

Don't Lower the Bar

In the name of him who came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, dear friends in Christ: A popular notion I run into quite often is this idea that the God of the Old Testament is a mean, angry guy who's forever smiting hapless populations with plagues, pestilences, and famines; or raining hellfire and brimstone down on them; or ordering his chosen people Israel to commit genocide on them – all for no apparent reason. But then, happily, in the New Testament, this same God suddenly changes into Mr. Nice Guy. Now he's all hugs and kisses, warmth and happiness, embracing everyone and tolerating – no, even encouraging – everything they do.

There are variations of the theme. One goes that the Old Testament is all about Law and judgment; but then along comes Jesus and he changes everything. He's all good news and Gospel. So we can forget about all that judgment stuff. Another is the "Jesus never said it" argument. It goes: there are all these laws in the Old Testament against this or that, but if Jesus didn't repeat it in his teaching, then it doesn't count. That law is no longer in effect. According to this idea we ought to read only the words in the Bible with red letters, I guess.

The overriding thought behind these sorts of notions is that the Bible's Old and New Testaments are two completely different stories that are in conflict with each other. But nothing could be further from the truth. There is only *one* storyline. It's God's love for the world in Christ Jesus. And it's the same God in both Testaments revealing different aspects of his complex character. On one hand you have his grace and mercy. They are ever present. On the other you have his justice and holiness that must be upheld. They are part of who he always is too. You can't divorce them from each other.

So, are there times of wrath and judgment in the Old Testament? Sure, like with the flood, the plagues on Egypt, the conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua, and the time of the exile when God's own people were driven out of the Promised Land on account of their continuing rebellion. But the New Testament has its times of judgment too, which, I might add, are more severe than anything you see in the Old Testament. I speak of the crucifixion, when the full fury of God's wrath against sin was poured out upon our Savior. And again at the end when Christ comes to judge all the earth and the wicked and unbelieving are cast into eternal hellfire. There's no judgment worse than that.

And while it's true that we see God's mercy in Christ most clearly in the New Testament, it's an ever present theme in the Old. Take creation itself: the fact that God makes this world with all of its wonders and gives it mankind knowing full well what it is going to cost him is an act of loving kindness beyond imagination. And then his continuing care for his people – his care despite their constant rebellion against him – his dwelling among them, forgiving their sins, providing for their needs, rescuing them from enemies over and over again—all are manifestations of his loving kindness. There aren't two stories. There is only one.

I recently read an article by a theologian who said there was one page he wanted to tear out of the Bible. A statement like that is guaranteed to grab the attention of Lutherans like you and I who would never think of doing such a thing. You don't mess with God's Word. But then he explained that the page he wanted to tear out was the one on which was written only "The New Testament". His point being that it's an artificial distinction that we make, an artificial distinction that feeds this silly notion that says "Old Testament bad, New Testament good".

It's certainly a distinction that Jesus never made. That comes through loud and clear in today's Gospel when he says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets [by which he means the Old Testament]; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

For a little explanation, what's translated "iota" there is actually "yod", which is the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. It looks something like an apostrophe. And what's translated "dot" refers to a tiny stroke of the pen that distinguishes some of the Hebrew letters which otherwise look awfully alike – kind of like how our capital O and Q look the same except for that little squiggle on the Q. What Jesus means, of course, is that he's not here to change or cancel anything in the Scriptures, not even the tiniest bit. Nor would that make any sense because he's what it's all about.

This speaks directly against the "Jesus never said it" argument. He doesn't have to. If it's in the Scripture, he endorses it. He can't do otherwise. He is the Word of God made flesh. And then he warns his hearers against making any changes or imagining that somehow now that Jesus is on the scene the Law of God has been changed or diminished in any way. He says, "Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven".

I call it lowering the bar. The standards of God's Law are an impossibly high hurdle for sinners like you and me. But we like to think of ourselves as pretty decent people. And one way to deceive ourselves into thinking that it's true is to lower the requirements the Lord sets for us in his Law. Bring it down to a manageable level. Then I can meet the standard and so show myself to be righteous – righteous in the sight of others, and more importantly righteous in the sight of God.

Who would do such a thing? Well, oddly enough in Jesus' time this was being done by the scribes and the Pharisees who were the fanatical legalists of the day. At first glance, you'd be inclined to think that they would be the last people on earth to be lowering the bar. Everyone looked up to them as the best examples of human perfection. They had laws on top their laws. And they were scrupulous about keeping them.

But their laws on top of God's Law were actually legal dodges. They were ways to meet the mechanistic letter of the Law but none of its spirit – like when Jesus told a man that the Law required you to love your neighbor as yourself and he replied, "Yeah, and who's my neighbor?" The scribes and Pharisees had a legal answer for that, and they would have defined it very narrowly, to just your immediate family and friends. And they would have said "love" in this context simply means being fairly nice and polite most of the time, not at all what God means by love. All their rules upon rules operated the same way. They brought the Law of God down to a level they could attain. Then they patted themselves on the back for doing it, while looking down on everyone else who wasn't keeping all their silly rules. This is why Jesus says "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" – which, counts the scribes and Pharisees out too.

And make no mistake: there is a scribe and Pharisee in each of us that plays this same game of lowering the bar on God's Law and favorably evaluating our relative righteousness compared to others. Another way it happens in our day is by what we call "Gospel Reductionism". This is the belief that because the Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus is the chief teaching of the Christian church, it's the *only* teaching that matters. What it really amounts

to is that because God forgives sin for Christ's sake, sin is no longer anything to concern yourself with. The trouble is that the Gospel is meaningless without the Law. Being saved by Christ only makes sense if you know what it is you're being saved from, namely sin and its eternally damning consequences.

There is also in our day a tendency to think that we know better in our times than did the ancients. We see this especially in the more progressive churches where it's taught that back in the old days people were ignorant about many things, and they condemned things that they shouldn't have. Thus they made up laws against homosexuality and abortion, for example. Ah, but now we have come of age and realize these were silly ancient taboos that men, not God, wrote into the Scripture. So it's only right and proper that we, being so enlightened, remove them from the Scripture. I mean, Jesus would have wanted it that way, right?

Except that he said "not one iota, not one dot" could be removed from the Law. You'd think that if he wanted us to change something, he might have mentioned it then. But he didn't. Nor did he allow the possibility that any parts of the Scripture were anything less than the inspired Word of God that cannot be changed.

No. We cannot lower the bar. God's perfect standard of righteousness must be kept where it is, which is impossibly out of reach to sinners like you and me. You, on your own, can *never* enter the kingdom of heaven.

"But whoever does [these commandments] and teaches them, will be called great in the kingdom of heaven". Who is that? Only one person who's ever lived meets that description. It's Jesus himself. He proclaims God's Law as it is written. He teaches it according to its true spirit and meaning. More than that, he keeps it. He meets its requirements that are impossibly high to us. He fulfills the Law. And for us, he fulfills the promise of God to send a Savior, a substitute sacrifice, who would pay the penalty for our disobedience precisely so that the Law and Prophets could be fulfilled. Therefore he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And he is the kingdom's open gate. Who enters through him, that is by faith in him having fulfilled all the Law and Prophets, is a citizen of the kingdom.

Let's not ever lower the bar. Let's trust instead in Jesus who cleared it clean for us. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!