

The Law from the Inside Out

August 30, 2015

Twenty-second Sunday of Easter
Readings: Deuteronomy 4.1-2, 6-8;
James 1.17-18, 21b-22, 2;
Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23

By Rev. Paul D. Scalia

A sure sign of spiritual sickness is to agree with the Pharisees. But we might find ourselves doing just that when we hear their complaint that Jesus' disciples "ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands" (Mk 7.2). Good manners, if not good hygiene, tell us to wash up before eating. So the Pharisees seem to have a point. Of course, our agreement is only apparent. The Pharisees had neither etiquette nor hygiene in mind but rather the minutiae of their laws. Their objection and our Lord's strong response bring to the fore a central purpose of our Lord's ministry (cf. CCC 577-582): the fulfillment of the Law in Christ, the passing from the Old Law to the New.

The Goodness of the Old Law

We live in an antinomian culture that makes discussion of the Law difficult. Our society regards any suggestion of "law" as toxic and any norm for human behavior as anathema. Our highest goal is to be able to do what we want, and we resent anything that might interfere with that. Any notion of what we "should do" is absurd. So we need to approach our Lord's teaching on the Law by first stepping back and appreciating the goodness of the Old Law.

The Old Law was not the imposition of a dictator or tyrant but the expression of love from Israel's God – who cared for Israel as his "firstborn son" (Ex 4.22), delivered them from slavery, led them through the wilderness, and triumphed over the other nations for them. The Law must always be seen in this context. Thus any discussion of the Old Law is inevitably preceded by a reminder of what the Lord had accomplished. Before his exposition of the Law in Deuteronomy, for example, Moses gives a long discourse on what the Lord had done for them. The Law makes no sense apart from that relationship.

Further, the Old Law established the external standard to which a faithful Israelite was to conform himself and by which he measured himself. It provided the answer to the question that lingers in every human heart: *How shall I live?* It indicated to the Israelites how to be in union with the Lord – in their worship, families, towns, work, business, and so on.

Thus the Law and its observance was everything for the Israelites. Indeed, they understood the Law as a blessing, a sign of election. Keeping "the Lord's statutes and decrees" revealed the wisdom of the Israelites: "Observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations, who will hear of all these statutes and say, 'This great nation is truly a wise and intelligent people'" (Dt 4.6). Those statutes and decrees manifested the uniqueness of their relationship with the Lord, the nearness of God to Israel: "For what great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?" (Dt 4.7)

But for all its goodness, the Law was insufficient. And it is on this point that Jesus enters into controversy with Israel's religious leaders. These conflicts center on three issues about the Old Law: its provisional nature, its pharisaical turn, and its externalism.

Law as Provisional

First, the Law is provisional. “It prepares and disposes the chosen people and each Christian for conversion and faith in the Savior God” (CCC 1963). The great lawgiver Moses himself spoke of a prophet who would come and bring things – that is, the Law – to fulfillment (cf. Dt 18). The Israelites of our Lord’s day awaited such a fulfillment. Saint Paul describes the Law as a “pedagogue” (Gal 3.24; CCC 708, 1964), using the Greek word that indicated the slave who walked children to school. As a pedagogue, the Law trained the Israelites in obedience to the things of God. By yielding to its commands they found the Lord near, and they received the wisdom that he bestowed. But as a pedagogue must yield to the real teacher, the Law of Moses had to yield to the Lawgiver himself.

Thus our Lord proclaims that he has come to fulfill the Law (cf. Mt 5.17-19). The *Catechism* describes this announcement as a “solemn warning” (CCC 577) because it signals the end to the Old Law’s requirements and was bound to scandalize the teachers of the Law. Jesus Christ fulfills the Law in two ways: by keeping it perfectly and by giving it an authoritative interpretation. In so doing, he brings to us the New Law. And, most importantly, he himself *is* the New Law, the one who enables us to live the gospel of charity.

Law as Pharisaical

Second, the Law had become pharisaical – literally. Here we get into some of the religious divisions of first century Israel. The two main religious groups in Israel were the Sadducees and Pharisees. The Sadducees acknowledged and adhered to only the written Law of Moses as found in the *Torah*. But the Pharisees – the dominant group at the time – also accepted as authoritative and binding the “oral Law,” that immense number of precepts, rules, and ritual observances that had grown up over the centuries. These were as binding as Moses’ words. Perhaps these accretions – “the tradition of the elders” – began as a way of incorporating devotion to the Lord into more and more aspects of life. Whatever the case, by our Lord’s day there were, as Mark observes, laws about everything:

For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles and beds. (Mk 7.3-4)

These purifications required more than just a simple visit to the sink. The disputed washing of the hands, for example, was an elaborate procedure requiring the washer to run water down his hand this way first, and that way next, being ever so careful not to confuse the clean water with the unclean. Now, expand that little ceremony into every other area of life, and you see how burdensome and discouraging “the Law” had become. Very little could be done in Jewish culture without fear of running afoul of some law or other. An overwhelming number regulations and obligations intruded on the simplest activities. *The Law* had become *laws*; the Law of Moses had become overgrown by the “the tradition of the elders.” Thus the “human tradition” had eclipsed “God’s commandment” and earned a just rebuke from our Lord (Mk 7.8).

As the *Catechism* plainly observes, the Pharisees “had led many Jews of Jesus’ time to an extreme religious zeal” (CCC 579). Indeed, those who kept the Law (more or less – no one could do it all) became puffed up and proud. On the other hand, those who failed became discouraged and felt increasingly alienated from the life of Israel. The Law had become a point of division within the nation and no longer the principle of unity.

Externalism versus Interiority

Third, the Law was external. To some degree this is inevitable for any legal code. And of course the Law’s precepts were expected to be observed with interior devotion. But with the accumulation of precepts, so much energy had to be expended on the external observance that the interior devotion quickly dissipated. Our Lord’s fiercest criticism thus centers on the externalism that the Pharisees had fallen into: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You pay tithes of mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier things of the law: judgment and mercy and fidelity” (Mt 23.23).

In contrast to this externalism, our Lord establishes the New Law. He turns the principle of morality inward. He announces that righteousness before God no longer means doing the external things *just so* or concerning oneself with the cleanliness of “cups and jugs and kettles and beds.” It means cultivating the proper interior disposition, the proper intention of heart and mind.

Our Lord applies this change most explicitly to the dietary laws: “Hear me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person” (Mk 7.14-15). Those are words of freedom for all who labored under the heavy dietary laws of the time. But he continues: “the things that come out from within are what defile. . . . From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile” (Mk 7.15, 21-23). With these words our Lord shifts the emphasis of morality from external observance to interior uprightness.

Now, we must avoid the simplistic notion that because he relieved people of the external burden Jesus therefore made everything easier. In a profound sense he has made things *more* demanding. Doing things externally is easier, since it requires so little investment of self. It is a much greater and more difficult thing to cultivate interior attention and devotion. To redirect our attention from the externals to the interior life is the task of a Christian.

This interiorization of the Law is no mere legal precept; it is in the very nature of our relationship with God. This is evident in Saint James’ exhortation, which bears a resemblance to that of Moses, proceeding from a narrative of relationship with God to the conclusion about morality. This time, however, the mighty works of God are not merely external, concerned with pharaohs, seas, rivers, and defeated kings. Rather, the narrative is about God’s spiritual gifts to us: “He willed to give us birth by the word of truth that we may be a kind of first fruits of his creatures” (Jas 1.18).

The exhortation that flows from this is, fittingly, to live from the inside out. One has to receive the word interiorly, be regenerated by it. “Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves” (Jas 1.22). Only then does the *doing* come: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (Jas 1.27). Here we see moral action in its proper place – as the fruit of interior regeneration and devotion.

In fairness to the Pharisees, those who take their faith seriously always risk the same attitude and rebuke. Although the Church’s canonical demands on us are really quite small, we constantly sense that tug to treat the matters of faith as a checklist to be completed or an external action that substitutes for interior devotion. May our devotion to Jesus Christ free us from a slavish sense and give us freedom of heart in fulfilling the demands of love.

About the Author

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FOR FURTHER READING

Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 107, aa. 1-4, available at:
<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2107.htm>

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##1949-1986, available at:
<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe>

Avery Cardinal Dulles, "John Paul II and the Truth about Freedom," *First Things* (August 1995), available at:
<http://www.firstthings.com/article/1995/08>

Eduardo Echeverria, "Christ Is the Fulfillment of the Law," *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (November 14, 2014), available at: <http://www.hprweb.com/2014/11/>

Stephen Pimentel, "The Master Key: Pope Benedict XVI's Theology of Covenant," available at:
<http://www.cuf.org/2006/03/the-master-key-pope-benedict-xvis-theology-of-covenant/>

IN SHORT . . .

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- ***The Law had become a point of division within the nation and no longer the principle of unity.***
- ***Jesus Christ announces that righteousness before God does not mean doing the external things, but rather cultivating the proper interior disposition, the proper intention of heart and mind.***
- ***Doing things externally requires little investment of self, so in a profound sense our Lord has made things more demanding.***
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