

## Instructions

Exodus 12:1-14  
Matthew 18:15-20

I have spoken before of the Christian band Burlap to Cashmere. They combine Latin and rock genres with real skill. I love their song, Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth, which their website describes as “a fusion of Cuban and Los Angeles Street Funk to an uptempo beat.” As the cool kids today would say, that song really bangs. And it has a bit of a hidden ball trick in its title. When made into an acronym, Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth spells Bible. As the tune’s lyrics say, “Living on through the Son, Living on to the One...Yes, the road is narrow...Yes, the road is tough...But whoever remaineth in Him...Shall not die but lift up.”

The Bible is filled with instructions. As followers of Jesus we have the responsibility of following them all, as best we can. But before we press forward with this train of thought we need a reminder. The “Westminster Divines” was the group of Reformed Church scholars who produced the King James Version of the Bible, and both the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. Those latter two documents appear in our Book of Confessions, making them important sources for our theology, our system of beliefs. The Larger Catechism tells us that obedience to the law of God—following those Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth—is *not* “unto salvation”. That is, we do not enter into God’s favor by being good. And thank God for that, as not one of us can behave ourselves one hundred percent of the time. To use the language of Martin

Luther, we *get saved by faith*. And faith comes to us as a gracious gift from God.

So why bother with the instructions at all? Using the work of the great reformer John Calvin, those Westminster Divines list three uses of God's law. It convicts us of our sinful nature. No honest person can claim to be holy once they have studied God's law. Second, the law guides our behavior. It teaches us right from wrong. Third, the law reminds us God is sovereign. God does what God wishes, with ultimate power. The rest of this sermon will dwell on the second use of the law, on its guidance for our behavior. But before we get to that, we need one more reminder. We all must admit our guilt of the sin of picking those parts of God's law we will obey, and those we will not. Just hours before sitting down to write this sermon I shared a phone call with a member who had had a disappointing conversation with friends. They had made judgmental comments about a certain group of people. Our member has a close family member who (probably) belongs to that group. As a matter of fact I do, too. With only an apparently partial knowledge of scripture these friends of our member's condemned the folks in this group of people.

Jesus said, "Judge not, lest you be judged." I believe he meant that we all fail to satisfy God's law. Put another way, nobody's perfect. And the Bible also tells us sin is sin. We may see murder or rape as worse than telling a little white lie to protect somebody's feelings. And in truth, we ought to see murder, rape and a list of other heavy sins as worse than lying. Depending on the lie. But as the Apostle Paul wrote, there is no such thing as a truly righteous person. So when we judge others we do so

from deep in the mud of our own imperfections. This is not a loving thing to do. So we try to obey God's law, but we must do so with with humility. And if we meet any measure of success we must always remember that it is God's Holy Spirit that empowers us to make it happen. There is really only one person who's conduct is our proper concern: our own.

Our passage from Exodus comes at *the* pivot point of the Old Testament. Because the Exodus, the escape of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, is the pivotal point in the history of the Jews. In chapter twelve of the book bearing this important name, God instructs Moses how to commemorate not what has already happened, but what will happen. God will free God's people. And God's people will observe their memory of the moment precisely in the way God decrees. The Exodus happened somewhere between 3350 and 3450 years ago. To this day, Jews around the world—including right here in Terre Haute—conduct their Seder meals in accordance with the instructions in Exodus 12. To my knowledge, our city has one synagogue, the United Hebrew Congregation on 6<sup>th</sup> Street. As Reformed Jews, they belong to the most liberal of the branches of American Jewry. But they observe the now 3,000+ year-old instructions from God about how to remember the Exodus. They have an environmental impact statement of their congregation's effect on the community—spoiler alert, it's negligible—on their website. They have called at least two women as rabbis. And they celebrate the Seder meal by the rules.

I do not know for sure what the Jews' theology teaches about this. But I

suspect they also no longer believe their obedience earns them God's favor.

Historically the Jews have believed their identity as Jews accomplished that.

Obedience to the law then becomes an obligation but not a ticket to heaven. Jesus was a Jew. A Jew who went out of his way to extend his favor to all kinds of people.

Paul was a Jew. A Jew who went out of his way to offer the Good News to Turks, Greeks, Etruscans, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Nubians, Scythians, Syrians and anybody who would read and/or listen to his preaching. And for Paul, this question of the purpose of the law became the most vexing, most common, most challenging topic of his letters in the New Testament.

We know that practically everywhere Paul went, planting and nurturing churches, those churches eventually experienced conflict. Judging from the written evidence in the New Testament, probably the most common source of that conflict was the question of whether Jesus followers had to become Jews. We may think the reason many resisted was the medical, physical requirements that entailed—especially for men. And we would be correct. No adult male wants to be circumcised. But another reason for resistance existed: the heavy demands of obeying the Jewish law. In cities like Corinth and Antioch, converting to Judaism marked one visually as an alien. Men had to wear ringlets over their ears and a prayer shawl across their bellies. Women had to have babies until their bodies made them stop. (As so often happens, while the men may have complained at least as much about their problems, the women bore the greater burden.)

But Gentiles protested the restraints of God's law equally because it, in their— and let's be honest, in our—minds intruded into every little corner of life. The old religions had required occasional sacrifices and pilgrimages. The old teachings about the gods claimed they sinned a great deal themselves. They did not ask virtue or restraint from people. They simply asked for people to cower before their altars. But have we really progressed beyond this today? It is so much more comfortable to “restrain” God to the confines of these walls and this hour. And if we can convince ourselves we are *mostly* good *most* of the time, that makes our ways of life so much easier to justify.

“Terry” seemed like a good guy. He moved onto a dorm floor populated mostly by guys who had lived there for at least two years and had a tight-knit community. But he quickly ingratiated himself into the group. He supported the intramural flag football team. He helped with the weekly Friday night dance in the lounge. He even preferred Count Basie to the Rolling Stones, which—forgive me, Judy Duffy—is the only rational possible opinion. But as winter bled into spring he began behaving erratically. His temper grew short. He started getting into shouting matches and fist fights with his floormates, one of whom you're looking at. Terry stopped attending our parties. Somebody heard rumors of him getting into fights elsewhere on campus.

Near the end of the semester a fire broke out at one of the Jewish fraternities, Zeta Beta Tau. One member died in the blaze; thirty others suffered serious burns. According to the New York Times, the investigation into the cause of that fire took

three years but led back to Terry. He had attended a couple of parties there and gotten into fights with members. He eventually admitted to detectives that yes, he had used his credit card to purchase the gelignite with which he had started the fire in the four corners of the fraternity house, simultaneously. Today, Terry resides in the penitentiary on the southwest side of Terre Haute. I have not visited him. I have no intention of visiting him. While I do believe he is a child of God, and may even have entered into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, I do not want to risk involvement with such an unstable person.

But the question is not whether I love Terry. The question is whether God loves Terry. And by extension, whether God loves you and me. And the answer, I believe, is yes. Not because we have followed God's instructions. We have not. Not perfectly. No, God loves us because God created us to be in fellowship with us. We try to follow God's instructions as an expression of our profound gratitude for that love. Jesus taught his disciples how to handle conflict in the church. This means Jesus knew darned well there would *be* conflict in the church. Because he knew equally well that the church would be filled with sinners. People like you and me. So as we experience conflict we owe it to ourselves, to one another, and especially to God to follow his instructions on how to handle it. Go to each other. Do not gossip. If the straightforward approach does not work, take at least one other person and try again. I promise you that if I have hurt any person hearing these words and they try to reconcile in this way, I will respect that. As I would hope any of us would. After all, God's primary instruction is that we love God—and one another.