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Strange Laws  
Matthew 5: 21-37

It is generally true that what is written into the law arises from actual human experience. Laws get made in response to a problem in the world or a question among the people. Every once in a while you hear about some rather strange laws that are still on the books - and you can assume that those laws have their origins in some actual dispute or incident. I've read, for example, that it's illegal to use an elephant to plow a cotton field. I wonder where that law came from. Could it have been a farmer still using an old ox jealous of his neighbor's competitive advantage, who went to his assemblyman to plead that's not fair? Or could it be that an enterprising farmer secured an elephant and taught it to plow, but there was some mishap and the elephant's big feet trampled the neighbor's rose garden? Curious to know where that one came from, one journalist did some reading into the history of this law and found that it may have been a reaction to promotional efforts by the P.T. Barnum circus. There's another strange law I read about somewhere that prohibits the serving of alcohol on church bingo nights. It should be apparent that law comes from some incident that got out of hand.

I say all this to emphasize that the Bible is an important source of legal information. Maybe you've heard of Hammurabi's Code, perhaps the most famous ancient collection of legal statutes etched in stone. It popularized the old Babylonian and Roman precept of "an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth." Archaeologists and historians are so interested in unearthed tablets and preserved scrolls that contain these law codes because they bring such insight to how ancient people settled disputes and meted out punishments. The Bible itself contains multitudes of these legal artifacts. Think about the Ten Commandments: thou shalt; thou shalt not. Our reading from Deuteronomy this morning may include pieces of a law book known as the Covenant Code. "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and obeying his commandments, decrees, and ordinances then you shall live and become numerous." Another of these important biblical collections is known as the priestly code. Found mostly in the book of Leviticus, the priestly code governed ritual life around the temple - and it's responsible for much of the church's reputation for being legalistic and judgmental. That's where we get all the weird stuff about sexuality, menstruation, wearing clothes of mixed fibers, and eating shellfish. It's a mistake to read these ancient law codes in the Bible and accept them uncritically as morally authoritative. They were never meant to be rule books for all people everywhere. They're snapshots in time. They reveal how communities understood the human experience, how they worshiped God, how they resolved conflict.

Exodus 22:33 is a great case example. "If someone leaves a pit open, or a digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restitution,

giving money to its owner but keeping the dead animal.” An ox falling into a pit is probably not a risk that you and I spend much time managing together. But for ancient agrarian societies, where most of the land was somehow shared and everyone regularly moved their livestock around - I can imagine how this was not an uncommon dispute. It’s really a law against carelessness. If you are going to dig a hole, it’s your responsibility to cover it up or fill it back in. If your neighbor’s ox falls into it and breaks a leg then you’re going to have to pay the neighbor the cost of that beast. And you can keep the dead animal because now it’s your problem. If it’s my ox that is lost, I may justifiably be angry about your thoughtless digging, but the law says I’m not entitled to more than restitution for the loss. The law sets a limit. It restrains my feelings of vengeance. The law actually holds back the cycle of violence that would ensue if I struck back. According to the law, I can’t retaliate by pushing your ox into a pit. I can’t burn down your house for killing my ox. I can’t kidnap your first born child. The statute names the crime, which came out of the community’s actual experience of life together, and specifies a measured dose of penance and restitution.

That brings us to another collection of laws in the Bible, these in the New Testament. Found mainly in chapters 5-8 of Matthew’s Gospel, you can call these the Jesus laws. They include many of the common statutes that you would expect in any society of human being - they’re about things that arise naturally in human life and community. Swearing oaths, marriage and divorce, ritual things like fasting and worship. Jesus doesn’t come up with these topics out of nothing. Everything he says pertains to real lived experience. The elephant in the cotton field had to come from somewhere. There’s got to be a story behind it. These aren’t rules for the sake of having rules; they arise from a need to address real things in our life together.

But Jesus does something different in his interpretation of the law. He intensifies the law and asks us all to hold ourselves to an even higher standard than the law. The law says thou shalt not murder. Jesus says, thou shalt not even become angry. The law says thou shalt not commit adultery. Jesus says, thou shalt monitor your thoughts and feelings on the inside long before they become a problem on the outside. The law says an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. That’s the code of Hammurabi. But Jesus says if anyone strikes you, turn the other cheek. If anyone steals from you, give them the clothes off your back. If anyone forces you to march for a mile, you should just keep on walking a second mile. The law code of Jesus is the law of perfect love. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” That’s the law. That’s the floor of life in a community together. We can all get by if we love our neighbors and hate our enemies, just as long as we follow the laws. We don’t have to like each other as long as you pay up when my ox falls into the idiot hole you dug. But this kind of retributive justice is not the way Christians are called to be. “I say to you,” Jesus says, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

The Sermon on the Mount asks more of us than that we just follow the law. Jesus calls us to an ethic of perfect love. Love of God. Love of neighbor. Love of enemy. It always makes us nervous when we read about the law of Jesus because it touches real places in our lives where we have fallen short. Jesus comes to the most tender and complex places in our lives - marriage and

fidelity, friendship and anger; he approaches our deepest desires, where the conflicts are real, where we're not sure what we really want, where we're still holding and may not be able to let go, where we're living with self-judgment or shame - and Jesus insists, in spite of what the law may say find your way to love.