

*These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.*

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### Sirach 15:15-20

NRSV

Two verses in the Old Testament seem to imply that God causes a person to sin at times: (1) God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart” in Exodus 11:10 and (2) in 2 Samuel 24:1 God “incited David” to count how many subjects he has – out of pride. But Sirach disagrees: in no way can God be held responsible for human sinfulness (vv. 11-12). God not only hates sin but he even preserves the godly person from committing it (v. 13).

In v. 14, he says that God “left them in the power of their own free choice”. (A scholar says that *inclination* is a better translation.) One can incline: (1) towards godliness (“life”, v. 17) by obeying the Law (v. 15) or (2) towards ungodliness (“death”, v. 17) by refusing to obey. God does allow us to go our own way, but he is always there to help us follow his ways. Only with his love can we attain eternal life. “Fire and water” (v. 16) are opposite extremes, and don’t mix. There are two choices; they are mutually exclusive. Then vv. 18-20: even though God is omniscient (he knows all that we think and do), he does not cause people to sin.

### Psalms 119:1-8

NRSV

This is the first stanza (of 22, one for each successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet) of the longest psalm. Each of the verses of this stanza begins with *aleph*, the first letter. The whole psalm is in praise of the Law (the expression of God’s covenant with humankind in the Old Testament) and of keeping it. The emphasis is on the love and desire for the word of God in Israel’s law, rather than being burdened with it. The psalm begins with a prayer for help in observing the Law. To be “happy” (vv. 1-2) is to be blessed by God. As in other stanzas, various words are used for “law”; here they are “precepts”, “statutes” “commandments”, and “ordinances”. The psalmist seeks to avoid sin, and to live in God’s ways.

### 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

NRSV

In Chapter 1, Paul says that he has learnt that there are divisions in the church at Corinth, that some adhere to particular leaders of the community rather than to Christ. The faith only makes sense to those who understand it spiritually, so he addresses them not as “spiritual people” (v. 1) but as neophytes (“infants”). He has been criticized for oversimplifying the good news, but their “jealousy and quarrelling” (v. 3) demonstrate that they are still only earthly minded, are still behaving according to human standards (“inclinations”).

It is natural to be attached to the person who welcomed you into the church, but you need to recognize that they are all “servants” (v. 5) of Christ. Each has a distinct function in bringing you to faith. Paul founded the church at Corinth (“planted”, v. 6); Apollos nurtured faith (“watered”) in the community; but it is

God who causes spirituality and faith to grow. He and Apollos have the same objective (v. 8). Perhaps the rewards (“wages”) are in seeing the church grow; perhaps they are in heaven. Paul and Apollos are co-workers. In the following verses, Paul expands on the church as “God’s building” (v. 9).

### Matthew 5:21-37

NRSV

Jesus has made clear that his mission is not to do away with (“abolish”) the Old Testament; rather he fleshes out its meaning fully (“fulfill”, v. 17). He speaks particularly about Mosaic law; it will remain in force until he comes again at the end of time (v. 18). In v. 19, he seems to soften his tone: whether or not one keeps and teaches every one of the 613 laws, one will be admitted to the Kingdom. The scribes and Pharisees kept all the laws scrupulously. Now he explains how their adherence to the Law is insufficient.

Each of Jesus’ expansions of the Law begins with “[You have heard that] it was said” (vv. 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). He then quotes a law. “Ancient times” refers to the days of Moses. The Ten Commandments forbid the act of murder (v. 21). Jesus extends this law to include propensities to kill: nursing anger, calling someone good for nothing (as the Greek says) or a “fool” (v. 22). Vv. 23-24 say that reconciliation take priority even over worship, to a Jew the most sacred act. Vv. 25-26 may be a parable: the Kingdom of God is at hand; seek reconciliation “quickly” lest God, the judge, finds against you. Jesus offers forgiveness.

Vv. 27-28, give another example. Avoiding adultery is not enough; even for a man to “look at a woman with a lustful eye” (Revised English Bible) is unacceptable. God expects purity of thought and desire as well as of action. Vv. 29-30 look extreme; they are meant figuratively, not literally. Jesus advises that one discard, promptly and decisively, anything in one’s life that tempts one to turn away from God.

Divorcing a wife was easy for a man in Palestine: in some circles, he could simply write her a “certificate of divorce” (v. 31) without cause. Jesus’ point here is that marriage is indissoluble, lifelong. He probably thinks of Genesis 2:24: in marriage, God makes man and wife “one flesh”. He makes one exception: “on the ground of unchastity” (v. 32). The Greek word means unlawful sexual behaviour, including adultery. He forbids remarriage because the first marriage still exists. This extension of the Law was not onerous for first-century Christians, for they expected the world to end soon, and they could live separately from their spouses. One swore an oath (vv. 33-37) to guarantee that what one said on a particular occasion was the truth. We still do it in court appearances today. Isaiah 66:1 refers to “earth” (v. 35) as God’s “footstool”; “Jerusalem” is God’s city (“... of the great King”). They are part of his realm. To “swear by your head” (v. 36) is to swear by oneself. Jesus says one should always tell only the truth. When one does, there is no need for swearing[-in]. A truthful person is consistent in what he says. Inconsistency is a sign that one has turned against God (v. 37). Perhaps Jesus actually said something like James 5:12: “let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no”.