

March 3 - 3rd Sunday in Lent

The Law of the Lord

Genesis, 20.1-17, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians 1.18-25, John 2.13-25

From Psalm 19,

*⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul:
the command of the Lord is true,
and makes wise the simple.*

*⁸ The precepts of the Lord are right,
and rejoice the heart:
the commandment of the Lord is pure,
and gives light to the eyes. (Psalm 19.7-8)*

How can we treasure and follow the law as given by God without becoming merely legalistic? The law is beautiful, true and wise, but if it is to rejoice the heart and give light to the eyes, the law has to be seen as a glimpse of God's will for God's people and not become an idol in itself. Following it will then be following the will of God for our lives, and not just keeping the rules for the sake of being good at keeping rules.

The ten commandments concern God and our relationship with God. The first commandments are explicitly about God.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

God declares, I am the Lord **your** God. This is a statement of relationship. The Lord is not a god, not one of many. The Lord is the God, the one and only God, but also the God in relationship with God's people. *I am the Lord your God.* We should seek to know and always be aware of the presence and the nature of God: God transcendent beyond the limits of our knowing and God incarnate, God with us. God's people should also be aware of all that God has done for them. They are asked to love the God who has already demonstrated love for them.

The scriptures often make a clear and explicit double statement of the positive and the negative. Do this, do not do that. So now we have an explicit explanation of the opposite of being God's people.

*You shall not **make for yourself** an idol.*

If you make something else (physical or otherwise) into a God, it is a thing of your creation and you are worshipping something that is not only less than God but even less than yourself, because you made it and you gave it primary importance in your life. You made it more important to you than the one true God.

*You shall **not make wrongful use of the name** of the Lord your God.*

*“Knowing another’s name allows for a certain amount of power. Moses and the Israelites could now act **in God’s name**. They could misuse it, misrepresent it, or honor it. There was trust involved in allowing them knowledge of the name, and that trust is reflected in the command to not misuse that name.”* (Kristin J. Wendland, Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa)

When we speak of God, we need to speak truly and with humility. Psalm 19 tells us how the heavens and the earth speak of God’s glory, without words and without any possibility of taking the Lord’s name in vain. They speak using the evidence of God’s work. We can speak with words of our experience with God and of what we know of God, but we should not pretend to know all about God or to know all the mind of God. Many wrong things have been done in the name of God. Let us not add to them.

We then have a hinge commandment that puts our daily life and our way of living into the context of our relationship with God.

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.

The sabbath is a day of rest, a day made holy to honour God, to pause our daily labour and to remember that in doing so we follow a pattern set up by God in Genesis. Do all that you have to do, then take a day of rest, and give a day of rest to others. Others (human or animal) should not be required to work unceasingly while you rest. A pause is good for all. This pause need not be mere inactivity. It might be a time to rebuild yourself and your relationship with God, to help others as Jesus did on the Sabbath, or some other worthy or godly purpose.

Can you think of a modern situation that might tempt us away from these commandments about putting God first in our lives?

[.....]

Then the circle of responsibility moves out to our relationship with others.

Honour your father and your mother.

Respect those who have cared for you or encouraged you. If that is not true of your father or mother, at the very least they gave you life. Life begets life. We value life, our own and others, and should be grateful to be alive in a world full of possibilities.

Now we move out from the family to wider society and refraining from deliberate behaviour that may harm others.

Jumping in at the deep end, *You shall not murder*. Murder is the deliberate and unsanctioned killing of another. Jesus said to beware of even an attitude of hatred or an abusive word. (Slippery slopes and the thin edge of wedges!)

The remaining commandments are similar in their dealing with the intent to do things that harm others.

You shall not commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or covet anything that belongs to your neighbour.

So, don't take what is not yours, not someone's family relationship, their material goods or even their reputation. Don't even nourish a desire for what is not yours. Letting those thoughts run around in your head is not good for you, let alone for your relationship with your neighbour or with God.

Can you think of a modern instance of these questionable practices?

[.....]

For the people being commanded, these commands are about matters related to respecting other people, including their possession and ownership of both material things and aspects of their lives. For those being protected, the commandments are about trusting others, whether that be with words, relationships, reputation or possessions.

The concern of the commandments and the law derived from them is not to bind Israel to some arbitrary set of laws, but to enable them to experience the fullness of life in relationship. (Terence E. Fretheim, Professor of Old Testament Emeritus, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.)

Jesus took these commandments and put a new perspective on them. When we are not sure what to do, we can always look to the words of Jesus. Essentially, take the first step towards the positives and don't take the first step towards the negatives. Love God and love your neighbour. If you do that, you are fulfilling the commandments.

Love God and you will not offend against God. Love your neighbour and you will not even insult them, let alone steal from them or kill them.

Similarly, Jesus said there are no exceptions. You shall love even your enemies. If you do this, you will not set out to harm them or even curse them.

Jesus did not say that this would be easy!

Respect for an 'enemy' does not mean you have to agree with them, comply with them, or allow yourself to be harmed by them. You also deserve respect and protection. Love your neighbour as yourself.

Despite easy platitudes, practice does not always make us perfect, but it can help us to make progress. Practice in ordering how we think about people can reduce the temptations to think and act badly towards them.

Our readings from the New Testament and from Mark's Gospel both tell us to also look beyond words to Jesus' life, death and resurrection. They are clear evidence of the love of God embodied in Jesus Christ.

We want to see evidence. We want things to be logical and make sense to us. Those who seek signs of power should look to the cross. Those who seek wisdom should look to the cross. This is beyond the power and wisdom of the world.

Following Jesus is not always easy. He asks some hard things of us. Vance Morgan (Professor at Providence College, Rhode Island) says, *A still small voice offers a bit of hope. "Of course it's too hard. Of course you can't do any of these things. That's the point. I can, and I am in you." If divine love has indeed overcome the world, then perhaps it can even overcome me.*

James 1.12 says, *Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.*

Let's reinforce the importance of practice with a quick chorus of Horatio R. Palmer's classic song from Pat Lewis and the 103rd street Gospel Choir. Yield not to temptation.

*Yield not to temptation, For yielding is sin;
Each victory will help you, Some other to win;
Fight valiantly onward, Dark passions subdue;
Look ever to Jesus, He will carry you through.*

Lord, help us to reflect your will and your ways in our lives always. Amen.