

The Best Way to Live
Psalm 19

A Sunday school teacher was discussing the Ten Commandments with her five and six year olds. After explaining the commandment to "honor thy father and thy mother," she asked "Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?" Without missing a beat one little boy answered, "Thou shall not kill."

What comes to your mind when you think of the Ten Commandments? How many of you can remember them in order? Even though most of us cannot recite them, somehow these commandments have become a centerpiece in our country for defending Christianity against secularism or atheism. Here is an example of this kind of understanding. In 2003, Judge Roy Moore was removed from his post as chief justice of the Supreme Court of Alabama. This was because he refused to remove a monument of the Ten Commandments from the state courthouse despite contrary orders from a federal judge. The monument weighs: 5,280 pounds, or just over 500 pounds per commandment. Judge Moore has been lugging this hefty monster around from one public appearance to another on the back of a flatbed truck. Joshua Green, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, notes that whenever the truck returns to Alabama, "a 57-foot yellow I-beam crane that spans the ceiling of the Clark Memorials warehouse drops down to retrieve the Rock from its chariot, and even this one -- a *five-ton crane* -- buckles visibly under the weight."

Whether you agree with Judge Moore or not, I think it is appropriate for us to ask, "Is this what Psalm 19 was inviting people to do with the words, "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul?" A good starting place to answer this question is to note that when the Psalm (or the Hebrew people) referred to the law, they were talking about more than just the Ten Commandments. They were talking about the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. With those books the law of God is about the story of God's relationship with the people of God and how God has led them faithfully, especially in times of trouble. This Psalm deals with two ways that God communicates and interacts with us. The first is through creation. The second is through God's Word (the Law). But the Psalm links this life-giving quality of the Torah also to the creative power of God revealed in the heavens. The orderly procession of day and night, the dome of the heavens, the light of the sun, all show forth God's creating power--and that same power is revealed in the realm of human life in the blessings conferred in living the Torah way. Far from being a set of empty rules or arbitrary legalisms, the Law is deeply linked to the very Way of the world in God. The Torah/law is more than just the Ten Commandments. It is a way for us to see God in action. Just like nature helps us see the goodness of God, the story of the covenant between God and Israel helps us see the love and commitment of God to humanity.

So why have people made faith to be such a burden? Why do we limit the Law to the Ten Commandments? Why have we reduced the Ten Commandments to rules of moral behavior that in following them they can send us to heaven, while breaking them can send us to hell? Why have we reduced them to only literal laws? I think one of the issues is that we often take them out of context and miss the point of the whole story of God's love for humanity. In verse 2 of Exodus 20 which was part of our first reading, we find an amazing point of God's self revelation and God's love for the people of Israel, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" This is the context of the Ten Commandments and not God saying, "Here are ten rules that you must obey or else!" Another important piece for us to unpack in Psalm 19 is the phrase "fear of the Lord." We often come at this from our own understanding of fear. We often think of our own fears in terms of our reactions to scary things

in our lives or our worries. But the biblical word for fear as it is used in this Psalm, *yirah*, carries much more meaning than what we can think of in English. It often means reverence. When the word is referring to the fear of God, it is an emotional experience of a complex nature which is connected with the perception or the awareness of the Holy and which produces reactions such as repulsion, attraction, fascination, awe, love, trust, faith, worship and adoration. This is the same word that is used in Psalm 139:14 "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." God's presence is what is at stake here in the Psalm and not God's punishment and rules. The Psalm is an invitation to know God's presence in our natural world, in the stories of faith from our ancestors and in our own beings. The Law of God that we are invited to uphold cannot be reduced to a set of moral codes. The Law of God is a much better and bigger gift to us. It is about God's very presence among us. If we are truly serious about God's law in our world, a better symbol than the hefty monument to the Ten Commandments would be our way of life.

When we limit our knowledge of God to a set of rules, doctrines or beliefs, we limit God's presence in our lives. We miss out on the real gift of God's presence. This is the same thing when it comes to nature. When we are out in God's creation, knowing the name of every tree plant is not more important than upholding them in our spirits and enjoying them. Often times we rush to see a spectacular view of nature, only to admire it for a few seconds, take some pictures and then leave and go on to the next viewpoint.

The Law of God does not teach us that God is the great legal eagle in the sky. Rather, it is the story of God's love for humanity and God's care for those who are oppressed. The 16th Century reformer, Martin Luther, once wrote, "With practice one can take the Ten Commandments on one day, a psalm or chapter of Holy Scripture the next day, and use them as flint and steel to kindle a flame in the heart." The early desert fathers and mothers understood this very well because they saw that the focus and goal of the spiritual journey was ultimately union with God. Christian morals and ethics emerged out of their deep love for and connection with God. In her book *The Forgotten Desert Mothers*, Laura Swan writes, "The desert ammas cultivated solitude in order to intensify their inner journey to their goal of union with God." The goal of the spiritual journey is not just about being a good person. It is about the journey to be a person who has no time outside of God's presence in their lives.

The story is told about the famous Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov who one day arrived at a small crossroads inn, many miles distant from the nearest Jewish community. He was warmly invited in, and served a refreshment by the innkeeper's family. "Where is your father?" he asked the children. "He's praying," they replied, and Rabbi Israel settled down to wait for his host. An hour passed, then two. It was late afternoon by the time the innkeeper emerged from his room. After greeting his guest, he apologized for his long absence. "I am an ignorant Jew," he explained shamefacedly. "I can barely pronounce the words from the prayer book, and deciphering its instructions, written in vowel-less Hebrew, is beyond me. So I have no choice but to recite the entire prayer book, from cover to cover, every day." "Perhaps I can be of assistance to you," said Rabbi Israel. For the next hour, the learned Rabbi sat with the innkeeper, patiently instructing him on the proper use of the prayer book. On small slips of paper, Rabbi Israel wrote out, in simple Yiddish, "morning prayers," "special addition for Mondays and Thursdays," "grace after meals," "afternoon prayers," "evening prayers," "for Shabbat," "for Rosh Chodesh," "for Rosh Hashanah," and so on, and inserted them to mark the proper place in the innkeeper's prayer-book. "Thank you so much," said the innkeeper, when Rabbi Israel took leave to resume his journey. "Now I can begin to pray like a proper Jew." But the innkeeper's joy was short lived. Later that day, the prayer book fell from its shelf, and every last slip of paper inserted by the Baal Shem Tov fluttered from its pages. "Woe is me!" cried the innkeeper. "Who knows how

many months will pass until a learned Jew will again come this way?" Determined not to let this opportunity to begin praying properly escape him, he grabbed the prayer-book and the notes and ran off in the direction that his guest had gone. After several miles of brisk walking, he finally sighted the Baal Shem Tov far ahead. From the distance he saw Rabbi Israel reach a river. "How will he cross?" wondered the innkeeper," He was about to shout a warning, when he saw Rabbi Israel spread his handkerchief on the water, step onto it as if it were the sturdiest of rafts, glide smoothly across, and disappear into the woods on the opposite bank. In a flash, the innkeeper was at the water's edge. Spreading his handkerchief on the water, he stepped onto it and glided across, and ran down the path Rabbi Israel had taken. "Wait, Rabbi!" he called. "Wait! You cannot go until you mark my prayer book again! "How did you get here?" asked Rabbi Israel in amazement. "How did you cross the river?" "With my handkerchief, same as you," replied the simple Jew. "I think," said the Baal Shem Tov slowly, "that God is extremely satisfied with your prayers as they are. Perhaps you should continue to pray just the way you have up until now."

We are invited today through the words of Psalm 19 to pay attention to God's presence in our lives in nature, in the Bible, in the events of our lives and in our every experience. It is not about following a set of rules. It is about the living presence of God. This is the law of God! This is the best way to live. Amen.