

John 2:13–22 (23–25)

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

Taught for the Third Sunday in Lent, Year B (Revised Common Lectionary) · 6 March 2012

The texts for the Third Sunday in Lent show us two dimensions of the law, one on each side. On the one hand, the law is God's good gift, and two of the texts make sure we hear that. Exodus 20 is the text of the Ten Commandments, and Psalm 19 has at its center a passage in which the law is praised beyond all limit. It is perfect. As the apostle Paul said, the law is holy and just and good. Among the gifts given in creation, it is one of the greatest of all, to be sure.

On the other hand, the law becomes a powerful source of temptation, a trap, a difficulty. This is clear above all, as the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18 and following, because the law makes the gospel look foolish. I suppose that's the biggest indictment of it: in the light of the law, a rather dim light we'd have to say, the gospel looks like silliness, like weakness, like a concession. The law by its very nature wants to make ultimate claims for itself. It wants to claim to rule the world, to be able to give life to all creatures. But of course it is a miserable failure at that, and so it attacks the gospel. "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom." What the law ends up doing is crucifying Jesus. So we get one of the great texts of the apostle Paul, which rings with the power of the gospel as an indictment of the law.

And finally, as if the apostle Paul hadn't done enough already, Jesus himself takes matters in hand and comes bursting into the temple, scattering the animals, opening the menagerie, tipping over the tables, dumping coins on the floor. It's one great mess. But he does even worse. He displaces the whole sacrificial system and closes it down, by being merciful beyond any limit and by giving himself wholly, requiring nothing. This is the promise of the gospel.

So we've got some texts that will give us a good workout. We'll start with the supporting texts, as usual, and then head for the Gospel. This is substitutionary atonement on two legs. Christ Jesus is interceding for you here, only it isn't happening in heaven. It's happening on earth, and he's got a whip in his hand. And he isn't a trucker stopping for some salacious entertainment. He's going into the temple to overturn the whole dreadful sacrificial system, with all its mythology, demands, and indictments. Really fun. So first we'll work on the

supporting texts, which set the law in a dialectic of law and gospel, and then we'll go to this magnificent story in John's Gospel, which is way too much fun.

Exodus 20: The Law as Gift

First of all, on the one side, the law is a great gift of God. You can see the gift if you just read the Ten Commandments closely. Of course, we're not supposed to do that anymore. In the name of cultural diversity we're supposed to leave the law unstated, because somebody might be offended, and in the middle class that is the worst thing conceivable. But these commandments are muscular. They're lean and powerful, and they penetrate right into the center of life itself. We can't praise the commandments enough, for they sum up everything that is required of us.

The basic premise is this: we are creatures. We do not have life in ourselves. It is not our possession. It comes into us from outside, and it continues in us as long as the conditions are right. When the conditions are no longer right, we're gone. That's it; it's all over.

When we went to Ethiopia, I was reminded again that my father did not endow me with the best lungs. Of course I smoked for years, and that didn't help either. But Addis Ababa is at seventy-two hundred feet, ranging up to almost eight thousand, three thousand feet higher than Denver, and so breathing becomes labor, especially at night. You fall asleep, then wake up sucking air desperately, trying to find enough oxygen. It's frightening. And you realize, for all the pretenses and all the mythology of life eternal, here we are, little airbags sucking wind. I had my CPAP with me, but I finally called somebody in the middle of one night because I was still sucking air; it couldn't keep up with me. They told me there was something else wrong, but I think it was just the quality of the air.

Anyway, you know how that works. We live in the illusion of immortality, and all of a sudden mortality breaks in. Then we discover that there are conditions necessary to life, and the genius of the Ten Commandments is that they name the ten most essential requirements. That is, they name what is necessary to live in relation to God and what is necessary to live in relation to our neighbor.

In relation to our Creator there are three commandments, because basically he takes care of it himself. The first and most important, of course, is that we are to have no other gods. We can only have one at a time, and if you get the wrong one, it's death. Simple as that. You shall not

take God's name in vain. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. We need to honor God's name, and we need to clear a little time in the week to hear his Word.

Then there are seven commandments for us and the neighbors, because that is quite a bit more complicated. The neighbors fight back, of course, and so we need help clarifying the essential conditions. The remaining seven commandments go in order of priority. The most important gift is your parents, because they bestow life. Life has to be protected, in the Fifth; marriage, in the Sixth, no adultery; property, in the Seventh, no stealing. Language needs to be honored, in the Eighth. And in the Ninth and Tenth, hope needs to be protected from false hope: no coveting.

So the commandments, quick as a wink, have penetrated right to the center. They are a good gift. Having one text on the commandments per year is ridiculous. We ought to be preaching and teaching these commandments regularly, because people spend all their time sitting in front of the tube watching the violation of one commandment after another for entertainment's sake, and nobody is teaching them what is really required. That's one of our jobs. Because we know the gospel, we can teach the commandments. You see right away that the commandments are just what Paul says, holy and just and good. They deal with the essentials.

Psalm 19: Praise of the Law, and Hidden Faults

Psalm 19 follows up on this. It's a really fun song, really interesting. "Day to day pours forth speech," but nobody's listening. If we paid attention, the heavens themselves would make a pretty good preacher. I remember being out in the middle of an African night with a friend: more stars than you ever dreamed possible, a light show of stars. You look at it and you can't help but think of the goodness of the good Lord. But for a sinner there is something else: darkness offers the opportunity for self-fulfillment. So we don't listen.

Still, right in the middle of this psalm there is a wonderful song of praise to the law. "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever." All the statutes, all the law, has this quality: it is a table of contents of the essential requirements of life. It anchors us in the hard realities of creaturely life, and it does so gently. So we get the Ten Commandments themselves as a summary of the law, and then a good example of legal piety. And such piety has some truth at its core; that truth is right here.

But now the problem is this: there is something in us, built into us, that upon hearing the law thinks we ought to do it in order to live. Philip Melanchthon used to call this the *opinio legis*, the secret suspicion of the human heart that it is really the law that justifies, and that if only we really kept the law we would live forever. That is the illusion. And the illusion begins to be exposed even by Psalm 19. This is really interesting. The psalm, even with its praise of the law, can't help but let the secret out: "Who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults."

I heard one of the great sermons of my whole life on that text. It was preached by a pastor up in northern Minnesota. I had heard him preach often, and I dreaded it. He was generally lousy; he couldn't find Christ Jesus with both hands and a flashlight. But that day, boy, he was on that text like paint: "Clear me from hidden faults." I came out of church and called the bishop, who at that time was in Moorhead, and a good man. I told him, "You'd better get down there. Something's bad wrong." Well, he went down there, and that dirty bird had been raping confirmands and was already into the second generation; he was raping the daughters of women he had raped twenty years earlier. Well, this is the law. Underneath there are these hidden faults we're not aware of. We can praise the law, but in the end it is going to leave us stranded.

1 Corinthians 1: The Word of the Cross

And that's what Paul is after in this wonderful text from 1 Corinthians, very familiar to all of us, a text that shows up fairly regularly in Lent. "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Here's the difference. The law regards the gospel as folly: compensation for wimps, it says. If you guys would really work at it, you could do it. Join the Kiwanis Club, move to Edina, live happily ever after, and have it your way. But in fact it doesn't work that way. The law, in our hands, is self-contradictory. While we are working on our obedience, it is actually disobedience that is being served, because the pretense that we can obey it exposes the reality that we are so full of self-awareness that we can't possibly let go. So "the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

The law is wisdom, that's for sure. It's wise; it shows us the way. But if you think you can follow the law down that path, you're dumb. You're going to die. It's not going to work. So Paul comes back to the power of the gospel. To the power of the gospel we flee. The power of the gospel seeks us out as the law crushes us, as the signs and the wisdom on which we rely go bankrupt and it all falls apart. Now if it's bankruptcy you're interested in, we've got a gospel for you.

John 2: Jesus Takes On the Sacrificial System

This text is generally underestimated. This little Gospel for Sunday is about as radical as it gets, because here Jesus attacks the fundamental pretense of the human heart: the *opinio legis*, the conviction that we have to save ourselves. That is original sin itself. That's the problem: we want to be wise. We want to know good from evil. So we take the law as if it were a rescue vehicle sent to deliver us. We grasp the law, and the law turns on us in our delusions and kills us flat out. So Jesus our Savior has to come and kill the law, and in order to do that he has to take on the whole sacrificial system. That's what he's after here: the whole notion of sacrifice. This is a full-scale attack on the illusion of original sin, that the law will make us our own saviors. And so here we go. This is more fun than a barrel of monkeys.

Take a look at it. This is early. You remember that John places this text differently from the synoptic Gospels. In the synoptics Jesus doesn't cleanse the temple until he gets to Jerusalem, very late, just before he is crucified. John wants us to know that he made a special trip to Jerusalem just for this purpose. And that's a lot of fun, because sacrifice, of course, is the religion of original sin. It's the religion of the human heart.

I just love the last verses of this text, verses 23 to 25, put on the end in parentheses. Jesus was followed by all kinds of people, "but Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people, and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone." He knew better than to rely on them. He knew they were looking for a sacrifice and that he was likely to be it. So he stayed a safe distance from that crowd, and wisely so.

Everything we run into in this story is the apparatus of sacrifice. The law and sacrifice go hand in hand. You've heard the customary theological description of substitutionary atonement: because we couldn't keep the law, sacrifice was required. Well, they've got that right, in correlating the law and sacrifice. The two line up right together, because the law

assigns points. Those who achieve get points; those who fail lose points. And those who have lost points have to find a way to get new points, and the way you do that is by sacrificing something. Cigarettes for Lent, how about that? Or liquor for Lent, a little more substantial sacrifice. Or how about your son, Isaac? The human heart wants to sacrifice, because it has the illusion that if it sacrifices it atones for what is happening under the law. So law and sacrifice go hand in hand. There is something in us that wants sacrifice. Even a pagan standing in a dropping elevator will say, "If you save me, I will do this," as though God were just waiting to have his palm greased. So the alternative to the obedience the law requires, the performance of the law, is the whole sacrificial system.

And here we get it. Jesus comes into the temple, and it's a barn: cows and sheep and virtually everything else you can imagine, everything named in the sacrificial system, all lined up there patiently, being led to their slaughter. We've got a livestock market in the temple. And with that we've got money changers, because of course this is Thrivent for Lutherans. That's exactly right, you bet. There's your field agent, just waiting for you, bringing you a sheep, lining it up so it can perform its tricks. We've got everything working here.

Now we've got the animals, and of course when you get animals involved you have to make sure nothing gets contaminated. So you have to have money changers, because you don't want plain old Roman coins being used; they're profane. So you can organize a nice business changing money for a small fee, depending on how much you're changing, of course, and everybody's pockets get greased. The money changer gets his commission, the high priest gets his commission, the little priests along the way get their commission, and everybody is satisfied that the sacrifice is being performed properly.

And of course it gets to be a great big mess. You remember that Golgotha is the gut pile. I have a friend up in Fergus I've hunted with through the years, and he has a T-shirt guaranteed to offend just about every liberal in creation: "Happiness is a steaming gut pile." There it is: a disemboweled deer. But here we've got disemboweled cattle and disemboweled sheep, and guts accumulating, and they're all carried out back to Golgotha, where Jesus will be crucified. That's not an accident. It is the most unclean place in the whole world, according to the law, so unclean that according to the Pentateuch anyone hanged there is by that very act identified as the condemned. So he goes to be condemned, and the condemned one goes to the gut pile where the cross is standing. Usually they were tied on; he is nailed, and he hangs there until

his internal organs collapse in on themselves. In Jesus' case it didn't take as long as they thought it should, and so a spear put him away.

So here is the whole thing. Jesus was not the first to criticize the sacrificial system. The prophets made a business of it. They quoted the good Lord: "I hate, I despise your festivals," about as profane a statement as could be made to the faces of the priests. "Do I need to smell them? I can smell them in the field. I don't need the smell of their flesh." The whole system is brought under attack by the prophets, and Jesus sums it up by saying, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Over and over again he attacks the sacrificial system.

But this is the point of the spear, the point where the attack is leveled most decisively. He goes into the temple, the holiest place in all Israel. He approaches the tables of the money changers and tips them over. He turns the animals loose, until there are cows and bulls and sheep and everything else running loose, defecating all over everything, doing what cows do. When we were in Ethiopia, the cows were in the street. There were a couple of heifers that liked to sleep on the cement in the middle of the road, with cars whizzing by on both sides and horns tooting, and there were those two heifers sound asleep in the middle of everything. Well, when they stood up, you know what they did. And you know what happened when Jesus turned all those animals loose. There's money everywhere and manure on the floor. It's an unholy mess.

Jesus has upset everything. He takes on the sacrificial system, and he takes it on as a rival. This is the self delivering the self, the self sacrificing something convenient, tallying the points, and going away congratulating itself on its great achievement. This is ridiculous. This is self-deliverance, spiritual onanism. And so Jesus goes in and destroys the whole business.

Destroy This Temple

Now this is the first chapter of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. You know what the priests thought. You know what the men representing them by changing money thought, and the janitors, and everybody else. So the question comes in John's Gospel: "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Where's your badge? What in the world are you doing anyway? He has upset everything. And he has upset everything for a very simple reason: he is the Savior of the whole world. Once he is done, sacrifice is obsolete. Sacrifice no longer has any value. Sacrifice has ended. When he tears the place up, he tears it up because sacrifice has no purpose

anymore. It's a delusion, a pious seduction whose main interest is collecting our funds for the service of the clergy and whoever else is in line to have their hands greased.

Jesus overturns it all because he has become the sacrifice. He is not a sacrifice to someone, not by any means. He is sacrificing himself for us, and this transaction is not taking place in heaven. It is taking place right here on earth. He is sacrificing himself by attacking the whole sacrificial system and exposing it as a fraud, and of course they're going to kill him for it. That's the end of it. All the law and sacrifice can accomplish is the death of another person. That's when they play their trump card, assuming it is the last word.

So when Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," they think he has some sort of magic for building buildings. Because death is ultimate, isn't it? Not anymore. Not anymore. When Jesus destroys the sacrificial system, he destroys it most decisively by overloading it, by a divine bolt of lightning that tears it to pieces, and then by being raised from the dead by the Father. No sacrifice any longer. Sacrifice has ended. And his attack on the sacrificial system will be the death of them. No human pretense will tolerate this, that somebody turns the bull loose to put its tail up on the sacrificial system. It's a mess, and Jesus is going to get it now, and get it good. I don't care whether it comes at the beginning of the story or at the end. This is the whole business right here.

Let's see if we have some time for questions. I should stop fooling around and see if you want to ask anything.

Questions and Answers

A question whether Leviticus and Numbers are superseded.

Yes. Leviticus and Numbers are superseded. The sacrificial system has ended; there isn't any more. I suppose you could say it was the hidden will of God. The priests thought it was the explicit will of God, and they took it as such. But now it has lost its standing. When you start thinking about sacrifice theologically, it's really a disaster. In order to make it work, as Gerhard Ebeling points out, you have to assume that God becomes passive. He becomes the recipient, and the human self becomes the actor. I expect that's why we love sacrifice: it gives us something to do, some way of manipulating and controlling. God's law defined sacrifice, but the law ended in Christ, and so did sacrifice. That is one of the most decisive achievements of the New Testament. The whole context of the story of Jesus is sacrificial; the whole cultus of Israel is sacrificial. But when Jesus is done with it, the Christian church

doesn't practice sacrifice. It takes nine hundred years for sacrifice to come back, and when it comes back, it comes back as the sacrifice of the Mass.

A comment that his self-giving is an act of grace.

That's exactly right: "I'm the sacrifice." And so the book of Hebrews says *ephapax*, once for all. He is the last sacrifice. Hereafter the language of sacrifice is appropriate only in relation to the neighbor. You see it there: "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

A comment on the crudeness of the sacrifices.

Golly, it's so crude. And you never know what God is going to ask, as Isaac found out. You can hear these critters moving and bleeding. If you've been around a barn very much, you know what's going on there.

A comment that it is hard to see the gospel in Leviticus and Numbers.

I'm going to speak sternly to you. The gospel is the end of the law. Leviticus and Numbers have lost their standing; even Roman Catholics say the sacrificial law has ended. So Leviticus and Numbers have no place in the Christian church as a sacrificial code. That's done. And Luther will go even further and say that the end of sacrifice is the beginning of faith. Now we live not by whatever we are willing to give up, our favorite toys or whatever, but by the sacrifice of Christ. He died by taking on the sacrificial system. That's why they killed him. This is the offense: he broke the Sabbath, and he broke the sacrificial system, and so he broke the old Adam's means of righteousness.

A comment that he put them all out of business, and a question about typology.

You put them all out of business, exactly. They have no place anymore. And of course the primary purpose of typology is to save Leviticus and Numbers. There's that famous essay by Isaiah Berlin about the difference between the hedgehog and the fox: the hedgehog sees the many through the one, and the fox sees the many. Calvin is the ultimate hedgehog. He wants the whole created world to make sense, and the way you do that biblically is to use typology to rescue the original revelation. So the sacrificial system becomes typology for Jesus' sacrifice, and then you turn Jesus' death into a sacrifice to God rather than a sacrifice for us, and you get into a real mess theologically.

One of the great books I ever read is *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, by Rebecca West, an Englishwoman. It's a two-volume history of Yugoslavia and the Balkans, and it ends up as a wholesale attack on sacrifice and the sacrificial system, its cruelty and its emptiness. That's what Jesus is doing here, only he's not just writing it. He's enacting it. He is taking the whole system apart right there in front of everyone, and that act of destruction will be completed by the cross. It's one of the great books ever.

A comment quoting Caiaphas: "It is better for you to have one man die."

This is where sacrifice ends up. It always ends up in the death of someone, and usually it's going to be a woman. That's blood and sacrifice and the law. It's frightening.

God bless you, my friends. I'm glad for all the questions. If you still have questions, write to me; I'm glad to get your emails and glad to help. I think the world of all of you, and I'm delighted to encourage you in your preaching. May Christ take your tongue and make it a means of grace. God's peace.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WaHtpL15USE>

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