

## The Law of the Lord

We caught some trains last Wednesday, in an effort to avoid the forecast heat. As I commented on FaceBook, Sydney Trains have their faults, but their airconditioning is generally pretty good.

On the trains there were various helpful announcements, telling us about the destination, the next stop and so on. But one stood out to me: “You could be fined for placing your feet on the seats”.

This is a helpful announcement – I already knew that I shouldn’t place my feet on the seats, of course, but visitors to our city might be used to putting their feet on the seats of their own mass transit systems. Of course, the announcement only repeated what was in writing at each end of the carriage.

I pondered briefly if we shouldn’t be warning people about other crimes. “You could be imprisoned for murdering your fellow passengers” or similar.

People have strange relationships with the law. Some people are absolute “law abiding citizens”, others have a more flexible view of the law (particularly, in my experience, placing one’s feet on seats, speeding, parking and tax law). We don’t really need to remind people not to murder anyone, do we?

The laws we live with in our society might be pretty good, most of the time, but they’re hardly perfect. People are always finding shortcuts and loopholes, the laws are unevenly administered, and people will sometimes simply ignore laws they don’t like – often without consequence.

Our laws aren’t perfect – but today’s reading from Psalm 19 tells us that the law of the lord is perfect. Or, in other translations that the law of the lord is good. And not just perfect, either, but also true, righteous, desirable, and sweet, among other things.

They are all odd words to describe laws. But if God’s law really is all those things, what does that mean for us?

I think that a helpful way to look at God’s law is to look at God’s law in the same context the David, the writer of this psalm does. So often, it seems people’s focus is on how we apply God’s law (and particularly how we apply God’s law *to others*), rather than how we regard God’s law, and what it means to us.

Remember: The people were in Egypt, enslaved, and they 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 contemplating such things often missed.

And a commandment is not quite the same as a command, and the requirement is not so much to ‘obey’ them, but rather to ‘keep’ them (Ex 20:6).

In thinking about the commandments, we should always 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. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

It’s interesting that Jesus didn’t turn to the Ten Commandments, he rather turned to two other verses from the Jewish law - “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*” From Deuteronomy (6:5 ) and “... *love your neighbour as yourself*” from Leviticus (19:18). All the law and the prophets do depend on these 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.

Later Jesus gives the disciples the ‘New Commandment’ that we love one another, even as Jesus has loved us (John 13:34-35), and in that he brought those two elements close together: love one another (living together), even as Jesus has loved us (to the same standard that God loves us, and in doing so we honour God). And in that, he sets those who follow Jesus apart from all the other people of the world: By loving one another, he says, all people will know that you are my disciples.

So 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 while the law has these two aspects, 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, but 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 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 what he must do to inherit eternal life – Jesus tells him that he must keep the commandments, and the man asks “which ones?”.

Jesus tells him “Do no murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother, and love your neighbour as yourself” (all the ‘living together’ commandments).

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.

Conversely, 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. Think about the white suited televangelist who praises God, and fleeces his congregation or who exploits his followers.

...

Today's psalm reading begins with David contemplating God's glory ("The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands"), but then he moves on to talking about the law of God: first about the law itself, then about how that law is helpful to him.

As we think about it, we should remember that this psalmist is David – someone who breached the odd law in his time.

When, David talks about the law, he uses words such as 'perfect', 'right', 'desirable' and 'sweet'. These are not words that people would usually use to describe laws – at least not laws written by people.

The laws that govern our society are human laws, designed for particular purposes at particular times. Amended to address changed circumstances and amended over time to address their own failings. We try to get our rules and laws right... but we never quite get there.

We spot flaws in them. We amend them. Circumstances change. We change the rules to suit. Times change, and we forget about rules, only to trip over them further down the track.

We try, as people, as companies, as churches, to create systems and rules and laws which are perfect. And we fail. We hear of people exploiting loopholes, of getting off on technicalities, and on the other side, of people falling through gaps in the system.

The laws that we make are flawed. They are imperfect. But the law of the Lord is perfect, and because it is, it revives the soul (19:7).

The statutes of God, far from resembling our human-made laws and being hard to understand, give wisdom to those who lack it – as the David says, they make wise the simple (19:7).

But because the law of the Lord is perfect, because the statutes of the Lord are easy to understand, there is a catch for us.... We can't plead ignorance... and there are no technicalities, there are no loopholes to exploit. *The precepts of the Lord are right... the commandment of the Lord is clear.* (19:8)

And this is, I think, the substance of the next part of this psalm, having reflected on the nature of God's law – its perfection, its simplicity, its very sweetness – he moves on to what it means for him – and for us: "*By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.*" (19:11)

It's an interesting phrasing – God's servant is *warned*. Not rebuked, not punished, not excluded, but warned. And this warning is contrasted with a reward that comes from keeping them. That's not how society's laws generally work: In tax law, for instance, if you don't declare all your income on your tax return, you are punished; if you do, there's no reward, that's just what is expected.

If, in Rugby Union, you enter the ruck from the side, you are penalised. But enter the ruck correctly, and there's no reward – the game just continues on.

So we need to ponder: Are we being warned by God's law? In fact: are we open to being warned by God's law?

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

I trust we aren't doing those things... but...

Are we loving one another as Jesus loved us? And are we loving God with all our hearts?

If we are doing those things, then we are rewarded, because we are identified as the people of God. We're not being rewarded in terms of God loving us more or anything, but our reward is being seen as God's.

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<sup>i</sup>. It is by keeping the commandments that we show our thanks to God.

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

But if we test ourselves against God's laws, and find we fall short, then we have a problem....We are being warned.

And the way to address that problem is not more obedience, it's not harsher penalties nor penances for those who fail. And it's not beating ourselves with a stick. Because the focus of the law is warning, not punishment.

But on the other hand, we shouldn't be ignoring problems, claiming or pretending that everything is acceptable, or that God's law is only really a guideline anyway, and the important thing is being true to oneself... because the law remains a warning.

Paul addresses both these things in his letter to the Romans, firstly, when he writes:

*"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin."* (Romans 3:20)

and later, he says:

*"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"* (Romans 6:1-2)

And in today's psalm, David writes: *But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.* (19:12)

We don't always know the things we do wrong. We don't always understand when our actions affect other people. Although our intentions may be good and pure and honourable, sometimes we don't understand the ramifications of our choices.

But these things happen, and we fail to keep the God's law despite our best intentions. We need God's help to keep us mindful of these things.

It's worse, of course, if we willingly disregard God's law – if we do that, we are turning our backs on God. If, despite God's grace to us, we are not honouring God, and if, despite God's grace to us, we are not living together as God would have us live, then we have a huge problem; and we read that David's response to this possibility is to appeal to God for help.

*Keep your servant also from wilful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression. (19:3)*

The only way that we can truly keep the commandments, to live the way God would have us live: honouring God and living together as God's people, is through God's grace. God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ, who has paid the price for our sins.

So, let's ask ourselves if we are honouring God and living with one another in such a way that you are identifiable as a member of the people of God, a follower of Jesus Christ?

And are we, as a church and a congregation, identifiable as the people of God to the wider world? A people who honour God and who live together as God intends? Not just people who do good. Not just people who praise God. But people who by keeping God's law, are identifiable – to the world - as the people of God.

Amen.

---