

I want to take a look at two of our Bible readings for today because both of them can be open to horrible misinterpretation. The gospel reading might be your first thought when it comes to misinterpretation; Jesus saying hate your parents and siblings, and all. That is true. We do want to look at it. But first I want to look at the even more problematic text from Deuteronomy.

There is nothing wrong the book of Deuteronomy, but it ranks among the most misinterpreted books of the Bible. It is so often misinterpreted because it can be used to teach a very popular lesson. You may have even gotten that sense from the first reading. Verse 19 says, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

You see, you can easily get the mistaken idea that if you love God and do what is right you will live a long and happy and prosperous life. If you do not love God and do not do what is

right your life will be miserable. You're going to get what is coming to you.

This lesson is so popular because it appears to make so much sense. Actions have consequences in the real world. If you consistently consume vast amounts of alcohol you will damage your liver and die from liver failure. If you drive too fast you will get a speeding ticket. If you eat too much and don't get enough exercise you will become obese.

It just makes sense to say that if bad things are happening in your life you are doing something wrong. If good things are happening in your life you are doing something right. It is then only one small step to add God into the picture. When an apparently good person is facing sufferings God must be punishing them for some secret sin.

People used to swear on a Bible in court for the purpose of bringing down wrath upon them if they lie.

The thing is, it's just not true - at least not where God is concerned. Jesus constantly battled these notions that would come up out of Deuteronomy. You'll remember he was once asked when the disciples saw a crippled man, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" It seemed obvious to them that someone did something wrong and this man's condition was God's punishment.

Jesus was asked other times why bad things happened. And he was forever struggling against the notion that rich people were rich because they were righteous before God and poor people were poor because they were sinners before God. No! No! No! Jesus taught repeatedly that the state of your life in this world is no reflection whatsoever of God's opinion of you.

At the recent balloon festival in Dansville my colleague Jeff Hedin, pastor of St. Paul's in Pittsford ran into this misguided theology that can come out of Deuteronomy. On entering he and his wife were greeted by someone from the Fellowship of Christian Farmers. They were immediately asked if they wanted to go to heaven. Jeff stayed quiet but his wife said, "Yes." And they were immediately given a lesson about how God loves them and wants to have them in heaven, but they have to accept the gift. They have to have Jesus in their hearts.

Without sounding mean or harsh, while the whole idea is sweet it also smacks of trying to make a business deal with God. If you just read our verses from Deuteronomy today and kept them out of their broader context you'd think the people of Israel and God were entering into a diplomatic agreement between nations. They'll do their part and God will do God's part. If they obey God's commands they will be blessed. If they disobey God will curse them.

But that is not what that passage from Deuteronomy really intends, and it is not the way Christian life works either. You don't make a conscious calculation to accept the love of Jesus because it means you get to go to heaven. You don't become a Christian as a strategy to have a better life. Although you'll have no trouble finding a preacher who will teach that.

That brings us to a question. What then is the point of being a Christian? If you don't do it to get to heaven, and you don't do it to enjoy God's blessings in life then what's the point? "What's in it for me?" you might quietly be asking yourself.

The whole point is the same whole point behind the text from Deuteronomy and Jesus' words in the gospel. God isn't interested in making deals with you. God is interested in being in relationship with you.

Theologian James Nestigen does a good job of explaining the Christian life when he says it is being realigned with who God made you to be. You are born into a broken world that is out of alignment with God's intentions. The way to wholeness is then to be realigned through being baptized into the crucifixion and death of Jesus. It is God's work to realign you, not yours. There's no business deal, no contract, no leveraging, no manipulation, no calculation on the part of either party.

Being realigned to the purposes for which you were created neither guarantees a good life or a hard life. But it is a way to a whole life.

My one uncle used to have a really really beat up old pickup truck. The mileage on it was really high and my uncle

was not one to believe in preventative maintenance. Actually he didn't believe in maintenance at all. That truck was the worst handling vehicle I've ever driven. The wheels were visibly out of alignment. You didn't drive it so much as you pointed it in the general direction you hoped to go and then kept compensating as it swayed left and right.

You have the wheels on your car aligned so that the tires last longer and so that the vehicle handles better. But when your car is in perfect alignment you don't say to yourself, "I'm going to only drive my car when the weather is pleasant and sunny because of the wheel alignment." No, you use your car for everything: sunny days, rainy nights, snow and ice, blazing heat.

Having a life in alignment with God does not mean just Sunday driving for you. It still means driving through whatever the conditions may be, and it means driving solidly and with confidence.

To wrap things up, the context of the verses from Deuteronomy is that it is an excerpt from a much larger sermon

Moses is giving the people. He is reminding them of their past mistakes. He says he knows they will continue to mess up. But, he encourages them to strive for that proper alignment with God. And he speaks God's promises of a time when God will write the words of goodness on their hearts. We are in a balance of law/gospel that we heard about two weeks ago.

Also, Jesus extreme language in the gospel; of course he isn't talking about literal hatred of your closest family members. But he is reminding his would-be followers of the cost of following him. Not everyone is going to be happy. Not everyone will agree. Some will become angry or be enraged when a person's life in alignment with God changes their life. Even if it is for the better, family dynamics are hard to change. So Jesus reminds them of that potential cost, and not to be deterred from it.

Life in alignment with what God created you to be won't be easy, but it will be whole. It is a life of confidence and strength. Not self-confidence or self-reliance, but working hope in the strength and confidence of God. Amen