

Lent III, 2024

Psalm 19

Loving the Law

Why preach on the Psalms?

The answer is simple.

If you want to know Jesus well, know the Psalms well.

The Psalms were the background music to Jesus' life – literally so, as Psalms are simply songs. Jesus probably knew many of them by heart; he certainly quoted them more than any other book of the Bible. If you want to know Jesus, get to know the Psalms.

But why Psalm 19? What is its message for us?

Well, basically, this. Do you see the glory of the heavens, or the brilliance of the sun? Do you know the beauty of the stars? Knowing God's law, says the Psalmist, is like that. It brings the same amazement, the same delight, the same exhilaration. It is more to be desired than gold, more than much fine gold, sweeter also than honey, dripping from the honeycomb. God's law can be your joy.

At which point, we might say, really? Surely Law is all about rules, and 'thou shalt not': it might be quite right and sensible and necessary, but it's hardly a *delight*. People who *do* delight in law are often rather difficult to like. They're anxious, obsessive, self-righteous, picky, judgemental. Didn't Jesus say, don't be like them?

And, we might add, law cramps our style. I am the master of my fate, the captain of my soul. Surely, as long as I'm not hurting anyone else, it's up to me what I do. No-one gets to tell me what to do. No-one gets to judge me. And we fall over ourselves not to appear judgemental ourselves. Whatever works for you, we say. If you're not harming anyone, it's your life, you run it.

This was not a point of view Jesus embraced. Listen to what he says in Matthew 5:

Do not think I have come to abolish the law. I did not come to abolish, but to fulfil. I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one jot, not one tittle, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Now, that is a tricky passage, and I have all sorts of questions about it, but the one thing it can't mean is that Jesus was casual about the law. True, he does sometimes seem remarkably unconcerned about parts of it. In Matthew 23 he cheerfully talks about some bits being more important than others. But one thing is absolutely clear. Jesus was not a hippy. He did not think love was all you need. He loved the law.

What kind of love are we talking here? Well, love like we love fresh air, or mountain water, or beautiful music, or a human lover. These are things that are good for us – as the Psalm says, they rejoice the heart, they revive the soul. They make us bigger, better, cleaner, wholler than we are. Well, so with the Law, says the Bible. It's not like Caesar's laws. Caesar's laws are all about controlling people, keeping them down, cramping their freedom. Necessary, perhaps, but not beautiful. God's laws, on the other hand, don't shut down your freedom, they make it grow. Do this, says God, and you'll find you're living as you were meant to live. You'll be like a tree in full leaf; like a song well sung. Everything about you is coming right. You'll find joy. Sweeter than honey.

What does it mean, practically, keeping the law? Too much for one sermon to say, but you know the headlines. Make no idols, and worship God alone. Don't let your life revolve around money, or success, or beauty, or popularity, or anything which is not God. Keep the sabbath. Put serious time into your family and your life with God. Be generous, really seriously generous with your money. Keep sex where it belongs, in marriage. Love your neighbour, especially the poor and the weak and the stranger. There's more, but you get the gist. Do this, says God, and you'll live. It's what you were made for. Live this way, and you'll really live. Every other way: chaos and death.

Simple, isn't it? Beautifully simple. Except being human, we complicate it. We are almost incapable of seeing a good thing without screwing it up, and so we make God's law a means of judging one other. Remember Jesus' story of the Pharisee in the Temple? Thank you God, he prayed, that I am not like other men. I fast, I give, I pray. Not like those other ones, the thieves and rogues and adulterers.' Or, we might say, those bigots. Those homophobes. Those woke people. Those teenagers. Those Rochdale voters. Insert whoever you disapprove of here. All of us disapprove of someone. All of us are tempted to look down on someone. To feel that we're on the right side of the law, the right side of God, and that they, whoever they are, are emphatically not.

How do you love the law without becoming self-righteous?

It can be done. Jesus loved the law, without pride, without contempt. The one who actually *could* judge, refused to judge. That's what is beautiful about him. So how do we become like that?

Well, partly, through praying Psalm 19. Note how it differs from the Pharisee in the Temple. Not, 'Oh God, aren't I good'. No, not at all. Rather, 'who can tell how often they offend? O cleanse me from my secret faults. Keep your servant from presumptuous sins, lest they get dominion over me. Only so shall I be undefiled, and innocent of great offence'. The Psalmist knows that he is nothing special. That he is weak. That he sins in ways he hasn't begun to grasp, that he is vulnerable to pride and self-righteousness. He knows that he needs mercy, grace, at every moment. That's what his love for the Law has taught him: not his superiority, but his need.

And that's why he ends with a prayer. God cleanse me. God keep me. Let my prayer and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord my strength and my redeemer. Those last words are important. O Lord, my strength. My redeemer. I am not my own strength. I am not my own redeemer. My rightness with God is not the result of my own effort, it is not something I can achieve. Yes, I love the Law, yes I try to keep it, with all my heart and soul and mind and strength. But no matter how well I do, or how much I fail, *that* isn't what saves me. That isn't what makes me right. Rightness – the soul revived, the heart rejoicing, sweeter than honey and finer than gold – that can only be given to me.

You don't need a degree in theology to know where this is going. Psalm 19 is teaching what we try to teach all the time, week in, week out. Everything you long for, everything God wants you to be, is *given* to you. It is utterly beyond your capacity to produce, or to deserve. It comes to you as a gift. Just like – exactly like, and exactly when – you come to this altar with empty hands. All you bring – all that the very best of you bring – is your need. Jesus Christ gives you himself. He puts Himself inside you. His rightness becomes your rightness. He will make you the one who keeps the law. He will make you like himself, and then not only the heavens, but you, will shine with all the glory of God.

To him be the glory forever and ever.

Amen.