

BETTER THAN GOLD?

What would **you** say was better than gold or sweeter than honey?
These words are expressions but they have to stand for something that is absolutely great and wonderful.

I don't know if you noticed something about our reading from Psalm 19.
That reading talks about something better than gold and sweeter than honey.
And we are tempted to think its not surprising that in the Bible of all places God will be described in that way.

But if you look close it is not God that is described that way at all in Psalm 19.
The thing that is so great and so wonderful is the LAW of God.

The law of God and the commandments of God are *"more desirable than the finest gold and they are sweeter than the purest honey."* (Psalm 19:10)

Really?

Isn't law negative?

I mean, maybe we need laws as a necessary evil, but it's surely not something to get excited about.

Isn't it strange to praise it?

Some reckon it's a kind of personal thing - that the Psalmist is 'into' law as other people are into other subjects. Some one says I love History. Or I love Maths.
Here's someone who loves Law!
But this isn't some geek who is admitting to his strange interest.

He's not saying *"Actually folks, believe it or not I really like law!"* like an accountant might say *"I'm actually really into figures and tables and spreadsheets"* while we're all thinking that sounds so boring.

The writer of the Psalm is saying that Gods Law **is** better than gold and sweeter than honey like it's a self-evident fact!

Does this make sense?

Is a religion full of laws attractive?

Is that why our faith is so loved?

Or isn't the exact opposite true?

Isn't in fact a religion of laws and rules and regulations the very reason why religion is **not** loved?

When I was growing up I spent a good bit of time in Tarbert, Loch Fyne, every year (sometimes more than once) because that's where my mother's family were

from. We stayed with gran and grandpa and out of respect for them on Sunday's we would go to their church – the Free Church of Scotland.

It was certainly an interesting experience, sitting in the rock solid pews for over an hour, singing unaccompanied psalms and listening to 45 minute sermons that appeared to me to be incomprehensible.

And the sense that I made of it as a young person was that this version of Christianity was not for me – it was a stern environment.

It seemed to be a kind of religion of laws that was austere, dull, strict, unexciting, unbending, judgemental and not very life-affirming.

Now there were (and are) good people in the Free Church – very good people indeed - and they are serious and sincere about their faith.

But law seemed to be very prominent in their thinking and laws weren't attractive to me.

There's loads of examples of this kind of thing.

Sticking with the Free Church for example there was Sunday.

That meant no loudness or playing, in the house at Tarbert you couldn't ever watch TV on a Sunday. Then the rules slackened and you could watch the news.

Then the rules slackened again and you could watch the news and a documentary as long as it wasn't too frivolous or entertaining!

Or the Amish communities in the USA where these folk stand back from the modern world and practice a kind of anti-technology austerity.

Or monks and priests and an enforced celibacy.

In each example they are on to something.

Keeping the Sabbath is something we should all think about, and find a way to do.

Getting away from noise and technology and finding silence in our life is really important.

And for some people living a celibate life allows them to serve God in a better way.

But the problem is when the rule is fixed for all people and when one particular idea is forced and becomes compulsory for everyone.

The trouble is where the laws and the rules seem to be more important than anything else.

And isn't the very worst bit about church -

the condemning of others in the name of regulations,

the curtailing of fun in the name of rules,

and the picture of God as a celestial snoop always waiting to trip us up and find us out?

And aren't some of these laws and rules pretty bad?

If we still adhered to them we would still see people having slaves and buying and selling human beings as if they were cattle.
 We would still be telling women to shut up and get into the background.
 Men would not be allowed to shave their beards.
 And we couldn't eat a garment made of two different types of cloth.
 Or eat shellfish.
 And if our children were disrespectful we could have them executed.

Are *these* the laws that are better than gold and sweeter than honey?

How do we make sense of this Psalm?

First of all we need to work out what is actually meant by the Law of God.

The people of Israel used the phrase to mean different things.

- * The Law of God stood for the Ten Commandments.
- * The Law of God stood for the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible called the Pentateuch, which includes the biggest amount of rules and for the Jews was the most important part of the Bible.
- * Sometimes they used the phrase "*the Law and the Prophets*", and that basically meant the whole of the Old Testament.
- * And the widest meaning of all of the Law of God meant all that plus the additional rules and regulations that the religious leaders had proscribed to flesh out Biblical commands.

We need to distinguish between the **Law** of God and the **Laws** of God.

The people of Israel were living with the laws of God.
 There were rules and regulations for almost every moment of every day.
 It was hard to live a day without breaking rules here and there.
 It was impossible to keep all the rules all the time.
 These rules were negative burdens.

To the 613 laws laid down in scripture there were thousands more added by the religious teachers.

Now even if you accept the laws attributed to God by human writers did all come from God, it is clear that many more rules did not.
 They were the attempts of human beings (in Israel's case the Scribes and Pharisees) to create a legal framework for living based on their religious beliefs.

And as far as the legitimacy of all the laws written into Scripture, people may still want to argue that they are all the unchangeable Word of God, but Jesus didn't think so.

Jesus took laws and disobeyed them saying they were not what God intended.
 For example, Jesus and his disciples broke some of the dietary rules, some of the social rules, and they broke rules in relation to Sabbath 'work'.
 Jesus took laws that seemed like common sense and turned them upside down.

"You have heard it said 'An Eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth' but now I tell you: do not take revenge."

(Matthew 5:38-39)

"You have heard it said 'Love your friends and hate your enemies' – but now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

(Matthew 5:43-44)

When Jesus was asked what laws mattered most
he didn't say thousands and thousands.
He didn't say 613 either.
He said two.

Love God and Love your neighbour. Everything hangs on this.
Show respect to God and treat your neighbour with love.
That is the essence of the Law.
That is in fact the Law of God.

Now this definition of what matters most – loving God and loving those around us seems to me to be the outline of the best life we can live.

These words are hard of course.
Difficult to live out.
Difficult to always put into action.
But the words set us free to be creative and these things make sense.

Can I suggest that because its hard to distinguish between the "law" and "laws" a better word to use nowadays would be the WAY of God.

Jesus lived a life in which he followed God's way and by doing so he lived the best life of all.

People can try to dismiss Jesus all they want but his words and his mission and his aims make good sense.
No one shows us better how to live.
No one shows us more clearly how to make the world a better place.

You don't have to be a Jew or a Christian or indeed a member of any organised religion to see that the way we live as a species is not healthy, and that some of the older spiritual teachings offer us a better way forward.

Here is part of a poem from the Dali Lama. It's called the Paradox of our Times.

*"THE PARADOX OF OUR TIMES
Is that we have taller buildings, but shorter tempers
Wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints
We spend more, but we have less.
We have bigger houses, but smaller families*

*More conveniences, but less time.
 We have more degrees, but less sense
 More knowledge, but less judgement
 More experts, but more problems
 More medicines, but less wellness.*

*We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values.
 We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often
 We have learnt how to make a living, but not a life.
 We have added years to life, but not life to years.
 We've been all the way to the moon and back
 but have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbour.*

*We have conquered outer space, but not inner space.
 We've cleaned up the air, but polluted our soul.
 We've split the atom, but not our prejudice.
 We've higher incomes, but lower morals.
 We've become long on quantity but short on quality.
 More leisure, but less fun;
 more kinds of food, but less nutrition.*

*These are the days of two incomes, but more divorces;
 Of fancier houses, but broken homes.
 It is a time when there is much in the window, and nothing in the room."*

(The Dalai Lama)

It's pretty hard to disagree with these words.

The way of the world isn't so great. Look at the world we live in.

The law of God (or the Way of God) and what matters most to God - just like the teaching of Jesus and values of Jesus, are at odds with the way so many people choose to live their lives.

And yet those values offer the best hope for us and for our world to live in peace.

Jesus lived a life that perfectly expressed Gods way.
 And that life has never been surpassed,
 No one lived a better life than Jesus.
 No one is a better example for us to follow.
 And the life that he brings leads to fullness of life for us.

Jesus' way of living brought inclusion - not exclusion,
 welcome - not rejection,
 it was about helping the needy rather than wallowing in greed,
 his way of life gave him time for reflection on who he was rather than blindly
 stumbling through one event to the next.

Jesus had a sense of love and hope, joy and peace that went with him no matter what he had to face.
And he lived with the great trust and certainty that comes from being in relationship to his Creator.

This is the heart of what God's Law really is.
It's not a never-ending battle to keep us with rules and strictures.

The way of God is the way that brings us to life in its fullness.
The way of God is what we all need as a basis for how we act and behave.
The way of God helps us shape our values our motives and how we treat those around us.

This way of God really is the greatest way to live.

It enables us to become the best versions of ourselves and to live the life we were actually created to live.

So I say the Psalmist (surprisingly) turns out to be right after all.
The way of God is indeed better than gold and sweeter than honey.

Psalm 19
James 3:1-12
Matthew (5:17-20)

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