

The entire book of Deuteronomy serves as a memory device. Here is the story of your redemption, it says. Here are the ways you might honour the God who comes to your rescue and calls you beloved. Here are the 'traditions of the elders', woven into the fabric of this on-going story of God's involvement with humankind. In one memorable example, they are actually written in stone. And that, as it turns out, is both a blessing and a curse.

A blessing, because it pays to know these foundational things: Love God – Honour your parents – don't kill, steal or covet. These remain pretty sensible ways to organize communities. Looking out for one another is something we've always needed reminding of, and if that reminder comes with divine authority, so much the better. But these sacred traditions have also proven problematic. The curse of them is in their permanence; ²"You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you." (*Deut. 4: 2*)

The text itself seems to insist on its own immortality, and that makes change - which is inevitable in communities, societies, religions and all living things - more challenging than it needs to be. The question of the faithful may seem simple enough: "How can we honour God?" But soon enough, a follow-up question begs to be answered: "How do we apply unchanging standards to a rapidly changing reality?"

As the Jewish people settled in this new land after generations of bondage and wandering, new situations met them with alarming regularity. They encountered new tribes, new nations and strange cultures. Some were hostile, others benign, but all of them had to be considered. Were they allies or enemies?

The only question that the Law of Moses asked of the people is "how do we honour God in these encounters?" Moses suggestion in the early part of his 'farewell speech' is simple: keep the statues and honour God, so that other nations will know you are "a great nation and a wise and discerning people" (Deuteronomy 4:6) But as time goes on, the question of 'what will honour God' seems to get muddled.

For once the nation is established, and a king appears, and once the temple is built, and the rules of God must be laid out to reveal God's rule (our idea, not God's, of course) things get...tricky.

What does it mean – exactly – to honour father and mother? Are we required to ‘see to the welfare’ of our parents in spite of our other duties to God? How much is required? How much (or little) can I get away with...?

This is the focus of the original argument in Mark’s gospel (chapter 7). One segment of the faithful population saw the new generation as slackers - not following the rules of cleanliness, which were meant to bring one closer to godliness. And Jesus points out how ‘the elders’ have adapted the rules for their own convenience. The law may say “honour father and mother’, but you stop short of helping your parents on the excuse that you have already given you life’s work over to God - and that has to count for something.

Playing with the rules - interpreting them in new situations - that’s just something that must be done. The law is a living beast, always needing to be tested against the next argument. So it is with the law of God, or that has been the habit of the faithful in every generation. And Jesus knows the law - knows the letter and the spirit of it - and his disdain for what law-keeping had become (and what it had done to the people’s relationship with God) is obvious. In one motion, he seems to dismiss every long held dietary law on the books.

“14 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile...” (Mark 7:14) The purpose of the law has become lost in the practice of it. Ritual washing had become an appearance to be kept up - a nervous tic in one’s religious life. What makes you unclean; what causes you to sin? It’s what comes from within you.

It’s much easier to imagine that sin (to use that good, old-fashioned word) is something beyond us. We would not deny the power it can have over us, but we are basically good (we tell ourselves) and this “thing” that separates me from God surely must not be my fault..so if I pray the right way, and offer the right sacrifice and attend the right rituals, I’m sure that I can rid myself of this nasty business. Sounds like sensible, straightforward, old-time religion, right? Repent and believe - turn from your wicked ways - confess and cleanse yourself etc. etc. etc...and not what Jesus says at all.

Jesus says, in effect, “master yourselves.” No ritual or ancient tradition can disguise the fact that we have the ability to think and plan and act in ways that do not honour God or our fellow humans. The rules that Moses insisted on - the ‘written-in-stone-law of God’ that became the focus of faithful life were first and foremost reminders to our collective (and individual) brains that, though we were clever and full of potential, WE ARE NOT GOD. It seems too simple, but there it is. Over and over in Deuteronomy, God is lifted up - as redeemer, judge, comforter, provider - and the people are urged to honour God in all things.

But God’s people remember that the story begins with a gift - created in the image of God, we are (*Genesis 1 and 2*) - and it is unfortunately easy, in the search for the spark of that image within us, to determine that we are god-like. Jesus may not have been aware of 20th century psychology, but he knew that the evil that comes from within us is the result of putting ourselves above God. The list of misery that follows - fornication, theft, murder, ²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly (*Mark 7: 21-22*)- these are acts of ego, committed when we imagine ourselves to be more important than any other.

When we play the part of a god, ignoring compassion and claiming power as our right, we separate ourselves from God. Sin is the act of challenging God’s supremacy - ignoring God’s sovereignty - placing ourselves beyond the need of God’s care and compassion. And Jesus’ advice about sin is true to his roots. He quotes Deuteronomy, when pressed: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your might. (and love your neighbour as yourself)” - The greatest commandment, he calls this - words which draw attention to the One who rules over us. Jesus would remind us (as Moses reminds his people) the “God is God...and we are not.” With this in mind, while the urge to sin still resides within us, it is tempered.

To acknowledge that God is God and we are not is an act of humility, and to think, and live humbly is to reduce greatly the temptation to theft, murder, adultery, avarice and various other kinds of wickedness. To live humbly is to live as Jesus did - serving and honouring God; serving and honouring others; not with mindless attention to the details of ‘the law’, but with constant awareness of God, whose grace gives life; whose glory brings joy; whose presence promises peace.