

## Questions & Commandments

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### NPMC – Feb. 12, 2023

*Scripture: Deut. 30:15-20; Matthew 5:17-30*

*Hymns: VT 95 - Praise the Lord, Sing Hallelujah; VT 571 - O God, We Read the Holy Law*

#### **Deuteronomy 30:15-20:**

<sup>15</sup> “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. <sup>16</sup> If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. <sup>17</sup> But if your heart turns away and you do not hear but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup> I declare to you today that you shall certainly perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. <sup>19</sup> I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, <sup>20</sup> loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

#### **Matthew 5:17-30:**

<sup>17</sup> “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>21</sup> “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. <sup>23</sup> So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup> Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup> Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

<sup>27</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

As you may be aware, our NPMC Adult Ed. class is currently doing a series on the relationship between faith and doubt, or what’s come to be known as faith

“deconstruction” and reconstruction. We are using various contemporary Christian

writers to discuss this, drawing from their theological journeys and crises and what they have to say about the resulting evolution or change their faith has undergone – everyone from Brian McLaren to Rachel Held Evans, Barbara Brown Taylor to Sarah Bessey, etc. Following one of Bessey’s books, we’ve entitled the series, Making Peace with an Evolving Faith.

A pattern that seems to be emerging among the writers and in our conversation is the whole question of power and control. Often, it’s a church community or a theology that stresses power and control – for instance, using threats of hell to manipulate congregants into holding certain beliefs, the requirement of signing on to a certain set of beliefs (sometimes literally) with no room for questions or disagreements, or else a view of God as highly controlling, that strikes these writers as particularly problematic. This then prompts a crisis and/or shift in their faith, and often a migration to a different church community. Control issues and the abuse of power are, in other words, deal-breakers for many people of faith, whether these are found in the way a community functions or in how God is understood; and often, the two go hand in hand.

Enter our lectionary passages for today. Now I’m not sure what the compilers of the lectionary had in mind for us to glean from these, but they’re a bit harsh to our modern ears! A God who gives us commands and speaks about punishing us for disobeying them seems to play right into that view of control and abuse of power that many find so problematic. Even Jesus, in our passage, seems to come across as condemning, as unyielding and strict in (ostensibly) sending people to “hell.” Perhaps unexpectedly, within these two passages, Jesus seems harsher than the Old Testament God! What are we to do with passages like this? I want to explore the theology – the

God-talk – within these passages today in a kind of open-ended way – in the spirit of our Adult ed. series. So my sermon today will not be about having all the answers, but about asking good questions! I invite you to join me on this meandering theological thought experiment.

Our passage from Deuteronomy sets things out very clearly: if you follow the commandments of God, you will live and be prosperous; if you don't, death and trouble will come upon you. Everything is set up along a stark binary – there are only two paths between which the Israelites must choose. Given that one of them ends in death, no land, and a lack of descendants, there is really only one path for them to choose that does not lead to disaster but blessing. At first glance, this seems to be somewhat simplistic and manipulative – classic carrot-or-stick strategies, offering a choice that isn't much of a choice at all. This seems to be the God who commands and expects complete obedience, under pain of death and curses.

Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann provides a deeper look at this type of passage for us, however. For one thing, he places it in the context of the ancient Israelite worldview, which looked to God as the upholder of cosmic justice, or a universe that was “morally reliable.” Sometimes this is also called a “retributive universe” – the idea that we get what we deserve, that those who do good in the world are rewarded, and those who act in evil ways are punished. We still hold to these ideas to some extent. The question of why bad things happen to good people is one example of this kind of thinking. (It's not always a helpful one!) So, to some extent, we expect fairness and justice in the world, as the ancient Israelites did. So, Brueggemann says, “Israel

envisioned a precise symmetry of act and outcome, so that those who obeyed received all the blessings of life – well-being, prosperity, fruitfulness, security, and land – and those who disobeyed received negation of life, whether by extermination, exile, barrenness, or natural disaster.”<sup>1</sup> It was almost a math equation: obedience = blessing, disobedience = curses and death. Easy, right? Well, not exactly.

The first issue is that life doesn’t work this way. And, as a matter of fact, the rest of the Bible is about how life doesn’t work like that! This is why the question of why bad things happen to good people came up in the first place, and Job, the Psalms, and other wisdom books of the Bible are particularly concerned with these kinds of questions. And a large chunk of the rest of the Hebrew Bible is all about how people fall short of the commandments of God because we’re human. Does this seem fair – that God would set us up for failure like this?

Given this human propensity to fall short of these commandments God had set out for us, a tradition arose of interpreting and applying the Laws of God in such a way that they were not only followed but followed and then some. Following the Mishnah, which forms part of the Jewish commentary on the Scriptures, rabbis and other religious leaders worked to “build a fence around the Torah” – that is, to lay out regulations that went above and beyond the requirements of the Law. “With the Torah at its center, Jewish law and practices—the fence—define the bounds of Jewish life and preserve the core values and ethics of Judaism.”<sup>2</sup> It’s said that Eve was the first to make this kind of theological move in the Garden of Eden, when she took God’s prohibition against eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil one step further, saying they

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 196.

<sup>2</sup> <https://jewishmuseummd.org/events/a-fence-around-the-torah-safety-and-unsafety-in-jewish-life/>

were not to eat of it or even to touch it (Genesis 3:2). The idea is that this protects one from even getting close to breaking the Laws of the Torah (and bringing any of those curses upon oneself).

In Jesus' time, we also see this theological move at work in the restrictions that have been set around Sabbath laws, some of which Jesus challenges in the Gospels for being too restrictive (see Matt. 12, Luke 6). But, crucially, this does not mean that Jesus didn't believe in this practice of building a fence around the Torah, or that he was somehow throwing out Jewish Law. We know this because of our passage for today from Matthew 5, in which Jesus himself sets about building a fence around certain parts of the Torah. He begins with an assertion that he has not come to "abolish" the Law but to "fulfill it," and then proceeds to lay out several examples of going above and beyond the requirements of the Law. Twice in our short excerpt, he uses this formula: "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you...." So he not only takes seriously the prohibition from the Ten Commandments against murder, but heightens it to include a prohibition against heaping anger and insults on others. Similarly, it's not only adultery that's a problem for Jesus, but looking at another person with lust, or objectifying another person. In this way, Jesus takes us one step beyond what these commandments required – building a fence around them, and going so far as to echo the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy (though I must add that what's translated as "hell" in some versions of the Bible was a reference to Gehenna, a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem – a place of fire and rejection, maybe, but not literal hell).

So what's going on here? Is Jesus critical of the way the Jewish leaders of his day were overly zealous in applying the Law (as in those debates he initiated about the

Sabbath laws) or is he in favour of this way of making the Laws even stricter (as in this passage, which is from the “hard sayings” of the Sermon on the Mount, no less)? Which is it Jesus – legalism or no legalism? Or is it about going beyond the letter of the law to actually respecting and valuing other people? If you’ll allow me to muddy the waters even more, I want to look for a moment at the language that we are using to think about this. We have discussions of commandments and laws which have a certain authoritarianism to them in our English language. But is this what those words meant in the original Biblical languages, or are we reading our baggage into them? Let’s have a look.

In Hebrew, a commandment is the word “mitzvah.” You might recognize this from the Jewish tradition of celebrating a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah, the coming-of-age ceremony celebrated when a child turns 13. Bar or bat means son or daughter, so that the ceremony celebrates a person becoming a son or daughter of the commandment. If that combination seems jarring, it’s again because of the toxic authoritarianism we associate with commands – that sense of controlling or abusing one’s power over another. Who wants to be a child of that?! But consider also that a synonym for “mitzvah” is “good deed.” For example, “Do a mitzvah and help Mrs. Goldstein with her packages.” An ancient version of the Talmud simply “refers to any charitable act as “*the mitzvah*.” With roots related to the words for attaching, joining, and companionship, the nuances of the word “mitzvah” come to suggest bonding and connection.<sup>3</sup> So good deeds, acts of charity, connection and bond – it doesn’t take much to get from there to ideas of the love for God and neighbour as oneself (incidentally, Jesus’ short-hand for

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<sup>3</sup> Tzvi Freeman, “What Is a Mitzvah? The State of Being Connected,” *Chabad.org*, accessed Feb. 9, 2023, [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1438516/jewish/Mitzvah.htm#footnote5a1438516](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1438516/jewish/Mitzvah.htm#footnote5a1438516)

the Law and the Prophets). The Greek likewise takes us beyond that negative sense of command. The verb “*entelloma*” means law not in the sense of orders forced upon one by a superior, but in the sense of natural law, or the way the world is organized. The sense of it is one of freedom to fulfill our true natures. In contrast to the hierarchical model of the Roman Empire, those who follow Jesus’ Way therefore follow a liberating path that leads to human flourishing. As my commentary put it, “Seeking natural law and obeying natural law doesn’t lead to slavery or submission but to science and technology, to prosperity, health, safety.” This term is also related to the term “word,” as in Jesus the “Word of God,” by which the world was created. My commentary adds: “The Word of God does not consist of a set of commandments to control a bunch of puppets, but is the repository of all treasures of wisdom and knowledge concerning nature.”<sup>4</sup> So we have, from the Hebrew, good deeds that bind us to one another and to God, and from the Greek, living out our true natures and keeping the Word of God. I think we can be forgiven for not knowing that this is what lies behind that stern word, commandment, in our English Bibles!

And Walter Brueggemann agrees, reminding us that the longtime separation between “law” and “gospel” is not only anti-Jewish, but artificial, because it takes the commandments out of their context within the covenant relationship. It’s like trying to separate “relationship” and “obligation,” he says. It makes no sense to envision one without the other. So, writes Brueggemann, “the commands, rightly understood, are not restraints so much as empowerments. Those who obey are able to participate in the ongoing revolution of turning the world to its true shape as God’s creation,” which is

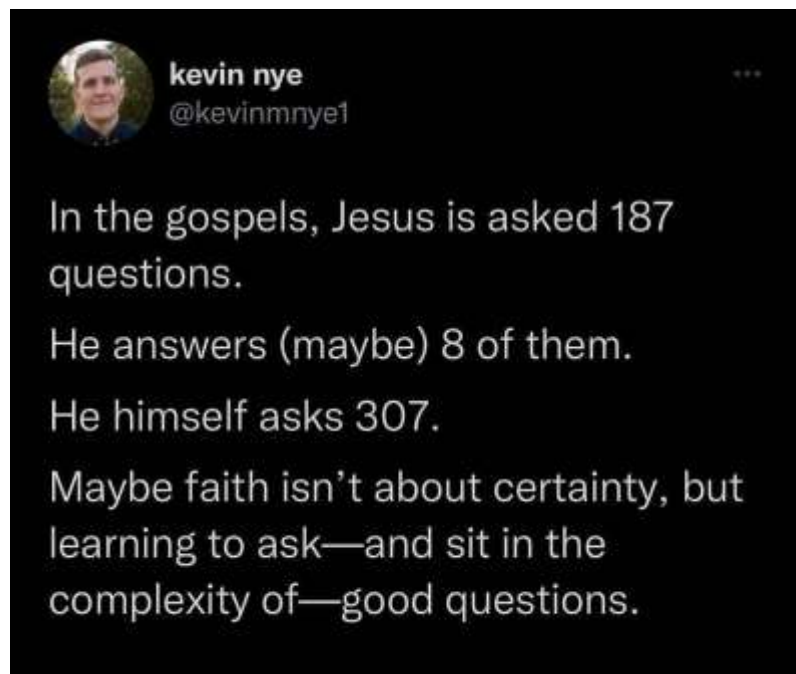
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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.abarim-publications.com/DictionaryG/t/t-e-l-o-sfin.html> One can see this parallel between command and word in John 14:15, among other places.

centred on an understanding that “Yahweh is indeed the ultimate joy of human desiring.”<sup>5</sup> So we are responsible in certain ways to God and each other because we are in relationship, and belong to one another. Responsibilities without relationship become empty obligations or duties, whereas relationships without any responsibilities are (at best) unhealthy. The two go hand in hand.

I hope I’ve managed to at least cast some doubt on theologies that would have us worship control and power-over others in place of a God of relationships and responsibilities. These remain challenging texts, but in sitting with them and wrestling with them in context, I hope we can see in them something beyond the way they’ve been misused over the generations to control others. If we re-read them with relationship at the centre, how does this shift their meaning? Can we still find something life-giving in them? I’ll leave those questions for us to continue pondering.

Jesus’ own example teaches us the value of questions:



Blessed be our questions, doubts, and wrestling in service of life. AMEN

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<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, 199-200.