



Discussion Guide

Law: Matthew 22.34-40

Getting Started: 10 minutes

- o Complete the following statement. “The point of the rules is. . .”
- o Optional: What, if anything from the sermon, encouraged, challenged, or really made you think?

Setting the Stage: *Rules. Some of us love them. Some of us loath them. They give structure and meaning to some, and deprive others of that very structure and meaning. Both sides battle it out, each claiming that in their understanding one finds meaning, they find life. So who is right? The lovers or the loathers? Particularly, who is right when it comes to the Old Testament Law. Some would have us to love it, keep as much as we can. Others would have us to jettison it as a thing of the past, something that has no purpose for followers of Jesus. What if the truth isn't found in either camp? What if the truth is found in a third way? In a radical and complete reordering of our understanding, of what we know and think we know about the rules? What would life be then? Might we actually find life?*

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes (The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Read Matthew 22.34-40. (You might consider recapping Matthew 21.23-22.33 for the group to provide context.)
- What answers does Jesus give to the legal expert? (Tip: Look down through the text to draw out all the possible ideas.)
- What might Jesus' answers imply about the nature and purpose of the Old Testament Law?
- In what ways, if any, could what Jesus says about the Law be part of God's movement to rectify the problem created in Genesis 3?
- How do people typically understand and approach religious laws?
- Do you understand Jesus' approach to be the same or different? Can you explain?
- How might people's understanding of religious laws influence their behavior? Their view of God? Can you elaborate?
- How do you understand and approach the Old Testament Law? Do you resonate with Jesus? Can you elaborate?
- How might your understanding and approach be influencing your life? Your view of God?
- How, if at all, might adopting Jesus' view change the way you approached life? Approached God?
- What, if anything, keeps you from adopting Jesus' view as your own? Can you elaborate?

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- o Prayer requests
- o Group prayer time
- o House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)



Group Notes

Law: Discussion Guide

Matthew 22.34-40

Context and Background

Law: We typically think of law as a set of codified rules governing behavior. However, law for the Hebrew people was much more than just a set of rules. "The Law" was considered to consist of the first five books of what is now our Old Testament (Genesis through Deuteronomy). It is sometimes referred to as the Mosaic Law (Torah) as Moses was considered to be the mediator of these books. The Mosaic Law consisted of three main parts: covenant, command, and case law. The covenant sections are the narrative sections that tell the story of God's covenant movement with people, particularly the Jewish people. The command sections involve specific commands dictated by God and given to the Jewish people. The case law sections typically have an "If. . .then. . ." format and address how specific instances should be handled. In general, these three sections were seen as a whole, a unit that set forth instructions and advice on how God's people were to live. It is important to understand that these instructions and advice were not meant to be followed as a means of earning God's love and favor. This becomes apparent in the reading of the covenant sections of the Mosaic Law. God's covenant movement occurred before the command and case sections of the Law were dictated to Moses. The implication is that God's relationship with people is not dependant on the Law. Rather, God initiates a relationship with His people freely and then uses the Law as a means of maintaining the relationship. In Jesus' time, there were several debates about the nature of the Mosaic Law. The outworking of one important debate is seen in Matthew 22.34-40. After the experience of the Babylonian exile, religious leaders began to argue about the importance of keeping the Mosaic Law. While they understood that God's free love initiated His relationship with them, they began to argue that remaining in God's love took a ritual keeping of the Law. This led to debates about "weighty" and "light" laws. That is, which were the essential laws to be followed and which simply got you extra credit with God? We see the practical outworking of this debate in the question asked of Jesus. Knowing the most important command is only important if some commands are more important and necessary than others.

Heart, Soul, and Mind: The ancient world thought of the human person in much different terms than the modern world. Ancient Greeks, influenced by Plato, divided the person into two component parts, body and spirit. However, in Jewish thought, a person was a single unified being before God with various aspects that originated from their person. In the Old Testament, the term used to refer to the single unified person is the term "soul." In the New Testament, the influence of Greek thought has not yet worked its way into the minds of the authors. This is a second-century phenomena that is still felt in the Church today. However, Jesus and his contemporaries viewed the person as a unified being with aspects of the person flowing from this unity. In the New Testament, various words that are partial-synonyms are used loosely to refer to this single unified person: soul, spirit, heart, and at times, mind. When these terms are seen in the same context it is best to see them as referring to aspects of a larger unified whole. We can draw out some minor differences, but the piling up of these words serves as a reminder that God asks for the entire person. In Matthew 22.34-40, we find such a piling up. Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6.5 to answer a question about the most important command in the Old Testament Law. He refers to loving God with one's whole heart, soul, and mind. In the context, heart refers to the center of one's will and action. The heart was often seen as the very center of one's being, the true inner-self and origin of all thought and action (1 Peter 3.4; Matthew 12.34-35). The soul maintains the meaning of one's whole person or integrated self. One might say, the essence of life or life-force that comes from God. The mind refers to insight or understand as this is the word used and not the typical word for mind. Most likely, the term refers to thought that results in action. As one can see, these three words have overlapping meaning. Each speaks in one way or another to one's true self that influences both thought and action. The true point of Jesus seems to come from the three-fold repetition of "your whole. . ." Jesus states that the most important command is to love God completely, with the whole self, rather than in a compartmentalized way. All that one thinks, does, and is belong to and is to be oriented lovingly around God. This is the weightiest command.

The Text

The greatest command (Matthew 22.34-40):

Beginning in Matthew 21, Jesus' ongoing battle with the Jewish religious leaders begins to heat up. These leaders decide that Jesus has become such a threat that they must get rid of Jesus (Matt. 21.45-46). With this as their goal, the Sadducees and Pharisees approach Jesus with a series of questions aimed at trapping Jesus in his own words, thus causing him to lose the support of the crowds (See. Matt. 21.45-46). The third such attempt involved questions about the most important command in the Mosaic Law (See *Law*). Jesus answers that two laws might be viewed as having equal weight and importance, because they sum up the intent and outcome of the rest of the Mosaic Law and the entirety of the prophetic teachings. First, one is to love God completely (Deut. 6.5). Second, and of equal weight, one is to love their neighbor as they love themselves (Lev. 19.18). Together these have been called "The Law of Love." Basically, Jesus states that what God requires is that one give themselves completely to God and to others. This, in turn, is the point of all the Law and Prophets, the accepted Biblical witness of God's desires for His people. It is important to note that Jesus' answer indicates that what is most important to God, and the entire point of the witness of Scripture involves how one relates to God and others. These relationships are to be marked by love, not an emotional attachment but a whole-hearted giving of oneself to another. In many ways, this state reflects the general state of relationships in Genesis 1-2. People were fully committed to God and one another. Thus, we can see that the Law was intended by God to point people to life, life as He meant it to be. Law is not about earning God's love and approval, nor is it about boundaries. The Law is meant to guide free and self-determining beings with a bent away from God (Gen. 3) back toward life as God intended it. Basically, the Law encapsulates how one makes the best use of their freedom so that they might experience life as it was meant to be.

Application: Laws, particularly religious laws can seem restrictive and harsh, even necessary evils to be endured to "be right" and "stay right" with God. Jesus states that these ideas can't be further from the truth. According to Jesus, the Law, and the entire biblical witness of God's truth, is meant to point people back to life as it was meant to be lived. Free, self-determining people with a bent away from God need guidance on how to best use their freedom so that they might experience life as it was intended. Thus, Law is a gift that seeks to put people back in a proper relationship with God and with others, the very thing lost in Genesis 3.