

# The Law in Ungodly Hands

Can “The Law” be misused? Can you trust just anyone to legislate or implement the law in your community, society, or country? What happens if the law is in ungodly hands?

## The Law

In the Christian faith and tradition, when we say “The Law,” we usually mean the system of laws outlined in the Old Testament. It is a series of rules around conduct given to the nation of Israel. It can be thought of as being composed of two categories: the moral code and the civil code. It was given to the nation of Israel at multiple times throughout their wandering and initial takeover of the promised land. The law can be thought of as two pieces: a Moral Code and then a Civil Code that builds on the foundation of that Moral Code.

## Moral Law

The moral law is shared initially as the 10 Commandments<sup>1</sup> and then expanded on further later on in Israel’s history, sometimes with more detail and sometimes as a refresher for them. It targets the individual and is applied internally, not externally. It is a tool for introspection and self-measurement.

It is meant both to show how far we are from perfection and to give us a target to aim at. It is a standard we hold **ourselves** to, not a standard that we force on others. As such, it is an impossible standard to meet perfectly. At a minimum, everyone at some point in their life has violated some part of the moral law.<sup>2</sup>

## Civil Law

The civil law builds on the foundation of the moral law and outlines how to maintain a social order that lives out the moral law corporately. Unlike the moral law, it is applied with external enforcement. It is a tool for social harmony, cohesion, and community protection, not primarily introspection.

You can see in Leviticus<sup>3</sup> an example of how God begins laying out a system of rules for the nation that are rooted in the 10 Commandments as their foundation. These elaborate on the moral code with more detail and processes for the nation to follow when the civil code is violated by an individual.

## A Tool in Ungodly Hands

This brings us back to the questions we started with. The civil law rests on the moral law, while the moral law works only when a person applies it to himself. So what happens when the people who enforce the civil law do not apply the moral law to themselves? Scripture gives us several examples.

## Naboth’s Vineyard - 1 Kings 21

In the book of 1 Kings, we see an example of the civil law being abused by the very people entrusted to enforce it. Naboth was the owner of a vineyard that the king desired.<sup>4</sup> Naboth refuses to give King Ahab the vineyard on the grounds that it was God’s inheritance to his family. Jezebel, his wife, hatches a plan rooted in the idea that because Ahab was the ruler, he was justified in bending the law to his will in this case.

They arrange for Naboth to be accused of blasphemy by two false witnesses (the very number required by Jewish law). The punishment for such a crime is death, and Naboth is stoned to death,

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<sup>1</sup>The Ten Commandments - Exodus 20:1-17 ESV

<sup>2</sup>“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” - Romans 3:23 ESV

<sup>3</sup>Leviticus 19 ESV

<sup>4</sup>Naboth’s vineyard - 1 Kings 21 ESV

clearing the way for Ahab to claim the vineyard under the law. God condemns this act and passes judgement on Ahab and Jezebel.<sup>5</sup>

All indications are that Ahab was not particularly righteous or godly except for when it suited him. As king, he was entrusted to enforce and keep the law. But Ahab did not understand the purpose of the law and instead treated it as a tool to get his way.

### **Samuel's Sons - 1 Samuel 8**

While Samuel was regarded as one of the great judges of Israel, his sons were less so. Apparently, his sons were a blind spot for Samuel, because in his old age he appointed them as judges over Israel. They, however, used the position to enrich themselves, taking bribes to pervert justice.<sup>6</sup>

Samuel's sons treated their position under the law as a tool for personal gain. They spurned its role in maintaining their social order. Unrest and angry citizens were the inevitable result.

The contrast with their father is striking. When Israel made Saul king, Samuel could stand before all Israel and ask, "From whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it?" No one could accuse him.<sup>7</sup> Samuel held the same office as his sons did. He had the same responsibilities as his sons. But Samuel was a man who followed God and held himself to the moral standard that the law he administered was built on. The result was a populace who found no indication of fraud or dishonorable behavior in him.

Perhaps Samuel's biggest failing was that he did not look to God to appoint a judge and instead appointed his own sons to the role. Samuel probably did not intend evil by this, but the law in ungodly hands is dangerous. Their behavior resulted in Israel asking for a king<sup>8</sup> and abandoning God's governance. The history of Israel's kings is a long list of examples where the law is in ungodly hands.

### **Pharisaic Hypocrisy**

In Matthew 23, Jesus calls out the religious leaders of His day. It's worth quoting His words here:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."<sup>9</sup>

The religious leaders were using the law to improve their own standing socially or politically.<sup>10</sup> But they neglected the heart of that law: the very foundation that the law was built on.

### **Balaam's Scheme**

Balaam is an interesting case. The story of Balaam and the donkey<sup>11</sup> is well known. What is talked

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<sup>5</sup>God condemns Ahab and Jezebel - 1 Kings 21:17-19 ESV

<sup>6</sup>1 Samuel 8:3 ESV

<sup>7</sup>1 Samuel 12:3-5 ESV

<sup>8</sup>1 Samuel 8:5 ESV

<sup>9</sup>Matthew 23:23-28 ESV - <https://www.bible.com/bible/59/mat.23.23-28.esv>

<sup>10</sup>Matthew 23:2-7 ESV - <https://www.bible.com/bible/59/MAT.23.2-7.ESV>

<sup>11</sup>Numbers 22:21-39 ESV - <https://www.bible.com/bible/59/num.22.21-39.esv>

about less is what Balaam did after the story ends. Revelation<sup>12</sup> and 2 Peter<sup>13</sup> both lay partial responsibility at his feet for teaching Balak how to lead the people of Israel out of the protection of God's law. Knowing that law and how it protected the people, Balaam showed Balak how to seduce them away from the law.

### **What Is the Lesson of These Stories?**

The civil law, particularly in the case of laws that arise in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is built on a particular moral tradition. That law will not and cannot work unless the people who administer it are also fully bought in and dedicated to the moral tradition that it is built on. Every example is of someone who, rather than being a person of faith in God and a follower of God, sees the law as a tool for personal gain. Ahab and Jezebel did not follow God but used His Law as a cudgel against an innocent man. Samuel's sons did not follow their father in his faith and used their position in the law to pervert justice and ultimately sour the people on the very system of leadership that God had established for them. The Pharisees and the scribes used the law to create a system of haves and have-nots and to enforce social strata.

The problem on each of these occasions was not the Law itself. The problem was that the people administering that law were not holding themselves personally accountable to the moral law that underlay the civil law they were responsible for administering. This is not a new idea. When Moses first appointed judges over Israel, the requirement was not only ability but character: "men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe."<sup>14</sup> You cannot trust the law to ungodly hands. It will always be abused and used to further selfish ambition rather than for the purpose that God made it for.

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<sup>12</sup>Rev 2:14 ESV - <https://www.bible.com/bible/59/REV.2.14.ESV>

<sup>13</sup>2 Peter 2:15 ESV - <https://www.bible.com/bible/59/2PE.2.15.ESV>

<sup>14</sup>Exodus 18:21 ESV