

Weybridge Methodist Church

Sermon 5th October 2014

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Aim: To see the law as superceded by Christ in order to understand God's vision for us personally.

I wanted to read the 10 commandments partly because they are one of the Lectionary readings for today and partly because I don't hear them read very often. In fact, I don't read them very often. I don't know about you? They are the basis of the Law for the Jewish religion. They are rules to follow if you are a follower of the Jewish God. They are given directly from God.

Some people believe, as Christians, we should follow the rules of God and we will be alright. If we keep the 10 Commandments then we are OK with God. We can enter heaven when we die. Certainly they are excellent rules for life! You shall not kill, steal, covet, bear false witness. Our laws are based on these and they are seen as good foundations for society. Moses and Aaron went up the mountain to get them and the people stayed away or they would die. Smoke covered the mountain and thunder and lightning frightened the people. The commandments were given in a climate of fear. God was powerful, awesome, frightening and would cause death to any who disobeyed Him. A terrifying God.

We heard the other 2 Lectionary readings. One from Matthew about the vineyard tenants who killed the owner's servants and his son, and the other from Paul's letter to the Philippians. I want to put all three together and try to find the new insights that God would have us understand here today

So let us think about the three readings and see if we can hear what God is telling us.

The parable of the vineyard was told where the Pharisees could hear... and they knew it was about them. Everyone who was listening would have known that the vineyard referred to Israel because it is described this way often in scripture. They would also have been familiar with the idea of an absentee landlord who made the vineyard and put up a hedge to protect it from thieves and wild animals, built a wine press and a tower. (This was a 1st class designer vineyard!) He then hired people to work it for him while he went away, this was not unusual. Neither was the idea of unscrupulous tenants. Palestine was not a peaceful, prosperous place. It was poor, overthrown and rebellious. The tenants' behaviour in killing the messengers and the son were quite believable. The meaning of this parable was clear then as it is now. The vineyard is Israel, the owner is God, the tenants are the religious leaders who were entrusted to care for the vines and bring forth a harvest of fruit for God. The messengers are the prophets sent by God and the Son is Jesus himself. And if this wasn't enough to annoy the Pharisees, Jesus then discusses the parable, quotes from scripture, about himself, and tells them that God will take the Kingdom away from them and give it to another nation who will look after it better.

Jesus isn't safe is he? I am always amazed how we often think of Jesus as meek and mild. He was dangerous. He deliberately goaded his enemies in such a way as to lead to his death. He didn't keep quiet and stay out of trouble, did he? I want to scream at him, "stop it, keep away, keep your mouth shut, go and live quietly somewhere and you won't have to die!".... But he did have to die.... He knew that when he was telling this story. The tenants threw the Son out of the vineyard and killed him. He knew he was predicting his own end, at the hands of the Pharisees.

There was one Pharisee, who we have heard already today. Paul.

Paul kept the 10 Commandments. Not only that, he kept the severe Jewish laws of the Pharisees, not only that, he had an impeccable pedigree in the Jewish nation and faith, His whole life had been dedicated to God from his birth. He was not a late comer to Jewish law, he was circumcised at the correct time, he did everything at the right time, and he even persecuted Christians at the right time.

The Law given to Moses was one of God's covenants with Israel. The laws which were drawn up for the Jews to live by stemmed from these and were almost impossible to keep. But Paul states that he did. He was blameless. The way to a righteous relationship with God was to keep the law. Paul had done this from birth and yet..... He counts all of that as loss. All the teaching of the law, all his keeping of the law, all his Jewish privileges and attainments were as garbage to him after he met Jesus. Paul discovered that the way to a right relationship with God was through a relationship with Jesus Christ, God's Son. Not because of anything that he, Paul, had done but because of what Jesus had done. Not based on keeping the law, but on faith in Jesus Christ. Not achieved by works but given by the grace of God.

So there we have it. The 10 commandments were good for a few thousand years. They were God's rules and obedience to God meant keeping them and that would lead to a right relationship with him. They were based on fear. The Pharisees kept the letter of the law but lost the meaning, binding themselves and others in a prison of judgement. They persecuted God's messengers and killed his son.

And then a miracle happened. God's Son was resurrected. The means to a right relationship with God was suddenly changed. It was a new life in Christ, salvation by faith through grace. The law was superceded by the very death of the landowner's son. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," God found a way out for us, a better way, a way to be in his Kingdom.

So for those who say it is enough to keep the 10 commandments I say look at Paul, he kept all the law. He was blameless on paper. He then realised that it was worthless in comparison to a relationship with Christ Jesus. If the Law was enough to get into heaven, to have that right relationship with God, then why did He send his only Son to die and be resurrected? For fun? No, because he loves us and wanted us to have a way back to him that we could ALL take, not just the righteous but all of us sinners too. The way to God is to give up everything for knowing him. Because everything we have is like garbage in comparison to what we can have with him. And we can't have him if we hold on to what we have. We have to hold on to him and let go of what we were.

Paul implores the Philipians to forget what lies behind, it is not important, what is important is the future, what lies ahead, to strain forward, to press on towards the goal, the prize. And the prize is..... the call of God shown in Christ. Not Christ alone, but the reason that Christ grasped him in the first place, the calling to be that which Christ alone knows he could be. Paul is straining to be the perfect, mature Christian that works and breaths and has his being in Christ, attaining his perfect will for him, the unique Paul.

Each one of us has a unique calling. We are all grasped by Christ. Some recognise this and give ourselves up to his salvation. We are saved, born again, our old selves die and a new person emerges. A person changed by God's Holy Spirit. This is God's plan for all his people. For those of us who made our commitment a while ago, listen to Paul! He exhorts us to press on. To leave behind the past, to strain forward to attain what it is Christ has designed us for. Paul didn't stop when he gave up everything for Christ.... he began.

The word Paul uses in verse 12 is *teleios* which has a variety of integrated meanings all related to perfection. But not an abstract perfection, more a becoming fully functional in a skill or for some given purpose. It means being fully grown and mature, one who is qualified as opposed to a student. If we think of an occupation like nursing we can see how a fully qualified Staff nurse has a maturity and confidence that a new trainee will not have but after years of training they can look back at their formation and know they have been transformed. Paul is urging his readers not to rest or hold on to their past achievements but to continue to reach for perfection and integration with Christ's plan for each individual.

Paul was speaking to a particular sect called the antinomians. They denied there was any law to follow in the Christian life. They thought that they were now within the grace of Christ and so it did not matter what they did, they could be forgiven. They made no effort and took no discipline. Paul insists that the Christian life is one of an athlete straining forward with every effort to reach their goal. Trained, self-disciplined, focussed and single minded.

I have a dog, Scruff, a border collie. He is a typical dog. When there is nothing to do he sleeps. He has an in built timer which tells him when it is time for food or for a walk and then we have no peace until we have complied. When I take him out I take a ball and throw it for him. He brings it back. I throw it. He brings it back. You get the picture. But if I don't throw it and just hold it in my hand he is all attention. His eyes are fixed on me, my arm and hand. His body is poised, back legs apart, body at an angle to be able to run in the right direction as soon as the ball is thrown. Ears alert and focused on me, he glances at my face to catch any clue as to what I may do. If I turn he is there ready. His whole being is focussed on the task. Each muscle tense and ready. Each sense straining forward. Perfect attention and readiness. What a picture of what Paul is telling us to be like for God. Are we like that? Or are we like the antinomians, happy to do little because we are saved.

- We have seen how the 10 commandments were set for people to follow but it was an impossible task set in fear.
- We have seen how because Jesus died for us, the new Covenant is based on love, and need not be tainted with fear. It has no need of Law to regulate it.
- We have seen in Jesus' parable of the vineyard how God entrusts his workers and gives them all they need to do his work.
- We have seen how Paul implores us to get up and get on with it. Being a Christian isn't a comfortable life. Jesus isn't a comfortable saviour.

The message God has brought for me today is to strain forward to become God's unique and perfect being in Him. To let go of the past and hold on to Christ. To grow and slough off the old me and work supported in the incredible love of God. The love that sent his Son to be killed, by the very people who should have worshipped him.. The love that will transform me. The love that will not let me go.