

The Heart of the Law

4th Sunday in Lent – March 25/26, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Deuteronomy 6:1-9 (NRSV)

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy,² so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long.³ Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

There are many misunderstandings about the Law. Today, we'll sort through some of these as we seek to become better readers of Scripture. You can think of today's study as a brief primer on the Law.

The Law

The Law consists of the teachings given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai. God gave these instructions in one big gift-wrapped package. It is as if God is moving in with the Israelites and the Law is the set of house rules. Much of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are devoted to the Law. We refer to this as the “Law” because it is the customary way to translate the Hebrew word, *Torah*. “Law” is a helpful translation, but “instruction” and “teaching” get closer to its meaning.

Today’s passage from Deuteronomy lays out the heart of the Law. Verse 4, “Hear O Israel . . .” begins a prayer, the *Shema*, that all Jewish boys and men recited daily. When Jesus is asked for the greatest of all God’s teachings, it is here that he turns. God’s teachings, God’s Law, begins with our love for God. The first four of the Ten Commandments begin to flesh out this fundamental teaching – no other gods, keep the Sabbath, etc.

The Law also includes many teachings about our relationships with one another, beginning with Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” another verse Jesus went to when asked to summarize the Law. The last six of the Ten Commandments begin to flesh out these teachings about relationships – no stealing or lying, no adultery or coveting, etc.

Finally, as we’ve seen, the Law also spells out a variety of rituals and practices by which the unholy people are able to approach the Holy God. Much about these rituals is bizarre to us and the meaning is often lost. Still, even here we can see God teaching his people about living with God. They are to bring their very best to God. For example, when they offer God a gift, it is to be from their own possessions, it is to cost them something.

“Works of the Law”

There is a phrase we sometimes use to express the idea that we can do enough good acts (good works) to make ourselves acceptable to God, to get to “heaven” as it were. The phrase is “works righteousness.” Much of Christian teaching is devoted to showing the fallacy of this notion. We are made right with God by God’s grace, for we are simply unable to love sufficiently on our own. We can never earn our way into God’s presence. We are just not capable of it.

Christians have often mistakenly assumed that the ancient Jews practiced “works righteousness.” If only the Jews could keep the Law in all its many details they would be saved and get to “heaven.” But this is a caricature of ancient Judaism.

Instead, the Jews of Jesus day believed that God had chosen them from among all the peoples on the earth. They, the people of God, would one day be God’s renewed and restored people. Thus, the question for a Jew was whether someone was in the people of God or not. Did they belong or not? Could the person wear the “badge of membership?” If they wore the badge, they would be made right with God.

When Paul speaks of the “works of the law,” as in Galatians 2:16, he is referring to the Jewish external symbols of membership in the people of God: Sabbath-keeping, adherence to the food laws, circumcision, and so on. These “works of the law,” he writes, are no longer the badges of membership in the people of God, now the only badge of membership is faith in Jesus Christ.

The purpose of the Law

In one sense, the underlying purpose of the Law was to restore the people to a right relationship with God so that all the cosmos could be healed and renewed. Humans were originally created to love God and one another every day and in every way. If the people can find their way back to such a love, then what was done in the rebellion in the Garden will be undone. Yet, as we'll see below, this is a purpose which the Law could not achieve.

The Law had another purpose however. Since only the Israelites were given the Law and taught how to live in a right relationship with God, then the Law marked them out as a special people. They were the ones who knew to keep the Sabbath, to avoid idols, to avoid certain foods, to say the *Shema*, to circumcise their male children, and so on. It was only natural that certain of these practices became important symbols of what it meant to be a Jew. They became boundary markers enabling one to tell a Jew from a Gentile. They served to keep the groups apart. Sabbath-keeping, food laws, and circumcision became the "badges of membership" in the people of God. They became what Paul would refer to as the "works of the law" (see the page one text box for more on this).

The dark side of the Law

In some ways, ignorance is bliss. Everyone has a general idea that they don't do the things they should and do the things they shouldn't. But the Law makes the general, specific. The Law turns "sin" into "transgression." For example, it is wise not to drive too fast. The Law turns that wisdom into a speed limit. Thus, the Hebrews could never plead ignorance of God's expectations, for "through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20).

The Law as a Delight

For a long time, I had trouble understanding the OT passages that would describe the Law as a delight – "Oh, how I love your law!" Psalm (119:97). I thought to myself, if the Law was simply the means for a Jew to "get to heaven" and they stood no chance of actually living up to it, as their own history showed – where is the joy in that?

But I now know that my understanding of ancient Judaism was a caricature, as I've summarized in the page one textbox. Of course, the Law, at its core, was a delight to the Jews. God had chosen them. God had saved them from slavery in Egypt. And God had revealed to them alone what it means to be truly and completely human as God intended us to be human. God had taught them how to live well with God and each other. God had taught them about freedom and justice and compassion and kindness and forgiveness. He had taught them and shown them the meaning of love.

When we read through the Old Testament it is easy to lose sight of the profound truth that what God sought from the Jews and seeks from us is our hearts. When we come to the stories of David in the book of Samuel, we'll see that despite his failings, he was "a man after God's own heart." We'll meet Job, whose story is about one thing – the state of Job's heart. Does he truly love God or does he simply like all the blessings that have been showered on him?

You might read ahead to Micah 6:6-8. You'll see that God was never really interested in all the sacrifices and offerings. Instead, God wanted the people's hearts. That they would do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. The Law was to point them toward a love that was fulfilled in Jesus.

Further, the Law shined a magnifying glass on the people's sinfulness. In large ways and small, the Law taught the people how far short they fell of God's expectations, how unholy they were. The Hebrews came to learn that none of them could truly love God and love neighbor in all things. If we think of the Law as the teacher and the Jews (and ourselves!) as the students, the teacher was unable to shape the students into the people they needed to be. The teacher was not incompetent; rather, the students were burdened with a learning disability that they could not overcome. The problem is not with the Law, it is with us. This may be easier to understand if you remember that, as Jesus said, the Law is summed up in the commandments to love God and to love one another.

Thus, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes, "Is the law therefore opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law" (3:21). But since we, the students, are unable to learn sufficiently because of the power of sin,¹ then we must be put right with God by faith, our faith in Jesus Christ.

When we come to the Law, we cannot remind ourselves too often that it is summed up in God's teachings that we are to love God and one another in all that we say and do, in things large and small, whether it is our lifelong friend or our most despised enemy. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to follow his example, leading lives of sacrificial love.

¹This is what Christians are trying to convey when we speak of "original sin." It is like a flaw in our moral DNA that prevents us from truly loving God and loving neighbor, no matter how hard we try. Further, it is a flaw that we are not able to repair, but that can only be repaired by God. Still further, Jesus was born without this defect in his moral DNA. He could love God and love neighbor without fail.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

March 26 – April 1 (outline from Ronald Clements' commentary)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Deuteronomy 17-19; Psalm 45 Kings, priests, and prophets; issues of life and death ~ murder	Day 2 Deuteronomy 20-22; Psalm 46 Issues of life and death - warfare, murder, capital offenses, and inheritance; maintaining the divine order of life
Day 3 Deuteronomy 23-26; Psalm 47 matters of general conduct; liturgy and thankfulness	Day 4 A day for reflection and catching up
Day 5 A day for reflection and catching up	Day 6 A day for reflection and catching up
Day 7 Deuteronomy 27-30; Psalm 48 The epilogue	

Sermon Notes

Spring Bible Academy begins on Monday! Please Join Us!

On-line registration is now available at www.standrewccl.org

The Spring Session classes are: *Paul: On a Mission from God* with Scott Engle (Mon. morn. & Tues. eve.), *Boundaries: When to say YES, When to say NO to take control of your life* with Rev. Linda Carmicle (Wed morn.), *Paul's Letters to Timothy* with Frankey Commer (Thurs. morn.), *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life* with Rev. Doug Meyer (Thurs. lunch), *Connection and Direction: Discover Your Spiritual Gifts* with Laura Zuber (Mon. eve.), *Introducing the New Testament* with Scott Engle (Mon. eve.), and *Jesus: His life, His time, His land, His Hebrew faith* with Debbie Lyons and Janet Collinsworth (Tues. eve).

March Book Recommendation

The Message – Remix . . . A Bible paraphrase by Eugene Peterson

I am supplementing my reading from the NRSV in the *Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible* with Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, a paraphrase of the Bible in contemporary language. I'm finding that Peterson helps me to make better sense of some of the more difficult (dare I say tedious) passages. The "Remix" is an inexpensive, hard-bound, compact edition of *The Message* with verse-numbered paragraphs.

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

You might begin by talking about your own understanding of the Law. What were you taught about the Law from the pulpit or in Sunday School classes? How does this square with your own reading of the Old Testament? What has surprised you most about the Law as you've read through Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy? What has surprised you the least?

What parts of today's background study are the most difficult for you to understand? To embrace? Does the study help you to see what Jesus meant when he said that he had come to fulfill the Law, not abolish it? You might even read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 and compare it to your reading of Deuteronomy and all the OT Law. Do you see how it is that the Law is not about turning the Bible into a book of right behavior, a rule book, but instead is teaching us what it means to live in God's presence?

With all this said . . . what does the Law mean to you? How would you teach the Law to your family and friends? Do you think that you can be made right with God by following his teachings well enough, by loving God and neighbor well enough? I'm guessing you know that you can't. But just because we can't love God and neighbor as we should, it doesn't mean that we shouldn't strive to do better at it every day and in every way. This is the life of Jesus' disciples.