

The Law of Love

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus redefines the family as “whoever does the will of God” the father, and his life and teaching throughout the gospel is presented as a gradual revelation of what that will is (Mk3:35). He shares with the religious authorities of the time the belief that this will is revealed in the commandments—that is, in *torah*. But he strongly contends with them on the authority of other traditions, especially concerning offerings and kosher rites. In line with the prophets, he argues that love towards God and others is the true meaning of *torah*, and God’s true will as law-giver. Thus, one fulfills *torah*—and so the will of God—not by adhering to rituals (seen in this teaching as “human traditions”), but by fostering social justice out of love.

It is, therefore, a matter of interpretation: Jesus differs from the authorities of the time in his belief about the tradition of the elders and its conformance with the will of God—which can only be a matter of interpretation for man. What is valuable then is simply coming to an understanding of his teaching, which his followers felt so strongly about as to break away from this tradition of the elders whom they so surely loved.

Above all, he teaches a worship of God which is in and of the heart. This teaching is in line with such ideas as the “circumcision of the heart” in Deuteronomy¹ and the prophets, and even with some of the Psalms². In this, Christianity continues a movement already unfolding in Judaism³ towards a new idea of worship—and thus, of the community of worshipers—based on new ideas of purity and impurity. It teaches that all these things are in the human heart, and not in the body of tradition.

¹ Cf. Deut10:12-19.

² Cf. Ps51:16-17: “For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

³ Cf. Is56:1-8.

To understand what this worship of the heart is, and what it means for the common identity, one need look further on into the Gospel of Mark, to chapter seven, where these ideas are laid out in the form of a story. During a dispute with some scribes and Pharisees, Jesus makes a distinction between what he sees as “human tradition”—here the kosher laws, laws of ritual purity and impurity—and the true will of God as revealed in his commandments:

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them [...] So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, “‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”” (Mk7: 1-2, 5-8)

This view of some rituals is by no means new to Judaism; rather, Jesus’ conflict with the authorities here picks up and echoes past conflicts between prophet and priest. Jesus himself openly shows the continuity between his teaching and the teaching of the prophets when he quotes Isaiah. Indeed, the Jesus movement seems a further unfolding of that begun by the prophets, a movement away from ritual and toward social justice as the means of fulfilling *torah*. As with the prophets, it is not an attack against the law itself; rather, it presents a refutation, from within Judaism, of a particular *way* of living *torah* which was around, and which Jesus and the fellow Jews who followed him saw and disagreed with. That is, fulfillment of the commandments out of a sense of legal obligation only, not out of any understanding of the morality contained within them. The scribes and the Pharisees then become the set type for this kind of legalistic worship, the negative way in which the Jewish authorities are presented in this story.

The example he puts forth is of authorities who insist upon making offerings to God instead of using the goods to support one's parents in their old age:

Then he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is *Corban*' (that is, an offering to God)—then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on." (Mk7: 9-13)

In this view, the commandments concerning right behavior towards one's fellow human beings are more important than those which govern ritual observance, and the two are even at odds sometimes. And in times like this, when carrying out the ritual commandments keeps one from carrying out the social and moral commandments, the latter override the former. It even seems that—by continually calling certain features of worship, such as kosher laws and laws of offering, "human traditions/precepts," and setting them in opposition to "the word/commandment of God"—Jesus is arguing that such ritual laws are not from God at all, but are human inventions or misunderstandings. If this is the case, even in this he is not without precedent in Judaism⁴.

But it is *not* a denouncement or an abolition of the law; far from it. Rather, his charge is *against* "[abandoning] the commandment of God, and [holding] to human tradition," and "making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on" (Mk7: 8, 13). He appeals to Moses (i.e. Torah) as a teaching come from God and not man, and thus authoritative above all other traditions. So it is at once an affirmation of the law as the will of God, and a warning not to give a human interpretation to the commandments such that they no longer bring forth the social justice

⁴ Cf. Jer7:21-6.

which Jesus, in line with the prophets, teaches as the true will of God and the true meaning of his commandments.

In this teaching, he urges all to look beyond simply the physical behavior towards others that the law commands, and to see what this reveals about how one is to look at others in the heart. Jesus, calling upon a voice from the past, urges those listening to shift the focus of their worship from ritual to moral; he appeals to the commandments on the basis of their morality, not simply their legality. In quoting the passage from Isaiah, Jesus sets in opposition to worship that is only “with the lips” the concept of a worship with the heart: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Mk7:6). What is being condemned is an outer worship which does not proceed from an inner—something like “going through the motions,” perhaps. Such worship is condemned as empty, “in vain,” coming only from what is human and leading only to what is human, ungodly altogether (Mk7:7).

All this leads up to one of the most profound messages in all the Christian writings, where Jesus lays out his own ideas about the heart as the place where *torah* is fulfilled, and purity achieved:

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mk7:14-23)

The immediate emphasis is on listening and understanding; the will to know, and the knowing itself. Answering the authorities' concern about his disciples' "defiled hands," Jesus calls the crowd to come to a new understanding of purity and impurity as being not from the body, but from the heart. For the distinction here between "heart" and "stomach" seems not to be between the two as organs both of the body, but between the body and something else. That is to say, it seems that what is meant by "the heart" is not the heart in the chest. Rather, it seems the heart that is meant is the seat of the will, and the place of conscience (inner knowledge, or understanding.) For what is in the heart are "intentions"; and, consistent with Christian teaching elsewhere, it is not only physical acts of evil which defile a person, but even the willing thought in the heart⁵. The act is what comes forth from this thought in the heart; "fornication, slander, etc." These are not just abstract thoughts, but real words and deeds which come from the will and the knowledge within. And these things alone, which are in and of the heart, make one pure or impure. So, he argues, it cannot be the purity of the body that makes pure the heart; for purity of heart is what makes the body pure. And this is what's essential; for it is from a right heart, knowing and willing what is good, that right behavior will come.

So at the same time as he is breaking down long-standing ideas of how one is to walk in the way of God, he is making new ones which are in a way more demanding, in that they urge one to keep God's commandments not out of a sense of legal obligation, but out of a deeply personal understanding of the morality which they hold. Jesus urges his followers to come to an understanding in their own lives of what God wills through the commandments, and then wittingly and willingly live them. And his own understanding, as far as it is presented in this text, is that what God wills above all in the

⁵ Cf. Mt5:21-4, 27-8.

commandments is love; love towards him and towards one another⁶. Love here is not just a feeling, but a good word and deed, born from the will and the knowledge within, in the heart. This is the profound message of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, carrying on the message of the prophets of old: one worships God primarily by loving others, in words and deeds which are from the heart; this is the sum of all the law and the prophets.

So Jesus continues to break traditional bonds, and make new ones. Just as before he redefined the family as those who do the will of God the father, so now, in shifting the focus of the faith inward, to the “human heart,” he redefines the community of faith itself. He does this not by removing *torah*, or rendering it obsolete, but by reinterpreting the way in which it is to be fulfilled. For he says that all one needs to fulfill the law is contained within the human person; in the will and understanding of the good, which is brought to fruition in the love of others. Thus he opens the way for Gentiles also to become the children of God and the heirs of his promise to Abraham. For in this view, these things do not come by keeping the traditions of the elders—not by circumcision or offerings or rituals to purify—but by keeping the law of love in the heart. The ones who worship God in *this* way will be members of the community, regardless of aught else.

⁶ Mk12:28-31.