

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 29, 2021

The letter of the law can suffocate, but the spirit of the law gives life.

Reading I

Dt 4:1-2, 6-8

Moses said to the people:

“Now, Israel, **hear the statutes and decrees**

which I am teaching you to observe,

that you may live, and may enter in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you.

In your observance of the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I enjoin upon you,

you shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it.

Observe them carefully,

for thus will you give evidence

of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations,

who will hear of all these statutes and say,

‘This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people.’

For what great nation is there

that has gods so close to it as the LORD, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?

Or what great nation has statutes and decrees

that are as just as this whole law

which I am setting before you today?”

A reflection, exegesis, and commentary on the scriptures. In this reading from Deuteronomy, Moses, as leader of his people, calls their attention to the statutes and decrees, challenging the Israelites with the following words, “Now, Israel, **hear** the statutes and decrees” and “**observe** them carefully.” As the saying goes, “in one ear and out the

other,” or worse yet as Shakespeare says of prayer, “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below; words without thoughts never to heaven go.” In this text, the law was not portrayed as a burden, but as a source of joy and freedom for those who followed and respected the sacredness and holiness of the law as the will of God. This is a call to obedience, for during the Exile the people were encouraged to be faithful to the written traditions as the focus of hope for the displaced and deported Israelite community. The Temple and the king might fall, but not the law of God. The Israelites were not to follow the statutes and decrees blindly, but, on the contrary, “...Observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations.” This verse brings us to the crosshairs of the letter of the law verses the spirit of the law:

By Bernard Kerik | Wednesday, 02 June 2021 11:37 AM [newsmax.com](https://www.newsmax.com)

“One early memory of my law enforcement career was the day I learned the concept of the-letter-of-the-law versus the-spirit-of-the-law.

Simply put the-letter-of-the-law means the law is applied exactly as written. For example - the speed limit on highways is 65 mph, any vehicle traveling at 66 mph or greater is in violation of traffic law and shall be issued a speeding ticket.

The spirit-of-the-law leaves room for officer discretion. This means I could consider other factors when deciding to issue a ticket, give a

warning, or ignore a violation all together. Following the spirit-of-the-law allowed me to apply the law as the legislature intended, especially in situations with extenuating circumstances or a warning was more appropriate.”

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 15:2-3, 3-4, 4-5

R. (1a) The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.

Whoever walks blamelessly and does justice;

who thinks the truth in his heart

and slanders not with his tongue.

R. The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.

Who harms not his fellow man,

nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor;

by whom the reprobate is despised,

while he honors those who fear the LORD.

R. The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.

Who lends not his money at usury

and accepts no bribe against the innocent.

Whoever does these things

shall never be disturbed.

R. The one who does justice will live in the presence of the Lord.

Reading II

Jas 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27

Dearest brothers and sisters:

All good giving and every perfect gift is from above,

coming down from the Father of lights,

with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change.

He willed to give us birth by the word of truth

that we may be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you
and is able to save your souls.

Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this:
to care for orphans and widows in their affliction
and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

A reflection, exegesis, and commentary on the scriptures. This

reading from James will cling to the inners of our conscience and call to action for the next five weeks. James shares sound, practical, and ethical advice. Words without actions are shallow, incomplete, and unacceptable for committed and genuine Christians. May your head sink into your heart and may your hands reach out in love. I encourage you to check out the video about the song, "Do Something" by Matthew West which could be used in various and sundry ways for catechetical purposes in parishes and classrooms, or simply let the song seep into the ground of your being where your Christianity takes root:

I woke up this morning
Saw a world full of trouble now
Thought, how'd we ever get so far down
How's it ever going to turn around
So I turned my eyes to Heaven
I thought, "God, why don't You do something?"

Well, I just couldn't bear the thought of
People living in poverty
Children sold into slavery
The thought disgusted me
So, I shook fist at Heaven
Said, "God, why don't You do something?"
He said, "I did, I created you"
If not us, then who
If not me and you

Right now, it's time for us to do something
If not now, then when
Will we see an end
To all this pain
It's not enough to do nothing
It's time for us to do something

I'm so tired of talking
About how we are God's hands and feet
But it's easier to say than to be
Live like angels of apathy who tell ourselves
It's alright, "somebody else will do something"
Well, I don't know about you
But I'm sick and tired of life with no desire
I don't want a flame, I want a fire
I want to be the one who stands up and says,
I'm going to do something"

We are the salt of the earth
We are a city on a hill
But we're never going to change the world
By standing still
No we won't stand still
No we won't stand still
No we won't stand still

Alleluia

Jas 1:18

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

The Father willed to give us birth by the word of truth
that we may be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Mk 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

When the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem
gathered around Jesus,

they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals
with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands.

—For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews,
do not eat without carefully washing their hands,
keeping the tradition of the elders.

And on coming from the marketplace
they do not eat without purifying themselves.

And there are many other things that they have traditionally
observed,

the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds. —

So, the Pharisees and scribes questioned him,

“Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders
but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?”

He responded,

“Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written:

This people honor me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me;

in vain do they worship me,

teaching as doctrines human precepts.

You disregard God’s commandment but cling to human tradition.”

He summoned the crowd again and said to them,
“Hear me, all of you, and understand.

Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person;
but the things that come out from within are what defile.

“From within people, from their hearts,
come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder,
adultery, greed, malice, deceit,
licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly.
All these evils come from within, and they defile.”

A reflection, exegesis, and commentary. In this Gospel of Mark, Jesus seriously cautions us to avoid empty rituals and quotes the prophet Isaiah, *...but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.* Rabbi Heschel captures the implication of empty rituals: “Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion--its message becomes meaningless.”

— Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism

The Pharisees and experts in the Jewish law complain to Jesus about some of his followers. Jesus clearly says it is more important to purify one's heart than to purify one's hands (although, currently of the relentless pandemic, it is highly recommended to religiously wash our hands). Sometimes, people scrupulously observe the rituals and letter of the law while their hearts are full of malice, envy, greed, and lust. One's external behavior does not reflect the truth of one's inner life. Jesus challenges the mindset of the Pharisees as He quotes Isaiah which provides some powerful contrasts: "lip service" with "heart," "dogmas" with "human precepts," and "God's commandment" with "human tradition." Jesus is acutely aware of the human tendency to absolutize, to legalize, and to quantify. Jesus says, "Hear me, all of you, and understand." We must go beyond the letter of the law and bask in the spirit of the law.

Beyond the Letter of the Law

by [Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson](#)

The great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to call this idolatry "pan-halakhism," reducing Judaism to a set of rules. As central as halakhah has always been (and must always be), the contours of Torah extend well beyond questions of law, well beyond issues of permitted and prohibited.

Today's Torah portion itself speaks to that religious realm beyond the reach of law. Much of righteous living cannot be reduced to simple rules. Prohibitions and mandates don't instill values such as kindness, selflessness, and charity. Above and beyond the rules is Judaism's insistence that we live our lives in a

way that testifies to God's goodness and justice and love. Such a way of living is called Kiddush ha-Shem, the sanctification of God's name. Any deed that makes God's sovereignty visible, any action that bears witness to God is Kiddush ha-Shem, the highest value within the orbit of Jewish values

Today's Torah portion is understood as the source of this mitzvah. God tells the Jewish people, "You shall not profane My holy name, that I may be sanctified in the midst of the people of Israel."

Life presents us with a simple choice: How we live our lives can either heighten a sense of God in the world or it can diminish it. There is no neutral, middle ground. By treating our fellow human beings with generosity, we bear witness to God's generosity. Acts of greed and selfishness make that bounty harder to perceive. By speaking out against oppression and bigotry, we affirm God as the righteous judge, as the One passionate about justice. To remain silent in the face of such suffering is to eclipse God's justice. By extending a basic trust to our fellows, we make it easier for them to feel God's willingness to trust them, to affirm the goodness of creation.

In everything we do—at work, on the road, at play—we can help other people to know that there is a God; we can bring credit to the God of Israel and to God's Torah. Far more than simply arguing about rules, the essence of Jewish piety is the compassion and love that the rules embody. As the great Nineteenth Century Rabbi Israel Salanter said, "Compassion is the foundation of belief. For a person who isn't compassionate, even the belief in God is a kind of idolatry."

In hell, Robert Cover noted, there will be only rules, and they will be strictly enforced. We make heaven here on Earth; we sanctify God's name and God's Torah by using it to express God's values of love, compassion, holiness, and justice. We are what we do, and to be a holy people we must live each moment as an opportunity to serve God.

-Roger J. Vanden Busch