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Deuteronomy 14: 1 - 11  
Romans 14: 1-23  
Matthew 15: 10-11,17-20

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Title: What Comes Out of You?

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Anyone who tells you that it is easy to be a faithful Christian hasn't been paying attention. Take our first reading – a fine list of specific foods that should or should not be eaten. A good list, a fine list. A list of what is clean and what is unclean.

In the second reading from Paul's letter to the Romans we have Paul not dismissing the importance of the law, but placing it secondary to being faithful. Some, he said, find they must be faithful by strict adherence to the laws. Others may not think the laws are important, but must follow them to help the faith of those who are weaker.

What is the relationship between the laws that are found in Old Testament and the life of a faithful Christian?

It is not an easy question. In fact, it is a question which Christians have wrestled with since the beginning. The first Christians were already Jews. They had grown up in the Jewish tradition, they found Jesus teaching in the Jewish temple. The Christians worshiped in the temple on Saturday and met on Sunday in celebration of the resurrection.

But then a crisis – perhaps the first in the church – when the first non-Jewish converts came to faith. They did not follow the Jewish customs. Some ate unclean food. Some were not circumcised. The controversies nearly split the early church. These were not bad people, these were not evil people. These were people who struggled with what it meant to be the faithful people of God. There were faithful people who could point to the witness of Scripture for how people should live. Paul was able to carve a careful path to help Christians everywhere find the way between the requirements of the law and the new life in Christ.

There were other controversies as well. There were others who wanted to say that Jesus was not in fact the Son of God, that He was not both human and divine. There are scant references in the Bible that speak to either of those issues. They were crucial issues to the Christian faith which nearly divided the church.

The first and best guide for the church has always been Scripture. Calvin compared Scripture to a set of spectacles – glasses. It is one of my favorite ways of understanding the importance of the Bible. Without Scripture, we might be able to see, but not correctly. I was talking with someone just the other day about seeing with glasses for the first time. “For the first time, leaves were an individual thing instead of this sort of moss on trees.” Life seen without Scripture might bear a close resemblance to the truth, but it isn't the whole truth.

It is not a simple matter because strict adherence to the law led to the Pharisees. Jesus had no stronger words than to those who used God's law as a weapon, a tool of division and of feeling superior. It is not a simple matter because throwing away the law is throwing away the foundation on which everything else is based. Jesus did not dismiss the law, although He did not always follow

it to the extent of those around Him. Perhaps the clearest story that illustrates this is the story of the woman caught in adultery. It is a story often used to illustrate that Jesus dismissed the requirements of the law, but if we listen carefully, we can hear the balance that Jesus struck. Remember that all the people had left their stones behind and left the woman alone with Jesus who finally spoke to the woman saying:

“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

Jesus walked that line. He clearly did not dismiss the importance of the law – He did not say “Go your way and do whatever you want to.” He did not say “How dare they hold on to outdated laws of an ancient society that do not reflect new findings in science and wisdom.” He very clearly said “I do not condemn you” – yet He clearly did not approve of what she had done “do not sin again.” I feel I should say that if the man had been brought before him, I suspect Jesus would have said the same thing to him as well.

Was the law important to Jesus? Absolutely. Were people important to Jesus? Absolutely. He kept them both, not dismissing the law, and not forgetting that the law is supposed to give life, to restore life, not take it away. It was dangerous for Jesus to walk that line – for fear that He would be seen as “soft on crime.” Jesus, some might think, didn’t care about the law, didn’t care about the rules that God’s people had followed for thousands of years. But if we read closely what Jesus said and did, we will see how often He demonstrated He cared a great deal for the law.

What Jesus cared about was the transformation of your life. That transformation did not come about simply by following the external rules. The transformation can be recognized by what comes out of people – in the form of how they act and what they do and even how they think. Jesus offers a list of signs to look for in our own hearts and in the hearts of others:

evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.

Not surprisingly, the *opposite* of each item on that list coincides with one of the laws or commands of God. What comes out of us reflects what has gone into us. Let me say that again because I think it bears repeating and clarity. What comes out of us is a reflection of what has gone into us. Paul puts this most wonderfully in his letter to the Philippians chapter 4:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul wants us to think about – reflect on – those things that are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing (to God, in context) commendable, that which is excellent and worthy of praise. I’m sure everyone

is familiar with the expression “Garbage in, garbage out.” If we fill ourselves with the negative, then the negative will come out. But we should all agree that we will no longer talk about these things in the negative.

Let’s not talk about “garbage in” – instead

Let’s talk about Godliness “in.”

Let’s talk about Holiness “in.”

Let’s talk about bringing truth and honor and justice “in.”

A friend once told me that when a new bank teller is learning to spot counterfeit money, the best way to teach him or her is NOT to bring in a lot of counterfeit money and let him handle it. There are so many variations on counterfeit money it is hard to learn to identify them all. No, the best way to teach him how to spot what is fake is to make sure that the teller knows what is real and true. The more exposure a new bank teller has to *real* money, the more likely they are to be able to tell when someone hands them a fake bill. Remember that the best counterfeits – the best deceptions, the best lies – are the ones that look like the truth.

How can we fill ourselves with the truth when it comes to God? It involves giving ourselves over to God, body and soul together. The two are connected, and only by offering both to God can we be transformed, as Paul wrote in Romans chapter 12:

I appeal to you therefore....to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God....Do not be *conformed* to this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect

Paul had no doubt that our blind acceptance of the ways of the world would hurt us. He saw that nothing less than offering our very selves to God will bring about that transformation of what comes out of our hearts and will be seen in our actions.

We have the tools to examine our lives. We have the spectacles of Scripture to work as our guide. We have the questions to ask “What comes out of me? Is it what God wants? Is it what I want?” If the answer is no, we have the path to change it although it will take much prayer and grace and hard work. We can fill ourselves with the truth and find our hearts and minds transformed.

It can begin today and in this moment, and it will continue for all the days, weeks and years to come, but a renewal needs only a moment to begin.

Shall we pray?

Almighty and ever-loving Father: we come before you asking that you would take hold of our hearts and minds, that you would take our very lives. Increase what is good and pleasing to you, and help us to have the courage to seek to change that which does not give glory and honor to your name. We thank you for the mercy and grace that you have shown to us and know that it is your love that saves us. We want to be your living witnesses on this earth, that those who see our lives may see your Son and praise your holy name. Amen.