

**PENTECOST:
A TIME TO EXPERIENCE GOD’S HOLY SPIRIT ALIVE AND ACTIVE**

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 17

August 30, 2009

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalm 15

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

The Praxis of God’s Laws

Today’s Old Testament lesson urges remembrance of the Law and adherence to its “statutes and ordinances” (Deuteronomy 4:1, *NRSV*). Nothing is to be added to it or subtracted from it. The commandments are established and are to be obeyed, diligently observed, even in changing circumstances and in the face of new temptations. The reward for doing so will be life and land and a reputation for being “wise and discerning” (Deuteronomy 4:6, *NRSV*).

How one does this, it would seem, is obvious and relatively simple. Imagine a checklist. In one column, a catalog of divinely ordained behaviors, and in the other column, a litany of “thou shalt nots.” Merely consult the table and act accordingly. Once you get the hang of it, you can go about your God-fearing business in an almost absent-minded fashion. That is not to suggest that it isn’t serious business; only that it can be a rather methodical process.

Not so fast. One way of reading what follows in Psalm 15 and in the lessons from James and Mark’s Gospel is to see these texts as responses to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy, attempts to find meaningful ways of upholding God’s Law in a manner that recognizes the challenges of ever-changing contexts and circumstances.

In the form of a short catechism, the Psalmist summarizes God’s Law, painting in broad strokes but adding depth and shape by means of antithesis and contrast. James reminds his readers that God’s Law is manifest in actions based on the principles underpinning that Law. Finally, the writer of Mark challenges the efforts of religious leaders to “cover all the bases” by depicting Jesus as an iconoclast whose words are especially demanding precisely because they lack “how-to” specifics. In other words, if I cannot protect myself by hedging the Law because all these vices and other bad things come from within, then what hope have I of ever “dwelling on God’s holy hill” (Psalm 15:1, *NRSV*)?

All three passages suggest that a tremendous amount of thoughtfulness, intentionality, and diligence is required of anyone who would “abide in God’s sanctuary”—not to

mention humility! There are no simple checklists. But there is the reassurance that this way of life, this mode of being in the world, this business of hearing and obeying God's Word, is not a prerequisite to entering God's kingdom but a consequence of already being part of that kingdom.

This week's Reflection was prepared by Scott S. Elliott, Ph.D, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Translations Officer in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Sudan –

With thanks to God that the Dinka Padang translation project is nearing completion and that work on the Mabaan translation will begin soon, and with prayers for God's guidance in the appointment of a new General Secretary for the Bible Society in the Sudan; **Ethiopia** – With thanks to God for the Bible Society's new office in Bahir Dar, for Scripture distribution to mark the Ethiopian Millennium, for the completion of the Amharic Septuagint Bible and audio Scriptures in Oromiffa, and for good progress with HIV and AIDS outreach work, and with prayers for translation projects, plans for another branch office, for the future of Bible House and economic growth, and for Bible work in Djibouti; **Eritrea** – With thanks to God for the current peaceful environment, and with prayers for smooth clearance of imported Scriptures and for the work of the Bible Society in general.

Activity Corner: "Hearing and Obeying" Heart Chart

Supplies needed: Bible; newsprint; two markers (preferably red and black).

Across the top of a sheet of newsprint, using a black marker, write the words HEARING AND OBEYING. Draw the outline of a large heart (large enough to fill the entire sheet of newsprint). Read Psalm 15 and James 1:17-27 and, within the outline of the heart and using a red marker, list what these passages teach about obeying God. Talk about how these teachings instruct us today. Then read Mark 7:21-23 and discuss what Jesus teaches about what comes from our hearts that makes us "unclean" or "defiles" us. Using a black marker, list these within the "heart." Compare the words in red with those in black and talk about what it means to live as a follower of Jesus. Conclude with a prayer that incorporates how you will "hear and obey" God.