

## What's Your Major?

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Deuteronomy 4:1-9

James 1:17-27

Mark 7: 1-8; 14-15; 21-23

Psalm 119:97 states "Oh, how I love your law!"

Not a passage we modern Christians find ourselves reflecting on very often. Most likely because when we hear "law" we think legalism and we prefer grace. "Through a study of Deuteronomy, however we discover this mindset to be mistaken and perilous. *Sara Koenig suggests* Christians would do well to re-capture the awe with which the Israelites approach God's law. The word torah, often narrowly translated and understood as "law," includes a fuller definition of "instruction" or "teaching."

A Jewish blessing connects torah with eternal life, saying, "Blessed is our God, who has...separated us from them that go astray, and has given us the Torah and planted everlasting life in our midst." Such an understanding of torah is what we find in the lectionary text in Deuteronomy. The "law" itself is a sign of God's presence, and even shares his attributes: life-giving power, wisdom, and understanding. Approaching the law in this way, Christians can better appreciate what it means for Jesus to be the incarnate word (John 1:1), the final "nearness" of God, the embodiment of wisdom and understanding (Colossians 1:15 ff.), and the fulfillment of the law (Matthew 5: 17)."<sup>1</sup>

James tells us that the truth is a good gift from God that is born into us so that we might bear this kind of fruit in our lives. For James the law and the truth is the character of our heart. It is not about doing good to get Salvation it is about living how we were created to live. The good news of the law is that God cares for us and protects us with these teachings. To be doers of Gods teaching is to live. To live the law is to live out that which is implanted in us.

Marks gospel carries on the theme of law being the truth carried in our hearts. When the Pharisees are quick to note the disciples' insurrection Jesus does not oppose the law but questions the motive of the Pharisees. Jesus questions them about the importance of the law and why it was written. In doing so he insists that what is within us is most important. If you have truth within than truth will be what you live. The Pharisees had gotten caught up in the religion and forgotten the faith.

Every culture faith and religion has the potential to fall into this trap. The Pharisees were devote people, they were not necessarily bad, some had just lost the purpose of their faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Koenig, Sara. Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies Seattle Pacific University. Workingpreacher.org

We too find our ways of carrying out religious ceremony, and we develop policies for our church and suddenly if someone does not do it the same way we find ourselves upset or condemning having no idea where the tradition came from in the first place.

Deuteronomy considers that the laws written on our hearts is a manifestation of the presence of God within us. If our laws or religious practices are not directing us back to the heart of God we need to consider what their purpose is and where they are directing us.

All around Squamish are churches who gather weekly for worship. One commentator asked us the following questions “What difference does this make to the community in which *we* live? Is *our* worship just lip service? If so, does God find enjoyment in it? Or does *our* worship challenge *us* to move into *our* community, in obedience to God's law, to care for the marginalized and needy in practical ways? How can *we* make *our* worship more of a “lived” devotion and less a weekly lip-service? What specific needs can you address in your community?” These are the questions we as church are to ask as we seek to discover God’s heart for Squamish.

Lindy Black the author of sermon nuggets gave me the title of today’s sermon. “What’s your major?” In his commentary he asked “how can we keep from "majoring in minors?”. How can we keep the main thing the main thing?”<sup>2</sup> It is the spirit of the law not the letter of the law in which we find God. Commandments or laws should never take precedent over love and compassion.

Anders points out “We have learned this slowly - from slavery to the position of women. We are learning it slowly in areas such as gender, sexual orientation and of power. Jesus speaks about the kind of tradition that fails the test. He points out that there is a kind of tradition that is wrong, that gets in the way of spiritual realities rather than pointing to them.”<sup>3</sup>

When following the law becomes our purpose we miss the point. When our religious ceremony takes precedent over caring for those in need we are majoring in the wrong area. Black says we are majoring in minors...

- “- We major in what goes in our mouths and minor in what comes out from the heart.
- We major in having faith in prayer and minor in having faith in God.
- We major in ritual and proper behavior and minor in real worship.
- We major in finding God and minor in enjoying the God already present.
- We major in looking for God 'out there' and minor in looking for God 'in here' .
- We major in worldly power and minor in inside things that are powerful. (Love, faith,

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<sup>2</sup> Black, Lindy sermon nuggets textweek.com

<sup>3</sup> Anders...according to IBID

truth)

- We major in punishing and minor in forgiving
- We major in the physical and minor in the spiritual
- We major in religion as an end and minor in religion as a means.
- We major in religion and minor in love<sup>4</sup>

I cannot speak for all of you but each of those majors gave me food for thought. It's not that we are bad people; it is just that sometimes we need to be reminded that our God is much bigger, and more gracious than we create him/her to be. It's not that our rules and religious practices are bad in fact they are often the things that draw us closer to God, but they must never be the end of the road.

Deuteronomy teaches us that the purpose of the law is to give life. The law shows us a God that longs for all of creation to know wholeness. And yet it is not the law that gives us life, it is God. Jesus does not direct us to throw out the law, but to bear witness to the love and care of God that comes out of the law. So we are called to seek the purpose and the heart of that which the bible teaches.

James' main concern is that as people of faith we often confine our understanding of God to a small set of rules and regulations. For James the only faith that counts is a faith that transforms the way we live. We are found to be faithful people as we live out the goodness and love of The Holy. God has given us this love; in fact it is imprinted on our hearts because, God is the great giver of life.

James directs us to know who God is and then desires for us to know who we are. Do we remember who we are? Do we see ourselves as creations of the most holy, as blessed gifts of God? Do we see ourselves as the fruit of God? Or have we forgotten who we are?

In his commentary Koester challenges us with James when he asks "What happens when you forget who you are? Life typically takes another course. If you forget how much you have been given, why would you give anything to others? If you forget how much you have received, then life is reduced to a quest to get what you can while you can. You may find the situation of the orphan and the widow to be regrettable (1:27), but conclude that this is the way the world is, and you need to get what you can while you can. Or what if you forget that God's word has given you new life, bringing you into renewed relationship with the God who made you and wants you as his own? If you forget what God's word gives you, then what you do with your words seems to matter little (1:26).

So James says, "Look at yourself again, in the perfect law of liberty," and tell me what you see (1:25). The law of liberty is the law of love. (that is mentioned in 2:8). And the law of love brings liberty—it is freeing—because love both frees us and constrains us. To know that one is loved is the most freeing thing imaginable, even as this same love holds

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<sup>4</sup> IBID

us in a relationship of love. This is where we see ourselves, James says. Look into the law of love. This is who God creates you to be. Is there some reason you don't want people to know who you are?"<sup>5</sup>

Is there some reason we wouldn't want people to know what God has inscribed on our hearts? If we are living in the truth of the law we will be living in the love of the creator that gives us life, and inspires us to offer that same life to everyone we encounter. True religion cares, shares, and loves. In true faith we become the pure and holy sanctuary of God.

May our lives reflect God's truth. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Koester, Craig Professor of New Testament Luther Seminary [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)