



Ezekiel 20:25 is a verse that jumps off the page as a false statement: “Then I gave them laws that are not good and commands that do not bring life.” How is it possible that God could ever give laws that are “not good” and “commands that do not bring life”?

First, let’s backtrack to the beginning of this chapter to understand the context. Ezekiel writes from captivity in Babylon. It is a discouraging time and the leaders seek to understand God’s will:

“Mortal man,’ he said, ‘speak to these leaders and tell them that the Sovereign LORD is saying: You have come to ask my will, have you? As surely as I am the living God, I will not let you ask me anything. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken. ‘Are you ready to pass sentence on them, mortal man? Then do so. Remind them of the disgusting things their ancestors did” (Ezekiel 20:3-4).

It seems like God is saying, “You leaders want to understand my will? What do you think Ezekiel? Isn’t it obvious that what has happened up to this point is not my will?” God then went on to contrast his will in the history of Israel with the rebellious human response. First, beginning in Egypt.

God’s will in Egypt:

“It was then that I promised to take them out of Egypt and lead them to a land I had chosen for them, a rich and fertile land, the finest land of all. I told them to throw away the disgusting idols they loved and not to make themselves unclean with the false gods of Egypt, because I am the LORD their God.

The rebellious human response:

“But they defied me and refused to listen. They did not throw away their disgusting idols or give up the Egyptian gods. I was ready to let them feel the full force of my anger there in Egypt” (Ezekiel 20:6-8).

This passage suggests that even prior to leaving Egypt the people were wrapped up in idolatry and the worship of the Egyptian gods. We have previously discussed God’s anger as his letting go and allowing his children to suffer the consequences of their rebellious choice. As we read on, we see that God’s will was to stick with his people and to bring them out of Egypt, even in their rebellion against him, in order to protect his reputation in the world:

God's will in the desert:

“But I did not, since that would have brought dishonor to my name, for in the presence of the people among whom they were living I had announced to Israel that I was going to lead them out of Egypt. And so I led them out of Egypt into the desert. I gave them my commands and taught them my laws, which bring life to anyone who obeys them...” (Ezekiel 20:9-11).

The rebellious human response:

“But even in the desert they defied me. They broke my laws and rejected my commands, which bring life to anyone who obeys them” (Ezekiel 10:13)

The people grumbled and complained on the way to Mount Sinai. They distrusted God and wanted to return to Egypt. They also rejected the authority of Moses and believed the message of the spies that they were too weak to enter the Promised Land. But once again, as the passage continues, we see that God did not give up. His reputation (“name” or “character”) was on the line and so he stuck with them. The best option available was to allow them to wander 40 years in the desert as the older generation died off leaving “the young people” (except for Caleb and Joshua) to enter the Promised Land:

God's will:

“I was ready to let them feel the force of my anger there in the desert and to destroy them. But I did not, since that would have brought dishonor to my name among the nations which had seen me lead Israel out of Egypt. So I made a vow in the desert that I would not take them to the land I had given them, a rich and fertile land, the finest land of all. I made the vow because they had rejected my commands, broken my laws, and profaned the Sabbath---they preferred to worship their idols. But then I took pity on them. I decided not to kill them there in the desert. Instead, I warned the young people among them: Do not keep the laws your ancestors made; do not follow their customs or defile yourselves with their idols. I am the LORD your God. Obey my laws and my commands. Make the Sabbath a holy day, so that it will be a sign of the covenant we made, and will remind you that I am the LORD your God” (Ezekiel 20:13-20).

But the generation that entered the Promised Land rebelled as well (this is getting repetitious!):

The rebellious human response:

“But that generation also defied me. They broke my laws and did not keep my commands, which bring life to anyone who obeys them. They profaned the Sabbath. I was ready to let them feel the force of my anger there in the desert and to kill them all.

God's will:

“But I did not, since that would have brought dishonor to my name among the nations which had seen me bring Israel out of Egypt. So I made another vow in the desert. I vowed that I would

scatter them all over the world.” (Ezekiel 20:21-23)

This "vow in the desert" refers to the predicted exile where God on many occasions warned that they would be taken captive into other lands:

“The LORD will scatter you among all the nations, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you will serve gods made of wood and stone, gods that neither you nor your ancestors have ever worshiped before” Deuteronomy 28:64 (See also Deut 4:27 and Lev 26:33).

A fair question to ask is whether or not the captivities to other nations was really “God’s will”? Of course not, but yet this was really God’s only option under the circumstances. A parent, for example, will sometimes do everything possible to protect her child from suffering the consequences of foolish choices, but at some point there is little else that can be done but to allow the child to experience the pain that the parent desperately tried to prevent. The experienced pain of captivity was a form of discipline that God hoped would lead his people back home. “I will abandon my people until they have suffered enough for their sins and come looking for me. Perhaps in their suffering they will try to find me” (Hosea 5:15).

Ezekiel 25 describes the leaders as asking for God’s will. What God is saying to them is this: “Listen to the story of ‘my will’ for you throughout this entire period of time! My will has been that you would be my people and that I would be your God, yet you have rejected me at every possible turn and now here you are in Babylonian captivity and you ask for my will? My will is that you were never here in the first place!”

Finally, after all this description of the back and forth from Egypt to the Promised Land we come back to the unusual verse: “Then I gave them laws that are not good and commands that do not bring life” (Ezekiel 20:25-26). My understanding is that this verse, in the context of the story that God is telling, describes the desperate measures God used to keep his people from collapsing entirely. Let’s consider a few examples of these “bad rules”:

### **Eye for an Eye**

“...the punishment is to be a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, and a foot for a foot” (Deuteronomy 19:21).

“Eye for an eye” is a bad rule, but yet it was needed at a time when “justice” called for escalating violence. Vengeance was the form of justice in that time: You insult me, I strike you; you knock over my fence, I burn your field down, and so on. “Eye for an eye” was a way of limiting the violence in that time, but it was far away from the idea.

Gandhi was right when he said that “an eye for an eye makes the world blind” but yet it was a necessary first step during a violent time as God gradually led his people toward a better ideal. The ideal is seen in Jesus who dramatically did away with the old form of justice: “

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But now I tell you: do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too" (Matthew 5:38-39).

Before Jesus' command for turning the other cheek, the cities of refuge were given as another gradual step in the right direction. "If someone kills another person unintentionally, without previous hostility, the slayer may flee to any of these cities to live in safety" (Deuteronomy 19:1-4). This is an improvement over "eye for an eye" in that protection was now provided for the person who accidentally killed another.

The road from escalating vengeance to turning the other cheek was a long one and involved some "bad rules" along the way (eye for an eye, cities of refuge, etc). When understood in this light, we see the God of the Old Testament as supremely patient, waiting for the day when he could unfold the truth with greater clarity. God could have merely said from the onset, "I forbid the practice of private vengeance. If a man accidentally kills another man while chopping wood, his blood may not be avenged by his family." In his wisdom though, God realized that this would have been too much, too fast, and he would have lost the connection with his people entirely and so he "gave in" to rules that were less than the ideal.

## Slavery

Time and again the bible reveals God meeting people where they are with rules and teachings that seem quite bizarre by today's standards. We need to be careful as we read the bible not to see these rules as eternal truths or else we might join Jefferson Davis who used the bible to defend slavery: [Slavery] "was established by decree of Almighty God...it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation...it has existed in all ages, has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts."

It's true that there are commands for how to treat slaves in the bible, but this does not mean that slavery is the ideal. For example, commands were given to let slaves go free after the sixth year of service (Exodus 21:2). Once again, this was an improvement on the old system in which the slave would never be set free.

Even in the New Testament, Paul would give advice that slaves should "...obey your human masters with fear and trembling..." (Ephesians 6:5) but yet at the same time he tried to move this entire system closer to the ideal: "Masters, be fair and just in the way you treat your slaves. Remember that you too have a Master in heaven" (Colossians 4:1). Ultimately, Paul would remind both slave and master that, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

If slavery was not God's plan, why not abolish it? Once again, "too much, too fast":

"It was not the apostle's work to overturn arbitrarily or suddenly the established order of society.

To attempt this would be to prevent the success of the gospel. But he taught principles which struck at the very foundation of slavery and which, if carried into effect, would surely undermine the whole system.”(Acts of the Apostles, pg. 459)

### **Women: Polygamy and Divorce**

The bible has rules for polygamy which did not immediately abolish it but rather moved things a step closer to the ideal: “If a man takes a second wife, he must continue to give his first wife the same amount of food and clothing and the same rights that she had before” (Exodus 21:10). The old system was cruel. If you didn’t like your wife, get rid of her and take another; if you don’t like her, get rid of her and take yet another. The new direction from God preserved to some extent the dignity and life of the first wife, although admittedly these were only baby steps away from a disgusting practice.

The OT divorce rules are another example of God meeting people where they are. We may be horrified at this command, yet it was an improvement on the old system where a woman on the “outs” with her husband was made into a slave:

“When the LORD your God gives you victory in battle and you take prisoners, you may see among them a beautiful woman that you like and want to marry. Take her to your home, where she will shave her head, cut her fingernails, and change her clothes. She is to stay in your home and mourn for her parents for a month; after that, you may marry her. Later, if you no longer want her, you are to let her go free. Since you forced her to have intercourse with you, you cannot treat her as a slave and sell her.” (Deuteronomy 21:10-14)

In Jesus’ day, the mistreatment of women continued. If a wife fell out of favor with her husband, she was sent packing – into a hopeless world of shame. Jesus improved on the Mosaic law when he said, “It was also said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a written notice of divorce.’ But now I tell you: if a man divorces his wife for any cause other than her unfaithfulness, then he is guilty...” (Matthew 5:31-32)

This was an affront to the Pharisees and contradicted their bibles. They came to Jesus armed with the writings of Moses:

“Some Pharisees came and tried to trap Him with this question: ‘Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for just any reason?’ ‘Haven’t you read the Scriptures?’ Jesus replied. ‘They record that from the beginning ‘God made them male and female.’ And He said, ‘This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.’ Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together.’ ‘Then why did Moses say in the law that a man could give his wife a written notice of divorce and send her away?’ they asked.”

Don’t miss Jesus’ incredible reply:

“Moses permitted divorce only as a concession to your hard hearts, but it was not what God had originally intended” (Matthew 19:3-8).

Incredible! Jesus’ words explain half of the difficult stories and teachings in the OT. These were a “concession” to the “hard hearts” of humanity. These were “bad rules” that were never a part of God’s plan.

The rules we are talking about in the OT are not the ideal! “...laws are made, not for good people, but for lawbreakers and criminals, for the godless and sinful, for those who are not religious or spiritual, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the immoral, for sexual perverts, for kidnappers, for those who lie and give false testimony or who do anything else contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:8-10). The law “was added in order to show what wrongdoing is...” (Galatians 3:19) and to lead us back to God.

I love the message paraphrase of this text:

“The law was added because we needed it when we were such rebels. Until the time when we were mature enough to respond freely in faith to the living God, we were carefully surrounded and protected by the Mosaic law...” (Galatians 3:23-26, The Message).

In a classroom of noisy and rebellious children, a good teacher will give rules – lots of them – they are necessary to highlight make a clear distinction between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Once the class is under control, however, the need to hammering rules of behavior becomes unnecessary. Rebellion was so severe in the OT among God’s professed people that rules multiplied.

## **War**

The Old Testament has God giving direct commands for his people to engage in warfare, but does this mean that “God is pro war” as Jerry Falwell stated? God’s plan was not that his people should fight their way into the Promised Land. He wanted to use other means such as sending the hornet ahead of his people. His people wanted to fight, however, and so God gave commands to fight. The heathen nations had to be driven out as there was no possible way that his people could intermingle and become involved in “all the disgusting things that they do in the worship of their gods” (Deut. 20:18). Many times God warned that it would be “fatal” for them to intermix. The historical record reveals that it was fatal to adopt the practice of worshipping foreign gods. This is seen most vividly in the life of Solomon, the “wisest man that ever lived” who became a fool in the worship of other gods. The commands to fight in the OT were a desperate means for God to maintain contact with his people. These commands were very, very bad rules, but let’s be careful not to make God out to be a monster because he gave them. All the ugliness and cruelty is within humanity, not God. What we see on God’s part is a willingness to muddy his reputation in order to meet our debased needs.

## The Ten Commandments

Even within the 10 commandments we see God meeting us where we are. The people that came to Mount Sinai were a rebellious group – grumbling, complaining and continually rebelling against the authority of Moses. God had to shake the mountain to get their attention and then to give a list of rules that would be very sad if, as a parent, you had to impose them to your family in the morning: “Please have no father and husband but me. Please don’t steal from your classmates and especially don’t kill anyone at school today. And to my wife, please don’t commit adultery today.” [Perhaps at this point, the wife would turn to her husband and repeat the 10th commandment: “Please do not desire our neighbor’s house and his wife!”]

It’s actually quite sad that God had to sit his people down and give them such a list.

Also within the 10 commandments, God warned that “I bring punishment on those who hate me and on their descendants down to the third and fourth generation” (Exodus 20:5-6). These words were also given to meet people where they are. In that time, God was perceived as responsible for everything, both good and "bad", and so God spoke to them with words that they could understand and identify with. It wasn’t until the book of Ezekiel that God was able to clarify that he does not punish to the third and fourth generation:

“The LORD spoke to me and said, ‘What is this proverb people keep repeating in the land of Israel? ‘The parents ate the sour grapes, But the children got the sour taste.’ ‘As surely as I am the living God,’ says the Sovereign LORD, ‘you will not repeat this proverb in Israel any more. The life of every person belongs to me, the life of the parent as well as that of the child. The person who sins is the one who will die’” (Ezekiel 18:1-4).

The entire chapter of Ezekiel 18 does on to clearly state that God does not punish the children (or great-grandchildren!) for the sins of the fathers.

“A son is not to suffer because of his father's sins, nor a father because of the sins of his son. Good people will be rewarded for doing good, and evil people will suffer for the evil they do. If someone evil stops sinning and keeps my laws, if he does what is right and good, he will not die; he will certainly live. All his sins will be forgiven, and he will live, because he did what is right” (Ezekiel 18:19-23).

There is truth to the words that God punishes to the third and fourth generation, however. If a parent is an alcoholic and beats his children every night, there is a negative effect of that brutality to the third and fourth generation. The books of Moses suggest that this is extrinsically imposed by God; Ezekiel clarifies that in reality this is self-imposed.

## The Ideal

So much of the bible is dedicated to God's attempts to reach stubborn rebels that we can easily miss the ideal. There is an ideal! All the rules and laws were designed to lead to a destination:

"Teacher,' he asked, 'which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and the most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like it: 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.' The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments"" (Matthew 22:36-40).

What God wants is very simple:

"The only obligation you have is to love one another. Whoever does this has obeyed the Law...if you love others, you will never do them wrong; to love, then is to obey the whole Law" (Romans 13:8,9). "For the whole Law is summed up in one commandment: 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself'" (Galatians 5:14).

Rather than being offended that God would give "bad rules" in the OT, we should rather be amazed that God was so patient and persistent in his attempts to win his children to his side.