

# OpenTheo

## May 8th: Deuteronomy 9 & Luke 6:1-19

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Not because of your righteousness! The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath.

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

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## Transcript

Deuteronomy chapter 9. 1. Do not say in your heart after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, it is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land. 2. Whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is driving them out before you, not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is driving them out from before you, and that you may confirm the word that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. 3. Know therefore that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people.

4. Remember, and do not forget how you provoked the Lord to wrath in the wilderness. 5. From the day you came out of the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the Lord. 6. Even at Horeb you provoked the Lord to wrath, and

the Lord was so angry with you that he was ready to destroy you.

7. When I went up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the Lord made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water. 8. And the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God.

9. And on them were all the words that the Lord had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly. 10. And at the end of forty days and forty nights the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant.

11. Then the Lord said to me, Arise, go down quickly from here. For your people whom you have brought out from Egypt have acted corruptly.

They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made themselves a metal image. 12.

Furthermore the Lord said to me, I have seen this people, and behold it is a stubborn people. Let me alone that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven, and I will make of you a nation mightier and greater than they. 13.

So I turned and came down from the mountain, and the mountain was burning with fire, and the two tablets of the covenant were in my two hands. And I looked, and behold, you had sinned against the Lord your God. You had made yourselves a golden calf.

You had turned aside quickly from the way that the Lord had commanded you. So I took hold of the two tablets and threw them out of my two hands, and broke them before your eyes. Then I lay prostrate before the Lord as before forty days and forty nights.

14. I neither ate bread nor drank water because of all the sin that you had committed in doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord to provoke him to anger. For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the Lord bore against you, so that he was ready to destroy you.

15. But the Lord listened to me that time also, and the Lord was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him. And I prayed for Aaron also at the same time.

Then I took the sinful thing, the calf that you had made, and burned it with fire and crushed it, grinding it very small, until it was as fine as dust. And I threw the dust of it into the brook that ran down from the mountain. At Taberah also, and at Massah, and at Kibroth you provoked the Lord to wrath.

And when the Lord sent you from Kadesh Barnea, saying, Go up and take possession of the land that I have given you, then you rebelled against the commandment of the Lord your God, and did not believe him or obey his voice. You have been rebellious against

the Lord from the day that I knew you. So I lay prostrate before the Lord for these forty days and forty nights, because the Lord had said he would destroy you.

And I prayed to the Lord, O Lord God, do not destroy your people and your heritage, whom you have redeemed through your greatness, whom you have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not regard the stubbornness of this people, or their wickedness, or their sin.

Lest the land from which you brought us say, Because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them, and because he hated them, he has brought them out to put them to death in the wilderness. For they are your people and your heritage, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm. Deuteronomy chapter 9 begins with a statement that Israel is about to go into the land, displacing powerful peoples, because the Lord will go over before them as a consuming fire.

The Lord has previously been described as a devouring fire in chapter 4 verses 23 to 24. Take care lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the Lord your God has forbidden you. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

While on this occasion it relates to God's judgment upon the people in the land, on the earlier occasion it relates to God's judgment upon Israel, if they are unfaithful. Israel then cannot presume upon God's judgment, as if it were only directed against their enemies. When the nations of the land were driven out before them, the natural temptation for Israel would be to speculate that this happened because of their own righteousness.

The Lord is clearly rewarding them for being an upright people. And the point of this chapter more than anything else is to leave Israel under no illusion that this is the case. The majority of this chapter is devoted to cataloguing the various forms of rebellion that Israel committed in the wilderness, while also making entirely plain that it was only on account of the intercession of Moses and his appeal to the grace of God that they survived as a people.

When we are the beneficiaries of great fortune or favour that sets us apart from others, the natural underlying question that we and others are asking is, why us? And in such situations we're generally inclined to give reasons. We worked particularly hard, we used our smarts, we were the most talented of the people in the situation. We like to believe that our good outcomes set us apart from others, not just in the outcomes themselves, but in some deeper way.

Those outcomes reveal something about us that makes us special, that sets us apart, that demonstrates in some way or other that we are special, that we are above others. And we should not only enjoy our good fortune, but we should feel entitled to it. We

merit this, we're the type of people to whom this sort of fortune belongs.

While we might attribute negative results to our bad luck, whenever we have positive outcomes we want to draw a line that connects it to our greater virtue, our greater capacity, our shrewdness, or some title that we have to it. And in a society that appeals to meritocracy as much as ours does, this is a particular problem. We often labour under the illusion that those who enjoy the best results in our society, who have the most wealth, the people who have the greatest power, the greatest positions of authority, the greatest status, whatever it is, we like to believe that that all comes down to some special characteristic in them, save of course for the occasions when this would cast an unflattering light upon us.

We have already seen that Israel would face the temptation when they entered the land to forget the Lord in their prosperity. This is another temptation that Israel would face, the temptation of attributing their blessings to their own righteousness. Moses has already talked concerning this to some extent in Deuteronomy 7, verses 7-8.

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the house of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Israel is not being given the land on account of its righteousness. Indeed, the bringing of Israel into the land seems almost incidental here.

The real point is driving out the wicked people before them, and they're driven out not because of Israel, but because of their own wickedness. At this point, Israel might still want to pat itself on the back for its supposed righteousness. Perhaps they weren't given the land for this reason, but clearly they aren't that bad, and they can congratulate themselves to some extent.

And the rest of this chapter is designed to puncture that illusion. Israel is a stiff-necked people. It escaped destruction by the Lord in the wilderness only by the intercessions of Moses and by the skin of their teeth.

Even at Horeb you provoked the Lord to wrath. Even at Horeb, the place where the covenant was established, where the law was given, where they saw the theophanic cloud and the fire, and when they heard the voice of God coming from the cloud, even at Horeb they rebelled against the Lord. And Moses discusses the golden calf for the first time in the book, recounting the events of Exodus 32-34, Israel's sin and his intercession for them.

In that passage, it was only because Moses stood in the gap between the Lord and his people and prevented the Lord from destroying them that Israel was saved. The Lord was about to blot them out and start anew with Moses, and Aaron also was about to be

destroyed. Moses had to intercede for both of them.

And then he goes on to list sites of Israel's rebellion. Tabara, Numbers 11, verses 1-3, the place where they complained. Massa, Exodus 17, verses 1-7, they tested the Lord there and he gave them water from the rock.

Is the Lord truly among us? Kibrath Hata'ava, Numbers 11, verses 31-35, the events with the quail. And then finally, of course, Kadesh Barnea, Israel's failure to enter into the land. Israel must not forget these events.

If at any point Israel forgets these events, they may fall into the trap of thinking that they entered the land because of their righteousness, because they were better than all the other peoples, that they enjoy these blessings on account of some virtue in themselves. Once again, the task of memory is important here. It will be as they remember their sin in the past, and the way that God showed grace and forgiveness to them.

It's only in their remembrance of that that they will be saved from deep error in the future, and all the dangers that that would open them up to. Moses saves his most powerful argument till the end. He mentioned his intercession earlier in the chapter, but he did not outline its contents.

It is when we see the contents of Moses' intercession that it becomes plain. Israel has no claim by virtue of its own righteousness. Indeed, if God were to judge Israel according to its own behaviour, there would be nothing but destruction awaiting them.

What was Moses' argument? First, he spoke of the way that Israel is the Lord's heritage, and that he has delivered them from Egypt. He then recalls the patriarchs and the covenant, and the promises that God had made to his people. Third, he speaks of the way that the Lord should do this for the sake of his own name among the nations.

And then at the end he returns back to the claim with which he began. Israel is the Lord's inheritance, and he has delivered them from Egypt. He has set his name upon them.

They are his own people. What should Israel notice? That there is no reference to their own behaviour here. That indeed, the whole purpose of Moses' intercession is to draw attention to something that stands firm over against the fickleness of their behaviour.

A generous grace that persistently resists their stubbornness. This, of course, has much to teach us too. We, like the Israelites, are tempted to attribute our favoured status, the blessings that we enjoy, the privileges that we have, and to attribute all of those to our own virtues, to some characteristic that we have, to some special entitlement that we possess, whatever it is.

And, like the Israelites, we need to learn that we have been the recipients of completely undeserved divine favour. We are the recipients of grace and of mercy. God has not given us what is due to us.

If he had, we would be destroyed. And God has given us bountifully from his storehouses of favour things that we had no title to. God has blessed us richly with things that can only be attributed to his own kindness and goodness.

Like the Israelites, we should never forget our own sinfulness, lest we fall into the dark ingratitude of thinking that the grace and the goodness of our God has been received on account of something in us. One of the central themes of Moses' sermon is that there is nothing in the people themselves that merits God's goodness. To give them that vertiginous awareness that what holds them aloft in this position of incredible blessing is nothing but the undeserved favour of God.

And this is no less true for us. A question to consider, how can we learn from Moses' example in our own prayers for the Lord's forgiveness and favour? Luke chapter 6, verses 1-19 On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grain fields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. But some of the Pharisees said, Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath? And Jesus answered them, Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him? And he said to them, The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse him. But he knew their thoughts, and he said to the man with the withered hand, Come and stand here.

And he rose and stood there. And Jesus said to them, I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or to do harm, to save life, or to destroy it? And after looking around at them all, he said to him, Stretch out your hand. And he did so, and his hand was restored.

But they were filled with fury, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus. In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles, Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alpheus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples, and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him, and to be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him, and healed them all.

Luke chapter 6 begins with a couple of controversies concerning the Sabbath. The disciples were permitted by the law to eat of the grain as they passed through a field. This was a form of gleaning, so they weren't stealing.

The issue, however, was that they were doing so on the Sabbath, and that what they were doing counted to some of the Pharisees' work. Jesus' disciples are challenged by the Pharisees for their behaviour, and Jesus gives a response. In his response, Jesus focuses upon the example of David.

In 1 Samuel chapter 21, verses 1-6, David and his hungry men were permitted to eat of the shewbread, which was usually restricted to the priests. Ahimelech the priest, rather than strictly applying the law, recognised that this was an exceptional case, and it was legitimate to give the bread to David. In that instance, the hunger of David and his men took precedence.

Jesus, of course, is a greater David. He has the prerogative to determine in this instance. His men are like David's men.

They're on a mission for God. As those committed to a divine ministry, it takes priority, and it is not a violation of the Sabbath. This is something that Jesus fleshes out more in the parallel passage in Matthew chapter 12.

The work of the priests is not counted as Sabbath-breaking work because it is in service of the temple. But, as Jesus argues, there is something greater than the temple here, Jesus himself. The Sabbath was meant to give rest to man, not to subject man to bondage.

And the Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the one who gives the true rest that the Sabbath bears witness to. In Jesus' response to the challenge to the actions of the disciples in the grain fields, he makes an analogy with David and his followers.

On one level, this might be seen as an example of hunger taking priority over the law of the temple. But it seems to be something more than that. He's aligning himself with David.

David's eating of the showbread in 1 Samuel chapter 21 does not seem to have been an instance of great hunger, and needing bread as an emergency. It's not described in that way. Rather, there seems to be something about David himself and the mission that he's on that gives some warrant for the exception.

And Jesus, it seems to me, is making a similar claim about himself and his disciples. This, I believe, becomes more apparent in Jesus' final claim. The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath.

He presents himself as the eschatological Son of Man again, as the Lord of the Sabbath as such. As the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus is the one bringing in the great Sabbath. His whole ministry began with a statement concerning the Jubilee, the year of the Lord's favour.

He's the one who's bringing rest and deliverance and all these other things that belong to the reality of the Sabbath. His entire movement is a Sabbath-bringing movement. And so it is not inappropriate for his servants and followers to enjoy exceptional prerogatives on the Sabbath day.

We should also here recall that this comes after Jesus' teaching concerning the old wineskins and the new wine. Jesus' ministry exceeds the old structures as it fulfils them. Jesus then heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath.

It's on another Sabbath. This is a different day, but it's connecting the two stories together, so that we recognise there's a Sabbath theme going through this part of the chapter. Although the man isn't in urgent need, Jesus gives rest on the Sabbath, which fulfils the intent and the commandment of the Sabbath.

And he poses a question to the people who would challenge him in a very stark way. To do good or to do harm? Now it would seem that this man does not urgently need to be healed. He could hang around for a few days and then be healed later on.

Jesus is presenting such healing not just as permissible, but as something that is part of the meaning and the purpose of the Sabbath itself. Sabbath-keeping is about giving life and healing. It's not designed just to be a means of laying heavy burdens upon people.

Perhaps in this story we're also supposed to see something of the healing and restoration of Jeroboam's hand in 1 Kings 13 being alluded to. The account of the choice of the twelve that follows begins with Jesus going up on the mountain and praying all night. Luke is the only gospel that recalls the prayer of Jesus prior to the choice of the disciples.

And perhaps in the situation on the mountain we should recall some of the events of Exodus. Not just the choice of the elders, but also the way there were different groups of people that had different degrees of access to the mountain. The choice of twelve seems to be naturally connected with the patriarchs and Israel.

They aren't just the number twelve by accident. Indeed, they are commonly called the twelve from that point onwards. And when Judas betrayed Christ and was dropped from their number, they had to choose a replacement to keep the number.



The twelve are listed beginning with Simon and Andrew and James and John. And Simon and Andrew, brothers, James and John are brothers, but Simon, James and John are the three core disciples. Elsewhere we often see these disciples listed in their order of priority.

So Simon, James and John. And then Andrew comes next because of his association with Simon. But here his association with Simon as his brother leads him to be second in the list.

Simon, in each of these lists, is the first. He is the primary disciple. He is the one who speaks for the others.

He is the one who leads the others. He is the one who represents the others. Here we're told that he was named Peter by Jesus.

And just a chapter earlier when he was called, he's called Simon Peter for the first time after he responds with a sense of fear and awe to the manifestation of the authority of Jesus' word in the miraculous catch of fish. This, I would suggest, is an important signal that Luke is giving his readers that at this point Peter is assuming something of his new identity that Jesus is going to give him as the first of the apostles. The order of the disciples is fairly consistent across the gospels with some variations.

The ordering of Andrew or the ordering of Judas who is also called Thaddeus, that varies. But everything else is pretty much the same. Each list begins with Simon Peter and ends with Judas Iscariot.

The twelve will function as a sort of band of brothers with Jesus. They can perhaps be compared with David's mighty men. Jesus is the divinic king and the man of action.

He's surrounded by his mighty men. Like David he has a larger group of mighty men and a core group of three. And we see that in 2 Samuel 23 verses 8-12.

Although Jesus had a great many female followers, including many prominent ones, some who were more prominent in the narrative than certain members of the twelve, the twelve are all male. They're like a military company and they're prepared for doing battle against the demons, for scoping out the land, for proclaiming the message of the kingdom, and later on for being the foundation and the leaders of the church. Having chosen the twelve, Jesus then goes down the mountain with them.

He's surrounded by a great company of his disciples and then a larger multitude. We see these different groups at various points in the gospel. There are various degrees of proximity to Jesus.

There is perhaps in the furthest circle the whole nation of Israel. Then there's the multitude that listen to him. And then in the circle within that there are his disciples who

follow him around.

Of those disciples some are closer than others. You can think of people like Mary Magdalene, characters like Mary and Martha and Lazarus. Then there are the twelve.

And the twelve are not merely following him around wherever he goes, but they have closer proximity to him. Of the twelve there are three who are particularly close, Peter, James and John. Of those three Peter is especially close in terms of the mission, whereas the disciple that Jesus loves, who we might presume is John, is closer in other ways.

Jesus gathers people around him in this way for a number of reasons, but one of these is that he wants to form a new people. And if you're forming a new people, just dealing with individuals one by one is not enough. You need to form a sort of leadership structure in which your teaching can be disseminated by others and spread throughout a larger multitude.

You need to be able to delegate certain parts of your mission to others as well so that they can assist you in your task. And the twelve will certainly be performing this role in the rest of Luke's work. A question to consider.

Jesus has referred to the Scriptures on a number of occasions in his ministry so far. What are those particular occasions? And what can we learn from them about the way that Jesus relates to the Scriptures?