

Sermon Series:

Our God will go before us

Exodus 33 & 34

THE TRANSFORMING PRESENCE OF GOD

Leviticus 19:1-18; Matthew 22:37-49; Galatians 5:13-25

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As we begin, today, I want to take a quick look back at Exodus 33,34 on which this series is based. God had given the people of Israel the Ten Commandments and other guidelines for their lives, and they had committed themselves to these. However, when Moses left to go back up the mountain to get God's instructions for building the Tabernacle, the place where God would dwell among them, they had disobeyed God and reverted back to the worship habits they had picked up in Egypt. They built an idol and worshipped it.

As a result, God withdrew from them. He promised to give them the land and everything they needed to live, but he told Moses:

I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way. (Exodus 33:3)

God knew they would continue to stubbornly rebel against Him and disobey His commands. God could not associate Himself with them because their behaviour would bring dishonour to His name. In response to a new revelation of God, Moses pleads with God:

O Lord, if it is true that I have found favour with you, then please travel with us. Yes, this is a stubborn and rebellious people, but please forgive our iniquity and our sins. Claim us as your own special possession. (Exodus 34:9)

Moses wants them to be God's people. God relents and promises to go with them. But in renewing the His covenant with them, He reiterates that their behaviour matters, and that they must obey His commands in order to reflect His holiness. It is only as they obey His commands that they will reflect His character as His people. The following books – Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy – are largely statements and re-statements of God's Law for His people. They contain directions on how they should worship Him and live with each other. The Leviticus 19 passage is an important example of the breadth of the instructions. The verses we will look at this morning focus mainly on our relationships with other people and how we are to treat them. Our other readings will help us think about these things from the perspective of our lives as Christians.

God's people must display God's likeness.

1. Goal of the Law

Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy. (Leviticus 19:2)

If God was going to be their God and be present with them, then they must display God's character to the watching world. The people around them worshiped "gods" who were jealous and selfish and deceitful, but their God was not like that; He was loving and righteous. The Law which God gave them was to teach them how to be like their God in the context in which they were living.

Today, as we look at the Law in the Old Testament, some things look very familiar to us because guidelines like the Ten Commandments have deeply influenced our Western culture, even if most people today don't realise this. For instance, the fact that we value human life and believe that all people are created equal comes from the influence of the Bible. Even today, many cultures which are influenced by other religions do not look at human life in the same way.

However, some things in the Law as given to Moses look strange to us because we are living in a very different setting than they were in. To be honest there are some things which we just don't really understand today because they relate to a culture far different to our own. However, if we think about them a bit, I think we can see the ideas behind the laws and how we might put those ideas into practice today.

For example, in Leviticus 19, we read:

Do not reap to the very edges of your fields ... Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. (v. 9-10)

This was God's welfare system. They didn't have supermarkets in those days! Everyone grew their own food on their family property. Those without property of their own, however, could go to the fields belonging to other people and harvest the grain left on the edges of the fields or on the ground. No one had to go hungry, but they did have to work for it like everyone else. This plan required the landowners to sacrifice some of their crop – a concrete way of showing love for the less fortunate. Those of you who studied Ruth in Grace Group last year saw this in action in her life. I wonder how God would set up this kind of welfare in today's society.

Another example from Leviticus 19 says:

Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life (v. 16)

Other verses give some specific examples of this such as not putting a stumbling block in the way of the blind. In Deuteronomy, there is a requirement that when they built their houses, and constructed a living area on the roof, they were to put parapets or walls around the edges of the roof so that no one would fall off them. (Deuteronomy 22:8) These are God's risk management directives - WHS! He wanted them to be aware of what was necessary to keep people safe. Maybe this is one area where we are just now beginning to take seriously things which God had already put into place in His Law many years ago.

But why were these things important to God? Because God loves and cares for everyone and He wants His people to do so as well - He wants them to *“Love your neighbour as yourself”*.

2. Summary of the law

There were over 600 specific regulations in the Law, but Jesus summarises them all with two phrases taken from the Law:

Love the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 6:5)

Love your neighbour as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18)

In this way He is pointing people to the concepts behind the specific regulations in the Law and explaining WHY it was important to do these things. All of the Law is about their relationship with God and their relationships with others. In both these relationships, an attitude of love important, not just the observance of regulations.

In focusing on love instead of the Law, Jesus did not loosen the requirements - in fact, He deepened them. The Sermon on the Mount is a good example of this. For instance, the Law said to abstain from adultery, but if you are seeking to love your spouse and others, then you need to do more than just not have a sexual relationship with someone other than your spouse, you have to keep a watch over your thoughts and attitudes as well. Lusting after another is demeaning to them and to your spouse. Today, we would use the word objectification, which means treating people as objects to be used to satisfy you own appetites and desires. In contrast, Jesus says that all people are valuable in the sight of God and therefore worthy of our love and respect.

3. Problem of the Law

The Law was a good guideline to help people reflect God’s character. However, there is one big problem - we fail miserably to live up to the standard of the Law. Our natural bent is towards selfishness and sin. Like the Israelites, we are all “stiff-necked”! Even when we want to do what is right, it is hard to change our thinking, behaviour and habits.

I was listening to radio this week about a program providing better sanitation for people and thus better health. However, they found that it is not just about providing toilets for people. Much work is needed to change their understanding of health and its value. And then they have to help people to change their habits. In fact, this is the hardest, most expensive part of the program. It is easy and relatively inexpensive to put toilets in schools. But if they want to change the children’s habits, they have discovered it takes at least two lessons a week for 2 years before they begin to see a real difference in behaviour.

Something a bit closer to home for us is the wearing of seatbelts. It is now over 50 years since this was legislated. During that time, there has been constant positive education on the importance of this. We also have substantial negative consequences in fines and demerit points. However, there are still about 5% of people who never wear their seatbelts, and more who do not always wear them. To this day, more than 50% of people who die or are seriously injured in car accidents were not wearing their seatbelts. You’d think after 50 years we’d do better than this!

Changing behaviour is hard. Our selfish, sinful hearts want to go our own way and do what is right in our own eyes rather than reflect God’s goodness and holiness. And yet as God’s

people we are still called to display God's likeness. Yes, it is wonderful that God has provided us with forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Without that, none of us could stand in His presence. But as God's child, I don't want God to just pick me up and forgive me when I fall, I want to do better at living His way. Praise God, the story doesn't stop here!

God's people living in God's presence will be transformed into God's likeness.

Let's see what Paul has to say about this in Galatians.

1. Free from the Law

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free (from the law). (Galatians 5:13)

As Christians, we are not bound to observe the regulations in the Law. There are some important principles that we can learn from the Law, like how to help those in need and the importance of minimising risk to others. But the specific regulations in the Law as given to the Israelites do not apply to us as Christians. However, we are still called to display God's likeness.

But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. (v. 13)

As Christians, we are to go beyond simple, static rules and regulations. We are to have a lifestyle motivated and shaped by love. But given our propensity to sinful behaviour, how can we do this?

2. Better than the Law

God has given us a better way than the Law, He has given us His very presence with us through His Spirit. The only thing which will enable us to live the way we should as His people is that He will go with us through his Spirit. Paul tells us to:

... walk by the Spirit (v. 16)

... led by the Spirit (v. 18)

... keep in step with the Spirit (v. 25)

Just as God promised to go with His people in Exodus, so He promises to go with us as Christians. Our job? To follow His leading, to "get in synch" with Him like a band marches in synch with each other. As we walk together, in each and every situation, God will show us how to love others.

But the question still is – how do I overcome my natural tendencies to go my own way? Paul goes on to say:

... live by the (life of the) Spirit (v. 25)

The Spirit within us gives us God's life and love to enable us to do His will. The Israelites had God with them, but they didn't have God's life within them. They had the external Law to guide them, but we have the internal, life-giving presence of the Spirit. It is this life which transforms us into God's likeness. We are changed on the inside which enables us to begin to live in ways that reflect God. And God's life brings God's love which overflows in love to others. This is the natural product of God's life within us. The life of the tree naturally produces fruit. The life of God within us naturally produces the fruit of the Spirit. What does this look like?

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance (patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (v. 22-23)

Some believe that the main word here is love and the other words are descriptions of this love. We see something similar in that great description of love found in 1 Corinthians 13 which uses many of these same words. Whether or not this is the right way to read this, here we see a list of what God is like – the God who is love. And this what we should be like.

But we cannot live like this on our own. Everything within us leads us away from this kind of behaviour. Paul says that the acts of the flesh – how we naturally act – are such things as *“sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies”*. (v. 19-21) You may not have been involved in any orgies lately, but I am sure that discord (or quarrelling), jealousy, selfish ambition, and dissension hit a bit closer to home for all of us – even if these just happen in our minds.

But with God’s life within us, our hearts and minds are transformed so that we can display God’s love to others. It is not about us trying harder to be loving. It is allowing God to change us by His presence within us so that our hearts are transformed, and our attitudes re-aligned to God. This overflows in loving acts toward others.

God’s people living in God’s presence will be transformed into God’s likeness and display God’s love.

The Law put the focus on doing loving things, and we tend to do that as well. We try hard to be loving, hoping that will make us good Christians. But I think Paul would put the focus further back in the process. Loving actions are important, but we will never be able to be truly loving until we allow God to do a deep, transformative work on our hearts. Then the life of the Spirit will bring forth the fruit of the Spirit which will display God’s love to a watching world.

As we finish this series, I just want to jump back to Exodus 34 one more time to look at an interesting outcome of Moses’ time with God when he was given a glimpse of God’s glory. We read:

When Moses came down Mount Sinai carrying the two stone tablets inscribed with the terms of the covenant, he wasn’t aware that his face had become radiant because he had spoken to the LORD. (Exodus 34:29)

Moses had physically changed from being in God’s presence. His face was radiant with God’s glory. This was so pronounced that the people were afraid, and Moses had to wear a veil over his face. When we are filled with God’s Spirit, we experience more than physical change. Our whole life transformed to show God’s glory in who we are and what we do. As people look at us and see how we live our lives, they should see the glory of God as a light shining in a dark place. Can you imagine a church full of people being transformed into God’s likeness? What kind of impact could that make in a community? What kind of an impact could our church make in our community?