

## Perfect Laws

Based on Exodus 20:2-17, Philippians 3:4b-9, Matthew 21:38-45

I spent time this week reflecting on laws – specifically on perfect laws. Have you ever run across a perfect law or are you even aware that such a thing exists? It seems to me that a set of perfect laws would be created to address an identified and agreed upon need, be applicable across time and space, across all conditions without exceptions, and would be perfectly applied. I expect that perfect laws would create an environment where all people could live in freedom and be equally valued and protected, where all persons could flourish and be considered sacred. Is there anywhere in this world, from the time of King Hammurabi until now, that perfect laws have been written and given to the people? Let's put a pin in that for a moment while we consider why we have laws in the first place.

The Judicial Learning Center has this to say about why we have laws in the United States, "...Laws are rules that bind all people living in a community. Laws protect our general safety and ensure our rights as citizens against abuses by other people, by organizations, and by the government itself. We have laws to help provide for our general safety...We also have laws that protect our rights as citizens, and which include things like: laws that come from the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution, that guarantee our basic freedoms like freedom of speech, religion, and the press and laws that protect us from discrimination because of our race, gender, age, or because of a disability...." This helps us understand that the reason that we have so many laws, rules and regulations is to help us live in community, protect our safety, and ensure our

rights. It also helps us understand a little better what our scriptures are speaking to us about this morning.

Paul was a really good Pharisee; knowing, following and helping to enforce the laws of Moses on the people of God. He was a Jew through and through, as he says in our reading for today. He says that he was faultless in his righteousness under those laws. Yet, upon meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus, he had his eyes opened to the deeper meaning of the laws of God – a more perfect understanding about the true righteousness that comes from God through faith. Jesus continues his dialogue with the chief priests and elders of the Temple. He tells them a second parable about some wicked tenants who won't give the owner of a vineyard his share of the harvest. Not only won't they give the rent, they kill all who the owner sends to collect. Jesus asks the religious leaders what will happen to the tenants when the owner comes? They tell him that the tenants will meet a predictable end. Jesus tells them that the same is true of them.

The Israelites have left enslavement and the rules and regulations of Egypt behind. Yet, they have not had time in their wanderings to develop new laws and rules to govern their behavior as a people. Into this void comes God who gives to them 10 commands to follow. These 10 rules can seem a bit arbitrary when put into context of where the people of God found themselves. However, in his book "Journey to the Common Good", Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann summarizes the heart of the commandments' teachings which is, love and trust YHWH "rather than Pharaoh's security system" (commandments 1–3); embrace sabbath rest as "an alternative to aggressive anxiety" (4); recognize that "neighbors, all kinds of neighbors, are to be

respected and protected and not exploited” (5–9); and “limit . . . acquisitiveness,” particularly “predatory practices and aggressive policies that make the little ones vulnerable to the ambitions of the big ones” (10). This is how God teaches the community of faith to live together.

Pastor and spiritual writer, Liz Coolidge Jenkins helps unpack the impact of these 10 Commandments for God’s chosen people. She writes, “...The people of Israel had been brutally dehumanized for 400 long years. And so even as God liberates them, God also affirms their humanity and invites them into ways of being that continually affirm one another’s humanity. God calls them to rehumanize one another - by trusting God to provide abundantly for all, by respecting one another, by resting, by being content, and by refusing to kill, steal, cheat, or lie.

Many years later, the psalmist will sing, ‘The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul’ (Ps. 19:7). For souls wounded from 400 years of collective trauma and likely wondering what healing might look like, I imagine God’s laws feeling like a balm. These refreshing, communally oriented commandments - this gift of guidance from a God who shows the people over and over again that they are not abandoned - do not decrease the agency of the people of Israel but honor it at every turn. They are not decrees from on high, demanding mindless submission. They are not moralizing standards meant to cause division between those who follow them perfectly and everyone else whom the perfect ones look down on.

They are guidelines for human flourishing - given by a God who says, as a way of preparing the people to receive the commandments, ‘I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself’ (Exod. 19:4). A God who wants the people to be God’s own

‘treasured possession’ (19:5). A God who empowers the recently enslaved desert wanderers to become ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (19:6).

Today, God’s laws not only serve as guidelines for holistic, transformative human flourishing, but they also help us discern how to engage with other sorts of authorities. Desmond Tutu saw this clearly in his anti-apartheid activism. ‘When a clash occurs between the laws of man and the laws of God,’ Tutu writes in *God Is Not a Christian*, ‘then for the Christian there can be no debate or argument about which he must obey.’ He goes on to urge, ‘Please let us be mindful of the important distinction between what is legal and what is morally right.’”

In the Ten Commandments, God prioritizes two key values: honor God and love your neighbor. Do not dishonor God’s image in your neighbor. If human-made laws are racist or otherwise unjust, such that they cannot be followed while honoring God’s image in every human being, then they contradict God’s laws and have no claim over a person of faith. In that sense, God’s laws offer a kind of freedom: earthly laws that contradict our higher law do not contain us. We can resist when we need to. We can struggle together for a better world.

In so doing, we find ourselves building new tools. In an exploitative world, we build generosity. In a competitive world, we build communal-mindedness. In a rushed and impatient world, we build space to rest. In a world where wealth is unjustly distributed, those who have resources refuse to try to gain more and more; instead, they open their hands to share with those who do not have enough. In doing these things, we - like the Israelites learning how to live out their brand-new liberation - become truly free....”

Time now to return to the question I posed in the opening of this reflection, “Is there anywhere in this world, from the time of King Hammurabi until now, that perfect laws have been written and given to the people?” I think that we can now answer that question with a resounding “yes”! God gave to the people wandering in the wilderness, and all subsequent generations perfect laws. Laws that we need to incarnate in order to flourish as a species and grow into the people that God has gifted and called us to be. How can each of us use these 10 perfect laws to live more generously, be more community-minded and focused, more compassionate toward those who live and believe differently than we do, and to open our hands, hearts and lives to those who are not flourishing?

One answer to those questions is for all of us to go back to the Bible and really spend some time immersed in the wisdom it contains. We can also read over those 10 perfect laws and begin to pray about how God is leading us to put them into action in this part of God’s creation. That’s why God gave them to the wandering Israelites and to the rest of us in the first place. Perfect laws lose their ability to positively impact our lives and the lives of those around us when they are ignored or not implemented. God has given us everything we need to flourish and to build a resilient community through these perfect laws. Let us seek God’s wisdom and strength to live into them to the best of our abilities. Amen and amen!