

Title: The Law and Sin

Date: 10/8/2023 (Proper 22, Year A)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20](#); [Psalm 19](#); [Philippians 3:4b-14](#); [Matthew 21:33-46](#)

Video Link: <https://youtu.be/K3RmBkf9Nlk?t=1988>

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my
heart be acceptable in your sight,
O GOD, my strength and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)
Amen.

When we hear the Scripture on Sunday mornings, the Old Testament reading is always paired with a Psalm that responds to the reading in some way. Some days you have to squint really hard to see the connection, and other days, it's more obvious. Today, it's all about the law.

In the Book of Exodus, God lays down the law through Moses.

What comes to mind when you think about the Ten Commandments? (Charlton Heston? Mel Brooks?)

Hold on to these answers, we'll come back to them.

In the letters of Paul, when he talks about being justified by faith instead of being justified by works, "works" refer to the work of following the commandments. Not community service, not making a financial pledge to your church *gasp*, not even caring for the poor.

Paul's argument against that is if we believe that we can be saved by our works, that means we believe that our salvation depends on what we do, or don't do. It means we believe that our salvation depends on how well we obey commandments like these. Not only does that take God out of the picture, that puts us in the place of God. We'd be like the tenants in Jesus' parable. These tenants have conveniently forgotten that it was the landowner who planted the vineyard, put up the fence, dug a wine press, and built the watchtower. Once the landowner was out of sight, they started to believe that they were not the caretakers, but the rightful owner.

They began to whisper to each other,
"We should get to decide what happens with the harvest."
"We put in all the work, so we should get ALL the fruits."

Sometimes I wonder if that's the foundational sin. We want to be the ones who decide. We believe that once we have the right knowledge, once we have eaten the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, we know what's best, for us and for all those under our care.

Instead of loving God with our whole heart and mind and might, we replace God with idols of our own choosing. Jesus famously says, “No slave can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth” (Luke 6:13).

If Jesus were speaking to us today, he might add, “You cannot serve God and historical narratives that you accept without question.” Do America’s founding fathers, or any country’s founding fathers, really know best when it comes to the challenges we face today?

We make idols out of purity and authenticity and allow “what used to be” to keep us from imagining “what could be.”¹

In *The Sacred Life of Bread*, the Rev. Meghan Murphy-Gill writes, “Food traditions are often born of necessity and availability...Designating any kind of culinary tradition ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ runs the risk of undermining how these food traditions are born to begin with...We simply cannot say that the evolution of food can stop at a certain point.”² This isn’t just true of recipes for bread; it’s also true of the Bible.

We make wrongful use of the name of God when we engage the Bible with an eye toward tradition but not reason and experience. We make idols out of tradition when we don’t question whether they are or have been beneficial and life-giving for **all** the people who feel their effects.

If Jesus were speaking today, he also might say, “You cannot serve God and chase shiny new technology without seeking to understand the full cost.”

Not only do we devote our time and attention to our digital devices, we sacrifice at their altar our earth’s natural resources, as in the metals mined to make them, and we sacrifice the financial well-being and physical health of those who produce them on one end and who process electronic waste on the other.³ Servers used to store and process things “in the cloud” consume a lot of actual electricity. Even if AI and robots don’t lead to Skynet and the Terminator, they can still cause a lot of harm if we trust and use them without careful consideration.

Instead of loving our neighbors as ourselves, instead of seeing them as part of us, we start calculating and comparing the work we put in with what we have, the work others put in and what they have. Then we get angry and jealous. This tempts us to steal and lie to get what we want, to take who and what we think we deserve, to keep others from getting what we don’t they deserve. When we get competitive, there’s no time for Sabbath. We tell ourselves that we have to keep hustling; we can’t stop working.

This is what sin looks like. It gives rise to a narrative that separates us from God and our neighbors. Sin doesn’t just set us apart from them; sin sets us against them.

Sin keeps us from seeing what we have. It keeps us from sharing our abundance because all we can see is what we don’t have. Sin encourages us to operate out of a place of scarcity and fear, to dig into the mindset of us vs. them. Sin is why we have FOMO, fear

of missing out. “**You** can’t tell us what tree we can and can’t eat from.” Sin is the reason a covenant built on the Ten Commandments feels more like another kind of slavery rather than a path toward freedom.

Yet, as the Psalmist tell us, the law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul; the law gives wisdom to the innocent; the law is just and rejoices the heart; the law is clear and give light to the eyes. We desire the law as much as we desire gold; the law is as sweet as honey.

Did any of these descriptions come to mind when I asked you about the Ten Commandments?

One reason may be that when we think about “the law” our minds go to the laws of the land. Sometimes writing a sermon feels like building a legal case. Scripture is to the law as commentaries written by theologians and practitioners are to legal precedent.

BUT the laws of the land are **not** the laws of God. They are guardrails we put up to keep us from running into each other. They are the walls we put up around what we believe is rightfully ours.

Human laws are based on rights rather than right relationship. Human laws determine who or what is right according to the letter of the law. They don’t encourage us to examine their historical and cultural basis. They don’t inspire us to reflect on the spirit behind these laws so that we can love each other in such a way so that someday they won’t be necessary. Human law dictates action; they don’t shape intent. They are notoriously bad at keeping people from breaking laws.

No matter how often and how strongly some people want to tell us that their laws are based on the laws of God, the proof is in what writer Liz Cooledge Jenkins calls the “Psalm 19 test.”⁴

It works like this. When we are considering a set of teachings of the Bible, when we consider how a person or an organization is interpreting it and applying it, we need to ask:

- Does it repair what was broken?
- Does it take the listeners seriously and invite them to take in the ways of wisdom?
- Does it make people feel deeply glad, the way we feel when we know we are safe and cared for?
- Does it make them feel luminous, as if they are shining with life from the inside out?

The Supreme Court came back in session on Monday, but can we rely on their decisions to revive the soul and give wisdom to the innocent? After yet another potential government shutdown was narrowly averted, do we rejoice in our hearts when we hear the acts of Congress? How many people’s eyes light up, with delight, when they think about the Texas State Legislature?

Our response tells us how closely those laws, whether they come from our government or the Bible, are aligned with God.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, we also see the framework for his understanding of the law shift one from one based on works to one based on faith.

By the standards of society and the religious establishment of his times, he had it made. He was born into the right family, the right tribe. He did all the right things. He was so good at following the law he was appointed to persecute those who did not follow the law.

By all rights, he should have felt secure in his salvation. Yet what the world considered gains, he came to consider loss. The traits and works he was envied for, he now regarded as rubbish. Why?

Jesus.

Instead of seeking success by worldly standards, even religious or spiritual standards, Paul now seeks to know Christ. His goal isn't knowledge; it's knowing Christ. His goal isn't to be right, even by the laws of God, but to be in right relationship with God and the people of God. He's no longer trying to earn points by doing the works of the law.

The law doesn't sustain us; God does. The power of resurrection isn't found in the law; it's found in knowing Christ Jesus. The shift from knowledge to knowing is important. Paul's focus isn't on knowledge in and of itself, but on knowing Christ, on striving to know Christ.

The antidote to sin is not law; the antidote to sin is Christ. The way to deal with sin isn't to create more laws. Otherwise we end up playing a perpetual game of whack-a-mole.

The antidote to sin is changing where we place our faith, so that we might change the way we live and engage with the world in hopes of improving the circumstances that cause people to struggle and have no good options.

The antidote to sin is changing in whom we place our faith, so that we may understand and follow the law the way Jesus did, as closely as we can, so that we may always strive to pattern our life on the life of Christ Jesus.

The antidote to sin is recognizing the ways in which we calculate, compete and compare ourselves against our neighbors, and to be clear-eyed and self-aware about our priorities and our commitments, our gods and idols.

This starts here, with us, with the words of our mouth and the meditation of our hearts.

Amen.

¹ Murphy-Gill, Meghan. *The Sacred Life of Bread*. p153

² Murphy-Gill, Meghan. *The Sacred Life of Bread*. p137-139

³ <https://slate.com/technology/2022/08/india-electronic-waste-workers.html>

⁴ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/sunday-s-coming/sunday-s-coming-ordinary27a-jenkins>