

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

**I Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; John 9:1-41; Ephesians 5:8-14**

**I Samuel 16:1-13** is the story of David being chosen king of Israel years before he actually ascends the throne. The story actually begins in I Samuel 15:35 and continues into the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter. “Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel. The Lord said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons”” (I Sam. 15:35—16:1).

God had earlier led Samuel to select Saul to be king over Israel, but God did so because He was acceding to the voice of the people (8:1-22). Samuel had initially resisted the pressure of the people to anoint a Hebrew as their king, but God finally instructed the prophet to do so. “The Lord said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them”” (8:7). Consequently, Samuel found Saul, “a handsome young man who stood head and shoulders above everyone else” (9:2), and following the instruction of God anointed the young man king of Israel.

Saul proved a profound disappointment both to Yahweh and to Samuel. Both his decisions and his actions (13:1-15:9) revealed that he had no intentions of ruling under the guidance and obedience of God, but wished to be an absolute monarch “just like all the other kings of the world”. His refusal to share power even with God was dramatically illustrated when Samuel told Saul that God had commanded him to “go and attack Amalek and utterly destroy them” (15:3). Saul did attack and defeat them, but rather than following this command, Saul spared both the king (to hold him for ransom) and the livestock of Amalek (which he could later sell for significant profit). Money was more important to Saul than was obedience to God!

The Hebrew monarchy was designed to be profoundly different than the rulership of the pagan nations. In the book of Deuteronomy, which was the primary law-code of the Jews, the monarchy was clearly limited. Deuteronomy named two systems to conduct the political life of the nation – the judicial system (Deut. 16:18-20) and the system of governance (i.e., the king) (17:14-20). Deuteronomy taught that the essential task of the political system was to dispense justice. “Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Deut. 16:20). For the judiciary, “dispensing justice” meant remaining free of corrupting influences such as bribes. To guarantee that justice would occur, Deuteronomy created an appellate court system that, through its capacity to review and overrule a judgment, would hold each judge accountable. But it was the regulations for the monarchy that were most intriguing.

Deuteronomy 17:14-20 sets out the regulations for the office of king. The king is to be chosen by God (therefore monarchy was not necessarily inherited) and is to be accountable to God. But once chosen, the king must not perceive himself as a law to himself, capable of “doing what is right in his own eyes”. Instead, what the king is to essentially be about is justice; he is to maintain justice in the land for Israel’s poor and powerless as well as the wealthy and powerful. Deuteronomy 17 sets two perimeters for the king. First, he is not to “turn aside from the

commandment”. Second, he is not to “exalt himself above other members of the community” (17:20a).

First, he is to personally keep the Law and be sure all Israel keeps the Law. And to keep the Law was to keep justice. The Deuteronomic Law was all about the ordering of the life of the nation so that those who were most politically vulnerable would be most protected (chs. 16-20), those who were poorest would receive the regular redistribution of wealth (ch. 15), and all would be in dynamic relationship with God (chs. 6-8). It was the king who held the chief responsibility of being sure the Law would be obeyed to protect the interests of Israel’s poor, powerless and marginalized. The fulfilling of this responsibility was what it meant for the king to be obedient to the Lord God.

To make sure the king would stay centered on his task of seeking justice for Israel’s most vulnerable rather than protecting the interests of its most powerful and wealthy, Deuteronomy stipulates that the king is to keep a copy of the Law before himself all the time, he shall read from that Law daily, he is to personally “diligently observe” all its statutes in his adjudication of the nation, and he is to make sure that Israel obeys all its laws (17:19).

Secondly, the king is not to exalt himself above any other Israelite. He is a mortal, like them all. He is neither better nor more privileged than they, but is as much under the stipulations of the Law as are his subjects. To be king in Israel is not a privilege, but an obligation. He has been appointed by God and the people only to provide a necessary service to the nation – the administration of the Law. His rank, therefore, is not one of privilege nor of divine right, but purely of function. Therefore, he cannot exercise the prerogatives of other kings. “He must not acquire horses for himself; (he must not) return the people to Egypt in order to acquire horses’ he must not acquire many wives for himself; he must not acquire silver and gold in great quantity for himself” (vss. 16-17). In other words, exercise of his office is no excuse for the king to make himself or his family wealthy or powerful. His position is solely that of servant.

What is being stipulated in Deuteronomy about the Israelite monarchy made it profoundly different than the monarchy of any other ancient Near Eastern nation. In the ancient Near East, the only law of any given land was the king! He was accountable to himself. Occasionally, kings tried to create objective laws (e.g., “the Code of Hammurabi”), but even in those cases, the king was either exempt from or the only interpreter of that Law. Not so with Israel. The king was as much under the regulations of the Law as was any Jewish private citizen. And, in fact, he had more obligation to the Law than anyone else because it was his responsibility to be sure the law was being kept in its entirety by Israel’s political, economic and religious systems and by the people throughout the land. It was his job to make sure that the entire structure was operating to guarantee justice for everyone in the kingdom, but especially those who were the poor, the most vulnerable and the aliens within that nation. Thus, being king over Israel was far more obligation than it was privilege.

But that was not the kind of king Saul envisioned himself as being. He wished to be Israel’s only authority. He wanted all the power to reside in himself and in himself alone. He had broken the covenant made between God and himself when he was anointed king over Israel, and each of his actions over his reign indicated how unwilling he was to be anything but absolute ruler of Israel.

Therefore, “the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel” (15:35), and began to lay plans to have a more worthy successor named.

Yahweh instructs the judge and prophet Samuel to go to Bethlehem on the ruse of conducting sacrificial worship. But while he is there, Samuel is to seek out the family of Jesse and anoint one of his sons as God’s choice to be the new king of Israel. Even the elders in Bethlehem knew that Solomon was not there only to conduct worship, for the text tells us they went to meet him “trembling” (vs. 4-5) and asking him “Do you come peaceably?” It is this little aside in the text that alerts the reader to how unstable the political situation was in Israel, with a king acting so despotically that the people “tremble” when a religious leader comes to perform prescribed religious duties because they are concerned about both the intentions of the religious leader and the murderous reaction of the king to any perceived threat.

Although Samuel assures the elders that he comes peaceably, and although he “covers his tracks” by conducting the expected religious ritual, the prophet has another motive in mind – to anoint the next king of Israel. So, after conducting the sacrifice, Samuel visits the home of Jesse and asks to see his sons. Jesse has no idea why this request, but dutifully brings them forth, starting with the eldest, Eliab. Samuel is impressed by Eliab, for he looks as commanding a figure as did the young Saul. But God declares to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (vs. 7). After his experience with Saul, God is no longer interested in one who looks kingly, but one who is motivated by his love for God and his love for justice for the people. In fact, the Hebrew states this even more dramatically than does its English translation, for it states “For it is not what man sees, for man looks into the eyes, but Yahweh looks into the heart!”

So the first son is rejected, and the second son brought forth. But each candidate is rejected by Yahweh, from eldest to the apparent youngest. Samuel inquires if there are any other sons and Jesse says there is one – a mere lad who keeps the sheep. Samuel insists that he be brought in, as well. He is, and when Samuel sees this young and ruddy boy, Yahweh responds, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one”.

How shocked Jesse and the other sons must have been when, instead of greeting them all or even blessing them, he stepped forward, commanded David to kneel, and then anointed him with oil. For they all knew the meaning of what was happening before their very eyes. Anointing with oil was not something to be taken lightly. Only potential kings, priests and prophets were anointed, and the ceremony for the anointing of a king was unmistakable. The anointing was the indication of God’s choosing of this individual to become his vassal. His being covered by oil was as if he were covered with the cloak of the true monarch (God) and thus had become the vice-monarch, the second-in-command under God who was now responsible to rule the people as God’s vice-regent. He had become “the Lord’s anointed”, the Hebrew word for “anointed” being *mashiach* (messiah). And that, in turn, became the title of the Hebrew king, for as the Egyptian king was called “pharaoh” and the Roman emperor “Caesar”, so the Hebrew king was named “Messiah” – the “anointed” one!

Jesse, his seven sons and even the young David knew exactly what had happened that day. Jesse's youngest son, the brother of the seven, had just been anointed king over all Israel. Then the text tells us, "And the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward" – so there was no doubt what had just happened. Son and brother David had just been anointed king by Israel's chief spokesperson for God, and God's charisma had fallen upon him. There was no question of the authenticity of what had happened that day. But there was another king upon the throne, one who was ruthless in maintaining his power and in eliminating any potential rivals. And as long as he remained upon Israel's throne, the life of every member of Jesse's family was in jeopardy, for they had all just participated in what could only be interpreted as treasonous activity. So it was that "Samuel then set out and went to Ramah" and Jesse and his sons went back to their chores as if nothing unusual had happened at all! And they all waited for a better season.

**Psalm 23** is that psalm which is most attributed to David. Whether it was actually written by him, no one knows, but there is no doubt that it is clearly an individual's prayer of the most profound trust in God's provision.

The problem with this psalm, of course, is that it is so well known that we recite it for its beauty and the comfort that it provides, rather than taking seriously its implications. So let's look at those implications.

First, the psalmist begins, "Yahweh is my shepherd." The task of the shepherd is to both guide the sheep and to protect the sheep. It is to give direction and to provide a comprehensive vision for the sheep because otherwise, sheep will simply graze from one patch of grass to another without giving any thought to where they are going or what they might be getting themselves into. Likewise, the role of the shepherd is to protect the sheep, because they have no real defense against any who might be their "enemy" – whether human, other animals, or nature itself. Therefore, for the psalmist to declare, "Yahweh is my shepherd" is to suggest that it is in being in relationship with God that gives us both direction and protection in our lives.

What is significant about this passage, however, is that the metaphor, "shepherd" is used for God. In John 10:11 and 14, Jesus uses the metaphor for himself ("I am the Good Shepherd"). And so that there is no question about what Jesus is actually doing in using that metaphor for himself, he uses a linguistic term that was thoroughly unacceptable and would never be used by Jews in his day. He says "I AM the Good Shepherd"!

When Moses asked God his name, God responded "I AM WHO I AM; so tell them that I AM sent me to you" (Exodus 3:14). God's reply is virtually impossible to translate into English, because what God did was to name himself by using an early form of the Hebrew verb "to be", rather than a proper noun (which is what you would expect God to have used). In Hebrew, the word that would be spoken would be "Yahweh", but that is not a name; it is a verb. The only way we can communicate into English the uniqueness of the words is to capitalize all of its letters ("I AM WHO I AM" or "I AM"). .

One would say, “Yahweh”. But by Jesus’ time, that name had become so precious that it was never spoken by a Jew, not even by the high priest. If Jews wanted to speak of God, therefore, they would combine the verbs of the name “Adonai” (“Lord”) with the consonants of “Yahweh” to get “Jehovah” (which was, consequently, a manufactured name). Because the name was sacred, no Jew would use the words “I am”; rather, they would find some other way of communicating the same thought (e.g., “He who is presently standing before you is the Good Shepherd”). Therefore, for Jesus to say, “I AM the Good Shepherd”, he would be communicating to any good Jew that he was Yahweh; he was God! What such a statement would accomplish for a Jew would be first, utter shock, and second, immediate identification with the Psalmist’s statement in Psalm 23, “Yahweh is my shepherd!” Therefore, all that Psalm 23 would suggest of God’s being and activity toward us would automatically be transferred over to Jesus. No wonder the political, economic and religious hierarchies of Jesus’ day were offended at Jesus’ words!

What is it, then, that God (Jesus) would do for Israel, for God’s “sheep”? The Psalm makes two particularly powerful statements. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (vs. 5a). “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me” (vs. 4a).

What is significant about these statements is not only what is said, but what is not said! The psalmist does not promise that God will deliver us from “the darkest valley” nor will we be delivered from “the presence of my enemies”. Life will continue to have significantly dark times. And we will continue to face opposition, resistance and even hatred.

What the psalmist does promise us, however, is God’s presence (Jesus’ presence) in the midst of our darkest time. We will be emboldened, equipped and given perseverance to face into those dark times of oppression, domination and exploitation.

An even-more powerful metaphor is used by the psalmist in the statement, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies”. But who are “my enemies”? The immediate assumption is that it is people whom the one reciting the psalm doesn’t like and who don’t like him or her. But it is far more than that. I would suggest that “my enemies” is the Psalmist’s reference to the systems! It is Israel’s political, economic and religious powerful and the structures and organizations that lay behind these powerful ones – structures and regulations used by them to keep the people under control and to take full economic and political advantage of them. And when the informed Jew reads of “my enemies” in this passage, he or she will not be able to do other than remember Ezekiel’s reference to them as “evil shepherds” (Ezek. 34:1-10).

When we hear the term, “shepherds”, we immediately think of the clergy “shepherding their flock” or congregation. But that was not the primary use of the word “shepherd”, either in Israel or in the ancient world. The term “shepherd” was used exclusively for the political leaders of a nation (e.g., Num. 27:16-17; I Kings 22:17). So Ezekiel was making quite a statement when he wrote of the powerful leaders of Israel and of the systems through which they functioned, “Ah, you shepherds of Israel, who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? But you eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but

you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (34:2-4).

The Psalmist is making a profound statement by using the metaphor of God setting a table for God’s people so that we can dine with God “in the presence of my enemies”. He is, first, making a political statement – that those powerful in our society who the people depend upon to most have the people’s interests at heart and to better their condition, are actually those who will most take advantage of the people and use them for the economic and political enhancement of the leaders themselves. The political, economic and religious leaders are the true enemies of the people. And they, like other wolves, are in our very midst! They have infiltrated our very society, for they are at the core of our political, economic and religious systems. And they put themselves forward as our shepherds, but in reality are ravenous wolves (Ezek. 22:23-27), for they see us only as victims with whom they can take advantage!

But, second, “you prepare a table before me in the presence of (such) enemies”. The Psalmist is saying that God sets a table for his people so that they can dine with God “in the presence of these enemies”. The political, economic and religious systems will still be there, seeking to take advantage of us, trying to intimidate us with their supposed power, continuously “in our face”! But they will not conquer us who can analyze, understand and know how to thwart their abuse of power. They will not be part of the banquet. They will not be invited to share God’s bounty. They will be excluded because they choose to exclude themselves by abusing their position and by seeking to take advantage of the poor. The banquet of life will not be out of their sight. It will be in the midst of the people’s engagement in public life. That is where the obedient follower of Yahweh will be, contending for justice, equity and a Godly relational culture. And that is where God (Jesus) will be, sustaining and shepherding us to be the world-changers we are called to be!

The conclusion we must draw is this: Psalm 23 is not the fuzzy, warm, gentle psalm we emasculate it to be. It is, in reality, an extremely strong political statement, holding the systems accountable for their abuse of power, and calling God’s people to join God in being about the Godly task of shepherding the world (and its systems) into the world as God intended it to be.

**John 9:1-41** is the story of the healing of the man born blind. This is a story of great faith and action on the part of the healed man, who is ready to enter into Jesus’ counter-kingdom and is not afraid of confronting the most powerful representatives of the kingdom of domination. Intriguingly, the story profoundly parallels and yet contrasts with another Johannine story of healing – the one in John 5:1-18.

There are significant similarities in the stories. In both stories, the featured men are isolated, near a healing pool in Jerusalem. Both men are victims of an extended illness – the man in John 5 being paralyzed from the waist down for 38 years, the man in John 9 being blind from birth. Neither man turns to Jesus for help. Instead, Jesus intentionally intervenes in both men’s lives, and heals both of them. Both men catch the attention of Israel’s religious leaders because of their healing. In the case of the man in John 5, Jesus healed him on the Sabbath, and in John 9,

Jesus healed on the Sabbath a man considered unhealable because of the assumed sin of his parents or himself that caused him to be punished by God by being born blind. Both men are hauled before the religious leaders to make explanation for himself, caught up in the leaders' efforts to condemn Jesus. But there, the similarity ends.

The healed paralytic in John 5 is intimidated by the religious leaders and their incessant questioning. Jesus found the man in the temple, and urges him to embrace a new lifestyle. The man returns to the Judean authorities, and tells them it is Jesus who healed him. The man distances himself from Jesus, and gives in to the intimidation of the Jerusalem elite.

Not so the man in John 9. Confronted by his neighbors, he witnesses to his healing "I went, I washed, I see" (9:11)! The neighbors bring him to the Pharisees who question him relentlessly. But the man not only continues to tell the story to the Pharisees. He also states, "He (Jesus) is a prophet" (vs. 17)! The Pharisees question his parents (9:18-23), who confirm that he was born blind but refuse to comment on how he got healed, not wanting to perjure themselves. Instead, they "pass the buck" by saying, "He (our son) is of age; ask him" (vs. 23)! They are so intimidated by the dominant culture, they will not even defend their own son.

Not so this man! He is questioned for the third time by the authorities. They say to him, "Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner!" The phrase, "give glory to God" was not a statement of praise. Rather, it was a legal phrase, putting the one to whom it was spoken under a legally-binding oath to tell the truth. The man's response is the high moment of the story!

"I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know – that though I was blind, now I see" (9:25)!

The man's retort cuts to the very heart of the issue of tradition versus experience. The man is, in essence, saying to the Pharisees, "I don't care if Jesus healed on the Sabbath. I don't care if your tradition says that a man born blind is being punished for past sins and can never be healed. I don't care about your laws and regulations and liturgies and traditions. What I know is this. I was blind from birth. And now I see!" The man will judge by his experience, not by "correct" theology. He is rejecting the primary standard upon which the dominant culture maintains its authority – because his lived experience tells him other than that!

Frustrated, the Pharisees command him to tell his story again, presumably to discover any inconsistency in it. But the man, now emboldened by the recklessness of his own actions, responds, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples" (9:27)?

This is sheer sarcasm. The man is mocking the authorities, laughing at them. And no authority can tolerate not being taken seriously! This is agitation as they have never experienced it before – and at the hand of a mere peasant, and "sinner" at that! This man's words are the bravest means of peaceful, nonviolent resistance -- of civil disobedience imaginable! This unlettered, supposedly terrible sinner of a peasant is not only lecturing but mocking the authorities. And they hit the roof!

They respond, “You are his disciple! But we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for his man, we do not know where he comes from” (9:28-29)!

The man’s reply is now the culmination of his civil disobedience of the authorities. His reply displays the fact that, rather than being intimidated by the Pharisees’ power, he has exposed them for the manipulating, scheming, exploiting and controlling force they really are. The healed man responds, “Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing” (9:30-33)!

The man is hoisting the Pharisees on their own petard! He is directly challenging them and their theology by which they maintain control of the people. He is, in essence, saying “It is you who teach that one who is a sinner will not be heard by God and given God’s power to heal. And you say this Jesus is a sinner, because he has supposedly broken the Sabbath. But the fact is that he healed me – and healed me on the Sabbath! We have never heard of a person born blind receiving his sight. Yet this is exactly what Jesus did for me. Therefore, following your own rules of logic, following your own interpretation of the Law, we have to conclude that this man is not a sinner, but has been sent from God!”

The healed blind man has made utter fools of the Pharisees. Either they have to acknowledge Jesus as one so loved by and chosen of God that God would perform an impossible miracle through him. Or the Pharisees must admit that their understanding of the Law is wrong, and they must change it. Which will it be?

This man has demonstrated that when one’s experience clashes with prevailing theology, it must be the theology that is questioned – not the experience. The claims of the Pharisees to rightly interpret the Law are false, the dominant culture they have built upon their interpretation of the Law is invalid, and the kingdom of Jesus is what needs to be embraced!

Virtually foaming at the mouth, all the Pharisees can do is resort to calling the man names (the desperate strategy of those who know that they have lost). And the text tells us, “And they drove him out” (vs. 34b), forcibly ejecting him from their presence.

So there is a profound difference between the healed blind man in John 9 and the healed paralytic in John 5 – even though their stories are so similar. For the paralytic is totally dominated by the fear of the systems. And the blind man, besides now seeing, is also profoundly free!

The saga of the man born blind now moves relentlessly to its climax! Thrown out by the Pharisees, rejected by the people and ostracized from the dominant culture, the man is sought out by Jesus! When he finds him, Jesus asks, “Do you believe in the Son of Man” (vs. 35)? Up until this moment, the man is unaware of Jesus’ association with this eschatological symbol of Israel’s Suffering Servant, so he responds, “And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him” (9:36). Jesus responds, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he” (vs. 37).



“You have seen him.” The man has never seen anything or anyone up until this day. He didn’t even see Jesus when Jesus restored his sight, because Jesus had put a salve on his eyes while he was still blind and instructed him to go to the pool and wash off the salve. And in doing so, the man received his sight. So he has never set eyes upon Jesus. But now he sets eyes upon him! And now he sees (literally “sees”) that “the one speaking with you is the Son of Man”!

Now the man knows who Jesus is! In his first meeting with the man, Jesus was a healer to him (9:8). Then, the man recognized Jesus as a prophet (9:17). Pressed by the Pharisees, the man concludes that Jesus must be a sinless individual (9:30-32) to be able to heal a sinner born blind! But now, in meeting Jesus face-to-face, the man confesses Jesus as the saving Son of Man and as Lord (9:35-38). The text tells us, “He said, “Lord, I believe.” And he worshipped him” (9:38). This is the only instance in the Gospel of John when Jesus is worshipped by an individual – actually worshipped. This indicates this man’s acceptance of Jesus as the “I AM” – Yahweh incarnate. For no Jew, with their strict monotheism, would literally worship anyone other than God!

In the light of such a profound change (conversion) on the part of this man, Jesus declares to the man and all others standing around, “I came into the world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind” (9:39). This man, born blind, now not only sees physically, but sees spiritually, socially, politically (because of his confrontation with the Pharisees), and thus has changed allegiances.

Some of the Pharisees standing by overhear Jesus’ statement, and concentrating on the last part of that sentence, respond, “Surely we are not blind, are we” (9:40)? Jesus response in verse 41 indicates that likely these Pharisees are believers in Jesus and his message. John 8:30, in a context dealing solely with the Pharisees, states, “As Jesus was saying these things, many believed in him”. So it is likely that there were Pharisees who, like Nicodemus, were attracted to Jesus’ message and, without surrendering their place in the dominant culture, believed in him. So it is to these Pharisees that Jesus now speaks. “Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see’, your sin remains” (9:41).

This magnificent, joyful, victorious chapter ends on a dark note. As long as the Pharisees consistently follow their faith, it can be said of them that they “not have sinned”. That is, their response to Jesus and their wish to eliminate him is perfectly consistent with their beliefs. As a pivotal force in the dominant culture, the Pharisees are protecting the conceptual framework of that society upon which their domination is based. Therefore, their rejecting response to Jesus is perfectly consistent with their role and position. They are being “pure” or “sinless” (i.e., being perfectly consistent).

But if they believe in Jesus and the mission he has come to fulfill – as are these “believing” Pharisees – and yet continue to maintain their position, authority and function in the dominant culture as Pharisees, they are “sinning” (i.e., being inconsistent and consequently hypocritical). And the reason they are sinning is that they are not being honest with themselves or consistent in their practice. They are trying to serve two masters – to believe in Jesus but to function as a Pharisee. To do so means that they are still trapped by the dominant culture, and thus remain its

servant. To seek to do that is duplicitous and a lie. It is therefore worse than being one who revels in the dominant culture and, because of the threat Jesus poses to their place in that culture, seek Jesus' execution. In the words of Elijah to the people of Israel, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. But if Ba'al is god, then follow him" (I Kings 18:21)!

**Ephesians 5:8-14** is part of a larger section in which Paul lays out some "do's" and "don'ts" for Christian practice. That section runs from Ephesians 4:25 through 5:20. The actions that Paul recommends Christians follow are to speak the truth in love, to be angry at injustice, to work honestly and with one's own hands, to speak only what is useful and will build up people, to be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving of one another, to live in love, give thanks in everything, and in all one does, to be imitators of God. To the contrary, the actions that are inappropriate for Christians to practice are to put away falsehood, to not allow anger to fester, to not steal, to not speak evil of anyone or anything, to not display bitterness, wrath, wrangling, slander, malice, to not fornicate or do unacceptable sexual practices, to not speak in obscene, vulgar or silly ways, to not be greedy or an idolater, to not be deceived by others, and in all one does, to not grieve God. Paul concludes these two lists by reminding the Ephesian Christians that "once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true" (5:8-9). So take no part in the works of darkness, but instead remember that you, both as an individual and as a community, are as those who have been awakened after a night's sleep. It is as if you have risen from the dead, "for Christ will shine on you" (vs. 14b).

Why would Paul need to give to his Gentile churches such an explicit list of what was appropriate Christian behavior and what was purely pagan behavior? Why should he have to tell his churches how Christians ought to behave?

What Paul faced was the profound difficulty of starting churches in communities where there were no models of Christian life. If Christians did not see an example of the faith lived out in practice, how would they know how to act?

For Jewish Christians, that would pose no problem because they had a history of 1,200 years of ethical behavior built around the building of a community of shalom – the acting out of a politics of justice, an economics of equitable distribution of wealth, and a highly relational religion. Individual Jews and Jewish communities might not continuously act out justice, wealth-sharing and a relational life of shalom with each other. But they would *know* what was appropriate behavior, and that behavior would always be held up before them and would be practiced by some. Therefore, Jewish Christians would both embrace and model the best of Jewish social, political and economic practice in their lives, as well.

But suppose you were seeking to proclaim the faith in a culture that held to profoundly different ethics than what either Jews or Jewish Christians would hold? What if the ethics of that society were built on the abuse of power, greed and a highly manipulative religious system? Introducing such Gentile communities to Christianity would be profoundly different, because those communities would not hold to the vision of living in a shalom community of justice, equitable

distribution of wealth and a relational faith. In fact, for many of these communities, there would be no model or even an example of such a society.

What Paul had discovered, plain and simple, was that many Gentile Christians and Gentile communities simply didn't know how to act as Christians! So what Paul was doing in today's epistle lesson and its larger context was giving them a quick tutorial on how Christians should act both in public and with each other. This tutorial is summarized in 5:15-20. Live as wise, reflective, focused people, he declared. Live to carry out God's will – which is to bring all society into a shalom community of love, justice and elimination of poverty. Center yourselves on worshipping God, “giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:20).

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