

First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“I Fought the Law, and the Law Won”

Luke 4:14 – 21
Psalm 19

January 24, 2016

I think that most of us have at least a little ambivalence about “the law.” I mean, on the one hand, we like “the law” because it keeps us safe, and keeps our community in order, and basically keeps us from completely going bonkers on each other. And that’s a good thing.

For example, it’s against the law for you to steal my car... and I know that all of you would *love* to get your hands on my ’94 Honda Accord! But, unless you want to go to jail... you won’t try to take it. The law protects both me, and my car. And it’s against the law for me to lock all the doors to the sanctuary, and keep you here against your will. So if I decide to preach one of those three hour 17th century sermons... there’s nothing I can do to keep you from heading for the doors after 15 minutes, even if I really, really want you to stick around for the whole thing. Unless I want to lose my job, and go to jail! The law protects you from my homiletical abuse. And we could name a hundred other ways in which the law works for our good... and which cause us to like the law and appreciate it.

On the other hand, however, there are times when we don’t like the law so much, and when we don’t particularly appreciate it... because it limits us and keeps us from doing what we want. For example, I might want to keep all of the money I make this year... and not pay any taxes of any kind. Just keep it all for myself. Unfortunately, not paying taxes is against the law... so, even if I really, truly want to keep all my earnings, unless I want to go to the pokey, I’ve got to pay my taxes. Or, maybe money’s a little tight this month... so I’d really like to be able to just help myself to the contents of one of our local bank vaults. You know, just walk on in there and stuff a pillow case with cash. Sounds like a pretty good deal... if it wasn’t against the law, and would land my fanny in the hoosegow!

And, hey, perhaps we’d just like to be able to disregard all traffic laws here in the village, drive however we please, and be completely oblivious to every other driver on the road. Wait, we already CAN do that! Anyway, you get the idea. Sometimes we like the law, and we appreciate what it does for us; and sometimes we don’t like the law, and we chafe under the way it reigns us in.

And, as we shift our attention and think about *God’s* law, the law of the Lord that comes to us in Holy Scripture... we can sometimes feel the same way; appreciate it sometimes for how it helps us, and resent it sometimes for how it holds us back. We can be grateful for how it helps us to resist our innate sinful impulses; and we can dislike how it thwarts our efforts to “do our thing.” I think we all know the reality of both sides of that equation.

Well, we might have some ambivalent feelings about God’s law from time to time... but the Bible certainly has no ambivalence on the subject. From the point of view of the Scriptures, God’s law is always good; always helpful; always to our personal, spiritual benefit; even if our flawed human nature doesn’t always see it that way. According to the lesson we read this morning

from Psalm 19, the “law of the Lord” isn’t just good, or helpful, or blessed, or some species of necessary evil; it is, as the Psalmist says in verse 7, “perfect!” Hear again what the Psalmist has to say about the law of God:

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. ... The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

Wow! According to the Psalmist, God’s law revives our souls; makes us wise; brings joy to our hearts; opens our eyes; and is more valuable than solid gold! No wonder he proclaims it to be “perfect!” So, even though we may have some mixed feelings sometimes about God’s law, the Psalmist is pretty sure that it’s good for us... all the time. And what I want to do with the rest of my sermon time today is to quickly run through a short list of ways that we benefit by knowing, understanding, and doing our best to follow... the law of the Lord.

But, before I do, what, exactly, do we mean by “God’s law?” Well, God’s law would include the Ten Commandments, of course; and the 613 mitzvot commandments, which are all the laws generally considered to be contained in the Old Testament. But we have to be very careful here... because many of those laws were time-and-place specific to the people of ancient Israel, and are not considered to be binding today. This is why it’s very dangerous and unhelpful to take literally all of the legal pronouncements of the Old Testament... because they simply don’t apply to us anymore; especially in the light of the life and ministry of Jesus.

I will never forget the lady at my former church, who went apoplectic when she learned that my 19 year old son had gotten a tattoo... as tattoos, or “skin cuttings” are forbidden in the Book of Leviticus. Another person was of the opinion that my son could no longer be a Christian, since he got the tattoo! Never mind the fact that the tattoo in question was a beautiful Celtic cross... a symbol of his sincere Christian faith!

And “God’s Law” would also include the teachings and commandments of Jesus in the New Testament, which are much more binding in our life and mission as Christian disciples. In His sermons and parables, Jesus modified many of the commandments of the Old Testament... and laid down some pretty important lessons of His own; like loving our neighbor as ourselves, forgiving those who’ve injured us, treating others as we would like to be treated, caring for outcasts, etc.

So, the subject of “God’s law” is very vast, and in some ways very complicated... and we’re not going to try to cover even a tiny fraction of it in one small sermon. Instead, in admittedly very general terms, I simply want to take a look at how doing our best to live our lives according to the precepts and teachings of Holy Scripture, what we would call “God’s law,” is ultimately to our advantage, and for our good. So, in no particular order, here’s a quick list of ways in which living by God’s law is for our benefit:

First, God’s law helps to keep our hearts and minds focused on... God! God’s laws aren’t arbitrary, capricious, or haphazard... they’re specifically designed to keep us headed in a heavenly, holy, and hallowed direction. And notice that I said “holy,” and not “holier than thou.” Obedience of God’s law is meant to keep us on the right track of holiness and virtue... not to give us a cause

of boasting and smugly parading our self-righteousness around in front of others. Remember, the call to be humble and gracious is one of the most important of God's laws that we are called to follow.

This need to stay "focused on God" was one of the primary reasons behind many of the laws and commandments which were given to the people of ancient Israel. After they left Egypt, under the leadership of Moses, Israel headed into a world filled to overflowing with pagan religions and practices which, if heeded by the Israelites, would have certainly led them into all manner of disobedience.

In such a context, God's law was meant to be a kind of "wall of separation" between Israel and her pagan neighbors. Of course, as the Old Testament tells us, that wall of separation didn't always work so well... as Israel fell into all manner of sin and disobedience once they reached the Promised Land of Canaan. But be that as it may, the law was given, in large part, to keep that disobedience from happening.

Second, God's law helps us to see and understand that we are, in fact, sinners... who stand in need of the grace and mercy that only God Himself can give. Basically, the existence of the law, and our inability to keep it fully and completely... is a daily reminder to us of our imperfection, and therefore of our need for forgiveness.

For Paul the Apostle, this is one of the most important uses of the law... it's ability to convict us of sin, and to inspire in us a desire to turn to Jesus for grace and forgiveness. According to Paul, if there was no law, we would have no idea that we were, in fact, cut off from God and adrift from His loving presence. The law opens our eyes to our true condition... and encourages us to repent, or turn around, and seek our hope and redemption in the Lord.

This theme was also developed at length by our theological forefather, John Calvin, in his "Institutes of the Christian Religion." Calvin points out that, even though Jesus and Paul went to great lengths to teach us that we cannot and will not be saved by our obedience of the law... but by God's loving grace alone; the law is still important because it reminds us of our need for God's grace. For Calvin, as much as for Paul, our very inability to keep the law... is proof positive of our need for something *more* than the law to establish us in our saving relationship with God. And that something more, of course, is the sacrifice of Jesus made on our behalf... the blessed new life that we find in the gospel.

Third, God's law gives us tremendous wisdom and understanding... and helps us in our efforts to live meaningful lives. I know that it's easy for us to think of "the law" as mostly a series of "dos and don'ts," designed to get us to "do" some things, and to "not do" others. But the law, in addition to guiding and regulating behavior, also teaches us how to live our lives wisely, peacefully, gracefully, and successfully.

We know that the world around us offers a constant stream of suggestions as to what a successful and meaningful life should look like. Some of those suggestions are helpful... but many of them aren't; and in fact, some of them are downright ridiculous and destructive. In a culture that too often rewards narcissism, selfishness, greed, dishonesty, and superficiality... the law guides us in the direction of selflessness, concern for others, generosity, kindness, grace, and depth of character. Or, as many spiritual theologians have put it throughout the centuries, the law leads us in the direction of virtue and meaning.

Of course, to live virtuously might not make one rich, famous, popular, or powerful; but it will almost certainly give one peace, joy, hope, and a profound sense that one's life has been meaningful and full of purpose. And to live a life like that, is worth all the money in the world. We are probably living in the smartest age that our world has ever known... but we all know that, in spite of our intellectual and scientific brilliance, wisdom is often in very short supply. God's law shows us the way to wisdom... and for that reason alone, it deserves to be taken seriously.

Obviously, much more could be said about God's law... and why it's in our interest to know it, and to keep it to the best of our ability. But, for now, it's enough for us to know these three things: God's law helps us to keep our hearts and minds focused on God; God's law helps us to understand that we're sinners in need of the grace which only God can give; and God's law gives us wisdom and understanding, for the living of lives that are truly meaningful and full of hope.

May we keep these things in our hearts and minds as we make our way through the week ahead! For that is our quest, and that is our life as Christian disciples. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!