

18th Sunday in Pentecost 2020

Readings - Exodus 20:1-4,7-9,12-20, Psalm 19, Philippians 3:4-14, Matthew 21:33-46

Introduction: Law and grace, works/righteousness and obedience, freedom in the Messiah have all been topics of debate since Acts 15 and the advent of Christianity. There has always been a tension between our understanding of the letter of the Law and the spirit of the Law.

Common Theme: The practical Word of God should be part of the foundation of the walk of discipleship with the risen Messiah. Jesus says, 'Blessed is he who hears my words and puts them into practice' (Luke 11:28). This obedience, however, is not to just the words of Jesus, but the entire Word of God. Jesus came to be the fulfillment, the capstone, of the Torah (the law and guidance of God).

Hebraic Perspective: The word Torah is often translated into English as 'law'. This is unfortunate as the Western English concept of Law and the Hebrew concept of the Torah are very different. The word Torah comes from the verb to teach, guide, and instruct. God brought His people out of Egypt and at Mt Sinai proceeded to teach, guide, and instruct them on how to function as a just, humane, and righteous society. Through the implementation of the Torah, Israel would become a reflection of the character of God. The Torah in Hebrew does not have negative connotations, as Paul would say in Romans 7 'the Law (Torah) is holy, just and good'.

Reading #1 - Exodus 20:1-4,7-9,12-20: The Ten Commandments are the core of the Biblical covenant between Israel and God. Keeping these commandments requires more details to be given, for example: what constitutes work on the Sabbath? How does someone honor their parents? And if the commandments were broken what would be the consequences? The discussions and explanations, through history, of the written instructions from God are commonly known as the Oral Torah.

Exodus 20:18 is an interesting verse that says that while God was speaking His commandments, Israel saw several things. **וַאֲתָ קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר , וְאֶת-הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת-הַלַּפִּידִם**, is usually translated that Israel saw thunders and lightnings and heard a trumpet or shofar. However that's not what the Hebrew actually says. It reads that Israel saw the voices and the fires and saw the voice of the shofar, all with definite articles and pluralization. How do you see voices? Why is there the element of fire? In the Jewish tradition when God speaks, fire comes out of His mouth. Many Bible verses note the connection between God's voice and fire. The Torah was given by God at Shavuot. We see this image again in Acts 2 at Pentecost with tongues of fire and a plurality of languages. In both, we see the example of how the motif of fire is used to represent guidance and teaching.

Reading #2 - Psalm 19: The Psalms are the Prayer Book of the Jewish People. The Psalms were prayed regularly on a monthly cycle and thus reflect the developing theology in the 2nd Temple Period. In this Psalm, the worshipper will be reflecting on the universal greatness of God, how creation acknowledges the majesty of God and how the Torah (Law), the teachings and

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instructions of God, are perfect and trustworthy. Perhaps not always understood, nevertheless, the words of God are light, pure, and more precious than gold. These prayers would also have been on the lips of Jesus and His disciples.

Reading #3 - Philippians 3:4-14: Often used as a proof text that Paul has 'done away' with the Law. Note that while claiming to be a Torah observant Jew he does so in the present tense, not in the past tense. Which is not what you would expect if the Torah was 'done away' with. The Torah was and still is God's instruction and now with the advent of Jesus, the Messiah Himself continues that instruction. Our response should be to continue in that instruction to mankind, with Paul even saying to participate in the sufferings of the Messiah as we endeavor to be more like the Messiah.

Reading #4 - Matthew 21:33-46: In this parable, the owner of the vineyard has every right to expect the fruits in their season. The landowner had prepared the ground, planted crops, and defended his investment with a wall. He even had hired farmers to harvest the grapes. In the end, the workers in the Vineyard failed to show the return of the harvest to the rightful owner of the land. While it is easy to point fingers and see the faults and fruitlessness of others, in this case, Temple leadership, the Kingdom parable speaks to us as members in God's Kingdom. We have been given both the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Both should produce fruit, since God looks for fruit from us too. There are many fruits of the Spirit. These are things we ought to be able to see in our lives, traits like joy, peace, and self control.

Hebraic Context - Many translations of Psalm 118 say that the stone rejected became the cornerstone. However, there are 4 cornerstones to a building, so that does not make the stone unique. The Hebrew term rosh pina is better translated as Capstone. It is the final stone in a supporting arch that bears the weight of the whole building. It is the most important of stones in ancient masonry.

Jewish commentary on the Psalms asks the question, 'What stone was rejected by the builders?' On one hand, they say that the stone is referring to David the author of the Psalm, who was not considered initially by Jesse or Samuel worthy for presentation as potential King. However, David was the one in the end who ascended to the throne of Israel. On the other hand, the rabbis describe a story of the builders of the Temple, who encountered a stone that did not seem to fit anywhere in the construction. It did not fit into the walls, it was the wrong shape for the floor, no one knew where to put it so they discarded it. However, as they neared completion of the Temple the requirement for an adequate stone for the Capstone became evident and the search was on to find a stone worthy. The builders encountered the rejected stone lying discarded near the construction site and discovered it to be the exact dimensions required and thus became the primary stone in the Temple.