

Moshe Weinfeld was professor of Bible at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He believed Deuteronomy 4 could be read as a homily on the first and most important commandment: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before (or beside) me.”

Israel is to heed and observe this commandment and teach it to her children and grandchildren. Why? It is the guarantor of their freedom.

During his sojourn into Christianity, Bob Dylan wrote, “You’re gonna serve somebody.”

You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you may like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a string of pearls

But you’re gonna have to serve somebody,
You’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody

David Foster Wallace sings from Dylan’s hymnbook in his commencement speech, “This is Water,” given at Kenyon College in May 2005. Wallace asserts there is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. The compelling reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship is that *pretty much anything else will eat you alive*.

Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. The world will not discourage such worship, Wallace says, because the so-called real world of money and power hums along in a pool of fear and anger and frustration and craving and *worship of self*.

St Augustine (It was his feast day yesterday) frames the matter poetically:

Lord you are
the light of the minds that know you,
the life of the souls who love you,
the strength of the souls who serve you.
Help us to
know you that we may truly love you,
so to love you that we may fully serve you,
whose service is perfect freedom.

We find it incredibly hard to believe perfect freedom lies in service to anyone or anything other than ourselves. With our lips we quietly mumble “Thy will be done” but our hearts insist on having our way. We do not allow our lives to be *determined* by knowledge of God. We prefer to take possession

of the divine and put it under our management. We imagine a God who exists to serve our needs, to be at our beck and call.

This is nothing new. The adversary convinced Adam and Eve they were free to do as they pleased without consequence. The boundaries imposed on them were arbitrary, imposed by a jealous god. The tragedy unfolds until in Genesis 6:5 we read “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humanity was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the intentions of their hearts was only evil continually.”

Humorists David Sedaris spends a lot of time in airports. Travel, he says, brings out the worst in people. He wrote a piece titled “Stand By.” “We’re forever blaming the airline industry for turning us into monsters. It’s the fault of the ticket agents, the baggage handlers, the slow pokes at the news stands and the fast food restaurants.”

“But what if this is who we truly are, and the airport is just a forum that allows us to be our real selves: not just hateful, but gloriously so? It’s a depressing thought. It was with me when I boarded my flight to Portland and was with me several hours later when we were told to put our tray tables away.”

“Then the flight attendants, garbage bags in hand, glided down the aisle, looking each one square in the face and whispering, without discrimination, ‘Your trash. Your trash. Your family’s trash.’”

“From the human heart,” says the Markan Jesus, “come evil intentions: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.” The interior of the human being is depicted as a Pandora’s box, a cave of malignancy, out of which hordes of demonlike evils emanate.

At the head of the list is “evil intentions” or “evil thoughts.” The grammar suggests that all the other evils follow, come out of, evil thoughts. This evil inclination is the inner enemy of God lodged within the human heart; it is a wild force that in the name of freedom propels people willy-nilly into actions that are opposed to God’s will.

It is important to know that the Bible sees this evil inclination not as an expression of who we truly are, but as a distortion or perversion of our real selves.

The basic problem is not how and what one eats, but who one worships and what one serves. Self-serving thinking is a malignancy that chokes the life out of tradition, turns it into an enemy of God, contorts it into a way of excusing injustice, and blinds us to our own culpability for the evils that trouble the world.

I heard an interview with David Michaels, author of a new biography of Eleanor Roosevelt. Michaels was asked by the interviewer, “If there is one thing you really want your readers to understand or consider anew about Eleanor Roosevelt, what would it be?”

Michaels responded, “We are only human through the humanity of others. Eleanor became more human to herself the more she connected with others and did things for others in *service* to others.” We are free to choose who to worship, what to serve, but we are not free to choose the consequences. The consequences of our choices will either enslave us, eat us alive or free us, make us more human.