

Law and Grace

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Luke 10:25-37

Today I want to talk about law and grace.

About the commandments.

We heard today - *if you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*

If you keep all the rules

We probably all struggle with reading all those rules in Leviticus, let alone keeping them...
But we don't know what to do with all this law stuff

IF I keep the rules I'm ok, but if I can't keep all the laws - I must be a sinner.
but Jesus has died to save me from sin
So perhaps these laws matter anymore!

This is how we often show and talk about our faith..

Coming to Jesus is seen as admitting all your bad stuff
and being forgiven.

The truth will set you free
but first it will make you miserable

There is this division between our faith being about
Keeping the rules
And Jesus died to save us from our sins

Sin
And forgiveness

Let off a crime I didn't know I had committed.

Although if you want a hint of a crime you might have committed you only have to look at one of those lists of St Paul's - drunkenness, orgies, gossip - have I don't anything wrong?

Its like we know in our heads that Jesus loves us - this I know, for the bible tells me so
But in our hearts we still think - yes, but I want to keep the rules.

And we do want to keep the rules
I think theres's part of all of us that doesn't want to get into trouble with teacher, or Mum or Dad. We don't want to let them down. We don't want to let God down.
Just tell us what to do, then we'll know that we're ok
We're basically nervous, afraid.
Not deep down, not all the time - but there is that bit.

And its not surprising there's some nervousness or fear. Think about the stories in Genesis - the start of our faith.

When Moses first brings the law down the mountain.

It was because the people were terrified of God

This God who had sent plagues, and death - killed all the first born, parted the sea and slain their Egyptian army. And then when they go near Mt Sinai - Moses says don't come near or God will smite you. Some die because they get too close to God.

Please give us some rules, some laws, so we can know where is a safe place to stand.

So it starts with

Deut 6:4 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength"

But then you say - help - what does that mean, how do I love God?

So then you get the 10 commandments - well, it means don't worship other Gods or make idols like they do next door. People are made in God's image, so their precious - so you can't kill them or steal them or lie to them. Relationships matter.

But then you get - well - I didn't mean to kill this person, but my axe head flew off - the principles of the law, need working out in detail, case law.

And the first 4 of the 10 - about God - also get worked out - this is how to worship God - detailed instructions of how to build the temple. This is what makes you unworthy, unclean to meet me - but this is what you can do to make it right.

613 commandments.

So that fear, of a terrifying all powerful God, is contained. Here's what God requires in general - love God, love your neighbour, and in particular ways of the law.

(And Jesus does exactly the same in today reading when he says here's the main principles, but here's what it looks like in practice.)

And what happens with all these laws - is that the Jewish people realise, through the prophets, that they are more and more sinful. More and more lawbreakers. And so they are taken into exile - they lose the king, the kingdom, the land everything. We did wrong. We are punished.

Haha - but were they right?

You see the mighty Ezekiel stops 33 chapters of laments and nagging and says - I am the Lord and I will be like a shepherd and bring you back. The endlessly suffering and compassionate Jeremiah says - God will go with you and suffer with you. And Isaiah says in chapter 40 - Comfort, comfort, my people.

That's why the exile is key to Judaism and Christianity. There are signs of God's loving side before, and there are signs of his judgement after, but it's a massive change. God wants us to know - it's not about the rules, it's about the relationship.

So as the centuries go by, God seems less terrifying, yet Judaism becomes distorted by the temple rulers and religious leaders. It seems to be more and more about rules and tiny laws - the extra midrash and talmud

And then Jesus comes, God himself comes, to correct our image of God.

He reminds us that God loves us first, before we do anything for him.

That he's much less interested in the 'how far did you walk on the sabbath' than in the - will you help someone if they're in need whatever the day of the week.

I'm not going to define your neighbour by a certain mileage or family connection - but by saying - anyone - even a flipping foreigner - a samaritan!

Jesus does not say - keep the rules and you can be my follower, I'll call you one of mine. (Even though we'd love that.)

He says - be with me - spend time with me - be a Mary, not a Martha

Come to me, and I will refresh you

Follow me and I'll give you life

Why wouldn't you want to hang out with someone who loves you more than anybody else has ever loved you, or will love you?

Just be.

We become like what we worship - become like Jesus.

But we love to rush round. Fill that tea urn, write another rota, knock on enough doors, go to enough meetings, make another cake.

Are we still afraid? Did I break some law, did I think some wrong thing? Did I make a mistake. Maybe teacher still doesn't like me. I better say sorry a lot, and work harder.

This human tendency to tame God by making it about rules to be kept.

To keep God at a distance by making it all about actions.

Just be still. Sit and know that God loves you

The reason is we have confession is not to drag stuff up, but if we're feeling bad, to know we're forgiven

The reason we make cakes and help others, is not to earn our place, but because it was something Jesus said we might enjoy, and could he do it with us.

Take the good Samaritan story.

You could see it as Jesus saying -

Hey guys - if you want to call yourself a Christian, hang around in underpasses with a donkey to take victims of mugging to a local bed and breakfast. Otherwise you're sinning.

Or you could see it as Jesus saying - right guys, time to get busy, show me how much you love me, ride those ambulances!

Or .. perhaps Jesus was just thinking - this could be fun, make you feel good, make the world a better place. How about you treat all people like they're made in God's image. You spend time caring for each other, and you know what - I'll be there too.

Our faith is not about rules, and trying to keep them.

Following Jesus is not about getting it right, its about hanging out with God, getting to know each other, and enjoying doing things together. That's what it means to live in the Kingdom of God.

Following Jesus is less about getting it right and keeping the rules, and more about hanging out, getting to know each other, and enjoying doing things together.

Worshipping him, we become like him