

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR A

### PSALM 118 (119)

This is a short extract from Psalm 118 (119), the longest in the Bible. The complete psalm has 22 stanzas, as many as the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Each line of the first stanza starts with A (Aleph); the second section starts with B (Beth); and so on. The whole psalm is like an ABC of the love for God's Law.

Each verse uses the word 'Law' or one of its synonyms (e.g. 'statutes'; 'precepts').

For the Hebrews, the concept of Law is not a list of do's and don'ts. Instead, it is the greatest gift from God, the guarantee of his Covenant with humankind, the expression of his love.

It might therefore be helpful to try replacing the word for Law and its synonyms with the word LOVE: as we pray the psalm:

They are happy who follow God's law: *They are happy who enjoy the love of God.*

Teach me the demands of your statutes: *Teach me how to really love.*

Train me to observe your Law: *Train me to live in love.*

God's law is not some impersonal body of rules which can easily be broken. It is rather a covenant between two people who are bound in love.



## Gospel Matthew 5: 17–37

Matthew continues his first discourse known as 'The Sermon on the Mount'.

### The Law of Moses

This Law was sacred for the Jews. It constituted a summary of all wisdom. It is found in the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, also called the Torah. In Jesus's time, the Scribes and the Pharisees sought to provide detailed explanations of the Law and saw keeping to its every detail as being the only way to perfection.

In this passage, Matthew shows Jesus's position towards the Law in general. He chooses four laws central to rabbinic teaching and outlines how over the years they have been watered down. He then goes to the heart of the Law and focuses on the spirit rather than the letter of the law.

The true disciple will have to go beyond the Law as adapted by the scribes to enter 'the kingdom of heaven'. Having a legalistic attitude – that is, one which equates righteousness, or doing the will of God, with external compliance to a code of conduct – is not enough.

### Murder and Anger

Jesus links murder and anger. One is often the cause of the other. He puts fraternal relations before cultic obligations. It is up to me to seek reconciliation. I must put love – of God, of others, of myself – above all things.

### Adultery and divorce

Here again, Jesus goes beyond the contemporary scribal interpretations of divorce and adultery. He is fond of using Aramaic hyperbole, that is overstating an issue to make a point. The invitation to self-mutilation is not to be taken literally as this practice was forbidden to Jews, a rule which Jesus will have been very aware of.

He is encouraging his disciples to take sexual morality in thoughts and acts very seriously. They should take decisive action to behave with love.

### Oaths

An oath invokes God to attest the truth of one's word or a promise that one would keep to one's pledge. They were very frequent in everyday speech. Oaths are not necessary if the disciples are acting out of love; the word of a truthful person is sufficient.



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