

David went to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. Ahimelech trembled when he met him, and asked, “Why are you alone? Why is no one with you?”

² *David answered Ahimelech the priest, “The king charged me with a certain matter and said to me, ‘No one is to know anything about your mission and your instructions.’ As for my men, I have told them to meet me at a certain place. ³ Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find.”*

⁴ *But the priest answered David, “I don’t have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here—provided the men have kept themselves from women.”*

⁵ *David replied, “Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever I set out. The men’s things are holy even on missions that are not holy. How much more so today!” ⁶ So the priest gave him the consecrated bread, since there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence that had been removed from before the LORD and replaced by hot bread on the day it was taken away. (1 Samuel 21:1-6)*

Following God’s Law Can Be Confusing

When I was in college, one of our professors asked a hypothetical question: if you lived in Nazi Germany and the Jewish family across the street banged on your door in the middle of the night and asked you to hide them, what should you do? That might seem like an obvious question and I think the professor thought it should be, too, especially for a bunch of guys who were studying for the ministry. But nobody raised their hand. So the professor called on me. I knew what answer he was looking for. But I also knew that the 4th Commandment teaches that we’re supposed to obey our government, even a bad government, so I said you shouldn’t. And he let me have it. He pointed out that that God’s Word places higher obligations on us than obedience to the government. Of course, he was right. But in a very small way, my adolescent confusion about scriptural principles illustrates the point that Jesus draws from our Old Testament lesson for today. Jesus uses it to give us guidance for one of our real difficulties: sometimes it’s hard to know what God wants us to do. We Christians want to do what God says is right. But sometimes, we have trouble figuring out what that would be. Most pastors have had members come and ask them, “Pastor, what should I do?” They’ll looking for more than practical advice. They want to know what is the right and God-pleasing thing to do. They only ask that question because in a sinful world, **following God’s law can be confusing.**

I.

The point that Jesus made has to do with the laws that God made for worship in the Old Testament. Those laws touched virtually every part of the lives of God’s Old Testament people. They’re still in our Bibles. What do they mean for us today? **Following God’s law can be confusing. What do you make of the ceremonial laws?**

Probably ten years ago now, I saw episode of the old TV show *The West Wing*. Do you remember that show? In this particular episode, the president, who was played by Martin Sheen, argued with a conservative activist. She pointed out that the Bible says that homosexuality is a sin. And the president went on rampage. He quoted one Old Testament law after another, like the ones that say that you can’t mix types of cloth in the same article of clothing or plant different crops in the same field. He pointed out that the Old Testament often commanded the death penalty for that kind of stuff and he asked if they should burn his mother for mixing crops in her vegetable garden. Of course, on the TV show, the conservative was left speechless, as if there is no answer to give.

If you engage people today on the issue of homosexuality and tell them what the Bible says, you’re probably going to hear something similar. The Bible’s commands against it are going to be lumped with all kinds of laws that people don’t understand today and the message is going to be that all those laws are just stupid. They’re the result of primitive superstition and prejudice and so is any other law from the Bible that doesn’t fit what our society wants to do today.

Do you believe that? I don’t. God gave the Old Testament. It wasn’t the result of primitive superstition or prejudice. The Holy Spirit inspired the holy writers to tell us what God wants us to know and to do. But, just like any parent, not all that God tells us is the same. There was a time in my family when we had an absolute rule that if we were in a parking lot, all our children had to be holding a parent’s hand. Today, I don’t insist

that my 15, 18 and 20 year old hold my hand in a parking lot. The rule had a purpose, but the purpose has been fulfilled. On the other hand, there are rules in our house that will be in force for as long as it is my house. If they want to live there, they will obey them.

God does the same thing. In the Old Testament, God gave an enormous amount of legislation. Some of it dealt with how Israel was supposed to run their country and feed their poor. A very large portion of that legislation dealt with Jewish religious practices: animal sacrifices, dietary restrictions, like no pork or shellfish, cleanness and uncleanness, and a large number of practices that were designed to set them apart from the nations around them. We generally call all these laws ceremonial laws. None of those laws apply to us anymore. That's the whole point that Jesus made from what happened with David.

David was a general in King Saul's army. Saul was jealous of David and he tried to kill him several times. So David fled. The first place he went was to the village of Nob because the tabernacle was there. The tabernacle was very large and elaborate tent. It was Israel's church building before King Solomon built the first temple. Because David was a believer, went to Nob looking for help. The high priest was a man name Ahimelech. Obviously, he had heard of the problems between David and Saul because he was nervous when David came to him alone. David asked for supplies. He was on the run and there weren't any malls or Wal-Marts for him to go to. But Ahimelech had a problem: the only food there at the tabernacle was consecrated food. In one of those ceremonial laws, God had commanded that each Sabbath, the priests were to put twelve specially baked loaves of bread on the altar in the Holy Place, the inner room in that tent. When they put a new set out, the priests ate the loaves they took away. No one else could. David was not a priest. But Ahimelech gave David those twelve loaves of bread.

Jesus approved of his action, even though it was a technical violation of God's ceremonial law. He said that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. So even when they were still in effect, those ceremonial laws had a purpose. They were designed to teach God's people basic theological concepts that would lead them to Christ. Only the priests could eat this bread because God was teaching his people that sinners can't come into his presence. But once their sin is taken away, then he welcomes them with open arms into his family. That lesson was important. But keeping David and his men alive was more important. All those Old Testament laws were temporary. They were like my family's rule that you had to hold a parent's hand when you were in a parking lot. Once the need was gone, the rule was abolished. Once Jesus came, all those laws about sacrifices and what they could eat and what made them clean or unclean were fulfilled. We don't need them anymore so God cancelled them.

But there are other laws in the Bible that we will always need, like what God says about homosexuality. We call them moral laws. God made those laws for all people of all times. We need to know the difference. When ultra-conservative Christians try to apply Old Testament ceremonial laws to us, like "a Christian Sabbath" that's wrong. God didn't make any such law. When liberal Christians try to lump all God's laws together and throw out all the ones they don't like, that's wrong, too. God's moral law does apply to us. But knowing which is which can be a challenge. It takes serious study of God's word to understand when he says things to be obeyed forever and when he was making temporary rules. Sadly, in a sinful world, we often find that other things distract us from that kind of study. And truth be told, sometimes we just aren't up for the hard work of carefully thinking through what God requires and what he doesn't. The sinner in our hearts wants rules even when God doesn't give them. And at the same time, he rebels against the rules he does have.

But we have Christ, who alone fulfilled all the Old Testament laws. He cancelled the written code that condemned us to hell. He stood in our place and paid for our sin. Now he works in our hearts through the gospel. He gives us the desire to follow him. He sends the Holy Spirit to work through the word so that we understand better what God requires. He lifts us up and gives us joy in understanding better and better what it means to live for him. Trust in that Savior's work.

II.

But the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament aren't the only difficulty that we see illustrated in this account. David's words and actions are a little troubling. He lies. And this isn't the only time in the Old Testament when we see a believer lie and do things that seem like they're for his own benefit. Of course, this wasn't a normal day for David. It was an emergency situation. But even in difficult situations, we Christians want to make the most God-pleasing decisions we can. But sometimes it's hard to know what the right thing to do is. **Following God's law can be confusing. What do you do when two laws conflict?**

That's really what David faced. On the one hand, God clearly says that we shouldn't lie. But God did not expect David to simply allow himself to be murdered. David understood that if told the truth, Ahimelech would have to make a choice: either he could throw David out and participate in his murder or he could conspire with him against the king God had given Israel. David did not put him in that position. He gave him the ability to honestly say to King Saul that he didn't know that David was on the run from him. Sadly, Saul didn't believe him and he murdered Ahimelech and all the priests at Nob. But David was trying to protect him.

Sometimes in the real world more than one law or principle that God gives us is in play. Sometimes they're opposed to each other, or at least, they seem to be. What do we do then? Well, my answer to my college professor illustrated the problem: you have to ask yourself, what is the more important thing? Obviously, in the Nazi Germany hypothetical, saving innocent people from Auschwitz was more important than obeying a law that commanded all Germans to participate in a senseless slaughter. Likewise, David determined that it was more important to protect Ahimelech from a charge of conspiracy than to tell the truth.

But sometimes it's still hard. We wrestle with end of life decisions. We wrestle with what to tell our children. Sometimes, we determine that it's best to mislead them rather than telling them something that will cause them real distress. Sometimes to protect someone's reputation, we don't tell things we know. This so hard because we do believe that God gives us real laws that really do apply to all people, and we're supposed to obey them all. Our society no longer believes that. But even the most firm believer that all things are relative will generally say that racial prejudice or child molesting is wrong. That shows that God has built into our hearts an understanding that there is a law that he holds us to. When two of his laws conflict, we often feel guilty whichever choice we make.

So what do we do? First of all, we weigh as best we can the importance of the two principles we're considering. Who will be hurt? How much will they be hurt? If we can, we seek the advice of other Christians who are mature in the faith. We pray for wisdom and guidance and we make the best decision we can in a sinful world. Then we fall on our knees and we ask our God to forgive us if we've misunderstood. We ask him to forgive our weakness and our sin that can't see any other way out. We ask him to have mercy on us in a sinful world where everything is not always clear to us. Then we trust that Jesus kept the whole law perfectly for us. And God counts that for us even in the situation we're struggling with. We trust that Jesus died and paid for all our sin – even for the weakness in our hearts and minds that can't see what's right sometimes. He paid for all that we are ever guilty of and he rose and said that all our sin is all gone forever. We trust his love. And then we go forward and live to the glory of Christ.

Martin Luther had a co-worker named Philip Melancthon. Melancthon had a very sensitive conscience. He often struggled with making tough decisions and would often he would agonize over them. One day, Luther said to him, "Sin boldly. You are saved by grace." He meant that in a sinful world, even our best efforts are imperfect. But as children of God we go forward, doing the best that we can, trusting in our God to bring us home to heaven for Jesus' sake. So we trust that he will see all our efforts in the light of faith and he will call us faithful and beloved even when we don't deserve it. My friends, sin boldly. Do your best to follow Christ. Follow him with confidence because you aren't saved by your efforts to live a good life. You strive to live for him because you are already saved by his grace. Amen.