

“Command-Meant”

Rev. Stephen Milton

Lawrence Park Community Church

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Have you ever taken a drive into the country and passed by some properties that had signs up for an invisible fence? You know, those systems where a dog has a collar on its neck which gives it a small electric shock if it roams off the property? The dog slowly learns where the shocks happen, so they stay inside the perimeter. This system teaches the dog that there are invisible rules that apply which have consequences when they disobey.

We humans like to think that we don't need contraptions like collars to keep us in line. We have our reason. We learn about rules and regulations through school, our families, church and popular culture, like cop shows. We have lots of invisible fences, but we don't need to be physically shocked to know what they are. Some of the rules we live by are posted on signs, others are just part of the legal fabric of our lives. We are expected to adhere by the rules, or else face fines and penalties.

However, lately, some people seem to feel like we are being treated like dogs with those electric collars. There has been a great deal of controversy over automatic speed cameras. The city has set them up in 150 locations in the city. They take pictures of a car's license plate when it is detected travelling over the speed limit. That data is sent to a computer, which issues a ticket, which arrives in the mail. This system has enraged some people. They have complained to the Premier. They have also cut down the speed cameras multiple times. A few weeks ago, 16 speed cameras were vandalized in one night.

This controversy raises several questions about personal freedom. The people who are angry with the system say that it is excessive. The fines are too high, and they rob the individual driver of the freedom to self regulate their speed. Why should a driver crawl along a straight road when there are no other cars in sight? Drivers should be able to use their discretion when driving even if it means going over the speed limit. The state is supposed to serve personal freedom, within safe limits, rather than restrict the individual.

The supporters of speed cameras make a case based on our collective safety. They point to the fact that when a car hits a pedestrian at more than 48 kilometres an hour, the risk of death is 90%. However, keeping speed limits down to 30 kilometres an hour vastly reduces the chances of death, which is surely good for all. The first speed cameras were placed near school zones and parks. A recent study found that they do reduce speeding. Supporters argue that drivers cannot anticipate when a child or cyclist may suddenly be on the road, so slower speed limits matter. The automatic cameras are needed to coerce people into driving slower.

The issue is a clash between two ideas of personal freedom. Do we limit our personal freedom for the greater good, even if it means handing out automatic penalties for infractions? Or should we rely on the discretion of individual drivers to maintain our personal and collective safety?

That question of how laws should apply to individuals has been of concern to religion for a long time, too. Today's scripture reading comes from Psalm 119 in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is the longest psalm. It has 22 sections, of which we heard 2. It is an acrostic psalm, which means that each section starts with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet. Each section declares how much the writer loves God's law, and how their life is improved by following God's laws. However, the writer is also well aware that others have not chosen this path. Instead, they have chosen to ignore and break God's laws, causing misery and difficulty for others.

The psalm suggests that the natural world is ruled by God's precepts.

The Lord exists for ever;

your word is firmly fixed in heaven.

Your faithfulness endures to all generations;

you have established the earth, and it stands fast.

By your appointment they stand today,

for all things are your servants. (Psalm 119:89-91)

In other psalms, it is clear that everything in the natural world willingly obeys God's commands, like faithful servants (Psalm 19). Human beings, on the other hand, are given a choice. We can choose to follow God's laws or disobey them. This is what makes us unique in creation. Our free will is a blessing and a curse, an opportunity and a burden. In today's psalm, the writer is delighted to follow God's laws, for they grant wisdom and a beautiful life. But it is obvious that others will choose to disobey God to act in what they think are their own interests.

Last week, we did a Bible study about the afterlife, and one of the points we explored was that for Jews of this period, there was no afterlife. When this psalm writer says how wonderful God's laws are, they are not anticipating any kind of heavenly reward for being obedient in this life. At this time, over 2500 years ago or more, the Jews believed that when you died, you were simply dead. No heaven or hell. No consciousness at all. Your body would become worm food, and your mind would simply cease to exist. So, to choose to follow God's laws in this life could only be beneficial in this life. This would be like driving the speed limit without any prospect of getting a ticket if you went any faster.

For this psalm writer, ethical action is a reward in itself. To be in God's favour was worth it, even if there were easier ways to live, where one gave into passions and temptations. These psalms reveal a sense of belonging through self discipline. A sense of self respect and self control which is worth it, knowing that it brings a person closer to God. There was no illusion about whether there were cosmic rules, there obviously were. The scriptures are full of them, and one could simply look at the stars, the trees and the animals to see other beings obeying God. These ancient Jews found freedom in obedience.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the word for a commandment is "mitzvah." It's the same word that is used in bar mitzvah. In English, a commandment sounds like a law which has been ordered by some higher authority - it is a command. But in Hebrew, a mitzvah is meant more as a rule which is good for you. Obeying this rule will benefit you, and others. Thou shalt not kill is a mitzvah, because when everyone obeys, everyone benefits. This is what today's psalmist is praising - the mitzvahs, the commandments and laws that have made their life better. The fruits of these restrictions on their actions has improved their life, and they praise God for steering them in this direction.

Our bodies have ways of teaching us about mitzvahs. As we age, how we digest foods change. Some people discover that the food and drink they consumed in their youth now pose problems. Hangovers last all day, not just a few hours. Or the cheese that tastes so good at dinner causes digestive problems that night or the next day. Or the bread you loved is now a cause of great pain. Aging often introduces the idea that although we are free to eat and drink anything we want, there is wisdom in self restraint. We are doing ourselves a favour by restricting our freedom.

The ancient Jews had six hundred and thirteen commandments they were expected to observe. Those rules dictated what they could eat, and what was forbidden. When they should worship, and when they were unclean, like the men with skin diseases we met last week. But when Christianity appeared, there was a shift. Paul told new Christians that Christ's loving sacrifice on the cross had set them free from this long list of mitzvahs. When Jesus was asked which commandments were the greatest, he replied there were really just two: love your God with your whole heart and soul, and love your neighbours as yourselves. Everything else derives from those two commandments.

Now, Christians were still expected to obey the ten commandments, but otherwise, we are given great latitude on how to interpret the two commandments. How will we love God? Will we read the Bible, go to church, take walks in nature? How often, and how much? That is left to us. Some churches at certain points in history have drawn up all sorts of rules so people were drawn back into a faith defined by rules. But that wasn't the original spirit of this faith. We are expected to define ourselves by how we interpret those two commands. It is very much up to us.

It is like we are all driving down the road with speed limit signs which are suggestions, and it is not clear whether there is a speed camera to issue tickets or not. Will the good deeds we do outweigh our bad deeds? We hope so, but we have no way of knowing how God will decide.

Jesus is quite vague about what happens in the afterlife, so the price of the tickets is not as clear as we might hope.

Instead, Jesus offers us a way of living. Love God with all your being. Be grateful for your life and all that is around you. Let God's love flow into you as you love God. Then, with that love, share it with others. Help them when you can. Care about the welfare of strangers, knowing that they are loved by God, too.

Christians throughout the ages have found that this commandment to love contains a strange paradox. Logic suggests that when we give of ourselves for others, we should end up with less than we had before. Less time. Perhaps less money or resources. We have given something up for someone else. But when people practice this kind of helpful love, we do get something in exchange. We receive meaning. Our lives feel broader, more rewarding. We don't need to stare at the ceiling at night wondering whether there's any point to our lives. We know that our lives matter - not just to ourselves, but to others, too. They may never know who we were when we signed that cheque or donated those clothes, or packed up that meal, or signed that petition. We don't do these things for credit or recognition. We simply do them as acts of love, the kind of love God has for every being on Earth. In walking in God's way, we are enriched, even when we give money away.

This feeling is an old one. That psalmist knew this feeling. That's why they could write, "I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life." God invites us to drive through this life, loving the view, and considering the needs of others. We are not asked to live in fear of cosmic speed tickets. Rather, God invites us to drive slow enough to help others. And strangely, if we do this, we will have a better ride than if we ignored the speed limit. Amen.