

“Engraving the new covenant in our heart”

We have been reading from the letter of Romans every week. There is a word that appears 20 times between Romans chapter 2 verses 12 through 29. When calculated, the number of times the word “law” appears is more than once in every verse. The “law” is an important keyword in the bible. Today, we will be focusing on the term “law”.

A Jewish man who once persecuted Christians named Paul wrote the letter of Romans. When Romans was written, Jesus Christ had already been crucified on the cross, buried in a grave, appeared in front of people after rising from the dead, and had already rose up to heaven. So there were many people who met Jesus, and witnesses were abundant. At that time, Paul heard many accounts of Jesus Christ.

There are no accounts of Paul ministering with Jesus in the bible. However, when Paul was filled with bloodlust and violently persecuted Christians, it is written that he was struck by light from the heavens, and heard a voice. This experience was a turning point for Paul, but he did not rely only on this experience. Later he researched Jewish history, met disciples of Jesus, listened to their stories, used his knowledge and experiences to search who Jesus was. After all of this, in Romans he writes who Jesus Christ is, and his significance to our lives.

Through Paul’s life, he spent the most amount of time on researching the history of the Jewish people, and how it connects to Jesus Christ in the present. An aspect of this research that could not be avoided is something that always in Jewish people’s hearts, the “law”. Based on this, Paul was examining the relationship between the “law” and “Christ”.

We have to acknowledge God’s existence when looking at Paul’s life. This is because if Paul did not exist, “Jesus Christ’s various acts” and “The Jewish walk with God” would have never collided. This means that, Christianity would have just been a new religion derived from Judaism, and most likely have disappeared from the earth quickly. And, the person who could bring the Jewish faith to Christ probably did not exist outside of Paul.

Paul the man who God chose, was very passionate about the law. He persecuted Christians who did not follow the law, and put them in jail. Not only was he a specialist who studied the law closely, but also strictly followed the law as well. This means that he had great knowledge about the law, and also understood the difficulties and limitations of obeying that law. God chose Paul during this period where Judaism will be reborn into Christianity. God chose Paul as an extremist who had the capacity to make connections between these two, something that none of the disciples could have done.

First let us talk about the Jewish people and the law. In the beginning of the Bible, God created the heavens and the earth, then first humans were created, they ate the forbidden fruit, and ran away from the Garden of Eden. They have two sons but the older brother kills the younger brother. This is the beginning of humanity. From this family, more people were born, and from here nations and tribes are born. Those with authority, and those without are put in place. For a long time, there was no definite shared rule that humanity lived by, in other words, there was no law.

Without rules, today we still see a world full of human greed, and we see problems that make us doubt our eyes. As I talked about two weeks ago, God gave us a conscience and ability to reason-a moral compass, but we take these things and lock it up, in order to do what we desire. To them, there are no rules so it is not difficult to imagine what the world looked like.

Amidst this situation of humanity, the Israelites became slaves to Egypt. Harsh labor is imposed on them, but God rescues the Israelites out of Egypt and for forty years, and millions of people spend their lives in the wilderness, looking for the promise land. However, in the journey of the Israelites, there is also no law. So even in harsh land, it can be imagined that the greed of people is revealed through much evil.

To these Israelites, God gives them two famous stone tablets-the Ten Commandments. Here, humanity receives law for the first time, a line drawn between man and God that must not be crossed. This law, the Ten

Commandments was extended by new commandments given by God. From then on, to the Israelites, "Obeying God, and living with God" became equal to "following the law".

In the Ten Commandments it is written, "thou shalt not kill". But before this commandment was given, there was always retaliation in response to murder. This was not a simple revenge, but one that was so extreme as to kill the murderer's entire village in retribution. In Japanese, there is a term used in a popular TV series that means twice the revenge. When people carry this kind of obsession for more revenge, it will become a brakeless force. Understanding this, God gave this law to the Israelites,

²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise (Exodus 21:25).

God who understood these people well gave the commandment "an eye for an eye". At first, this commandment may appear to be a cruel, but it is a rule that puts a brake to an escalation of punishments. This law put a stop to this chain of death caused by vengeance.

In this way, God drew a line that people cannot cross by giving people this set of laws. God gave people rules to follow, and at first people tried to live according to this law. However, after thousands of years, the Israelites showed that mankind could not follow the law. Even if there is one who claims to be following the law, it is only by external appearance and they are full of hypocrisy. The inability to follow a rule and the birth of hypocrisy from it, are things that have remain unchanged in this world.

In its origin, the law was not given so that God can impose his authority. But it was given so that when we live in it, we will be protected, and our lives would be blessed. But, the Jewish people added on laws that they themselves created, and pointed out and called people who could not follow the laws unclean. This was what the law had become in Jesus' time and Paul's time. And to the people of his time Paul writes this,

¹⁷ Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; ¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹ you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? (Romans 2:17-23)

Paul was a scholar with expertise in law, and he strictly tried to follow the law. But, even as one with such high status concerning the law, he saw the truth that we are not capable of following the law. He held his position with pride, but despite this he could not follow the law himself, and hypocritically judged others for not being able to follow the law as well. These strict words were probably pointed towards himself as well, and he knew the condition of his heart.

The “law” is something that people have created in order to regulate our complex society. In the United States and Japan, there is a legislature that governs the country. Regular citizens, the president, everyone is under the authority of this law. However, the law is often broken. There is something similar to the law, which is a pledge, or vow. There is the pledge of allegiance to a country, a vow to marriage, a pledge in the inauguration ceremony of a President. As for wedding vows and the oath of office, these are pledged to God. However, we cannot keep these pledges.

We need rules in our lives, but there is not a single person who has never broken a rule or pledge in their lives. When we break the law, we categorize the committed act. We decide the weight and severity of the sin. However, there is no categorizing or ranking of sins in the Bible. In front of God, sin is sin and there is no big or small. Outside of the law, there is no person that lives according to only one’s conscience.

Rules also have loopholes and self justified interpretations. We can always pretend and make our appearance look good; the Pharisees were that way as well.

Jesus said this about them, ³⁸ As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. However, their hearts were filled with hypocrisy.

We can hide our true selves to an extent. However, in Jesus's eyes our hearts are transparent and he said to the Pharisees, "Woe to you, teachers of the law, you hypocrites, you blind guides, you snakes" in the Bible. His statement is so intense that it has us worried if he should be saying such things.

Is the Bible saying that these laws that people cannot follow, these laws that bring about hypocrisy in people's hearts a useless thing? Were the thousands of years spent with the commandments given by God a meaningless age? No. Jesus says this.

¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished (Matthew 5:17-18).

We have been talking about the negative qualities that laws reveal. But Jesus says that he came not to abolish, but to fulfill the law. And what he meant by this is written in Matthew, ³⁷ Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40). Jesus came to show that the law was based on two simple things: To love God and to love our neighbors as our selves.

The Bible shows this episode of Jesus, At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. ² When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the

Sabbath.”³ He answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. ⁵ Or haven’t you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? ⁶ I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. ⁸ For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” (Matthew 12:1-8)

The Sabbath is written in the ten commandments.⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work (Exodus 20:8-10).

The Pharisees interpreted the Sabbath rule from the Ten Commandments and defined rest in various ways. Through this, they made a strictly binding rule. For example, putting on a fire, and tying shoelaces were considered violation of the commandments, and offenders were judged. So when the disciples picked some grain, the Pharisees condemned them. However, Jesus reflected on the two greatest commandments; to love God and to love our neighbor, and since God was a God of mercy, when a hungry person ate grain, it was a blameless act.

In a similar incident, when Jesus was criticized for healing the man who had been waiting for 30 years by the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem; Jesus responded by asking if they would not save a child or ox that falls into a well on Sabbath day. Jesus commanded to be one who loves God, loves people, has mercy and follows the law. In this way, Jesus made the law into completion.

Paul had heard testimonies from disciples who heard Jesus say these things, and verified the intention and root meaning of the laws. Paul’s eyes were opened to these things, and he wrote of these realizations in Galatians,²³ Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ

came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian (Galatians 3:23-25).

John also wrote of his insight and said,¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). The laws given to Moses were essential. However, God’s grace is given to us through Jesus Christ. The commandments led up to Christ’s coming-and because of Jesus, there is a new covenant before us.

Another surprising thing is that these things weren’t forced by Jesus’s arrival. This relationship between the laws and Jesus Christ were a part of God’s great plan. 650 years before Christ’s birth, Jeremiah prophesized this;

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

³² It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to ^[d] them, ^[e]”
declares the LORD.

³³ “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the LORD.

“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, ‘Know the LORD,’
because they will all know me,

from the least of them to the greatest,"
declares the LORD.

"For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."

(Jeremiah 31:31-34)

650 years before Jesus's birth, Jeremiah writes that God will make a new covenant unlike the one made with their ancestors. God says that he will write it on our hearts, and that we will come to truly know him. Jesus fulfilled this new covenant. Paul must have had this prophecy of Jeremiah in mind when he confirmed Christ as the fulfiller of the law

How does this application of the law in the Bible apply to us living in 2017? As Jesus said, the laws are not to be abolished, but still be in effect. However, God summarizes the numerous laws into two commandments. These are,³⁷ "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40). As I mentioned earlier, because Jesus focused on these two things he was criticized by the Pharisees. But, God desires for us to love him and love our neighbors as Jesus did. God does not provide a long set of rules that we must memorize. By writing and engraving these two commandments in our hearts, we can interpret any law.

When facing 500 rules, we cannot be intentional and follow all of these laws exactly. We are to follow the law through interpretation by the two most important commandments told by Jesus. True freedom from God is there. God tells us that we are love God with all heart and all our soul and with all our mind, and love our neighbors as ourselves, and reflect upon these things when we face our daily problems. God desires for us to use these commandments to dictate our actions today. Let us pray.

Translated by Kou Okura