

I drive downtown for work, which means that most days I pass a homeless person. Sometimes I'm speeding by and they are pushing an overflowing grocery cart in the opposite direction. Sometimes a man is at the light right where I get off I-30, holding a sign that says something like "Lost my job. Lost my house. Hungry. Please help. God bless." I tend to avoid looking him in the eye. If I look him in the eye, I won't be able to hide the tension that is just below the surface. The tension I'm trying to ignore.

[cardboard sign with "God Bless"] It's that last line of his sign that really is troublesome. "God bless." It seems to assume that if I give money, God will bless me, that God blesses those who are good, those who obey him. But then I wonder what "God Bless" means for this homeless man. He seems unblessed. Perhaps he's been disobedient. What if giving him money actually enables his disobedience. Maybe what he needs is to hit rock bottom and then pull himself up by his bootstraps. No handouts.

This tension I try to ignore is a real struggle for many of us when we meet a person in desperate need. It's a struggle in our political system as we want to create safety nets that help keep people alive when they are down on their luck, and yet we don't want to create dependency on the system. One of our political parties focuses on the safety net side of this, and the other party focuses on the responsibility side. Most of us are in the middle somewhere. We feel the tension, and so when we approach a light that has a beggar, we don't look them in the eye and the tension remains right below the surface.

Whether or not to give money to a homeless person may seem like a small thing, but in reality it's connected to this enormous tension we humans struggle with between law and grace. Often in our thinking, this tension plays out as being between God being concerned about law in the Old Testament and then, thankfully, Jesus being all grace in the New Testament. Today we are going to see that this dichotomy is not true and we're going to see how God responds to the tension of law and grace in humanity.

We're in the season of Epiphany, the season that follows Christmas. If Christmas celebrates God coming into the world, Epiphany asks, So what? Who is this God who has come into the world? How does this God resolve our tension? Is this God a God of laws or a God of grace? Spoiler alert: God doesn't resolve the tension, like we would want. Instead, God enters the tension, and that is good news for us, because this is how we enter into relationship with God.

The series we are doing this Epiphany is called the Prophets & Poets Mixtape. We're learning who God is by listening to the prophets and songs God's people have celebrated for thousands of years. Like the mixtapes you used to make as a lovestruck teen, these songs and sages reveal the character of God and help us see God in new, surprising ways.

What we are going to see today is that the inner turmoil we experience between grace and law is a tension that is in the Bible as well, and despite the fact that we want religion to solve this tension for us, the Bible provides no simple answer. The reason for this is that the tension exists deep inside what it means to be human. We are people who have free will, we make choices

and are responsible for our actions, and so we need rules. Yet we are also a broken people, creating and living in sinful systems that oppress us, and so we need grace. Sometimes the Bible gives us rules for how to live, and sometimes the Bible tells us stories of God's grace that overcomes even our poor decisions. Sometimes the Bible tells us to hold others accountable to the rules, and sometimes the Bible tells us to extend them grace. But one thing is consistent throughout the Bible. God does not ignore the tension. God does not avoid eye contact with us. And God does not stand on one side or the other. God does not merely make rules. Nor does God simply allow us to do whatever and never face any consequences. Instead, God always moves toward us in the struggle, living with us in the tension. God dwells in the tension with us because God wants to heal the very depths of who we are. God wants to be in relationship with us, and the way toward relationship is through the tension.

[Scripture Slide 1] This is what we see in our first scripture reading for today, which is Deuteronomy 30:15-20. Imagine with me this scene from the Hebrews' story. Moses is standing on the eastern side of the Jordan river. And the Hebrew people who have been wandering in the desert for 40 years since God miraculously took them out of Egypt and gave them the law at Mt. Sinai, are all gathered and they are ready to cross the Jordan and enter into the promised land flowing with Milk and Honey. Moses is standing in the tension between the law that was given at Mt Sinai and the grace and freedom of the promised land. He has just spent a long time recounting the laws to them, and that's where our reading comes in. It is the very end of his speech to the people, just before they cross into the Promised Land.

“Now listen! Today I am giving you a choice between life and death, between prosperity and disaster. 16 For I command you this day to love the Lord your God and to keep his commands, decrees, and regulations by walking in his ways. If you do this, you will live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you and the land you are about to enter and occupy.

17 “But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and if you are drawn away to serve and worship other gods, 18 then I warn you now that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live a long, good life in the land you are crossing the Jordan to occupy.

19 “Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, so that you and your descendants might live! 20 You can make this choice by loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and committing yourself firmly to him. This is the key to your life. And if you love and obey the Lord, you will live long in the land the Lord swore to give your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This is a beautiful thing! Can you imagine the excitement, and fear. A people about to enter a new land, a people trained for generations and generations as slaves to not have any choice. Now, here is a choice! OH that you would choose life!!

And let's be clear. By choosing to love God and obey these laws, they are choosing life. These are not arbitrary laws simply based on other nations' laws. They are a people that were

enslaved for 400 years and God suddenly lead them out to freedom. But for a while, their freedom from slavery meant little more than being homeless. After crossing the Red Sea, they had no land, and they had no rules. It was the wild, wild west. How would they live? The only government they knew was one that enslaved people. What good would their freedom be if they did not also have a new way of living in the world, a new system of laws that didn't simply replicate what they just came out of? So the first thing God did was take them to Mt Sinai and give them God's law. Moses says to them, "This law is how you should live! This law, this Torah, is now life to you, it is your freedom to be something different than a people who are slaves. This law allows you, of all the people on earth, to be in relationship with the one true, good God, to be trained into being like him."

But if we're honest, most of us didn't hear a call to relationship in those verses. "Keep his commands, decrees, and regulations" sounds more like shape up or ship out! And so we do something rather interesting. We begin to judge ourselves and others by whether or not they are blessed. We hear laws, rules, exhortations throughout the Bible, and we literally turn them around. Instead of understanding them as flowing from God toward us as life, we begin with seeing the person in front of us, whether they are prospering or fallen on hard times, and then we assume something about their morality. In our judgement, we walk God's promises backwards. We assume the homeless person has made unmoral decisions, that they have not been following God. We assume God is punishing them. If they had obeyed God's commands, they would be prospering.

We are used to thinking of justice in terms of punishment. That's how our system of laws works in this country. We have a hard time thinking of justice in terms of relationship. When we think of justice in terms of punishment, we take the laws given to Moses on the mountain and try to enforce them ourselves, and we leave God on the mountain. Now that God has told us what we need to do, we think we can do it on our own. Just follow the rules. Simple.

But there are some big problems with that. The most important problem is that there are a whole set of laws that were given that are about how to build the tabernacle. God is not interested in staying on Mt. Sinai. God intends to dwell with his people in the land. God desires relationship, not just rule following. God's mission was never just to give the people laws in order to get them into shape. God's mission was to live among them and be in relationship with them.

**[Deeds-Consequence]** There are many laws in the Bible where God promises that if we follow them, God will bless us and we will live good, long lives. One of the Psalms says, "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." Our right-leaning political party today understand this part of the Bible pretty well. And it is truth. It is God's good truth to us. Theologians call this deeds-consequence theology, meaning that whatever our deeds are, the things we do have inevitable consequences. Deeds-consequence theology is what Job's friends showed up with and tried to convince him of, and they were quoting things we see throughout the scripture. They weren't wrong; they were just one-sided. Deeds-consequence theology fits very well into our particular economic system of capitalism, where competition and working hard are mostly rewarded. The problem is, deeds

consequence theology only speaks to part of what it means to be human. Runaway capitalism, for example, takes advantage of whomever it can, and so we must have regulations on capitalism to stop things like monopolies or selling home loans to people who can't really afford them.

**[Liberation]** To address the other side of what it means to be human, there is what's called liberation theology that runs throughout the Bible. It begins with the idea that God doesn't show up to Moses and say to him, "Go tell my people that they have sinned and that is why they are in slavery. And tell them that if they repent and confess and change, then I will free them from slavery." No. God simply says, "Go liberate my people." Similarly, there are laws spread throughout God's commands that say things like we heard last week, to not gather wheat and grain from the edges of the fields, but to leave it for the widows and orphans. Our left-leaning political party understands this better than our right-leaning party. Or another biblical example, I encourage you to read Deuteronomy 15 some time today. It is all about cancelling people's debts after 7 years, and giving generously to the poor, and freeing slaves after every seven years. The chapter is part of the set of laws, and yet there is no punishment listed for not obeying. God simply reminds them in very strong terms that they were once slaves, they were once in a strange land, and God gave freely to them, so they should do the same for others. You see, it's the relationship God has created with them, to become their God, that is important. And it is relationship with other people, that God encourages them toward, not just blind obedience to the law.

**[Deeds-Consequence vs. Liberation]** Our problem occurs when we make one of these two ways absolute, and we become the judge. Our politics in this country have increasingly become absolute, not allowing us to even discuss the other side with people that used to be friends. God could have given us one way or the other, but God gave us both. The tension allows God to enter into it with us, to live with us, to be in relationship. Consider the love of a good parent for a child: it is not rules OR grace. Rules are needed to shape and form the child, but grace is just as important to shaping the child. The tension between the two allows for the blossoming of trust and love and for the ultimate goal, good relationship.

**[Scripture Slide 2]** It is the mature working out of that trust and love that we will hear from our Poet today. Our song is from Psalm 119. Last week we learned that Psalm 119 is a love poem to the law, I think JR called it a rock opera? You'll remember it's the longest chapter in the Bible. And it is an acrostic poem. One of the purposes of the acrostic was to make these Psalms easier to memorize (not everyone could afford a Psalm scroll). And this Psalm in particular was likely memorized by children. It was, then, a way of training children in how to live in the world. Training them how to know and love God's way.

It was written hundreds of years after the law was given, and it was written by a poet who has seen how the commands of Lord, the Way of God, leads to life. He has seen his nation submit to God's laws and flourish and he has himself submitted and flourished. As we read the first 8 verses of this Psalm, listen for the combination of words that have to do with law and the words that have to do with relationship. There is the language of instruction and the language of love

all mixed up together. This is a different way of understand the law than how we usually think of it.

Joyful are people of integrity,  
 who follow the instructions of the Lord.  
 2 Joyful are those who obey his laws  
 and search for him with all their hearts.  
 3 They do not compromise with evil,  
 and they walk only in his paths.  
 4 You have charged us  
 to keep your commandments carefully.  
 5 Oh, that my actions would consistently  
 reflect your decrees!  
 6 Then I will not be ashamed  
 when I compare my life with your commands.  
 7 As I learn your righteous regulations,  
 I will thank you by living as I should!  
 8 I will obey your decrees.  
 Please don't give up on me! -- Psalm 119:1-8

Wow! That last line: “Please don’t give up on me!” It’s hard to imagine a line that could speak more to the goal of relationship. We struggle so hard to do what we know is good, and yet we fail, and we desperately need someone to not give up on us, and most of all we need God to not give up on us. The Psalmist isn’t writing about simply obeying rules. His aim is beyond rules. The Psalmist desires a relationship that changes who he is. He wants his actions to reflect the decrees. He wants to be able to compare his life with the commands. He wants to live as he should as a way of thanking God for righteous regulations. The Psalmist is talking about a learning process, a shaping of the whole person to be in line with who God is in the world. He’s so enamored with God and God’s ways, that he wants to be made like them. God’s commands are not seen as something that can be accomplished and done any more than a marriage can be accomplished and done. Rather, like a marriage, God’s commands are a life-giving relationship. God comes and dwells with his people in all of their tensions of hurt and joy, all the tensions of obedience and grace. God’s requirements upon us are an invitation to relationship. God refuses to give us the easy answers we seek, because to do so would be to only deal with part of what it means for us to be human and to be in relationship. Life looks different when we stop making averting our eyes from the tension in our lives and we instead invite the Holy Spirit to occupy those spaces with us. I am a teacher, and though I have not been at it a long time, I’ve found that if I only respond to my students with grace, they will simply take advantage of the class, and they will learn very little. However, if I only respond with rules, students lose motivation to learn. They just check the minimum boxes to get a grade, and they again learn very little. If I live in that tension with them, though, they have enough structure to stay on track and enough freedom, even if it doesn’t work out sometimes, to try new things.

## Communion

[Communion Slide] There is nowhere that this tension of obedience and grace is greater than when we come to the communion table. On the very night he was betrayed, Christ extended gracious hospitality to his disciples, eating and drinking and teaching. Later that evening, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was obedient to the Father, praying not my will but yours be done. Christ submitted to the Father's way, to the Father's commands, even when it meant death. And yet all around and throughout that submission, he moved in grace - breaking bread with his disciples, healing an ear that was cut off, making sure his mother would be looked after, even asking God to forgive those who were crucifying him, because they knew not what they were doing. Not only did God tell us to live in this tension, God became human, took on flesh, and showed us how. God revealed his desire to live with us in the tension.

In taking communion today, we follow Christ's command when he told his disciples, "do this in remembrance of me", and in following his commands, we are shaped into being like him - to have the same obedience to the father, to extend the same grace to those around us. It is not easy to take up our cross and follow Christ. This religion will not solve the tension in our lives. But, we have seen, and here at this table we practice, that God enters into the tension with us and gives us true, relational life.

You do not need to be a member of Catalyst to take communion here today. If you desire to be in relationship with this God who is willing to enter into your tension and mess, you are welcome to join us.

*Prayer*

### **Blessing**

Some of us, I believe, live too much in the spaces of law. We try to earn our way into God's favor. We talk about that a lot here at Catalyst. If that's you this morning, know that God's word to you today is one of grace. Some of us, though, live too much in the spaces of grace. We have not learned to love God's commands; we are not willing to be shaped by God's decrees. I would challenge you this week to spend some time with Psalm 119 this week, reading a couple sections per day, and considering what are the things that God has spoken into your life, things you know you're supposed to be doing and simply haven't done. Are you in love with God's words to you, God's commands? Do you see them as the means to true life?