

## Love and the law

Our Old Testament reading today was the ten commandments – or at least it was one of the accounts of the ten commandments: we had the Exodus account, but there is a very similar reciting of the ten commandments in Deuteronomy 5:6–21.

Now, you'll probably remember how the commandments were first delivered to the nation of Israel: the early chapters of Exodus tell us how the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, how they cried out to God, how God called Moses and acted through him – petitioning Pharaoh to 'let my people go', and how, after the series of ten plagues, Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, through the parted red sea and into the wilderness.

Then in chapter 19 we read that 'Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.'" (Exodus 19:3-6.)

Three days later, Moses again ascended Mount Sinai, and met with God there... and was given the commandments by God, and Moses brought the commandments to the people.

In this sequence, it's important to note the timing: The people cried out to God. God saved the people. God gave the people the commandments. The commandments came after the saving. And this is something that people often miss – the saving comes before the commandments. When people say the ten commandments do or should apply to all people, not just Christians (and Jews), or that they are the basis of human society, they're missing that sequence. The commandments weren't given to all of creation, they were given to the nation of Israel, after God had saved them. And they were given for a specific purpose – and that is to make the nation of Israel – the people of God – special.

In fact, the commandments, and the development of all the laws we see in the book of Leviticus follow on from that and have the effect of making the people special - setting apart the nation of Israel from all the other nations of the world. At its heart, the law is about honouring God in particular ways and about living together in particular ways, and about being set apart as the people of God. About honouring God and living together, and as a result of those two things being set apart as the people of God.

The nation of Israel kept the Sabbath, other nations kept working. The nation of Israel didn't eat pork, but the other nations did. The nation of Israel freed slaves after seven years, other nations did not. The nation of Israel – God's chosen people – was clearly different from the nations around them.

Of course, whenever we think about God's commandments, and how we should consider them, we should remember how Jesus answered (Matthew 22) when a group of Pharisees and Sadducees got together and asked him what the most important commandment was:

"Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'" (Matthew 22:37-40)

It's interesting that Jesus didn't turn to the Ten Commandments, he rather turned to two other verses from the Jewish law – one from Deuteronomy (6:5) and one from from Leviticus (19:18). All the law and the prophets do hang on those two commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart (honour God)... love your neighbour as yourself (live together), and by following those two commandments, we are set apart as the people of God.

And Jesus' reply is echoed by Paul in today's reading from his letter to the Romans (13:8) "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law."

This is Paul: "...circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." (Philippians 3:5-6)

Paul knew the law as well as anyone. He knew the detail. He'd lived by the detail. And yet he writes "...for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law."

At its heart, the law of God has these two aspects – honouring God and living together and it has the effect of setting apart the people of God from the other peoples of the world. These two aspects persist all the way from the delivery of the Law in Exodus and Deuteronomy, through to the New Testament.

It's important to remember that the law has these two aspects, and they are inseparable as God's law. If we just do the living together stuff: honouring parents, no stealing, adultery or murder and so on, and we don't specifically honour God we're just nice people, we're not God's people. You probably know people who do keep those commandments but are of other faiths, or of no faith at all. They're nice people, they're good to know, but they're not God's people.

We see it set out clearly in Matthew (19:16-22), when the rich young man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life – Jesus tells him that he must keep the commandments, and the young man asks "Which ones?".

Jesus tells him "'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, honour your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbour as yourself.'"

The young man assures Jesus that he keeps those and asks what he lacks.

Jesus tells him that if he wants to be perfect, he needs to sell his possessions, give to the poor and follow Jesus... If we are just nice people, living together nicely, then we are not honouring God.

On the other hand, if we say we “honour God” but fail to keep the other commandments, then we do not set ourselves apart as God’s people either. Consider the televangelist who praises God, and fleeces the congregation. Or the organised church which has from time to time in history exploited its power. Or the industrialists of the nineteenth century who taught scripture classes on Sundays, and exploited workers during the rest of the week.

The commandments that God gives his people, aren’t really all that difficult to keep, they aren’t really all that harsh and onerous. We should want to follow God’s law – and that was reflected by the psalmist in today’s psalm:

Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end.

Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart.

Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. (Psalm 119:33-35)

And David wrote in Psalm 19 (7-10), *“The law of the Lord is perfect, [...] the precepts of the Lord are right, [...] the commandment of the Lord is clear, [...] the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.”*

Now we don’t talk about laws like that very often, do we?

Humans do a good job of complicating things, of course, adding rules and guidelines to help us keep the commandments, and then adding rules and guidelines to help us keep those guidelines, and so on and on.

But when we get down to it, God wants us to love him, and God wants us to love each other. At one level, it’s simple, but at another, it’s difficult. We get distracted from the things of God by things of this world, and we are not perfect: we have different ideas and different priorities and we don’t always get on with each other.

So the Psalmist asks God for help. “Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees... Give me understanding... Direct me in the path of your commands... Turn my heart toward your statutes... Turn my eyes away from worthless things.” (Psalm 119:33-37)

But however we try to keep God’s commands, we will always fall short. We need to be like the psalmist and ask God for help in keeping his commandments.

Or as Paul says, “let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ...” (Romans 13:12-14).

Instead of living like everyone else in the world, Paul implores us to put on the armour of light and to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. If we put on – wear - the armour of light, and clothe ourselves with Jesus, then it will not only be helpful for us, but it will be visible to others.

As I reflected last week, most of the time, what is good, what is the right thing, is pretty clear – it's really not too difficult to hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good, but human beings do a good job sometimes of misleading each other and ourselves. We do a really thorough job of complicating the law and seeking loopholes to the law.

Sometimes the good and evil isn't clear, and sometimes we confuse ourselves and each other, so we need to rely not just on our own judgment – we need to pray for God's guidance, just as the psalmist does. "Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end." (Psalm 119:33)

We need to let God, as the saying goes, write his law on our hearts.

So, I wonder... is God's law written on our hearts today? If we test ourselves against God's law, how are we going?

Are we, for example, loving one another as Jesus loved us?

Are we, for example, loving God with all our heart?

Are we, for example, not stealing, murdering, committing adultery or coveting?

If we do test ourselves and find we are okay, then we can rejoice, but we need to be clear here: we're not saved by keeping God's commandments.

God saved the nation of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and then showed them, through the law, the way that their gratitude should be expressed. It is by keeping his commandments that we show our thanks to God for what God has done for us.

God saves us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and shows us the way to show gratitude.

As I read a while ago, "...grace ... meets us where we are, but is not content to let us remain there"

Sometimes it is put as "Holiness is not the way to Jesus. Jesus is the way to holiness."

Paul exhorts us to "... behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. (Romans 13:13)

For most of us, I think, avoiding drunkenness and debauchery isn't going to be hard – the greater challenges for us will be avoiding dissension and most of all, avoiding jealousy.

But no matter which things we find easy and which we find hard, the only way that we can truly keep the commandments, to live the way God would have us live: honouring God and living together has God's people, is through God's grace. God's grace revealed in Jesus, who was perfect, and gave himself up for us.

So, I encourage you to ask yourself are you honouring God and living with one another in such a way that you are identifiable as a member of the people of God, as a follower of Jesus Christ?

Are you heeding Paul's exhortation to "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law"?

Are you praying the prayer that the psalmist prayed - "Teach me, Lord, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end. Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight"?

But as well as ourselves keeping God's commandments, are we, as a church, identifiable as the people of God to the wider world? A people who honour God, and a people who live together as God intends? Not just people who do good. Not just people who praise God. But people who focus on love, people who know that love does no wrong to a neighbour; and that therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Amen.