

Focus: Living life as God desired.

I wonder if you have read George Orwell's *Animal Farm* before; it was written in 1945. For anyone who hasn't, briefly, it's about the animals in a farm revolting against their human owners and throwing them out. Then the leaders, Napoleon and Snowball, created 7 commandments to govern the animals:

1. Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy.
2. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend.
3. No animal shall wear clothes.
4. No animal shall sleep in a bed.
5. No animal shall drink alcohol.
6. No animal shall kill any other animal.
7. All animals are equal.

These commandments were subsequently distilled into the maxim "Four legs good, two legs bad!" which the sheep on the farm often used to disrupt discussions and disagreements between the animals on the nature of Animalism.

Then, Napoleon cast Snowball out of the farm and, with Squealer, his sidekick, secretly revised some commandments to clear themselves of any accusations of law-breaking. Namely:

- No animal shall sleep in a bed with sheets.
- No animal shall drink alcohol to excess.
- No animal shall kill any other animal without cause.

The original purpose of the Seven Commandments was to keep order within Animal Farm by uniting the animals against the humans and preventing the animals from following the humans' evil habits. However, the leaders revised it as their mindset became more anthropomorphic (i.e. more humanlike). The original maxim was replaced with the maxims, "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others", and "Four legs good, two legs better."

Most people regard the Ten Commandments in the Bible as the Law that God has given humankind to live by, failing which, one is considered sinning and falling out of grace. From fleeing slavery in Egypt to freedom in Canaan, from worshipping Yahweh to bowing to other gods, from being a free nation to exile in Babylon, the ancient Israelite history has indeed supported such perception of the Law.

In the Pentateuch or Torah, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments in the book of Exodus. Subsequently, 27 chapters in Leviticus and 34 chapters more in Deuteronomy listed down the do's and don'ts which then became the 613

commandments (or the Law) of the Jewish tradition, covering every aspect of beliefs, behaviours, diet, customs, ethics and attitudes.

And in the Gospels, we learn about the Pharisees keeping the Law legalistically and manipulating it to become the tradition of the elders. For example, they accused Jesus's disciples of not washing their hands before eating because they had instilled a ceremonial ritual of washing hands and utensils before eating (see Mt 15 / Mk 7). But in reply, Jesus pointed out that they had not honoured & supported their father & mother by giving the excuse that they were giving the Corban (that is, the gift devoted to God).

I wonder what was God's intent in giving the Law in the first place? Is the Law there simply as a rule to instruct us what we should and should not do so that God will be pleased? So should our everyday living be like that of the ancient Pharisees, strictly Law observant, centred on the Law?

For example, the 4th Commandment says: Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. So, how should we observe the day? A friend of mine strongly believes that we should not work on Sunday as it is the Lord's Day and should be kept for worshipping God. What do you think?

I think this belief is problematic if observance of the Sabbath becomes obligatory, especially for those who unavoidably have to work on Sundays. For example, doctors, nurses & staff in hospitals & nursing homes, public transport or supermarket staff, and so on. They would be laden with a sense of guilt for being unable to worship God in church, but the fact is that "God is spirit, and so we worship God in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24) anywhere and anytime.

Moreover, has anyone never taken public transport, dined out or bought things on Sundays? Indeed we have, haven't we? In that case, how could we have our Sabbath rest at the expense of others? It just doesn't make sense, does it?

Then again, more Christians have regarded many commandments as obsolete, especially the prohibitions, as they hold on to Paul's teaching in Romans 10:4 that Christ has brought the Law to an end so that everyone who believes is put right with God.

What do you think? Has Christ brought an end to the Law and Are we free from the Law? How shall we relate this to what Jesus has taught in Matthew 5?

I do not think that Paul's words are to be understood literally, that Christ has brought the Law to an end. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus insisted, saying: "Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. I have not come to do away with them, but to make their teachings come true."

So, how has Jesus made the teachings of the Law come true, I wonder?

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew 5, Jesus was teaching the multitude of people following Him on the mountainside. Four times He reminded the people of what they had heard or learnt from their ancestors, and each time He gave a new teaching.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit murder; anyone who does will be brought to trial.' 22 But now I tell you: if you are angry with your brother or sister or accuse the person to be good for nothing or worthless, then you will be brought to trial in danger of going to the fire of hell.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' 28 But now I tell you: anyone who looks at a woman and wants to possess her is guilty of committing adultery with her in his heart.

"It was also said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a written notice of divorce.' 32 But now I tell you: if a man divorces his wife for any cause other than her unfaithfulness, then he is guilty of making her commit adultery if she marries again; and the man who marries her commits adultery also.

"You have also heard that it was said, 'Do not break your promise, but do what you have vowed to the Lord to do.' 34 But now I tell you: do not use any vow when you make a promise. ... Just say 'Yes' or 'No' - anything else you say comes from the Evil One.

There is a common view that Jesus has raised the bar of the Law, making it harder for us to observe, but has He?

Is Jesus telling us that we cannot even be angry with and insult someone; OR think of possessing a person as we look at them, OR cannot divorce our partner, OR cannot make any oath at all? No, I don't think so.

God is love and God loves the world so much that He has come into the world in the person of Jesus to reconcile the world to Him. Therefore, Jesus' approach to the Law is not to set it aside or annul it, but to make it a central part of what it means for us to cling on or hold fast to God.

For him, it means that we NOT only don't kill one another, but we should also avoid hatred and anger. We should also be practising reconciliation in our relationships.

For him, keeping the Law means that we NOT only avoid promiscuity, but we also ought to relate to others with pure hearts.

For him, it is NOT enough to follow the letter of the law regarding divorce, we should NOT treat people as disposable and should make sure that the most vulnerable — very often the women and children — are provided for.

For him, obeying God means avoiding all the ways people use to evade the truth and simply being honest – i.e. let our ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’ and our ‘No’ be ‘No’, no beating around the bush. In other words, for Jesus, obeying God is NOT just a matter of what we do; it must come from the heart.

Jesus has made the teachings of the Law come true by teaching us that the purpose of the commandments has always been to call people (and us) into a relationship with God. It is a special relationship based on Christ and faith in Christ, upheld by sincere love for and trust in God, and by obedience that comes from the heart. This relationship is expressed through our relationship with one another as well.

When we continue reading Matthew 5, we will find Jesus’ teaching reaches the climax as he urges us (in verse 44) to “love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.” This is God’s ultimate desire for humanity.

In our first reading of Deuteronomy 30, Moses urged the Israelites to walk in God’s ways by observing God’s commandments, decrees, and ordinances. And in loving, obeying and holding fast to God, they are choosing life – the abundant life that God desired them to live through a covenantal relationship with God. Hence, the purpose of the commandments is to define the way humans should live in terms of loving God.

So, Are you up for the challenge of living your life pleasing to God, particularly in your relationship with God and with one another?

May I invite you to close your eyes and think about one particular relationship in your life – one that is most important to you; one that is healthy, good and well-sustained? Think about what makes that a good relationship and why it is so important. Let’s give thanks to God for that person and the relationship.

O Gracious God, we thank you for giving us these people in our lives to let us experience your love and for us to extend your love. May we continue to bring blessings to one another.

May I invite you to call to mind another important relationship but has suffered some damage. Difficult as it might be, gently look past who was to blame for the hurt, and just hold that person and relationship in prayer. Reflect on what you could do and would do to restore this broken relationship. Let us entrust in God’s loving mercy to heal and restore our relationships.

O merciful God, with your enduring love, free and uplift our weighed-down spirit and heart so we have peace to work on our broken relationships. Guide us with your wisdom and fill us with your patience and love to restore our relationships to greater health.

To sum up, Jesus has made the teachings of the Law come true by calling us to follow him and live in the love of God. In Christ, our focus shifts from the dos and don'ts to actively witnessing his love. There shall be no room for sin as our hearts & minds are filled with God's desire to love God and love one another. May we respond to Jesus' call to live life as God desired.