

## Scripture

### **Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9**

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 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.

6 You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" 7 For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? 8 And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

9 But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children—

### **Psalm 15**

1 O Lord, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?

2 Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,  
and speak the truth from their heart;  
3 who do not slander with their tongue,  
and do no evil to their friends,  
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;  
4 in whose eyes the wicked are despised,  
but who honor those who fear the Lord;  
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;  
5 who do not lend money at interest,  
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved.

### **James 1:17-27**

17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

### **Mark 7:1-11**

7 Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. 3 (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; 4 and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.)

5 So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” 6 He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;  
7 in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’  
8 You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

9 Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! 10 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’

11 But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)— 12 then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, 13 thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.”

This is the Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God**

### Sermon:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Do it. Just do it.

This is the theme running through all of our scripture readings this morning.

Deuteronomy urges us to follow God's statutes and laws, and that when we do other people will see our example and admire our ways. We are to do the things that God commands us to do and to teach our children to do the same, and in so doing draw others into God's kingdom.

The Psalmist asks 'who will dwell with God?' The answer is those who walk blamelessly and do what is right. Those who do the will of God.

The Mark scripture is all about what we do – specifically it's about discerning whether we are doing what serves God, or doing what serves ourselves.

And finally James exhorts us to be doers of the word – not just hearers. I appreciate the care that the translators took with this passage – they intentionally chose the word hear over listen.

When we urge somebody to listen there is an implicit exhortation to action in the words. We don't just mean pay attention, we mean 'hear my words and then do what I ask.'

Be doers of the word. Just do it.

This kind of scripture tends to make people uncomfortable for a couple of reasons.

Firstly, the message is all about obedience. Not grudging compromise, but wholehearted enthusiastic obedience. Many people don't like that message; they didn't like it back then and we certainly don't like it in our current culture that prides itself on freedom and individuality. We don't like being told what to do.

Aside from our general resistance to obedience, the more theologically minded among you may be thinking 'Hold on a minute here; this is starting to sound like works salvation and I'm not buying it. This is not the way that God works.'

Now, works salvation is one of those stained-glass churchy words – let me unpack it for you. In our reformed tradition there are five key principles, one of which in Latin is *sola gratia*. Essentially it states that we cannot earn or buy God's favour.

Our salvation comes only through the grace of God, it is an unearned and undeserved gift. The gift of eternal life, like the gift of our bodily life, has nothing to do with our own efforts. We

didn't conceive and birth ourselves, and neither can we attain eternal life, here and in the hereafter, through our own power. It's all God. Not at all us.

If this is the case, then what does it matter what we do? Of what purpose is obedience if it doesn't earn us a place in heaven?

To answer this question I'd like to turn to another passage found in Mark's gospel. 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'

These are the words spoken by God during the baptism of Jesus. As Jesus arose from the waters of the Jordan God made a grand pronouncement about his son, introducing him to all those gathered on the banks of the river as the Beloved, the one in whom God was well pleased.

But what was he pleased about? Jesus hadn't done anything yet that was worth writing about according to Mark. No miracles, no healings, no banquets by the seaside, no water into wine. Nothing.

And yet God was pleased. This must be what was in Luther's mind when he declared that salvation is through the grace of God alone. Jesus didn't work for God's approval, and neither do we have to.

But, look at what happens next. The order in which events unfold is crucial. Jesus received an identity and a blessing from his father, was filled with power by the Holy Spirit, and immediately was driven into the wilderness to face down the devil. After that, he began his ministry of healing and deliverance.

It is only after receiving his identity of son, the security of being beloved, and the power from the Spirit that Jesus had the strength and authority to stand toe to toe with Satan and to begin commanding the forces of nature.

Grace, love, and power flow from the father to the son. The son received the love and power of God and used those things in obedience to the father to serve both God and the people that God made. This in turn brought glory to the father and in this way the cycle continues.

God loved Jesus, Jesus loved God and other people, and those other people loved God, and round and round it goes. We love because God loved us first.

This is what God had ordained from the very beginning. God names us and empowers us, we respond by using that power in obedient service, that action glorifies God and brings others into God's kingdom.

What happens if we try to reverse this flow? Instead of beginning secure in God's love and responding in enthusiastic obedience, what happens if we try to begin with obedience?

The first problem we run into is that instead of beginning with confidence as sons and daughters of God, we begin as nothing. If we are attempting to win God's favour through good works then automatically that means we begin without God's favour. That's a very insecure and disempowering way to start our journey.

Instead of being motivated by love, instead what drives us will be guilt, shame, and fear. We will never know if we measure up to God's standard, in fact, inside of us will be a little voice that will make sure that we know that we will never measure up. We will never be able to work our way into God's good graces in a way that will ever give us security and peace. We will never attain our identity as God's children through this method.

If we earn God's love and God's fatherhood through our actions then we can also lose God's love through our actions. If God's love is conditional then we begin with fear and will never be free of that fear.

What is more, we will have a very hard time trying to work for our salvation. Since we begin the journey forsaken by God, any steps we take will have to be using our own strength and trying to act out of our own authority.

When we try this route we will find that we are trying to journey towards God without God. These are the 'religious' types who are overly concerned with what they are doing, and even more, what other people are doing. There is usually little mercy and little love coming from these types because they don't experience mercy and love themselves. Every day is a life or death battle with eternal consequences, and the saddest part is that as miserable as they become and as miserable as they make the lives of those around them, they will never achieve their identity as children of God through their blind adherence to the letter of the law.

No. God set the order in the very beginning. God created humans and blessed them. As they looked about them in wonderment on that first day God said 'Get some rest tonight, for tomorrow is Sabbath.' The first couple spent their first full day basking in the love and delight of their maker, and only after that were they assigned work to do.

We need to receive before we can give. God's grace equips us to serve.

This paradigm also works very well in today's climate of identity politics and intersectionality. Briefly put, identity politics is concerned with power dynamics. It places people into identifiable groups of race, gender, sexuality and based on how these attributes intersect in any particular person proponents of identity politics will determine where people fit in the hierarchy of authority and power. By identifying people in this manner, the idea is that some kind of social engineering can strip away power from some groups and assign it to others to seek more egalitarian outcomes. It's all about power and authority with an eye on distinguishing who are the oppressed and who are the oppressors.

If we look at this same diagram we can see the proper relationship between power and authority. When God gives us our identity of sons and daughters, he also confers authority. Jesus the son of God, was able to perform miracles in God's name. He had authority over spirits and all of creation.

Towards the end of his earthly ministry Jesus said to his disciples 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'

We too, have authority by virtue of our identity in Jesus. It is not an empty authority. With this authority also comes power.

When Jesus sent the twelve out in pairs he sent them empty-handed. No extra cloak, bread, money – take nothing, he said. But he did send them with power and authority over all demons and illnesses.

Power given by God is intended to serve God's interests. The power to heal, to feed, to liberate, to comfort – all of these serve to increase God's kingdom. Using power in this way spreads justice throughout the land.

If we come at it the wrong way, we see power and authority as the world does. First, we seize power, usually through the use of fear and force. Once we have exercised our power over others we then claim authority, which we then use to consolidate more power to serve our own interests. Ultimately, power and authority that is seized through violence and fear and used to serve ourselves leads to an open attack on the ultimate authority – God. All totalitarian systems deny the existence of God.

Of course, power and authority sought in this way does not contribute to justice but leads inevitably to injustice, which is what the identity politics adherents are pointing out to us.

The ways of the world lead to abuse of power, but when we obey and follow God's plan we are empowered and we empower others.

Now we come back to the beginning and the idea of obedience. We often think that when we submit or obey that we lose liberty, that our lives are somehow diminished. What find though, is that those who don't obey – who insist on going backwards through this triangle – live lives marked by fear and insecurity, never sure of their standing with God, never sure of their position relative to others, and always afraid of losing power or prestige. People who live this way create injustice and sow mercilessness and cruelty.

But, when we move through the triangle the correct way – in obedience – we discover that we are greatly loved, that we are claimed as children, we are given authority to act, we are given the power with which to act. When we obediently act in God's power each step we take claims

territory for the peaceable kingdom, we are planting seeds, laying bricks, being lifted up and lifting others up. Oddly enough, self-centred disobedience leads us to insecurity and weakness, while obedience to God leads us to lives of liberty and fulfillment.

James calls us away from passive faith into active kingdom living. Be doers – don't just get busy – but be doers *of the Word* and you will be blessed in your doing.

I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

