

Loving the Law

I love seafood, particularly shellfish. I love crabs and shrimp, and especially raw oysters and clams on the half-shell. If I strictly followed the laws of the Old Testament, I could not eat shellfish. In the Book of Deuteronomy, in the 613 laws that follow that book's version of the 10 Commandments, shellfish are considered unclean and are not to be eaten by humans. It's an abomination. The Jews of Jesus' day followed that rule, as do the Orthodox Jews of today. That would be a tough one for me.

As a Christian, I can eat all the Oysters Rockefeller and all the New England Clam Chowder I want, and it's not a sin. How can that be? Why do we Christians feel we can break some of God's Old Testament rules, like eating shellfish, but not break others, like committing murder or committing adultery? Christians have been criticized as only selectively and arbitrarily following God's laws. You may not believe me, but I have heard with my own ears pastors argue that committing adultery is no worse a sin than eating a crab cake. Actually, there are good logical and theological reasons for our Christian practices in regards to the law. So trust me, you don't have to skip the shrimp chow mien at the City Buffet, but you do have to skip murder and sexual indiscretion – and we'll tell you why.

The covenant God made with Israel at Mt Sinai, when He gave them the 10 Commandments, was in many ways the definitive covenant between God and the Jews. God prefaced the 10 Commandments by reminding His people of what He had done for them, namely, He had rescued them from

their slavery in Egypt. That is called the Passover. God was not only their Creator; He was their Redeemer and their Savior. They were absolutely dependent on Him. The debt they owed Him for the Passover was infinite. What can one give in return for one's life and freedom but unquestioning obedience? It logically follows then that God could have justifiably imposed on His people any demands He wanted, whatever they might be, even something ridiculous if He so desired. What he chose for them was the 10 Commandments, a reasonable set of rules, the original primary purpose of which was to create peace and prosperity in the new land he was giving them. As always, God was looking out for the best interests of His people.

An interesting theological/philosophical question to consider is: Does God make rules because they are right, or are God's rules right because God is the one who makes them? To put it another way, is there some inherent standard of right and wrong in the universe, independent of God, that God voluntarily adheres to, or is it the case that whatever God declares right is right and whatever He declares wrong is wrong at His divine discretion? For illustration's sake, consider the delicious shellfish again. Did God prohibit the Jews from eating shrimp for some good reason, perhaps because they were a potential source of food poisoning, or did God nix the shrimp simply on a whim?

I am persuaded to believe that God can do whatever He wants. He is free to make any law He wants, whether or not it is logical to us. Most of His laws do seem to serve some good practical purpose – aren't you glad he outlawed murder – but some other laws seem more or less arbitrary. It is possible that God's laws that seem arbitrary to us may serve some good purpose we

cannot yet understand, but, then again, that may not always be true. For instance, I have heard people reason that God forbid shellfish eating because there was no refrigeration in ancient Israel and eating spoiled seafood can make you very, very sick. True, but Christians began eating traditionally unclean foods, such as shellfish, in the 1st century, and safe refrigeration for seafood didn't really come along until the 20th century. What happened there?

What happened was that St. Peter had a vision in the Book of Acts where the Lord specifically gave him instructions to eat previously forbidden foods. This vision coincided with the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles who did not keep kosher. It took a special revelation of God to overturn one of God's laws, a law that apparently was made to separate the Jews from the Gentiles, and then rescinded to bring Jews and Gentiles together under the lordship of Christ. Refrigeration had nothing to do with it.

In a similar way, Jesus defined another law, one of the 10 Commandments, specifically, the commandment about observing the Sabbath. The Pharisees had misinterpreted and misapplied God's law about remembering the Sabbath. They had made it an extreme burden by adding on demands that God never intended. For instance, they prohibited healing on the Sabbath. Jesus said he had not come to nullify the law but to fulfill it. Accordingly, Jesus showed the people how the Sabbath was to be correctly observed, and he made it a joyous, life-affirming thing.

From that we can reason that God's laws, especially including the 10 Commandments, which are the epitome of God's law, stand as they are in

the Old Testament, unless they are modified by direct biblical revelation or clarified by Christ in the gospels. Peter's vision allows us to eat Lobster Newburg, and Jesus' Sabbath teachings allow us to do good deeds on the Sabbath. But no vision, and nothing Jesus ever said, allows us to commit murder or commit adultery. God would never contradict Himself that way.

Last week I made mention in the sermon of the concept of "properly discerning law and gospel." That's important because God's Word to us is always both law and gospel. But somewhere a lot of people have gotten the mistaken notion that the gospel has done away with the law, or that the law is in its self bad, and that's not true. That's not Jesus died to show us. We need to the law to convict us of our sins. The wisdom God shares with us, in the New Testament, is that the law not only helps us live in an orderly community, it also shows us our need for a savior. The law shows us that we are not perfect, in fact, we are far from it. So we, who cannot follow God's law and are in danger of perishing, go running to Christ who is perfectly obedient to the law. Taking our sin upon his self on the cross, Jesus won for us our salvation. That is the Christian Passover.

Jesus' death and resurrection may not seem quite logical to us, but God ordained it as necessary for our salvation. Knowing we have so great a Savior, we can trust that whatever God ordains is right. We need not endlessly debate and question His laws. We need not fret over His directives. We can confidently accept what the Bible teaches us. We can lovingly respond to God with obedience, knowing that even where we fail, the gospel will succeed. Amen.