

# Bite Size Bible Study

Above the Law #235

By Pastor Lee

No, I am not encouraging you to break the law, but there were times in the Bible where a person did go beyond what the law prescribed in order for grace and justice to cover the situation.

I've already touched on this subject in Bite Size Bible Study #220 in Joseph's response to Mary's Pregnancy. You can go back and read this here:  
[https://www.gclemongrove.org/files/ugd/9e9b0c\\_109910476b9d49c783f7f12d61a021e2.pdf](https://www.gclemongrove.org/files/ugd/9e9b0c_109910476b9d49c783f7f12d61a021e2.pdf)

Now I would like to expand on this concept and show going "Above the Law" and what it requires.

We talk about grace a lot and how God's grace covers our inability to act in appropriate ways (sins). In this way He demonstrates to us that there are appropriate ways of living that are loftier than the rules He has given us to follow. These are not ways of getting our own way but a mindset of giving others a benefit that is not warranted in any given situation.

Mary when confronted with the possibility of being pregnant by the Holy Spirit, was willing to go above the Law and accept the situation. The Law stated emphatically that she should not become pregnant either by her espoused husband or any one else. The penalty was death. She chose to believe the angel and become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She opted to go "Above the Law".

Joseph also went "Above the Law" by deciding to divorce her quietly but went even further when he married her.

*This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.*

*But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Matthew 1:18-21 NIV*

Joseph uses an extraordinary and unexpected definition of justice that is "Above the Law". What allows Joseph the right to go "Above the Law"? Justice for him was more than an equal application of law. It was a broader understanding of justice imparted to him by the Holy Spirit.

In the story of Abraham, he was willing to sacrifice Isaac in order to obey God. In most cultures laws, both ancient and modern, say that a father should not kill his son. If Abraham was to obey God, it required him to do something that was against most cultural laws.

In both stories the participants acted "Above the Law" in keeping their relationship with God, even though keeping the relationship could cause them distress, human disapproval or even death.

We need to remember who gave humanity the Law and under what conditions it was given. Although it is usually called the Law a better definition would be teaching, or rules for successful living. God sets the minimum standard by which we are to interrelate with each other. He has given us general rules to that end, but sometimes a given situation will require that we act above that law and extend grace and mercy, thereby applying a greater definition of justice. Knowing when to apply this greater definition is only known by an intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit.

In one of the prophesies of Isaiah there is a picture of a special "suffering servant". Through this gentle servant God would one day act to save mankind. In one of these four unique songs, Isaiah describes that servant.

*"Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen one in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him,  
and he will bring justice to the nations.  
He will not shout or cry out,  
or raise his voice in the streets.  
**A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.**  
**In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;**  
he will not falter or be discouraged  
till he establishes justice on earth.  
In his teaching the islands will put their hope."*

Isaiah 42:1- 4 NIV

Focusing in on verse three (bolded) we encounter some strange metaphorical wording that seems not to make sense at our first read.

Reeds were used in the ancient world as pens. If the reeds were damaged, they could not function properly as writing implements. So, what can be done with a crushed reed? The only option is to break it and use it for cooking or heating.

Crushing a reed made it unable to be used as a pen, unable to pass along understanding to a future generation. Likewise, crushing the spirit of a person makes them unable to fulfill their God given purpose in telling others of God's goodness.

Small clay lamps were used to give light in the house and were fueled with olive oil. The wicks of these lamps hung from a spout at the side of the lamp. As the oil ran out, there was danger that the wick might fall off and the flaming end fall out of the spout and cause a fire. A bowl of water was often placed on the floor under the lamp to prevent such an accident.

But this servant of God will not break the wick, nor will he quench the flame on the wick.

When applied to a person this means that the good that shines from that person will not be snuffed out. They will be able to reach out to other people to encourage them in their relationship to God. Even though they are making mistakes they will not be destroyed.

Justice, as understood by this servant is neither “retributive justice” (you harm me and I will harm you), nor is it “equal application of law” (I pay my taxes and so will you). Justice means compassion for the weak and exploited.

Peter received a vision directing him to visit a Gentile family. Jews considered Gentiles unclean, and Peter was naturally upset by the vision. Translations commonly say he “pondered” the vision, but the roots of the Greek terms employed here specify that he was angry because the vision overthrew his long-held understanding of the Law which forbade contact with Gentiles.

Was Peter to change his entire perspective on how God works in the world? All his life Peter had believed that his duty as a Jew was to have nothing to do with Gentiles. Was he now suddenly expected to overthrow the understandings of centuries? One would expect him to be upset. “How can God do this to me?” he might have asked.

A literal meaning of the Greek word has to do with anger *within the person* involved. This profoundly fits the feelings of Joseph on first hearing the shocking news about Mary.

In other stories we find the parable of the great banquet, a man is insulted publicly (shamed). Instead of choosing retributive anger he chooses to extend grace to the unworthy outside of his community.

*Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’*

*“But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ “Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ “Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’*

*“The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’ ““Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’*

*“Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”*

These and many other stories show us that the Law spoke of a “bottom line” way of living one’s life. But in many cases that “bottom line” needs to be built up to a higher level – to go “Above the Law” and to extend grace, mercy and justice to those who may or may not deserve it.

Jesus’ example has shown us the way to go “Above the Law”, not to break the Law but to amplify it and extend a right relationship with others through a more honorable behavior – a behavior that better reflects God’s character.

Referenced:  
“Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes” by Kenneth E. Bailey