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April 19th: Numbers 15 & Mark 12:13-34

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Laws concerning sacrifices and the tassels. Jesus challenged by opponents in the temple.

Some passages referenced:

Leviticus 2 (laws of cereal offerings); Numbers 5:11-31 (the test of jealousy); Philippians 2:17, 2 Timothy 4:6 (the Apostle Paul as a drink offering); Romans 11:16 (the firstfruits of the dough); Leviticus 24:10-16 (the stoning of the blasphemer); Exodus 35:1-3 (the law of fire on the Sabbath); Numbers 13:18 ('and see what the land is'); Numbers 14:32-33 (the Israelites' whoredom); Exodus 28:28-29, 36-38 (blue thread in the priestly garments); Numbers 4:5-12 (blue coverings for the holy furniture).

Deuteronomy 25:5-10 (law concerning levirate marriage); Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Leviticus 19:18 (love God and neighbour).

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

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Transcript

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Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your guard. I am the Lord your God. Numbers 15 Numbers 15 Numbers 15 Numbers 15 Numbers 15 Numbers 15 Numbers 15 Numbers 15 Numbers 15 Numbers 15 One of the things that these laws do is to firmly reassert the mission and the intent of the Exodus.

It begins with a statement that refers to when you come into the land you are to inhabit. By not directly mentioning what has gone before, it suggests that the mission is not going to be finally blown off course. It will carry out its intended object.

Once more it foregrounds sacrifice and the relationship of the people with the Lord. It recalls the fact of the deliverance from Egypt and the fact that the Lord's purpose is to settle them in the promised land, something mentioned in verses 2 and 18. The laws concerning sacrifice here also anticipate that settlement in the land, when they will have the plentiful quantities of wine, oil and flour that are enjoyed in a settled agricultural society.

It also reaffirms the fact that they have access and approach to God through sacrifice, even after all their rebellion. This section of Numbers outlines the cereal and drink offerings that accompany a food offering. A food offering is one of those sacrifices that is consumed in part by the Lord on his altar as a pleasing aroma.

So it would be an Ascension or whole burnt offering or a peace offering. These were to be accompanied by the stipulated cereal and drink offerings. Those stipulated offerings increasing with the size of the sacrificed animal.

The drink offering would await the entry into the promised land, unless they were offering some drink made from the grapes of Ashkel. Wine is a drink of celebration and rest and enjoying it had to wait for their settlement in the land. Also the drink offering was presumably entirely poured out on the altar and not participated in by the worshippers or the priests.

The priests were forbidden to drink in the tabernacle and as sacrificial food it would have to be eaten within the tabernacle precincts. The cereal offerings are described in more detail in Leviticus chapter 2. The cereal and the drink offerings seem to, among other things, be offerings of people's work to the Lord. They also seem to function as memorials that bring the offerer and their work to mind on the basis of the sacrificed animal that they accompanied.

A sacrifice that represented the person of the worshipper. One interesting use of a cereal offering is found in the Law of Jealousy in Numbers chapter 5. Where barley flour instead of the typical semolina wheat was used and was not adorned with oil or frankincense nor accompanied by a sacrificial animal. There it seems to function to bring the works of the possible adulterous woman to the Lord for judgment.

The Apostle Paul also speaks of himself being poured out as a drink offering in Philippians chapter 2.17 and 2 Timothy chapter 4.6. As the wine was poured out with the blood at the base of the altar there was presumably some sort of symbolic connection or association between the two. An association that would be worth exploring perhaps to understand the relationship between Christ's blood and wine in the New Covenant. When they entered the land they had to present the first of their dough as a contribution.

An offering of the first fruits of their own creative labour. The Apostle Paul again refers to this in Romans chapter 11 verse 16. If the dough offered as first fruits is holy so is the whole lump and if the root is holy so are the branches.

It might be worth considering the fact that all of the offerings just mentioned elaborate the existing sacrifices with extra offerings that would occur when they entered the land. This might help us better to understand the positioning of this material immediately after the failure to enter into Canaan. It underlines the promise and suggests a greater communion with God that will follow as they enter into the land and they can offer the fruits of the land with their existing sacrifices to the Lord.

The next section concerns offerings for unintentional sins. If the whole congregation sins unintentionally there needs to be a purification offering of a male goat and an ascension offering of a bull. However if an individual sins unintentionally he must only offer a female goat.

Presumably he is included in the congregational sacrifice of the bull. There is however no sacrifice for high handed presumptuous premeditated sin. It seems that sin could be downgraded by repentance but if someone intends purposefully and defiantly to go against the word of God that is not something that there is a sacrifice for in that particular state.

The account of the Sabbath breaker that follows then seems to be an example of such high handed sin. Numbers intersperses law and narrative and the narrative and the law need to be read alongside each other because they are mutually interpretive lots of the time. The man gathering the sticks is to be presumed to be a high handed Sabbath breaker.

This is reminiscent of the story of the punishment for blasphemy in Leviticus chapter 24 verses 10 to 16. Now an Israelite woman's son whose father was an Egyptian went out among the people of Israel. And the Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel fought in the camp.

And the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the name and cursed. Then they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shalometh the daughter of Debarai of the tribe of Dan.

And they put him in custody till the will of the Lord should be clear to them. Then the

Lord spoke to Moses saying bring out of the camp the one who cursed. And let all who heard him lay their hands on his head.

And let all the congregation stone him. And speak to the people of Israel saying whoever curses his God shall be put to death. Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death.

All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native when he blasphemes the name shall be put to death. The action of the man then seems to be treated as tantamount to blasphemy.

Why is his sin so serious? Exodus chapter 35 verses 1 to 3 would seem to be part of the reason why. Moses assembled all the congregation of the people of Israel and said to them. These are the things that the Lord has commanded you to do.

Six days work shall be done. But on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of solemn rest. Holy to the Lord.

Whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day. The Sabbath is the central sign of the covenant and a desecration of it is to be taken with the utmost seriousness.

The man seems to be engaged in a premeditated act to break the law concerning building up a fire on the Sabbath day. This is an intentional and a defiant sin. The people are uncertain of how to judge presumably on account of the fact that he hasn't yet built the fire.

However, the premeditation is enough to condemn him. It's clear enough what he was intending to do. This is followed by another strange law concerning tassels on the corners of garments.

What on earth is that doing here? Once again, however, this is an incredibly important law in the context. It points back to the previous chapters and it anticipates the drama of the chapters that follow in the rebellion of Korah as we'll see as we go through the narrative. Jonathan Sacks observes that there are a number of key words used here, which are also key words in the story of the spies.

Not to follow after your own heart could be translated not to spy out after your own heart. The form of the verb translated for you to look at in verse 39 is also found in chapter 13 verse 18 in the instructions to the spies and see what the land is. Finally, the reference to the people's inclination to whoring recalls the reference to their whoredoms in chapter 14 verses 32 to 33.

The stipulated blue thread in the tassels recalls the blue of key elements of the priestly garments in Exodus chapter 28 verses 28 to 29 and 36 to 38. And they shall bind

breastplate by its rings to the rings of the ephod with a lace of blue, so that it may lie on the skillfully woven band of the ephod, so that the breastpiece shall not come loose from the ephod. So Aaron shall bear the names of the sons of Israel in the breastpiece of judgment on his heart when he goes into the holy place to bring them to regular remembrance before the Lord.

And then in verses 36 to 38 You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, Holy to the Lord. And you shall fasten it on the turban by a cord of blue. It shall be on the front of the turban.

It shall be on Aaron's forehead. And Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord.

This also recalls the handling of the most holy furniture from inside the tabernacle in Numbers 4, verses 5 to 12. When the camp is to set out, Aaron and his son shall go in and take down the veil of the screen and cover the ark of the testimony with it. Then they shall put on it a covering of goatskin and spread on top of that a cloth all of blue and shall put in its poles.

And over the table of the bread of the presence they shall spread a cloth of blue and put on it the plates, the dishes for incense, the bowls and the flagons for the drink offering. The regular showbread also shall be on it. Then they shall spread over them a cloth of scarlet and cover the same with a covering of goatskin and shall put in its poles.

And they shall take a cloth of blue and cover the lampstand for the light with its lamps, its tongs, its trays and all the vessels for oil with which it is supplied. And they shall put it with all its utensils in a covering of goatskin and put it on the carrying frame. And over the golden altar they shall spread a cloth of blue and cover it with a covering of goatskin and shall put in its poles.

And they shall take all the vessels of the service that are used in the sanctuary and put them in a cloth of blue and cover them with a covering of goatskin and put them on the carrying frame. So as we see here, the most holy things are associated with cloths and threads of blue. Rather than spying out after their own hearts and eyes then, as we saw in the story of the spies in the previous chapters, the tassels were there to alert them to their holiness as a people as their garments had something in them that connected them with the garments of the high priest and the most holy furniture of the tabernacle.

A question to consider. What are some of the cues that we can use to recall ourselves to our true identity as the people of God and to faithfulness to the Lord as the tassels called Israel to such faithfulness? Mark chapter 12 verses 13 to 34 And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians to trap him in his talk. And they came and said to him, Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion,

for you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God.

Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay them or should we not? But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it. And they brought one. And he said to them, Whose likeness and inscription is this? They said to him, Caesar's.

Jesus said to them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him. And the Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection.

And they asked him a question, saying, Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. There were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and when he died left no offspring.

And the second took her and died, leaving no offspring. And the third likewise. And the seven left no offspring.

Last of all, the woman also died. In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife. Jesus said to them, Is this not the reason you are wrong? Because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong.

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, Which commandment is the most important of all? Jesus answered, The most important is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

There is no other commandment greater than these. And the scribe said to him, You are right, teacher, you have truly said that he is one, and that there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, You are not far from the kingdom of God. And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions. In chapter

12 of Mark, Jesus is engaging with his opponents in the context of the temple.

And here the Pharisees collude with the Herodians to trap him. The Herodians no longer enjoyed power in Jerusalem, but Jesus came from Herod Antipas' territory, and Herod Antipas was in Jerusalem at the time for the feast. Tax to Caesar was a deeply fraught political and religious question.

To pay the tax was a seeming acknowledgement of its legitimacy, and, by extension, of the legitimacy of the Romans' authority in the Holy Land. And the Denarius itself probably had blasphemous statements of Caesar's being the son of God. One way or another, Jesus seems to be caught.

Either he aligns himself with the tax rebels and the revolutions against Rome, or he will seem to be like a compromiser or an accommodationist with Rome. The Pharisees and the Herodians begin with flattery. They're trying to put Jesus off his guard, and perhaps to tempt him into the radical answer by praising his virtue of fearless candour.

The statement that Jesus is not swayed by appearances also means, quite literally, that he does not look at people's faces. And it was precisely the face of a person, Caesar, that was part of what was at issue here. Jesus' answer is a profoundly shrewd one.

Before he even addresses the issue, he asks them why they are testing him, connecting what they are doing with Satan's testing of him. Then, as he answers their question more directly, he deals with it in some very clever ways. First of all, he asks them to produce a coin.

They must reveal one of the coins to be in their possession, compromising them. The Jews could enjoy their own coinage to some degree, but they clearly had one of these coins in their possession, so they were in a difficult position if they were going to ask a question that was designed to trap him, because they were caught too. The statement, To some, it might seem to be saying, give Caesar what's coming to him.

To others, pay your taxes. However, there is a logic to it. If you have this blasphemous object in your possession, why not give it back to Rome? There is a willingness to be dispossessed of such an item.

There are Jews also to be paid both to Caesar and to God. You need to recognise what Caesar is owed and what God is owed. There may be opposition between those two, but Caesar is owed something.

Some have seen in the identification of Caesar's image an implication that we are supposed to render the image of God to God, as in our persons and other persons. The reasoning of Jesus, however, is that the coin is Caesar's, and so the tax isn't just an arbitrary imposition, but something given for services given. Those Jews could be paid while still having a certain ambivalence in relationship to Caesar.

Jesus' answer is neither that of the accommodationist or the compromiser, nor that of the revolutionary. He treads a line between compliance and resistance. Rendering to God limits what you render to Caesar.

Caesar can't be given worship, for instance. Following this, Jesus is challenged by the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection. They present an elaborate account of the performance of the Levirate marriage in this case of a woman who has gone through a number of different husbands who have not born her a child.

And the question is, in the resurrection, whose wife is she? Jesus' answer challenges their presuppositions. They see the resurrection almost as a perpetuation of the existing form of life, whereas for Jesus it's a transformation. Marriage and giving in marriage functioned to fulfil the calling to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and also served to sustain the human race in response to the reality of death.

This is one of the significances of the Levirate Law. The Levirate Law was to raise up seed for the dead brother. Of course, the resurrection is a different way of raising up seed from the dead.

The resurrection involves a new principle of generation or regeneration. It's no longer marriage through which people are born, but through the rebirth from the dead. The angels don't marry, but are a non-procreating living host.

Here it might be interesting to see Jesus' teaching against the background of something like 1 Enoch 15 3-10, apocryphal literature that would provide an understanding of how angels were viewed by many at the time. Why have you forsaken the high heaven, the eternal sanctuary, and lain with women, and defiled yourselves with the daughters of men, and taken for yourselves wives, and done as the sons of earth? You were holy ones and spirits, living forever. With the blood of women you have defiled yourselves, and with the blood of flesh you have begotten, and with the blood of men you have lusted, and you have done as they do, flesh and blood, who die and perish.

Therefore I gave them women, that they might cast seed into them, and thus beget children by them, that nothing fail them upon the earth. But you originally existed as spirits, living forever and not dying for all the generations of eternity. Therefore I did not make women among you, the spirits of heaven.

In heaven is their dwelling, but the spirits begotten on earth, on earth is their dwelling. Humanity is a race, but the angels are a living host. They do not reproduce, they are created as a complete host.

The angels are also presented as if a band of brothers. There are no women among them, there are no fathers and sons. The resurrection then isn't just revivification and return to our existing form of life.

It is a transformation of life, where we will no longer be faced by the reality of death, or the need to procreate and fill the earth. And in that context there is no longer the need for marriage. This doesn't mean that we cease to be male and female, but it does mean that procreation ends.

Jesus' reference to Exodus chapter 3 seems very odd here. The statement that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would not seem to imply that resurrection will occur. However, it presents the action of the Exodus as being done for their sake in part.

It suggests that they haven't just simply ceased to be. They have a destiny still to be worked out. A destiny in their descendants, but also a destiny in their own persons.

The event of the Exodus is a new birth. It's a birth event occurring through the events of the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea. God is raising up Israel from slavery, and raising up in them the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

There's more going on here. There are themes of resurrection within it. The bones of Joseph are being taken up with them, raised up out of Egypt, brought into the Promised Land and buried in Shechem.

The great attention given in the story of Genesis to burial of the patriarchs and their wives from Genesis chapter 23 onwards is already an indication that the body is not just to be discarded, that the body has some destiny remaining to it. And what happens to that body after its death is a matter of extreme importance. Jesus' response to the testing of the Sadducees here might also recall his response to the testing that he received earlier concerning Moses' teaching concerning divorce.

In both cases, Jesus highlights a problem of perception in his opponents, and also the way in which the proof text that they brought forward needs to be relativised. Finally, a scribe presents a third question to him, although Mark doesn't present it as a testing question in the same way. It seems to be more genuine.

The scribe has seen that Jesus answered the other question as well, and he wants to see how he will answer this question. Is Jesus going to choose some particular law that reveals an imbalance in his teaching? Perhaps the greatest commandment is, you shall not murder, or maybe the greatest commandment is, remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Whatever Jesus' answer, maybe he's going to tread on some toes, open himself up to some criticism, suggest some imbalance at the heart of his belief.

But Jesus' answer once more is shrewd. The greatest commandment, and there is a greatest commandment, is the summary commandment of the Shema. In this commandment, the entire law is encapsulated, and the second great commandment arises from it.

To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your

neighbour as yourself. These two commandments sum up the entire Ten Commandments and all the other commandments. The law is not just a collection of miscellaneous laws that are assembled together.

There is a logic and a unity and a system of truth summed up in the call to love God and neighbour. The whole purpose of the law is encapsulated in these things, and then it's refracted into these specific commandments, which explain what that actually looks like. The statements that Jesus identifies are also taken from the law itself.

They're taken from summary sections of the law. Leviticus chapter 19 is a summary of key elements of the second table of the law, the way that we relate to our neighbour. And Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 to 5 is at the very outset of chapter 6 to 26, which unpacks the Ten Commandments which are given in chapter 5. The law and the prophets all arise out of this.

By contrast, the scribes and the Pharisees' approach to the law is so often one that takes bits and pieces and abstracts them from a larger system of truth that is ordered around a central principle, the loving God and loving neighbour. The commandments that Jesus identifies express the positive truth at the heart of all the thou shalt nots. While the scribes and the Pharisees nullify the law on account of their tradition, Jesus fulfils it.

He highlights that reality that lies at the very heart, the centre, the weighty matters of the law. The scribe responds to Jesus' answer with great approval and actually expands upon his answer by showing that obedience is greater than sacrifice. And hearing this response, Jesus declares that the scribe is not far from the kingdom of God.

Once he's appreciated the true nature of what it means to keep the law of God, the centrality of loving God and neighbour, and the importance of this over sacrifice, he has grasped one of the very core principles of the kingdom of God. A question to consider. In Jesus' teaching concerning divorce, he draws the attention of his hearers back to the period before the fall, to God's original institution of marriage and his creation of man and woman.

In his response to the Sadducees, he draws attention to something that lies beyond the patterns of this age, to a new heavens and a new earth where there will no longer be marriage and giving in marriage, but we will be like a heavenly host. How can marriage in the valley of this present age be informed by the reality of these two horizons?