



**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block**

**Sunday, June 23, 2019
Sacrament of Baptism & Senior High Graduation Sunday**

**Sermon: "Rules to Live By" *
Psalm 42
Galatians 3:23-29**

Psalm 42

*¹ As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.*

*² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.*

*When shall I come and behold
the face of God?*

*³ My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"*

*⁴ These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.*

*⁵ Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God;
for I shall again praise the Lord,
my help ⁶ and my God.*

*My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.*

*⁷ Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.*

⁸ By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,

*and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.*

⁹ *I say to God, my rock,
"Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?"*
¹⁰ *As with a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me,
while they say to me continually,
"Where is your God?"*

¹¹ *Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God;
for I shall again praise the Lord,
my help and my God.*

Galatians 3:23-29

²³ *Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.*

²⁷ *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

This week during our GCPC staff meeting, our beloved director of music, Jeff Jones brought some of North Carolina's most bizarre laws to our attention. Here are my top 10 favorites:

1. In North Carolina it is illegal for elephants to plow cotton fields.
2. It's a felony to steal more than \$1000 worth of grease.
3. No one is permitted to wear a costume during a business meeting.
4. It is illegal to rollerblade on state highways or in the sun.
5. You cannot visit cemeteries after midnight.
6. If a man and woman who aren't married go to a hotel and claim that they are married, then according to state law, now they are married.
7. Bingo games may not last more than five hours and no alcohol can be served. Happy Hour is also illegal.

8. Women are required to wear clothes that total 16 yards. Meaning no Daisy Dukes!
9. It's illegal to practice as a professional psychic or fortune-teller (but amateurs are ok).
10. It's against the law in North Carolina to sing off key.ⁱ

After hearing this list and thinking about this week's passage, my wheels have been turning. I have been wondering...*what purpose do laws serve?*

Our society was built on a series of laws. Laws help to ensure that certain social customs, practices and rules can be formally recognized and enforced. And in our community we know that there are some laws that we feel more acutely than others on a daily basis.

Laws can feel positive or negative. Through the years, there have been laws put in place to promote justice and freedom, and there have been laws made for the purpose of creating hurdles or barriers for change.

We have experienced laws that push open doors for the marginalized and laws that maintain the status quo, enslave, silence, and persecute the most vulnerable among us (black and brown bodied people, the poor, the LGBTQIA+ community, indigenous and undocumented persons).

We have known laws worth expanding upon and laws worth protesting.
We have had laws that celebrate all sorts of families and communities,
and laws that seek to separate or divide us.
Laws that are timeless and laws that are outdated.
Laws that are long gone and laws that can't seem to change.
Laws that ensure safety and laws that instill fear.

And from the list that I read today, we can see that there are also some laws that can feel archaic or strange (I mean, although we would all love to have perfect pitch, I hope we would not consider it a crime to miss a note or two).

The laws we have in place – especially the ones that turn our heads around – cause us to wonder what was going on in our society at the time when they were written? What were lawmakers thinking and responding to? And why on earth do we still maintain some of these (seemingly outdated or irrelevant) laws today?

As we know, our Bible is filled with sacred laws: everything from how to properly do ritual practices to the importance of honoring our parents and elders. When we look at our Biblical laws, we remember that they were written in a specific context for a specific community – often times by and for people of faith experiencing persecution, desperate to name what makes them different, build community, promote healthy living and faithful worship, and ensure their survival through the ages.

Today, these laws remain our timeless touchstones . We turn to them for guidance on how to live lives focused on God.

In our text today, the Apostle Paul is standing at a crossroads in our Biblical legal history.

It is often said that he was the first Christian convert, but in actuality Paul was born a Jewish man (and he never abandoned that identity). He was part of the early Christian movement - where there were many Jews who maintained and loved their Jewish faith, but also now followed Jesus (and believed that he was the Messiah).

Paul was living in this tense moment for Jews, Jewish-Christians, and this new crop of Gentile-Christians – all who were discerning if and how they could live and practice in community.

When Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians, he was feeling unnerved by Jewish-Christians who were insisting that Gentile-Christians embrace Jewish laws and customs in order to be welcomed into this new Christian movement. *Complicated, right?*

In Paul's eyes, laws should never keep us from entering into Christ's inner circle. "All you need is faith" he sang out. Through faith, through baptism, we are all welcome into this community and loved exactly as we are – no questions asked.

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." Paul says. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Paul's intention in our text is simple – he is speaking of radical inclusion. The Christian identity was taking shape and Paul did not want laws - of any kind - to be used as a way to separate Gentile-Christians from the rest of the fold. Instead, he hoped to usher in a new sort of community – one focused on the expansiveness of Christ's love for all people – exactly as they are.

So, what purpose do laws serve?

We know that there are countless laws and passages in our Bible that have been misused and misinterpreted to justify oppression, violence and hatred toward groups of people through the years. This passage is absolutely one of them.

When we do a quick read through this morning's text, we can come to the hard and fast conclusion that Paul is devaluing Jewish law (claiming that it has now been replaced by Christian faith). But we must be careful when we read. Interpretations like this one have been used time and time again to justify anti-Semitism and the persecution of the Jewish people.

During this morning's text, Paul is not criticizing the Jewish people, in fact, he is not speaking to them at all. Paul is not engaging in interfaith dialogue here, but in intra-faith dialogue – meaning he is speaking to us, his fellow Christians (this budding group of believers).

The heart of his message is this: he is not calling for us to reject or dismiss law. Rather, he asks us to not be imprisoned by it. Paul invites us to have the courage to question law when it holds us back from each other, when it keeps us from fostering radical community, when it is used to promote anything other than love and justice.

In this new age, Paul is pushing us to think deeply about our identity as Christ's followers, and discern what purpose law can and will serve in our lives:

What is most important to us? He asks.

When are we falling short of Christ's love in our day to day lives?

How are we called to embrace law and how are we called to branch out from it?

Will we be imprisoned by who we think we should be or will we be bold enough, liberated enough, to step out into something wholly new?

So, what purpose do laws serve?

Headline #1 this week: Our government went to court to argue that it should not be required to provide parents and children being detained at our U.S. border with soap, adequate sleeping conditions and a toothbrush.

Since last September six children have died in U.S. detention centers and the three judges present questioned whether lawyers sincerely believed that these facilities were in fact "safe and sanitary" for children, as required by law.

"To me it's within everybody's common understanding," said one judge. "If you don't have a toothbrush, if you don't have soap, if you don't have a blanket, it's not safe and sanitary. Wouldn't everybody agree to that? Wouldn't you agree to that?"

The lawyer responded that "those things may be" part of the definition of safe and sanitary.

"What are you saying, 'may be?'" a judge shot back. "You mean, there's circumstances when a person doesn't need to have a toothbrush, toothpaste and soap? For days?"

Perhaps the terms "safe and sanitary," are just too vague the lawyer said. "The terms seem relatively obvious," the judge retorted.ⁱⁱ

Paul pushes us to ask: will we be imprisoned by laws that keep us from each other or will we let our faith liberate and unite us?

Headline #2 this week: When asked about reparations for black bodied people in this country, our Senate Majority Leader said that America should not be held liable for something that happened 150 years ago, since none of us alive today were responsible for enslaving human beings.

Author and journalist, Ta-Nehisi Coates responded to his remarks during a hearing: “It is tempting to divorce this modern campaign of terror, of plunder, from enslavement, but the logic of enslavement, of white supremacy, respects no such borders and the guard of bondage was lustful and begat many heirs. Coup d’états and convict leasing...Redlining and racist G.I. bills. Poll taxes and state-sponsored terrorism.

We grant that the majority leader was not alive for [many things]. But he was alive for the electrocution of George Stinney. He was alive for the blinding of Isaac Woodard. ... He was alive to witness the harassment, jailing, and betrayal of those responsible for legislation by a government sworn to protect them. He was alive for the redlining of Chicago and the looting of black homeowners of some \$4 billion. Victims of that plunder are very much alive today...

What this committee must know, is that while emancipation dead-bolted the door against the bandits of America, Jim Crow wedged the windows wide open...It was 150 years ago. And it was right now.”ⁱⁱⁱ

*Paul asks us: will we be imprisoned by laws that keep us from each other
or will we let our faith liberate and unite us?*

Surely there are too many laws to count that have been used to divide and oppress, to imprison and to discipline. Paul invites us to be empowered by our faith to seek out and live by laws that put us in right relationship with God and with one another.

A dear friend named Katie, serves as a Jewish rabbi in New York City. Last year she visited Grace Covenant on a baptism Sunday (and got a kick out it). She especially loved the way we paraded the newly baptized baby down the aisle as a way to welcome him into community.

Now, Katie lives a strict Jewish life and takes the law of keeping Sabbath seriously. Every Friday night at sundown she stops all things that are considered “work.” She doesn’t cook, or write, or text, or call, or drive until the sun goes down on Saturday.

From the outside, we can think that this law, this mitzvah of keeping Sabbath is outdated or burdensome. But for Katie, this law is a relevant and holy gift. She and her family look forward to Shabbat with the same anticipation Christians might feel about a Christmas morning. Shabbat is a unique and perfect law that calls her to stop working, to rest, to sleep, to notice, to play, to feel gratitude, to connect more deeply with God and with those around her.

On Shabbat, Katie spends hours in the synagogue – praying to God in community and discussing the week’s passages with people of all ages. And when she goes home she plays board games with her family and they share a big meal at table.

This law of Shabbat keeps her life in balance, it sets her up for the week, and brings her into right relationship with God and with the world around her.

So, what purpose do laws serve in our lives?

In our passage today, Paul demands that we think deeply about the sort of community we Christians want to cultivate.

What we are willing to risk, step away from, move towards?

Do we have the courage to question laws that keep us silent and separate, and instead embrace laws that bring us into right relationship with another, help us to build radical, inclusive community, and promote Christ's love and justice for all people?

Friends, in this deeply wounded world,

God gives us everything we need to be liberated.

God paves the path for us to run towards each other.

And God calls upon us to lean on our faith in Christ in order to keep our arms wide open.

*New sermon title.

ⁱ Emory Rakestraw. "20 Completely Absurd And Strange Laws That Are Only In North Carolina." *Only in Your State*. March 23, 2015. <<https://www.onlyinyourstate.com/north-carolina/weird-laws-nc/>>

ⁱⁱ Meagan Flynn. "Detained migrant children got no toothbrush, no soap, no sleep. It's no problem, government argues." *The Washington Post*. June 21, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/06/21/detained-migrant-children-no-toothbrush-soap-sleep/?utm_term=.01e1a8302d85>

ⁱⁱⁱ Olivia Paschal & Madeine Carlisle. "Read Ta-Nehisi Coates's Testimony on Reparations." *The Atlantic*. June 19, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/06/ta-nehisi-coates-testimony-house-reparations-hr-40/592042/?utm_campaign=atlantic-politics-and-policy&utm_content=edit-promo&utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_term=2019-06-19T15%3A21%3A48&fbclid=IwAR2Ajxvv9sCvEFMHpP8O3GloKvgOeGgV00XM_OvPYocG_WrS8du8w1jscsA>