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June 25th: Judges 7 & 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

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Gideon's 300 men. Paul's concern for sexual morality.

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

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Transcript

Judges chapter 7. 1 So he brought the people down to the water. 2 And the Lord said to Gideon, Everyone who lapped the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise everyone who kneels down to drink.

3 And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was three hundred men. 4 But all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water. 5 And the Lord said to Gideon, With the three hundred men who lapped, I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home.

6 So the people took provisions in their hands and their trumpets. 7 And he sent all the rest of Israel every man to his tent, but retained the three hundred men. 8 And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

9 That same night the Lord said to him, Arise, go down against the camp, for I have

given it into your hand. 10 But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant, and you shall hear what they say. 11 And afterward your hand shall be strengthened to go down against the camp.

12 Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outposts of the armed men who were in the camp. 13 And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the east lay along the valley like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the sea-shore in abundance. 14 When Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a dream to his comrade.

15 And he said, Behold, I dreamed a dream. And behold, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came to the tent, and struck it so that it fell, and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat. 16 And his comrade answered, This is no other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel.

God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp. 17 As soon as Gideon heard the telling of the dream, and its interpretation, he worshipped. 18 And he returned to the camp of Israel, and said, Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand.

19 And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and put trumpets into the hands of all of them, and empty jars with torches inside the jars. 20 And he said to them, Look at me, and do likewise. When I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do.

When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then blow the trumpets also on every side of all the camp, and shout, For the Lord and for Gideon. 21 So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp, at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch. 22 And they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands.

23 Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars. They held in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. 24 And they cried out, A sword for the Lord and for Gideon.

25 Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran. They cried out and fled. 26 When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army.

And the army fled as far as Beth Shitter, towards Zererah, as far as the border of Abel Meholah by Tabath. 27 And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian. 28 Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, Come down against the Midianites and capture the waters against them, as far as Beth Barah and also the Jordan.

So all the men of Ephraim were called out, and they captured the waters as far as Beth Barah and also the Jordan. 29 And they captured the two princes of Midian, Oreb and

Zeb. They killed Oreb at the Rock of Oreb, and Zeb they killed at the winepress of Zeb.

30 Then they pursued Midian, and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeb to Gideon across the Jordan. In Judges chapter 7 verse 1 Gideon is initially spoken of as Jerobail, the name that he was given after the destruction of Baal's altar and the removal of the Asherah pole. He encamps with his men beside the spring of Harod in the valley of Jezreel, while the Midianites are to the north of them.

He has a large crowd with him, 32,000 people, but the Lord doesn't want them to boast, so he drastically limits their numbers. First, they lose 22,000 people by applying the test of Deuteronomy chapter 20 verse 8. And the officers shall speak further to the people and say, Is there any man who is fearful and faint-hearted? Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own. So all the people who are trembling are removed.

And the place name is Harod, which is the same Hebrew consonants as the verb for tremble used here. And it's not an accident that we have this parallel. Only 10,000 remain at this point, and this seems an auspicious number.

It's the same number of the Canaanites and Perizzites who were defeated in chapter 1 verse 4, or the number of the Moabites killed in chapter 3 verse 29. However, it is far too many for the Lord. He establishes a further test, applied as the men are taken down to the water.

All of the men who lap the water-like dogs are to join the company. As Peter Lightheart suggested, this connects with the name of Caleb, which means dog. The Lord wants 300 Caleb-like men.

James Berjan notes that as they are hunting a raven, Oreb, and a wolf, Zeb, dogs are appropriate. The Lord is testing his people, and the test is not an arbitrary one. The first test selects for people of faith, and the second test for men that remind us of Israel's faithful hero, Caleb.

John Baruch compares this to the process of threshing Israel. Gideon is separating the wheat from the chaff. However, these aren't crack troops selected for fighting skills, so much as people who are selected for qualities associated with faith.

We might also think of Samson, who in a few chapters' time, in chapter 15, will use 300 foxes with torches to cause chaos among the Philistines. Here, 300 dogs with torches will do the same. The Lord instructs Gideon to go against the camp of the Midianites, but once again he graciously gives him a sign first.

With his servant Peura, Gideon goes down to the camp of the Midianites and overhears a man telling another his dream, and the man's companion giving its interpretation. A cake of barley tumbles down into the camp of Midian and overturns the tent, presumably the

tent of the commander of the army. The barley bread is poor food.

It represents presumably the Israelites, and the loaf rolls into the camp. It takes the initiative and strikes unawares against the camp, rather than directly facing the Midianites in battle. The loaf is extremely small, but it has a huge effect.

It overturns the tent. Perhaps there are Jewish feasts playing in the background here as well, as next chapter we all encounter Succoth. The Midianites are clearly fearful of Israel, but perhaps more than that, Gideon's name and reputation has preceded him, and this would have been a source of great encouragement for him.

Gideon then divides his men into three separate groups, gives them trumpets, and empty jars with torches. They come to the camp in the middle watch of the night, and they make a commotion with the trumpets and breaking the jars. The torches are then revealed, and this would suggest 300 companies of men surrounding the camp.

The people in the camp are woken up and startled. It's the middle of the night, seeing other armed people running around, they start attacking each other. The Lord has struck terror upon them in panic, and so they end up destroying each other.

The blowing of the trumpets clearly reminds us of Jericho, another occasion when God acted on behalf of his people, and the way that they stand in their place while the Lord wins the victory might also recall the Red Sea. After the Midianites are confused and kill many of each other, the Israelites come to complete the victory. They trap the Midianites as they try to cross back over the Jordan.

Gideon summons the Ephraimites to help with this. Oreb and Zeb, the raven and the wolf, are captured at the rock and the winepress respectively. The Israelites were hiding from the Midianites in the rocks in chapter 6 verse 2, and Gideon was hiding in the winepress in chapter 6 verse 11.

So now the tables have completely turned. The event of the defeat of the Midianites is recalled later in scripture, most notably perhaps in the book of Isaiah chapter 9 verses 3 to 5. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil.

For the yoke of his burden and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle, Tumult, and every garment rolled in blood, will be burned as fuel for the fire. And then in chapter 10 verses 26 to 27, And the Lord of hosts will wield against them a whip, as when he struck Midian at the rock of Oreb.

And his staff will be over the sea, and he will lift it, as he did in Egypt. And in that day his burden will depart from your shoulder, and his yoke from your neck, and the yoke will be broken because of the fat. In Isaiah then, the defeat of the Midianites is an example of

the sort of defeat that God will win over his enemies in the future.

It's one of the great victories that God has wrought. It's also referenced in the New Testament in a far more subtle and poetic way. In 2 Corinthians chapter 4 verses 6 to 10, For God who said, Let light shine out of darkness, has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. We are, according to Paul, like jars of clay containing light within them.

Much as Gideon won his victory with weak jars of clay hiding light, so we are those who have light within us, and we will be used by God to win his victory again. Even though we are greatly outnumbered, the surpassing power does not belong to us, it belongs to God. James Bajon has observed a fascinating further example of a place where we have an echo of this story.

It's in 1 Kings chapter 18, where in verse 22 we read, Then Elijah said to the people, I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are four hundred and fifty men. Now, what's significant about that is the fact that Gideon's men were outnumbered 450 to 1, and just as Gideon was famous for opposing the worship of Baal in pulling down Baal's altar and in cutting down the Asherah pole, so Elijah has a great conflict with the priests of Baal and the priests of Asherah on Mount Carmel. It would seem that we're invited to compare these two events.

The courageous stand of Elijah is comparable to the courageous stand of Gideon and his men. In both occasions the Lord demonstrates his power, in part through the weakness of the people that he has chosen to fight for him. A question to consider, what further parallels can we see between this story and the story of 1 Samuel chapter 11? What might we learn from the comparisons between the character of Saul and the character of Gideon? 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 1 to 12.

Finally then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you receive from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God, that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter.

Because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore

whoever disregards this disregards not man, but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

Now concerning brotherly love, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders, and be dependent on no one. First Thessalonians chapter 4 begins with a finally in many translations.

Gordon Fee, however, suggests that it might be better translated as, as for other matters. The main purpose of this first epistle to the Thessalonians is the relationship between Paul and his companions and the Thessalonians, which occupies the significant majority of the letter. However Paul also wishes to exhort the Thessalonians to continue in what they had been taught.

He speaks as though most of the Thessalonians were adhering to the teaching that he and his companions had instructed them in, yet some might be diverting from it, which is why he reiterates it, without rebuking the entire church or belabouring the points. Paul entreats and exhorts the Thessalonians in the Lord Jesus. He speaks to them gently.

One of the important features of apostolic rhetoric is its preference for gentle persuasion and reasoning over command, prohibition or rebuke. There are occasions when these things are appropriate, but most of the time we have persuasion and reasoning. Such rhetoric is designed for the mature, for people who have a stronger internal grasp of what is good.

By contrast the rhetoric of the law is far more designed for people in a state of infancy and immaturity. Persuasion furnishes us with reasons for action that we can internalise and possess as our own. Command, however, gives us external reasons for action when we are not at a point when we can internalise the reasons yet.

Paul is speaking to the Thessalonians as people in Christ who have his spirit indwelling them, and as mature people who can be reasoned with and persuaded and won over. He has already instructed the Thessalonians in the Lord Jesus on the matters that he is about to teach them on again, speaking to them as one with apostolic authority. Now he takes the opportunity to repeat the instructions that he has already given them.

The teaching he gives relates to a fundamental issue in how we relate to God, about God's desire for us, namely the fact that God desires our sanctification. Sanctification relates to being blameless in holiness, which Paul mentioned back in chapter 3 verse 13. Being holy involves being set apart, and one of the aspects of this that Paul often draws attention to in his letters is holiness in sexual matters, speaking of our bodies, or perhaps more particularly our sexual organs, as vessels.

Paul maintains that we need to control our vessels in holiness and honour. We have been devoted to the service of the Lord and we must treat our bodies accordingly. Self-control is emphasised here, in contrast to the Gentiles who are ignorant of God and who act in the passion of lust, their uncontrolled desires controlling them.

The categories of holiness and honour are really important and prominent ones for Pauline sexual ethics. The categories that far exceed are more customary categories for sexual morality that can boil down to little more than consent. For instance, the concept of same-sex relations as a form of dishonouring the body is an important aspect of Paul's argument against such practices in Romans chapter 1. Paul's teaching of sexual ethics rests on a very different view of the person, and he expresses this ethic most fully in 1 Corinthians 6, verses 9-20.

of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.

Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body, and God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For as it is written, the two will become one flesh.

But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. As Christians, our bodies have been visibly marked out for resurrection in the seal of baptism.

Our bodies are the limbs and organs of Christ. Our bodies are the temple or the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells not merely within our minds or within our hearts, but in our bodies.

Our bodies are the self as an object, even to ourselves. Before I have subjective awareness, before I have agency or volition, I am my body. My body is the very root of my being.

It's my place in the world. It's the thing that people relate to as me. Our bodies, however, are marked out as holy.

They're marked out as God's own. God claims us at the very deepest part of ourselves. Our bodies are the site of shame, of felt mortality, of weakness, of death, and many, many other things like that.

We may feel exposed to the judgment of others in our bodies as their gaze falls upon us. We may feel violated by things that others have done to our bodies, or things that we have done with our bodies. We may feel that our bodies are failing us as we age, or through forms of infirmity or disability.

We may feel, for instance, wrongly stigmatised by others on account of our bodies, perhaps because of our racial or our ethnic appearance. Yet God has claimed our bodies for himself, and he will raise up these bodies on the last day. Our bodies, being set apart for God, have great dignity and must be treated as holy accordingly.

Our bodies are earthy, they're mortal, they're weak, they're ungainly, and generally somewhat unattractive. The scriptures never suggest otherwise. The scriptures don't divinise the body.

They don't pretend that the body is anything other than what it is. However, God has made these bodies a realm of his habitation, and he desires to raise them up. He values our bodies, and he relates to us in our bodies, not just in ourselves detached from our bodies.

This is why sexual ethics is such a hugely important issue for Paul. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and if your body has been set apart by the Lord, you must treat your body accordingly. Paul particularly speaks to those who are sexually immoral, and wronging their brother in this matter.

Perhaps he has in mind a man having an adulterous relationship with another man's wife. However, sexual behaviour in general is, for Paul, not something that can be privatised, as we tend to imagine. Our bodies belong to Christ, they have been bought at a price by him, so we don't have the right to do what we wish with them.

Husbands and wives must honour each other with their bodies. Whatever physical or psychological prophylactics we might employ, we cannot engage in sexual relations without acting towards another person's very self. Beyond this, sexual holiness has implications for our neighbours.

Sexual immorality in the Church compromises the whole body in Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 5, as he says, a little leaven leavens the whole lump. Sexual immorality is also something that the Lord will judge. This is a fact which Paul and his companions had solemnly warned the Thessalonians about.

To dismiss the importance of sexual holiness is to sin against God himself, who has sanctified our bodies for himself by the gift of his indwelling spirit. God has called us for

the very end of holiness, and sexual impurity runs directly contrary to God's intent in salvation. We disregard this at our very peril.

Paul concludes this section by turning to discuss the duty of love. This is something that they had already been taught by God. Perhaps Paul has in view the new covenant promise of God's more direct teaching of his people by the Holy Spirit.

This is something the Thessalonians already knew. Paul is spurring them on to act more faithfully in terms of it. The issue that precipitates Paul's teaching seems to be the behaviour of some indigents in the community, who are selfishly taking advantage of the provision of others and living off others' generosity when they could and should be providing for themselves.

Acting in such a manner is unloving to others and dishonours the church before outsiders. It is an honourable thing to live in a way that is provident and not dependent. We should aspire to live quiet lives that aren't disruptive, concerning ourselves with our own affairs, working with our own hands in our own labours and seeking to be as self-sufficient as possible.

People who don't live in such a manner are disruptive, they get into other people's business, they make themselves a nuisance and a burden in their communities and prevent their communities from doing things they could do otherwise. When we live in an appropriate manner however, we will not selfishly make ourselves a burden upon others and we will also be able to serve people ourselves much more readily. Living in such a manner will also be respectable in the eyes of the world around, which besides improving the church's witness is a good thing in itself, as it manifests the holiness to which we have been called.

A question to consider, what are some ways in which the aspiration to self-sufficiency is important for the practice of love?