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May 9th: Deuteronomy 10 & Luke 6:20-38

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Circumcise your hearts! Beatitudes and woes.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Deuteronomy chapter 10. I myself stayed on the mountain, as at the first time, forty days and forty nights, and the Lord listened to me that time also. The Lord was unwilling to destroy you.

And the Lord said to me, Arise, go on your journey at the head of the people, so that they may go in and possess the land, which I swore to their fathers to give them. And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heavens of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the Lord set His heart in love on your fathers, and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day.

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.

Love the sojourner therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God, you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him, and by His name you shall swear. He is your praise.

He is your God, who has done for you these great and terrifying things that your eyes have seen. Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven. Deuteronomy chapter 10 continues the narrative of the preceding chapter.

At this point it's still not clear whether Moses' intercession had its intended effect or not, but God re-establishes the broken covenant, writing the covenant on the tablets of stone, which will be placed in the ark. Moses points out that they are still there, a testimony to the restoration of the relationship. The fact that the tablets are placed in the ark not only protects them, but it symbolically situates them in the presence of the Lord, for his remembrance and for his enforcing of the covenant.

We don't know where the places that are mentioned after this actually are situated. Aaron's death is spoken of, but perhaps this is to make clear that the judgement for his sin with the golden calf finally came to him later. In many respects these verses could be seen as diversion from the course of Moses' argument, because he returns to the subject of his intercession on Mount Sinai again in a few verses time.

At that time Levi was set apart. Now it seems clear that this was not later on at the time after Aaron's death, but rather after the sin with the golden calf, when they rallied to Moses in chapter 32 of Exodus. They had opposed idolatrous worship, so they are made the guardians of Israel's true worship.

Their task is to carry the ark, to minister to the Lord and to bless in his name. The benediction was a central part of the priestly calling, though its significance may often be understated by people. Numbers chapter 6 verses 22-27 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his son, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel.

You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

So they shall put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them. The Levites have no inheritance in the land, but the service of the Lord is their inheritance. This is in part in fulfilment of Genesis chapter 49 verses 5-7.

Simeon and Levi are brothers, weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their counsel. O my glory be not joined to their company! For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen.

Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel. I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel. This is a negative judgement upon Simeon and Levi, arising out of their actions in chapter 34 of Genesis after the affair with Dinah.

While both of them were scattered, Simeon had an enclave within Judah, and Levi was scattered throughout the nation in its different cities, it seems that for Levi the judgement was turned into a blessing. The very scattering among Israel that was their punishment became something that set them apart. Their inheritance was the Lord, and so they did not have a special inheritance within the land, rather they had the tribal cities that were scattered as enclaves throughout the rest of the nation.

Likewise, the violence and the vengeance that characterise Levi in chapter 34 of Genesis and in chapter 49 in the blessing and judgements upon the sons of Jacob is something that is turned into a positive trait, as we see in the characters of Moses, in Aaron, the Levites in chapter 32 of Exodus, and characters like Phinehas in chapter 25 of Numbers. Their violence is tamed and used for the service of God, as their zeal is used to lead Israel out of slavery, and then as that zeal is used to guard jealously the holiness of Israel to the Lord. And the scattering of Levi is not merely something that sets them apart as a tribe, it's a means by which Israel itself can be established in a common identity, as this one tribe is scattered throughout all of their tribal areas, constantly alerting them to the fact of their common identity, lest they should retreat into tribal separatism.

Furthermore, at the heart of Israel's life are people who are dependent upon the hospitality of the nation, of the various tribes. These are people who will be identified with the aliens and the strangers, the poor and the marginal. At the heart of Israel is a diaspora, and Israel itself will later become a diaspora, a scattered people among other nations, but yet set apart within them, a testimony to the God that they serve, as the Levites were a testimony to God, as they were scattered throughout the nation.

If the various tribes were like great trees planted within the land, the Levites were like the birds that nested in their branches. There is a third reference to Moses interceding on the mountain here, which makes clear that this is a theme that's been running throughout. Deuteronomy 9, verse 18, And then in Deuteronomy 9, verse 25, And when that situation is finally resolved, there's a calling back to the beginning.

At the beginning, in Deuteronomy 9, verse 12, By this point, Moses has made definitively clear that Israel's standing with the Lord is not upon its own righteousness. At this point, on the basis of the Lord's undeserved favour, he presents Israel with what the Lord calls them to. As Geoffrey Tague observes, as elsewhere in Deuteronomy, the accent here is

upon underlying attitudes, not upon mere surface obedience and adherence to commandments.

The letter of the commandments is not the primary thing, important though it is. Rather, true obedience will arise from a spirit of love, trust and devotion. Deuteronomy, among many other things, is a great body of teaching against legalism.

Now, that seems surprising to us because it's a book about the law. Indeed, it's named after the law. But the fact is, as we look closely, it's a book about faith.

It's a book about devotion to the Lord, about love of the Lord. And these are the things that lie at the heart of Israel's relationship to the Lord, not mere external obedience to the commandments. The commandments are given to them for their own good.

And they will recognise this to be the case as a spirit of true obedience is cultivated in them. And such a spirit will naturally lead to willing and not grudging or resentful surface obedience. This is the true obedience that is called for, obedience that springs from a willing and devoted heart to the Lord.

Israel has been set apart by the Lord. But the Lord isn't a mere national deity. Many have thought about the religion of Israel as a sort of henotheism.

There are many gods in the world, but there's only one God that Israel serves. So the Egyptians can serve these particular gods. The other nations around about can serve the Baals and these other sorts of gods.

But Israel is going to serve Yahweh. But God is the God of the whole earth and the heavens. This should heighten Israel's awareness of the depth of grace.

God is above all other gods and powers and rulers and authorities. God is unique. He's the uncreated one.

He's the one who has made all things. And Israel is faced with the reality of this God's immense grace towards them. The creator God has chosen them for himself.

Moses charges them at this point to circumcise their hearts. They're about to enter into the land and they must prepare their hearts accordingly. As they stand on the brink of entry, they must rededicate themselves to the Lord.

Circumcision was always a physical sign that needed to be confirmed in a posture of heart. It was a sign and seal of the righteousness that is by faith. Dedication of oneself to the Lord in a physical sign needed to be fulfilled in spiritual dedication.

The circumcision of your heart corresponding to the circumcision of your flesh. The Lord is not a partial God. He can't be bribed.

He's a God of justice. He regards the widow and the fatherless and takes up their case. Those who do not have a man in their life.

The widow who has lost her husband and the fatherless who's not just an orphan but someone who does not have a father. God is the one who acts on behalf of such persons. He also loves the sojourner.

The one who does not have the security of membership of the society. The same political or civil privileges. Israel itself is reminded at this point that they were once sojourners and they must have an attitude to the sojourner in their midst that shows that they have learnt the lessons from how it felt when they were sojourners.

Israel is to live as the firstborn son of this God. Not trusting in their own righteousness. Not trusting in some special entitlement that they have and they are supposed to reflect his character to the world.

The Lord is not a tame God. He's not a God in Israel's possession. Not a God under their control.

Not a God who is beholden to them or a God to whose favour they are entitled. Rather he is the Lord of Lords. The God of Gods.

The creator of all, heaven and earth. He has graciously taken them for his own and they must never presume upon his grace and persevere in sin but they must cleave to him. Moses' sermon continues to chart a way between the insecurity of fear and the over-security of presumption.

A question to consider. How might the uniqueness and character of God make devotion to him different from devotion to the gods of the pagan nations? Luke chapter 6 verses 20-38 And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples and said, Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold your reward is great in heaven, for so their fathers did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you, to one who strikes you on the

cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods, do not demand them back.

And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.

And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. And your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High.

For He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged.

Condemn not, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you.

Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you. In Luke chapter 6, in a passage described as the Sermon on the Plain, we find Luke's version of the material that we find in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount.

This, presumably, was a message given on several occasions. A number of people have suggested that Matthew and Luke are in tension with each other at this point. But as Jesus is a teacher who's travelling from place to place within Israel, it should not surprise us in the least that he gives the same material in various sermons on various occasions.

There are, however, a few differences. Luke has four Beatitudes, corresponding with the first, the fourth, the second, and the eighth of Matthew chapter 5. He also parallels them with four woes. In the case of Matthew, there are woes that correspond with the Beatitudes in chapter 5, but those woes are found in chapter 23, the woes that are declared to the scribes and the Pharisees.

Various biblical books are structured in a way that highlights the blessing-woe opposition. We can think about it at the end of Deuteronomy. In the book of Psalms, it begins with, Blessed is the man who does not walk, etc.

The book of Proverbs has this sort of juxtaposition in its first few chapters, particularly in chapter 9. Leviticus has blessings and woes in chapter 26. Such oppositions are common throughout the material of the law, the material of the wisdom literature, and also in the material of the prophets, and they take on a different flavour in each. In the case of the law, there's an emphasis upon divine sanctions.

In the case of wisdom, there's an emphasis more upon the different natural outcomes of wisdom and folly. And in the case of prophecy, the emphasis is upon what God is going to bring about upon people who are rebellious, as opposed to those who are faithful. Luke more strongly emphasises the theme of reversal in the Beatitudes and woes, even than Matthew does.

The blessings and the woes in Luke are symmetrical and paralleled. The theme of the reversal of fortunes is also present here. We've seen this already in the Magnificat, and we see it later in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and it's found at various other occasions within the Gospel.

The Beatitudes and the woes particularly do recall the Magnificat in chapter 1, verses 46 to 53. My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for He has looked on the humble estate of His servant. For behold, from now all generations will call me blessed, for He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.

And His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with His arm. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty. We're seeing many of these themes returning at this point in the Beatitudes and the woes.

The point of the blessings and the woes is not to say what people should do, so much as it is to declare the way that things are. And the message is very surprising. It goes against what we might expect.

It seems, as we read through much of Scripture, that the blessed are those who are rich and prosperous and rejoicing. But here it's quite the opposite. Those who are rich are not the ones who are blessed.

Note that unlike Matthew's Beatitudes, these are also directly addressed to the disciples. Not blessed are those, but blessed are you. The Beatitudes are paradoxical, and there's a danger of de-eschatologizing them, of forgetting that these statements only make sense if God is imminently going to act in history, that people are blessed because God is going to act in their favour.

This is not just an implicit set of imperatives. It's less about ethics than about what God is about to do. For instance, we should not pursue being persecuted.

Persecution comes to the righteous, but they don't pursue it. God is about to visit His people, and those who have hungered for His advent will be given cause to rejoice. Their objective condition will change.

And Luke has poor rather than poor in spirit, and we might feel a bit uncomfortable

about the fact that he doesn't invite spiritualizing here. We might want to be assured that he doesn't mean the poor literally. He means the poor in this spiritual sense.

But we should be made to feel uncomfortable. The poor are the marginalized, the rejected, those who do not fit into the system of this world in some way or other. And there's something fitting between the material conditions of the poor and the spiritual condition of being poor in spirit.

Jesus elsewhere talks about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. The poor, then, cannot just be spiritualized. On the other hand, however, we should be aware of simply suggesting that the poor in spirit and the poor materially are one and the same group of people.

There are rich people who are poor in spirit, and there are materially poor people who are outside of the kingdom. The Epistle of James highlights the way that poverty and riches, in a very literal sense, played into the early church's understanding of its relations. James 1, verses 9-11.

There James captures something of the paradoxical way in which Christians should relate to physical poverty and riches. James warns the Christians he is writing to against giving excessive regard to those who have riches. Chapter 2, verses 2-6.

And then in chapter 5, verses 1-5, this great statement of judgment against the rich. Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted, and your garments are moth-eaten.

Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you, and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. While we often want to soft-peddle the teaching of the New Testament relating to riches and poverty, we should not do so.

Its teaching is all the more important because of how much it unsettles us. A further thing that comes out in Luke's Beatitudes and Woes is this emphasis upon division and judgment in society. There is going to be a reversal of fortunes in the future, and there's also going to be a great division, a great divergence of these two groups.

Some are going to weep, some are going to laugh, some are going to have all their riches taken from them, others are going to inherit all. The disciples of Jesus are supposed to rejoice in the face of persecution. In persecution, Jesus and his disciples are aligned with the prophets that went before them.

And of course, after Christ, the disciples are aligned with him in their persecution. Jesus charges his disciples to love their enemies. This, while a teaching that's often ascribed to Christ as a radical break with what went before, is a teaching that we can find grounded in the Old Testament.

Leviticus 19, verses 17-18 presents the great golden rule in the context of loving your enemy. Where is love for neighbour most clearly tested? When your neighbour is your enemy. This is one area where the universalism of a liberal approach, which sees the duty of love as this universal posture towards all mankind, can often go awry.

Because the greatest test is not in our relationship to the person who's in the far distance, it's the person who is nearest to us. That is where we find the greatest challenge of love. The greatest challenge of love is not our posture towards people in far distant continents, it's how we relate to those people under our own roof, those people in our own neighbourhood, the people in our own families, the people who are close to us in a way that irritates us.

Those are the people we are most likely to hold a grudge against, to hold anger and harbour hate against in our hearts. And speaking with Leviticus, those are the people that Christ calls us to love. We must resist starting the cycle of vengeance.

We turn the other cheek. If someone takes our cloak, we do not withhold our tunic. We are not acting as people who are preoccupied with our own rights.

Rather we look to the Lord as the one who defends us, who provides for us, the one who will avenge us if we are mistreated. Generally, as human beings, we have a desire for reciprocity. If we do things, we expect something back in return.

But as Christians, we are supposed to do things expecting nothing in return. And there is a paradox here again, because as we do that, our reward will be great. The principle in the Old Testament, he who gives to the poor lends to the Lord, applies here.

As God guarantees our reward, we are freed to act in an uncalculating way. We can cast our bread on the waters, not knowing how they would ever return to us, but trusting that in God's providence they will. Not only will our reward be great though, we'll also be sons of the Most High.

We will have those characteristics that reflect God's own character. Judge not, and you will not be judged. Condemn not, and you will not be condemned.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. With the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.

There is a sort of reciprocity here, but the reciprocity is one secured by divine action, not our claim upon our neighbour. The principle of not judging is one that we find in various

occasions in Scripture. We see it in the hypocrite of Romans 2, verse 1. Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges, for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

There's the principle in Deuteronomy chapter 19, verses 18 to 21, concerning hostile false witnesses. And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. Your eyes shall not pity.

It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. The point of Jesus' statement about not judging is not a matter of not making moral judgments. There are many occasions in Scripture where we are called to do just that.

Rather, it's not playing the judge. Not putting ourselves in the position of God, exalting ourselves as the righteous arbiter over all others. And the emphasis here is upon condemnation in particular.

Again, looking at the epistle of James, chapter 2, verses 12 to 13. We are those who will face judgment ourselves. And the judgment in view is primarily eschatological judgment.

And there's a suspension of judgment on our part, which occurs as we submit to the judgment of the Lord. It's the same thing with vengeance. We do not seek to avenge ourselves, nor do we seek to realize the full reality of future judgment in the present, because we recognize that vengeance is God's, and ultimately it will be secured by Him.

The principle of not judging also highlights hypocrisy. We might think here of the parable of Nathan given to David. And David's judgment, which is very fierce, and then Nathan responds, You are the man.

We can be caught in our own judgments. Rather than being people defined by judgment and condemnation of others, however, we should be people who are primarily defined by forgiveness. As we forgive others, so we will be forgiven.

There's also the importance of sorting out our own lives first. This accusatory you is often a way in which we deflect attention from our own issues. Condemnation of others can be a way in which we secure our self-righteousness.

A question to consider. How does Jesus model his own teaching that he gives in this passage?