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May 22nd: Deuteronomy 23 & Luke 12:1-34

May 21, 2020



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Various laws concerning the principle of adultery and stealing. Worry and money.

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

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Transcript

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gathering of all the males ruling and worshipping on behalf of the nation. It's a matter of
full citizenship and participation in Israel's public life. There would be the people
responsible for crowning kings, for making war, for administering justice, allocating land,
participating in worship, these sorts of things.

And there would be an assembly operative at both the national and at the local, city or
town level. The public life of Israel was formed by men and almost entirely run by them.

The public worship of Israel was also especially focused on men for this reason.

It was the men who had to present themselves before the Lord at the pilgrim feasts for instance. The women could attend but their attendance was more optional. From the perspective of the modern reader, it can easily be falsely presumed that the exclusion of women from the public life of Israel, for the most part, was because they were being oppressed and purposefully excluded.

What this misses is that the public life of Israel and other nations was largely created by groups of men. It wasn't this pre-existing neutral space that was colonised by men in a way that prevented women from coming in. The men would create the wider political structures, forge the realm of public life, forge unities between families and clans and the larger life of the nation.

It was the men who had to create and preserve the realm of public life through their force of arms and their creative power. The realm of public life would be forged through their collective exertion of social, physical and institutional power. And it would have seemed very strange to them that someone who wasn't ever expected to fight as one of the military assembly should have a place in the assembly when it exercised its rule.

It was a male realm at its origin. It is only in fairly recent history that the realm of public life has been greatly abstracted from the work of male groups in guarding the realm of the polity and also establishing its institutions and power structures. The idea that men and women should be interchangeable in their status as citizens is only something that really develops as there is an abstraction for instance of the enjoyment of political citizenship from the military responsibilities of the citizen, things which would have been seen as naturally going together in most ancient societies.

Finally, it is also important to recognise that the men weren't participants in public life as detached individuals, but rather persons were deeply embedded in families, standing for and symbolising their families. They maintained the interest of larger groups and the members of those groups would see themselves in the men that stood for them. As people who think in terms of a more atomised and individualistic society, we find it very difficult to understand how such people would have thought.

However, some sort of understanding along these lines is important if we are to appreciate what is taking place in scripture, that on the one hand it isn't merely this power grab by men over women, it is a far more complicated reality than that, and scriptures use and handling of such structures is an accommodation to them, often an accommodation less to sin than to immaturity, to a society that has not yet been able to develop the structures that would allow for a more free and equitable way of living. With such an understanding of these structures, on the one hand we learn not to condemn them so instinctively, and on the other hand we learn not to idealise them. The person excluded from the assembly could still live in Israel, they weren't exiles, however they

lacked the civil rights enjoyed by full citizens.

The eunuch, or the person with crushed testicles, is probably someone who was mutilated in the service of a false god. However, priests were also disqualified from ministry by defects of this type, which may suggest that such emasculation was seen as unfitting in the holy assembly of the men of Israel. The next restriction is upon someone born of a forbidden union.

Many readings have seen this as a bastard, or perhaps it's a child of incest, or a forbidden marriage of some other type. Ammonites and Moabites are then set apart as groups that would not have the right of citizens for a long period of time, if at all. Both of these nations were descendants from Lot, and both of them were born through incest.

But here they're seen as nations that were inhospitable to Israel in their time of need, and also nations that explicitly tried to subvert them. It's on account of that history that Israel is supposed to be careful about their dealings with these peoples. The Edomites and the Egyptians are different though.

The Edomites are related to Esau, they're twins, and they're close kin. And Egypt, before the pharaoh of the time of the Exodus, showed hospitality to Israel. For this reason, Edomites and Egyptians could assimilate to Israel and become members of its assembly far more rapidly than other nations.

Israel was supposed to welcome the stranger, but in many ways aliens and strangers were prevented from participating in Israel's life as full members of the people until a few generations of assimilation and other factors. The nation of Israel had to preserve its religious character. Foreigners in the land were not given the right of free worship of their foreign gods.

They were not permitted to participate in some of Israel's worship without being circumcised and becoming Israelite themselves. They were also restricted in their ownership of the land, they would probably live in the cities. As ownership of the land was largely restricted to those who had ancestral holdings within it.

We shouldn't assume that such sorts of legislation were timeless however. Israel's relationship with surrounding nations could change, and it might be prudent to admit some earlier and exclude others for longer. Ruth is an example of a Moabitess who became part of the people of God.

Her offspring became members of the assembly earlier than ten generations. This wouldn't be the only example of a law that changes in scripture as the times change and the context change. We get another hint of this in Isaiah chapter 56 verses 1-8.

This material falls under the seventh commandment against committing adultery. Israel's sexual fidelity and integrity is important for its public life. It also needs to be

aware of intermarrying with and having union with peoples of other nations, particularly nations that are not faithful to the Lord, nations that have proved to be enemies of Israel in the past, that have drawn them astray.

Verses 9-14 concern the holiness of the war camp. The war camp has a special state of holiness, higher than the regular camp. This enhanced status comes from the fact that the Lord is fighting with his people and is in the camp with them.

And so, for instance, men must refrain from sexual relations. In 1 Samuel chapter 21 verse 5, and David answered the priest, Nocturnal omissions mean that someone has to leave the camp. They have to become clean again before they can come back in.

Defecation has to occur outside of the camp. The military are in jeopardy because the Lord's holy presence is in their midst and they must behave accordingly. This again comes under the seventh commandment.

It's about maintaining the purity of the body, the purity, sexually and otherwise, when you're in the presence of the Lord. And it's also about the holiness of the people to the Lord. This is followed by the law of the fleeing slave in verses 15 and 16.

And now we've moved into material related to the eighth commandment, you shall not steal. Man-stealing is a form of stealing that suffers the death penalty. We don't know if the slave was stolen in such a way.

There's no reason to presume that he was. The slave here is presumably a slave from a foreign country who is permitted to live in Israel as a free man. They would not engage in extradition of slaves, unlike other ancient Near Eastern societies.

And they don't just give this man temporary asylum, he enjoys permanent asylum in Israel. Israel were once slaves and they must treat slaves with dignity. It's not clear that this applies to slaves within Israel who would have had the right to go free in the seventh year.

And so fleeing before that time might not have been viewed in quite the same way. This comes under the law for stealing then. The escaped slave has the right to his freedom and it takes priority over any supposed claim his master has upon his service.

Verses 17 and 18 are unusual verses in this context. It would seem to belong with the preceding material, the material concerning the seventh commandment. It's about the wages of a prostitute.

Some believe that this is to be classed under the seventh commandment, but I don't think that's the case. The point is less about not being prostitutes, although that's part of the point, but it's about what happens with their money. We like to think of money as an abstract medium of exchange.

Any money is as good as any other money. But money has a history and money associated with prostitution should not be allowed anywhere near the Lord's house. This comes under stealing as the money is a sort of cursed possession and presenting it to the Lord is robbing him of his due, giving him something that is polluted by sin.

Verses 19 to 20 concern the restrictions on interest. The type of loans generally in view here are charitable loans for poor Israelites. Money did not play anything like the same role in Israelite society as it does today.

Theirs was not, primarily, a money economy. They can charge interest to foreigners but not to their brothers. The suggestion seems to be that they have a cooperative and a more mutual economy.

Rather than one party potentially prospering from the losses of another, both parties would either prosper or suffer together. As a money economy grew, some of this legislation would presumably have been relaxed in various ways. In Exodus chapter 22 and Leviticus chapter 25 there is the suggestion that the people receiving such loans would have been poor.

If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a money lender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him. Exodus chapter 22 verse 25. If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you.

Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. Leviticus chapter 25 verses 35 to 37.

The principle then seems to be focused upon the poor and charitable loans. But the principle does seem to have some more broad applications, even though the poor were mostly the ones who were borrowing. The ideal is a society where everyone prospers together, rather than one of privatised interests at competitive odds with each other.

Israel is a nation of brothers, and they must all take an active concern for and invest themselves in each other's well-being. The foreigner would most likely not be the poor person. He would be a trader.

He would be someone looking for money for a venture for his business. And so the considerations regarding the poor Israelite would not necessarily apply in his case, not just because he was a foreigner, although that's important, but because he was using the money for other means. Not stealing then involves not taking advantage of the poor.

It involves the responsibility to be prepared to give a loan to such a person when they need it. It also pushes in the direction of a society of brothers, where, although differences in personal wealth are quite permissible, the ideal is that all should prosper

together. Verses 21-23 concern the keeping of vows.

People would make vows to the Lord for particular purposes, perhaps as thanks for something that the Lord had given them, perhaps in order to seek some blessing from His hand, perhaps in response to God's answer to prayer. And vows, when made, should be paid, and quickly. To vow and not pay is to be guilty of a serious offence, though there is nothing wrong with not vowing.

The final verses of this chapter, verses 24 and 25, concern the right to eat unharvested crops. Private property rights are relaxed in Israel, under the principle of not stealing. The land has been given to all of Israel, and the right of every Israelite, no matter how poor, is to have some right of way in and right to eat of the land.

The owner of a vineyard or a field would be stealing if he denied such rights to a fellow Israelite. On the other hand, if the person going through a vineyard or a field started to harvest the crop, rather than just taking what they could eat on the spot, they would be guilty of stealing from the owner. A question to consider.

The law concerning the prostitute's wages suggests that God is concerned with the history of the things that people sacrifice or give to Him. How might this principle inform our approach to Christian worship? Luke chapter 12, verses 1-34 In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, He began to say to His disciples first, Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.

Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops. I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear.

Fear Him who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear Him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God? Why, even the hairs of your head are all numbered.

Fear not, you are of more value than many sparrows. And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges Me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God. But the one who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.

And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. And when they bring you before the synagogues, and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say. Someone in the crowd said to him, Teacher, tell

my brother to divide the inheritance with me.

But he said to him, Man, who made me a judge or arbitrator over you? And he said to them, Take care and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. And he told them a parable, saying, The land of a rich man produce plentifully. And he thought to himself, What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? And he said, I will do this, I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.

And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years, relax, eat, drink and be merry. But God said to him, Fool, this night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God. And he said to his disciples, Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on, for life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

Consider the ravens, they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow, they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith? And do not seek what you are to eat, and what you are to drink, nor be worried, for all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them.

Instead seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the needy.

Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. In Luke chapter 12 Jesus warns against the leaven of the Pharisees.

This is the hypocrisy that they have within themselves. They pass on from generation to generation, just as the mixture of the leaven is put into a new loaf, and then that is placed to a new loaf still. So the leaven of the Pharisees is the hypocrisy that generation after generation they pass down, with the result that all affected by it are corrupted.

But the time is coming when things in secret will be revealed openly. Open proclamation will take the place of private teaching. And the disciples of Christ must not be fearful.

They must declare openly what Christ has declared in private, declaring from the rooftops what his word is. Such open proclamation would be the first thing to fall by the wayside in the case of fear. And the point here is not merely that of not being afraid, it is a calling to be bold, to go forward, and to face all the challenges.

You should not fear being persecuted, because persecution associates us with our Master, and our Master is greater than any persecutor. They cannot kill the soul, only the body. If he notices even the sparrows fall, how much more will God notice his children, who lay down their lives in his service? Every hair on our heads is numbered.

If we confess Christ before men, he will confess us before his Father in heaven. Success in this mission will look different from what success in missions usually looks like. Disciples will find themselves brought before rulers and authorities and synagogues and having to defend themselves in such contexts.

But the Holy Spirit will give them the words on the day that they need them. Whoever speaks against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Son of Man will not be forgiven. There are two ages and two visitations.

In the story of Joseph, there is that first visitation to his brothers as he tells them his dreams and they reject him. And then he comes again when he delivers them in Egypt and gives them food. Moses visits the first time and he tries to act as the judge for his brothers, the Israelites, and they reject him.

And then he comes again and delivers them from Egypt. Jesus, in the same way, he comes the first time in his earthly ministry and he is rejected. Then he comes the second time in the message of the Church as he gives his spirit to the Church and if that message is rejected, final destruction awaits.

Jesus at this point is surrounded by thousands of people who are almost trampling each other and a man calls from this crowd, calling Jesus to act as an arbiter between him and his brother in a quarrel concerning inheritance. But Jesus refuses to adjudicate. Rather he talks about the danger of covetousness and preoccupation with possessions.

And he tells the story of a rich fool. This rich fool seems to be a skilled farmer, someone who is so skillful and effective that he needs to build bigger barns. And he has everything mapped out but he has not considered the way that he stands relative to God.

He seeks to plan his life without any reference to God and with little awareness of the precariousness of human life and wealth. And when his life is required of him, his bigger barns are of no use. All his wealth that he has built up while on earth is of no service.

He had laid up treasure for himself and he was not rich toward God. Like Solomon, Jesus draws attention to the creatures and God's concern and provision for them. Once again

the issue is our attitude to material possessions and provisions.

We are to adopt a posture of dependency upon God for our daily needs. Worry and anxiety is far more likely to diminish our life than to extend it. And there is some assurance to be found in this reminder of the limits of our power.

This isn't a denial of the value of prudence and provision for ourselves but rather a spiritual posture to be adopted, with anxiety being the alternative. This connects with Jesus' teaching concerning daily bread that we look to God for provision for these things. There's a contrast between worry and faith.

To whom are we looking? In the parable of the sower, it is the worries of this world and a deceit of wealth that act like thorns that choke the seed. And we must beware that this does not befall us. What is our priority? It should be seeking the kingdom, everything else is second.

That is where we will ultimately find security, as we lay up riches towards God rather than towards ourselves. Ultimately Jesus' disciples should not need to fear on this front. Although they are only a little flock, the Father desires to give them the kingdom, and he will give them the kingdom.

He is a good Father and they can look to him to provide. Jesus recognises that motives don't float free, but they can be nudged and pulled by material situations and conditions. The problem is the loss of material wealth.

And the alternative is to invest your resources in spiritual things. The heart will tend to follow your resources. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Put your money where you want your heart to be, and where it is not vulnerable to loss, and where it won't place your heart in the same jeopardy. Selling possessions and giving to the needy is a means by which to dislodge your heart from its false attachments. It also builds up riches where they cannot be lost or destroyed, building up riches towards God.

The one who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. A question to consider, what in Jesus' teaching can we truly possess, and how can we come to possess it?