

Ethics for the Good Life

1. Intro: Hugh McKay – The Good Life

- In his book, the *Good Life* ... sociologist Hugh McKay seeks to spell out what he considers to be the 'good life'
- In it he says the good life is this:
 - "a life characterised by goodness, a morally praiseworthy life, a life valuable in its impact with others, a life devoted to the common good."
 - "This type of life is marked by courteous respect for others rights, a responsiveness to their needs and a concern for others wellbeing. "
 - "A person living this life will be motivated by kindness and compassion"
- When it comes to living the 'good life' he says ...
 - "Virtually every philosophical and religious tradition tells us with the clarity and urgency of a ringing bell, that there's only one good way for humans to live."
 - "If we want to contribute to a civil society by promoting the peaceful, harmonious and mutually supportive communities which are our natural habitat, we must learn to treat each other in the way we ourselves would wish to be treated – the so-called Golden Rule"
- One of God's gifts to us in the Bible is he spells out what Hugh McKay is talking about
- All those attributes of a 'good life' came from the author of life himself
 - God is the one who shows us how to live the 'good life'
 - And so we're going to turn to the scriptures this morning and see what God himself has to say about the 'good life' and how to live it
- As we do, we going to explore three points?
 - What is the good life?
 - How do you live the good life?
 - How do you get the good life?

2. What is the good life?

- We're working our way through the OT book of Exodus
 - If you've seen the movie '10 Commandments' you'll be familiar with the story
 - It covers the time in Israel's history when Moses led God's people out of Egypt through the Red Sea
- Now Ch 21-23 the Israelites receive the rest of the Law – known as the Book of the Covenant

- What is the Book of Covenant?
 - Basically it's the application of the 10 Commandments to OT Israel
 - It's a whole series of Laws given to God's people that help them flesh out what it means to live lives that are holy and pleasing to God
- In essence, the Law was given to Israel to show them how to live the 'good life'
 - The word 'Law' in Hebrew is the word 'Torah'
 - Torah has means 'instruction' or 'guidance'
 - The Law that God gives his people was his guidance or instruction on how to live the good life in the world he created
- I say the 'good life' ... because as the one who created us and our world, God is the one who knows what's best for us and how to live
 - Like a manufacturer giving us an instruction manual to show us how to use their machine or appliance
 - Why do they do it?
 - To ensure we use it properly
 - To ensure we don't hurt ourselves
 - To ensure we get to enjoy it to the max
- We're used to this ... we follow makers instructions all the time
 - On Sears hair dryer: "Do not use while sleeping."
 - On a child's Superman costume: "Wearing of this garment does not enable you to fly"
 - On a Swedish chain saw: "Do not attempt to stop chain with your hands"
 - On a muffin packet: "Remove wrapper, open mouth, insert muffin, eat."
- When we don't follow the makers instructions
 - We hurt ourselves, we hurt others
 - Don't experience the 'good' that it ought to bring
- The same is true with God's Law
 - He gives us his Law for our good ... to help us live the 'good life'
 - When we follow his Law ... life on the whole, **is** good
 - When we reject his law ... we hurt ourselves, we hurt others and we don't experience the 'good life' God made us for
- So what does the Law in the Book of the Covenant teach us about living out the 'good life'

- The Law covers a myriad of life issues including:
 - justice, social justice, property law, sexual ethics, retribution, compensation law, personal injury law
- 21:2-11 deals with human rights including the rights of slaves and daughters
- 21:12-36 deals with various situations relating to injury of people and animals
 - If anyone ... harms / assaults / kidnaps / attacks / beats > these are the punishments
 - If animals cause harm / damage to property ...
 - If you cause harm to animals
 - ... these are the restitutions to be made
- 22:1-15 deal with questions of proper use and care of people, livestock and property
 - If animals are stolen, die, injured under someone else's care
 - If you steal animals and caught ...
 - and what restitution is required if injury or damage is done
- 22:16-27 deals with social responsibility
 - Of cases of sexual abuse and immorality
 - How to treat vulnerable people ... foreigner, orphan, widow, poor,
- 23:1-9 relate to matters of justice > false witness, lying, bribery and obstructing justice

- All of it is an application or unpacking of the 10 Commandments
 - Do not murder, do not steal, do not covet, do not give false testimony
 - These are good ethics for ensuring we can live the 'good life' in our society
 - In fact most of it resonates with us because much of our modern day case law is derived from the OT Law God gave his people all those years ago

- Probably the most famous of the laws is found in Exodus 21:23-25
 - *But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.*
 - It's point is that justice is to be done, but justice is to be fair
 - There's no room for excessive revenge or retribution like we see happening in our bkie gangs here in Australia

- And while a lot of the Law is presented in terms of what to do when the Law is broken ...
 - The implication is ... this is how you ought to live
- God is saying
 - When you follow **my** Law
 - ... society functions so much better
 - ... everyone in society is able to live the good life
- **Apologetic Sidebar – True Freedom**
- Often when the topic of God’s Law comes up, people react to it
- They will say
 - “God just wants to spoil our fun”
 - “Christianity is a strait jacket”
 - “being a Christian means you have to give up your freedom”
- What’s behind that?
 - It’s the post-modern idea that ‘I’m free to do what I want any old time’ [Soup Dragons]
 - Anything that imposes restrictions on my freedom is inherently bad
- But actually that’s a myth ...
 - Because whether you are Christian person or secular person ... we forgo our freedoms all the time
 - A single person gives up their freedom to marry
 - A married couple gives up their freedom to have children
 - An elite athlete gives up their freedom to focus on training
 - None of those things are bad . . . in fact they are actually good things
- In fact, true freedom comes when restrictions fit with the reality of our nature and capacities
- Example:
 - A fish, because it is designed to absorb oxygen through water rather than air, is only **free** ... if it is restricted and limited to water
 - If we let it escape out of its fish bowl onto the couch ... its freedom to move and live is not enhanced ... but destroyed
 - The fish dies if we don’t honour the reality of its nature
- Like the fish in the bowl ...
 - true freedom is not absence of restrictions
 - true freedom comes when we live according to the right restrictions that fit with the reality of our nature

- Therefore, because God made us ... his Law doesn't restrict us ... it actually frees us to live the good life he made us for
- To try and live life apart from God and his Law is like jumping out of the fish bowl
 - It might seem like its true freedom, but actually it fails to enhance our life and will only end up destroying us

3. How do you live the good life?

- When it comes to the OT Law ... it's creates a lot of controversy
 - Christians get confused over the role of the OT law
 - Secular people will say its outdated
 - Others will accuse Christians of being inconsistent in their handling and use of the Bible because they'll say
 - You need to obey this particular law
 - yet at the same time ignore other laws

West Wing - Bartlet's Diatribe Against the OT

- There's a famous scene from the West Wing that highlights this dilemma
- Jed Bartlet, the president of the United States was about to address a gathering of radio talk show hosts in the White House
- As the president entered the hall, they all stood and applauded
- All, that is, except one — a woman with blond hair, wearing a green suit who was known for her condemnation of homosexuality based the Law in the OT
- The President said to her "Excuse me, doctor, it's good to have you here. Are you an M.D.?"
- "A Ph.D.," she replied
- "In psychology?"
- "No, sir," she said.
- "Theology?"
- "No."
- "Social work?"
- "I have a Ph.D. in English literature," she replied.
- "I'm asking," continued the president, "because on your show people call in for advice and you go by the title 'doctor,' and I didn't know if maybe your listeners were confused by that and assumed you had advanced training in psychology, theology, or health care."
- "I don't believe they are confused. No, sir," she responded.
- "Good," said the president "I like your show. I like how you call homosexuality an abomination."

- "I don't say homosexuality is an abomination, Mr. President," she replied. "The Bible does."
- "Yes, it does! Leviticus 18:22!"
- "I wanted to ask you a couple of questions while I had you here. I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, always cleared the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be?"
- "While thinking about that, can I ask another? My chief of staff, Leo McGarry, insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or is it OK to call the police?"
- "Here's one that's really important, because we've got a lot of sports fans in this town. Touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean, Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football?"
- "Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John for planting different crops side by side?"
- "Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads?"
- "Think about those questions, would you? One last thing ... in this building when the President stands, nobody sits."

- What the producers of the show were trying to do through President Bartlet ... was that if we accept the OT Law as the authority on homosexuality, we must also apply to ourselves everything Moses required of ancient Israel
 - But if we were to uphold every one of the OT laws, when fleshed out with particular examples, it absurd
 - The implied ... but obvious conclusion is that the Law in the OT scriptures are outdated and have no authority or relevance for our lives today in this post-Christian, postmodern world we live in

- And so what are we to do with the Law?
 - Is it relevant for us here in Sydney in 2016?
 - And if it is, how are we meant to understand it?

- We need to understand that the OT Law was historically conditioned ... especially the Book of the Covenant > Ch 21-23 > which is the application of the 10 Commandments to the Israelites

- Unlike us today, Israel was a theocracy > their religious law was also their civil law
- The laws within the Book of the Covenant applied to Israel in their historical setting ... in a way they cannot be applied to us today
- For example
 - 23:19 gives a specific command about not cooking a young goat in its mother's milk
 - That's totally irrelevant to us ... but then ... it was an application of the 1st Commandment ... you shall have no other gods but me
 - Because cooking young goats in their mother's milk was part of a Canaanite fertility ritual
 - And so what God's forbidding is magical practices in worship of false gods
- So we can't directly apply the law code of these chapters to us as they did to Israel
- This means that the details of what it means to obey God will be different in our cultural context
- Notice I said the details may be different ... and not the principles
 - In our cultural context, oxen and donkeys don't have much relevance
 - But the principal of care for human life, assets and property etc are still the same
 - The principles remain the same ... because God and his character remain the same
- Which means the writers of the West Wing ...
 - While they may have scored points with secular viewers and given Christianity a bit of a kicking
 - They failed to understand the OT law in the context of the whole Bible
 - Because all those applications of the 10 commandments in the Law were for that time and not our time
- Now if we left it there ... then we would be free to jettison all the OT law and the ethics it espouses
 - Which would just be a slippery slope to making up our own moral code
- So the big question is ...
 - Are we free to change the law with changing cultural circumstances?
 - How do we know what still applies in 21st century Australia and what is not required

- The answer lies in understanding that the Bible's story is a progressive one
 - And that all the OT finds its fulfilment in Jesus Christ the Son of God
- Jesus himself says in the sermon on the mount [p959]
 - Matthew 5:17 - *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."*
- As you read through the rest of that very famous sermon on the mount ... he takes the OT law and completely expands it
 - *Matthew 5:21-22* ²¹ "You have heard that it was 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.
 - *Matthew 5:27-28* ²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
- You see Jesus takes the **principles** of the Law and applies it to **everyone** in way that extends far beyond OT Israel, or the Jews of Jesus day
 - And in doing so ... gives us the principle of the OT law for us to follow today
- Another example is that verse we read from Exodus 21:23
- A little further on in the sermon on the mount, Jesus says in Matthew 5:38-44
 - ³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' ³⁹ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. ⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you
- You see what Jesus is doing here?
 - He is taking the OT Law and magnifying it ten-fold
- In this case ... the OT Law which Jesus restates in v38 'eye for an eye, tooth for tooth' can only **AT BEST** restrict the human appetite for revenge
 - That's why the principle was given
- But we know .. that retaliation and vengeance is our normal human mode

- When people annoy us, wrong us, hurt us ... our natural response is to get them back
- Even if when the offense is relatively mild
 - the person cutting us off in traffic
 - neighbour who constantly revs their car engine
 - Let alone more serious offences
- But Jesus takes the principle and teaches us a 'torah' (an instruction) which totally transcends the limits set by the OT law and conventional human society
 - Look at v44 where he sums it up – *But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*

- You see ... what Jesus is doing is applying the Law to everyday life and situations that flows from the character of God
 - And that is the characteristic of love

- Later in Matthew, an expert in the Law asked Jesus
 - *Matthew 22:36 – "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"*
- Jesus replied
 - *Matthew 22:37-40 "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*
- You see friends ... the ethic for living the 'good life' is not
 - Following a list of Laws from the OT
 - Not evening following list of rules from the NT ...
 - or something the church has made up
 - or your own rules of right and wrong
- The way to live the 'good life' ... our ethic for the 'good life' ... comes down to two principles
 - Love your maker and love your neighbour
 - Love fulfils the Law

- So when
 - You're disputing with your neighbour
 - There's tension in your marriage
 - Not relating well with your kids
 - Caused damage or loss to someone else's property

- You're faced with a dilemma at work
- The ethic for the 'good life' is ...
 - What is the loving thing to do?
 - How can I do what is most loving to that person?
- As Adam and Simone raise Lillian ... it's not about obeying this rule and that rule to be a good girl
 - It will be about teaching her to do what is loving to others
- You see how radical that is?
- It's not ...
 - "What can I do to paint myself in the best light?"
 - "What can I do to get out of my mistake?"
 - "What can I do to get what I want?"
 - "How can I limit what I have to do?"
- Rather ... love is limitless and ensures that we do the right thing every time
 - We don't need laws to spell out for us what to do in every single scenario and situation
 - We simply need to ask ... "how can I love that person in this situation?"

4. How do you get the good life?

- Because love has no boundaries ...
 - What Jesus is demanding a complete and limitless response towards those around us
 - And because of this ... living out this ethic is far, far more challenging to keep
- Our problem is not that we cannot understand this ethic ... but that we cannot do it
- If we go back to the sermon on the mount in Matt 5
- Most of us could happily say
 - "I've never murdered anybody"
 - "I've never committed adultery"
 - "I've always been just when people have wronged me"
- But how many of us could say
 - "I have never hated anybody"
 - "I've never looked at a woman / man lustfully"
 - "I always love my enemy and prayed for them"
- I know I couldn't!

- Because the love ethic that Jesus calls us to exposes me as an adulterous murderer who hates his neighbour
- However ... this is where the good news of Christianity gives you and I hope
- You see other religions say
 - **If** you obey > **if** you're good enough > **then** you will be saved > **then** you can have the 'good life'
 - If you **don't** obey > if you're **not** good enough .. then you're excluded from the good life
- But Christianity says
 - You **are** saved ... therefore - obey
- Christianity says
 - The 'good life' of eternity doesn't depend on you living a 'good life'
- You see the Law was never designed to be a ladder on which we climb up to heaven
 - We saw this in Exodus that God had **first** rescued his people out of Egypt ... and **then** he gave them the Law as the ethic by which they were to live as his people
 - You see they came into relationship with him **first** ...
 - because of God's grace and mercy
 - not because they obeyed the Law
 - The law came after
- And it remains true for us ...
- We can have the 'good life' despite being unable to perfectly live the good life'
- Why?
 - Because Jesus Christ gave up the good life in heaven
 - Came to earth and lived the perfect life ... the perfect life you and I couldn't live
 - And then he went to the cross and took on the judgment and punishment we deserve for all the times we've failed to love others
- The 'good life' in heaven is not for good people
 - The 'good life' in heaven is for forgiven people
- God gave us the Law, not so we could be forgiven if we could obey it
 - No! He sent Jesus Christ into the world to live the perfect life and die for us so we may be forgiven
 - And then he says to us ... now

- Love the Lord your God with all your heart
- And love your neighbour as yourself

- Apostle John writes
 - *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.¹*
- Jesus Christ gave up the good life so we could have the good life
- At the cross, Jesus loved us so we could love God and love others

- What are the ethics for the good life?
- What ethic are Adam and Simone to teach Lillian as she grows up?
 - It's the ethic of love
 - *Love God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

PRAY

¹ 1 John 4:10-11