
The Beauty of the Law

Psalm 119:129-136

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 27, 2014 by the Rev. Meghan Feldmeyer

One Spring break when I was in college, I was part of a caravan of students traveling from Texas to Colorado. Just outside of Amarillo we were caught in rain and I watched with horror as my friends in the 15-passenger van in front me hydroplaned off the road, spun in the mud, and finally tipped over. In the shock and panic of those first minutes after the accident, I remember feeling a rather profound need for *someone* to take charge and tell us what to do. We were a bunch of 20-year olds standing in the pouring rain on the side of the road in the middle-of-nowhere, East Texas. Our primary mode of transportation was totaled and one of our friends was seriously injured. This was back in the dark ages before all creation carried cell phones, so we really were a lost bunch. In the end, everyone was okay, but I vividly remember that all I wanted in that moment was a real-life adult to come in and tell us how to get out of this mess.

Have you had a moment like that, where you wished someone else who knew what they were doing would take charge? Maybe you *are* a real-life adult, but have nevertheless found yourself in a situation completely out of your depth...maybe with a troubled child, or a complex friendship or situation at work, or perhaps you feel like you've managed to make a mess in your own life that has no clear good resolution and no easy way out. You may yearn for someone who is truly wise, with a bird's-eye view of the situation, to step into the chaos and tell you exactly what to do to make things right...or at least how to minimize damages. Can you imagine the comfort and relief if someone you trusted showed up and took the reins?

The ancient Jews knew this feeling of bewilderment in the midst of chaos. They spent years as slaves in Egypt, yearning for freedom and new life. But instead of the promised land their new freedom has them in the wilderness, wandering and lost in the midst of fierce and rocky terrain. They did not have a plan. They did not have direction. They did not have a home. They are God's beloved people, but they don't yet know what that means. And this is when the most significant moment in all the Old Testament takes place...God speaks from heaven and took the reins of the Israelites wandering, revealing himself to Moses at the top of Mt. Sinai. The reins in this story are the Ten Commandments and the other laws and teaching given to Israel by God. We commonly refer to this collectively as Torah, which is somewhat flatly translated as law, though the word "teaching" or "instruction" is a richer translation. These laws and teachings gave a way for the Israelites to shape their lives together, to give them guidance for living and properly loving *each other*, while also learning what it meant to live and love one holy God. There was relief and comfort that someone they trust stepped into the chaos. God's heart was with the Israelites. God wanted them to flourish as a people. He heard their cries as slaves in Egypt, and he heard their cries again in the desert. God in God's love sought to bring order and comfort into the aimlessness and confusion.

Psalm 119, a small portion of which was read today, is basically a very long love song expressing joy and gratitude for God's law, instruction, and wisdom. It is the longest Psalm in the book, coming in at 176 verses. This means Psalm 119 has more verses than 14 Old Testament Books and 17 New Testament books. It could easily have been a book of the Bible itself! And the whole of it is directed to thanking God for the law. The Psalmist, our teacher, dwells on the gifts of the law... "your decrees are wonderful, therefore my soul keeps them. The unfolding of your words gives light...with open mouth I pant because I long for your commandments...my eyes shed streams of tears because your law is not kept."

This love and joy and appreciation of the law are counter-cultural to how we think of laws and rules today. Truthfully, it was counter-cultural in ancient Israel too. Because, really, when was the last time you felt any deep gratitude to the point of tears for speed limits or tax laws? I might have cried *because* of a law, but not in gratitude *for* a law! We live in a culture that prizes independence above almost anything else. We bristle when anyone, from our parents to our government, tells us what to do or how to live. Even if we like telling other people what to do and how to live, we certainly don't want anyone to return the favor!

Our Psalmist has much to teach us in Psalm 119. God's teachings were not designed for human restriction and punishment, but for *life* and *flourishing* and *freedom!* The Psalm suggests that obedience to God's law doesn't enslave, it liberates. Jewish rabbinic tradition has a rich trove of reflections on the *gift* of God's law. For the rabbis, following the law allowed them to acknowledge God in *every part* of their day—how and what they cooked, the fabric they wore, the relationships they observed—all of this was a way to invite and welcome the one holy and loving God into the contours of regular daily living. It was a way to remind them that the God who stretched out the universe was also near and close, part of even small routine moments. It suggests that God might just have a stake in how you live, who you worship, how you spend your money, etc. The impulse of the Jewish rabbis was to uncover the benefit and gift and wisdom of God's laws. The Torah contained precious treasure, and one could find beauty in dwelling and meditating on God's holy guidance. In the same way an oyster might take a rough grain of sand and construct a pearl from it, the teachings are like an oyster, and you and I and all of God's people are the rough grain that the law slowly transforms us into something ever more precious and beautiful.

I don't know about you, but at this moment I find myself thinking, "hey, I want some of that beautiful law! I want to be that grain of sand in the oyster, so I can be crafted into something precious for God, and to serve a world in need." As Christians, we often have a somewhat uneasy relationship to what we think of as "Old Testament law" because we suppose Jesus came to free us from the law and to remind us of God's grace. And yet in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus specifically challenges us, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."¹ Is it possible that in Jesus God comes into our very midst to give us physical embodiment of God's teaching? That Jesus in his holiness, in his mercy, in his sharp criticisms, in his willingness to dwell among the sick and the sinner, in his journey of sacrifice to the cross reminds us that God gives us the law for our *good?*

And so I also wonder, how has this all gone wrong? When did the precious treasure of God's good instruction become a weapon of coercion, shame, and self-satisfied self-righteousness? It is too often the case that we humans manage to twist and distort and manipulate for our own purposes the very things God intends for good. One ancient rabbi speaks to this shadow side saying, "If one studies Torah for its own sake, it becomes to him an elixir or life; but if one studies the Torah not for its own sake, it becomes to him a deadly poison."² Any time we use God's words as a weapon instead of a gift, we are twisting what God has intended for good, and making God's words of life a deadly poison.

There is a great story in Jewish midrash about the dangers of misusing scripture. A father and son saw another man farming on the Sabbath. Thinking they knew best, they took upon themselves to teach the farmer a lesson and subsequently, in true super-hero fashion, incinerate the farmer with one gaze. But God is enraged that these righteous men took it upon themselves to determine the good and the bad, and they are sent into a cave as punishment for destroying God's good world.³

So, when I say that the law is good because the Psalmist says it is good and Jesus seems to care about it, I'm not suggesting you should grab your Bible and use it to beat others (or yourself) over the head. I'm not suggesting you do what is called proof-texting, where you pluck particular scriptures out of context and use it for your own arguments, or to shame someone into obedience under the suggestion that God knows best. This is God's good world and God is the one charged with determining who is being faithful.

The radical beauty of God's law is most certainly compromised if it is not taken as being part of a whole, and if it is not understood as embodied within a community that has knowingly and willingly submitted to it. The Jewish rabbis reflections grow out of a *lifetime of training* in scripture. I'm also not suggesting that simply because you are obedient to God's laws that somehow all will be right in your life. There is no one-to-one correlation between obedience and success. In fact, there may even be a negative correlation; our obedience to God will often lead us away from what the world defines as successful. But the Psalm reminds of us God's

¹ Matthew 5:17-18

² C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 705.

³ http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/132504/jewish/A-Carob-Tree-and-a-Spring.htm

loving heart and suggests that our obedience will ultimately lead to our discovering renewed joy and *true freedom*. It is dangerous to assume that our dreams of success are necessarily God's dreams for us, because God's ultimate dream for us is that we become a holy and loving people.

The ancient rabbis suggest that simply *practicing* the good could become a corridor to moving towards God. They suggest that the simple act of obedience releases the will, that good motive comes into being simply out of practicing the good law. There is something to be said for forming good habits and subsequently discovering that these habits can form people for good. These habits can come in handy when we find ourselves in a moral dilemma. After so many years of practicing the good, we are enabled us to know how to respond to the good, because goodness becomes a habit.

You may remember in January of 2009 US Airways Flight #1549 had to make an emergency landing in the Hudson River after running into a flock of geese and losing power 3 minutes into the flight. The captain that day was a man named Sully Sullenberger. He and his crew collectively managed to successfully land the plane in open water, and safely get the 155 people to rescue boats with no loss of life. This is an example of how years of practicing good habits paid off in a time of crisis. Every member of that crew rehearsed and trained in the proper protocols, so that in a situation of panic and chaos, the habits could take over and help guide people to safety. Our moral life is not so different. If we immerse ourselves into the goodness of God's instruction, if we practice these habits, trusting in God to hold the reins and submitting ourselves to God's guidance, we learn to become a holy and loving people.

This is not to say all our obedience is done from pure motive. But sometimes the constancy of practice can itself purify our motives. Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel uses the imagery of a symphony to demonstrate how our motives can shift if we consistently practice the law:

At the moment in which an artist is absorbed in playing a concerto, the thought of applause, fame, or remuneration is far from his mind. The complete attention of the artist, his whole being, is involved in the music. Should any extraneous thought enter his mind, it would arrest his concentration and mar the purity of his playing. The reward may have been on his mind when he negotiated with the agent, but during the performance it is only the music that claims his complete concentration.⁴

So it should be with us, and our practice of God's good law.

We come before God, our conductor, who loves us and desires our good, and we practice being holy. Our gracious conductor steps into the messes we make, takes the reins, unfolds the music, prods us along as we labor over the notes; adjusts our style, rhythm, and pitches; encouraging us in our discipline and practice; until that day comes when the symphony comes to life...and we join with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, singing and playing the hymn of unending praise to the heavenly conductor who has also composed the music and crafted the orchestra.

This is participating in God's good creation, a moment of true beauty and grace, borne out of our practice and God's careful guidance. And make no mistake...we will fail again and again and again. But this does not mean we give up and set aside our instruments. Or that God gives up on us and sets aside God's love for us. Today if you are feeling like your own failure and weakness render you unable to even audition for God's orchestra, or that you've missed way too many notes to ever be part of something beautiful, take heart—there are always chairs in God's orchestra, and God is always willing to coach and guide and conduct us. Because ultimately, the law isn't about what *we do* for God, but about what God has done for us and for our flourishing. We have help in our quest to keep the commandments and God's teaching, we have the Holy Spirit and the example of Christ who lead us in holiness and grace and mercy and forms a pearl from the rough edges of our lives. We are the pearl of great price, indeed. Amen.

⁴ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "A Hebrew Evaluation of Reinhold Niebuhr." (1956) in *Jewish Perspectives on Christianity*. ed. Fritz A. Rothschild (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1990) 295-96.