

The law's aspirations (Romans 13:8-14; 23A)

Justice is complicated--even when it is the law of God.

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September 4, 2020

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What is the right thing to do? Justice is complicated—even when it is the law of God.

Scripture includes major apodictic laws, sweeping statements like “you shall not murder, or steal, or commit adultery”—beginning with the Ten Commandments, but not ending there. “You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. You shall not revile the deaf nor put a stumbling block before the blind” (Lev. 19:13-14). There are more.

Scripture also includes an enormous volume of casuistic laws, if/then rules regarding endless circumstantial possibilities. Some seem arbitrary: “If you go into your neighbor’s vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in a container” (Deut. 23:24). Some seem reasonable and kind, like, “If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them” (Lev. 25:35). Others, not so much: “If a man meets a virgin who is not engaged, and seizes her and lies with her, and they are caught in the act, the man who lay with her shall give fifty shekels of silver to the young woman’s father, and she shall become his wife” (Deut. 22:28-29).

Law has many functions. It is formative of societal structure, including who has power and freedom and who does not. Law aspires to protect how we behave toward

one another in terms of fairness, purity, and safety. Law makes overt what expectations and behaviors are acceptable, so that everyone is functioning under the same rules.

But, of course, the law has its limitations. While some laws seem obvious— you shall not steal, for example—others do not. What is presumed to be legitimate in one time or place is revealed to be offensive in another. Laws protecting a rapist and forcing the victim to be his wife are the opposite of justice. Laws prohibiting homosexual relationships (e.g., Lev. 18:22) are now seen by many people of faith to be grossly unfair.

As the early Gentile Christians were navigating their way into their new identity as followers of Jesus, they were faced with this conundrum: which of the laws of the first covenant were essential, and which were not? It was complicated—especially in light of the difference between the familiar laws of the empire and the newly learned laws of the Torah. (Especially complicated was whether to fulfill the command for circumcision, which proved to be an extraordinarily charged debate.)

Writing to the Romans, Paul turns to Jesus' interpretation of the law as the ultimate guide: that fulfilling the law requires us to focus not on its minutiae but on its *telos* and aspiration. When questioned by the scribes about this very matter, Jesus summarizes it this way: "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 . . . and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31).

As Christians consider the differences in our expressions of faith, as well as the complexities of the law and courts in America today, we, too, could begin with this question: what is the *telos*, the aspiration of both secular and sacred law? What kind of a society—what kind of a church—have we created by virtue of the laws we have in place? Who have we privileged, and who have we demeaned? And what on earth would it look like if, in fact, we truly aspired to love our neighbors—not just some, but all?