

# Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

## GETTING WITH THE PROGRAM

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

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By Steven E. Albertin

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. 2You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you. 6You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!" 7For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? 8And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

9But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children.

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## DIAGNOSIS: "Failure"

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *This Is It!*

“Do you want to know how to live healthy, have enough money for your retirement, get into the best schools, win the approval your boss or simply just follow Jesus, then This Is It!” promises the guru, prophet and expert, pointing to his program of ten easy rules, 12 measured steps, three comprehensive principles and SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timely). This is the sacred system that must be honored if you want to have the blessing you crave.

“But you can’t fudge! No relaxing the rules. No adding additional strategies. Just do what you are supposed to do. Be committed. Follow through. Your neighbors will be impressed. They will think you are pretty cool.”

As the Israelites are about to finally enter the promise land, this is how Moses must have sounded. The Book of Deuteronomy is Moses’ last will and testament offered to the Israelites after their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness. He reminds them how they got there and what will be expected from them if they don’t want to bungle what God is about to deliver to them: the Promised Land. They are expected to Get with the Program described in all the “statutes and ordinances” this “second law,” and this second iteration of what God had already given them at Mt. Sinai.

They are not to mess with the program. No additions or subtractions. Just stick with it. “Give heed [v. 1] . . . keep them [v. 2] . . . and observe them diligently [v. 6]” and they will look wise to their neighbors (v. 6). Other nations will be impressed with them and their religion. No one else has a system like this (v. 8). If it means anything to them, they will make sure that it is passed on to their kids (v. 9). Get with the Program and they will be able to keep the land that God is about to deliver to them.

Therefore, they must listen carefully and pay attention to all that Moses is about to tell them . . . . again . . . . in the “second law,” . . . . in the book of Deuteronomy. This is important and urgent. This is it!

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Believe in It!**

To Get with the Program and make it work, we have to Believe In It. We are talking here about commitment and dedication. We are talking about what truly matters. These are “religious commitments,” even “sacred obligations.” Our heart had better be in it and believe in The Program or it won’t work. So, pay attention, heed the pleas and give it your heart and soul.

There is a similar urgency in Moses’ plea. This is no ordinary program. This is God’s program. The stakes are huge. It begins in the heart. Israel must believe in The Program and its author, Yahweh, “the Lord our God,” more than anything or anyone else. If they do not, they will never be able to keep the statutes and ordinances that will always accuse them for their failure to Get with the Program.

We know from the history of Israel that Israel repeatedly “fell off the wagon.” They kept on giving their hearts to other gods. They did not listen to Moses’ urgent plea to trust God. Instead, they gave their hearts to other gods and suffered the consequences.

The history of the development of the Book of Deuteronomy reveals how often Israel failed to Get with the Program. First created by the deuteronomic historian sitting in the rubble and ruin of the Babylonian Exile, this anonymous historian wanted to “explain” why and how Israel had brought this awful fate upon themselves. He reconstructed the Program into Moses’ last will and testament. Only if Israel Gets with the Program, can such future devastation be prevented. However, they did not Get with

the Program. Therefore, the book underwent further development and revision as part of the religious reform of King Josiah (ca. 621 BC). Even though Moses originally warned against such revisions (v. 2), they happened again and again precisely because Israel could never Get with the Program. They could never fully believe in it or its God. Their hearts were always trusting some other god than the God who had delivered them from bondage in Egypt and led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Watch Out!***

It is revealing that the lectionary editors omitted verses 3-5 from this reading. Why? The harsh description of God's judgment on those who gave their hearts to other gods is a grim reminder of how serious God is about The Program. Israel must love God with all its heart, soul and might. If the conditions are not met, if they do not "heed the statutes and ordinances," if they do not "observe them diligently," if they practice idolatry and give their hearts to someone else, Watch Out! Bad things will happen. Consequences will be suffered. Just look at the destruction of those who gave their hearts not to Yahweh but to the Baal of Peor (vv. 3-4).

Moses realizes the stakes. He urgently pleads, "take care and watch yourselves closely" (v. 9). At stake is the future of their children (v. 9), Israel's reputation among their neighbors (vv. 6-8) and their very existence. If they fail to Get with the Program, they will surely suffer the fate of those who "followed the Baal of Peor." (v. 3)

Such is the dark possibility that awaits all who do not Get with the Program. Whether the Program is the latest self-improvement strategy, pious faith practice or even the sacred instruction of God's "statutes and ordinances," the ever-present accusation and criticism of our shortcomings signal the ominous fact that all

of us fail to Get with the Program and are doomed to suffer the fate of those who “followed Baal of Peor.” (vv. 3-5).

Moses’ urgent warning, “Watch Out!” seems like an exercise in futility.

## **PROGNOSIS: “Success”**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *What Now?***

So if our situation is so bleak, What Now? What hope is there? Is God only interested in putting us in our place and keeping us down? Why does Moses think it is so important that we Get With The Program when it will always remain an unrealized possibility? Can the Program ever work and succeed? There must be more to the story. There is! And therein lies our hope.

Moses begins his plea with the words, “So now, Israel.” What Moses says here is related to what he previously has said (chapters 1-3). There Moses reminded Israel of all that God had graciously done to rescue Israel from bondage, lead it through the wilderness and finally bring it to the edge of entering the Promised Land. Getting with the Program began with God’s gracious choosing of Israel and not with Israel’s worthiness. If the Program is to succeed, it will succeed because God succeeded in delivering these people from all that would make them fail.

Such grace signals another time, yet to come, when God’s gracious intervention would be even more dramatic, so much more so that some called it a NEW Program, a New Covenant. Determined to love and not let repeat offenders and relentless failures be lost, God befriends all the Program failures by dying on the cross. At the cross we see the extraordinary lengths to which God will go to win the trust of those who follow the Baal of Peor. God silences God’s own deadly criticism by suffering the fate we all deserve. God swallows hard, bites his own tongue and eats his own words by suffering failure. In exchange, God offers

to make us successful graduates of the Program. The resurrection confirms God's decision to make the Program work for us.

**Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *That's It!***

Upon hearing this good news, The Program failures cannot help but exclaim, "That's It!" They finally realize that this is always what God wanted to do: "be gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." If we want to Get with the Program, all we need do is trust what God has already done in Christ. That is certainly what Moses wanted Israel to do as he left them this last will and testament. Because God rescued Israel and brought them to the cusp of the Promised Land, because God sent Jesus who suffered, died and was raised from the dead for the forgiveness of sins, would we not want to Get with the Program? Program failures everywhere are stunned by such mercy. We are thrilled. We joyfully cry, "That's it!"

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Getting with the Program***

Now Moses' urgent pleas have become delightful invitations. Because of what God has done, the "statutes and ordinances" are no longer "carrot and stick" but "gift and blessing." They describe ways in which Israel GETS TO live in the world. All those Gentiles, first the Babylonians, then the Persians and later the Romans, will be impressed with how God's chosen people live in the world. "See how they love one another!" their first century Roman neighbors would say of the Christians. Free from the "law" of the Program, such God/Christ trusters find themselves Getting with the Program, loving their neighbors, observing the commandments, heeding the statutes and ordinances without even being concerned about how well they are doing it. That's what happens when you Get with the Program.