

CONSIDER A BETTER WAY

In the words of Deuteronomy 30:15:
I have set before you today
Life and prosperityor death and adversity.

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Today's passages possess no enchanting narrative...or personal story that inspires the mind and heart.

These texts are: "sit down you've got to hear this."

This is a professor going over the essential points on the exam.  
This is a judge laying it all out on the line.

This is a Biblical exhortation about the rules of life.  
And, it's Jesus declaring, "You're not understanding what is going on. Let me explain."

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When I write a sermon, I try to faithfully reflect the presentation and the content of the passages, so....
Don't sit back and relax.
Instead, tighten up those shoulders and neck muscles....because the message in today's texts won't creep in, nor will it soothe.

It's stands out like a stop sign in snowy landscape, and it demands a response.

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Deuteronomy is not a cozy armchair book.  
It reads more like an Instruction manual,..... because it is.

We have here the Deuteronomic formula which became the motif for much of the final rendition of the Old Testament documents, written after the exiles return from Babylon.

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The message is presented with two choices.

Choice One is living--Living--in the promised land.

This choice means that death and destruction is not pounding on the door. Instead there is peaceful life / whole living with prosperity and blessings.

The second choice / the alternative results in a tormented life of never reaching home--that desirable, peaceful state. This alternate choice leads to depravity, decay and death.

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Well, upon lengthy deliberation that followed detailed analysis by an ad hoc study groups, it is can be determined that the first choice is better.

However, I was a little off in my representation of the choices.

I actually presented the consequences of Doing / Being the option.

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So, more clearly presented, the first choice is:

Obedying God's commandments, and all laws radiate from loving God and walking / living and being God's way.

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Love God. Love God means more than a box of chocolates and a pretty red Valentine's Day card.

Those things are just symbols. We all knew that,.... right?

How do we love?

How do we show Love? How do we embrace and be the love?

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Let that stew for a while,.... until we get to the Gospel lesson.

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When we understand what loving God involves, then we'll know what walking God's way is all about. And to be sure, God's way is the best way. It is the way of life --true and beautiful living.

The laws and commandments were written as guideposts to help along the way. They are not ends to themselves. That interpretation is legalism, and legalism is appeasing / adhering to the letter of the law subject to one's tilt and bias, to avoid punishment.

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The alternative choice:

No one in their right mind would choose the second choice,... unless, ..unless something is terribly wrong.

Verse 17 reveals how the wrong path is taken, and it states:

"If your heart turns away"--remember this part about the heart.

"If your heart turns away and you do not hear--you do not pay attention to the message / to God's advice,..... and ....you are lead astray, then choice two happens.

Lead astray is being deceived. It is being conditioned by commercials and mass media. It is being influenced by tainted theology, and it is fooling ourselves to think we know better or can get away with less.

Devotion to anything other than loving God and walking God's way is in essence worshipping other gods--gods of our infatuation and destination.

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This is the message from the Deuteronomy text.

The challenge of this passage remains with us today whether we are faithful Jews or Christians.

Moreover, it seems we humans seem to always face the temptation to water down our commitment to a vague and general "doing our best."..... whatever that means.

And, that is the problem..... we think we are simply "settling for an easier way", yet the choice was all or nothing.

No "in between" was mentioned. Accepting that reality is frightfully unnerving. The key is what direction we are heading, and there are two ways to go.

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Faithfully, with love and devotion,... following the law is not so easy. People were twisting things and trying to be legalist, to form another way. So thanks be to Jesus, he gave us some insight and help.

And, Jesus revealed that it's NOT all or nothing.

Jesus did point out that less than perfect gets less than perfect results; however, there are blessings and benefits in heading in the right direction. There are two choices in direction, and we are on our way, one way or the other.

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We did not read verse 17 of Matthew 5, yet I think it is helpful to hear it: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; i have come not to abolish...but to fulfill.

Jesus is not negating anything.

He is granting more insight and a better understanding on how to live.

Jesus stresses that our choices / our actions erupt from the heart--from our mind and emotions.

We do what our internal passion moves us to do / pulls us into.

That drive could be fear, such as a fear to disappoint or a fear of punishment.

Or, that drive could be lust, greed..... or love.

We do / we are the reflection of what dwells within us, and there is more to this than just the measurable, physical results.

Who we are / how we think and feel has consequences, too.

And, that aspect is the added insight the Jesus grants us.

In other words, we can rust from the outside ... and... we can rot from the inside out,..if we are not walking with God.

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I won't take the time to go into much detail about each of the issues Jesus presents. I will try to say enough to expose spirit of each.

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Concerning Anger:

We know about the evil of murder.

It is destruction,...which is opposite of a loving and creating God.

However, Anger is destructive, too.

Anger is destructive inside,..... and it also tends to seep out in many ways, such as gossip and slander,.....and it usually is the reason for murder.

To be sure, hate and murder are not the same. A victim would most definitely prefer the hate.

Still,.....unless the hate / the anger is resolved,.... unless there is reconciliation and forgiveness..... the consequence stated is hell.

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Concerning Adultery:

A little contextual information is helpful.

Jewish culture, at that time, tended to view adultery as a property rights issue. It wasn't really a morality concern.

For example:

O.T. law forbade coveting a neighbour's wife, yet lust and seduction of a single woman or a non-Jewish woman was okay.

Yet, according to Jesus it is NOT okay. It's not acceptable because it is destructive. Lust devalues the object of the lust and it also devalues concepts of beauty, justice, respect and equality in one's own soul. Moreover, it can lead to more than just destructive thoughts. Lust can destroy a sense of community participation, too.

Adultery and lust are destructive,..... and the owner of such... will experience hell.

I'll say more about tearing out one's eyeball a bit later.

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The section on divorce is mostly a subcategory to adultery.

Jesus is expanding / reiterating the destructive injustice of regarding women as property.

In those days, men could dismiss and reclaim women as if they were livestock. Women had virtually no say in the matter.

Jesus addresses this destructive behavior by mandating that men treat women with respect and as equals. This relates to what Jesus said about adultery, and the failure to show respect, to do justice and be compassionate will result in the same consequences as committing adultery --hell.

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Verses 33-37 are about making oaths / legal promises, and this section is the binding that holds the rest together.

Jesus is calling for simple, direct honesty. Therefore, oaths / promises are not required.

Swearing an oath is a legal side step; it is a veiled attempt of avoiding total revelation and truth, by suggesting one aspect is valid.

In other words, it is deception, ..... and deception can be destructive, too. Legalism hides behind oaths and vows, and it can trick people.

An open exposed soul reveals the truth:.....the love or the hate / the respect and honour or the lust and exploitation.

Jesus is admonishing all to be open and honest, and to avoid joining the ranks of the evil one--the great deceiver.

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A few comments about hell.

Hell is a place of insatiable desires.

Forget Dante's Inferno and Augustine's imagination.

Hell is when quest and drive is never fulfilled or satisfied.
That place / that condition is like dying of thirst with abundant water all around. There is no end to the torment, because the cause / the consumption is NOT real. And, that experience burns endlessly.
Hate and anger can never be appeased--thus there is hell.
Lust and greed can never be satisfied.....and that is hell.
Conquest and destruction radiates hell and is hell.

Basically, hell is choice number two, and Jesus is informing us how to choice a better way.
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Honesty binds Jesus' helpful clarifications together, but it is love that makes it all work.

Love is much more than giddy infatuation and heart thumping romance.

To grasp loving God, loving each other and ourselves, then we must realize the depth of love.

Not only is love warm, uplifting and gracious, but love is also devotion, commitment, creativity, justice, ..... and hard, very hard work.

It's not easy to shift one's anger away from the source / the person... and onto the destructive action.  
It's Not easy to love a person who has committed a horrendous crime against you. It's hard to focus the anger on the crime and destruction, and NOT on the person.  
Plus, it is NOT easy to reconcile with someone, regardless who the victim is. It's NOT easy to make peace.  
Hate and anger is a void that can NOT be filled, but it can be refocused .....and dissolved with love's determination.  
Love pulls us to a higher level--to a better way.

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Reprogramming one's way of thinking about ownership and power, cloaked as sexuality, is much like tearing out an eyeball.

It's hard to change how we behave, and extremely challenging to change how we think and feel about others.
Treating others respectfully / regarding others as equals, including with sexual orientation, may demand full and honest confession that we are not so lofty and righteous.
The journey to truth and respect can be a painful path to find.

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Love, more often than not, requires hard work--diligent, committed hard work.  
Creation is much harder to do than destruction.

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We have all witnessed someone or heard about someone who is sabotaging his or her life. We can see the destructive behaviour, and when we do, we are prone to mumble to ourselves:  
she/he should have made better choices.

Well,..... I think we are all fooling ourselves.

We have our secret fears and desires, and we are worshipping lesser gods that we can't release, yet..... we know better.

Just like with any addict, rationalizations and denial are cheap and easy, and God's walkway feels constantly too far to stride into.

And, just like any addict, salvation is never realized alone.

Truth is necessary,..... and we need each other.

We can't do it alone.

We can't do this thing called "living" by ourselves, and that is why we need love, each other and..... that is why we need God.

Yet, getting in step with God is not easy.

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God has given us a roadmap, a compass, a guide and more.

God has given you and me time..... time to find the better way / time to ask for help and time to love. We call that time life,..... and it's a choice.