

## Not Difficult?

Reading this text which is presented as part of Moses' final exhortation to those folks he has led out of Egypt so many years ago, it find it hard to believe that after his experiences with them on that journey that he said this: "Surely this commandment that I am commanding to you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so we may hear it and observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." Because we often encounter a lack of clarity when reading translations as certain nuances of how a word may have changed over an interval of time what about this statement might seem less "tongue in cheek". If you consult the modern paraphrase that Eugene Peterson translated from original Hebrew scrolls you find in his the Message that choice offered carries the same clear message...you are going to be given a choice...a choice where the best one is clearly presented. However, the choice Moses presents is prefaced by this statement that making the choice is not going to be hard. The text from Peterson's The Message reads this way: "This commandment that I'm commanding you today isn't too much for you, it's not out of your reach. It's not on a high mountain—you don't have to get mountaineers to climb the peak and bring it down to your level and explain it before you can live it. And it's not across the ocean—you don't have to send sailors out to get it, bring it back and then explain it before you can live it. No. The Word is right here and now—as near as the tongue in your mouth, as near as the heart in your chest. Just do it! Evidently that living it, that doing it is not as easy as Moses claimed. Despite the presentation of an simple either/or choice, history records that evidently the choice is harder than it seems because so often what is chosen, what is acted out in the lives of people is not what seems the obvious good, easy choice for life. Reading the presentation of the choice, it is universally felt that choosing life is the "right" choice. The commandments that Moses exhorts them to choose are those found in the Decalogue: that part of the Torah we call the Ten Commandments. When we read this passage we might get the impression that this is a one time choice for the Israelites. But we have scriptures which consistently show us that the choice is not a one-time offer as throughout their recorded history, they received the opportunity to make the choice for life numerous times. To "choose life" in this moment does not mean to have accomplished anything or to have finished anything. Choosing life means the start of something: then and now, the start of a messy, difficult, and holy relationship with God. Throughout Hebrew Scripture, the Israelites strayed from the covenant, only to find God continually willing to embrace the people again, even if they also experience God's judgment along the way. There will be centuries of prophets who will continue to give the people that same message given by Moses. The message is always that striving to live in relationship with God yields life. Covenant fidelity which God desires with us is not accomplished or thwarted simply through intellectual commitment or vocal assent. Covenant fidelity is found in a set of lived practices, an ongoing orientation toward love of God and neighbor. Here Moses is not asking the people simply to check off the correct box found on a list, but is asking them to turn their whole lives toward God and God's ways of relationship—ways of love and compassionate care. We may no longer worship graven image idols like the idolatry manifested in scripture, but we do still have idols

which we worship. We make idols out of politicians, our of political ideologies, we chase after shiny new consumer goods, we idolize musicians and sports figures...striving after power and status...all sorts of things are given priority over those things important to God...our relationships with God and each other which result in justice and righteousness among us. Regardless of whether we view the results of the choices we have made as a society as curses or simply the inevitable result of these idolatrous practices these choices have consequences. The inevitable consequences of these choices have impacts on us and our neighbors and God's creation are easily identifiable. If we serve wealth instead of God, the poor suffer. If we serve consumption instead of God the environment suffers. God's desire for us to be only in service of God needs to be the beacon that guides our journey through daily life, or else we do suffer and face both spiritual and physical death. Choosing life has always meant to practice life by turning away from all idols and turning back towards God. Choosing life is choosing that covenant relationship with God. The commands presented are presented in this passage in two triple commands: to love God, to walk in God's ways and to keep God's commandments. The second triplet is similar: to love God; to hear God's voice; to cling to God. These commandments were truly as Moses claimed: they were not burdensome or impossible but a way to remain faithful, to establish religious identity and to respond to God's initiative. Put another way, what Moses is telling them is because God loves you, he has given you this gift of the Law which is your Owner's Manual for life in this creation. You don't have to do a trial and error experiment...God gifts you with the ways to live well in community. But people have been given this guide for so long now, and have been notorious for choosing death and so producing mayhem and unhappiness for themselves and others. Moses knew what we know, what most parents come to know, simply showing people the better way to live is no guarantee that they will take that path. Knowing which decision is the better choice given within God's Law is not really rocket science, but just knowing is often not sufficient. People chose wrong all the time. Many have observed over time that the word "law" can be used a couple of different ways. Sometimes a law reflects the way someone decides things should be. So that the sign you drive by setting a limit on your speed on a certain section of road is the law, but it's rather arbitrary in your mind. If you own some property you can post a "No Trespassing" sign, or you can post a sign saying "Hunting permitted". Whichever you decide to post, that becomes the law for that property you own. Speed limits and trespassing signs are "law" in the sense of how we decide how things should be. But there is another kind of law that you can sense is being meant when someone speaks of the "law of gravity" or "the second law of thermodynamics". This type of law does not suggest how things should be but how things simple are in all situations. You might choose to disobey the law of gravity, if you want, even deciding you don't believe it. However that choice or belief won't change the result when you drop something and it falls on your foot. Too often we make the mistake of thinking that God's laws are like those speed limits; that they are just arbitrary hoops God wants us to jump through. But as God's people we need to know that God's law is like gravity—God gave them to us as guidelines and rules as that owner's manual for life on earth. God loves us and wants us to be safe, healthy, and well. God knows that for true shalom to come it will be with people following the owner's guide for life in the Promised Land. There are many choices that I doubt seriously God cares how we choose. However, God does very deeply care, in some cases even more than we naturally do, about some of our choices. The presentation of this choice comes after God has already

chosen; has already claimed us. We aren't saved by the keeping of God's commands. We are saved by grace alone and the faith we have in Jesus Christ. We don't walk in God's ways in order to convince God to bless us. We walk in God's ways in order to show our gratitude for God's mighty actions to redeem us despite our making bad choices. It's that true human flourishing is found only in faithful obedience to God's commands and purposes for us. Yet we know that our choices do matter. They shape our daily lives. However, much in our lives is chosen for us; chosen by the virtue of our place of birth, our genetic and social place which is determined early. But the most important choice in this life and the next was made for me when God claimed me in baptism. But we do have many choices to make as we strive to be faithful. Jesus' teachings, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount addresses many of these choices each of us has to make. He presents the choices which result in actions which greatly matter not just for you as an individual, but the individuals around you. What you do every day might reflect on or give witness to others. Because what we choose to be in the world is not only a revelation of ourselves, but are also the communities of which we are a part. There is a weight and a responsibility to that. In our society that is a challenging message. Our world favors and rewards certain things: individualism, autonomy, and independence. The gospel message is one of connectedness, community and dependence is not a popular message if taken as one which should be lived daily. To truly swim against the values of our world—to speak for the "common good" over selfish advancements is not easy. Yet it is the call found as a responsibility of a faithful discipleship. Despite Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount that he came to fulfill, not to change those "laws" given so long ago, the portion we read today contain some words which have been interpreted differently. These are the verses which begin: "you have heard that it was said....but I say to you." Jesus' changes are to things that have been said, not things that have been written. This points us to the truth that our God is a living presence with us. These alterations that Jesus seems to make are made to deepen, to fulfill God's intent which stresses relationship, which stresses the value and importance of what contributes to community well-being. Jesus expands the teachings to include not harming others in ways other than physical harm...emphasizing the harm of insults, of lies, or anger, or holding grudges...all things that harm relationships. Jesus' sermon is a faithful recalling of and reinvestment in the ancient trustworthy tradition; a pointing out of the insufficiency of the law which did not include preservation of community relationships. In Jesus' words we find confirmation that our relationships matter to God—and that God we are invited to be in such a close relationship that we can count on God's presence with us to guide us in how to live faithfully. To do this we must separate the God of the written scripture from the one who is as Moses said "near to us". Our God is different from that historical presentation and most other gods found in history and our world. Our God is no Unmoved Mover as described by philosophers or as those found in mythology that saw humans as toys. Neither is our God simply a spiritual God. Instead our God cares deeply and passionately about us and about how we treat each other because God loves all of us so much. What if we consider that God cares about how we keep the laws for our sake—not for the law's sake. Jesus' teachings take the law to an extreme because is because of how deeply God cares for us and our well-being. In the name of the Father and the son and the Holy Spirit.

