

Fulfilling God's Law

For Berkeley Chinese Community Church, UCC
Berkeley, California • September 10, 2017
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Psalm 119:33-40

Teach me, O God,
the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it
to the end.

Give me understanding,
that I may keep your law
and observe it
with my whole heart.

Lead me in the path
of your commandments,
for I delight in it.

Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.
Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.

Confirm to your servant
your promise,
which is for those
who fear you.

Turn away the disgrace
that I dread,
for your ordinances are good.

See, I have longed
for your precepts;
in your righteousness give me life.

Romans 13:8

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

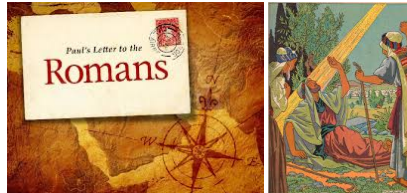
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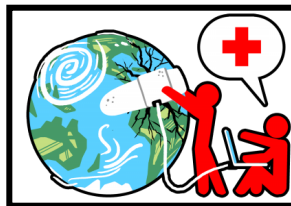
August turned out to be a sermon series all pointing to how we might consider BCCC's future. We talked about Peter's attempt to walk on water to Jesus that is really about staying in the boat – no matter how big the storm we find ourselves in...to stay in the boat with the faith that Jesus is in the boat with us and Jesus will lead us through the storm safely!



Then we talked about who's in that boat with us?
And how do we manage to be row together in that boat?
And what kind of faith can keep us rowing together even if those in the boat with us are challenging individuals.



Next we get some more clues about how to do this – it might be easier to row together if we somehow are transformed into someone like Paul describes in Romans 12 – someone transformed by renewing our minds – by seeing the world differently in order to serve God...AND that we focus on the whole and figure out what our part is...like how each body part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around.
And today we're given the key to it all...Jonathan and Everett said it musically, the Psalm's verses today points to it...

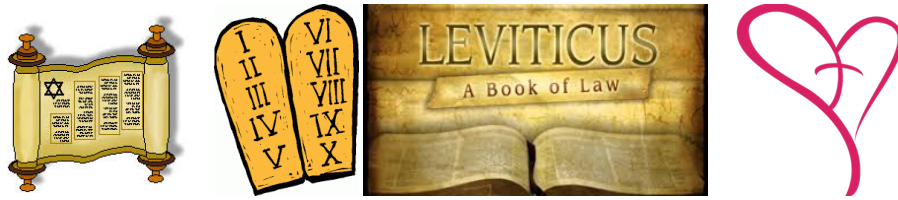


It begins...Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the Lord.
² Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
³ who also do no wrong,
but walk in his ways.

The middle is all about asking God to teach us God's laws and decrees...
And ends with asking God to let us live in order to praise God, and that God's decrees and laws help us do that.
And the verse in Paul's letter to the Romans tells us to
to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law!



It's as simple as that! Funny thing – that's what Jesus was trying to tell us, right? Remember when he was asked what was the greatest commandment? I'm sure people's heads were swimming with all of the laws to abide by in order to be the child of God that God was hoping for.



There were the 10 Commandments that Moses brought to the people after he encountered God on Mt. Sinai. Then there's the entire book of Leviticus is all about legal and moral practices to live by in order for humans to live with one another.

But Jesus came along and simplified everything when he answered the question about the greatest commandment – he said, “What?” <<prompt congregation>>> - Right – “Thou shalt **love** the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.” And the second? Thou shalt **love** thy neighbour as thyself. And he wrapped it up by saying, “On these two commandments **hang** all the law and the prophets.”

Is it really as simple as that?

Who are we to question Jesus? The head of our church and faith?

He took all that he knew about God and what God has been trying to teach God's people and boiled it down into something so simple that we don't need to clutter our brains with a lot of little laws! Love God, Love your neighbors – with the assumption that we love ourselves! Simple! Something that doesn't take a lot of brainpower to get.

It seems that others before him tried to make things simple so that God's people could remember what God is wanting people to do and be. Psalm 119 is one of those attempts.



It is the longest Psalm in the Old Testament. I read somewhere that Psalm is organized as an *acrostic*...that is...the author wrote each stanza of 8 verses beginning with one of the 22 letters of Hebrew alphabet...in consecutive order...aleph to tav. If this Psalm was originally written Greek, each stanza would begin with letters alpha to omega...in English, from letters A to Z.



I sure don't remember when nor how I learned the English alphabet but I now have grandchildren – who I watched as they developed language. And learning the alphabet was made simpler by learning the alphabet song...remember? <<sing a, b, c, d, e, f, g....next time won't you sing with me.>>

It was a fun way to begin the work of learning to read...it contained a little humor and a lesson! And we might begin to read...

Psalm 119 is kind of like that – it’s an uplifting and joyful message centering on the truth of God’s law guiding and directing the lives of God’s people. The whole of it is not at all what we might associate with “laws” and “decrees”. It’s not restrictive! In fact, the precepts or statutes of God are intended to bring about contentment in one’s life and to give the receiver of the Law true joy.

For the Jewish people, the Torah, God’s Law was a gift indicating God’s intention and desire to be in relationship with them. God had created humanity, breathed life into humanity, and continues to sustain the lives of humans through a steady and steadying presence of God.

One commentator offers the remark...

“This complex psalm...celebrates the place of Torah in the life of Israel. Torah is best translated as ‘instruction’ rather than ‘law.’ It is a gift from God inviting us to engage in holy play!”

Look at that – we’re back to our “ABC song!” Well, maybe it’s not “Holy” but definitely play...it is playful and its intention is to teach us our letters that give us an opportunity to learn about the world and ourselves and others through reading.

It seems to me that Psalm 119 is an invitation to learn a way to live, which is couched in a kind of singsong rhythm formed through the use of the Hebrew alphabet. It takes the concept of law and gives it a playful twist...it blends a preschool teaching technique with a teaching about a deeply serious understanding about how the law creates and helps to maintain God’s place in the life of God’s people. *It is playful* but with a serious purpose.

That takes some serious redirecting in our thinking - we don’t often think of applied law as playful or freeing. In general, I’ll bet we think of laws as restrictive and even punitive at times. For example, a law, which penalizes someone for failing to pay his or her due tax, will definitely not help the taxpayer experience any benefits. But unpaid taxes could be directly linked to unfunded or underfunded road care, educational needs, social and economic helps, which will, over time effect all of us.

We can all agree that laws have a necessary place in our society...but we also have seen how they can also be abused. There are still laws that discriminate against someone because of race, color, gender, sexual orientation, or age. We seem to have a tendency as human beings to fall from grace – just look at our history – regardless of which nation we’re zeroing in on. Here in the US, we are, as a country and a people, established on a principle of freedom and liberty for all. We recognize how far from the mark we have slid when misplaced or damaging laws rule rather than the kinds of laws, which contribute to the care and welfare of all our citizens. Here we are again...



So again, we ask God – teach us – AGAIN – what is your commandment? Teach us!

Love God – we remember, and love your neighbor as yourself...which means we love ourselves – just as God made us – in God’s own image.

And with love – we are fulfilling God’s law. But boy, do we forget so easily and so frequently...how to love...what it means to love...and it’s not all fun and games, not all a bed of roses. It’s hard work!

I remember commiserating with a friend during a particularly rough spot in both our married lives. We exchanged stories about the shortcomings of our respective husbands, she threw up her hands and said, "Sheesh – I guess marriage is just a tradeoff in tolerances!"

We suddenly laughed so loud we woke up our napping toddlers - It was just what needed to get some perspective....to bring us back to a "loving attitude".

You know the very well known verses of I Corinthians 13...

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Nice words...a jingle, a poem, that almost begs us to memorize it!

Nice ideas – nice concepts – but are they doable?

In marriage? In partnerships? In the same boat? In the same church? When we are on the same team?

Out in the world? With those folks who pushes our buttons?

Not so easy, right? Not easy to watch what we say and how we say it and how we look when we speak our words...our body language, our facial expressions...they all communicate to whoever we are interacting with!

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered.

That's the small print, folks – those are the headings of our procedures manual of "how to behave with a loving attitude".

Be patient – know that not everyone lives according to the schedule we have set...including God! That includes others' faith journeys, others' life journey, others' developing a "loving attitude"...that impatience we feel? It probably wouldn't surprise you to hear that the antidote is prayer – give it to God.

In pray silently - *"OK, God, you want me to live with this person? I can't deal with this now – he's all yours. I'm going to bed or I'm going to have a cup of tea or I'm going for a walk."*

OR *"OK, God, you want me to work with this person? Can't do it right now. Help me!maybe if we take a break...maybe if I stand up and stretch...maybe if I go to the bathroom...maybe if I take a breath..."*

OR pray aloud – *"OK, God – we seem to be in a bad place right now. You probably don't want us to stay here – help us to breathe your spirit in and find your light that we might follow in your way. Amen!"*

God is always there!!!

Be Kind – means just that – BE kind!

If you have a gibe that you are dying to say to your conversation partner – swallow it – what you utter in jest or as a joke can be interpreted as a slight or dig...words can hurt - they can eat away at the hearer's self worth and your relationship.

Pray instead – get that dig in and share it with God – God knows you AND God knows your conversation partner...God will get it and the barb has no chance of ever hurting your relationship! God is there...God is love...patient, kind and more.

Be Kind - If you have a critique of someone in your boat, think of a way to say it that doesn't rock the boat – a way that affirms the other's being. One rule of thumb that I learned in teaching preschool back in the day...is 3 positives to one negative....so, to a child who is not cooperating by taking turns on the slide: 1) I like how you climb the steps up so carefully! 2) I'm so glad you enjoy sliding down the slide! 3) It's great that you put away your blocks before you came outside. NEXT: Everyone in line really likes sliding too...so come stand in line so everyone can have their turn..you, too! Softened with some positive comments about himself/herself, a child is more apt to listen to what is said next. And the 3 positives don't have to happen just before a negative. Positives just by themselves anytime are good! Works for adults, too!

Example: If my husband were here, I would say – 1) I love your sense of humor; 2) I love how you enjoy being with the grandchildren; 3) I love how you are always ready to help me when I ask. NEXT: And I would love it if you smile more.

You know my husband Nowell – those who were here at yesterday's Music Festival caught a glimpse of him. A smile on his face is NOT his norm, right?

You can practice this on your own – at home or at work or in the classroom..



Love is patient, Love is kind...and if we move and act and think and speak love, it seems to me that the others follow: protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres...



Folks...we have opportunities to transform ourselves into the children of God that fulfill God's law – to love...merely love. Can we do it? We need to try together...and fulfill God's law here at BCCC and beyond...Amen!