

THE LAW OF THE LORD

PSALM 119:33-40; ROMANS 13:8-10

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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Earlier this summer, Naomi ran a half marathon in Vancouver. After her race, we were all walking around downtown with my brother and his family.

My brother and I ducked into a Starbucks to, a) avoid shopping; and, b) top up our caffeine levels, when I noticed a teenage girl standing by the wall with what I assumed were her parents.

Her t-shirt caught my attention.

I thought about walking over and taking a picture, but something told me that her dad might not appreciate a random middle-aged man walking up to his teenage daughter and snapping her picture. I have a very keen ability to read situations like this. ☺

So, in the absence of a picture, I spent some time on Google this week hunting down the shirt for your benefit. Here's what it looked like.

[PowerPoint image] — “Well, another day has passed and I still didn't use algebra once.”

You're all laughing. Which is what I hoped you would do.

Why do we find this funny? What question is this T-shirt is a response to?

Why do I have to take algebra? When am I ever going to use this stuff?!

My kids have asked me this question. I almost certainly asked it of my parents when I was their age. They didn't have much of an answer to give me, if memory serves, and I've hardly done better with my kids.

I usually say something like, "Um, I don't know.... you just have to do it."

I thought about this shirt when I came across today's scripture reading. Psalm 119 uses a word that we perhaps don't like very much: law.

For many of us, the phrase "the law of the Lord" brings to mind something like a teenager's view of algebra. Something we have to do even though we have no idea why.

Maybe we think of endless pages of irrelevant OT rules and rituals. Maybe we think of past church experiences that gave the impression that faith and religion and God is mainly about a long list of do's and don't's that seemed designed to do little more than suck the joy out of life, and make sure we're never having too much fun.

Perhaps it is the spirit of our individualistic age, but we don't *tend* to hear words like "law" and "commandments" as anything like a source of delight or life, as the Psalmist does.

So, on this Sunday after the week when kids were back in school, submitting themselves to all kinds of laws and commandments, on this Sunday when our regular rhythms of church life resume, I thought it might be good to ponder this concept of the "law of the Lord."

The Psalms are, of course, prayers or songs. They are a way of expressing what we feel and what we hope for before God.

And for the people of Israel, the Psalms were an educational tool. The repetition of prayer and song was (and is) a good way to cement things in human minds.

Psalm 119, in particular, was good for teaching. It is the longest Psalm by far, stretching out over 176 verses (nearly seven pages in my bible), with each of its twenty-two sections beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet (again, almost certainly to aid in memory).

Speaking of memory, a few days before the kids left for school, we were eating supper and we got into a discussion about, of all things, the parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.). The kids were quite pleased to think they knew more than their parents on this one.

In that spirit, I decided to pay attention to one part of speech in particular in our passage this morning. The verbs.

Verbs are action words. Verbs are about motion, activity, progress (or regress). They're about going in a direction.

There are six verbs in this passage. So, very briefly, I thought I would look at how this Psalm sets us in motion in the Christian life.

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

As human beings, we need to be taught. This sounds simple, perhaps, but it's worth saying. A well-lived life does not come automatically to us.

Most of us have had a good teacher in our lives, whether in school or church or the workplace. Good teachers call forth the best in us. They invite us to discover more about ourselves and about the world. They expose us to time-honoured wisdom, protecting us from the illusion that we are as unique or wise as we sometimes think we are.

Teach me, the psalmist says. I don't know everything. I need to know more of who you are and what you have in mind for a human life.

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

The word "give" implies that there is a Giver. Understanding and spiritual wisdom are gifts from God. James 1:5 says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."

The verb "give" carries within it the acknowledgment that God is God and we are not, and that understanding is a gift.

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

Again, the expression of a desire to be led carries with it the recognition of human limitation.

We don't always know the way, do we? We get so many mixed messages from so many sources about what it means to be human, about what the meaning of life is, about what we should or shouldn't think, about what we should or shouldn't do.

We need to be led. But not by those who love power and crave influence, not by those who hunger for the spotlight, not by those who are more concerned about their own status and reputation than our own. We have probably all experienced leaders like this and we tend to avoid them.

We need to be led by the God who made us, who loves us, and who wants good for us.

Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain.

This verb is so important that it occurs three times in our passage. *Turn* me toward what you desire.

At the heart of the Christian life, I am convinced, is the constant, daily invitation (battle?) to **turn**. Away from self and toward God and others.

We are so naturally inclined toward selfish gain. It is instinctive for us. Ever since Eden, we humans have been bent inward.

But if we are willing, God will turn us in the right direction. He will save us from what Simone Weil described as becoming "the lone member of my own sect."¹

We need to be turned away from self and toward God and neighbour.

Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways.

The word "vanity" is an interesting one. It can mean an obsession with the self. It can also refer to things that are temporary, passing away, trivial, unworthy of our attention.

¹ <https://awst-press.com/essay-series/why-i-still-believe>

It probably wouldn't be too much of an overstatement to say that our culture is drowning in vanities. We pour billions of dollars into mindless entertainment. We waste countless hours drifting around aimlessly though the lives of others on social media. We look to celebrities and athletes for inspiration and wisdom when we should be looking to our elders. We obsess about outward appearances and do everything we can do to avoid the painful realities of aging and death.

Turn my eyes from these things. Give me life in your ways.

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

Cement in the core of my being the hope of your promise that is for all those who revere you. Vindicate the hope that I have.

Convince us daily of your trustworthiness as our Maker and our Redeemer.

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

Again, that verb, "turn."

Submitting to the discipline of a religious life can seem crazy. *Why deny yourself? Be true to yourself and yourself alone. You determine the rules of the game.* These are the mantras of our day.

We dread being thought foolish or naïve or unsophisticated. It's not always fun being out of step with what we perceive to be the spirit of the age.

Turn this disgrace away, the psalmist says. Remind me that your way is good.

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

See me.

You alone know the desires of my heart. You alone know that I want to want what you do. You alone know that I long for life, even if I don't always do it well.

I want to end with one more verb. Love.

In the second short reading from Romans, Paul makes a truly remarkable statement:

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

Not “the one who loves another is well on their way to fulfilling the law.”

Not “the one who loves one another just has to top things up with the right doctrinal package.”

No, *the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.* There is nothing more that the law requires.

All the verbs that the Bible contains are summed up in this one: love.

If we love one another, we are saved from our own selfishness, and we place ourselves at God’s disposal to be led, guided, and turned in the right way.

(I’m going to put this image up and leave it up for the rest of the service, because I think it is a beautiful picture of the love that leads, guides, turns, and gives to us.)

Love sums up all the other verbs; love is the *reason* for all the other verbs.

And unlike algebra, we can use love every day.

It is only when love is our law, that the law of the Lord truly and finally becomes a delight.

Love is our curriculum as Christians. Love is what God requires of his people. The church is to be about the business of training human beings in Christ-like love.

As we head out into a new school year, I pray that we would follow our curriculum well in imitation of the one who loved us—and love us—to the end.

Amen.

