

Deuteronomy 30:9–14 (NRSV)

⁹ and the LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all your undertakings, in the fruit of your body, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, ¹⁰ when you obey the LORD your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Exhortation to Choose Life

¹¹ Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” ¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” ¹⁴ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

Not Too Far Away

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: July 11, 2010 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:9–14

It isn't rocket science. Here in the early part of the Bible God says to ancient Israel, God says to the chosen people, "Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away." From the beginning it has been simple. From the day that God spoke to Abraham and made a covenant with him, the way was supposed to be simple. If the people did a few things that God commanded, it would go well with them.

And yet we know the history of God's people was a history more of failures than successes in keeping the commandments. More often than not God's people have left God pulling hair from the holy head.

It was supposed to be easy. In many respects it was all captured in the Ten Commandments, or as Jesus says, in Love God with all your heart, soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. That's it.

But ancient Israel time after time forgot or ignored these simple mandates. The directives receded from the consciousness of the people, often within the course of a generation. Political exigencies were sometimes involved. When the empire next door demands that you worship its idols, the choice is obvious. Tomorrow the invaders come if you don't. On the other hand, you have vague promises of becoming a nation great and mighty God knows when. The choice is obvious. One might even say that it is in the nature of human survival to think that the commandments are naïve and unrealistic for people of the world.

Sometimes, though, the problem wasn't political survival. Sometimes the amnesia about the commandments was a matter of greed. Again, vague promises of rewards some day shine less brightly than today's piles of gold.

These reasons for backsliding, and more, are evidenced throughout the Bible. Never are they more apparent, though, than in that 140 or 150 year period between the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 and the fall of Judah to Babylon in 586. For a century and a half Judah's existence was delicate. Military and political threats abounded. Political demands were backed up with military might. Principles stood little chance in the face standing armies knocking at the door. And then there was another sad fact. Even in times of duress and hardship there can be wealth and self-indulgence for a few. Many were such self-serving opportunities that came to the kings of Judah. As men of the world, they survived by hook or by crook. They made unholy alliances in trade for perceived safety. They stocked their palaces with opulence and looked the other way when the poor went without. And though prophets like Isaiah spoke to them, the kings reviled them as idealistic and unschooled in the ways of the real world.

Eighty years or so into the period of this Southern Kingdom, in 640, an eight year-old boy, Josiah, came to power. His father had been assassinated after barely two years in office. Josiah in his youth was, of course, a puppet. His father's assassins had been caught and dispatched. The old dispensation was immediately restored. And the boy Josiah lived and ruled under the watchful eye of palace officials. From what we know, there was nothing new or

remarkable about the early years of Josiah's long reign. Judah had settled into patterns of accommodation to the powers without and into ways of corruption within. Though Josiah's great grandfather had been something of a reformer, there was hardly any memory of that long gone era. Rather, we can imagine that Josiah's reign in the early days was steady the course of his grandfather Manasseh, one of the most notorious kings in a notorious lineage. Early on the ways of the world held sway.

But the story goes that in 622, in Josiah's 18th year as king, the temple was under repair. In the reconstruction work an old lost scroll was uncovered. It was brought to the king. Here's a clip from the PBS program, "The Bible's Buried Secrets," that describes the moment.

Josiah weeps, so affected is he by the discovery. The old scroll so many years hidden in the dusty recesses of the Temple contained Israel's old Magna Carta, the law of Deuteronomy. This law, these words from God, Josiah realizes are not too high or too far away. Among them are the words of today's passage, words simple and sensible. They make Josiah weep. As a result of the discovery and its impact on the king, Josiah institutes the greatest era of reform in the history of Judah. The bible's record of these days is so taken by Josiah's reforms that it tells of them in detail and mentions almost nothing else about his reign. The Bible tells this wonderful story essentially of its own rediscovery. It is a watershed moment.

But human frailty and misadventure is adaptable if nothing else. The reform itself became corrupt. The people evidently became puffed up and self-righteous. They felt secure because they had rediscovered the law and were surely God's people. The Temple was refurbished. They were once again God's chosen ones. But Jeremiah tells us that the cure had within a short period become the sickness. On their lips constantly was the pious prayer, "Temple of the Lord, Temple of the Lord, Temple of the Lord." But Jeremiah tells them they have only the outer form of righteousness. Meanwhile their spirits have decayed. Their religion is pro-forma. The poor, the widow and the orphan go uncared for even as pious congratulate themselves. Jeremiah tells them that the Lord is sick of their piety and their sacrifices, which have no depth and have left their hearts cold and hard.

It would be hard to miss the parallel in Jesus' time, when he accuses the religious authorities of placing burdens on the people instead of helping to lift their load, when he talks of the hypocrites who pray to be seen, and when he points out time and again that the letter of the law can destroy the spirit of the law. The parallels with our time are clear, too, are they not? In our own time some who claim to be the most religious condemn rather than love others of God's children. It's simple. It's not too hard. It's not too far. Love your God with all your heart, soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself. Not too far in theory, but oh so far from what we manage to actually do. And the ability to be blind to our obvious contradictions, to be forgetful of the basic essentials is stunning, to clothe our iniquity in the sheep's clothing of godliness.

But in Judah soon disaster was impossible to ignore. Here's another clip.

Jeremiah's warnings went unheeded. In 586 the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and took the elites to exile. For ancient Israel it once again provided a point for theological reflection. In the Exile she thought long and hard about what had happened. Ultimately, she interpreted the disaster as God's recompense for her apostasy. Some say that in this time of Exile the scribes composed the Old Testament as we know it, arranging the old stories to emphasize the blessing pursuant to following the commandments, and curses to ignoring them. This interpretation led the Exiles, then, when they were allowed to return to Judah forty years hence, to begin anew with a commitment to God's way. Another clip.

So, the Exiles return. Ezra reads from the book of Deuteronomy. The new Temple and the new kingdom will remember the law, they say. It is not too hard. It is not too far away.

Except that it is. A half a millennium later Jesus makes it clear that little has changed by his day. The religious authorities and the people still do not live by the ancient codes. And, of course, two millennia after that, neither do we. If it's not hard; it's not easy, either. If it's not far away, it's farther away than we seem to be able to grasp.

So here's the truth. The commandments don't make obvious sense to us. We human beings are wired to see things differently. In religious terms, it might be called the stain of sin. Whatever it is, we don't quite believe that loving your neighbor, let alone your enemy, really makes sense. We don't quite believe that we should give away what we have. Some of the most religious people in America think that taxes and immigrants ought to be outlawed. When push comes to shove, we just aren't convinced that God's way makes any sense. In some respect, the whole emphasis we sometimes see on heaven is an admission that the calculus doesn't work. People don't get here on earth what the commandments say they deserve, so it must be that the rewards and punishments happen in eternity. Donald Trump may be rich and happy now, but just wait, the logic goes.

In short, what we are talking about here is nothing less than a full-scale reorientation of being human. In some sense religious mathematics hasn't worked. We have thought, and certainly the ancients thought, that the blessings and curses were on our terms. Follow God and you get power—remember Jesus' disciples, they thought that. Follow God and your enemy won't overtake you. Follow God and you will know riches beyond all imagining.

But in the end, the prophets, the law itself, and certainly Jesus were trying to say something a little different. The blessings and curses aren't so much on our terms as we thought. The whole idea is a transformation of the human heart such that new meanings of blessing and curse blossom forth.

Jeremiah told the people of the day when the law would be written on their hearts. It wasn't just that it would be easier to read there. It would be that loving your neighbor as much as yourself, really loving them, would inscribe a sense of the sacred, a sense of awe into your very flesh. Not coveting your neighbor's wife didn't mean that you would be rewarded with Angelina Jolie in return. It meant that a sense of the sanctity of right relationship would overflow from your heart. Loving your enemy wouldn't mean risking becoming a doormat in the hopes that God would give you the victory by holy intervention. Loving your enemy would mean that even in the midst of the ugly exigencies of this world in which we live our hearts would remain untainted by the corrosive power of hatred and unsullied by the distorting blindness to the humanity of those who oppose us.

“Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away,” says the Lord. All it requires is transformation. All it requires is a change in the human heart. Amen.