

“Clean Hands, Clean Heart”

The book of Deuteronomy is a crucial part of scripture. It is the last book of the Torah also called the Pentateuch or the Five Books of Moses. The Five Books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—were called that because for years they were thought to have all been written by Moses. They were not, but faith and fact are different things, and believing the books were written by Moses gave them extra credence. To call this set of books the Pentateuch uses a Greek word that denotes a collection of five books. There was something special about the books that they should be grouped together, but Pentateuch just means five. The specialness of the books would be defined in another way. That way could have been calling the five books the Torah. Torah is often translated as law. Indeed, in the New Testament the translators put that work in Jesus’ mouth whenever he refers to “the law and the prophets” (two of the three parts of the Hebrew Bible). A better translation for Torah is teaching. The five books are God’s teaching to the Hebrews. This was teaching which would prepare the Hebrews for their entry into the Promised Land.

The Book of Deuteronomy is intended to summarize all the teaching in the other four books, although it may have been the first of the books put into writing.¹ It is called Moses’ valedictory speech to the Hebrews as they prepare to end their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness and enter into the land of milk and honey. The reason the sojourn lasted so long was that the people had rebelled against God during the Exodus. God decided that none of that generation would enter the Promised Land. Forty years was considered the span of a generation and so in Deuteronomy we stand with Moses on Mt. Nebo looking into the Promised Land. As he prepares to die, he reminds this new generation of God’s promises and God’s requirements.

The Torah is much more than a set of laws or teachings. It does include the Ten Commandments and another six hundred commandments about eating, clothing, the treatment of elders and neighbors, and rules about sexuality and childbirth. These rules were commanded by God as ways for Jews to express their relationship to the Holy. What binds together many of these commandments is the importance of cleanliness. Not 21st century cleanliness with antiseptics, soaps, and sanitizers. They were discussing ritual cleanliness. That is what makes a person acceptable before the Lord.

Therefore, one did not want to eat foods that were considered unclean such as pork, rabbit, horse, squirrel, shellfish, reptiles, insects, birds of prey, and combinations of meat and dairy products. Places and utensils used for preparing food needed to be ritually clean. Humans must be also. One should

¹ Many Biblical scholars believe that the Book of the Law that was “discovered” in the Temple during Josiah’s reign is the Book of Deuteronomy. 2 Chronicles 34:14-15

wash hands, cooking vessels, and food with living water, running water. After engaging in certain activities, it was important to wash the whole person in living water. It was not a bath with soap and shampoo which we might do for sanitary reasons, the importance was the moving water that made the person ritually clean before God.

As you might guess a lot of people did not follow these rules rigorously. Think about it. We put up signs reminding people to wash their hands in public toilets during the pandemic, because we know that people do not wash their hands after using the toilet. A flight attendant I met recently said that they believe that at least half of the people using airplane lavatories do not wash their hands. They can tell by the how few towels are used during a flight. Eww.

The Pharisees knew that people were not following the cleanliness commandments and were trying to revive the following of these codes. They kept the commandments and expected faithful Jews to do likewise. Jesus is a rabbi, and they assume he would teach these rules to his followers. Apparently, he did not or at least he was not rigorous in doing so. While Jesus does not disagree with the Pharisees, he focuses on what true cleanliness is.

Jesus is not opposed to washing, he is opposed to making it an idol. If we are so focused on the rule we are missing how our actions, desires, and thoughts are what truly make us unclean. Let me put it this way. Would you rather encounter someone who washed his hands religiously but harmed people or someone who did not wash his hands but loved and cared for people. Jesus is saying that we lose sight of the importance of cleanliness when we focus on the outward actions instead of the inward intentions.

Look at the list of sins that he lists when confronting the Pharisees. He says, "For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly." These are evil things, and no amount of hand washing is going to cleanse.

Rather, the idea is that we cleanse ourselves ritually and by doing so we remind ourselves that we are to be clean in all ways before the Lord. The outward action is supposed to be a reminder of how we are to live in every aspect of our lives. Unfortunately, the Pharisees seem to have gotten stuck on the letter of the law and forgotten the spirit of it. That is why Jesus quotes Isaiah saying "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."

The psalmist poses and answers the question that is also in Jesus' teaching. Listen as I read Psalm 15 which we read together earlier.

1 LORD, who may dwell in your tabernacle? *
who may abide upon your holy hill?

2 Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right, *
who speaks the truth from his heart.

3 There is no guile upon his tongue;
he does no evil to his friend; *
he does not heap contempt upon his neighbor.

4 In his sight the wicked is rejected, *
but he honors those who fear the LORD.

5 He has sworn to do no wrong *
and does not take back his word.

...

7 Whoever does these things *
shall never be overthrown.²

None of us will be blameless because we are human. We can work toward that state of life by following the precepts of the Lord, “not only with our lips but in our lives.”³ When we do our best to live in the spirit of God’s laws, we get nearer to blamelessness. We become more loving and caring. We become closer to the person God created us to be. That is what God wants, what the Pharisees sought but missed, and what Jesus tries to point us back toward. That is the bold proclamation of a full, sacred, and God-filled life.

To end I would like to share a prayer written by Thomas à Kempis who was a priest, monk and author in the 15th century.

“Grant me, O Lord, to know what I ought to know,
To love what I ought to love,
To praise what delights thee most,
To value what is precious in thy sight,
To hate what is offensive to thee.
Do not suffer me to judge according to the sight of my eyes,
Nor to pass sentence according to the hearing of the ears of ignorant
[persons];
But to discern with a true judgment between things visible and spiritual,
And above all, always to inquire what is the good pleasure of thy will.
Amen.”

² The Book of Common Prayer, Psalm 15, p. 599

³ Ibid, The General Thanksgiving, p. 125