

I Love Your Law: A Sermon about law and grace

Ps. 119: 97-104

Jer. 31:27-34

2 Tim. 3:14-4:5

Luke 3 18:1-8



There is a common theme to the readings from the Psalm, the Old Testament reading, and the epistle this morning. It is a theme that would be tempting to overlook. One could preach on the gospel, which is about prayer. The epistle is the classic text for the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. The Jeremiah passage is about another central theme in Christian theology, the new covenant. Better to stick with one of these.

However, I am a glutton for punishment. And the passage that keeps nagging me is the Psalm. In the revised lectionary reading for this morning, the selection begins at verse 97. "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day." Verse 104 concludes, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way." One could

choose almost any passage from Psalm 119 and find the same theme: Verse 72 states "The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces." In verse 127 we read, "Therefore I love your commandments above gold, above all fine gold." In case, you have missed it, the Psalmist loves God's law the way that other people love money or mouth-watering desserts. If he were writing today, he might say, "I love your law more than a double shot Cafe Latte."

And the Psalmist does not love the law because it shows him how sinful he is, how far below the standards of the law he has fallen, and how he needs to throw himself on God's mercy. No. He loves the law because he keeps it, and he intends to keep on keeping it: "Take away from me scorn and contempt, for I have kept your testimonies." (v. 22) And again, "Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes; and I will keep it to the end." (v. 33) Anyone who has read Psalm 119 all the way through notices that it is one long meditation on God's law, how the author delights in it, and how he intends to keep it.

If we think that we can get away from all this talk about law by turning to the New Testament gospel of grace, we are simply mistaken. The epistle reading from 2 Timothy is the classic passage for the doctrine of biblical inspiration. We read here that "All Scripture is inspired by God" (or as the English Standard Version puts it, "breathed out"). (2 Tim 3:16) Theologians have spilled much theological ink about what *theopneustos*, translated "inspired," means, whether inspiration applies to original autographs only, or whether it is a process that includes compilation and redaction, whether words are inspired or concepts, to what extent the biblical authors maintained their individual personalities. The arguments go on and on. What is often missing from these discussions, however, is the central point – what the text says about the purpose of inspiration. Paul begins the section with an exhortation: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed."¹ Then follows the

statement about inspiration, immediately followed by the purpose of these inspired writings. The Scriptures, we are told, “make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.” Because they are God-breathed, they are “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

When 2 Timothy was written, the New Testament canon did not yet exist. So when Paul writes to Timothy about the Scriptures here, he is talking about the Old Testament, and he is saying the same thing that the Psalmist says about the law. It makes us wise. It trains us in righteousness. It equips us for good works. That, my friends, is law. Paul is, in essence, giving us a short New Testament version of the same thing we find in Psalm 119. Paul might just as well have written, like the Psalmist, “I love your law!”

As twenty-first century people, we tend not to know what to do with this kind of language. Our problem is not just that the Psalm is long and repetitive. Or that Paul tells us that the Scriptures are “profitable for training in righteousness.” It is that we do not know what to make of this central theme: “I love your law!” The problem is that we do not really love God’s law. Not really. We might respect the law, or feel that we must do our best to obey it. But how can we think of it as enjoyable and sweet? Usually we think of the law as commanding us to do the thing we have to do, but we would rather not do—to tell the truth when lying might save us from embarrassment, to be faithful to our spouse when we find ourselves alone in a hotel in a strange city, and we meet a very interesting stranger, to point out to the store clerk that she gave us too much change. The law is about something we might have to endure, but not something we enjoy.

Why don’t we love the law? I am going to suggest three reasons for our discomfort with divine law, and I would suggest there is a dialectical progression to these three reasons. One leads

logically to the next. I am going to provide three suggestions as to how we might overcome the obstacles set by these reasons. With each reason, I am going to suggest a theologian who provides an appropriate solution. I am going to show how each solution echoes material found in one or the other of this morning's lectionary readings. And I am going to conclude by making some suggestions about how we might come to love God's law.

So the first reason that we twenty-first century people, find the law uncomfortable is that modern and post-modern people value their freedom. Autonomy and freedom from external authority has been the driving theme of modern Western self-identity. Law, especially divine law, is an imposition. To deny us our freedom is to deny us that which makes us truly human—to be all that we can be. Moreover, divine law strikes us as arbitrary and irrational. True post-modernist authenticity demands that we ourselves decide what laws will rule our lives, based on what makes sense to us and brings us fulfillment.

Modern and post-modern people see a disconnection between divine law and human flourishing. I would suggest that, historically, the reasons for that stretch back to a divorce between divine law and what theologians call teleology, between law and creation, between law and human happiness, and between law and God as our Chief Good, that happened some time in the late Middle Ages.² In one of her essays, Dorothy Sayers uses the example of making an omelet to suggest two kinds of law.³ There are arbitrary laws, such as insisting that anyone who makes an omelet must wear a top hat while doing so. And then there are laws that are inherent to the nature of what is being done, such as the law that states that anyone who makes an omelet must break eggs.

When we lose the relation between divine law and the order of creation, and God's nature as the Chief Good, and our own good

as being found in conformity to God's intentions for our happiness, we end up thinking that God's law falls into the top hat wearing category rather than the egg breaking category. Then we will view God's law as a case of the biggest bully on the block pushing his weight around. However, it makes a big difference if we understand there to be an inherent connection between divine law and divine Goodness, between law and creation, and human happiness. Divine law is, then, like the law about breaking eggs when we make omelets.

Thomas Aquinas would be the theologian who best illustrates this principle that Divine Law is about sharing God's goodness with creation (*Summa Theologiae*, "Treatise on Law," 1.2.90-108).⁴ Divine law is about an ordered universe, and about what creatures need to do to get along in that universe. For human beings, divine law means that God has created us for friendship with himself, and we can only be happy when we obey God's law because God's law is just the way things are. God is not a bully; God is more like an artist.

We find a similar notion of law in Psalm 119. There is a connection between God's law and God's goodness: "I know, O LORD, that your rules are righteous, and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me. Let your steadfast love comfort me. (75-76) There is a connection between God's law and the order of creation: "Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Your faithfulness endures for all generations; you have established the earth, and it stands fast." And, finally, there is a connection between God's law and human happiness: "The LORD is my portion; I promise to keep your words. I entreat your favor with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise." (57-58)

In the Old Testament Wisdom literature, God's wisdom is expressed both in creation and in law. The New Testament writers re-interpret these Wisdom passages and apply them to the pre-existent Jesus, the Word of God, through whom God has

created, and then redeemed the universe (Col. 1:15; 2:3; John 1; Heb. 1). It is in the incarnate Christ that we see God's wisdom come among us, and Jesus' teaching in passages like the Sermon on the Mount is God's wisdom come among us. (Matt. 5-7) He is the new Moses. So Jesus expresses God's law as for our good, and that is just the way things are. Egg breaking, not top hats.

The second reason that divine law makes us uncomfortable is that we are post-Reformation Christians. We live on the other side of the great divide between Law and Gospel. Law, we know, always condemns. Law reminds us that we are guilty. Although there is a radical Lutheran reading of the law that sometimes seems simply to dismiss law, Reformation Christians are not alone here. I have both studied at and taught theology in Roman Catholic settings, and in completely secular settings; I have graded countless undergraduate papers written not only by Protestants, but by Roman Catholics, as well as unbelievers, that have informed me that Judaism is bad because it is a religion based on law and good works.

So this is our second problem. If an arbitrary divine law is an affront to our autonomy, a perfect divine law is an affront to our dignity. A God who is wholly Good is not much better than a God who is an omnipotent bully, if we don't measure up to his perfect standards. We know that we fail to keep the law, and, the law reminds us continually of that failure. A God who threatens and judges us is a God we resent.

Here I suggest that we turn to Phillip Melanchthon, Martin Luther's disciple. In the "Apology for the Augsburg Confession," Melanchthon suggests that we cannot love God if we do not first see God as a lovable object. The human heart cannot love a God whom it perceives as angry and threatening or giving commands of the law. God can only be loved if we first see that God is merciful, that God loves us, and is for us. Only then can we experience the gratitude that enables us to respond to God's love with love of our own. If we

understand God's command as an expression of his love, we can respond with love in kind.

A helpful illustration for this is a scene from one of my favorite movies, *The Princess Bride*. The narrator tells us that nothing gives the heroine Buttercup more pleasure than ordering around the farm boy Westley. Westley always responds with the three words, "As you wish." One day, Buttercup is amazed to discover that when Westley says, "As you wish," he means "I love you." And then she is even amazed to discover that she truly loves him back. Then follows the scene where Buttercup says to Westley, "Farm boy, fetch me that pitcher." Westley responds, "As you wish," hands her the pitcher, they look deeply into each others eyes . . . and the next scene fades to their two silhouettes in front of the setting sunset. Whether Buttercup and Westley are quite correct in their Law/Gospel hermeneutic, the key point is clear. We do not hesitate to respond to the orders of the one we love with those three words: "As you wish."

The passage from Jeremiah addresses this second problem. We cannot respond to the commands of a God before whom we have guilt, because we can only fear that which condemns us. God speaks to that fear in Jeremiah, "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, the covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. . . For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31: 31-32, 34) A few verses earlier God says, "As I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant." (v.28) The husband whose command Israel has disobeyed by breaking the covenant has dealt with Israel's unfaithfulness with love, by building up, not destroying, by forgiveness, and forgetting of wrong

deeds, with a new covenant.

This language of new covenant is why we call the New Testament the New Testament. The salvation to which Paul refers in 2 Timothy, about which the inspired Scriptures make us wise, is the "salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Paul summarizes this salvation earlier in 2 Timothy. It is the "gospel of the power of God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our own works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2 Tim 1:8-10)

We now have the solution to our second problem, our guilt before the law that condemns us. The God whose law we have violated has shown himself a lovable object. In Christ he has redeemed us; through his death, not because of our good works, but because he loves us. He has abolished our death.

This leads us to our third problem. The law may be for our good. The God who has forgiven us in Christ may have shown himself a lovable object by taking our sin upon himself, but we are still left with a problem that makes us unable to respond to the law with a simple "As you wish."

That is the problem that Augustine addresses in *The Confessions*. Augustine begins *The Confessions* with the famous prayer that acknowledges that we are made for God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in God. And throughout *The Confessions*, it appears that Augustine's restless heart is searching for the God in whom alone he can rest. At the end of Augustine's journey, however, it turns out that Augustine has not been searching for God, but running from him.⁵ Our problem is that our restless hearts are corrupt. We resist God. We flee from God. Before we can rest in the God for whom our hearts are made, before we can see God as a lovable object who

has forgiven our sins, our hearts must change. As long as we are sinful, we will continue to perceive the law as a command to wear top hats when we make omelets. We do what we love. As long as we love sin, we will hate the law, and we will not see God as a lovable object. The problem is not with the law; it is with us. We need to change. It is not just that we need forgiveness, but that we need deliverance from ourselves.

Jeremiah addresses not only our need for forgiveness, but also our need to become someone else: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." And when that happens, says Jeremiah, we will no longer need to teach one another, "Know the Lord," for we shall all know him (Jer. 31:33-34).

Biblical scholars sometimes debate these days whether Romans 10:4 should be translated as "Christ is the *end* of the law, for righteousness to everyone who believes," or, instead, "Christ is the *goal* of the law." Theologically, I would say that both need to be said. Christ is the end of the law in the sense that our salvation is not based on our moral behavior or good works or our ability to obey the law, whether that means in terms of its ceremonial precepts, or rather of its primary moral teaching, to love God with all our heart, and our neighbors as ourselves. We have failed to do these things. At the same time, Christ is the goal of the law in that the righteousness and moral goodness that God's law asks of us has been fulfilled in Christ, and he intends to fulfill it in us, in our own lives.

It is important to remember that Paul does not end his discussion of law in Romans with 7:25, "I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin." Romans 7 is not Paul's description of the "normal Christian life." It is rather the diagnosis of the abnormal life we all live when we resist God's law because we are enslaved to sin.

Paul's prescription follows in the next two verses of Romans 8. After stating in Romans 8:1 that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, Paul continues, "For the *law of the Spirit* has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." (2-4). Thomas Aquinas asked whether the gospel is a new law, and he responded that it is, but that the new law is not really law because it is the love of the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts that enables us to fulfill God's law by loving God with all our heart and our neighbors as ourselves. (*Summa Theologiae* 1.2.106)

Paul's discussion of law in Romans 1-7 is followed in Romans 8 by his discussion of new life in Christ, and the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit who not only forgives us our sin, but frees us from its power in our lives. Because the Holy Spirit dwells within us; we are united to the risen Christ, and we become new creatures. As through faith and baptism we are united to Christ, we share in Christ's death and resurrection, we die to sin, and we are raised to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:1-14). We become new creatures, our hearts are changed (2 Cor. 5:17). We do what we love, and we now love the law of the God who first loved us, gave his Son to die and live for us, and now gives us his Holy Spirit, to share the Son's resurrection life with us. So Christians do indeed love God's law – not as a source of self-righteousness, certainly not as a task for self-improvement, but as our loving response to the God who has shown his love for us in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and now, through his indwelling Spirit, frees us from the slavery of sin, so that we can become slaves to righteousness (Rom. 6:15-18).

Now before I get carried away, I need to qualify myself. There is still the Augustinian dilemma. We are fooling ourselves if

we believe that we can simply snap our fingers, and undo all of that self-centeredness that loves sin, and so does not love God. God's law is for our good, but learning to love God's law does not happen overnight. Jesus was not jesting when he suggested that following him meant that we must take up our cross. (Mark 8: 34-35) Part of that cross means dying to the self that hates God's law, and crucifixion is a slow and painful death. In this world, we are pilgrims, and we need to learn over and over again that God is a lovable object. As we are reminded constantly here at Trinity School for Ministry, we live in the eschatological tension between the "already and the not yet."

But as we keep our eyes on Jesus, and not on ourselves, and not on the pride or shame that comes with trying to keep the law, or failing to keep it, we really do come to know God as that lovable object. The Holy Spirit really does dwell within us, and, as we are united to the risen Christ, Jesus lives his resurrection life in us; through that resurrection life, we are caught up into the eternal love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit that is the Trinity itself, and our lives produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22) This is the triune love that has created the world, has shared this love with us, and has made us friends with God (John 15:15). When that love commands, we more and more find ourselves responding, "As you wish." Amen.

1 Most critical biblical scholars question whether the apostle Paul actually wrote the pastoral epistles. Theologically, it does not matter whether 2 Timothy is the actual work of Paul's own hands, of an amanuensis writing in his name, of a Pauline disciple writing in his spirit, or is a compilation that contains original Pauline material. "Paul" here refers to "canonical Paul." If Paul actually wrote it, so much the better.

2 I would lay the blame here at the feet of William of Ockham, but John Duns Scotus prepared the way.

3 Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (NY: Harper & Row. 1979), 15-16.

4 Or, if you're Anglican, Richard Hooker.

5 I owe this reading of *The Confessions* to Rusty Reno from an article that I think appeared in *First Things*.