

# THE LAW OF LOVE

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Deuteronomy 10:12-19 - Serve the Lord your God with all your heart  
Psalm 119:33-40 (responsively, *Voices United*, p. 839, Part Three)  
Romans 13:8-14 - Love is the fulfilling of the law

This whole matter of the law--the direction God gives us for living and its translation into love as a way of life--is focussed on perhaps the most important question for us. It's simply "How, then, shall we live?" One of our really exciting hymn writers in the church today, Linnea Good, wrote a song called "How Then Shall I Live?" So I want to introduce this sermon by reading a bit of that hymn and the question she asks.

*Took a walk outside of my walking. Stepped inside another's shoes.  
Walked the dusty borders between us, Paths I'd never chosen to choose.  
How then shall I live? How then shall I live, O God? How then shall I live?  
Heard a sound outside of my listening. Felt the living hum of the ground.  
Waited on the voice of the Spirit, Singing with its new, old sound.  
How then shall I live? How then shall I live, O God? How then shall I live?<sup>1</sup>*

She wrote that song after having spent some time on a visit to Mexico City and seeing for the first time in her life the other side of life--the depth of the poverty in the underdeveloped world--and then came back here to this part of the world where she saw in a whole new way the world around us, the things that concern us, the things that we have in our lives. Then the question: "So how do I live here, now that I've been there, now that my mind and my awareness have been stretched?"

There's some way in which that has always been the eternal issue as reflected in the Old Testament, the centuries of Hebrew history and on up into the life of Christ where it gets focussed in a powerful way, the writings of Paul, and the history of the church as we try to understand that. It's a perennial question that just doesn't come up at all if we live our lives never seeing anything except what we've seen before--if nothing ever changes. If life were just static we could easily work out the rules and make it simple to know what to do. But life changes and grows, and even where it doesn't change there's always something beyond the little circle of our lives, beyond what we've experienced; there's always something that will stretch us a bit further. That's what makes the question so exciting: "How, then, shall we live?" Where do we find the direction for living, and what is it that guides us, especially when we step beyond the familiar?

The Book of Deuteronomy--"Deuteronomy" means the second law--is perhaps the most important book in the Old Testament in relation to what we call "the law." The word "law" is a translation of the Hebrew word "Torah." I'm going to use the word "Torah" throughout the rest of this morning's sermon. It's one of those Hebrew words that is good to learn, because it has a richer nuance than when we translate it into English. Etymologically, "Torah" is related

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<sup>1</sup> Linnea Good, *How Then shall I Live*, © 1993 Borealis Music.

to the same verb that gets used to describe what an archer does. It's the directing or aiming of the arrow. It's a sense of direction that God gives us for life. So "Torah" is much more than just the first five books of the Bible and much more than just the law codes that are in the Bible; it's that larger sense of direction for life. It includes Genesis, of course, with all the marvellous stories of those dysfunctional families trying to make their way in life. And in the midst of that muck and those stories the people of the Jewish tradition over the centuries have learned to look and look again, to think and think again, and to discern ever new how God directs us for our living.

So the first thing I want to do is expand our understanding of "Torah." There is a tendency in some streams of Christian tradition to consider the law as just the rules--that rigid sort of rule-book way of life--and the Gospel as the introduction of the way of love. But that's not the case; that's far too simplistic. The Hebrew tradition understands "Torah" as an expression, as an attempt to understand the way of love, and understands how life gets transformed as it goes along. So it was fun to read that bit of the song that we'd never read at all. There are 22 parts, and we read only one of them. The song is long, one section for each of the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Whoever got into that couldn't stop celebrating the joy of Torah. But that gives us a hint that Torah wasn't understood just as a rule book. It was something that could be described as sweeter than honey. You know what that means; every one of us does. When in some moment of prayer, or in meditation or crisis, we've caught a glimpse or a sense of God leading and directing us, we've had some kind of breakthrough and a sense of the sacred with us. That's Torah; that's knowing God's direction for our lives.

And so Jesus' teachings talk about the law being fulfilled in love. And then Paul picks up on that and says love is the fulfillment of all the commandments. In other words, the whole point of the commandments is simply a way of explaining how love--he gives some examples--gets lived out in life. I want us to be thinking of that dynamic because it's not an old thing that goes away. We live with it perpetually; there's a part of us that has a propensity towards that rule-book way of life. There's a part of us that wants to get everything in control and neatly laid out in the rules. We try to keep everything static, but that causes some very violent and abusive things in our lives because we have to put up walls to shut out anything that's different, any experience that would challenge our simple little view of life that we've got all worked out. But life always shatters that. As a result, we all have that sense of wishing things were simple so we could reduce life to a simple set of rules. However, we all have that part of ourselves that knows there's a more dynamic sense of "How, then, shall we live." It is a sense that can't be spelled out in a static set of rules. Rather, we need something more dynamic, something more living, something more of the inner life, to direct us to know how to live in the brand new situation every day of our lives so that we don't need to be afraid of what's new and what's different. In other words, we have a compass or a guide within ourselves.

There is a parallel in the writings within the field of developmental psychology and the writings about people's spiritual development. There's a very common standard, a kind of model, that we all learned about how children start out learning to follow the rules. They do what they're told by their moms and dads and mainly to please their parents. That's why we start out learning to be good--the big people around us like it when we're good. That's how we work in life. And then as people mature they come to the point where they realize there's a set of rules that are a bit restrictive, that if they break the rules they get punished or hurt or lose something, but also that if they can get away with breaking the rules they can have more fun.

And so there's a certain stage, an adolescent stage, of moral development when children start to claim power and begin to push the limits and see what they can get away with. At every one of these stages there are always some people who remain stuck for the rest of their lives. These are emotionally-arrested people in their 50's who still try to see what they can get away with. It just gets translated onto a larger economic scale.

But the world gets to be a better place if by the time people are in their 20's and 30's they move on from that into a self-righteous stage where all of a sudden they know what's good and they do what's good just to be good. It's to be good; it's following all the rules. That's the place that's kind of dangerous, because that's where one must really get rigid about shutting out anything that's new or challenging even though that rigidity ultimately doesn't work. We know that kind of person who is at the "goody two-shoes" stage. It's just good to be good. Some people become stalled at that stage too, and they go through the rest of their lives like that. There are also some people who flip that upside down and turn into "baddy two-shoes." Their whole lives are about being bad and breaking the rules. But it's still a life oriented toward the rules. Psychologists and spiritual writers recognize a fourth stage which is a kind of final level of maturity where a person finds the principles and the nature within his or her own heart that can guide beyond the rules into a larger good unrestricted by rules. That's what we aim for, and in a way that's what spiritual practice is; it's certainly what Jesus was teaching, and certainly what Paul was teaching in Romans.

More recently, another dimension has been added. Some people have pointed out that the psychologists who did that seminal work, worked mostly with boys. As an understanding developed that there's a feminine side to psychology that's a little different from the male psychology, they noticed that the theory was mostly a kind of individualistic thing about boys learning how to be men that are good--a sort of lone star, independent, thing. Feminist psychologists and Christian feminists have commented that girls tend to grow differently; their moral development happens in a more relational way. It's more rooted in friendships and how we get along, and what breaks friendships and how we treat one another. In my view, one of the most important contributions feminism has made to our understanding of psychology and spirituality is that relational dimension. When we read the Gospel we see that relational dimension at the very heart, and so it's a very important contribution. Therefore, moral development also has to do with how we relate to one another.

Notice that today's reading from Deuteronomy is about the law, but it mentions how we treat the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. When we hear the word "stranger" we need to remember, and it's right in that passage too, that this is set within an understanding of election that God chose us Israelites, of all the people of the world, to be the special people. And so we can very easily get into a chauvinistic, clannish, mentality as Israel did at times in their history. But here it is, here it is right at the heart of their writings. It's about how we treat the stranger. Yes, we are chosen of God, but we're not chosen to shut everybody out; we're chosen to be the ones to show the kind of love that opens the heart, beyond the boundaries, to the stranger. That heart, that love we live from the heart, that relationship way of life, guiding us beyond the laws and the rules, is what enables life to continue to be human and to be God-like in every situation of our lives.

Recently I discovered one of the most exciting motion pictures I've ever seen. It's called "The Decalogue," a series of ten one-hour episodes. Most of you will not have seen it because it's Polish and has never really been shown in North American theatres. It appears on the top-

10 all-time movie lists of almost all the prominent film critics of the world. The word “Decalogue” is the technical Latin term for the Ten Commandments, and so the movie explores the moral issues around the Commandments, around those principles of life. Part of its brilliance is that it takes us into what in one of the ten parts is referred to as “moral hell”--the situations in life where there are no rules that give us simple answers, the borderline issues where all the rules can contradict.

One example in the ten stories is about a woman who comes to her doctor with a problem. Her husband is critically ill, perhaps deathly ill, and the doctor is her husband’s doctor. She is pregnant by a different man and asks the doctor whether her husband is going to live or die. If he will live, she’s going to get an abortion. We have to set aside the North American take on the abortion issue where we’re still trying to figure out whether it should be legal or not. In countries like Poland the issue was settled long ago; a woman has the legal choice whether or not to abort. The advantage of that resolution is that it allows us to move on morally to explore the question of choice, to the dynamics of how a woman makes a choice whether or not to abort. That’s the place where we need to ask “How, then, shall we live?” The doctor’s dilemma is what to say to the woman, because he doesn’t know whether her husband is going to live or die.

The acting is marvellous, and the subtlety of the story it explores takes us right into the nuance of that absolute dilemma--to the place where there is no rule that works, or the rules are contradictory, or as my ethics professor used to say we’re not always deciding between right and wrong. As a matter of fact in most of our issues, our really difficult moral issues, we’re choosing between wrong and wrong. Now if we’re into our salvation in a purely self-righteous way, we are damned because we don’t get to be right. However, by the grace of God, even the choices between wrong and wrong can be made faithfully. God doesn’t call us to be right; God calls us to be faithful, and therein lies our salvation from a truly forgiving God. So in a situation like that, between the wrong and the wrong, the doctor chooses to lie to her. He tells her that her husband is going to die, so she keeps the baby. Her husband lives and welcomes the child.

We can’t make choices like that based on the rules, can we? We make choices like that out of our hearts, hearts filled with love that has always been there. Love is not just a New Testament thing, and the proof of that is in one of my favourite passages from Jeremiah where Jeremiah speaks the word of God and tells the people: “I’m going to make a new covenant with you. It’s not going to be like the old covenant, which was written in stone, which you broke. My intention, my direction, my will, my Torah, is going to be written on your hearts. And you won’t need to tell each other about me because I’m going to simply be your God and you’re going to be my people. No one’s going to have to learn about me because every one of you will just know me. You’ll know me, right from the least to the greatest. And you’ll know my love in your hearts, you’ll know you’re loved and accepted just as you are, and all you’ll ever have to do is live your lives from that love and you’ll always know how, then, you shall live.”

Our hymn, number 603, is Jim Strathdee’s way of picking up that partnership way of life: “In loving partnership we come, seeking O God, your will to do. Our prayers and actions now receive; we freely offer them to you.”

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor