

**Opening Prayer**

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

**Deuteronomy 30:15-20**

<sup>30:15</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 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.

**Commentary**

The setting is the plains of Moab, as the Israelites prepare to cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. The book states that Moses is the speaker, but the laws given in Chapters 12-28 are updated versions of those in earlier books. Times have changed since Sinai: the people were semi-nomads then; now they are farmers and shepherds. It is a time of religious revival, of new commitment to God. V. 6 puts the Law in a new light: God will “circumcise your heart” – he will work changes within the people so love becomes the driving force. Note also v. 20: “loving the Lord your God ...”. They will keep the Law because they love God.

Our reading summarizes Chapters 27-28, which tell of:

- the ways in which the Israelites will be blessed if they keep this expanded and updated covenant; and
- the consequences of failing to keep many of the laws, i.e. being excluded from the community.

Then it offers a choice: keep the laws in love and obedience, or suffer the consequences of following other paths. Keeping the Law because you love God will have many benefits, including long life (“length of days”, v. 20).

## Reflection

Deuteronomy describes the “choice” before all of us: to love and obey God, or to “go astray” after “other gods.” The first choice leads to life, and the other, to destruction. Have you ever viewed your own relationship with God in such stark terms?

### 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

<sup>3:1</sup> And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, <sup>3</sup> for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? <sup>4</sup> For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely human? <sup>5</sup> What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. <sup>6</sup> I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. <sup>7</sup> So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. <sup>8</sup> The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. <sup>9</sup> For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

## Commentary

In Chapter 1, Paul says that he has learned that there are divisions in the church at Corinth, that some adhere to particular leaders of the community rather than to Christ. The faith only makes sense to those who understand it spiritually, so he addresses them not as “spiritual people” (v. 1) but as neophytes (“infants”). He has been criticized for oversimplifying the good news, but their “jealousy and quarrelling” (v. 3) demonstrate that they are still only earthly-minded, are still behaving according to human standards (“inclinations”).

It is natural to be attached to the person who welcomed you into the church, but you need to recognize that they are all “servants” (v. 5) of Christ. Each has a distinct function in bringing you to faith. Paul founded the church at Corinth (“planted”, v. 6); Apollos nurtured faith (“watered”) in the community; but it is God who causes spirituality and faith to grow. He and Apollos have the same objective (v. 8). Perhaps the rewards (“wages”) are in seeing the church grow; perhaps they are in heaven. Paul and Apollos are co-workers. In the following verses, Paul expands on the church as “God’s building” (v. 9).

## Reflection

“For we are God's **servants**, working together; you are God's field, God's building,” Paul writes to the quarreling Corinthian church. If you were to describe your area of service within the church in one word, what would that word be?

## **Matthew 5:21-37**

<sup>5:21</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.<sup>31</sup> "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'<sup>32</sup> But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.<sup>33</sup> "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.'<sup>34</sup> But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,<sup>35</sup> or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.<sup>36</sup> And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.<sup>37</sup> Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

## **Commentary**

Jesus has made clear that his mission is not to do away with ("abolish") the Old Testament; rather he fleshes out its meaning fully ("fulfill", v. 17). He speaks particularly about Mosaic law; it will remain in force until he comes again at the end of the era (v. 18). In v. 19, he seems to soften his tone: whether or not one keeps and teaches every one of the 613 laws, one will be admitted to the Kingdom. The scribes and Pharisees kept all the laws scrupulously. Now he explains how their adherence to the Law is insufficient.

Each of Jesus' expansions of the Law begins with "[You have heard that] it was said" (vv. 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). He then quotes a law. "Ancient times" refers to the days of Moses. The Ten Commandments forbid the act of murder (v. 21). Jesus extends this law to include propensities to kill: nursing anger, calling someone good for nothing (as the Greek says) or a "fool" (v. 22). Verses 23-24 say that reconciliation takes priority even over worship, to a Jew the most sacred act. Verses 25-26 may be a parable: the Kingdom of God is at hand; seek reconciliation "quickly" lest God, the judge, finds against you. Jesus offers forgiveness.

Verses 27-28 give another example. Avoiding adultery is not enough; even for a man to "look at a woman with a lustful eye" (Revised English Bible) is unacceptable. God expects purity of

thought and desire as well as of action. Verses 29-30 look extreme; they are meant figuratively, not literally. Jesus advises that one discard, promptly and decisively, anything in one's life that tempts one to turn away from God.

Divorcing a wife was easy for a man in Palestine: in some circles, he could simply write her a "certificate of divorce" (v. 31) without cause. Jesus' point here is that marriage is indissoluble, lifelong. He probably thinks of Genesis 2:24: in marriage, God makes man and wife "one flesh". He makes one exception: "on the ground of unchastity" (v. 32). The Greek word means unlawful sexual behavior, including adultery. He forbids remarriage because the first marriage still exists.

This extension of the Law was not onerous for first-century Christians, for they expected the world to end soon, and they could live separately from their spouses. One swore an oath (vv. 33-37) to guarantee that what one said on a particular occasion was the truth. We still do it in court appearances today. Isaiah 66:1 refers to "earth" (v. 35) as God's "footstool"; "Jerusalem" is God's city ("... of the great King"). They are part of his realm. To "swear by your head" (v. 36) is to swear by oneself. Jesus says one should always tell only the truth. When one does, there is no need for swearing, or swearing-in. A truthful person is consistent in what he says. Inconsistency is a sign that one has turned against God (v. 37). Perhaps Jesus actually said something like James 5:12: "let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no."

## Reflection

In the Sermon on the Mount, of which this passage is a part, Jesus has set for Christians a new measure. What he calls us to is not some impossibly high standard, but rather to a new wholeness, an integrity of thought, feeling, and action. When you read Jesus' "But I say to you" statements, do you feel burdened or liberated? Remember that Jesus says that his "yoke is easy, and (his) burden is light." (Matthew 11:30)

## Responsive Psalter

from Psalm 119:1-8

- <sup>119:1</sup> Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.  
<sup>2</sup> **Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart,**  
<sup>3</sup> who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.  
<sup>4</sup> **You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.**  
<sup>5</sup> O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!  
<sup>6</sup> **Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.**  
<sup>7</sup> I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous ordinances.  
<sup>8</sup> **I will observe your statutes; do not utterly forsake me.**

## Closing Prayer:

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**