



THE KINGDOM

HOLINESS, THE LAW & THE KINGDOM

Sunday 21 March 2021

BONUS SERMON TRANSCRIPT

One of the difficulties in putting this series on the kingdom together was that we wanted to move through the major markers of the kingdom in the Old Testament before we come to their fulfilment in Jesus at Easter. If only Easter was a bit later! But it wasn't, so I felt like I missed out on at least one sermon in this series. So today, here is a bonus week in the series to hopefully help strengthen the amazing, miraculous kingdom links that thread right through the Old Testament toward the coming of Jesus and His death and resurrection which we will celebrate in a few weeks.

If you've been keeping up, you'll know this is a very macro-level survey of the Old Testament looking at how the kingdom is revealed as core to the gospel story. Last time we looked at God making a promise to "Father Abraham, had many sons, many sons had Father Abraham and his many sons were..." I was going to say dysfunctional but kind of normal.

Then we skipped through to the end of Joseph's life and the beginning of several hundred years of servitude in Egypt where, over successive generations, the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied in Egypt and this ethnic group was making the locals nervous: the king of Egypt established harsh labour conditions, they were subjugate and oppressed, and a policy of capping the population by killing male newborns was instigated. They were literally living under the curse of the fall here:

During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them. (Exodus 2:23-35)

God saw the suffering of His people and called 'time'. He calls a Levite named Moses to lead the nation out of their bondage, but also out of this culture that was not the kingdom. Like Abraham, they needed to get out of the prevailing culture and be set apart.

Exodus chapters 1-15 tells that story, which includes the super significant parallel story of Passover where the Israelites were saved from death by the blood of the lamb on painted their doorposts. They then pass through the waters of the Red Sea into new life, like Baptism. And as they escape to freedom we quickly find that these people are happy one moment and then whinging the next because they are missing the food back in Egypt. And by chapter 19 they arrive at Mount Sinai and they camp there for one year. This next slab of time extends from Exodus chapter 19 right through to Numbers chapter 10. This is like a one year school for the nation, a boot camp on how to be God's people and partner with God in blessing all the nations:

*Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, **you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."* (Exodus 19:3-6)

I've picked this passage because here is the first time we see scripture specifically using the word 'kingdom.' This is a reiteration of that promise to Abraham, of a nation that had a special identity and calling: "**you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.**"

Ok, so what's that? It's not really our language... A 'kingdom of priests' and 'holy nation' are similar terms. What's a priest? You may be imagining someone with robes and a big hat - but every culture through time has had priestly people. These were people who seem to have a special connection to the divine, they go between God and ordinary people, stand in the gap, mediate on behalf of others.

But to carry out that function these people had to be set apart for that task. They were not common, they were separate, set apart for a special purpose, consecrated. That's what 'holy' means: separated, consecrated to the Lord. My toothbrush is holy: it's set apart for a purpose, it's like no other brush in the house, and no one else is allowed to use it because it's holy. If another member of my family accidentally uses it, it's time for a new toothbrush - it's holy.

God commanded Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 to come out and be set apart for a special purpose. "Be holy for I am holy," God said to Moses, "bring them out - they are

holy." And now they are at Mount Sinai about to learn what it means to be a holy kingdom of priests – a new kind of nation.

NOTE: it's NOT a kingdom 'with' priests, but a kingdom 'of' priests, a priestly nation – holy, set apart. A nation may be populated by individuals but, from the get-go, being in the kingdom of God was being in the people of God, not in some intangible way but in very real communities of people. A growing trend today is people saying that they love Jesus but don't need the church. They often see it as an institution to be rejected; and I suspect it's easier to reject institutions, of which we are naturally suspicious, than family. And I'm reminded here that God's vision of the kingdom was always a people as a holy nation, not as individuals. We will discuss this later in our series...

How were they to be this kingdom of priests, this holy nation? What would distinguish them from other nations and kingdoms? One key way was the Law. What's the Law? It's a vision for the way we must uniquely live in God's kingdom: it describes what God is like, what God values, and how to live as a distinctive people who value what God values. The Law is what holiness feels like – bearing God's image not only in nature, but now as a living reminder of who Yahweh truly is. The Law is a blueprint for a kingdom-life that looks absolutely radical, weird and peculiar to the surrounding culture and, I might add, radically progressive to the time in which it is written.

Now a little more detail here because the Law is vast, weird and complex, and sometimes people read this section of the Bible in a way that may generate confusion. There are three categories of laws:

- **Civil law:** for instance, property rights; marriage and divorce standards; laws about theft, murder, and other crimes; health regulations; etc.
- **Ceremonial law:** defines the sacrificial system, the festivals, the role of the Levites, and the specific physical features of the tabernacle and how you are to live a life of worship.
- **Moral law and creation law:** includes the Ten Commandments, and creation principles such as human identity, binary gender and the nature of marriage.

There may be the Ten Commandments, but there are over 600 laws which any good Hebrew worth his salt would adhere to. Pharisees later made this an art-form. Now some of these laws are pretty outrageous today and if you have ever attempted to read through the Bible you'll know that Leviticus gets pretty laborious, feels irrelevant and, at times, shocking.

What do we do with the law today, especially like in Leviticus or Numbers? How do we determine which of the 600+ laws in the Old Testament apply to Christians today? Should we avoid eating shellfish? Is it still bad to wear linen and wool together? Are owls still off

the menu? Ought we to observe Passover? How about tattoos? Do I have to avoid eating fat?

This opens a can of worms which I think is super helpful if you want to make sense of the Old Testament. Is the Law applicable? The short answer is no - and yes. No, it's not all applicable today because many laws relate specifically to a person 2000-3000 years ago living in Canaan. Also, many relate to a ceremonial system that ended and many were fulfilled by Christ once for all. But yes, the Law *in principle* still provides people with a 'true north' upon which to know what God desires and what is good and evil in a world of moral relativism. See the 'Application' section at the end for more on the topic of Moral Relativism. If you want to know more about how we interpret scripture, read the next indented section:

So, what is authoritative on both sides of the cross and what ends at the cross? Now, there are differing opinions on this and mine represent only one school of thought. Firstly, as 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "*all scripture is God breathed and useful for our instruction correction and training in righteousness*" and carries weight. But, while all scripture is inspired and has authority, I would argue (and you may not agree with me) that it's not all equally authoritative nor applicable this side of the cross. That sounds heretical but in truth we all live this way all the time. For example, Deuteronomy says children who are disobedient and slothful should be stoned to death. We don't apply that and many other things because, in practice, we recognise that for some reason we can't theologically explain, that's no longer applicable. I'll get to why shortly...

When you read the Bible with a flat view of scripture - that it's all equal - you put the revelation of Jesus on par with, say, Abraham or Moses. Do Abraham or Moses have something to contribute to our picture of God? Absolutely! But how do we most clearly know what God is like? Where do we go for that? We go to Jesus.

Hebrews 1:1-3 says "*In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.*"

"*In the past God spoke to our ancestors (Israel) ... in various ways ... but in these last days (which is the time post resurrection), [God] has spoken directly, by his Son,*" who is the radiance and exact representation of His being. The writer of Hebrews is saying that we have had glimpses of truth before, but Jesus is the most complete revelation we can ever have of the nature and character of God. Light and heat are to the sun what Jesus is to the Father. God is totally Christ like. Or, as CS Lewis put it, "Jesus is the total content of the Father's revelation to us." That's why I would argue that scripture is not equal because

Christ is our ultimate revelation of the Father. Nothing should qualify or compete with Jesus' revelation of God as found in the gospels. The Old Testament still massively contributes, but it's like the background scenery onto which the artist paints foreground image of a masterpiece.

So, what does Jesus say about the Law? In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapter 5-7), Jesus says it (the Law) will not pass but He also radically extends and reinterprets it in terms of its application. However it's not ALL applicable because some of it was prescribed to a specific people in a specific time, and some of it was fulfilled by Christ once and for all. Which bits?

- What we find in the New Testament is that the *civil law* was God's way of specifically shaping Hebrew society; it's not binding today.
- The *ritual law* used sacrifice and festivals and the tabernacle to teach lessons about sin and atonement, which mostly ended with the destruction of the temple, but more so it has now been superseded by the work of Christ. Just read the book of Hebrews to see why.

The *civil and ritual law* of the Old Testament is unique in that it was God's way of shaping His relationship with a covenant people and their worship life.

But, the *moral laws and the creational principles* that God established (like the nature of humanity, of gender, marriage) has ongoing validity, mostly because they are repeated in one form or another in the New Testament and repeatedly endorsed by Jesus. The Ten Commandments are timeless pronouncements of how humans can do two things: love God (commandments #1-4) and flourish together for the blessing of all (commandments #5-10). Jesus said the whole old covenant Law can be simply summed up by "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*" and "*Love your neighbour as yourself*" (Matthew 22:37-40).

It would be reasonable to ask: "So if most of the Law of Moses does not strictly apply to us today, and we just need to love well, then in what sense is it part of the Word of God for us?" As I said earlier, the whole of this biblical narrative is the story of God re-educating ordinary people at specific times and places in order to bring salvation to humanity, but that doesn't mean every verse is about us. The Law of the Old Testament is the Word of God for all people for all time, but it was given to specific people at specific times in their re-education so that we would have the language, the concepts, to be able to recognise God and know how to enter into relationship with God again. The apostle Paul puts it this way: "*The Law was our guardian [custodian, tutor] until Christ came that we might be justified by faith*" (Galatians 3:24).

So, the Law stands as a true expression of the will and the ways of God - of His kingdom -

but expressed in a particular era, subject to modification, providing the basis for ever higher revelations of what it means to be the covenant people of God. Some of it is still relevant but some was time bound. Jesus summed it up when he said: *"I have not come to abolish [the Law or the Prophets] but to fulfil them"* (Matthew 5:17).

So, that year of receiving the Law at Sinai was to provide essential blueprints for the 12 tribes of Israel to function in the kingdom. At least, in theory.

In Exodus 24:7 we read, *"Moses took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They boldly, and naïvely responded, "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey."* I can't help think that their best intentions of obedience are recorded in several places through the Torah to highlight how they routinely failed to live up to it.

Straight after this affirmation of the covenant, God gave a detailed set of instructions in Exodus chapters 24-31 about a special place where God and people can meet in a tent - this was a place where the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man could intersect or overlap again, as in Eden. The tabernacle is literally decorated as though it is a tiny slice of the garden of Eden where God and humanity dwelt, only now with a priesthood who would mediate for us. This place of mutual dwelling is so significant both in our later understanding of the temple and in giving us a framework for the ultimate temple of God: a living temple brought with the indwelling Spirit of the new covenant (we will get there later).

But Moses is up on the mountaintop too long, so by Exodus chapter 32 the people are restless and their promise of obedience quickly evaporates:

"When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord." (Exodus 32:1-5)

Can you believe this! It's so said, it's funny. If ever there was a group of people who had witnessed the miraculous work of God, and encountered the presence of God, who had been given more clearly the instruction on the will and way of God, it's these people - and still they quickly lose their way. Moses is gone too long and Aaron makes an executive decision to break commandment #1 and #2. They melt their jewellery and make an idol - a golden cow of all things. Moses then crashes the pagan inspired festival and is so angry he

smashes the only copy of the Ten Commandments in existence (which is why you should always back up your tablet!)

But again, we come back to this beautiful contrast of grace in the face of wrong headedness. In Exodus 34:1-7 we read:

"The Lord said to Moses, "Chisel out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I will write on them the words that were on the first tablets, which you broke. Be ready in the morning, and then come up on Mount Sinai. Present yourself to me there on top of the mountain. No one is to come with you or be seen anywhere on the mountain; not even the flocks and herds may graze in front of the mountain." So Moses chiselled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the Lord had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."

Here is another key moment of education. What is God like? Again in the stupidity and idolatry of Israel, He is just, He will punish evil, but His default is to forgive and heal. Our default is to reject His grace; His default is to sustain grace. We refuse to keep the Law, but God refuses to give up and keeps making a way for us, declaring that He is loving and just (v6-7).

So, God makes another copy (thankfully) and then from Exodus chapter 34-40 they take the instructions the Lord already gave Moses and get on with building the tent of meeting, and God anoints particular craftsmen with His Spirit to carry out the work. God is not giving up again. He says, "Let's still make this place of meeting," and when it is finally complete the Book of Exodus ends with the glory of God entering and filling the tent. God says, "Here I am! I'm not going away!"

Tim Mackie makes a really interesting observation here that in Leviticus chapter 1, "*the Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting*"; and by the beginning of Numbers chapter 1, "*the Lord spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting.*" How do you get these broken, messed up, idolatrous and dysfunctional people inside the tent of meeting, into the glory of the Lord's presence, when everything in them keeps them out? That's why we have Leviticus. And in all its weirdness, God is going to continue the re-education and explain the place of sacrifice.

Today we have a different relationship to the Law. Jesus clearly fulfilled the Law on our behalf but He also doesn't abolish it. The apostle Paul understood this tension when he said in Galatians 3:24: "*The Law was our guardian [custodian, tutor] until Christ came that we might be justified by faith*".

The Law is something we can't live without, but it's also something we can't live with. The Law beautifully show us as disciples how to live aligned to the will and way of God, to know (amid a society buckling under the confusion of moral relativism) what is actually good and right and just.

But the Law also equally shows us as disciples how we just can't do it. It reveals our sinfulness; how, as Paul says, "*we all fall short of God's glory*". It reveals our need for someone else to fulfil it because we simply fail every time. A disciple is not someone who successfully keeps the Law of God. A disciple is a person who submits their life to the only one who can, and to humbly live with a deep transformative gratitude.

As we progress through this grand story of the kingdom, we will keep seeing that God keeps comforting us in our groaning, stooping to help us in our weakness, and providing a way through into relationship, life and hope. Next time we will examine Israel's longing for a king and where that got them as we draw toward the Palm Sunday entry of the true king who was not at all what they expected...

Reflection and Application:

- In this message, some fundamental elements of the life in the kingdom and language that will lead us closer to understanding Jesus, have been explained – like Priesthood, Tabernacle, Holiness, the Law. What have you discovered, or what stood out to you?
- Biblical interpretation was discussed briefly, and if all scripture is equal in authority or if Jesus is over all and interprets all. At one point, Scott said, "God is Christ-like" and "Jesus is the total content of the Father's revelation to us." Does that change the way you may read scripture?

Personal Reflection from Scott:

As I reflected on this whole area of the Law and its place in our lives today, I was struck by how little I have valued it. New covenant theology (i.e. Jesus fulfils the Law and I am no longer under its jurisdiction) has so shaped my discipleship that I have not appreciated the Law's contribution, not only to the Judeo-Christian world view but to the far-reaching impact it has made to western economic, political and societal development. Our society is based on the dignity of all people and objectively formed laws that reinforce that dignity. These laws and principles do not find their origin in natural selection but in the Ten Commandments.

And this thought collided with a growing sadness around what we are seeing in our cultural moment today. The rise of humanistic, secular thought has incrementally changed and undermined a biblical view of good, evil, right and wrong. Secularism is suspicious of anyone or anything that lays claim to an ultimate authority or any standard outside of the individual. Ethics and religion have been pushed out of the realm of objectivity into faith

and belief and they are private matters that have almost no voice in the public domain. Now, subjectivity is the new objectivity. In other words, "What I think, what I feel, what I desire is the only truth that matters. The locus of moral authority lies within us. Follow your heart, if it feels good it is good." This is called moral relativity.

Moral relativity says there is no such thing as universal right or wrong. Individual cultures are free to form their own moral truths which are always correct because there is no objective standard upon which to say otherwise. This thinking began in the 20th century and led to a growing sense of liberation from Judaeo-Christian morality claims. People were free to do what they want, unconstrained by traditional values. Over the past 50 years this has evolved from a doctrine of liberation to one of condemnation, especially in the past decade. Now, ironically, diversity of belief has been eroded in a tide of political correctness and personal fragility. Now if you don't accept another person's vision of the world as true - you are a "hater", "a bigot", "white privilege", "the patriarchy" and you stand on the wrong side of history. You are being cancelled, counselled, outed and sometimes fired. This has been especially present in the areas of race, gender and sexual orientation.

The secular enterprise is attempting to create identity, purpose, meaning and truth apart from a transcendent being and objective moral law. But how are we really doing? It seems people are more confused, divided and offended than ever. With no objective truth, we now have successive generations whose moral compass have no standard 'true north'. We are free to decide our own truth based on our desires and yet, when we do people get hurt. The recent exposure of historical sexual assault claims by women in politics such as Brittney Higgins and Chanel Contos' petition (which tragically includes tens of thousands of testimonies from young women) has exposed both a gap of moral knowledge and clarity within both men and women. We are free, for example, to access as much pornography as we can download, yet that freedom has enslaved and rewired young brains such that they have no understanding of intimacy or monogamy later in life, and men view women merely as objects to fulfil their increasingly deviant sexual desires. And we seriously wonder how we got here?

The same is true for the confusion that has grown concerning gender. The biblical order of creation is fundamentally binary. Creator and creation, heaven and earth, sea and land, male and female. Gender dysphoria aside, secular ideologies would have us throw off binary values. This is demonstrated in the push for inclusive and neutral language. The Australian National University's Gender-Inclusive Handbook includes terms like "chestfeeding" instead of "breastfeeding". The terms "mother" and "father" should be replaced with "gestational" and "non-gestational" parent. What next? This is all somehow associated with moral relativism.

I find much of the Law, apart from the Decalogue, a bit alien and weird. And yet I have a new appreciation that God's people are supposed to be weird in comparison to the

nations that surround them. They are to have an objective moral code to guide them. They are to come under authority of biblical truth. They are to be holy which means agreeing with God's Law, His judgement of what is good and evil. No matter what our secular culture says, disciples say "I agree with Jesus." To be holy is going to make us unlike the culture of the world. And if the secular project leaves some people empty, we have a compelling alternate vision for life that champions dignity, community, intimacy and fulfilment - it's the kingdom they want, with the King they need!