

Under Gods Law

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[0:00] Well, I'd like us to turn back to Psalm 19, and I'm going to read the very last verse, verse 14. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

For a three-part series called Services Today and for the service next Sunday morning, I want to do a short three-part series called Integrated Decisions. Now, you might be thinking, what on earth does that mean, Thomas?

Yes. Well, with that title, I'm trying to capture two crucial things that we all need to reckon with. The first is that life is full of decisions.

Sometimes that can be huge, life-changing decisions. So where are we going to live? Whether or not we're going to get married? Who are we going to marry? What job we're going to apply for? What path we're going to choose when we leave school?

Sometimes it might be less life-changing decisions, but still ones which weigh heavily on us. Who we should vote for? How much money we should spend on a car or on a holiday or how much we should try and put aside to save?

[1:14] What responsibilities we should take on at our job? What voluntary commitments we should take up in our lives? These are the kind of decisions that we have to make. And then alongside these bigger decisions, there's also just the constant day-to-day decisions that we're making all the time.

What we're going to wear, what we're going to eat, what we watch on TV, what you look at on your phone, how much you exercise, what you do on your day off this week, when you go to bed, when to get up.

Now, all of these are decisions that we have to make. And all of the decisions we face, we're very often prompted by the situations we face week by week.

So this week, you might have to make a decision as to how you're going to react if somebody at work is difficult. You have to make a decision as to what you're going to do if something happens that makes you feel judged or criticized.

We have to decide what we think about all the things that are happening in the news. We have to make decisions about how we're going to respond if things go well or if things go badly. We have to make a decision about how to react when something captivates us and when something infuriates us.

[2:36] In all of these ways, and in many more ways, life is full of decisions. We're constantly making choices. We're relentlessly confronted by decisions that we need to make.

So that's the first big thing that I'm wanting us to think about in our next three sermons. But the second big thing that I'm trying to capture with that title is that our decisions need to be integrated. And what do I mean by that? Well, first of all, I mean the fact that you are a thinking, choosing, deciding person. That's a crucial aspect about the Bible's teaching regarding humanity.

You're made to be a thinking, choosing, deciding person. In other words, you're not made to be a robot. And you're not pre-programmed. And you're not controlled by an external force like fate or something like that.

No, you're made to think for yourself. So you've been made by God to be a decision maker. And that's a wonderful privilege for us.

[3:42] But it's also a profound responsibility. Responsibility. And that balance of privilege and responsibility is just a key part of what gives humans dignity. And that's a key part of the Bible's teaching regarding humanity.

But the thing I'm trying to get at is the fact that that decision-making power that we all had, it should align with the rest of reality. In other words, our decision-making must not be taken in a way that is blind or irrational or based on fantasy or based on guesswork.

Or to put it another way, to put it a more blunt way, our decision-making should not be stupid. But the key to ensuring that our decision-making is wise and appropriate is to ensure that our decision-making aligns with the rest of reality.

It needs to align with what is real and with what's true and with what's right. In other words, our decision-making needs to be integrated with the rest of reality.

Now, I'm sure everybody here agrees with that. I don't think anybody's going to argue with that. We want to think and choose and decide in a way that displays a decision-making that's balanced, that's coherent, that's appropriate, that's wise.

[5:12] That's how I want to live my life. I want to be a good decision-maker. But I look at my life and I can see that so many times I've made decisions that are hasty, that are blind, that are selfish, and that sometimes have been damaging.

In other words, I look at my own life and there's a gravitation in me towards stupid decisions. And maybe you can see some of that in your own life as well.

So what do we do? Well, that's what I want us to think about because this is one of the key areas where the gospel helps us. And the gospel helps us because one of the big emphasis of the Bible is that as we live our lives, we need to make decisions and those decisions need to be integrated.

That's crucial for all of us to think about that, whether we're following Jesus, whether we're not quite sure where we stand in terms of faith, or whether we're still at the moment sure that we're not there yet in terms of faith.

We've got to think about this. We've got to have integrated decisions. So what does it involve? Well, I want to give you a short summary and then I want to give you a diagram, which I hope is capturing everything that I'm trying to say.

[6:32] So making integrated decisions involves living under God's rule in God's world as God's child. Living under God's rule in God's world as God's child.

And we can put that into a diagram there that we're living under God's rule, under God's law. We are living in God's world and we are doing that as God's child.

And what I'm trying to get to in the diagram there is that there's an upward, an outward, and an inward aspect to all of this. And the upward aspect speaks about authority.

What is the ultimate authority in our lives? What is it that decides right and wrong? What are the overarching norms that should shape our decisions?

Outward speaks about application. So how do our decisions connect with the people and with the world around us? What's the right thing to do in any given particular situation?

[7:35] And then inward speaks about our attitudes. Why are we doing what we're doing? And what kind of person are we becoming through our decisions?

There's that upward, outward, inward aspect, authority, application, attitude. And all of these are immensely important. And the thing I'm trying to say is that all three of these need to be integrated. And the reason why they need to be integrated is because all too often they aren't. Let me give you examples. So do I accept the authoritative statement, the authoritative proposition, that using a mobile phone while driving is dangerous?

Yes, I do. Do I also recognize that as that is applied, I need to be conscious of others on the road, of myself, of my passengers, and I need to drive in a safe way?

I need to make sure that I approach driving in a safe way as I apply that. Do I agree with that? Yes. So do I accept the authority that using a mobile phone is dangerous? I accept that. Do I accept that I need to be responsible and careful as I'm driving?

[8:43] Yes, I accept that. So does that mean that I never, ever look at my phone while I'm driving? No. I have looked at my phone while I'm driving.

And so that's a bad decision. And these things are not lining up. Another example. Somebody might say, I believe the authoritative truth that family is the most important thing.

And I don't think anybody would disagree with that. I believe that. And then they also might look around them and say, my wife and my children are the most important people in the world to me. And they'll say, yes, that's true. And yet all too often, they are grumpy, selfish, impatient, irritable, and it's their members of their family who get it.

And so you see that it's all out of alignment. A third example. You might approach school and think to yourself, you know, I believe, you know, that I want to work hard.

[9:47] I know this is important. I want to do my best at school. And that's the kind of attitude, the bottom part, the inward part of it. You think, I want to do well. And I also recognize the authority of my teacher. And so I think, you know, I want to do well.

And I know that I need to listen to what my teacher says. And when she says, you need to revise for this. And you'll study revision booklets on Google Classroom. And you'll need to spend a couple of hours on this before the test next week.

You think, I accept all of that too. And so I want to do well. My teacher has authority. And then all my friends are saying, no, I'm not going to study. I'm going to play Minecraft. And you think, I'll just do that. And you've betrayed your convictions by the decision that you've made.

And so in all these examples, we're making bad decisions. The reason they're bad decisions is because they are disintegrated. They actually go against what we really want, what we really believe, and what really matters to us.

And it happens all the time. Because nobody wants to be grumpy and short-tempered towards their children. Nobody wants to be a nightmare colleague to work with. Nobody wants to fall into the slavery of addiction of any sort.

[10:55] But it happens to people all the time. And it happens because of the decisions that they make. And the key point is this. Disintegrated decisions cause disintegration.

In other words, if our decision-making is all messed up, then it will ruin our lives. Bad decisions mess everything up.

They disintegrate families, careers, friendships, self-esteem, confidence, communities, even churches. And in the face of all of that, the Bible's calling us to make integrated decisions.

And we'll do that when our decisions are taken under God's rule, in God's world, as God's children.

And so we're going to unpack all of these in our three sermons.

And here, we're thinking especially about living under God's rule. So, everything that I've been trying to describe describe in this diagram is woven right through the Bible.

[12:07] And one place where you can see it very clearly is in Psalm 19. The Psalm speaks about God's rule and authority. It speaks about the glory of God at the beginning.

It speaks about the law of the Lord in verse 7 and then through into verse 11. It also speaks about God's world around us, the heavens, the sky, the sun, day and night.

And at the same time, the Psalm also looks inward. So it looks to God's authority. It looks outward at God's world. But it also looks inward. It speaks about the soul.

And it speaks about the heart. And it speaks about wisdom. It speaks about your servant. It's all looking inwardly at ourselves. And it all culminates in the words of verse 14, which is a prayer that the reality of who God is would shape every decision that we make in our lives.

And so this morning, I want us to focus especially on the authority of God over our decision-making. And this is a really important thing to think about because it's very easy to get wrong.

[13:17] Some people recoil immediately from the idea that God would have authority over our decision-making. But when we say that God has authority over our decision-making, we simply mean that it's God who ultimately decides what is right and wrong.

And that's the basic ethical question facing every human. What is right and wrong? And then over that lies a bigger question.

Who decides? That's the big ethical question that all humans have to wrestle with. And the Bible's answer to that is clear. It's God who decides.

It's God who decides what is right and wrong. And there's two key aspects to that. First and foremost, right and wrong arises from God's character.

And so the very nature of God sets ethical parameters for humanity. So from a biblical point of view, when we say things like truth matters, kindness is good, selfishness is wrong, life is precious, and love is the highest virtue of all, all of that's true because it reflects God's character.

[14:37] He is true and kind and life-giving and loving. And the opposite of these are all wrong because they contradict the nature and character of God himself.

So the very nature of God first and foremost sets the ethical parameters for humanity. And then secondly, the second way in which we see this is that from God's character comes God's law. And the law, as set out in the Ten Commandments, reveals more about what is fundamentally right and wrong. And one of the great emphases of Psalm 19 is that it's a song about how positive and beneficial that law is.

And you see that in verses 7 to 9. It speaks about the law as perfect, it's sure, it's right, it brings joy to the heart, it's pure, it enlightens the eyes, it's clean, it's true, it's righteous, it's to be desired, it's sweet, all this beautifully positive language in relation to God's law.

Now, these words and this Psalm are correcting one of the biggest misunderstandings and one of the most common misunderstandings that exists around Christianity. And that's the misunderstanding based on the idea that living under God's law is going to make your life rubbish.

[16:02] So many people think that. It's so easy to think that and far too often the church has actually made it even look like that was true. But it's not true.

God's laws, his parameters for right and wrong, his authoritative ethical code, it's not given us to stifle, spoil, or sour our lives.

God's law is given to us so that we can thrive. His law is life-giving and it serves to set the boundaries within which we can flourish. That's what God's law is trying to do.

And do you know what it is that proves that that's true? What proves that that's true, that God's law is good and helps us to thrive? The thing that proves that it's true is your dreams.

Because if you look at the Ten Commandments, particularly what we call the second tablet, the second half, commandments five through to ten, all of these align with your dreams.

[17:07] What's the dream for a parent? What's the dream for a parent? That your children would grow up in a healthy, respectful, loving environment where they can thrive and where they can love you and they can delight in the fact that you are their mum or their dad and they honour you because you've loved them and looked after them.

That's the parent's dream. That's the fifth commandment. What's the dream for life? To live long, to stay well, to be safe, to reach old age, to live at peace with one another, to be healthy in mind and body.

All of that is the outworking of the sixth commandment that outlaws murder, outlaws killing. Life is to be preserved. Life is to be precious. What's the dream relationship?

To fall in love with that one guy or girl and to be happy and faithful forever. That's the dream. That's the seventh commandment.

What's the dream for work? To work hard, honestly and humbly, to save up, to own your own home, to provide for family, to do it right. Not to cheat your way to anything, but to do it right.

[18:32] And for your home, your garden, your space where you raise your children to be the thing that you've worked to build up and protect, it's yours. That's why stealing's wrong.

That's the eighth commandment right there. What's the dream for a society that justice is upheld, that truth and honesty are always maintained? What's the dream for a community that people don't lie about each other or gossip about each other or any of that kind of stuff?

That's the ninth commandment. What's the dream for day-to-day life? Contentment. Where you're not just agonizingly jealous over what everybody else has, but you're content. That's the tenth commandment. These are our dreams. God's law is giving us everything that we want.

It's shaping life to make it beautiful. And the ultimate confirmation of the beauty of God's law comes by looking at the perfect keeper of God's law, Jesus Christ.

[19:32] He was the perfect law keeper. Everything in his life displays what God's law is intended to produce. And it's interesting. You look at the words that are used to describe God's law in Psalm 19.

It speaks about perfect and sure and right and pure and clean and sweet and true and righteous. These are the words that Psalm 19 uses to describe God's law.

If you go and read the Gospels, you can use exactly the same words to describe Jesus. He's perfect and right and sure and clean and true and righteous.

In Jesus, we see everything that God's law is intended to produce. So all of this is telling us that the Bible is giving us authoritative rules that should shape our decisions and they arise from the character of God and they're revealed to us in God's law.

Now, the key point that all of this is highlighting for us is that whether we realize it or not, our decision making will always involve deferring to an authority.

[20:41] That's the big thing that we have to recognize. We have authority in our diagram. We've got it at the top here. There's some kind of authority in our life. Our decision making will always involve deferring to that authority and the crucial question we have to ask is this.

Who has that authority in your life? who is the ultimate rule maker in your life? And if it's not God, who is it?

And this applies to us, you know, whether we're not yet a Christian but it also absolutely applies to us as Christians as well. This is so important for us to recognize for all of us because we might say that God, we might ask Christians, we might say, God has authority in my life.

Of course he does. He's God. He's in charge. He is king. But then in our actual decision making we don't or hardly think about him at all. It can happen so easily.

So easily, you know, instead of thinking about, you know, what would God want in this situation? We're either enticed by the kind of temptations that we struggle with or we're kind of buckling under the pressure of, you know, conforming to what other people think or we're driven by frustration, revenge, anger, insecurity or whatever it might be.

[22:05] All of us have got to ask the question, who sits at the top of your diagram? Who sits at the top of your diagram?

Who has authority in your decision making? Is it you? Lots of people would say it's me. I decide. I am the one who actually sets my boundaries for right and wrong.

Lots of people say that. Is it somebody else? Is it the person that you're in love with? Is it your boss at work? Is it even your children where you think, you know, I must make sure that I do everything that makes them happy.

Is it someone else? Is it something else? Is it your bank balance? Is it your career? Is it your house? Is it your social media profile?

Or is it nothing? Well, you just think, well, there is no, there is no ultimate authority. And I'm a bit reluctant to say this because I think it's going to sound, I'm going to sound a bit harsh.

[23:19] but I want to suggest that if your answer is not God, if God is not the ultimate authority in your life, then your answer is crazy and scary.

It's crazy because it's intellectually untenable. if you put you at the top, if I'm like, I'm the ultimate decision maker, that has absolutely no intellectual basis whatsoever.

For me, a tiny speck of a few cells that exist in a tiny corner of the globe in this massive universe and I say, I'm in charge of everything that's right and wrong. That's intellectually ridiculous. It's also crazy to give that authority to somebody else because they have exactly the same weaknesses that I have.

It's even worse to make it something like my money or my house and if it's nothing then that just pulls any ethical foundation out from underneath our lives and the Bible is telling you you were

made to be much wiser than that, much wiser.

You were made to have an understanding of reality that's coherent, that is intellectually robust and sustainable. And so it's crazy to put something other than God in authority.

[24:41] It's scary because it means that you're casting yourself into the hands of something or someone that's not strong enough to hold you.

Because authority always brings with it responsibility.

And if we're allowing someone anything to have that ultimate authority in our lives and we're saying that defines right and wrong we are immediately putting ourselves into their hands and those hands are not strong enough.

They are not strong enough and the Bible is telling you you are far more precious than that. You're far more precious than that. And so all of it's telling us that in our decision making we need an ultimate authority.

We need an ethical framework for right and wrong. We need stability or as Psalm 19 tells us so brilliantly we need a rock. rock. We need a rock.

And that's exactly who the Bible reveals to us. God is the rock and who God is and what God wants should shape all of our decisions. That affects the massive decisions of life, where to live, who to marry, what to do.

[26:05] It applies to the weightier decisions of life, financial decisions, career choices, priorities for our family, what to pour our time into, and day-to-day choices, how we react to things, how to speak to people, how to organise our time and in all of these areas it will do us so much good if our decisions are shaped by what God wants.

But the big question is, well how do you do that? How does that work? And this is where it's easy to make a very, very big and common mistake in our Christian lives.

It's so easy it's so important to remember that everything that I'm describing it does not come through what I would call a recipe book approach to making decisions.

Often we think that that's how it works, so we think I've got a choice to make in my life, it's like about whether to apply for this job or not, or what to choose to do after school, or how to deal with this particular situation.

We have what we could call a recipe book approach where basically we come to God and it's like tell me exactly what to do. So I'm a terrible cook, any of you who know me will know that I'm a hopeless cook and so if I'm going to go and cook something I look at the recipe book and it has to tell me exactly what to do.

[27:24] And I'm like if I'm measuring flour into something, you know if it's not like exactly 110 grams, I think that everything is like I need to be told exactly what to do because I don't know how to do it.

And we often approach a relationship with God and our decisions as Christians in exactly the same way. We want God to basically say this is exactly what you should do in this situation and we want that to be dead clear whether it's from reading our Bible or from some event or from sign or from something and it's like Lord make this absolutely clear.

But there's something wrong with that kind of thinking. What's wrong with that kind of thinking? Well we're basically saying to God you have to make the decision for me.

And that's not how it works. Because God has made you and me to be thinking, choosing, deciding people.

And that's why if you don't get a clear answer from God with a decision that you make it's because you shouldn't be expecting it because he's actually not saying I'm going to decide for you.

[28:32] He's saying I'm going to help you make your decision. Because a good father doesn't raise his children so that he then makes all the decisions for them for the rest of their lives. No, a good father raises his children so that they are matured enough to make decisions for themselves.

And that's why decision making as a Christian doesn't come through a recipe book process where God makes the decisions for us. It doesn't come through a recipe book, it comes through a relationship.

We make decisions but we base those decisions on the fact that God is our father and we need his wisdom to guide our choices. He's our rock and so our relationship with him should shape the decisions that we make.

But that of course raises a massive problem because sin has alienated us from God, knocked us off the rock and brought us into all sorts of mud and mess where we don't know what to do.

And that's why in order to have a relationship with the rock we need a redeemer. redeemer. And the amazing thing that Psalm 19 is telling us is that in the gospel that's exactly what we have.

[29:42] The God who is the rock, the ultimate unchanging stable definer of right and wrong is also the redeemer. He gave his son so that we could be restored into a relationship with him.

And that's what the gospel gives you, a rock and a redeemer. the one who is unchangeable who defines right and wrong and the redeemer who has come to save us from our sins and bring us into the relationship with God that we desperately need.

So if you're a Christian as you go into this week you're going to face hundreds of decisions. Some are big, some are small. What is the ultimate authority that shapes those decisions?

And the key thing we have to recognize is that in our lives there's a thousand voices trying to be that authority. Psalm 19 is calling us back to the Lord and to his law.

We want to make integrated decisions always shaped by the fact that Jesus is our rock and our redeemer. So as Christians we face hundreds of decisions this week.

[30:48] If you're not yet a Christian you also are going to face hundreds of decisions this week. but you face a bigger decision right now.

You face the biggest decision of all right now. Are you going to follow Jesus? You, your family, all of us together, what are you going to do?

And if you say no to that, are you making an integrated decision? I don't think there's anything more important for us to think about.

Amen. Let's pray.