**DEUTERONOMY 21:22–22:12**

*(Reading: Galatians 3:1-14)*

**The Law Is The Way For True Love**

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ…

Some years ago there was quite a bit of public debate regarding proposed legislation in New Zealand for so-called Civil Unions. A Civil Union, as you may know, is an alternative recognised relationship besides marriage. It has been used as a way of recognising homosexual relationships.

The arguments in favour of that weren’t much different to what we’re heard subsequently regarding Same Sex Marriage. It was about the same thing, after all.

One of the many exchanges in this debate was one between a conservative Bible-believing Christian and one who said he was a Christian but didn’t feel the Bible should be believed too much! The more liberal ‘Christian’ made this point in favour of recognising homosexual relationships: ‘Love doesn’t discriminate and neither should the law.’ You see, that liberal person was using discriminate in the sense of making an unjust distinction in the treatment of different people on the grounds of race, sex or age.

Not that homosexuality comes under any of those categories of race, sex or age anyway! But that doesn’t stop them redefining whatever they like. Then to them ‘sex’ isn’t about gender but about an inclination.

Well, the Bible-believing Christian didn’t need long to respond to this. He replied: ‘Love does discriminate and therefore the law must also.’ And then he went on to give some quite clear examples.

You know what? He didn’t hear from that other person again! Because as well as the word ‘discriminate’ meaning not to make an unfair distinction it also means to recognise that there are differences. And how do we recognise what these differences truly are except by what God tells us they are?

That way is the law. And this is not the law which is changed on an almost daily basis by human parliaments but the Law that is enshrined in God’s Word. This is the Law that lays down the way things **ought** to be between all of us.

But especially the Law is a matter for those in the covenant. And the book of Deuteronomy has all the typical marks of a covenant text. Here we have the documentation of God’s covenant with Israel as it was renewed just before Israel entered into the land of Canaan.

And you know, congregation, how loving isn’t this law? When this was at the heart of God’s people they had the most safe and secure community!

We can see this first of all in the verses 1 till 4 of chapter 22. Here we note that ... THE LAW IS GOD’S WAY TO OTHERS.

Now, at first, these four verses might seem like they are giving examples of the same thing. But as we make our way through these verses you will see how, with each new example, more is being asked of those within the covenant.

Verse 1 seems straight-forward enough. In fact, it’s what any of us would recognise we have to do. If you see your neighbour’s dog off his lead and away from home, you take it back to him.

Or do you? How many times don’t we feel we just can’t be bothered? You see, it might not be the first time it has happened with this particular neighbour. And who wants to be the one who’s always on other peoples’ cases?

To have this attitude is quite selfish. And that’s why this example is specifically given here. Right at the beginning of the law being God’s way to others we are told we have to look out for what belongs to others.

Nowadays what belongs to your neighbour includes a lot more than any animals he has. There’s his car and all his other property. If you see some other child riding one of his kid’s bikes when you’re quite sure he shouldn’t be, what do you do?

At the very least you should give your neighbour a ring. Let him know what you saw and where you saw it. It’s very unlikely he’d be upset. More likely than not he’ll be grateful to get his property back! And how much won’t he be thankful to have a neighbour like you? Indeed, how often haven’t tremendous opportunities for witness come about because we lived out God’s law to others?

But this concern for others doesn’t only involve the next door neighbour. Verse 2 draws the principle out even further. Here if the owner doesn’t live close by you are to look after what is his until he has the opportunity to come and pick it up off you. This involves even more work for you, with feeding and pasturing it and whatever else it might need. It means taking that much more out of your time for others.

There was even the chance that at first you did not know who that property belonged to. In those days you had to hold on to it until the owner came, or you heard about someone looking for it. Because then the bush telegraph was very effective. The news got around quick enough.

Nowadays, this is where the police serve a purpose. If you find something, and it might not at first seem valuable – at least not to you – you pass it on to the police, or at least let them know. Everyone knows if they have lost something precious to them they should check with the police station straight away. You could use the local Facebook too!

Verse 3 confirms that it doesn’t matter what that thing might be. To mention a donkey is to speak about something worth less than an ox or a sheep. But it still belonged to your neighbour. The same for his clothing or anything else he lost. It’s not a matter of ‘finder’s keepers’, or something they won’t miss, or an object not worth the bother. It belongs to your neighbour so back to your neighbour it should go.

It’s actually when we live this principle out from our hearts that we model Jesus Christ. Just think how much he went out of his way for us. And he – of all people! – had no obligation to do that whatsoever.

So what we’re seeing here is when we go beyond the requirements of the secular law. This is about going that extra mile for others. And doesn’t that spirit make all the difference to those around us?

Verse 4 brings this mercy home in an even clearer way. There it talks about when what belongs to your neighbour becomes injured or damaged in some way.

At first we wonder what this could mean for us today. But we don’t need to think about that for long. Apart from helping to heal or fix up what is an essential means of transport for your neighbour, have you helped them to be able get on with their lives?

There was a sad situation a minister had in his new congregation. A wedding had not gone ahead for the daughter of one of the members. It was the man she was going to marry who had pulled the pin and turned out to be a fraud.

It meant, though, that the holiday they had planned with another daughter from overseas couldn’t happen. They simply couldn’t afford it. The man who pulled the plug had the car they were going to travel in!

That minister happened to have an extra car then. It wasn’t being used specifically otherwise. So he loaned it to them.

How thankful they were. And, you know, what a great connection he had with the unbelieving members of that family in future years! By freely helping them to get on their feet, so to speak, he not only astounded those others who didn’t think they were worth the bother, but especially showed something of what the covenant is all about!

Dear believer, when you see something obviously not right happening do you go to help? If someone falls in the shopping centre are you right in there helping them?

There are some who might not like that, or others looking on who wouldn’t dare get involved, even others filming it on their phones, but this is not about you. It’s about them. They’re a part of God’s creation too.

There was a parable the Lord told which illustrated this. Do you remember it? Yes, it’s the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. There the priest and the Levite followed the precise details of the law. But they missed altogether the spirit of the law. It took a foreigner – a Samaritan of all people – to show the true intent of the law to the man robbed and beaten by bandits.

And what did that Samaritan get out of it? Financially he received nothing – he lost money actually. But personally he is the most blessed of all men.

Now, we might think that what the Samaritan did for a foreigner goes beyond what the law says here in Deuteronomy 22. But the word for “brother” in verse 1 is a broad term. It can also be translated as fellow man, or even enemy, as it is in Exodus 23 verses 4 and 5.

In this way we see THE LAW IS GOD’S WAY TO OTHERS. And then this passage further develops the Law as the way for true love. In the verses 5 till 11 we note that ... THE LAW IS GOD’S WAY WITH NATURE.

Congregation, here we turn from how we are to treat what belongs to our fellow man to how we are to care for God’s creation itself. But that’s not what these verses might at first seem like! You may well be wondering how we can get that common aspect out of a series of quite diverse verses. Yet they do have the same strand.

You see, while verse 5 might seem a bit out of kilter here, it is making a point about the way we were created. Mankind is made up of two parts – male and female. Right from creation itself its clear there are these two distinct sexes. All of God’s living creatures confirm it. And when he took them into the ark it was a male and female of every variety.

This is a distinction we must uphold because it is what’s at the heart of creation. To blur the sexual divisions or the vital importance of the connection between the two is going against God.

Now, it seems the immediate background to this cross-dressing of verse 5 is the religious practices of the pagan nations around Israel. At least seven other times elsewhere in Deuteronomy the word translated “abomination” here comes up in connection with those religions.

How truly up to date this is! For don’t we have a false religion out there doing the same in our own day! While this here is more specifically known as ‘transvestism’, it’s just one aspect of what we see in the secular humanism all around us.

So right throughout the ages this has been one way that the devil has attacked the gospel. While in Galatians 3:28 Paul says that there is no difference now between male and female that is about status in the sight of God. It definitely doesn’t apply to what you wear.

Indeed, this verse is against a trend on the increase today. It is clearly against the intentional masking of male or female characteristics in an attempt to defy one’s God-given gender. How much wasn’t that shown in our Census questions?

The word for “garment” in the first part of verse 5 shows this as it covers more than what you wear. As the property of the Israelite’s neighbour was to be regarded as sacred, so also the divine distinction between the sexes. And this included also all domestic and other utensils.

Congregation, it all goes go back to creation and how God created the world to be. THE LAW IS GOD’S WAY WITH NATURE.

And this theme continues in the verses 6 and 7. Again this might seem an incidental detail, somehow thrown in here because it doesn’t really fit anywhere else. It’s actually something which only appears in Deuteronomy.

So why this sudden thing about a bird’s nest you come across on the road? Who cares about that? How’s that going to make a difference to things?

Well, it is certainly tied in because these creatures also are part of God’s creation. But notice, too, the relationship shown through this. Here we see the bond between parents and their offspring.

That’s been shown already in Exodus 23:19. There it said not to cook a young goat in its mother’s milk. And in Leviticus 22:28 we see something similar. There it declares that one must not slaughter a cow or sheep and its young on the same day.

This tells us that the people must leave something for future procreation. No wonder verse 7 says that then it may go well with you and you might have a long life. Because then you are making provision for there to be something in the future.

It shows that the earliest and most consistent environmentalists are those who believe in YAHWEH - the Lord of the covenant. It’s those who follow the loving Creator and Saviour who themselves care for his creation. There can be no place for the greedy and selfish abuse of nature.

And the concern for God’s creatures continues with the housing regulation we read of next in verse 8. This could almost be an early government health and safety law. It is certainly the predecessor to those laws we have today.

This was particularly relevant for the Israelites then because much of their living was done on the roof. The oriental houses all had flat roofs for this purpose. As a heavy traffic area it was vital that it be a safe area. Just think: If someone fell off your roof and killed themselves, how would you feel? In fact, you would be in a lot of trouble, with possibly manslaughter charges up against you!

But most of all we see the high respect for human life shown here. As in chapter 19:10 here was the avoidance of the death of innocent life.

We see further God’s way with nature with the next three rules which kept the distinctions in creation as he had made them. It’s a similar theme as in verse 5. The verses 9 till 11 speak also of unnatural associations.

Now, what the original reason for the prohibition against mixed cropping in verse 9 was we’re not quite sure. Perhaps it was again something to do with a pagan religious practice. But more likely it could have been someone trying to be greedy through the over-use of the soil.

The unequal yoking of an ox and a donkey in verse 10 means that one of the animals is worked a lot harder than the other. And the mixing of two different materials in verse 11 meant differing rates of shrinkage of wool and linen. While the pressure to do these things might have been economical in the end it wouldn’t work out. God’s people must respect God’s creation. THE LAW IS GOD’S WAY WITH NATURE.

This is a lesson that some research scientists should take to heart today! Playing around with nature is no game!

But especially for God’s people – those recreated through faith - there has to be respect for God’s creation. Indeed, we are those who definitely witness to the Lord God in all we think and say and do. And thus it is that the last aspect brings this altogether.

For now we see, in the third place, THE LAW IS YOUR WAY FOR THE LORD. This is where we come to verse 12, and also tie in the last two verses – the verses 22 and 23 - of the previous chapter.

Verse 12 tells us about the right clothes to wear. As God’s people the Israelites were to stand out as those belonging to the Lord. Wearing tassels on the four corners of the garment they wore did this.

In Numbers 15 it gives us the reason for these tassels. There, in the verses 39 till 41, the LORD said through Moses, “You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD your God.”

So verse 12 is a very important reminder. When they go into the Promised Land, which is just over the river, they had to be bound to YAHWEH. By what they wore on their outer clothing they were to distinctively be seen to be the Lord’s.

But now you could be wondering: How does this tie in with those last two verses of the previous chapter? Well, turn to those verses. And let’s note, first of all, how they end.

You see, this rule about not leaving a dead body hanging overnight was so that the land the Lord was giving them wouldn’t be desecrated. In the positive we would say that this meant they had to do whatever they could to keep the land holy, so set apart for the Lord.

Congregation, THE LAW IS YOUR WAY **FOR** THE LORD. This is not about you! It never was and it never will be! This is about everything pointing up to him.

The Hebrew language is most emphatic that the corpse of the executed criminal had to be buried the selfsame day. This is the most serious thing. And we can know that because it’s likely that the corpse hung like this had not died by hanging but had been hung after execution to show how much God’s curse was upon this man. In other words, he would have had to have been a really bad man.

We see the same principle at work in Numbers 25. There Israel was seduced by Moab through sexual immorality. As a result of that the LORD said to Moses there in verse 4, “Take all the leaders of these people, kill them and expose them in broad daylight before the LORD, so that the LORD’s fierce anger may turn away from Israel.”

The hanged man was especially accused. And because he was a curse he defiled the land. Not only was the land defiled by immorality and crime but also it was defiled through the sight of those who had been punished with death. You see, then their sins were still very much in view!

In this way the Lord was most loving. Through the firm punishment of those who rebelled against him, he enabled his people to continue to be blessed in the Promised Land.

The same principle remains today. Where the Church of Christ deals biblically with sin in her midst there the Lord continues his blessing. And where there is no discipline there the Lord’s curse remains.

This is exactly why the Church is such an ineffective force in the western world today. She has not dealt with sin in the camp. To get to the stage of denominations where the only thing you have vow to in becoming an office bearer is being committed to women in church office, and you don’t have to believe in anything else, is to keep hanging out that cursed body!

And yet it was through this very law which showed the extent of Israel’s sin against the Lord that God brought about the ultimate blessing. Jesus Christ became the world’s sin-bearer, taking the world’s guilt. God’s one and only begotten Son bore the curse of the law. He carried in himself God’s judgment. He became the curse for us on the tree of the cross.

Congregation, here we see how all what the law pointed to has become fulfilled. We no longer stand under God’s curse, which we completely deserve! There will never ever need to be the cursed man hung out on a tree to purify the land.

Isaiah 53:12 prophesied of what Christ would do for us in this. It said that he would bear the sins of many and so make intercession for our transgressions. And Paul in 2nd Corinthians 5 tells of how Christ did this. In verse 21 there he wrote, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

In Galatians 3 Paul draws upon our text in connection with this. There he said that just as the corpse of a condemned criminal carried the curse of God, so Christ hanging on the cross as a condemned and executed criminal was publicly exhibited as one who bore the judgment of God. To free us from the curse of the law Jesus himself became accursed.

Dear believer, do you know what this means? Yes, we are redeemed! But even more than that, we are restored! In Christ Jesus we become the height of God’s creation which we were originally made to be. And that means we will go to the Promised Land that is perfectly blessed.

Old Testament Israel was always dependant on keeping to the requirements of the law. And as helpful as those laws were they could never guarantee true peace in the land. You only need to think of all the sacrifices that had to be continuously made! How many animals weren’t offered up? How much blood wasn’t constantly being sprinkled over the altar?

But now the ultimate sacrifice has been made. By faith we have received the promise of the Spirit. In this way we come to know what true love is. Because it is Christ’s sacrifice for us. And that is how we are meant to be to each other and to everything else.

Indeed, isn’t this what our text has brought out for us? We have to go out of our way to think of and do what is good.

And, just think, we don’t do that now because it is the way to please God, as the Israelites did. Rather, we do it now because it’s the way we thank God for all he’s done in his Son. How much doesn’t this now encourage us?

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let’s pray…

O Lord Jesus, how much don’t we thank you again for all you have done for us! When we were so wretchedly lost, you found us. In the midst of blindness, you have made us to see!

And it was all because you bore the curse of being hung on a tree. You suffered hell itself on Calvary.

May we always be thankful to you for this greatest of all gifts. Help us to so live by your Spirit that we will live lives pleasing you and the Father. Then you can use us to show the way to true love in the communities where you have placed us.

In your saving Name we pray, Amen.