

Epworth Chapel on the Green
February 16, 2014
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 119:1-16
I Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

If we were to go to a nearby street corner this morning and engage passersby in conversation, asking them what they think of when they think of God, what do you suppose their responses might be?

Assuming that people would not run from you when you asked the question, it is probably true that many people see God as an old man with white hair and a white beard, sitting up in heaven and looking down at us rather sternly. There are many who might see God as the “cosmic Policeman,” who has his ticket book in hand, ready to issue citations at a moment’s notice for any infraction of His law.

Since three of our Scripture lessons this morning focus on God’s law, it might benefit us if we stopped for a moment and asked ourselves how we understand God’s law, and *who* benefits if we obey it. Do we keep the law for the law’s sake? Do we keep it for God’s sake? Or do we keep it for *our* sake?

To refresh our memory, you may recall that the law handed down through Moses as contained in the first five books of the Old Testament is in Hebrew known as the *Torah*. The word *Torah* means “instruction.”

If you divide the book of Exodus into two parts, you'll see that the second part of the book begins in chapter 20, where we get the Decalogue, the commandments which we've heard this morning. The first half of the book tells the story of how God rescues the children of Israel from their slavery in Egypt, and calls them into special relationship with Himself.

If we were to summarize both parts of Exodus with a single word, we could label the first half of the book as *Redemption*, and the second half of the book that begins with the Decalogue *Revelation*. So it is always important to remember that the Commandments and God's law did not arise in a vacuum. They arose as a result of the fact that God had rescued and redeemed a people, and brought them into relationship with Himself.

And God did not redeem the children of Israel merely to lead them *out* of their slavery. He redeemed them in order to get them on the move and to lead them *toward* the land of Promise.

I wasn't with that early group of folks who came out of Egypt, but if I had been, I think one of my questions would have been: "This is great. We're not slaves anymore. We've been claimed by God and we have a new life. So how does all of this work?"

That question, I believe, had to be on the minds and hearts of the children of Israel. God in His wisdom anticipated it, and as a result there comes *Revelation, Torah, instruction*.

Seen in this way, God's law seems less like a heavy-handed decree and more like a wonderful *gift*.

This is precisely the picture we get from the Psalmist in Psalm 119. The instruction of God's law is a precious gift that becomes the source of happiness and fulfillment in life. In fact, it is a gift so valuable that the Psalmist says it is worth more than "all manner of riches."

Many of you recently were forwarded a short video clip of Christians in China receiving Bibles for the first time as they arrived in the mail. The video clip shows the believers being presented their Bibles (still wrapped and unopened), and their reaction at receiving them. Those Chinese Christians came to my mind this week as a modern commentary on this portion of Psalm 119. God's law for those believers is a priceless gift.

As time passed for the children of Israel, however, God's law and instruction gradually became severed from its relational foundation, and became more an end in itself. In time, many came to believe that obedience to the law was in fact *how people entered into relationship with God* and kept favor with God. And by the time Jesus arrives on the scene, those in charge of teaching the law to others had

begun to use it as a way of oppressing others. They found ways to observe the *letter* of the law while violating its *spirit*.

So, while a person could refrain from actually committing murder, he could harbor hatred and bitterness toward another in his heart and actually speak hateful words to another.

A person could refrain from committing adultery, but look at another man or woman solely from a physical standpoint as a way to gratify their desires.

The law also allowed a man to divorce his wife for the most petty, insignificant things. Women were seen more as *property* than they were as *persons*, which made them some of the most vulnerable and dependent people in society. And so Jesus says a resounding “no” to the practice of divorcing a woman for small and petty reasons, reminding his hearers that the law was designed to protect society’s most vulnerable members.

Do you remember from last week’s Gospel how Jesus said that the righteousness of those listening to his teaching must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? I believe that what he means by that is that we must not allow God’s law to be cut loose from its *relational* moorings, because when that happens you can easily end up obeying the *letter* of the law while violating its *spirit*. But when God’s law is seen as a precious gift, given by an adoring Parent who wants his

children to treat each other well, things look differently. The law exerts its true force *in the context of the relationships* that give the law its meaning.

Those of you who are parents know this very well. When your kids were growing up, you established rules for them. Don't play in the street. Look twice before crossing the street. Treat others with respect. Respect the property of others. Don't accept rides from strangers. Keep your room clean and do your homework.

Your kids may have thought you were overbearing tyrants at times. But hopefully as they grew older, they came to understand the relational foundation of those rules. As they grew up, they realized that your rules were designed to protect them and to care for them and to help them find their way in the world.

So also with God's law. It's His precious gift to us, to help us and guide us in our relationship with Him and with one another.

As you come to the Lord's Table this morning, come with gratitude in your hearts for this wonderful gift. Receive the grace he offers. And, in the words of our collect, ask Him for the help of His grace, so that we might please Him in both will and deed.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.