

St Andrew's URC, 2 September, 2018.

Readings

Psalm 15 read responsively (translation by Walter Houston)

LORD, who is allowed into your tent?

Who can live on your holy hill?

Everyone who lives honestly,
and does what is right.

**Everyone who means the truth when they speak,
and never tells lies about other people.**

**They don't harm anyone else,
or spread stories about their neighbours.**

They turn up their noses at mean people,
but they respect those who honour God.

**When they make a promise which costs them,
they don't try to get out of it.**

They don't lend in order to make money,
and they won't take money to condemn an innocent person.

Whoever lives like this is safe for ever.

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 5-8

James 1:19-27

Mark 7:1-2, 5-15, 21-23

'Just do what you're told!' Our ears at the tenderest age were assailed with these words, or ones very like them. 'Why won't you do what you're told?' Good little children are obedient, and obedience means doing what you're told. Our parents, so we were reliably informed, knew what was best for us. And anyway, even if they didn't, we ought to obey them.

That's all very well for children—though even children deserve to be told *why* they should do something. But when we grow up, we don't expect to be ordered around. At least, we shouldn't need it in our personal lives. In the workplace all too many people end up in jobs where someone has the right to tell them what to do, no questions allowed. But if we have grown up healthily, we have gained a sense of responsibility. We know what we ought to do and not do to be responsible to our family and our neighbours and society in general. But society as a whole needs laws, because some people have not grown up properly and behave as if they didn't have any responsibility to others around them.

So what do we make of the fact that the Bible, and not only the Bible but many other religious writings as well, often picture being good or religious as obeying God? And that obeying God means doing what God tells you. And the Bible, or parts of the Bible, claim to tell us what God tells us. So the first five books of the Bible, what Jews call the Torah, and Christians sometimes call the Pentateuch, consists to a large extent of laws or commands, given by God himself in the first four books and by Moses speaking in God's name in Deuteronomy.

In these commandments God tells his people what to do, or to put it better, he tells them how to order their life together. Jewish scholars count 613 commandments in these books, and in the short passage we heard from Deut Moses tells his hearers not to add to them or subtract anything from them. Yet no more than twelve of them, or even only two, are well known to most Christians, the commandments to love God and love our neighbour, picked out by Jesus as the greatest commandments, and for a dwindling number of us the so-called Ten Commandments. I expect most people in this church could repeat all ten, but I'm not sure that would be true of everyone in every church in the land.

They might be more interested in Jesus' teaching in the Gospels, and much of that also consists of commands. He speaks with the authority of God. 'The people of old were told... but I tell you' he says in the Sermon on the Mount. 'This is my commandment', he says in the Gospel of John, 'You shall love one another.' But he also criticises the Pharisees for adding to the biblical commandments, and at the same time getting round commandments which are in the Bible, such as commandment no. 5 in the Ten Commandments, 'You shall honour your father and your mother.' In his view, they were nullifying the commands of God and obeying human commands.

So it seems all we have to do is look in the Bible to see what God has told us to do, and do it. But it's not quite as simple as that, and I don't think any Christian has ever thought it was, even though some people would like it to be as simple as that.

The commandments in the Torah sometimes contradict each other. Jews can't observe many of them, because so many are linked to Temple worship and the Temple was destroyed shortly after Jesus' time. And Christians never have observed most of them. Paul tells Christians they are free of the Law, which will not bring them salvation. But the most important reason is that a morality which is based on 'doing what you're told' is simply not appropriate for grown-up people. Yes, we can do with guidance, but not orders, and orders rigidly obeyed in the wrong situation can be terribly destructive, especially when they are imposed by human beings on other human beings.

Fleur and I saw a film the other day that is a splendid—and a terrible—illustration of this. It is called *Apostasy*. Do go and see it if you get the chance. It takes place in a Jehovah's Witnesses community in Oldham. A mother has two daughters. The younger one, Alex, is the ideal Jehovah's Witness, who has completely accepted the sect's theology. She suffers from a severe form of anaemia, and the only thing that can save her in a crisis, when she collapses and is taken to hospital, is a blood transfusion, which in line with JW teaching she refuses and dies. She is 16 years old and is honoured as the community's heroine. The elder one, Louise, gets herself pregnant by a boy who is not a JW, and so is not under the community's control. She is excommunicated from the fellowship for fornication. No one in the fellowship is allowed to communicate with her except for necessary purposes, one of which is regular meetings with the elders to get her to repent and come to a better frame of mind. She leaves home, but her mother keeps visiting her, for

necessary purposes of course. But the experience of her sister as well as her own makes her eventually refuse the chance to be reconciled, and she leaves the community altogether, which means her mother can never speak to her again. In a few short weeks she has lost both of her daughters and her baby grandchild as well.

We may say, Well, that's the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the rule against blood transfusion is an unwarranted interpretation of a commandment in the Bible, against eating blood, that other Christians don't observe anyway. (I'm sure a few of you like black puddings.) It's like the Pharisees' washing their hands, a human invention added to God's commands. But there are more orthodox Christian groups that have created as much havoc by equal rigidity, especially over sexual matters. The treatment of unmarried mothers in the Catholic Church in Ireland in the 50s and earlier was crueller than the treatment of Louise in the film, if only because the JWs don't have the power to immure them in a laundry and prevent them communicating with anyone outside the walls.

We don't need orders but we do need guidance, and there is tons of guidance in the Bible. Let's have a look at two of our readings to see what help they give.

When James tells his readers to be doers and not just hearers of 'the word', what is the 'word' he is talking about? The examples he picks are not taken from the Torah. 'Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger'. You can find that teaching in the book of Proverbs, but Proverbs doesn't claim to be God's commands. 'Pure and incorrupt religion means taking care of widows and fatherless children in their distress, and keeping oneself clear of the world's taint.' The Torah forbids people to take advantage of widows and their children, but you have to go elsewhere in the OT to find teaching on the positive virtue of helping them. Of course, James is only using widows and their children as one example of what we ought to be doing, because they were the traditional example of vulnerable people. He means we should be helping anyone who is poor or vulnerable and needs help. James calls all this 'the perfect law of freedom', which we should be doing and not just listening to. But it doesn't consist of commandments which you have to observe literally. It is the loving guidance which comes with the Gospel, and because we know God loves us, that sets us free to act, under his guidance, in the way that we see as best in the circumstances.

So, if you do that, will you be obeying God? Of course you will, because that is what God wants.

What Deut in our first reading says about the other nations is very interesting. Moses says, 'The peoples, when they hear all these laws, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!"' In other words, the other nations, who have no idea of the divine source of Israel's laws, can see that they are wise and good and just, even though their own laws are not nearly as good. 'What other great nation has statutes and ordinances that are as just as this entire law that I am setting before you?' So that means that the laws

Moses is going to set forth are not arbitrary. Everybody can see, just by the light of nature, that they make sense and are just. We have consciences, and we can think, and assess the biblical commandments. It is not a question of an arbitrary, unquestionable voice from on high telling us what to do, like a naughty child, but rather guidance helping our own reason and conscience to decide what is the right thing to do. And that is probably rather nearer than you might think to the way the writers of Deut, who put their teaching into the mouth of Moses, thought about it. There's a lot of evidence that laws in the ancient Near East, which includes Israel, were intended as examples and guidance for judges rather than as absolute rules to be obeyed literally. Viewed in that light, the biblical law is a rich heritage of moral thinking that can help us, especially in our social and political life, rather than a millstone that we must either drag or drop (and most of us drop it, of course).

From that point of view we might be more sympathetic to the Pharisees than the Gospel account is. For one thing, they didn't impose their rules on ordinary people: their handwashing and so on were a discipline for the religious elite. They are surprised to find disciples of a rabbi being so lax about it, but they are not in a position to insist that they do the same.

But what about the 'Korban' permission? What Jesus is criticising is that they are apparently permitting a man to leave his parents without support in their old age—there were no pensions—provided he dedicates the portion of his income that would have gone to them to God, which effectively means to the temple. And that would be outrageous. But suppose a Pharisee said, 'All we mean is that provided your parents are well provided for anyway, by another son or other secure income, then you can decide whether to use the income that you might have used for them to support the Temple'? You can imagine Jesus and the Pharisees having a debate about it.

His overarching point, though, is something different. True obedience to God is not a matter of outward obedience, it's precisely not a matter of observing rules, or what today we would call a box-ticking exercise, which the Pharisees might have tended towards; it's a matter of the heart, of our inward disposition, because it is from the heart, from what we are really like inside, that all the wicked acts come that Jesus lists at the end of the passage: murder, adultery, stealing and so on. And likewise it is from our inward disposition that goodness comes: love and kindness and humility and self-control. But these must be disciplined by the guidance of God, and that is where the commandments and the guidance come in.

There is one more thing, one more aspect of obedience. In the Lord's Prayer, we pray 'Your kingdom come, your will be done', and if we are not to be hypocrites, praying that prayer means committing ourselves to accepting God's will for us as Jesus did in Gethsemane, 'Your will, not mine be done'. Jesus obeyed God by letting himself be arrested, tried and crucified.

Most of us won't have to offer that extremity of obedience, but more than a few have had to in the history of Christianity, the latest perhaps being the 24 Egyptian Coptic Christians murdered by ISIS in Libya on the seashore, the

event which inspired a modern icon featured in this month's Reform magazine. The Coptic Church has recognised them as martyrs, rightly, for the only reason why they were killed was because they were Christians, and you may be sure that each of them was given the chance to embrace Islam, and refused. That's why later in the same prayer we say, 'Lead us not into temptation', or, better translated, 'Do not put us to the test'—which doesn't mean just any test, but the ultimate test. We might not be able to pass it, for God's answer to that prayer may not be 'No, I won't' for everyone, but we still pray like Jesus, 'Your will, not mine, be done.'

So to sum it up, obeying God means: taking our God-given conscience seriously; taking the commandments in the Bible seriously as guidance but not slavishly; and being open to the leading of the Spirit through prayer in every situation. In the words of Psalm 15 (not my translation this time, but the nrsv's): 'Those who do these things shall never be moved.' That's to say, they will stand fast.

But the fact is that in the end we are never going to get it right every time. There will be plenty of occasions when we don't 'do these things', when we do what we know is wrong, or don't do what we know or believe is right. And we don't stand fast, we slip and fall over in disgrace. Because this happens to us all, it is so important that we shouldn't judge others. Because we fail, we need every day the forgiving and restoring grace of Christ to wipe the slate clean and start again. And that is what we shall pray for in our next hymn.