition, John 3:16 has been extracted from its context time and again and used as a summary of the good news contained in the New Testament. However, one could just as easily turn to Luke 24:26 as a summation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Or, perhaps the opening lines of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 could be considered the gospel of Jesus Christ. Or, yet again, others have mapped out an understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ in Paul's letter to the Romans.

All these individual verses, and others, have strong arguments for why they should be considered the best summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet, each one has a slightly different nuance. They all approach the gospel differently. It is the contention of this study that highlighting one of their voices is not sufficient for understanding the

gospel of Jesus Christ. All their voices are needed. So, unlike other approaches, this study will not try to distill the gospel of Jesus Christ into one or two succinct lines.

Some may disagree with this approach. After all, it is understandable why attempts have been made to distill the message of the gospel to one or two lines. For convenience sake alone, it makes for an easier proclamation. It fits nicely with modern-day communication strategies that emphasize simplicity and repetition. However convenient such an approach may be, though, it doesn't faithfully reflect what the earliest readers of the Gospels passed down to us.

Perhaps in the time the Gospels were written and the New Testament canon was formed, there was a simple, one or two sentence definition of the gospel of Jesus Christ that was widely accepted. However, such a brief statement wasn't what was canonized. Instead of a one or two-line definition of the gospel of Jesus Christ, what was canonized and handed down to us today is a collection of four² narratives and a series of letters from early Christians to congregations and leaders, in all their fullness.

This study assumes that if one wishes to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ, one should turn to the four Gospels that have been passed down to us in their entirety, rather than any short, pithy statements that Christian leaders throughout history have tried to distill the good news down to.

Supporting this approach, Francis Watson draws on the work of Lessing while arguing against harmonizing or distilling the four Gospels into one summary. According to Watson, "thinking to defend the evangelist's reputation as a historian, the Harmonist has unwittingly destroyed it. His work is more an indictment of the evangelists than a

² Or five, depending on one's views of the continuity of Luke-Acts.

vindication."³ Distilling the gospel into one message or phrase or summary is, in effect, an attempt at harmonizing the four Gospels into one statement. By doing so, we discount the voices of the evangelists who wrote the Gospels. To the evangelists, every word of their Gospel was a part of the good news that they were proclaiming.

There is no evidence that the authors of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John ever believed that their writings would be compiled into a collection. Nor is there evidence that this was their intent in writing. The evidence points to the Gospel writers believing that their works would be self-sufficient. Watson claims "each new Gospel promises its readers a fresh encounter with Jesus as he really was, in certain aspects at least of his manifold being."⁴ If we want to understand what each Gospel is telling us about Jesus, we need to receive that Gospel on its terms. The temptation to summarize or harmonize the Gospels should be resisted, so that the voice of each Gospel author can come through clearly.

One could point out that, later, as the canon was formalized, the individual Gospels were not viewed as self-sufficient by the shapers and formers of the canon. Instead, four Gospels were deemed critical and four were retained in the canon, all four being necessary. It appears that the shapers of the canon did not deem the individual Gospels self-sufficient. The response, however, is that the shapers of the canon decided upon four separate, distinct Gospels, rather than one simplified, harmonized version. Attempts to harmonize the four were rejected and the four Gospels, despite their distinctions and differences, were all deemed critical to understanding the gospel of Jesus

³ Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), 89.

⁴ Watson, *Writing*, 605.

Christ. Harmonizing into one message is different than canonizing four distinct Gospels. The shapers of the canon opted for the latter and, in doing so, preserved the unique voices of each of the four Gospels. This study assumes that we should honor those unique Gospel voices and the decisions of the shapers of the canon and receive the Gospels as they were handed to us, with all their distinction, difference and, at times, seeming contradiction. The gospel of Jesus Christ, as best as we can understand it, is contained in all four of the writings known as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, with each presenting a different and critical aspect of Jesus.

It is for this reason that, in this study, the gospel of Jesus Christ is best understood as the message found in the texts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Similar to the approach to the "law" in this study, this understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ places all readers at the same starting point. More than anything, though, it preserves the voices of the Gospels as they were handed down to us and allows us to lose ourselves in these writings, rather than try to beat out of these writings a message we would like to hear.

One important question relates to the Apostle Paul's relationship to the gospel. It is widely accepted that the writings of Paul that scholarly New Testament consensus deem to be authentic were written before Matthew, Mark, Luke and John put their Gospels to writing. If the understanding of the gospel is found in the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, how do we determine Paul's understanding of the gospel?

Paul was clearly elevated by the shapers of the canon as a person with a unique and authoritative understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul also seems to have a slightly different manner of talking about the gospel of Jesus Christ than Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. Paul's exact understanding of the gospel, though, isn't laid out as clearly as

we would hope. He seems to nuance the exact formulation of the gospel to different congregations. One could point to a specific letter of Paul to find a summary of the gospel of Jesus Christ, but why should one of Paul's articulations of the gospel take precedence over the others? Paul did not leave us with just one summary. Instead, we are left with Paul's numerous letters to different communities that can be clear on some points and confusing on others.⁵

In this study, an attempt will not be made to define a consistent and clear gospel according to Paul from his letters. Paul's view of the law and its function in the Christian life will be discussed and engaged. However, Paul's specific definition of the gospel or understanding of the gospel will be left as an open question.

What we can say confidently is that Paul believed that there was *a* gospel of Jesus Christ. God had performed actions in and through the life of Jesus of Nazareth that constituted good news. According to Paul, these actions changed everything for all of humanity, including interpretation of the biblical law that Paul had immersed himself in during his early years. While we can't determine Paul's precise understanding of the gospel, we can examine how Paul's understandings of the works of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth affected Paul's understanding of biblical law.

In summary, in this study the gospel is found in the writings known as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in their entirety. All four will speak to God's use of the law, with their distinct voices preserved. Though Paul did not have access to the definition of the

⁵ None of this is to deny that there are summary statements of the gospel of Jesus Christ in Paul's writings, or throughout the New Testament. There clearly are. What is being argued against here is generations after the New Testament writers taking one summary and elevating it as pre-eminent, either explicitly or in practice, over the others.

gospel expressed in the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Paul clearly understood the works of God in Jesus of Nazareth to be good news that altered his understanding of biblical law. As such, Paul can be instructive in understanding how the gospel can affect one's view of biblical law.

D. A Note on "Faithful" Reading of Scripture

What does it mean to be "faithful" to a text? No precise answer can be given to this question. Debate is still open. Consequently, rather than provide a precise definition of the term "faithful," this study adopts certain assumptions about what a faithful reading of scripture is.

Old Testament scholar Iain Provan argues for a "literal" reading of Scripture. According to Provan, reading scripture literally "means to read it in accordance with its apparent communicative intentions as a collection of texts from the past, whether in respect to smaller or larger sections of the text."⁶ Though many have claimed to read scripture "literally," according to Provan they have failed to do so because they did not take seriously the communicative intent of the authors or editors of the scriptural texts. Provan goes on to say that we should "try to understand what *Scripture* is saying to us in just the ways in which we seek to understand what other *people* are saying to us — taking into account, as we do so, their age, culture, customs, and language, as well as the verbal context within which individual words and sentences are located."⁷

⁶ Iain Provan, *Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 105.

⁷ Provan, *Reformation*, 105.

This study assumes the same criteria for "faithful proclamation" as Provan uses for "literal reading." A faithful proclamation respects the communicative intent of the authors of Scripture. It doesn't figure out the intent perfectly, but it seeks to discern what the authors and editors were trying to communicate by looking at the language used, the context in which the language is used and exploring the range of possible meaning.

This study recognizes that we cannot come to an exact understanding of the intent of an author. As Dale Allison writes, ". . . once we acknowledge 'the limits of interpretation' (Umberto Eco), it is all but impossible to define those limits without taking into account a work's original historical context, in which I include authorial intent. This is not to say that such intent is everywhere retrievable. All too often, obscurities cannot be banished. . . ."⁸ However, *respecting* intent does not mean that we discern it exactly. It means that we use the best available tools and consult the best available conversation partners to discern what is being communicated, we establish a reasonable range of possibilities, we debate probabilities amongst the possibilities and we hold our conclusions loosely, understanding our own limitations and the inherent limitations of human language. All the while, we continue to participate in good-faith discussion, dialogue and debate about the meaning of Scripture and the intent of the authors and editors of Scripture.

Though this study is about preaching the legal texts of the law, the primary authors and interpreters to whom this study seeks to be faithful are the authors, editors and organizers of the New Testament, especially the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The bulk of this study will examine their interpretation of the law to develop

⁸ Dale Allison, *The New Moses* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 1993), 3.

possibilities for preaching legal texts. These New Testament authors and editors sought to be faithful to the law. They rooted their writings in the language and worldview of the law. As followers of Jesus and adherents to the message of the New Testament, we cannot help but be influenced by the New Testament when we read the law. In seeking to preach the law, this study attempts to aid preachers in preaching the law in a way that supports and enlightens the proclamation of the New Testament.

Many have disagreed with the Gospel writers over the centuries. Many questioned their faithfulness to the law in their own time. Many, as we learn from the Gospels, doubted Jesus' faithfulness to the law. And yet, they persisted in their claim that they were faithful to the law. Every reader of the Gospels must decide if they believe that the testimony of the Gospels is trustworthy. If one accepts that they are indeed trustworthy, then one accepts that they and Jesus are faithful interpreters of the law, as that is one of the key claims made in the Gospels. This study assumes that the writers and editors of the New Testament are trustworthy. Therefore, being faithful to them is being faithful to the law.

As should be obvious at this point, this study does not adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion in dealing with biblical texts. This study assumes a high level of trust in the biblical authors and their message. Some may find comfort preaching against a text or in opposition to a text. Perhaps that is appropriate at times. However, due to the theological commitments of the author, this study does not approach scripture with suspicion, but instead with trust.

In sum, this study places the authors and editors of the New Testament in a position of respect and seeks to discern what the authors and editors were trying to

communicate by writing and editing. Specifically, it examines the ways they interpreted the law and used it in their own writings to communicate the truth of Jesus of Nazareth. Then, it seeks to limit the proclamation of a preacher to a message that reflects accurately what the authors and editors of the New Testament were trying to communicate, as best as can be determined. All the while, it recognizes that the best one can do is respect the intent of the author. We cannot and should not seek to claim the authority of the author or of the text and assume that our message is the message of the Bible itself. A "faithful" proclamation, in this study, is one held humbly and one open to correction, as it seeks to continually discern the meaning of the biblical texts through dialogue.

E. Conclusion

As stated, this study seeks to develop suggestions for preaching the legal texts in the law that are faithful to both the legal texts in question and to the Gospels and the letters of the Apostle Paul. It is intended to open dialogue and to continue discussion. It defines the law as the first five books of the Bible — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy with an emphasis on the legal sections of these books. It understands the gospel to be found in the words of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John about Jesus, while consulting the Apostle Paul. It looks for the points of contact between these texts, to see how the New Testament writers interpreted the law and to glean insights for the proclamation of the gospel through the preaching of the law.

The study views the writers of the Gospels and Paul as authorities on both the biblical legal traditions and Jesus' life, ministry and proclamation. Consequently, the study seeks to view the legal traditions through the interpretive lenses of the writers of the Gospels and Paul. By understanding the legal traditions of the Bible through the eyes

of the writers of the Gospels and Paul, one can gain insight into how a preacher committed to the witness of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection can preach these texts to a congregation. By using the writers of the Gospels and Paul as guides to interpreting the legal traditions of the Bible, one can be faithful to both the gospel and the law.

Again, the way this project approaches its task is by examining points of contact between the law and the gospel. In chapter 3, select passages from the Gospels that contain quotes of the law will be examined. In chapter 4, scholars who have interpreted the Apostle Paul's view of the law will be consulted. And in chapter 5, scholarship focused directly on the legal passages of the law will be searched for connections with themes in the New Testament. Throughout each of these chapters, periodic comments on possibilities for preaching will be made. In chapter 6, these possibilities will be synthesized into six suggestions for preaching the law.

The expectation in this study is that a range of faithful suggestions will be discerned and presented, so that the legal texts that influenced the New Testament can be preached directly in a way that is faithful to both the law and the gospel and that illuminates the message of the New Testament. Not all suggestions agree with one another. Whatever tensions are present in the suggestions, though, are rooted in the perceived tensions inherent in the Gospels and Paul. It is in the distinctions that tensions develop between the Gospels, but it is also in the distinctions that each Gospel's voice is heard most clearly. Different preachers will connect with different suggestions, just as different readers connect with different Gospels. Hopefully, a reader will connect with some of the suggestions and then preach the legal texts of the Torah.

CHAPTER 3

THE LAW IN THE GOSPELS

A. Introduction

This chapter will examine the way each Gospel writer utilizes texts from the legal traditions in the Bible and presents Jesus' overall attitude towards the law. Consulting the insights of scholars and other writers, each section will seek to discern how the Gospel writer interpreted the legal texts in light of Jesus' instructions related to the law. Along the way, after each Gospel is examined, that Gospel's section will conclude with a few suggestions for preaching legal texts that are gleaned from the perspective of Jesus in the Gospel and the perspective of that Gospel writer.

B. The Gospel of Matthew

1. Jesus' View of the Law According to Matthew

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." - Matthew 5:17-19 (NRSV)

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' view of the law is positive. What this means is that Jesus does not present the law as something to be overcome, or discarded or argued against. Instead, Jesus presents the law as something that he is fulfilling. The law is positive, in the sense that Jesus' followers should take it seriously as an expression of God's will for human lives and as an expression of what a righteous life looks like. Jesus' example serves as the model for a life lived correctly under the law. It is also positive in that following the law will result in positive benefits in the lives and after-lives of Jesus' followers.

According to William Loader, Matthew "portrays Jesus in strong continuity with the written Torah and the Prophets."¹ Jesus is not undoing anything written in the law or the Prophets. Far from it, Jesus is extending and continuing what was written in the law and the Prophets. Patrick Schreiner highlights that the key term for understanding Jesus' relationship to the law in Matthew is "fulfillment" when he writes, "Jesus did not come to abrogate the law nor to simply affirm it; he came to fulfill it. . . . The law and the prophets are not to be set aside but to be completed."² Matthew 5:17-19, quoted at the beginning of this section, serves as the best summary of Jesus' view of the law in Matthew.

What does it mean for Jesus to "fulfill" the law in the Gospel of Matthew? Provan asserts that ". . . it means that Jesus has come to confirm, authoritatively, the true meaning of the Law and the Prophets — he has come to provide 'the full picture' concerning what they have to say, which will remain authoritative until 'heaven and earth

¹ William Loader, *Jesus' Attitude Towards the Law* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press, 1997), 260.

² Patrick Schreiner, *Matthew, Disciple and Scribe: The First Gospel and Its Portrait of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2019), 141.

disappear."³ However, for Provan, "fulfilment" is not limited to teaching, as ". . . Jesus not only *teaches* this scriptural righteousness, but he also *lives it out*."⁴ In this understanding, "fulfilment" in Matthew is focused on Jesus' deeper and accurate understanding of the Law and the Prophets and Jesus' ability to restate them accurately, while modeling a life lived in faithfulness to the law and the prophets.

Along these same lines, Grant Osbourne suggests that Jesus "fulfilling" the law points to Jesus bringing the Old Testament (OT) "to its intended end or goal."⁵ Osbourne elaborates by saying that Jesus "fulfilling" the law and prophets means that "the meaning of the OT is completed by being fulfilled in Jesus; in both his deeds and his teaching he lifted the OT to a higher plane."⁶

When combined, these interpreters suggest that Jesus "fulfilling" the law in the Gospel of Matthew points to Jesus following the law perfectly in his deeds and understanding and restating the law perfectly in his teaching. Because of Jesus' fulfillment of the law, humans can attain the life the law was intended to provide.

It is not surprising then, that in Matthew, the law is never undone nor nullified. It never ceases to be important or to be of positive benefit to human life. Instead, the law lives on through the fulfilment achieved via the life of Jesus. Through Jesus' work, the law becomes attainable for humans. While some have viewed Jesus' Sermon on the Mount as a reinterpretation of the law, it may be more accurate to say that the Sermon on

³ Provan, *Reformation*, 115.

⁴ Provan, *Reformation*, 118.

⁵ Grant Osbourne, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 2010), 179.

⁶ Osbourne, *Exegetical*, 182.

the Mount is a restatement of the law. Jesus carries such great authority that he can restate the law, providing clarification so that human beings can uphold God's law. Nothing in the law is undone or set aside. Through Jesus, the whole of Torah has now been fulfilled.

In Matthew, Jesus has an unparalleled level of authority over the law and its application to human lives, to the point that if one wants to understand the law, one need only look at Jesus' words and life. Loader writes that Matthew "has fashioned a Gospel which primarily sets forth the authority of Jesus, but does so in a way which still holds place for Torah."⁷ Perhaps Loader is even understating the case, though, by implying that Jesus' authority could push Torah out. It may be more accurate to say that Jesus' commands and the Torah's commands become one in the Gospel of Matthew. As David Kaden writes, "For Matthew, if one follows Jesus and keeps his commands they will do God's will and gain access to the kingdom of heaven."⁸ The law is an expression of God's will. Jesus' words and life are an expression of God's will. While the former may have been misunderstood or confusing for humans, the latter can be followed to fulfill the former. There is no discontinuity between the two. The authority given to Torah is Jesus' to wield.

Much has been made of Jesus as the new Moses in Matthew, and rightly so.⁹ When Jesus ascends to deliver the Sermon on the Mount, he is ascending as the

⁷ Loader, *Attitude*, 271.

⁸ David Kaden, *Matthew, Paul and the Anthropology of Law* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 181.

⁹ For a discussion of Matthew's use of a Moses typology to present Jesus, see Allison, *Moses*.

spokesperson of God, who carries the authority of Moses. In the way Moses delivered the law, Jesus now delivers the clearest exposition of the law that humans will ever receive.

What has been at times overlooked, though, is how Jesus' authority over, and practice of, the law relates to Jesus' role as king. Schreiner writes, "Jesus not only gives the new law as the prophet in the Sermon on the Mount; he *embodies* the law as the wise king. Kings were meant not only to be law-givers but also to live the law. . . ."¹⁰ So, in Jesus' proclamation in the Sermon on the Mount, he takes on the role of a prophet, proclaiming the law to God's people. But, in Jesus' life, he takes on the role of a king, embodying the law so that God's people can see a righteous life lived well. In both roles, Jesus is a figure of authority who makes clear to the people that the law has been fulfilled in him and they can now attain the law and receive its positive benefits for their lives.

2. Matthew's Use of the Law in the Gospel

In this section, verses where Matthew quotes the law will be examined to draw out the way Matthew presents Jesus' view of the law, so that this view may aid in interpreting legal texts of the Bible. Not every quote of the law from the Gospel of Matthew will be examined, but only certain quotes that give an overall picture of how Matthew presents the words of the law in the Gospel.

a. Matthew 4:4 -10 - *The Temptation in the Desert*

Matthew 4:4-10 provides the reader with three quotes from the book of Deuteronomy. The account is of the temptation in the desert by Satan. Jesus has been baptized by John and the Holy Spirit has now taken him into the desert. There, Satan

¹⁰ Schreiner, *Matthew*, 102.

offers Jesus three temptations. The first is to ease Jesus' hunger by turning stones into bread. The second is to throw himself off the roof of the temple, trusting that God will save him. The third is that all the nations of the world will worship Jesus, if only Jesus will bow down and worship Satan.

Jesus' response to all three temptations is to quote the law. He doesn't rely on his own authority as the baptized son of God, but instead draws on the authority of the law to combat Satan. To the first, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3. To the second, Deuteronomy 6:16. And, to the third, Deuteronomy 6:13. The theme of obedience to Jesus' words will play out throughout the Sermon on the Mount and the rest of the Gospel. Here, in the temptation, though, Matthew gives the reader a clear picture of Jesus being obedient to the law. Gundry writes that the way Matthew has formed the quote of Deuteronomy in response to the first temptation "presents Jesus as an example of obedience to the word of divine law."¹¹

This theme of obedience can be taken one step further. In the temptation narrative, Jesus can either be obedient to the law or obedient to Satan. Jesus chooses the law. What is striking is the human portrayal of Jesus in the account. The Son of God can be tempted. Bruner writes that ". . . Jesus identifies himself with human beings and treats himself as one of us."¹² In the temptation account, Jesus is presented as utterly human, able to be tempted. In his response to the temptation, Jesus responds by doing what all human beings should do. He upholds the law and uses it to guide his behavior and

¹¹ Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 56.

¹² Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Vol. 1: The Christbook Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 125.

responses. In a potentially difficult moment for Jesus, Matthew portrays him as utterly relying on the words of the law.

It is hard to imagine a more thoroughly positive portrayal of the law. Jesus is being tempted and is in need. In his need, he draws upon the words of the law to repel Satan's advances. Through his obedience to the law, Jesus models for all humans what our responses should be to temptations.

In the account of Jesus' temptation, the law is presented as a refuge and a source of life. And, at the end, reliance on the law wins the day. Obedience to God's law repels Satan, the temptation is over and Jesus is now able to begin his public ministry and proceed in his role as the Son of God, proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven. And it all begins with Jesus' obedience to the law and reliance on the law to guide his behavior.

b. Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43 - *"You have heard that it was said . . ."*

These quotations of the law take place in the Sermon on the Mount. Before the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew has gone to great lengths to help us understand that Jesus is the new Moses. Just as Moses was forced to escape a murderous despot, Jesus was forced to flee a murderous despot. Just as numerous innocent infants were murdered at Moses' birth, innocent infants are murdered at Jesus' birth. Jesus went down into Egypt and came back up, just like Moses came up out of Egypt. And, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus ascends a mount to deliver the law, just as Moses ascended Sinai to receive and then deliver the law to the people of Israel. It is therefore not surprising at all that the law is heavily quoted in this introductory section of the Sermon on the Mount. What Jesus is presenting in the Sermon is the law. At least, it is the clearest and most accurate exposition of the law.

In these statements, Jesus quotes the following verses: Exodus 20:13, Deuteronomy 5:17, Exodus 20:14, Deuteronomy 5:18, Deuteronomy 24:1-2, Leviticus 19:12, Numbers 30:2, Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:19-20, Deuteronomy 19:21 and Leviticus 19:18. Matthew's reliance on and extensive knowledge of the law is evident in these quotations. The very fact that the law is being quoted this extensively tells us something about the view of the law in Matthew. In Matthew, the law is to be wrestled with, pondered over and studied well. It is to be known, to be discussed and dialogued about.

Jesus uses the formula for each quote "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . ." With each quote of the law, Jesus provides a more in-depth understanding of the implications of the pronouncement of the law. For instance, according to Jesus, the law may prohibit murder, but Jesus prohibits the anger that can lead to murder. While the law prohibits adultery, Jesus prohibits the very lust that leads to adultery.

With these quotations, and with Jesus' formula, one could argue that Jesus is drawing a contrast with the law. However, such an argument misses Jesus' point. Rather than drawing a contrast with the law, Jesus is expanding the authority of the law in the lives of his followers. One can see this also in Matthew 19:3-9. While the law allows for divorce, the values behind the law surpass the specific commandment and now claim even more authority in the lives of Jesus' followers, narrowing the options for an individual in cases of divorce. The values underlying the law, namely, the image of God being equally reflected in both male and female and that truth being lived out in human relationships, are never set aside, as Jesus' citation of Genesis 1:27 displays. A man

cannot summarily dispense with his wife. Instead, the authority of the values behind the law's specific commands grows by eliminating options that deny the inherent equality of male and female from creation.

Luz states that "Jesus' proclamation of the will of God is the 'door' to the Old Testament."¹³ It is not an accident that Matthew 5:17-19, where Jesus makes clear that he came to fulfill and not abolish the law, directly precedes these quotations of the law in Matthew 5. What Jesus is displaying is not an abolishing or discarding of the law. It is a fulfillment of the law, where the meaning of the law is fully filled in.

Bruner writes that, in Jesus' time, "contemporary teachers often said, 'But I say to you,' modestly, to contrast their remarks with those of other human teachers. But Jesus cites the OT Word of God . . ." ¹⁴ When understood this way, the quotes could be taken not as a denigration or demotion of the law, but instead as an elevation of Jesus' status. Jesus is the only teacher who can make such statements in response to the law. And only Jesus can reveal the correct interpretation of the law. The law isn't something to be cast aside by Jesus' quote, but instead Jesus is the only one who can help humans understand what God meant with the declarations of the law.

The effect of these quotations of the law, overall, is to emphasize the seriousness with which Jesus, and Matthew, take the law. The law is not something that only affects outward behavior. It must also affect the inward human being, the very motivations and desires of humans. The law, in Jesus' hands, has the potential to utterly change not just human behavior, but the very thought processes and emotional responses of human

¹³ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 1989), 279.

¹⁴ Bruner, *Matthew*, 208.

beings. The law, according to Jesus in Matthew, can infuse our whole being with righteousness and lead us to lives of obedience lived within the bounds of God's will.

c. Matthew 18:16 - "*But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.*" (NRSV)

In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus explains to his followers how to handle conflict within the community of Jesus' followers. If someone has sinned against you, you first go to the person directly and alone. If they refuse to listen, you bring a few other people with you, so that the interaction can be confirmed by witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, then you bring it to the whole community. If they refuse correction by the community, then they are to become as a "gentile" or "tax-collector." Verse 16 relies heavily on Deuteronomy 19:15, which requires multiple witnesses for a charge to be withstood against someone who has violated the law.

In this passage, Jesus is taking a standard established in the law and repurposing it. Originally, the Deuteronomic law established a justice system that would preclude unjust accusations against individuals based on flimsy testimony. Multiple witnesses must attest to the violation of the law for a charge to be sustained.

Matthew, however, reflects a different situation. Albright and Mann point out that, in this teaching, "what is envisaged is not a court of law, for the *one or two others* are not witnesses to the offense, but to the willingness or unwillingness of the offender to be reconciled."¹⁵ Jesus' community of followers don't have political or judicial power to

¹⁵ W.F. Albright. and C.S. Mann, *Matthew* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1978), 220.

settle a dispute, so they wouldn't have established courts of law. They can't punish someone formally in the Roman system. The only remedy available to them is to shun an individual who refuses correction, as Jesus instructs in verse 17. It is a different setting with different remedies available to the people of God, due to the relatively powerless status of Jesus' community of followers in the Roman empire.

In this new setting, though, with no formal power to punish, Jesus still applies the principles laid out in the law. Jesus is taking the same principle and using it to establish a less formal manner of settling disputes between individuals within the community of Jesus' followers. While the circumstances may have changed for the community, the principles of how to resolve violations against a fellow member of the community do not change. The principles underlying the law stand.

3. Summary

The above passages are just a sampling of the quotations of the law in the Gospel of Matthew. This sampling, though, exemplifies Jesus' approach to the law in Matthew and reveals how the evangelist interpreted the law in light of Jesus' life, teaching and resurrection from the dead.

Matthew unequivocally upholds the law as positive. The law is life-giving, it sustains life and it guides human behavior so that humans can interact with one another in a righteous and just way. More than that, the law has the potential to not only affect human behavior, but to change human hearts and minds, affecting the very thought processes and emotional processes that have led to humans harming one another. The law is transformational in the Gospel of Matthew.

The law, however, can only be fully understood in light of Jesus' teaching. Jesus is the sole teacher of the law who assumes the role of both prophet and king. He proclaims the law like Moses and he embodies the law like a good king should.¹⁶ His obedience to the law preserves Jesus during his time of temptation and his obedience to the law becomes both a model for us to follow and the means by which we are able to follow the law.

More than anything else, though, in the Gospel of Matthew the law is relevant. It can affect our lives and it should affect our lives. The specific situations that the law spoke to in its origin may have changed, but there is always an underlying value that led to the specific laws that are found in the legal codes of the Bible. Those underlying values should be pursued and are still normative for human behavior today.

4. Preaching the Law with Matthew

From this examination of the law in Matthew, there are at least four principles for preaching that can be instructive for preaching the legal texts in the Torah.

a. The Law Is Positive

Since the Reformation, the law has been regularly spoken of with negative connotations. The law is contrasted with the gospel, or with grace. "Legalistic" now means "needlessly rigid" in many circles. The "spirit of the law" reigns supreme, while the "letter of the law" can be relegated.

¹⁶ See Deuteronomy 17:14-20 for a description of the biblical ideal for a king. I thank Professor Eugene Lemcio for pointing this citation out to me in personal conversation.

If a preacher wants to be influenced by Jesus' view of the law in Matthew, that preacher should not speak of the law using negative language. Jesus himself says that not one letter of the law will be struck. The letter of the law, according to Jesus in Matthew, still matters and should be upheld. Using negative language when speaking about the law contrasts sharply with the positive presentation of the law in the Gospel of Matthew.

b. The Law Can Seem Confusing but Should Be Engaged Nonetheless

Part of what Jesus is doing in Matthew chapter 5 with his "You have heard it said . . ." statements is clearing up confusion around the law. Humans have misapplied God's law and didn't allow God's law to change not only their behavior but also their thoughts and heart. The way to combat this is not to discard the law, but instead to dive deeper into the law. Matthew's Jesus displays an extensive knowledge of the law, quoting from various sections of it in Matthew 5 alone. This displays a deep engagement with the law. There may be misunderstanding about its meaning, but avoiding the law will not lead to clarity.

Preachers should wrestle with the legal texts of the Bible more regularly, not less frequently. More familiarity, rather than avoidance, with these legal texts will lead to clarity.

c. Jesus Is the Teacher of the Law

Matthew is clear in depicting Jesus as our teacher when it comes to the law, and Jesus as the only teacher worthy of the law. A preacher seeking to preach the legal texts of the Bible can relieve some stress by mentally and rhetorically placing Jesus in the place of the teacher. Jesus is the one who will guide us through these texts. Therefore, a preacher doesn't need to have every answer to the difficulties posed by these texts.

Preachers can point to places of misunderstanding and lack of clarity and then elevate Jesus' role as teacher of the law. This approach can ease the pressure of otherwise daunting texts.

In Jesus' day, there was confusion about the legal texts, what they meant and how they should be applied. Jesus helped to clarify some of these questions. We should not be surprised that there are questions today about the legal texts and how they apply to our lives. Jesus is the teacher, prophet and king who will clarify this for us. Our job is to simply keep seeking to learn from Jesus and keep following Jesus' example and words, as best as we can. When preaching the legal texts of the Torah with Matthew in mind, any preacher should remember and openly acknowledge to the congregation Jesus' role as the teacher of the law.

d. There Is an Underlying Value to the Specific Laws That Reflects God's Desire and Is Relevant to Our World

According to Jesus in Matthew, the law still matters. Some of the specifics of certain legal statutes may not apply because of changes in situation and setting, but the law itself still matters. This does not imply the standard dichotomy of the "spirit of the law versus the letter of the law." It is hard to see Jesus or Matthew accepting that framework and that dichotomy has too often been used to denigrate and discard the letters of the law.

The letter of the law is what will reveal to us the value underlying the law, so the two cannot be separated. In the same way that Jesus identifies the value of healthy, healed and just community from Deuteronomy 19 and applies this value to a new situation in Matthew 18, the legal texts of the Bible have underlying values that can speak

to us today. Perhaps it is the value of closeness with God that is clear throughout the sacrificial system in Leviticus. Or perhaps it is the value of God living amongst the people, which results in the building and upkeep of the Tabernacle.

A preacher seeking to preach the law under Matthew's influence will search for this value, asking Jesus to guide this search. That preacher will continue to dig, until God's character, as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, is revealed in the law. Admittedly, some texts are more difficult than others. But, Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is clear that the law is a gift for humans that can still affect their lives in a positive way. God's heart is displayed in the law, even if the individual statutes don't make sense in our current context. The laws may seem odd to us. Some seem abhorrent. But, understanding their context and searching for what the value was that God was uplifting can reveal to us new perspectives on God's character.

This does not mean that we gloss over passages in the law that seem to advocate morally unacceptable behavior that we would never condone, based on our larger understanding of the Biblical witness. What this means is that Jesus upheld the law in the Gospel of Matthew and Jesus portrayed the law as positive in its time. There are profound differences between the world that the law was first written down in and our own. There is information that we do not and cannot understand about the original context of the law. Recognizing our own limitations, preachers should seek to understand why Jesus would uphold the law in the Gospel of Matthew and what value it may hold for us today.

Whatever value is found, though, must be supported by Jesus' character and words, as Jesus is the teacher of the law. Kaden summarizes what, according to Jesus in Matthew, is necessary for entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven: "mercy, a clean interior

life, following Jesus, loving God and neighbor, and doing the weightier matters (i.e. justice, mercy, and faithfulness)."¹⁷ The law is what helps us understand these criteria and guides us in fulfilling these criteria in our lives. If a legal text seems to undermine or run counter to any of these criteria, then the preacher needs to reassess her or his interpretation of the text and keep searching for a value that reveals God's character as exemplified in Jesus, the teacher of the law. This is one of the key lessons that Matthew teaches us about Jesus's relationship to the law.

C. The Gospel of Mark

1. Jesus' View of the law According to Mark

"So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." - Mark 2:28 (NRSV)

While the law is present in the Gospel of Mark, it is nowhere near as prominent as in the Gospel according to Matthew. Unlike Matthew, Luke and John, Mark doesn't even use the Greek term for "law." The Gospel of Mark is less structured in general, though, with fewer clear themes than the other Gospels. So, while the law may not receive as systematic of a presentation in Mark as it does in Matthew, that is also true of most other themes and topics in the Gospel of Mark versus other Gospels. Some recent thinking has even suggested that Mark isn't a Gospel in the way that Matthew, Luke and John are Gospels, but is instead a series of notes intended to be expounded upon by later writers.¹⁸ So, comparing Mark's presentation of the law to Matthew's presentation of the law

¹⁷ Kaden, *Anthropology*, 178.

¹⁸ See Matthew Larsen, *Gospels Before the Book* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

doesn't necessarily yield much information about Jesus' view of the law as presented in Mark.

William Loader writes that Mark's purpose in writing was "to present Jesus as Son of God, as good news, not to provide a treatise on Jesus' attitudes towards Torah. Yet it was impossible to do the former without attention to the latter."¹⁹ Therein lies the importance of the law in the Gospel of Mark. The law can help us understand Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God. In fact, without the law, we cannot understand Jesus' identity and we cannot follow Jesus, as the Gospel urges us. So, while the law may serve a secondary purpose in Mark, that purpose is critical to the overall aim of the Gospel, which is to help us, the readers, follow Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God. Therefore, the law is important in Mark.

One reason the law is critical in Mark is because of its relationship to Jesus' identity. Mark understood clearly that Jesus was Jewish. Jesus was rooted in the traditions associated with the people of Israel and their covenant relationship to the God of the Torah. Jesus upholds and preserves the law, because it is part of his identity as a Jewish man living in Palestine in the first century. As a Jew, Jesus believes that Sabbath observation is important, that the Temple is important, that Torah is instructive and that God has spoken to Israel by gifting them the law that establishes Sabbath and Temple.

The law is also important in Mark because the law carries divine authority, both for Jesus and for his opponents. For instance, in Mark 7, Jesus accuses the Scribes and the Pharisees of having discounted God's law and of placing human traditions above it. It is clear from this encounter that Jesus in Mark still upholds the law as something of value

¹⁹ Loader, *Attitude*, 124.

that was given by God and should be upheld, rather than discarded. This exchange also reveals that Jesus' opponents valued the law to some degree. Otherwise, there would be no point in making the charge that they had discarded God's law in favor of human traditions. Jesus makes the accusation because the law is upheld as a gift from God by the Scribes and the Pharisees.

This same exchange, however, reveals something very important about Jesus' view of the law in Mark. In Mark, Jesus is able to set aside a portion of the law for the sake of a broader interpretation and application of the law. This is not the presentation of Jesus and the law in Matthew. In Matthew, Jesus' words are the fulfilment of the law. In Mark, however, Jesus can set aside portions of the written law to pursue God's purposes. This does not mean that the law is not important in Mark. It is still critical. But, in those moments where the law and Jesus come into conflict, Jesus' word wins out. The very fact that Jesus and the law can come into conflict sets Mark's view of the law apart from Matthew's view of the law.

For example, in Mark 7:14-23, Jesus unravels the purity laws related to food in the law. In Mark 2:27-28, Jesus makes clear that he, the "Son of Man" (NRSV), is Lord over the Sabbath. He can dictate the ways in which Sabbath should be followed. While one could say that Jesus' argument was against the adding of traditions to the law, rather than against the law itself (and this is true), the point of Jesus' statement in Mark 2:28 is that he is the Lord of the Sabbath. He has authority over Sabbath. The Sabbath does not have authority over him. There is a priority that is established early in the Gospel, where human well-being is paramount.

In summary, Jesus in Mark does uphold the law as important, but establishes his own authority over the law. Mark isn't as concerned with Jesus upholding the letter of the law as Matthew is. While disagreement between Jesus and the law is infrequent, when it does exist, Jesus' word wins out. What is most important is that traditions around the law are recalibrated to more closely reflect God's character. In Mark, the law is still a source of divine revelation and the law helps us to understand Jesus' role as Christ and Son of God.

2. Mark's Use of the Law in the Gospel

In this section, specific uses of the law in the Gospel of Mark will be examined. Mark's direct quotations of the law are not extensive in the Gospel. However, Mark does quote the law at certain key moments. Often, Jesus quotes the law during a dialogue with someone else in the Gospel. In disputes with the Scribes and Pharisees or when explaining to an individual a key point about following God, Jesus turns to the law.

a. Mark 7:10 - *"For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.'"* (NRSV)

This quote takes place during a debate with the Pharisees and the Scribes about purity laws, as mentioned above. The Pharisees and Scribes criticize Jesus because his disciples don't wash their hands before eating and eat with defiled hands. However, there was no actual law mandating the washing of hands for all people before eating.²⁰ Only individuals serving in specific roles or people who had experienced a particular type of

²⁰ See James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 205.

defilement were required to wash hands. Oral traditions had developed around the washing of hands and purity rituals to distinguish adherents to the Torah from the increasing presence of gentiles around Jewish communities. These oral traditions are not found in the written Torah.

Once the Pharisees question Jesus on the lack of his disciples washing hands, Jesus accuses them of hypocrisy. He first quotes Isaiah and then quotes from Exodus 20:12 (or Deuteronomy 5:16), Exodus 21:17 and Leviticus 20:9. Jesus lifts up Moses' commandment to honor one's father and mother and elevates the provision that one who speaks evil of one's father or mother should be put to death. Jesus then shows that one of their traditions violates this commandment. So, while the Pharisees and Scribes are trying to point to Jesus' disciples not washing their hands as a sign that Jesus is not an authentic teacher of Torah, Jesus highlights that they are the ones who have discarded Moses' actual words. Jesus' disciples' violation doesn't violate any actual words of Moses, whereas the Pharisees and Scribes violation does. Jesus' point is that the Scribes and Pharisees are not genuine arbiters of the law. They undermine the law with their traditions. Jesus, on the other hand, is the genuine teacher of the law.

What stands out in this exchange is the standard that is used to judge each party. The Scribes and Pharisees try to use a tradition that they uphold as strongly as Moses' actual words. Jesus responds by showing how, in another, unrelated area, the Scribes and Pharisees violate Moses' words. The standard for judgement is adherence to Moses' words.

Jesus, however, doesn't end there. He goes on to pronounce that nothing that enters a human can defile the human. It is only what exits a human's heart that defiles

him or her. As Joel Marcus points out, this pronouncement "cuts the ground out from under any system of ritual purity and impurity."²¹ Marcus also writes that this pronouncement "raises unsettling questions about the law of Moses itself."²² In the Gospel of Mark, the law is the standard by which to judge a person's adherence to the God of Israel. However, Jesus can make pronouncements that raise the standard of the law. Jesus is the authentic teacher of the law who, as the Son of God, has been given the authority to make such pronouncements. These pronouncements do not nullify the law. Nor do they relegate it. They put the law in its appropriate place, serving God's purposes as revealed in Jesus, God's son.

b. Mark 10:19 - *"You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'"* (NRSV)

This quote of the law takes place during a dialogue between Jesus and a rich man. The rich man approaches Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds by quoting a mixture of the commandments given in Exodus 20:12-16 (or Deuteronomy 5:16-20) while adding "Do not defraud," which is not listed amongst the other commandments in the law. After acknowledging that he had followed these commandments from his youth, the rich man asks what else he might do. Jesus responds by lovingly telling him to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, prompting the rich man to walk away grieving.

²¹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1999), 456.

²² Marcus, *Mark*, 454.

This exchange is notable because, in the Gospel of Mark, the commandments of the law are tied to eternal life. In fact, with the way Jesus answers the question of the rich man, it seems obvious that the commandments are connected to eternal life. Jesus says, "You know the commandments" and then proceeds to recite them from the law. Jesus expects the rich man to make the connection between eternal life and the commandments himself. In Mark, it is assumed that the law is life-giving.

c. Mark 12:29-31 - *"Jesus answered, 'The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.'"*
(NRSV)

This quote of the law is in response to a question from a scribe. After seeing that Jesus had answered well, the Scribe asks Jesus what is the chief commandment of all. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:4-5, reciting the famous prayer known as the "Shema." Jesus then adds Leviticus 19:18, which states, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The scribe then agrees with Jesus, saying that these two commandments are more important than all "burnt offerings and sacrifices." Jesus affirms the scribe's response.

Apparently, according to Jesus in Mark and the scribe dialoguing with him, there is a hierarchy in the law. The "burnt offerings and sacrifices" mentioned are explained and mandated in Leviticus. However, the commandments cited by Jesus take precedence over the portions of the law mandating the burnt offerings and sacrifices. Not only that, but Jesus adds the Leviticus quote to the Shema of Deuteronomy. The Shema would have stood on its own as a famous prayer. It is not connected to Leviticus, nor has Leviticus

been connected to the Shema.²³ But Jesus connects them and is affirmed in doing so by the scribe. Jesus is the authority figure over the law who can assess the hierarchy of the legal commandments accurately and place commandments in their appropriate place.

This reinforces one of the key truths about the law in the Gospel of Mark. While Mark assumes that all the law is worthwhile, there are key portions of the law and principles from the law that take precedence over others. It is Jesus, and, amongst humans, only Jesus, who is the authority figure who determines the hierarchy of commandments and statutes within the law.

3. Summary

In the Gospel of Mark, the law is not quoted as regularly as in the Gospel of Matthew. Mark doesn't place the law at the front and center as Matthew does. Mark never mentions the Greek term for "law" explicitly. When it comes to the frequency of legal quotes, Mark's are more sparing.

This does not mean that the law is less important, though. Mark's overall agenda is to display Jesus as the Son of God. When the law helps in that endeavor, it is used to that end. The law also connects us with Jesus' Jewish heritage, which helps the reader understand Jesus' identity as the Son of God more clearly.

In the Gospel of Mark, while the law is assumed to be life-giving, Jesus is the authority figure who can reorganize and reprioritize the law so that it can fulfill its life-giving function. Amongst humans, only Jesus possesses this authority and only Jesus' authority supersedes the authority of the Torah.

²³ See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 317.

Within the law, there is a priority order to the commandments. Some are more central to God's character than others. Again, it is only Jesus who can determine (and has determined) which commandments most reflect God's character and desires for creation. Therefore, Jesus is the authority figure who guides us in understanding the law.

4. Preaching the law with Mark

From the examination above of Jesus' use of the law in the Gospel of Mark, there are three principles that can help a preacher approach the law with less apprehension and more confidence.

a. The Law Is Assumed to Be Important and Good

In our own context, the law is not commonly assumed to be either important or good. After hundreds of years of the Reformation tradition that used the law as a stand-in for the perceived rigidity of pre-Reformation Catholicism, many Christians and non-Christians assume the law to be bad. Preachers, therefore, will likely need to take care to highlight the importance of the law and change the assumptions of a congregation. Small reminders like "To Jesus, the law was life-giving" or "In Jesus' time, Moses' words were the standard" can help a congregation to understand just how assumed the law was in Jesus' time and culture.

b. The Law Helps Us Understand Jesus as God's Son

When preaching the law, Mark's example can help a preacher rightfully draw a distinction between Jesus and the law. Jesus uses the law for his purposes and the law points to Jesus. Not the other way around. For Christians, Jesus is the authority more than

the law.²⁴ While the law can be a helpful guide that points to Jesus, Jesus being revealed as the Son of God is the point of the law. Highlighting Jesus' identity as the Son of God is an appropriate use of a biblical legal text, according to Mark.

c. Jesus Reveals a Hierarchy Amongst the Commandments in the Law

For those who have moral qualms with the law, Matthew's view that the letter of the law is good and should stand for all time could be daunting. According to Mark, however, while the whole law is good, some parts of the law take precedence over others. Jesus is the authority figure who determines this. Preachers can follow Jesus' example and prioritize commandments according to Jesus' morals.

So, when approaching a legal text for a sermon, it is perfectly acceptable for a preacher to interpret that text through the overarching commandments and principles that Jesus has laid out in Mark. In what ways does the biblical legal text urge a congregant to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind and soul and love her neighbor as herself? How can Sabbath observance aid humans in living full lives, without inhibiting humans from pursuing the vocations that God has called them to?

If a preacher comes across a biblical legal text that seems to undermine the pre-eminent commandments that Jesus has laid out in Mark, Mark's example tells us that it is acceptable to interpret that commandment through the lens of the commandments that Jesus lifts from the law. So, if a preacher comes across a passage in Leviticus that advocates capital punishment for a seemingly minor crime by today's standards, Mark

²⁴ Any hierarchy Jesus determines among the statutes of the law is determined by Jesus' deeper understanding of Torah and what God was accomplishing. Therefore, preachers cannot use this as a way of discarding the law. Doing so would violate Jesus' authority.

would allow a preacher to advocate for the offender to not be stoned (and would likely argue for even more grace to be extended to the offender), if that violated the Levitical principle of loving one's neighbor as one's self. Or, if purity laws are used in a way that isolates or marginalizes individuals, Mark would allow a preacher to speak against that use of a purity law and point out that Jesus' elevation of the commandment to love one's neighbor supersedes the purity law. It is Jesus who laid out for us this hierarchy in the Gospel of Mark, and preachers should use it to help navigate challenging and disturbing texts in the law.

This principle allows a preacher to preach a legal text faithfully while remaining faithful to Jesus' witness. If a preacher follows this principle, that preacher is remaining as faithful to the law as Jesus was in the Gospel of Mark. So, preachers should not be nervous to accurately point out disturbing laws in a text and explain why they are disturbing, but also why they are not to be followed today. Jesus' example in Mark teaches us that, due to Jesus' deeper understanding of Torah, not all laws carry the same level of importance for God's people in all times and situations.

D. The Gospel of Luke

1. Jesus' View of the law According to Luke

" . . . as it is written in the law of the Lord . . ." - Luke 2:23 (NRSV)

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of the God of Israel fulfilling long-held hopes of the people of God by intervening in the world in the person of Jesus Christ. God intervenes in and through the person of Jesus so that God's purposes of redemption and restoration can be achieved. The Gospel of Luke tells a well-crafted tale, displaying literary talent and a range of vocabulary not evident in the other Gospels.

Most of Luke's quotes are the same as Mark's and Matthew's, but Luke has, in most instances, presented them slightly differently. The direct quotes of the law are not placed in as prominent of position as in Matthew or Mark. For instance, In the temptation narrative, Luke has Jesus quoting the same passages from Deuteronomy as Matthew, but Jesus' response to the first temptation is a much shorter quote of Deuteronomy 8. Luke also has the same interaction between Jesus and a lawyer (or, in Mark, a scribe) asking what the greatest commandment is, but expounds on the definition of who one's "neighbor" is with the parable that has become known as the parable of the "Good Samaritan." Rather than solely appeal to a citation of the law, Luke has Jesus expound on the concept of "neighbor" through a story. The parable becomes, by far, the most memorable part of the exchange in Luke, and not the legal citation. Similarly, whereas Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew draws clear parallels between Jesus and Moses and quotes and expounds on the law at length, similar material in Luke, known as the Sermon on the Plain, largely avoids the law directly. While much of the same material is present, it has been handled and arranged differently.

One should not mistake Luke's different use of the law as an attempt by Luke to disavow the law, however. In Luke, the law retains its same place of importance as in Matthew and Mark. Indeed, one could make the argument that Luke's use of the law is just as prominent as Matthew's, simply in a different way. Luke writes differently than Matthew and Mark in many ways, so it should not be surprising that Luke would write about the law differently.

Luke has worked allusions and references to the law into the background of the narrative of the Gospel. Instead of overt quotations, Luke will have a parable that elevates

law observance. Or, Luke will display knowledge of the sacrificial system laid out in Leviticus and place characters being faithful to this system in key roles as God works to achieve God's aims in the Gospel. So, though the references to the law may not be as overt as in the other two Synoptic Gospels, Luke still recalls the law. In fact, it could be argued that one cannot grasp the full meaning of the Gospel of Luke without understanding the law.

The law in Luke, though, is not the ultimate symbol of the Gospel. Though it is important, it is important because of the way the law supports and reveals the aims and purposes of God. Joel Green writes, "the aim of God is even more key to Luke than are the scriptures of Israel . . . the scriptures are important for Luke particularly because they witness to God's purpose . . ." ²⁵ The aim of God is achieving redemption for Israel and for the nations, through the life, work, death and resurrection, of Jesus of Nazareth. The law, as well as the other scriptures of Israel, point to and reveal this narrative of redemption. That is where the importance of the law lies in the Gospel of Luke.

Another way of stating this is that, while all the Gospels are in narrative form, Luke's Gospel is driven most by the narrative. It is the narrative that recounts the work of God intervening in the world to redeem humanity, culminating in the life and work of Jesus. The law is a critical part of that narrative. In fact, the story cannot be told correctly without the law. So, the law is there, present, helping to move the story along, pointing to God's work of intervening in the world in the past and reminding the reader of all that God has done, so that the reader can see what God is doing now. The quotations are still

²⁵ Joel Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1995), 28.

there, but the law is more than just a series of commandments to be quoted. The law is a central and necessary character in the story of God's work of redemption.

2. Luke's Use of the Law in the Gospel

a. Luke 2:22-24 - *"When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.'"*(NRSV)

Luke 2:22-24 serves as a transition point in the narrative of the Gospel and an introduction to a new phase of the story. Jesus has been born and has been named and is now ready to be presented to God as part of a purification ritual. The law of Moses is referred to three times in this short section. Each explicit reference highlights the obedience of Jesus' parents to the law of Moses.

It is notable that Luke goes out of the way to highlight that Jesus' parents were Torah observant. Luke has already told readers that John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, is a priest and that his mother, Elizabeth, is a descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother, the first priest and the dominant symbol for the priesthood. This reveals that the two primary characters who will participate in and fulfill the purpose and aim of God in the Gospel are born from parents who uphold and observe the law. As Fitzmyer puts it, "the new form of God's salvation comes with obedience to this law."²⁶

²⁶ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (New York, NY: Double Day, 1979), 421.

This is the type of narrative approach that Luke uses. There isn't an explicit command here for the reader to go and do likewise. Instead, the characters are revealed to the reader as people who take the law of Moses seriously and who will continue to observe it. They currently display faithfulness to God through the best means available to them, the law. As such, they witness to God's faithfulness to Israel and they display a deep hope in the faithfulness and character of God.

Another curious point in this story is the mentioning of the two doves. This is a direct reference to Leviticus 12:8. In the other Synoptic Gospels, the sacrificial system of Leviticus was not quoted directly. The legal texts quoted leaned heavily in favor of ethical commandments or commandments related to exclusive worship of the God of Israel. Luke, however, has his characters displaying their faithfulness by following the purification laws of Leviticus. Furthermore, the specific mention of the two doves is an explicit marker that Jesus' parents are among the poor. In Leviticus, the allowance of offering doves is a means by which the marginalized and the poor can be included in the sacrificial system.²⁷ The sacrificial system is inclusive and important. It is not to be discounted. It is a way for all humans to display their faithfulness to God and to display their desire for life with God.

The purification laws were, however, inappropriately abused to isolate and marginalize people. This happens in Luke 7:36-50. Jesus is eating dinner with some Pharisees. A woman perceived as sinful by the Pharisees comes and anoints Jesus' feet with perfume and dries them with her hair. Then she kisses Jesus' feet. The Pharisees

²⁷ Again, thanks are due to Professor Eugene Lemcio for reminding me in personal conversation of the symbolism of doves in the Levitical sacrificial system.

regard her as sinful and seem aghast that Jesus would let her touch him. In their eyes, her impurity makes Jesus impure. Jesus, however, responds by declaring the woman forgiven of her sins, thereby purifying her.

The purity laws, when observed to display faithfulness to God, are used by God to bring about salvation. But, an understanding of purity used to marginalize a woman is overridden by Jesus and the woman is made clean of sin by Jesus' proclamation. The law, when not distorted by human sin, can be used by God to great purpose. When the law is distorted by human sin, Jesus will correct it and redirect it, so that it can again point to God's redemptive aim.

b. Luke 16:14-31 - "*Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.'*" (v. 29, NRSV)

This section begins another disagreement with the Pharisees. Luke makes sure that the reader knows that the Pharisees are "lovers of money," thereby impugning their motives. They ridicule Jesus and Jesus responds by condemning them. Jesus then begins a brief discussion of the law. According to Jesus, the law was in effect until John the Baptist. Then, the gospel of the Kingdom of God is proclaimed. However, in case anyone got the impression that the gospel of the Kingdom of God somehow nullifies the law, Jesus reflects a similar pronouncement to the one from Matthew 5:17-19 and says that it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one letter of the law to be dropped. Jesus then follows up by giving a more restrictive teaching on divorce than the law.

This brief discussion of the law serves to make clear to any who might question Jesus' adherence to the law that Jesus does indeed uphold the law. The statement doesn't go as far in linking Jesus and the law directly as Matthew's proclamation that Jesus came

to fulfill the law, but it makes clear that the law still stands. The gospel of the Kingdom of God did not nullify the law.

While Jesus' teaching on divorce may be interpreted as contradicting the law, it is important to recognize that Jesus' contemporaries would likely not have viewed Jesus' teaching as weakening the law. As Loader writes, Jesus' followers and contemporaries ". . . would have perceived Jesus' strictness as strengthening, rather than weakening or abrogating the law."²⁸ Jesus' teaching is not contradicting the law, but instead is emphasizing the law and making the commandment of the law more robust. This teaching follows Jesus' proclamation about the law still standing perfectly, while strengthening the purpose of this specific law.

As the passage continues, though, Jesus moves from proclamations about the law into a parable. This is another way in which the law is addressed more through narrative than imperative in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus tells the parable that has become known as the Rich Man and Lazarus. Lazarus, a poor man with sores, begs at the gate of a rich man's house. The rich man ignores Lazarus and offers him no food or aid. After both die, Lazarus finds himself with Abraham while the rich man ends up in Hades, being tormented. Abraham offers the rich man no relief, telling him that a great chasm has developed between them. The rich man then asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn the rich man's brothers, so that they can change their behavior and avoid the punishment the rich man is receiving.

Abraham then says, remarkably, that the rich man's brothers already have Moses and the Prophets. Moses is the proclaimer of the law, meaning that the law and the

²⁸ Loader, *Attitude*, 380.

Prophets are sufficient warning for a human being to understand what God desires from a human life and what one must do to avoid punishment in eternal life. Luke, similar to Matthew and Mark, upholds the law, along with the prophets, as life-giving and as protective, especially for the poor. Eternal life is found in the law. Listening to Moses is critical to avoiding eternal punishment in Hades, in the logic of this parable.

Again, though, Luke says all of this through a parable Jesus tells. It is done through narrative. There isn't an imperative proclamation in this parable, but instead an example that can be followed. Luke places the law within the context of narrative and highlights its importance in that context.

c. The Central Section of Luke and Deuteronomy

Luke 9:51 begins Luke's travel narrative of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. In 9:51, Jesus "sets his face to go to Jerusalem." Around the middle of the 20th century, scholars began noticing and highlighting congruence between this middle section of Luke's Gospel and the narrative of the book of Deuteronomy. C. F. Evans first posited that Luke's travel narrative is a reconstruction of the narrative of Deuteronomy.²⁹ Since then, scholars have developed different paradigms for highlighting the comparisons between the central section of Luke and Deuteronomy.

While scholars disagree about the level of cohesion of the two, most all scholars hold that there is some level of parallel between the two. For instance, Dale Allison, while skeptical of Evans' proposal, has written "Even if one does not concur (I have my

²⁹ For an analysis of Evans' proposal, see Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders, *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 121-39.

doubts) that Luke's central section is a Christian Deuteronomy, the remarkable parallels throughout Luke-Acts between Jesus and Moses . . . are plain enough."³⁰ Furthermore, though Luke Timothy Johnson believes that the proposal put forth by Evans and others inhibits Luke's narrative too much, he also acknowledges that "there are such points of balance to be discovered, obviously, otherwise such theories would be impossible."³¹ Green asserts that "Luke has built up a series of reminiscences, some linguistic and others conceptual, of Exodus material, but he has done so in a way that mimics the Deuteronomic portrayal of the Exodus journey . . ."³² What seems clear is that, while there may be debate about the level of coherence between the two narrative structures, the influence of Deuteronomy on the Gospel of Luke, especially on the travel narrative beginning at Luke 9:51, is apparent.

The connections between the narrative of Luke and the narrative of Deuteronomy display yet again the way that Luke views the law in the context of narrative. For Luke, Deuteronomy is not simply a book of abstracted commands to be followed. Luke recognizes that Deuteronomy has a narrative structure and takes place within a larger narrative. Indeed, all the law is placed within a narrative context. Deuteronomy's portion of the narrative is to highlight Moses' final speech to the Israelites before they will enter the Promised Land without him. It is Moses' goodbye speech. It is one part of a larger story.

³⁰ Allison, *Moses*, 98.

³¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 163.

³² Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 398.

So, for Luke, the law is not simply imperatives handed down from God to the people of Israel. It is part of a larger story, a story that reveals God's acts of redemption and salvation. Because of this, Luke's use of the law can also be viewed as predictive. Luke tells a narrative that reveals God's character in the past. God behaves in certain ways in the past, so Israel can expect God to behave in similar ways in the future. The narrative that subsumes the legal texts of the Pentateuch and utilizes them serves as a revelation of what actions from God people in the future can expect. As Loader says, "Luke sees the law and the prophets functioning predictively."³³ For Luke, the narrative of Deuteronomy is not just a story. It is a revelation of God's character and serves to set the expectations of Israel appropriately. For Luke, the law is narrative. So, Luke uses Deuteronomy to influence the narrative of Jesus' travels, to highlight for the reader that Jesus is achieving the same purposes of God the law was meant to achieve, just in a more complete and permanent manner.

3. Summary

In Luke, the law is still important, but in a different way than in Matthew and Mark. Rather than quoting specific commandments as imperatives to be followed, Luke weaves the law into the narrative of Jesus' life and ministry. The characters in the Gospel of Luke reveal the life-giving nature of the law. The story the law is placed in reveals the character of God to the people of Israel and to the world, so that they can know what to expect from God in the future. It sets the expectations that surround the hope Luke holds

³³ Loader, *Attitude*, 381.

in Jesus appropriately, so that the reader can see God's actions clearly not just in the story contained within the words of Luke's narrative, but within his or her own life.

The law is important in Luke, but it is important because it points to and reveals the aim and purpose of God, which is to save the world through Jesus of Nazareth. God's plan of redemption is being lived out through Jesus. The law can help reveal God's purpose, but Jesus is the one who makes God's purpose most clear. When humans misuse the law, Jesus restores the purpose of the law and redirects the law back to God's aim of salvation.

Throughout, the narrative that surrounds the law is critical, because it reveals God's character and God's faithfulness. The law, in Luke, becomes an expression of God's faithfulness, an expression to which humans are called to respond with their own faithfulness, as the parents of Jesus and John the Baptist display at the beginning of the story.

4. Preaching the Law with Luke

From Luke's presentation of the law in his Gospel, these are at least three principles that can help guide a preacher approaching one of the biblical legal texts.

a. The Law Serves the Purposes and Aims of God

To those who might try to say that the law is defunct, or can be neglected now that Jesus and the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is here, Luke makes clear that the law cannot be set aside. It is still a source of revelation, of which not one letter will fall away. The law reveals God's character and reveals what God wants to do in the world. In this way, the law still serves the purposes and aims of God.

However, there is a point to the law beyond just the individual commandments. The point of the law is to point to God's purposes and aims. It is not to simply give a list of commandments. If humans begin using the law inappropriately, correction is in order and Jesus can and will provide such correction.

For a preacher preaching a legal text, a question the preacher can ask is, "What is God trying to accomplish with this law?" Also, a preacher could ask, "How does this law help set Israel apart, or move God's plan of salvation forward?" The preacher should then look to the narrative that the law is found in to see how that commandment is functioning to aid the people of God in their mission or how that law sets God's people apart as distinct from other nations. Once the purpose of the law is established and a connection to God's plan of salvation is established, a preacher can make that connection for a congregation and use it to reveal God's character.

b. The Law Is Rooted in the Narrative of God's Actions in the World

Perhaps one of the reasons that preachers have shied away from the legal texts of the Torah is because they have lost sight of the narrative around accounts of the law. The legal texts are not isolated texts. The legal texts are part of a grand narrative. The entire Pentateuch is a narrative that outlines the journey of the people of Israel out of Egypt and to the border of the Promised Land.

Reclaiming this narrative can help make more sense of a legal text. For example, if one were to preach the texts that mandate the building of the Tabernacle from Exodus 25-31, one can remember that, within the narrative, God has given the architecture of the Tabernacle to Moses so that God can live amongst the people. Just on its own, the instructions about the Tabernacle are a set of random instructions. Within the narrative,

though, the execution of those building instructions for the travelling structure allows God to be present directly with Israel, thereby providing connection between God and God's people, wherever they may travel. Suddenly, the Tabernacle instructions reveal a deep truth about God's character. God wants to live with God's people and be present with God's people. That is what God has always been trying to do and it is what God accomplished most fully in Jesus Christ. The Tabernacle instructions are born of the same desire that drove God to enter humanity in the form of Jesus. Within the context of the narrative, the Tabernacle instructions take on a whole new meaning and become accessible to congregations.

This is true for most other legal texts, also. There is a narrative context. If a preacher finds that she is stuck on a certain legal text, stepping back and looking at the overall context may unlock a whole new meaning to that text and provide possibilities for preaching.

Preachers should entertain the possibility of crafting new narratives to help present a legal text, also. Jesus, in Luke, tells stories to elucidate God's aims in the law. Using creative and well-crafted narratives in a sermon to elucidate the law can help a preacher present the law in an understandable way. Playing around with a narrative to present a legal text is not unfaithful — it is following Jesus' example in Luke.

c. The Law Can Prepare Us for How God Will Act in the Future

In Luke, the law serves a predictive function. It reveals God's acts in the past, which can set our expectations appropriately for how God will behave in the future. In this way, the law can predict God's behavior for us, to an extent. We can learn what to expect and what to not expect from how God provided for God's people in the law. While

purity laws may seem odd to us, one purpose they accomplish is that they set the people of Israel apart from the other nations around them. This tells us that God in the past wanted a people set aside who would behave differently than other nations, to be a witness to God's character in the world.

Consequently, it shouldn't surprise us that Jesus calls disciples to follow him and urges them to behave differently than the Pharisees and gentile rulers. It shouldn't surprise us that God works through individuals (Jesus' and John's parents) who faithfully follow the law, because they have been set apart as members of God's people. And, it shouldn't surprise us that the Apostle Paul gives the early congregations he communicates with instructions that set them apart from the world around them. And, we shouldn't be surprised if Jesus makes demands on our lives and asks us, today, to behave in ways that set us apart from the culture around us. This is a desire of God that was first revealed in the setting down of the law. The revelations of God in the law can set our expectations and, to an extent, help us predict and interpret how God will behave in our lives.

E. The Gospel of John

1. Jesus' View of the law According to John

"Now the Jewish Festival of Booths was near." - John 7:2 (NRSV)

The Gospel of John has by far the fewest direct quotes of legal texts amongst the Gospels. Apart from a possible reference to Numbers 9:12 in John's depiction of the Passion, there are no direct quotations of legal texts in the Gospel.³⁴ In John's literary

³⁴ This quotation may also refer to Psalm 34:20 or Exodus 12:46, and not Numbers.

world, though, the institutions and worldview cultivated by the law are abundant. Understanding these institutions and this worldview makes intelligible many of the dominant themes and messages of the Gospel of John. As Bauckham writes of John, "the text becomes more meaningful when the full range of its biblical allusions is recognized."³⁵ The Gospel of John is thoroughly immersed in the world that the law created, even if it doesn't rely as directly on the text of the law.

Despite being immersed in the same world of the law as the Synoptic Gospels, though, John utilizes the law differently than the Synoptic Gospels in key ways. John doesn't quote the law directly or reflect many debates between Jesus and scribes that reference the law directly. For instance, John "played down some debates over Jewish ritual and practice that are prominent in the Synoptic Gospels."³⁶ Even when John recounts similar situations to scenes in the Synoptic Gospels, such as healing on the Sabbath, the theological interpretation of the scene is different than in the Synoptic Gospels.³⁷

However, some aspects of the law remain consistent between John's treatment and the Synoptic Gospels' treatment. Like the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John "assumes that God gave the law."³⁸ The law was a divine gift from God for the people of Israel. Furthermore, in the traditions inspired by the law "salvation is to be found, not

³⁵ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 154.

³⁶ Carlos Raul Sosa Siliezar, *Savior of the World* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 184.

³⁷ See Marianne Meye Thompson, *John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2015), 6-7.

³⁸ Loader, *Attitude*, 483.

elsewhere."³⁹ The law is a revelation of God's desire and character for the people of Israel. Moses also plays a prominent role in John, just as in the Synoptic Gospels. The law in John retains some of its same character as in the Synoptic Gospels.

In the Fourth Gospel, however, the law serves one chief purpose. As Loader observes, in John ". . . Jesus sees the chief role of the law as bearing witness to himself."⁴⁰ Similarly, summarizing the function of the law in John's gospel, Craig Koester writes that the earliest readers of John ". . . considered the law to be an indispensable witness to Jesus (5:39); they understood that obedience to divine 'commandments' had a central place in the life of faith; and the new commandment's emphasis on love was a christological recasting rather than a rejection of the traditional emphasis on love as the basis and essence of the Torah."⁴¹ What stands as paramount is the law's ability to witness to Jesus and make known Jesus' true identity.

Since the entire Gospel's purpose is to bear witness to who Jesus is and to inspire others to bear witness to who Jesus is, it would make sense that this would be the function of the law in the Gospel of John.⁴² The law points to Jesus. It prefigures Jesus and reveals Jesus' character, which in turn reveals God's character. It sets up a system of symbols that can make known to the world what God was doing in Jesus. In John, therefore, the law sets the stage for Jesus and shapes the world Jesus inhabits so that

³⁹ Loader, *Attitude*, 484.

⁴⁰ Loader, *Attitude*, 483.

⁴¹ Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 266-7.

⁴² For a discussion on the overall purpose of John's Gospel, see J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 1-5. Also, see Thompson, *John*, 13-16.

people can understand Jesus' identity as God's Son and place their faith in Jesus as the savior of the world.

2. John's Use of the Law in the Gospel

a. John 19:36 and the Relative Lack of Legal Quotes in John - *"These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.'"* (NRSV)

This quote is the sole possible direct quotation of the law in the Gospel of John. While there are numerous other allusions or references to events or practices that make clear the influence of the law on the culture of Jesus' day, this quote is the only possible direct quote of a legal text. Even then, it is not certain that this quote comes from the law, as defined in the introduction of this study.

The quote takes place in John's account of the passion. Jesus is on the cross. The soldiers have come to break his legs to speed what would otherwise be a long death, but seeing that Jesus has already died, they do not break his bones. John uses the quote to highlight that it was foretold that none of Jesus' bones shall be broken.

There are a few possibilities regarding where John derived this quote. One is Psalm 34:20, which states, "He keeps all their bones, not one of them will be broken." Another possibility, and one that seems likelier, is Exodus 12:46, which states, "It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the animal outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones." Exodus 12:46 is found in God's instructions to Aaron and Moses regarding the first Passover. It is a brief instruction amid a larger narrative and is not considered part of the legal codes in Exodus. The instruction in this passage is not

normative for all of Israel for all time but is instead an instruction for the Israelites in Moses' time, so that they can escape the final plague.

The third possibility for this quote is Numbers 9:12, which states "They shall leave none of it until morning, nor break a bone of it; according to all the statutes of the Passover they shall keep it." This passage is part of the instructions that are normative for all Israelites. It establishes the Passover as an institution to be followed, whereas the Exodus passage served as a memory of the first Passover.

Scholars are divided on the source of John's quote, whether it is Psalms, Exodus or Numbers. It is also possible that the passages are not mutually exclusive as the source of John's quote.⁴³ On the one hand, John has emphasized Jewish traditions and festivals throughout the Gospel, so has already displayed a deep reliance on traditions like the Passover, which would make the Exodus or Numbers passages likelier. Furthermore, Jesus is set up in the Gospel of John as the Passover Lamb, who is taking away the sins of the world. On the other hand, the Psalms serve as a source for a number of quotations in the passion narrative and as a regular source of citation for John's Gospel throughout.

Regardless, though, one can see that John's use of legal quotes is very different than the Synoptic Gospels' use of them. John's only possible example is not even a clear quote of the law, the quote is not used in any imperative sense whatsoever and the quote is used as a prophetic predictor of an event. Instead of the possible legal quote being used to shape Israel's behavior or lay out appropriate practices, the primary purpose of the quote is to affirm that an aspect of Jesus' death was foretold by the Hebrew scriptures. If

⁴³ For discussion of this quote, see Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1970), 937-8.

the quote is indeed referring to the Passover instructions, then the purpose of the quote is to make a connection for the reader between the Passover lamb and Jesus, thereby giving the reader an interpretive lens to better understand the significance of Jesus' death.

The lack of direct quotes of the law gives an indication into how John uses the law, though. John does not use the law as a regulator for ethical behavior that is operative. The law is not cited to guide behaviors or worship practices directly. Instead, the law is an assumed part of the culture in which Jesus lives. The effects of the law on human behavior are secondary, while the cultural symbols that the law creates are primary. Overall, the sole possible quote of the law in John serves as a prophetic predictor that helps the reader understand Jesus' identity. The law, in John, witnesses to who Jesus is.

b. Events in John That Relate to the Law

William Loader cites a series of narrated events in John that reference events from Israel's history related to the law. According to Loader, these events take place in: 1:14-18, 5:37b, 6:46 (Sinai); 1:51 (Jacob's vision at Bethel); 3:14-15 (Moses lifting the snake in the desert); 6:5-15, 26-58 (Manna).⁴⁴ These events point more to the narrative surrounding the law than the text of the law itself, but these events are related to the law symbolically.

John references these events in the Gospel to show that Jesus has managed to achieve something that the original event had not fully accomplished. As Loader phrases it, "Like the first event, so another has taken place which formally corresponds to it, but

⁴⁴ Loader, *Attitude*, 484.

achieves something not achieved in the first."⁴⁵ In general, the use of these events deepens the purpose of the law in John, which is witnessing to who Jesus is and helping the reader to understand Jesus' identity at a deeper level. The law points to Jesus and the events in Israel's history related to the law, like the revelation of God at Sinai, to show that what the law failed to fully achieve, God has now achieved in Jesus.

By this, John does not disparage the law. The law is still a gift from God. Jesus, as God's divine son, however, stands above the law and can achieve what the law never could. The high Christology of the Gospel of John marks Jesus as capable of feats that the law could not complete. Whereas the law is a gift from God and an expression of God's will, Jesus is the very Word of God incarnate. As such, Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God, whereas the law was a more mediated revelation of God's will.

John's referencing of these events highlights the insufficiency of the law to fully accomplish God's plan of salvation. More than that, though, the referencing of the events highlights Jesus' sufficiency to accomplish God's plan of salvation. The reader should read these passages as an elevation of Jesus' identity, status and role and not as devaluation of the law's standing. The law was the standard for divine revelation and remains the standard. Jesus simply exceeds that standard.

c. Institutions and Practices in John That Relate to the Law

In the same discussion, Loader also lists more than a few institutions present in the Gospel of John that are derived from the law. These institutions and practices are found in: 1:29, 35 (Lamb who takes away the sin of the world); 1:48, 50 (sitting under the

⁴⁵ Loader, *Attitude*, 484.

fig tree; 2:6 (stone jars full of water for purification); 2:13-22 (the temple); 3:25 (purification baptism); 4:9 (purity scruples in relation to Samaritans); 4:20-24 (temple mount); 5:1-30, 9:1-41 (the Sabbath); 5:31-37a, 8:17-18 (laws of testimony); 7:37-39, 8:12, 9:5 (Feast of Tabernacles); 10:1-21 (the Shepherd); 13:1-11, 11:5 (purification for the Passover); and 19:29, 36 (Passover lamb).⁴⁶

These institutions highlight best John's most frequent use of the law in the Gospel. The law has created practices and institutions that have allowed the people of Israel to understand and experience God. These practices and institutions also serve as signposts pointing to Jesus' identity as the Son of God.

Scholars disagree about how to interpret Jesus' relationship to these practices and institutions. For some, Jesus is viewed as replacing these institutions. Loader writes, "What Christ brings, or in Johannine terms, what Christ is, is not supplementary, let alone complementary; it replaces."⁴⁷ By achieving what the law wasn't able to fully achieve, Jesus does not just fill in the gaps of the law. Jesus replaces the law. Whereas the law was the means of revelation of God to the people of God, with Jesus' life the law is revealed as only pointing to Jesus, while Jesus is very God in human form. Jesus is the greatest means of revelation of God, with the law serving in a subservient position to Jesus, pointing to him and making him known.

Others have emphasized continuity between Jesus and the law. O'Day and Hylan write, ". . . the Gospel claims that Jesus in some way embodies or continues these traditions. God is still giving manna to the people, God is still shepherding the people,

⁴⁶ Loader, *Attitude*, 484-5.

⁴⁷ Loader, *Attitude*, 485.

God is still tending the vineyard."⁴⁸ In this reading, Jesus does not replace the law or its institutions but continues them, just in a deeper and more significant way.

While both views can be reasonably argued from the Gospel, what a preacher can rest in is that, in the Gospel of John, the law has created rituals, practices and institutions within the culture and community that Jesus ministers to. These practices reveal who Jesus is. As Jesus' identity is revealed more and more, he either replaces these practices and institutions with himself, or he continues these traditions and is the perfect practitioner of these rituals, symbols and institutions to the point that God's people no longer have to partake in these institutions and practices in the same way.

Wherever one comes down on that question, the law is critical in the Gospel of John as a witness to Jesus. Without the law and the cultural world it creates and the symbols it supplies, we cannot understand who Jesus is. The law points to Jesus, guiding the reader to an understanding of Jesus as the Son of God, Word of God incarnate dwelling amongst us and the source of eternal life.

3. Summary

In John, the law serves as a witness to the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. Though there is only one possible citation of the law in the Gospel of John, the law is present throughout the Gospel in the form of institutions, practices, rituals and symbols that the law has created in Jesus' world. These symbols and rituals point to who Jesus is and let the reader understand that Jesus is God incarnate, living amongst humans. There is debate over whether Jesus replaces the law with himself or serves to continue the law

⁴⁸ Gail O'Day and Susan Hulen, *John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006), 16.

through his perfect practice of it. Regardless of where one comes down on this question, the law and its institutions are a critical witness to Jesus and the law in John's Gospel points people to follow Jesus, not itself.

The high Christology in the Gospel of John allows the reader to understand that Jesus stands above the law. The law was a mediated revelation of God to God's people. Jesus is the direct revelation. When the law revealed God to the people of Israel, it was pointing to Jesus. Now, Jesus is present and people can understand God through the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is now God's direct revelation to the world.

4. Preaching the Law with John

From John's use of the law, the following are three principles that can guide a preacher approaching a legal text, if the preacher wants to preach the law in the way John used the law in the Gospel.

a. The Law Witnesses to Jesus

A preacher approaching a legal text can read the law alongside John, looking for signs that point to Jesus' identity or signs that the law sets the stage for works of God enacted in Jesus like those narrated by the Gospel. While any preacher should be cautious about overdoing this, John's example makes clear that the law, along with the practices and institutions it brings about, indeed witnesses to Jesus' identity. So, a preacher should look for signs that point to Jesus or set the stage for Jesus while staying close to John's language and example, to make sure the preacher isn't importing too much of her or his own theology onto the text.

For example, in what ways might the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 set the stage for an understanding of the forgiveness of sins of which the people of God aren't

aware? How might this practice have prepared God's people to be ready for a sacrifice that would completely cleanse them and all of creation of sin, even the sins they didn't realize they had committed? In what ways might this practice, and others, witness to and aid a congregation in understanding what God did in Jesus of Nazareth?

b. The Law Has a Different Meaning After God's Work in Jesus

This principle is not saying that the law can be discarded. It is not warranting any form of Marcionism, or any belief that there is discontinuity between the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. "Different," in this context, does not mean "inferior." The law remains important for the people of God and remains a source of reflection and meditation for the people of God.

That being said, the fact remains that John utilizes the law in a way that leads one to believe that the law is no longer expected to be directly followed. There are no quotes of legal texts in the Gospel that are used as imperatives for human behavior. Debates about purity laws and debates about the relevance of specific commandments are absent from the fourth Gospel. The law was in place to witness to Jesus' identity. Now, Jesus' identity has been revealed, so the primary function of the law, according to John, has been achieved. Consequently, the people of God's relationship to the law has changed after Jesus' resurrection.

Hopefully, this principle can free a preacher to expound upon the law as it is presented in its context, on its terms, understanding that some of it may be difficult to understand and morally abhorrent. Preachers don't need to apologize for difficult portions of the law or explain away troubling commandments. Its purpose is not to regulate human

behavior any longer.⁴⁹ Perhaps we may find it difficult to understand why certain laws were necessary, but preachers don't have to explain why and how every commandment was necessary. Since it is not expected to regulate human behavior any longer, preachers can explore the law, taking it on its terms and looking for the ways in which God used it to set the stage to reveal who Jesus is.

3. Jesus Stands as the Pinnacle of the Law and His World Was Immersed in the Law

Jesus stands as the pinnacle of the law in the Gospel of John. His identity as the Son of God is of the utmost importance in the Gospel. The law exists to help people understand who Jesus is and what God has done by being present with humanity in the person of Jesus. The high Christology of John makes clear that Jesus stands as the pinnacle of the law and is pre-eminent in this Gospel.

However, Jesus' world was immersed in the law. It was saturated in the law. To understand the true significance of God's work in Jesus, congregations should be knowledgeable about Jesus' world, about the law's influence on it and about the law itself. Without a healthy knowledge, understanding and respect for the law, congregations run the risk of missing out on key symbols that translate at a deeper level all that God did in Jesus.

We will never be able to recreate completely Jesus' world or understand perfectly the symbolism that the institutions of the law carried for Jesus and his earliest followers. But John has given us a gift of a resource in the form of this Gospel to at least lay a foundation of the rich symbolism that the law created for the early followers of Jesus.

⁴⁹ Though it can still guide human behavior towards a path of thriving, as it does in John's gospel, as evidenced by Jesus' observance of festivals and legal institutions within Judaism.

Preachers put themselves at a disadvantage when they neglect the symbolic world that John has recreated for us in the Gospel and when they neglect the ways in which the law points to Jesus. Preachers also put their congregations at a disadvantage when they neglect the law and the symbolic world that it created.

So, while Jesus stands as the pinnacle of the law, we can't understand Jesus' identity fully without at least a basic understanding of the law. Preachers should therefore immerse themselves in the law, studying it, reflecting on it, diving into it and preaching it to their congregations, so that when a congregant comes across the Gospel text again, this rich layer of meaning is available to the congregant and so that Jesus' world, as presented in the Gospel of John, can be that much more intelligible.

F. Conclusion

In this chapter, examples from each of the four Gospels were highlighted to glean insights from how the Gospel writers viewed the law and its place in their understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Scholarship was consulted to help illuminate these insights. For each Gospel, possibilities for preaching were drawn out and examined.

The intent of this chapter was not to definitively conclude which view of the law is most appropriate. The intent of this chapter was instead to present possible approaches to legal texts so that they can be interpreted for a congregation and preached more regularly. Hopefully, preachers can have their imaginations sparked by the writers of the Gospels. While the writers of the Gospels may have had differences in nuance in the ways they viewed the legal texts of the Pentateuch, all the Gospel writers were shaped by these legal texts in different ways and used the worldviews and concepts from these legal texts to help others understand what God had done in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

CHAPTER 4

THE APOSTLE PAUL'S USE OF THE LAW

A. Introduction

Over the last 50 years or so there has been a surge in scholarship focused on the interpretation of the law in Paul's letters. Attempting to correct perceived mistakes of the Reformation, numerous scholars took account of Paul's identification as a Pharisee and as a Jew in the second-temple period and began wondering how these aspects of Paul's identity might affect his interpretation of the law. In this light, verses like Romans 7:12 began to stand out in a distinct way. Rather than the law being solely, or even largely, a negative constraint that Jesus needed to overcome on behalf of Jesus' followers, scholars asked the question "Might Paul uphold the law as a good and divine gift from God?" Questions like this led to a re-thinking of what the law is generally and how it interacts with the life of a follower of Jesus.¹

This chapter will reflect on certain scholars who, within the last few decades, have rethought Paul's approach to the law. It would be well beyond the scope of this project to survey all the relevant literature on Paul's interpretation of the law. This project is focused on preaching and how one can better preach legal texts. So, instead of

¹ For an overview of the debate around Paul's view of "Faith" vs. "Works of the law," see Nijay Gupta, *Paul and the Language of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 134-147.

surveying all the relevant literature, each section of this chapter will have a description of a certain scholar's interpretation of Paul's views of the law. Then, possibilities for preaching legal texts will be derived, based on that scholar's view of Paul's interpretation.

In this way, multiple conversation partners will be invited into the discussion on how one can interpret and preach the law best. Paul, scholars and the sources to whom the scholars are responding can all serve as guides in how one can approach the law and preach it faithfully. The scholars chosen were chosen based on their respect in and influence on the field of Pauline studies, their distinct views of Paul's interpretation of the law and the potential for deriving creative approaches to preaching the law from their understanding of Paul's views. The scholars do not agree with one another and, in key ways, actively disagree with one another. The aim of this chapter is not to approach Paul seeking one clear way of preaching the law. The aim of this chapter is to present multiple possibilities for preaching the law, possibilities that can both spark imagination and be rooted in sound scholarship. Readers may connect or agree with certain scholars' views over others. The hope of this chapter is not to win a debate, but instead that any of the scholars' views might lead to the law being preached creatively, faithfully and more regularly.

B. Richard Hays - *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*

1. Overview

Hays is a critic of a common interpretation of the law derived from the Reformation. According to Hays, "The Reformation theme of justification by faith has so obsessed generations of readers (Protestant readers, at least) that they have set law and

gospel in simplistic antithesis . . ."2 This presentation of the law and gospel as antithetical has "made it difficult for belated generations of Gentile readers to grasp Paul's passion for asserting the continuity of his gospel with the message of the law and Prophets."³

In Hays' view, Protestantism inherited a tradition of interpretation of Paul from the Reformation that was rooted more in the issues of the Reformation than in Paul's letters. This interpretation led to a misunderstanding of Paul's views of the law, which has now made it difficult for gentile Christians to read Paul correctly. However, in Hay's reading of Paul, the law and gospel are in no way antithetical, but very much in congruence and continuity. "Paul insists that his gospel does not annihilate the law but establishes it."⁴ The law is not something to be viewed negatively or as a constraint around the believer's neck.

In Hays' interpretation, the law and Paul's gospel are in congruence because Paul does not focus on "the specific commandments of the Pentateuch but to the witness of Scripture, read as a *narrative* about God's gracious election of a people."⁵ It is not the commandments themselves that reveal God's will, but it is their placement in a narrative context and their meaning within that narrative that display God's desire to elect a people and enact a plan of salvation.

² Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 53.

³ Hays, *Echoes*, 53.

⁴ Hays, *Echoes*, 53.

⁵ Hays, *Echoes*, 53.

Hays goes on to argue that Paul interpreted the Hebrew scriptures in general with a high degree of freedom. "This means above all else that Scripture is construed metaphorically: it signifies far more than it says."⁶ For Hays, Paul uses a variety of creative approaches to interpret the law, many of which would not line up with modern views of accurate and faithful interpretation of a text. To read the text like Paul did, it must "be read as a vast texture of latent promise, and the promise must be recovered through interpretive strategies that allow the hidden word to become manifest."⁷

Hays imagines Paul as an exegete who is less concerned about the original meaning of the texts he exegetes and more concerned that the meaning of those texts, as he interprets it, points to Jesus as Christ. This same strategy of interpretation is then commended and urged by Hays, when he writes, "only when our interpreters and preachers read with an imaginative freedom analogous to Paul's will Scripture's voice be heard in the church."⁸ So, for Hays, if one wants to interpret the law in the same manner as Paul did, one should be less concerned with the original intent of the law itself and more concerned that the proclamation of the law point to Christ and prefigure Jesus as the Christ.

Hays acknowledges that "Such reading is dangerous."⁹ Reading Scripture in the way that Paul does could lead to the eventual morphing of the church's proclamation to the point that it is not recognizable. To counteract this, Hays offers some constraints of

⁶ Hays, *Echoes*, 154.

⁷ Hays, *Echoes*, 155.

⁸ Hays, *Echoes*, 189.

⁹ Hays, *Echoes*, 189.

interpretation. First, an interpretation of Scripture must be contained by God's promises as recounted in Scripture. Second, an interpretation of Scripture must point to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Third, and seemingly most important to Hays, an interpretation of Scripture must shape and form a community into people who reflect the love of the God who raised Jesus from the dead.¹⁰ If one recognizes these constraints, then one can wield a great degree of freedom in how a text is interpreted and proclaimed.

2. Possibilities for Preaching

Drawing implications for preaching from Hays' book is not difficult, since Hays draws connections himself directly. According to Hays, preachers need to feel the same freedom as Paul did when they interpret a biblical text. Preachers should not be constrained by questions of historical context or original intent of the author, but should instead use the three constraints mentioned above to guide their readings and interpretations. If a preacher reads a meaning about Jesus into a text where the original author clearly did not mean for Jesus to be referenced, Hays believes Paul would approve.

If one finds this approach appealing, the implications for preaching the law to a congregation should feel liberating. Approaching a legal text becomes less a matter of discerning the original intent or feeling beholden to repeating the legal text as it is historically understood, and more a matter of reading Jesus into the text, even if the text clearly has no direct connection to Jesus. Hays' constraints should always be present, however, placing boundaries around the interpretation of a legal text.

¹⁰ See Hays, *Echoes*, 191.

A preacher should also be aware of the norms of the congregation in which the preacher preaches, particularly if preaching a legal text in the way Hays' advocates. For certain congregations, fidelity to the original meaning of the text is paramount. Discarding the original meaning too frivolously could become an obstacle to the gospel proclamation. In such a context, a safer approach may be interpreting the law in its narrative context, as Hays argues Paul did, rather than exhibiting too much freedom in interpretation. Instead of asking how a specific commandment functioned ethically amongst God's people or regulated behavior, a preacher could place a commandment in the context of the narrative in which it is found and then seek to discern how that commandment revealed God's character or solidified or fulfilled a promise God made. Then, using the example of the law in that narrative, the preacher could inspire hope for God to fulfill promises in the future of the congregation.

C. "Paul within Judaism" - Paula Fredriksen and Matthew Thiessen

1. Overview

Matthew Thiessen published his book *Paul and the Gentile Problem* in 2016. A year later, Paula Fredriksen published *Paul: The Pagan's Apostle*. Though Fredriksen and Thiessen come to slightly different conclusions in their books, they share one fundamental conclusion that is relevant to preaching the law, and will therefore be addressed together. According to both Fredriksen and Thiessen, Paul never stopped perceiving himself as a Torah-observant Jew. Furthermore, Paul never advocated for Jewish believers in Jesus to stop following the law. Both scholars argue that Paul was speaking to gentiles in his letters, not to Jewish believers in Jesus and that the law still

stands and is normative for behavior for all Jews, including Jews who believe in Jesus as the Christ. Therefore, according to Thiessen and Fredriksen, the law still stands.

Thiessen argues that the primary mistake readers of Paul have made throughout the centuries is assuming Paul is writing to both gentiles and Jews. Because of this error, they "concluded that his statements about the Jewish law are an indictment of Judaism and its supposedly legalistic or ethnocentric religiosity."¹¹ According to Thiessen, Paul was writing solely to gentile audiences in both Romans and Galatians. Consequently, Paul is encouraging gentiles, and only gentiles, in those letters to not follow all the commandments of the law. The few commandments that apply to gentiles in the law still apply and the many commandments that apply to Jews still apply. "Paul does not attack the Jewish law and Judaism, but the misapplication of the law to gentiles."¹² Therefore, the law still stands.

Fredriksen points out that "the law's rhetorical valence varies widely in Paul's Epistles."¹³ Paul does not speak about the law in purely negative terms, nor does Paul speak of the law in purely positive terms. Instead, there is a mixture present in Paul's writings about the law. Attending to Paul's positive portrayals of the law "reveals the inadequacy of characterizing Paul's mission as 'law-free.'"¹⁴ Paul's negative comments about the law are focused on the curse the law brings about for "Gentiles who, *without*

¹¹ Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 164.

¹² Thiessen, *Problem*, 100.

¹³ Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 108.

¹⁴ Fredriksen, *Pagans*, 119.

Christ, cannot live according to its demands."¹⁵ Rather than view the law as a curse, though, or as negative in any way, Paul teaches that "enabled by spirit, through Christ, gentiles *can* do what the law requires" ¹⁶

For both scholars, the view of the law as negative is something that scholars and the church have projected onto Paul and not a view that is intrinsic to Paul. The only time the law is negative in Paul's writings is, per Thiessen, when the law is misapplied to Gentiles or, per Fredriksen, when one seeks to follow the law outside of Christ.

2. Possibilities for Preaching

The implications for preaching the law with Thiessen and Fredriksen's understandings of Paul in mind should be obvious. If the views of these scholars are accepted, then preaching the law negatively reflects a misreading of Paul. Talking about the law as a curse, in and of itself, that inhibits the life of the believer would be inappropriate. Any negative language about the law would be limited and qualified, applying to only specific situations and specific circumstances. The antithetical framework of law vs. grace would have to be abandoned as anachronistic. For many preachers who claim the Reformation as a part of their heritage, such changes to preaching the law could be difficult to accept.

The converse of this, though, is that preachers can look to the law as yet another means by which God has offered grace to humanity. The law, in this view, is unequivocally good and should still be spoken of as a divine gift and as a way of living

¹⁵ Fredriksen, *Pagans*, 130.

¹⁶ Fredriksen, *Pagans*, 130.

life with God. The law can then become a rich source of preaching material, as a preacher searches it for evidence of God's grace.

Another benefit to the Paul-within-Judaism view is that any hint of anti-Semitism simply doesn't make sense within this framework. Judaism and the law never stopped being God's connection to humanity. Gentiles were simply grafted into this connection, becoming children of the covenant of God with Israel through Christ and the Holy Spirit.

There is an important word of caution with preaching from this view, though. Any preacher of gentile descent should be wary of cultural appropriation of the law. In this framework, the law applies to Jewish believers and not to gentile believers, at least not in the same way. A preacher of gentile heritage should recognize that the law is something that a gentile stands on the outside of, looking in, and should have a healthy level of respect and appropriate distance from the law.

The Paul-within-Judaism view, though, when handled appropriately, can lift the law up as an unequivocal good in the life of the believer in Jesus as the Christ and can help Christians today understand the law as a means of God's grace and not as a curse on their lives.

D. Paul and the Faithfulness of God - N.T. Wright

1. Overview

N.T. Wright published his extensive work on Paul in 2013. Wright relies on his understanding of worldviews to interpret Paul within a possible context normal for a second-temple, pharisaical Jew who also proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah. Wright argues that Paul's overall mission was to establish communities centered around and shaped by

the confession that Jesus is the messiah and that God reconciled the world through Jesus. Wright makes a strong case for the unity of the Christian church in this work.

Paul's view of the law is integral to Wright's project. Regarding Paul's view of the law, Wright claims that scholars have misinterpreted Paul because they "failed to see the various interlocking narratives which comprise the structure of his worldview, and the way in which the narrative of Torah belongs within them."¹⁷ In identifying Paul's worldview, Wright relies on the various layers of narrative that have shaped Paul's identity. For instance, the narrative of the Roman empire, which places Roman might as supreme, or the narrative of a Pharisaical Jew, which places the God of Israel as supreme and the law as the greatest expression of God's will. All these narratives collide within Paul and influence Paul's reception of his vision of Jesus and the news of Jesus' resurrection.

Within the mixture of narratives, though, Wright believes that we can discern clarity regarding Paul's overall view of the law. According to Wright, Paul holds that "There was nothing wrong with Torah, nothing inherently enslaving about it. But when the good Torah was given to the Israelites, it was bound to enslave them, because they were sinful."¹⁸ Wright is not alone in this view. More recently, Nijay Gupta parallels Wright when he writes, "This does not mean for Paul the law was evil or destructive, but rather served as a limited but necessary covenantal mechanism *until* the coming of the (unmediated) Christ-relation."¹⁹

¹⁷ N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God. Vol. 2* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 852.

¹⁸ Wright, *Faithfulness*, 878.

¹⁹ Gupta, *Language*, 147.

Where Wright differs markedly with the "Paul within Judaism" approach, however, lies in Wright's assertion that, according to Paul, ". . . those who belong to the Messiah are not under Torah. Jewish Messiah-believers have been redeemed from that state; gentile Messiah-believers must not enter it."²⁰

On the one hand, Wright differs from traditional views of the Reformation that propose the law was a curse, or that its sole purpose was to expose our sin before God and convict us. The law was not given primarily to incite guilt or expose sinfulness. The law was, and remains, a good gift of God intended to guide God's people in its time to a life lived with God.

On the other hand, Wright disagrees with approaches that proclaim that the law is still binding on anyone. Though a good gift from God, the law was insufficient to fully reconcile the world to God. It played its role for a time and now, after the advent of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus, the law is no longer binding on anyone. It should not be discarded as useless or portrayed in a negative light, but it should also not be received as normative for human behavior. Instead, it should be presented as the good gift of God that it was in its time, a gift that carried the people of God through desert and set up a people of God who would birth the messiah into the world.

2. Possibilities for Preaching

If one adopts Wright's view of Paul, then preaching the law becomes simple. First, the narrative around the law should be highlighted. As we saw in the Gospel of Luke, the law takes place within the context of a greater narrative. Paul, according to

²⁰ Wright, *Faithfulness*, 878.

Wright, was acutely aware of this narrative and was shaped significantly by it. Outside of this narrative, the law loses its ultimate meaning for believers in Jesus as messiah. Within this narrative, the law can be proclaimed as the good gift of God.

However, human sin distorted the law, so its goodness was not able to be fully realized by the people of God. It was a good gift that could only be so good for so long for God's people. Ultimately, the world needed Jesus so that it could be reconciled to God. So, the law should not be proclaimed as binding.

A preacher could therefore approach legal texts in the Bible searching first for its role in the narrative of God's faithfulness and then looking to see how the law served as a gift to the people of God in the time and place it was given. For instance, while the Holiness Codes in Leviticus seem onerous and burdensome, they served the purpose of marking Israel as distinct from other nations. This distinctive identity was passed down from generation to generation, despite imperial conquests of Israel and Judah and exile to Babylon. This distinctive identity was preserved and then shaped and formed the people to whom Jesus was born. So, what was it that was so distinct from other nations in the Holiness code? What actions did the Holiness Code lead Israel to partake in or refrain from that marked her as distinctive? What were the customs of the nations around Israel that the Holiness Codes rejected? All these questions, and others like them, can lead to interesting possibilities for a preacher to highlight the distinctiveness of Israel that the law aimed to achieve.

If one adopts Wright's view of Paul, it should be clear that speaking of the law in any sort of negative sense is inaccurate and unhelpful. The law is not a curse. Nor is it meant to convict us or simply make us aware of our sin. The law is meant to show us life

as it is supposed to be lived. It is an unequivocally good gift. If there are any problems, those lie in the hands of sinful humans who were unable to receive the law well. They do not lie in the law itself.

In short, preaching the law along with Wright's depiction of Paul would lead a preacher to identify evidence of God's faithfulness through the law, thereby encouraging a congregation to see signs of God's faithfulness in its life. God was faithful in the law, which helped the people of God survive as a distinct community. Then, God was ultimately most faithful in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, when the world was reconciled to God and the world began to be set back to rights. This faithfulness undergirds the entire law and is what a preacher should be searching for when preaching the legal texts of the Bible.

E. Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith - Francis Watson

1. Overview

Not all parts of the Torah are treated equally by Paul. In Paul, "Huge tracts of scriptural material are passed over with barely a mention. There is in Paul no reference to the Flood narrative or the story of Joseph; most of the Sinai legislation is passed over in silence, as are the preparations for the conquest."²¹ Paul selectively uses the texts from the Torah that he cites and doesn't seem committed to reciting one, cohesive voice from the Torah. Regarding the parts of the law that he leaves out, "Paul never indicates that he would like to speak of such things but is hindered by constraints of time, space, and

²¹ Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* Second Edition (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2016), 473.

subject matter . . ."22 Paul simply lifts certain passages from the law instead of others and feels little need to justify this practice or explain it.

Rather than presume that this meant Paul had no desire to be faithful to the Torah, however, Francis Watson proposes that Paul is lifting various voices that Paul reads in the Torah and highlighting the voices with which Paul agrees most. According to Watson, ". . . Paul believes that he hears a plurality of voices within the Torah itself: the text that derives from the Sinai event is multiple and not singular in its origin."²³ Highlighting that scholars have noticed tensions in Paul's reading of the law, Watson refuses to try and smooth these tensions out. Instead, Watson posits that ". . . tensions within Paul's view of the law derive from tensions within the law itself . . ."24

In this understanding, Paul reads various "voices" within the law. Different streams of thought that are consistent within themselves, but not entirely consistent with one other. While "disagreement" might not be the best word to use, these voices within the law create tension with one another. Paul, rather than distorting the Torah or trying to twist its meaning to serve his own purposes, is reading Torah faithfully and retaining the tension that exists from the various voices that Paul hears in the law.

Paul, therefore, is not interpreting the law conveniently or even creatively (a la Hayes). He is interpreting the law dutifully, but lifting out and highlighting one specific tradition or "voice" among other "voices" in the law. This method of reading the law

²² Watson, *Hermeneutics*, 473.

²³ Watson, *Hermeneutics*, 478

²⁴ Watson, *Hermeneutics*, 479.

allows Paul to both be faithful to the law and to prioritize certain sections and values of the law over other sections and values present in the law.

2. Possibilities for Preaching

Allowing Watson's understanding of Paul to help preach the law can open at least two possibilities for preaching the law. First, Watson's understanding of Paul's interpretation of the law allows for a prioritization within the law. Not all legal passages are created equal in this understanding. Some will be more central to the gospel, while others more tangential. Some will point more clearly to Christ, while others may appear hazier and fuzzier. A preacher, therefore, could also prioritize texts in the law, placing some as subservient to others and highlighting others as more normative and central to the proclamation of Jesus.

One obvious difficulty that this raises, though, is that a preacher runs the risk of highlighting the "wrong" texts and relegating the "right" texts. Or, to put the problem in the form of a question, how does a preacher decide which texts to highlight and which to place as subservient? This is a valid question and is a good caution for someone who wanted to preach the law in the way Watson describes Paul interpreting the law.

In response to this difficulty, a preacher should hew closely to Paul's use of the law in his letters. A preacher should try and follow Paul's example by looking at the specific passages Paul did highlight and being aware of the many passages Paul chose to either ignore or not give significant attention to. While Paul didn't address a majority of legal texts, his values come through in the texts that he did choose. So, a preacher can be attentive to the decisions Paul made and try, as best as is possible, to let Paul's decisions guide the preacher's decisions.

A second possibility that Watson's approach to Paul opens, though, is the possibility of using other biblical theories to help identify the various "voices" Paul might see in the law and highlighting the tensions therein. For example, a preacher could use the "Documentary Hypothesis" to help navigate the law. In short, the Documentary Hypothesis posits that there are at least four sources that were utilized to shape the first five books of the Bible. These sources have been termed "J, E, P and D." These sources contain different emphases, different grammatical and linguistic features and different theological assertions.²⁵

The Documentary Hypothesis is not without its flaws. If one takes a step back from the Pentateuch, it seems clear that multiple traditions contributed to the writing of these five books. However, when one looks closely at the details, it is much more difficult to assign precisely which tradition wrote which section and to determine if there are four traditions, or many more, or perhaps fewer. While the overall concept makes sense, the lines between traditions become blurry in the details.

What is interesting, though, is that Watson is essentially positing that Paul read the Pentateuch with the same fundamental assumptions of proponents of the Documentary Hypothesis. Namely, multiple "voices" or traditions contributed to the first five books of the Bible who agreed on some points but had tension at other points. There are multiple "voices" in the law, and these voices don't always agree, exactly.

A preacher could take a legal text, look at the values being displayed in it, analyze its theological assumptions and discern its function within the narrative of scripture.

²⁵ For a more in-depth look at the Documentary Hypothesis, see Richard Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2003).

Then, a preacher could look for a different legal text from a supposed different tradition in the Pentateuch, see if there is any tension between those two traditions and then emphasize one tradition over the other.

For example, Leviticus 24:17 states that the punishment for killing another human is death. It clearly mandates capital punishment in the case of murder. In contrast to this, Genesis 4:15 not only prohibits anyone from taking Cain's life after he had murdered his brother Abel, but God promises that vengeance will be enacted against anyone who takes Cain's life. So, not only is capital punishment prohibited against Cain in Genesis 4, but Cain is offered protection in the form of God's vengeance.^{26 27}

Rather than seeking to reconcile these two views of capital punishment, a preacher can accept that these are two different voices speaking in the Pentateuch and focus on how these two views of capital punishment differ. What do those differences mean? What are the theological emphases that can be derived from those differences? Which view lines up more closely with Jesus' understanding of Torah and the greater narrative of scripture? Does one of these traditions point to the gospel more clearly? Is there something in one of these traditions that is more relevant to a congregation's situation than the other tradition? If one is preaching the Leviticus passage, how might the tension with the Genesis passage highlight values present in the Leviticus passage?

This approach, and these types of questions, can make for interesting sermon fodder. What it can also do is lift out actual tension in the biblical text between different

²⁶ Thanks to Professor Eugene Lemcio who pointed out this example in personal conversation.

²⁷ Biblical Law is full of possibilities for this, due its complexity and the various contexts in which certain laws and prohibitions are found.

traditions and use them to the preacher's advantage. There is tension in the Bible. It is one of the facets of the Bible that makes it fascinating. Preachers shouldn't shy away from that tension, but should instead preach the scriptures faithfully, even if it creates tension within a sermon. If Watson is correct, then Paul was doing just this in his letters.

F. Concluding Remarks on Paul and the Law

Paul's views of the law have been debated for generations. They will continue to be debated. A preacher cannot sit back and wait for these academic debates to conclude, assuming one scholar will be able to determine Paul's exact view of the law. This chapter is intentionally structured to not offer one conclusion on how a preacher can preach the law like Paul wrote about the law. It is structured to provide multiple options for how a preacher can utilize the fascinating research around Paul's view of the law to shape sermons based on biblical legal texts.

The implications for preaching drawn from the scholars discussed in this chapter obviously disagree with one another, because the scholars surveyed disagree with one another. That is fine. Paul's letters were written for specific occasions to certain congregations dealing with different situations. Not knowing all the specifics of those occasions or the make-ups of the congregations to which Paul is writing, we will inevitably disagree on how to read Paul's letters. When Christ returns and we are in glory, we can ask Paul exactly what he meant and who was most correct in interpreting his views of the law.

Until then, we can only make our best effort at interpreting Paul, interpreting the law and preaching the Bible. We will, inevitably, be wrong. But, humans being wrong has not stopped God from preaching the gospel through us. By practicing diligent

exegesis and then holding our conclusions humbly, we may be able to help congregations understand possibilities derived from the biblical legal texts, possibilities that help them better understand the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Finally, important research from important scholars and writers was neglected in this chapter. A comprehensive survey of the literature that has been produced on Paul's interpretation of the law could fill multiple volumes. This chapter is not intended to be comprehensive. The hope is that the differing views presented here spur a preacher to engage this literature more directly and learn from the debate around Paul's interpretation of the law. It is a fascinating debate and one that any preacher would be edified by. So, hopefully the limited scope of this chapter gives a glimpse into the interesting perspectives on Paul available and encourages a preacher to engage the debate and then directly preach the biblical texts that influenced Paul.

CHAPTER 5

GOING DIRECTLY TO THE LAW

A. Introduction

In Chapter 3, the law was approached through the eyes of the Gospel writers. The way each Gospel writer quoted the law helped shape principles for how preachers can approach legal texts in the Bible. Scholars who had focused on the interpretation of the Gospels helped guide the conversation of the use of the law in the Gospels. In Chapter 4, the law was viewed through the eyes of the Apostle Paul and scholars who have focused on Paul's interpretation of the law were consulted to help glean insights for preaching legal texts from Paul's example.

In this chapter, the legal texts of the Bible will be approached more directly. Rather than utilizing the perspective of the New Testament authors, the sources consulted will be scholars who have spent their careers learning to interpret these legal texts directly. Some of the insights of scholars who have worked with these texts for years can provide insights for preachers. At times, they may be able to introduce a preacher to a new angle on a legal text, or they can help correct a misimpression that has developed in Christian interpretation over the years. The goal of this section is to examine the legal texts of the Bible in their more direct context, to see what insights can shape and direct preaching.

Like the previous two chapters, this one is not meant to be exhaustive or comprehensive. It is meant to begin a conversation and spark ideas for preaching. It is not

meant to answer age-old questions of interpretation. Each examination is brief, as much more could be (and has been) said about the legal texts of the Pentateuch. Each scholar consulted has been selected based on their potential insights for preaching. The chapter will proceed by looking first at the Covenant Code in Exodus, then the Priestly Sacrificial System, the Holiness Codes of Leviticus and finally the book of Deuteronomy.

B. Covenant Code (Exodus 20:22-24:8)

1. An Ideal Community

The Covenant Code is a section of legal commands that directly follow the Ten Commandments in Exodus. According to William Morrow, "The Covenant Code means to describe an ideal community, one that regulates itself without the apparatus of an ancient state and whose only king is God."¹ It describes how the people of Israel will respond to God's gracious act of freeing them from Egypt, as they enter a covenant with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Absent from the Covenant Code is an explicit mention of a judiciary or of a priesthood. Such bureaucratic structures apparently aren't necessary in the Covenant Code, or, at least, it isn't necessary that they be spelled out explicitly. The primary emphasis isn't on the adjudication of offenses, but instead on the commands themselves.

The commands of the Covenant Code focus on the interactions of the members of the community of Israel to one another and towards outsiders. The Code prohibits idolatry, homicide, offenses against parents (both verbal and physical), abduction of persons and oppressing the outsider. It includes provisions for building altars, celebrating

¹ Morrow, *Introduction*, 84.

festivals, practicing sacrifice, slavery, recompense for property damage and lending. As mentioned earlier, though, systems of enforcement and institutions such as the priesthood and a judiciary are not explicitly mentioned in the Code. There is an underlying assumption that God is the enforcer of these commands and that the people of Israel will answer directly to God.

God is the true Monarch of Israel. As such "God is concerned with the totality of human life."² While this was expressed through the prophets ably and regularly, "It is not surprising . . . that the religious imagination of ancient Israel might use law to convey the same insight. The result was the kind of synthesis of civil, social, and religious instructions that one finds in the Covenant Code."³

That God is the true monarch of Israel is the key theological insight of the Covenant Code. The Commands should be read as an expression of what an ideal community honoring God's will for human interactions could look like in practice. Living with God as monarch requires changed behavior for God's people and an increased awareness of the rights of other people both within the community and outside of it. The Code contains the theological assumption that the way humans treat each other matters to God and that human interactions can reflect God's character in the world.

2. Possibilities for Preaching

There are two key insights related to preaching from the Covenant Code.

² Morrow, *Introduction*, 84.

³ Morrow, *Introduction*, 84.

a. God Is Monarch

The metaphor of "Monarch" for God is a common one throughout scripture. Because of its regular usage, it could be easy for the force of the metaphor to be blunted. Where the Covenant Code can be helpful is by extending the metaphor of God as monarch to include human beings as God's subjects. A monarch rules by dictating how subjects will interact with one another. A just monarch establishes systems of justice, so that the subjects can flourish and thrive, free of oppression. By providing law, God fulfills the role of a true monarch and establishes a community in which God's subjects can live to their fullest.

Preaching from the Covenant Code can serve as a reminder that God was intended to be the one who ruled the people of God, and who ruled the world throughout. It can also be an opportunity to extend God's reign into the life of the believer and the congregation, so that God serving as monarch becomes less of an abstract metaphor and more of a precursor for a congregation to begin living in the way God has laid out.

2. God Cares about Human Behavior

Anytime a legal text is preached, the charge of legalism could be levelled. However, the fact that God has provided laws for God's people at various points throughout history demonstrates clearly that human behavior matters to God. Ethics are important to God. Not for the sake of moral superiority, but for the sake of justice. God's people are meant to reflect God's character in the world, as they respond to God's continual gracious acts. God makes known how humans should behave through laws like the Covenant Code. The way humans worship matters to God. The way humans treat foreigners matters to God. Appropriate respect for parents matters to God.

With debates about legalism, it is often assumed that focusing on behavior at all will lead to legalism. This doesn't have to be so. Legalism refers to tying behavior to salvation and an assumption that bad behavior will lead to damnation. One can detach behavior from salvation, though, and still claim that human behavior matters to God.

By giving Israel the Covenant Code, God was supplying for the world a witness to what just and right community can look like. Though the specific provisions (such as, and especially, commands regarding slavery) don't translate to our world today, the underlying principles that God cares about human behavior and desires to have a people who practice justice and witness to God's character in the world stand. Preaching texts from the Covenant Code with these principles in mind can connect a congregation to God's desire in giving these commands and help them understand God's concern for human behavior and the way human behavior can aid the world in understanding God as the true monarch of the world.

C. Priestly Sacrificial System (Leviticus 1-17)

1. Life with God

In his three-volume commentary on Leviticus, renowned Leviticus scholar Jacob Milgrom argues for a new understanding of the sacrificial system of Leviticus, as well as new translations for sacrificial terms in Leviticus. Specifically, the sacrificial offering commonly termed the "Sin-Offering" needs to be understood differently, according to Milgrom.⁴ While many may think of the sacrificial system as cleansing human beings of

⁴ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991-2001. Vol. 1), 257-92.

sins so that they can be saved, Milgrom argues that the sacrifice cleanses the sanctuary from the effects of human sins. In Leviticus, human sin dirties God's sanctuary. If the sanctuary is not cleansed regularly, the dirtiness of human sin begins to pile up and infect the sanctuary throughout.

Why is it important that the sanctuary be cleansed? Milgrom answers this by postulating that "the God of Israel will not abide in a polluted sanctuary."⁵ In this understanding, the purpose of the sacrificial system is not to make humans presentable to God so that they can be "saved," but instead to keep the sanctuary, which is God's dwelling place amongst the people of God, clean enough for God to be able to reside there. If the sanctuary becomes too polluted by human sin, God must abandon the sanctuary, as can be seen in Ezekiel 8-10, when the glory of God leaves the temple in Jerusalem. If God's presence leaves the sanctuary, then God's people no longer experience protection and other benefits that come along with God's presence.

If one embraces this view, the perspective of the sacrificial system changes immediately. These arcane, specific and tedious commands morph into expressions of a deep desire to experience and retain God's presence. In scripture, God has always desired to live amongst creation, specifically in relationship with God's people. Human sin has driven God away repeatedly. The sacrificial system is God's way of temporarily overcoming the effects of sin and making life with God possible. While the actual symbols of the sacrificial system may seem distant, the desire to live with God and to have God dwell with us is perhaps the most relatable desire expressed in scripture.

⁵ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 258.

2. Possibilities for Preaching.

Once one understands the values underlying the sacrificial system in Leviticus, these texts can provide an array of possibilities for preaching. First, preaching the sacrificial system can provide new language for describing God's desire to live amongst humanity. The sacrificial system can even serve as a symbol to anticipate God's mission in the incarnation. A preacher could pair John 1:14 with the texts of the sacrificial system, thereby displaying the consistency of God's desire to live in relationship with humanity.

Second, preaching the priestly sacrificial system can help provide theological and literary context to the references to the sacrificial system in the New Testament. The letter to the Hebrews could be paired well with a series on the Priestly sacrificial system in Leviticus, as both can mutually illuminate each other. Or, perhaps the ripping of the temple curtain detailed in the Synoptic Gospels can take on new significance in light of the sacrificial system.⁶ Once infused with theological meaning, the imagery of the sacrificial system could be used to deepen a congregation's understanding of certain New Testament passages. Without having the sacrificial system preached to them, though, a congregation would likely miss much of the rich meaning of the sacrificial symbols.

⁶ An interesting possibility for interpretation would be to connect the significance of the ripping of the temple curtain at Jesus' death in Matthew 27, Mark 15 and Luke 23 to Milgrom's proposal. If Milgrom is correct, then Jesus' sacrificial blood would be a cleansing agent that cleansed the whole world, thereby allowing God's presence to inhabit the world. The ripping of the curtain symbolizes a barrier that once withheld God's direct presence from the world being torn in two and no longer holding God's presence back. This could then make sense of Matthew's depiction of the dead rising and appearing. Signs of God's reign, namely the overcoming of death, are now present because Jesus' blood has cleansed the earth and God's presence is now present throughout all of creation. This would also coincide with a potential connection between the temple and creation evident in Genesis 1. The world is God's temple and through Jesus' blood, God's presence will never have to be held back from creation again.

Third, placing the sacrifice of Jesus within the framework of the sacrificial system can open a new dimension to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. If the concern of the sacrificial system was to retain the presence of God, one could see potential anxiety arising. Israel was in a constant state of atoning for its sins, knowing that God's presence may leave them if they don't attend to their sinfulness. While the sacrificial system is an expression of God's desire to live with God's people, it was an imperfect and temporary solution to the problem of sin. Jesus' sacrifice, however, can be understood to have cleansed the entire world from the effects of human sin, thereby making it possible for God's presence to live permanently throughout the world. God's presence will never have to leave again, as it did in Ezekiel 8-10.

Fourth, Milgrom's understanding of the sacrificial system can direct focus away from an individual sinner who needs to be cleansed and direct focus onto the cleansing of the effects of sin that takes place. It forces one to look outward, to the effects of sin on the world, and not simply on individual salvation.

All told, preaching the sacrificial system has the potential to deepen a congregation's understanding of many symbols present in the New Testament and presents opportunities to draw deeper connections between the Old Testament and the New.

D. Holiness Codes of Leviticus (Leviticus 18-27)

1. "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself"

Leviticus 18 - 27 has been termed "The Holiness Codes." In this section, the word "holy" becomes more prominent. One also finds instructions on the year of Jubilee and

on Israel's treatment of the promised land where God will lead them. There is a strong emphasis on laws that will shape and form the people of Israel to be God's holy people.

Anthropologist-turned-biblical scholar Mary Douglas presents the chapters of Leviticus 18, 19 and 20 in a unique and thought provoking way. According to Douglas, Leviticus 18 and 20 serve as frames, introducing Leviticus 19 to the reader.⁷ Leviticus 18 and 20 contain a preponderance of negative prohibitions. Most of the laws are introduced with "Do not . . ." These prohibitions are meant to contrast Israel with the idolatrous nations that surround her.

Chapter 19, however, contains more positive language. More (though by no means all) of the imperatives in chapter 19 are framed in a positive way, stating "You shall . . ." rather than "You shall not . . ." It also contains an emphasis on the holiness of God, which sets the stage for Israel to respond by being God's holy people. Rather than being tedious for the sake of tediousness, chapter 19 is an introduction to the Holiness Codes that serves as an interpretive lens for the Holiness Codes. Douglas further points out that chapter 19 builds up to the central command of "love your neighbor as yourself." This commandment could very well be the key summarization, or interpretive lens, for the rest of the Holiness Codes. Pairing this with the instruction in Leviticus 19:34 to "love the alien as yourself," one can see the momentum for loving others as oneself building in the book, setting the stage for interpreting all the commandments through the lens of loving others as oneself. Whomever we come into contact with, we are to love

⁷ See Mary Douglas, *Leviticus As Literature* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 239-40.

them as ourselves, in whatever ways possible. Whatever commandments God gives are, ultimately, toward that end.

If Douglas' interpretation of Leviticus 19 is accurate, it would make sense of Jesus' pairing of "love your neighbor as yourself" with Deuteronomy 6:4 as a summary of the law.⁸ While this is speculative,⁹ appropriately presenting possible connections like this can spark one's imagination and help the law come alive. Regardless, even if one denies a connection between Douglas' interpretation of Leviticus and Jesus' quote, Douglas' interpretation is a viable and helpful option for interpreting the Holiness Codes.

2. Possibilities for Preaching

According to Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels, "love your neighbor as yourself" serves as an appropriate summary of the law. According to Mary Douglas, Jesus' summary wasn't novel to Jesus, but is inherent to the text of Leviticus. If she is correct, then Leviticus itself summarizes the "Holiness Codes" with "love your neighbor as yourself."

Accepting this premise, a preacher using "love your neighbor as yourself" to interpret a legal text in the Holiness Codes becomes appropriate. When "love your neighbor as yourself" becomes the interpretive lens of these chapters, the specific laws gain a new dimension. For instance, the year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25 becomes not just an idealistic economic quirk, but instead a prescription for the people of Israel to love their neighbors not just in word, but through economics. The Sabbath year, also in

⁸ See Mark 12:31; Matthew 22:39; Luke 10:27

⁹ It would be difficult, if not impossible, to definitively prove that what Douglas identifies as the rhetorical strategy of Leviticus 19 was behind Jesus' quoting of Leviticus 19:18 as half of the summary of the law.

Leviticus 25, becomes not just a time to avoid tilling the land out of pure obedience to God, but also a time to avoid working the land so it can be replenished and produce for the whole community and for future generations, thereby loving others concretely and practically.

According to Douglas, Leviticus used "love your neighbor as yourself" to introduce and interpret the final section of Leviticus. In the New Testament, Jesus used "love your neighbor as yourself" to summarize and interpret the law. Following Jesus' example in interpreting the law through this line in Leviticus can open all sorts of possibilities for preaching the law.

E. Deuteronomy

1. The Second law

Deuteronomy consists of Moses' goodbye speech to the people of Israel before they enter the promised land. In this speech, Moses is giving a second recitation of the law and expounding on it for the next chapter of Israel's life. The ten commandments are repeated in Deuteronomy, accounting for the title "Deuteronomy."¹⁰

As such, Deuteronomy is a piece of rhetoric. It is a persuasive speech that urges Israel to remember the covenant on Sinai and to take God's law seriously. Samuel Balentine writes that "Deuteronomy's instructions attain their power through rhetorical persuasion and conviction, not through enforcement."¹¹ Deuteronomy is Moses' swan

¹⁰ "Deuteronomy" is derived from "second law" in Greek.

¹¹ Samuel Balentine, *The Torah's Vision of Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 185.

song. He will not be around to enforce these laws that he is recounting. He must now hand the people of Israel off to Joshua and the only tool at his disposal is the persuasive use of words.

In the narrative of the Pentateuch, Moses thought it important to restate the law. In Moses' mind, the law needed to be proclaimed again. Underlying this fact of the narrative is that Moses understood that reflecting on the law time and again was worthwhile. The law isn't meant to be proclaimed once and then set aside. It is meant to be continually mediated on, continually recited and followed. Given the fact that in Deuteronomy there are slight changes to the presentation of the law (even the Ten Commandments) one could make the argument that the law is intended to be reinterpreted. Regardless, the law is meant to be proclaimed to God's people not just at Sinai, but through the generations.

2. Possibilities for Preaching

Deuteronomy's presence in the Pentateuch is a reminder that the law is dynamic and is intended to be active in the lives of the God's followers. It should be proclaimed regularly, particularly at pivotal moments in the communal life of God's people. Moses believed it important to proclaim the law to the people of Israel as they prepared to enter the Promised Land and beyond, as he commands them to proclaim the law every seventh year.¹² Preachers should proclaim the law to God's people today, as they prepare to engage in the missions God has given them in this world.

¹² Deuteronomy 31:10-13

Preaching Deuteronomy, a preacher can highlight the differences between Deuteronomy and the other iterations of the law. A preacher could show the ways the law has changed, adjusting to the circumstances of Israel. Like the other sections of the law discussed in this project, the underlying values behind the specific commands in the law can be lifted and their relevance to today's world discussed. Similarities in the iterations of the law can be highlighted to show the law's consistent nature. Differences can be highlighted to show the way the law can adapt to the circumstances God's people find themselves in. Throughout, the proclaiming of the law can shape and form the behavior of God's people so that God has a community that can witness to the justice and mercy God exemplifies and commands of humans.

If nothing else, preaching Deuteronomy can emphasize the importance of proclaiming the law, the importance of reflecting on the law and the importance of the text of the law itself. Deuteronomy is written proof that God's law endures and should be reiterated, so that God's people can respond appropriately and choose life, as Moses urges them.¹³

F. Conclusion

Given the overwhelming amount of top-rate scholarship focused directly on these legal texts, this chapter is remarkably brief. As has been stated many times in this study, though, the purpose of this project is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of scholarship. The purpose of this project is to take certain insights from scholars and develop approaches to preaching the legal texts faithfully and regularly. Hopefully, the

¹³ Deuteronomy 30:15-20

brief discussions in this chapter can spark preachers' imaginations as they approach these texts.

CHAPTER 6

PREACHING THE LAW IN LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to take the conclusions from the previous chapters and summarize them, distilling them into six suggestions for preaching the legal texts of the Pentateuch. These suggestions will not encompass everything that has been noted from the previous chapters. The purpose of this whole project has been to give preachers practical tools that can aid them in interpreting and preaching the legal texts. So, brevity and precision have taken precedence over comprehensiveness.

Each suggestion is stated in the form of an imperative, so the advice given here can shape the perspective of preachers approaching legal texts from the Pentateuch. Not all suggestions will work for every text, but the hope is that at least a few of these suggestions will unlock the meaning of a legal text for preaching.

Suggestion #1: Assume the Law Is Relevant to Your Congregation

The law may seem confusing and it may be difficult for us today to discern the law's role in our lives. The question of how Jesus' life, death and resurrection affects the role of the law in our lives is open and should be debated. Despite those difficulties, though, the law remains relevant and should be pursued. It was clearly relevant to the Gospel writers and to Paul. The writings that they passed down to future generations all assume that the law is relevant. For those of us who have inherited the texts of the

Gospels and Paul's letters and who attempt to discern their message and apply it to our lives, the law is relevant.

The law's relevance is multi-faceted. Luke teaches us that the law can help us understand how God worked in the past and help us predict how God will act in the future. Matthew teaches us that specific laws can reveal what God holds dear, thereby revealing God's heart and character. John teaches us that Jesus' world was fully immersed in the symbols created by the law. To understand Jesus' words and actions, Christians must work to understand the law. Mark assumes that the law is positive and reveals God's will. Those who seek to receive and proclaim the message of the New Testament must take the law seriously.

Perhaps part of the difficulty in preaching legal texts may be that preachers begin with an assumption that the law is no longer relevant. Such an assumption will prohibit the range of possibilities a preacher sees in a text. Approaching the law with this suggestion in hand can eliminate one of the main challenges a preacher may face — namely, overcoming feelings of detachment from the law.

Furthermore, Preachers who rely on preaching plans or tools that don't amply sample legal texts from the Pentateuch should adjust those plans and tools to reflect the reliance of the Gospels and Paul on the law. Resources used to develop sermons that carry the assumption that the law isn't relevant to our lives today start a preacher off at a disadvantage right out of the gate.

Not every legal text will have the same level of relevance. As we saw from our look at Mark's use of the law (and Francis Watson's interpretation of Paul), not all legal texts carry the same weight. Jesus reveals a hierarchy within the law. Certain legal texts,

according to Jesus, take precedence over others. Some legal texts may have a narrower scope of relevance. Others may be broader. It is up to a preacher, with the help of the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the witness of Jesus in the Gospels, to discern which legal texts are most relevant to a congregation and in what ways they are relevant. That is always the task of preaching any text, though, and legal texts should not be excluded from a preacher's repertoire simply because they feel uncomfortable or confusing. Jesus is the teacher of the law and Jesus will guide us through the law.

If a preacher begins by assuming a legal text is not relevant and lets that assumption drive the exegetical process, the task of interpreting these texts will feel more arduous than need be. The legal texts of the Pentateuch are relevant. The Gospels and Paul make that clear. Assume it to be true and decrease the number of hurdles in the exegetical process.

Suggestion #2: Use the Narrative Context of the Law to Your Advantage

The Bible tells the story of God's covenant with the nation of Israel. At Sinai, God chose a people to reflect God's will in the world so that the world would know God's character. It is common for Christians to talk about the concept of covenant. How can we speak intelligently about the covenant while ignoring the content of the law, though? The law gives definition to the covenant. And how can we speak about the law without speaking about the narrative in which the laws are revealed? The law is not just one part of the narrative of God's story with creation. The law is a definitive chapter of that story, perhaps superseded only by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Understanding this both heightens one's urgency in preaching the law so that congregations can understand it better and provides a preacher with a critical tool for

interpreting and preaching these texts. A preacher shouldn't feel the need to treat the legal texts as abstracted commandments with no narrative context. They are part of the story. They were given at a specific time to a specific people. Placing them in their narrative context can help a preacher approach these texts in the way scripture presents them, as part of the story of God's people.

The fact that the Tabernacle is instituted while Israel is in the desert should change one's understanding of the detailed instructions for the building of the Tabernacle. The Tabernacle was the temporary house of God, so that God could travel with the people of Israel through the desert and protect them. The care taken to receive those instructions and then build the Tabernacle accordingly reflects the deep desire of God's people to live with God and reflects God's desire to protect them in the desert. On their own, these instructions seem like random lists of different materials and numbers. In their narrative context, this random list of materials and numbers become deep expressions of faith, trust and hope that God will live amongst God's people and protect them at a difficult time.

The fact that Moses repeats the Ten Commandments and expounds upon the law right before Israel will enter the Promised Land affects the reception of these commandments. This is a new generation hearing the words of Deuteronomy. They are about to face different challenges than their ancestors faced in the desert. The narrative around Deuteronomy alters the way the specific commands are received and deepens their meaning.

For all legal texts in the Pentateuch, there is a narrative driving them and framing them. Those narratives can unlock the legal texts in ways that make them interesting to

preach and to hear preached. The law is a key chapter of the story of God's relationship with God's people. For those seeking to be God's people in the world today, what can be more fascinating than understanding how God went about setting aside a people to reveal God's will in the world in another time? Use this narrative to your advantage.

Suggestion #3: Emphasize Positive Language

In popular culture, "legalism" is negative. The world of scripture doesn't have this same understanding of law, though. In the Gospels, the law is unequivocally good. The only problem with the law is the way humans misinterpret it and use it to control and marginalize people with less power in society. The law itself, though, is a gift from God that should be meditated on.

Let your language reflect this truth from the Gospels. Preacher's should not be associating the law with negative theological concepts. That has been done for hundreds of years and it has put congregations at a disadvantage in understanding the law. Speak about the law with the respect it is given in the Gospels, so that your congregation lets go of the impression that the law is negative. It may deviate from our values today, but the law was received as a gift from God by Jesus and his earliest followers. Present it as the gift of God that it was in the Gospels, so that your congregation can more readily accept it as this same gift.

Some may say that Paul speaks about the law negatively, so we should also. As we saw in Chapter 4, however, there has been a shift in the way scholars have understood Paul's writings about the law. Many (perhaps most) leading scholars now hold that, according to Paul, the only negatives that come about from the law are from humans misunderstanding the law and misapplying it.

Proper understanding of the law leads to the law blessing the life of a believer in Jesus. If congregations are to be shaped by the law, this fundamental truth should be preached to them. Preachers can turn to the law not expecting to receive guilt and conviction, but instead to see God's character and desires revealed. They can turn to the law to better understand a critical chapter in the story of God's people. They can turn to the law to see yet another expression of God's grace.

The law is positive. It was given by God to sustain God's people and to define them. If helpful, substitute "instruction" for "law" when preaching these texts, to break up the imperfect legal metaphor for these texts and to emphasize God's aim in providing these texts.¹ These texts were given by God to shape and form God's people so that the rest of the world could understand God's desire to bless the nations. And it was into a culture thoroughly shaped and formed by the law that Jesus was born. These legal texts are a gift. Talking about them as such can dispel misimpressions that congregations hold about these texts and help a congregation see them as the rich theological source that they were for the Gospels.

Suggestion #4: The Law Points to Jesus, So Let It Do So

This may be one of the more controversial suggestions. The clear majority of Jewish commentators would disagree with this assessment. Christians have, for centuries now, appropriated the texts of Ancient Israel and read Jesus into passages that the authors didn't intend for there to be any mention of a messiah, let alone a messiah like Jesus of Nazareth.

¹ This insight is due to the helpful comments of Rev. Dr. Jeff McCrory, who pointed out the advantages of using "instruction" instead of "law" when talking about Torah.

As a Christian preacher, though, the model of the Gospel writers and Paul is our model. The New Testament texts fundamentally change the way we view the legal texts of the Pentateuch. The New Testament writers repeatedly appropriated the texts of Ancient Israel and used them to make sense of what they believed they witnessed in Jesus. To say otherwise would be to deny a basic truth. For followers of Jesus, we can't help but look at the law differently than our Jewish friends. The Gospels, Paul and the New Testament writers in general are our examples for reading the law.

According to the Gospels and Paul, a key function of the law is to point to Jesus. There may be some disagreement amongst the Gospel writers about how the law does this, but all agree that in some way, it does. For Matthew, Jesus' role as the authoritative teacher of the law highlights Jesus' elevated status amongst humans and highlights Jesus' role as our master. For Mark, the law helps us understand Jesus as God's son. For Luke, the past faithfulness of God witnessed by the giving of the law helps us know what to expect from God as we learn about Jesus and as we seek to follow Jesus after his death and resurrection. For John, the law witnesses to Jesus. The institutions and practices created by the law reveal to the reader Jesus' identity as the Son of God. And for Paul, there is no way to detach God's revelation in Jesus as the messiah from the story of God's revelation at Sinai. We cannot understand Jesus without understanding the law, and understanding the law reveals to us who Jesus truly is.

There are some boundaries that should be placed around this suggestion, though. When approaching a legal text, a preacher should use the Gospels and Paul as a true model, meaning that the Gospels and Paul should limit the possibilities of making connections to Jesus. Preachers should only draw connections that the Gospel writers and

Paul already drew and only draw connections in the same way that the Gospel writers and Paul did. Preachers shouldn't overstate these connections beyond the ways the Gospel writers and Paul stated these connections.

Preachers should also always be aware of the stain of antisemitism on the church's history. And, not just its history but the current reality of antisemitism in the church and the world today. Respect should be given to Jewish commentators who disagree about who Jesus was and is and who have valid arguments about Christians misappropriating Jewish texts. The disagreements should always remain just that — disagreements of interpretation and not a means of belittling, disrespecting or denigrating Jewish interpretations of the shared scriptures between Christians and Jews. While Christians can't help but view shared texts differently than Jewish interpreters, Christian preachers must be aware of the fraught history of Jewish-Christian relations and express disagreements respectfully.

For Christians, though, the New Testament is clear — the law reveals Jesus and helps us understand Jesus' identity in multiple ways. When approaching a legal text, let the text point to Jesus. Don't shy away from connections that the New Testament made to the law. Trust the Gospel writers and Paul.

Suggestion #5: Use Uncertainty

Given how distant the legal texts of the Bible can feel from our current lives, a preacher may be afraid to preach from a text that she or he doesn't completely understand. In those moments of uncertainty, preachers should take solace in the fact that they are in good company. Christians have debated these texts for over two thousand years. The debate is highly unlikely to be settled anytime soon. To understand just how uncertain the

best scholars are about interpreting the legal texts of the Bible well, all one need do is perform a quick search on the internet of the research done on Paul's interpretation of the law. It is massive and is growing exponentially.

These legal texts weren't meant to be "solved" or "figured out." They were meant to be meditated upon. They were meant to be discussed and dialogued. If a preacher comes across a legal text that seems uncertain, a preacher can present that uncertainty to the congregation in the sermon. If there are multiple interpretations of a text, a preacher can present all the relevant options to a congregation in a sermon. The history of interpretation can be an aid, not because it helps a congregation settle on one cohesive meaning, but because it can help a congregation realize that in their uncertainty, they are in the company of the saints who have gone before. A preacher can bring a congregation into the dialogue over the meaning of these legal texts amongst God's saints throughout the history of the church. These texts can become invitations to deeper discovery, not invitations to certainty.

By acknowledging uncertainty around a legal text, a preacher can also decrease the intimidation a member of a congregation may feel in the face of the legal texts of the Bible. It is likely that congregation members haven't spent significant time reflecting on these texts or pondering their meaning. Many may be carrying scars from these texts being misinterpreted in a harmful way and used to manipulate or control a community. They may have shied away from these texts, or outright hidden from them. Hearing a preacher accept and normalize uncertainty could be refreshing. Indeed, it could be beyond refreshing. It could be freeing.

A preacher should also be willing to preach against misinterpretations and abuses of the legal texts from the past. Sometimes, the history of interpretation is helpful. Other times, the history of interpretation is harmful. Preachers can unravel misinterpretations of the law and rebuild a congregation's understanding of it. At times, this will be necessary.

If a preacher isn't comfortable being open about uncertainty or preaching against a previous interpretation, another option is to pick the best option for interpreting a legal text, use it to interpret the text, present it as the best option and then let the congregation know that there is disagreement about the passage. Chapter 4 of this study is intentionally designed to facilitate just this type of practice. The scholars surveyed in that chapter all disagree with one another, making it impossible to synthesize all their approaches to Paul into one coherent, "correct" interpretation of Paul. At best, three of them are wrong. Infinitely more likely, all of them are a mixture of right and wrong, to varying degrees. At this point in time, though, we don't know which is which. So, we do the best we can as preachers, select the option that makes the most sense at the time and preach the text.

The research and literature on these legal texts and the New Testament interpretation of them is vast, because uncertainty about their interpretation is vast. A preacher can get lost in this research. That's not a bad thing. The uncertainty around these texts creates possibility for deep dialogue and deep growth. Preachers should be grateful for that uncertainty, embrace it and use it to guide the development of sermons.

Suggestion #6: Preach the Legal Texts to Display God's Love

This may sound like an obvious suggestion, and it is. It is also true of any text in the Bible. It is especially true when it comes to legal texts in the Bible, though. Given their imperative nature, these texts have been used to control behavior. They have been

abused by preachers and leaders to try and manipulate communities and individuals. Many people are walking around with scars from the way these texts have been used in their lives. Any preacher seeking to be faithful to the scriptures should never assume that they have "figured out" these texts.

Approach these texts humbly and stick closely to the lessons learned from the writers of the Gospels in how they used the law. The writers of the Gospels and Paul used the law to help people understand who Jesus is and what God had done in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. They used the law to help people experience the deep, saving love of the God of Israel. As part of the story of God saving humanity, the law is full of God's efforts to reach out to humans. Like all of scripture, the law is ultimately about God's actions, not human behaviors. Preachers should preach these texts with this in mind, allowing these legal passages to reveal a different aspect of God's continuous love for creation.

Deuteronomy closes with Moses urging the Israelites to choose life.² God offered life through the law. Present these texts to your congregation, so they can also choose life by experiencing God's love through these texts and responding to God's gracious acts in the same way Moses urged the Israelites.

Conclusion

The legal texts of the Bible served as sources for the New Testament witness. The writers of the Gospels and Paul realized that these legal texts illuminated who Jesus is, what God was doing in Jesus and how deep God's love is for creation and for humans.

² Deuteronomy 30:15-20

For members of a congregation to understand the depth of the witness of the New Testament, they will need to understand the law. The best way for them to do so is for preachers to work these texts into their sermon plans and then preach them well. Hopefully, these suggestions can serve as a guide in doing so.

CHAPTER 7

SAMPLE SERMON: DEUTERONOMY 29:14-29

A. Introduction

This chapter will examine a sermon that the author preached based on Deuteronomy 29:14-29.¹ The suggestions from the previous chapter will be applied to this sermon to highlight ways the preacher used the suggestions well and to highlight areas for improvement. This chapter will also provide a concrete example of preaching the legal texts of the Pentateuch. Not every preacher will approach this text in the same way, but hopefully the model that this preacher utilizes can provide a framework for other preachers to approach these legal texts.

B. Suggestion #1: Approach the Law as Relevant

Lines 20-22 in the sermon manuscript are the result of the preacher assuming this text is relevant. The connection to the rhetoric of conservative Christian leaders after Hurricane Katrina exemplified the relevance of talking about God's wrath well. After Katrina, conservative Christian leaders attributed the tragedy to the perceived sins of citizens in New Orleans. Their comments were hurtful, unbiblical and, frankly, disgusting.

¹ The text for this sermon can be found in the appendix.

By contrasting the text in Deuteronomy to horrible rhetoric from Christians relating to a recent tragedy, the relevance of the text was made apparent. Furthermore, by drawing distinctions between the abusive use of legal texts discussing God's wrath by certain Christian leaders and between Moses' discussion of God's wrath, the unbiblical nature of the negative rhetoric was exposed.

Lines 41-42 highlight just how relevant this text is to our current context. Some congregants may have remembered that a local megachurch pastor in the Seattle area had once proclaimed to his congregation that "God hates you."² It generated ample press. By addressing this type of unbiblical rhetoric, a distinction was made between a biblical way to speak of God's wrath and a manipulative way to speak of God's wrath. By claiming biblical language about God's wrath and setting boundaries around it, the abusive practices of unhealthy preachers in the local area were countered. This was very relevant to the local context.

C. Suggestion #2: Use the Narrative Around the Law

Lines 145-52 placed the legal text in the overall narrative of the Bible. The overall purpose of God to accomplish redemption and restoration as expressed in scripture, and especially in the life and work of Jesus, served to interpret Moses' discussion of God's wrath in Deuteronomy 29. By wrapping God's wrath in God's desire for creation to be restored and saved, God's wrath becomes less intimidating and scary. The fundamental

² Matthew Cortina, "Mark Driscoll Sermons: Tells Mars Hill Congregation 'God Hates Some of You.'" Christian Post. November 10, 2011.
<https://www.christianpost.com/news/mark-driscoll-sermons-tells-mars-hill-congregation-god-hates-some-of-you-video.html>

truth that a congregant can rest in is that God's desire is for salvation and redemption, not destruction and pain.

The narrative context was used again in line 155, as Deuteronomy 30 was referenced in the sermon. This allowed for the concept of "hope" to be introduced to the sermon and helped anchor the sermon in God's desire for redemption. The fact that a different section of Moses' same speech could be referenced helped to solidify the overall point that God's priority is redemption, not destruction. Because of this, a congregation member could hope for redemption and have faith in God's desire for redemption, rather than drown anxiously in terrifying thoughts of God's wrath.

D. Suggestion #3: Use Positive Language

This suggestion could have been used more effectively in this sermon. The covenant was referenced in lines 8 - 12 and 133-34. In lines 8-12, the covenant is mentioned to set up the overall context of the sermon. There is no explanation of what the covenant was or how it functioned in the life of Israel. This was a missed opportunity to lift the law up as a positive force in the life of Israel.

In lines 133-34, the covenant is used to establish Moses' motivation in addressing God's wrath, as opposed to Jonathan Edward's motivation. Again, though, the covenant itself is never discussed. Why does Moses want Israel to follow the covenant and why does Moses want to instill confidence in Israel to follow the covenant? This was a missed opportunity to reframe the law in the life of the congregation and to explain its function more clearly.

E. Suggestion #4: The Law Points to Jesus

Line 147 serves to connect this legal text to Jesus more than any other line in the sermon. In fact, this is the only explicit connection to Jesus in the sermon. This was another missed opportunity. It would have been good to remind the congregation of God's plan of redemption and of Jesus' mission more fully, rather than just mention God's hope for redemption. This could have been a "Show, don't tell" moment, but instead turned into a "tell" moment.

A good place to point to Jesus would have been at the very end of the sermon, when the sermon discusses how the world should know that God wants to save them. The utilization of the whole narrative of scripture earlier in the sermon set the stage for his connection. In retrospect, that connection should have been made. Right after establishing the words of hope in Deuteronomy 30, pointing to the ultimate hope in Jesus would have been natural.

F. Suggestion #5: Use Uncertainty

In some key ways, this suggestion would not have worked well for this sermon, highlighting that some of these suggestions will work better with certain texts and worse with others. In this sermon, the aim was to reframe God's wrath and root God's wrath in God's desire for redemption. This sermon was arguing against a history of interpretation that led to abuse. To unravel that history of interpretation, confidence in the overall assertion of the sermon, that God's wrath needs to be rooted in God's desire for redemption and salvation, was necessary. This was not a sermon where the assertions being argued against should be unraveled with uncertainty, but instead one where the

assertions being argued against would be unraveled with bold proclamation rooted more firmly in scripture's witness.

There was a limited opportunity to embrace uncertainty, though, and it was taken. Lines 101-121 lift uncertainty up as a value. Not knowing everything about God's wrath is heralded as a virtue. Embracing our uncertainty and using scripture to guide the way we talk about God's wrath was a key point in this section of the sermon. This theme was then revisited in lines 177-179. This uncertainty helped to counter the excessive confidence of past interpreters of God's wrath who mistook their own frustrations and prejudices for God's wrath.

So, in this sermon, uncertainty was used selectively to help counter the history of interpretation, but was not used as the underlying proclamation or hermeneutic. Contained uncertainty helped bring about confidence in the areas one can be certain of when discussing God's wrath.

G. Suggestion #6: Preach the Law to Proclaim God's Love

The purpose of this sermon was to help unravel negative views of God's wrath, so that members of the congregation could see God's desire for redemption and hope. The sermon's aim was not to control behavior, nor to try and assert power over anyone in the congregation. The hope of the sermon was that those receiving the sermon would acknowledge that the Bible does discuss God's wrath, but that God's plan of salvation is greater than God's wrath and that there is nothing to fear from God's wrath. Hopefully, congregants walked away with a deeper understanding of God's character as revealed in all of scripture and could let go of any fears they have held about wrath.

With this purpose in mind, it is safe to say that a desire to have the congregation glimpse God's love drove this sermon. While the term "love" may not have been front and center throughout the sermon, God's desire for redemption and salvation and the faith we can have in God's character were front and center. In this way, God's love was proclaimed.

H. Conclusion

In this chapter, the six suggestions from the previous chapter were applied to the manuscript of a sermon based on Deuteronomy 29:14-29. Some suggestions revealed strengths of the sermon's approach to a legal text, some revealed weaknesses and some didn't apply well. Going through the list of suggestions when approaching a text, however, can help guide a sermon based on a legal text.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this project was to consult relevant scholarship to develop suggestions for preaching legal texts of the law. In chapter 3, each of the four Gospels' use of legal texts was examined and possibilities for preaching were drawn out from each Gospel. In chapter 4, four views of the Apostle Paul's views of the law were examined and four different possibilities for preaching legal texts were drawn out based on the four views of Paul presented. In chapter 5, scholarship directly focused on the legal sections of the law under examination was briefly consulted and possibilities for preaching based on that scholarship were developed.

Then, in chapter 6 overall suggestions for preaching legal texts of the law were presented and expounded upon. These suggestions were developed by identifying the possibilities for preaching from the previous three chapters and synthesizing them into general suggestions. Finally, in chapter 7, these suggestions were applied to a sermon previously preached by this author, to show how the suggestions might add to the process of examining a legal text and developing sermon material.

The overall goal of this project was to make the legal texts of the law more accessible for preaching, so that preachers can preach these texts more regularly. The foundation of this entire project rests on the prevalent use of the legal texts of the law in the crafting of the Gospels and the influence of the law on the Apostle Paul.

If preaching is to be faithful to the biblical witness, then the sources that the writers of the New Testament were influenced by should be influencing preachers. Preachers should be presenting these sources to congregations in the form of sermons, so that when Gospel texts come up, the legal background is intelligible to a congregation. If the New Testament writers were immersed in the world of legal texts and the law, then our congregations should at least be conversant with the legal texts and the law. The best way that they will do so is if preachers preach these texts.

The legal texts are alien to us. They, at times, seem morally abhorrent. However, they weren't viewed as alien and morally abhorrent to the writers of the New Testament. The New Testament writers reconciled their understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ with their understanding of the legal traditions they inherited in scripture. Rather than ignoring the legal texts that can seem difficult to us, we can use the example of the New Testament writers to learn how to reconcile our understanding of the gospel they've presented to us with the legal texts traditions they inherited.

Hopefully, this study can serve as a small step towards that process of reconciling these texts. Hopefully, preachers can read these texts with fresh eyes, seeing expressions of God's justice, God's desire to live with humans and God's desire to shape and form a people to reflect God's will in the world. Hopefully, this study helps the gospel be preached and received at a new depth, a depth that acknowledges the legal traditions that influenced and served as the symbolic world of the New Testament writers.

APPENDIX A

"The Secret Things Belong to the Lord - Deuteronomy 29:14-29"

Included is an adapted manuscript of a sermon delivered by the author of this study on June 3, 2018. The suggestions presented in this study were being developed at the time and influenced the crafting of this sermon. The text the sermon was based on is Deuteronomy 29:14-29. It was delivered to John Knox Presbyterian Church, a PC(USA) congregation just outside of Seattle, WA. The manuscript has been edited for the purposes of readability and standardization. Line numbers have also been added to aid interaction between the sermon manuscript and chapter 7 of this project.

1 I am sure that, by now, you are all used to the ritual that we partake in every week, where
2 the scripture passage is read and the person reading the scripture says, "This is the word
3 of the Lord." You all respond with, "Thanks be to God." Sometimes, though, like this
4 morning, after reading the scripture passage I want to say, "This is the word of the Lord?"
5 You also may be wondering if you really are thankful for the passage. We just had a
6 beautiful testimony given of God's faithfulness here in our community with the homeless
7 ministry and then I had to ruin it by reading a passage about God's wrath and destruction.
8 Bible passages about God's wrath are not easy passages. In this passage, Moses is
9 talking to the Israelites and they are renewing the covenant that God has made with
10 Israel. Moses is outlining for the people of Israel the consequences of not following the
11 covenant. Moses is letting them know what will happen if they abandon the Lord and turn

12 to Idols. These consequences are real. We can't simply brush them under the rug. These
13 are traumatic possibilities that are being discussed. These aren't easy passages.

14 I think a lot of our job as Christians would be easier if we could just ignore these
15 passages and set them aside. We can't, though, because these passages are in the Bible.
16 And not just in the Old Testament. The Gospel of Matthew talks frequently about
17 weeping and gnashing of teeth. The Apostle Paul, in Romans 1, talks about how God's
18 wrath has been revealed. And the book of Revelation hints at God's wrath and gives us
19 images of God's wrath. So, the scriptures talk about God's wrath.

20 As Christians, we need to learn to talk about God's wrath well. If we want to be
21 biblically faithful and want to learn to proclaim the message of scripture, we have to learn
22 to talk about God's wrath well. Sadly, I don't think many of us, including myself, are very
23 good at talking about God's wrath, for a variety of reasons. Some Christians have chosen
24 to do what I mentioned earlier, which is to ignore these passages and act like they don't
25 exist. That raises certain problems, namely, how faithful are we being to scripture if we
26 just ignore passages in it?

27 Other Christians seem very comfortable talking about God's wrath, but don't seem
28 to care about talking about God's wrath well. I remember watching the devastation of
29 Hurricane Katrina when I was in college. Shortly after that tragedy, I remember seeing
30 various Christian leaders identifying specific sins that they thought people in New
31 Orleans had committed. And they started claiming that this was God's wrath on the city
32 of New Orleans for people committing those sins. Never mind the fact that people
33 commit sins in all cities throughout the world without any type of consequence. And,
34 never mind the fact that thousands of innocent people had just lost their lives, people

35 whom God loved dearly. I believe that God was grieving over that event. I didn't believe
36 that Hurricane Katrina was about God's wrath.

37 Many Christian leaders have come out and tried to proclaim God's wrath, but
38 when you look at it closely, they are really trying to use God's wrath towards their own
39 ends, towards some political goal they are hoping to accomplish. That is not talking about
40 God's wrath well, it is not talking about God's wrath in a biblical way, and it is not talking
41 about God's wrath in a healthy way. But, since so many of us don't want to talk about
42 God's wrath, we've ceded the language of God's wrath to people who want to abuse it.

43 I don't think we should be too hard on ourselves, though, because the tradition of
44 not talking about God's wrath well goes back a very long ways in our nation. In fact, it
45 goes back to before the United States government was even founded.

46 One of my favorite theologians is a man by the name of Jonathan Edwards. And
47 it's not just because he has a good, strong first name. Though he does. Jonathan Edwards
48 wrote books that have caused me to think. He wrote a book on the trinity that is
49 interesting. He wrote a book on the freedom of the will that, while I may not agree with
50 everything in it, challenged many of my thoughts and forced me to think. But what
51 Jonathan Edwards is most famous for, why he is taught in history classes in schools, is
52 really one sermon that he delivered. He was a pastor, he was a preacher, he was a
53 theologian, he was the President of what would become Princeton University and then he
54 was a missionary, but what he is most famous for is a sermon that he delivered entitled
55 "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." You may not have heard of Jonathan Edwards
56 but you've probably heard the title of that sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry
57 God." It was a sermon where Jonathan Edwards was seeking to talk about God's wrath.

58 He was seeking to instill a fear in the people of God's wrath because he thought they were
59 becoming too complacent.

60 He described God's wrath as a water that is building up, but is being held back by
61 a dam. At any point, though, the dam could break and God's wrath could flow out into the
62 world, wreaking havoc and destruction on anything it flows over. As the sermon goes
63 along, this portrayal of God's wrath builds and builds and builds. And then, Jonathan
64 Edwards gets to a certain paragraph that has become famous. I'm going to read this
65 paragraph now and I want to warn you that this language is very vivid. You may have
66 heard this before, but just be prepared that this is vivid language. Edwards said,

67 "The God that holds you over the pit of fire, much as one holds a spider, or some
68 loathsome insect, over a fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath
69 towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to
70 be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you
71 are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous
72 serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn
73 rebel did his prince: and yet 'tis nothing but his hand that holds you from falling
74 into the fire every moment: 'tis to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go
75 into the fire the last night... but that God's hand has held you up: there is no other
76 reason to be given why you haven't gone to the fire since you have sat here in the
77 house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending
78 his solemn worship: yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why
79 you don't this very moment drop down into the fire. Oh sinner! Consider the
80 fearful danger you are in."¹

81 He sounds fun. I want you to know that I had to tone down some of the language
82 that Edwards used in this paragraph to make it family friendly. Who knew that puritan
83 preachers needed parental advisory stickers on their sermons?

¹ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2003), 223.

84 Jonathan Edwards portrays a God who is full of wrath. I believe he did this with
85 good motive. He was trying to help people convert. But I also believe that he made some
86 very critical mistakes in trying to talk about God's wrath. I bring him up not because he
87 was extraordinary, but because he was so ordinary for his time. This was the way that
88 many preachers talked about God and God's wrath. It became a famous sermon because it
89 was a good example of what people were thinking about God.

90 So, this tradition about God's wrath is what has been passed down to us. It is
91 something that I think we are still responding to it in ways that we may not even be aware
92 of. When people are reacting to ideas of God's wrath, it is a picture close to Edwards
93 depiction that I think they are responding to.

94 But Jonathan Edwards made some mistakes. And I think we can see those
95 mistakes more clearly when we step back and look at Moses' example. Because Moses is
96 also talking about God's wrath. It may sound like there are similarities between what
97 Moses was saying and Edwards said, but there are some very, very critical differences
98 between the ways that they each talk about God's wrath.

99 The first difference is at the end of our passage this morning. In verse 29, Moses
100 makes a comment that almost seems to not fit with the rest of the passage. Moses says,
101 "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to
102 us." It's not an accident that a comment acknowledging mystery is mentioned directly
103 after talking about God's wrath.

104 Whenever we talk about God's wrath, we have to do so with a deep humility,
105 recognizing that there is so much we don't know. Actually, very little has been revealed
106 to us about how God's wrath functions, when it functions and when it is evident. We have

107 to remember that there are secret things that belong only to the Lord and there are things
108 that have been revealed to us. We have to look at what has actually been revealed to us in
109 scripture and we should not step outside of the language that scripture uses to talk about
110 God's wrath. We shouldn't fill in the blanks.

111 Jonathan Edwards, in his sermon, tried to fill in many blanks. One of them is,
112 first, Jonathan Edwards jumped to this conclusion that God's wrath always relates to
113 something that happens to us after death. But, when you look at the example of Moses,
114 and I think most of the examples in scripture, God's wrath refers to events that are taking
115 place in this world now, in this life or in the past. Most of the time, God's wrath refers to
116 events that have already taken place in the life of the nation of Israel. We can jump very
117 quickly to assume that God's wrath refers to events after death, but God's wrath seems to
118 be a function more of events taking place in the world now or in the past. We need to
119 make sure we aren't overstating the case for the future when we talk about God's wrath.

120 Another mistake that I see in Edward's sermon is that he described God's wrath as
121 uncertain. He described it as water that was building and that, at any moment, the dam
122 might break. In the paragraph I read, he talks about how at any moment one can fall into
123 the pit of fire. There is an uncertainty to God's wrath. But if we know anything about
124 God's character we know that God's character is consistent, that we can rest in God's
125 character and trust in God's character.

126 When you look at the example of Moses talking about God's wrath, there is no
127 uncertainty. The very fact that Moses is giving them this warning eliminates uncertainty.
128 If they experience God's wrath, they will know exactly why they are experiencing God's
129 wrath. They are given clear instructions — don't worship idols. If you worship idols, you

130 will experience God's wrath. There is no uncertainty. Edwards was trying to instill fear
131 into the people in his congregation. Moses was, ultimately, trying to instill a confidence
132 in Israel to follow the covenant, to hold the covenant, to keep the covenant. I think there
133 is a difference in what the aims were between Moses and Edwards. The effect of that
134 difference is pronounced.

135 There is another mistake that Edwards made and that many, many, many, many
136 Christians have made. At times in my own life I've made this mistake. And that is that
137 Jonathan Edwards portrayed God's wrath as a central characteristic of God. When you
138 read this sermon, the picture you get is of a very angry God who is driven by wrath and
139 anger — that, really, is God's core character trait. But when you read the scriptures, God's
140 wrath is more a tool that God uses. It's not an end in and of itself, but it's a means to an
141 end. And the end is nothing less than the salvation and restoration of creation and
142 humanity. Edwards portrayed a God who may throw someone into a pit of fire on a
143 whim, at any moment. But the narrative of the Bible portrays a God who cares
144 passionately and deeply about saving every single human being. God wants to save all,
145 and God is seeking to do that. That is the whole point of why Jesus came. Anytime we
146 talk about God's wrath, we have to do so understanding that the first word is God's desire
147 to save humanity and the last word is God's desire to save humanity. In between that, we
148 can talk about God's wrath. Anytime we talk about God's wrath, we need to be sure that
149 we mention that God is a God of redemption and God is a God who can redeem
150 everything, including the consequences of God's own wrath.

151 It is critical that people understand that God's wrath is a means to an end. God
152 wants us to be people of hope, people who trust in God's character. You can see this in

153 Moses' speech. Right after Deuteronomy 29, as you move into Deuteronomy 30, Moses
154 gives the people a word of assurance. Moses lets them know that, after God has scattered
155 them, after they have been taken from their land, if they begin to follow the covenant in a
156 new land, God will have mercy and will bring them back to the promised land. Moses
157 ends on a note of hope.

158 Now, I've been beating up on Jonathan Edwards this morning. I hope he forgives
159 me. We can talk about it in glory someday. In fairness, though, I want to say that I
160 believe that Jonathan Edwards understood that we have to end on hope. If you read the
161 manuscript of Sinners in the Hands of an angry God, Edwards does get to a place of
162 hope. The sermon ends on a note of hope. But there is a problem with the language that
163 he used to get there. As Edwards preached, he wanted to instill fear. He wanted the
164 people to be upset. It worked. As the sermon progressed, the people in the congregation
165 to whom he was preaching became more and more upset. They became despondent.
166 People started crying in the pews, weeping, wailing and openly screaming. And when
167 Jonathan Edwards read the paragraph that I read to you earlier, a hysteria broke out in the
168 congregation, to the point that he couldn't finish the sermon. He had to stop the sermon
169 and ministers who were present had to go into the congregation and calm people down.
170 Jonathan Edwards was never able to get to that message of hope because of the way he
171 talked about God's wrath earlier in the sermon.

172 When Christians don't talk about God's wrath well, I believe we lose our voice. I
173 believe people stop listening. We lose our ability to pursue our mission. Moses says at the
174 end of Deuteronomy 29, "the secret things belong to the Lord. The things revealed belong
175 to us and to our children." May we always remember that there are secret things, there are

176 mysteries we don't know. When we speak of God's character may we do so out of
177 humility and may we rest in those things that are revealed to us. While God's wrath does
178 exist, God is a god of salvation. Our God is a god of hope, a god of faith. Our God is a
179 god with consistent character, in whom we can and should trust. And may we
180 communicate to the world that, most importantly, God is desperately trying to save them.
181 In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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