

A Rewind Button or an Owner's Manual?

Deuteronomy 11:13-21, 26-28; Matthew 7:21-29

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Do you ever have those days when you wonder why people are still friends with you?

Picture it. It's a dreary Friday morning,
and I'm sitting in 11th grade U.S. History class.
The classroom is stuffy,
with 30 teenagers packed into their desks,
an overhead projector whirrs,
a torn map of the United States dangles from the chalkboard.
I look at my classmates, whose eyes like mine, are glazed over,
as my teacher drones on about the Roaring 20s and Prohibition.

The day hadn't started out like this.
In fact, when I came to school that morning,
my friend Erin had greeted me with absolute joy.
The night before, the boy she had had a crush on for months,
had called and asked her out.
It was her first date ever,
and she was so excited.
She had spent all of first period telling us
what she was going to wear
and where they were going to go
and you couldn't wipe the smile off her face.

But now we were in history, and nobody was smiling.
Finally my teacher stopped her lecture
and said, "Ok, time for Current Events."
That was our cue to get the newspaper clippings we brought from home and be ready to give a
compelling summary.

Well I hadn't done my homework
And that's when it came to me.

I still don't really know why I did this,
but before I could think twice, my hand was in the air,
"Yeah, I've got one," I said, when my teacher called on me.
"Erin's got her first date this weekend," and I pointed to where she was sitting in the first row.

It was funny, or so I thought,
but then there was split second of silence,
and I saw Erin's head start to turn around.

And I realized at that moment,
what unfortunately I've realized in many moments since,
that life needs to come with a rewind button.

There should be a way to back up and start again,
like in grade school kickball games,
when you can simply yell out, "Do over."

I'd even settle for a pause button,
just long enough for one of those mental voiceovers,
like from the movies, to come to me, with a voice of reason,
"Are you really going to say that out loud?"

That would have been a pause moment for sure...
because by the time Erin's head turned fully around,
it was beet red with embarrassment and anger,
and the entire class exploded into laughter.

There are a number of moments like these ones,
where I'd like to go back and re-write history,
maybe give myself a little talking to...
or at least give an account for why things happened
they way they did.

It seems that the authors of Deuteronomy know this feeling, too,
because they are trying to do a little rewrite of their own.

By the time they sit down with their quills to record this speech of Moses,
it's been some six or seven hundred years since he died,
and things haven't worked out so well for the people of Israel.

They had made it to the Promised Land,
but there had been wars and violence,
and more than a few corrupt kings.

Things hadn't worked out exactly as they hoped,
so when they write their history,
there's a way in which they are hitting the rewind button,
describing what they "should" have done,
where their hearts should have been,
and why things shook out the way they did.

"You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children...write them on your doorposts." If you keep my commandments, you will be blessed. If you break them, you will be cursed.

It was their hindsight talking,
their way of giving account for why things hadn't gone according to plan.

And yet, from the day those words got written down,
it became their foresight, too,
because observant Jews took the text to heart and head, quite literally.

Picture this. It's another Friday morning,
and I'm on an airplane on my way to Tel Aviv in Israel.

The cabin is stuffy,
with 500 travelers crammed in their seats.
An engine whirrs,
as others and I do our best, with our facemasks and thin blankets,
to catch some Z's.
Suddenly there is the distinct sound of the unlatching and latching of overhead compartments.
It wouldn't be a problem if it was just one or two,
but it's twenty or thirty.
And then starts the zipping and unzipping as bags open and close,
the word, "*Slikha*," which means "Excuse me" in Hebrew, punctuates the air
as I hear people climbing over seats.
My curiosity finally gets the best of me,
and as I raise up one half of my sleeping mask,
I can't believe my eyes.
Men, Jewish men, are scattered throughout the aisles,
muttering to themselves
furiously wrapping black straps around their arms,
then attaching a black box and straps around their heads.
Then they all move toward the front of the plane,
disappearing behind the first class cabin curtains.
Several minutes pass, I don't remember how many,
before they came back, and the muttering begins again,
then zipping and unzipping,
latching and unlatching,
before everyone is back in their seats and the plane quieted down again.

"You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead."

It is a very literal act,
binding the words of God to their arms and hands, to their foreheads.
And it's an ancient practice, that, like a glacier,
has slowly carved its way into modern times.

These boxes and straps are called *tefillin* in Hebrew, or "phylacteries" in English,
and ultra-observant Jews still pray with them every morning.
Inside the boxes are rolled up scrolls with scriptures on them,
reminding them of God's commandments...
not just the Ten Commandments,
but all 613 commandments in the Torah—
commandments that include everything
from not mixing meat and dairy,
to taking care of widows and treating one's neighbor with love.

Now back then,
laying *tefillin*, as it's called, helped them to stave off certain temptations...
temptations to burn sacrifices to pagan gods,
who might provide the rain or thunder they needed for their crops
temptations to roast the fatted calf for themselves only,
rather than sharing with the widow or the orphan or the neighbor.

Today, of course, the temptations are different,

temptations to serve the gods of wealth and prosperity,
temptations of convenience over keeping kosher.

And yet the purpose of laying *tefillin* is the same...
It reminds them of who they are,
and what they are about,
Servants of the one true God,
who are trying to be obedient to God's commands.

This practice was not then, nor is it now, a guarantee that someone will keep every commandment,
and, if you ask most Jews,
they'll tell you it's pretty much impossible to keep all 613.
But it doesn't keep them from trying.
With God's teachings ever present, literally between the eyes,
they are trying to be obedient,
so maybe when temptation comes,
it will help them make the right choices.

It's not necessarily a rewind button for life,
but it's the next best thing—a sort of owner's manual,
on how to live faithfully and abundantly.

So what does all of this have to do with us?
We who aren't Jewish,
and who don't have to worry about 613 Torah commandments.

Well, Jesus did give us our own list of commandments
during the Sermon the Mount,
the end of which we heard today.
It's a revised list of the Torah laws
which although shorter, seems equally as daunting:
Sure, "do not murder" and "do not commit adultery" make the list,
but so do:
"Do not be angry with your brother or sister.
Don't look at anyone with lust.
Do not swear oaths.
Turn the other cheek.
Love your enemies.
Don't worry about tomorrow.
Don't judge your neighbor.
Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

It's a laundry list of Christian ethics, for sure,
but it's even more.
It's our owner's manual for an abundant life.
And it seems we might do well to follow the examples of our Jewish brothers and sisters
and nurture an attitude of obedience.

I think this might be what Jesus was getting at in what we heard this morning.

After drolling out all these commands on the Sermon on the Mount,
he closes with this startling saying;

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of God in heaven. On that day many will say to me, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name? Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’”

Like the authors of Deuteronomy,
it seems for Jesus, too, that even perfect behavior, in and of itself,
is not really what the life of faith is all about.
Instead, it has much more to do with where our hearts are,
and if we are living our lives out of genuine love for God
and love for neighbor?
It’s necessarily the letter of the law Jesus is after, but the spirit.

Maybe we don’t literally need to bind the Sermon on the Mount to our heads,
but figuratively it wouldn’t be a bad idea.
It could do us some good to have love squarely between our eyes,
to start our mornings off by praying things like:
Help me to love you, God.
Help me to love my neighbor as myself.
Help me to turn the other cheek.
Help me not to worry so much about tomorrow.

This may not be the same as a rewind button for our lives,
but it is be an even better thing:
an owner’s manual,
that if we read it, and meditate on it, and try to stick to it,
it’ll mean we won’t have to do as much trouble-shooting,
or pausing, or rewinding, or asking for do-overs.

We are already God’s beloved,
and this is how we live it out,
for God welcomes our obedience, however feeble or failing.

I wonder sometimes what would have happened
back on that morning in U.S. History
if I had started my day with different thoughts.
Thoughts about how much God loved me,
how much God loved Erin,
how grateful I was for good friends.
I like to think my actions would have been different.

In any case, I learned a lesson with my friend that day.
I learned why it’s good to think before you speak.
I learned how much pain it can cause
when you don’t love your neighbor as yourself.
But I also learned what it means to be forgiven,
what it’s like to have someone turn their other cheek to me.

I can’t go back and rewrite that story in my life,
but I can bind that lesson to my hand and my head and my heart,
and in so doing, prepare for the next time,
when maybe then,

I'll remember to love God
love my neighbor
and do unto others as I would have them do unto me.

Amen.