

is the phrase: “I am the Lord.” (2, 3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18). It is a phrase repeated 8 times in the space of 18 verses.

Don’t completely strip your vineyard, or pick up the fallen grapes; leave them for the poor and the foreigner. *I am the Lord.* (10)

Don’t treat the deaf with contempt or put an obstacle in the way of the blind; you are the fear your God. *I am the Lord.*

Don’t seek revenge or nurse grudges but love your neighbour as yourself. *I am the Lord.*

On the one hand, the refrain is a warning from God: ‘If you break my commandments you’ll have me to answer to.’ On the other hand, the refrain is the invitation from God: ‘Live a holy life.’ One of Calvin’s themes is Christians should live with an awareness of God.

Every Christian should bear in mind that that throughout life we must deal with God. Knowing this, we will be ready to account to God for all our actions.
Institutes 3.7.2

If we were really to live life moment-by-moment before God and answerable to God, it would both act as a brake on our worst impulses and as an encouragement to our best impulses. But more than this, if we would really live life before God, if we really availed ourselves of the help he offers, life would not be the desperate struggle that it often is. We often struggle because, at bottom, we think that it’s all up to us. And when we have to rely on our own, often depleted, resources, it’s no wonder that when someone threatens us, we retaliate with

threat; when someone wants us to go the extra mile, we refuse; when someone wants to beg or borrow from us, we withhold. It’s no wonder, when we rely upon our own strength, we hate our enemies, we love only those who love us, and we greet only those we already know (see Matt 5:38-47). It’s no wonder we fail to keep Jesus’s demands in the Sermon on the Mount, because when life becomes an individual struggle we naturally first look to our own interests before we look to the interests of others.

But now, listen. Listen to God’s command and promise.

You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

And listen again; listen to Jesus’s commentary on this command:

Be complete, then, as your heavenly Father is complete. Matt 5:48

Isn’t the reason why people respond to threat with threat, why people won’t go the extra mile, why people withhold from those in need, why people fear their enemies and cling desperately to those who love them, because they think that life is an individual struggle for survival? They think, “money and resources are scarce so we’ve got to hold onto what we’ve got.” This is the economy of threat, scarcity and want. But the good news is that there is an alternative: *God’s commands and Jesus’s teachings, if we all follow them, have the power to create a different economy and a transformed society.*

God’s commands in Leviticus are really about putting others’ interests first and loving our neighbours, and when we do this we are being holy. Jesus’s commands in the Sermon on the

Mount are able to be lived out by those who think and act not out of fear or want or need but who think and act out of completeness and fullness. That is, they think and act as those who have found completeness and fulfilment in God through the grace of Jesus Christ. They have found a never failing source of fulfilment in their heavenly Father, and out of the overflow of that fulfilment through Christ they are able to give and forgive and love and be courageous.

On Wednesday of the past week, 27 Anglican Bishops, 10 Methodist Chairs of Districts, 3 United Reformed Church Synod Moderators, and 2 Quaker leaders wrote a letter to the *Daily Mirror* highlighting what they believe to be a discrepancy:

Britain is the world's seventh largest economy and yet people are going hungry. Half a million people have visited foodbanks in the UK since last Easter and 5,500 people were admitted to hospital in the UK for malnutrition last year. One in five mothers report regularly skipping meals to better feed their children, and even more families are just one unexpected bill away from waking up with empty cupboards. We often hear talk of hard choices. Surely few can be harder than that faced by the tens of thousands of older people who must "heat or eat" each winter, harder than those faced by families whose wages have stayed flat while food prices have gone up 30% in just five years. Yet beyond even this we must, as a society, face up to the fact that over half of people using foodbanks have been put in that situation by cut backs to and failures in the benefit system, whether it be payment delays or punitive sanctions. (*Daily Mirror*, 19.02.14)

The authors of the letter call on government to investigate food markets that are failing, to make sure that work pays, and to ensure that the welfare system provides a robust last line of defence against hunger. www.endhungerfast.co.uk

I can verify that these church leaders know what they are writing about because on Tuesday I did a shift at the foodbank in Barnet and most of those who presented vouchers for food did so because as a result of benefit delays which, when combined with cost increases in rent and food, are a recipe for hunger and destitution. But not all those who come to the foodbank are on unemployment benefit, some are pensioners and some are the low paid contracted who, when they have had to pay an unexpected bill, have no money left for food. They are not scroungers but desperate people who are willing to submit to the humiliation of turning up to a foodbank because they and their family are hungry. We might reflect that the foodbanks, most of them set up by churches, are actually putting into practice the holiness code advocated in Leviticus: they take the surplus food of those who can afford it and give it to those who don't have enough. But those who work in foodbanks would probably concede that they are treating the symptom of hunger and are not dealing with its cause. To deal with the cause is much more difficult. I think it requires individuals to take responsibility to find financially sustainable ways of living, supported by government and community groups, including the Church. Let us as the Church live out holiness by doing what we can to meet desperate need. But once immediate need has been met, let us communicate the gospel message that completeness and fulfilment can be found in God through the grace of Jesus Christ. We can testify that when we seek God's help in a faith community, we find a source of spiritual and communal strength that enables us to face life's challenges.