

God's New Deal Is Not A Zero-Sum Game

In *Psalms* 8 David cries out, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?" David raises a very important question: "what **is** man?" It's a question that scientists and philosophers have pondered down through the ages. In biblical terms, man is God's image-bearer, created by God to exercise stewardship over all of God's creation and to fill the earth with image-bearers. But throughout history, most attempts to come up with a definition of man have not included his relationship to his creator. As a result they range from the confusing to the comical. The **American Heritage Dictionary**, for example, defines man as, "a member of the genus homo, family hominidae, order primates, class mammalia, characterized by an erect posture and an opposable thumb, distinguished by the ability to communicate by means of organized speech and to record information in a variety of symbolic systems." So much for the confusing. As an example of the comical, one 19th-century zoologist declared that the only scientifically accurate definition of "man" was, "featherless biped." Evolutionists, of course, believe that man is merely the result of the random interaction of molecules. My favorite secular definition of man is attributed to Harry Truman, who said that men are creatures who make deals with each other specifically so that they can break them. Joseph Stalin was of the same opinion. He said that people's promises were like piecrusts—made to be broken. Truman and Stalin may have been cynical, but from a purely secular perspective, they were close to the mark. Deals are agreements struck between people who are motivated by self-interest. They are typically the end result of a process known as negotiation, which is a polite work for civilized combat. A tries to get more out of B than B gets out of A and visa versa, and when they come to a compromise, they have a deal.

The earliest samples of writing ever discovered are records of deals called covenants which were made between individuals and tribes regarding property boundaries, military alliances, and the like. In the modern world, deals are the lifeblood of commerce. Manufacturers make deals with wholesalers, wholesalers make deals with retailers, retailers offer deals to customers who are looking for the best deal. Unions make deals with employers about terms of employment for their members. Real estate agents put together deals between property owners and people who want to rent or buy their property. You probably bought or leased your car from an automobile dealer. Not only does commerce run on deals—the political world does as well. Politicians make deals with each other which they are glad to honor—until a better deal comes along. It was also Harry Truman who said that if you wanted a friend in Washington—buy a dog.

Husbands and wives make spoken and unspoken deals with each other regarding who can do what without offending the other. We even make deals with ourselves—they're called New Year's resolutions. We tend to break those deals too. People who are good at making deals tend to prosper and those who aren't, don't.

So is there anything wrong with making deals? Not at all.

With deal-making, as with everything else, one can choose to act in good faith or to be unscrupulous. One can respect the rules of the game, or one can strive to win at any cost. There's nothing morally wrong with deal-making per se: it's simply an orderly way human beings have developed to compete with one another in a fallen world without battering each other's brains out.

There is, however, one important thing to understand about deal-making, and that is that it's a closed system—a zero-sum game. The only way one person can benefit is by another's loss. The energy in the system remains constant and at the end of the game, the equation has to balance.

But as it turns out, there is another way to deal with one another, *and that is to let god in on the deal*. When two or more gather together in God's name rather than in order to compete, the game is no longer zero-sum because the system is no longer closed. Once God is invited into the game, his power begins to flow into the equation. Trust is created, and people become focused on securing the common good rather than on profiting from each other's loss. They become a fellowship rather than a balancing act.

God made both kinds of deal with mankind. First he made a two-way covenant with the Israelites at Mount Sinai. That deal was simple: he gave them laws to obey—laws like the ten commandments—and promised them that if they obeyed his laws they would be blessed, but if they broke them they would be punished. *Deuteronomy 30:16-17*: "for I command you today to love the lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you..." "but if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed." Sounds like a zero-sum game. Of course the Israelites failed to keep their part of the bargain. They broke God's laws and bowed down to other gods. God knew that this would happen because he knew his people.

He knew that they were stiff-necked and rebellious and that they would break the laws he had imposed upon them and worship pagan idols. But instead of leaving them losers in a zero-sum game, God came up with a new deal.

When the time was right, he proclaimed a new covenant which would replace the old covenant he had made with His people at Mount Sinai. According to this new covenant, God himself would suffer the consequences for his people's failure to obey the old covenant. He would pay the penalty for all of their sins. And once the penalty was paid, the sins of his people would be forgiven—along with the sins of the rest of mankind as well. The new deal was complete forgiveness for everyone—free, abundant and universal. It applied to past sins, present sins, and future sins and it didn't matter how many because Paul wrote: "where the law was given, sin increased, but where sin did increase, forgiveness increased all the more." God offers forgiveness to us because he knows that forgiveness is the only thing on earth that can turn a rebellious heart into an obedient heart. Paul wrote, "Although you were slaves of sin, you were obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and having been set free from sin you became slaves of righteousness." And once God's forgiveness turns our hearts away from loving sin to loving righteousness, we are able to extend his forgiveness to others. We really mean it when we pray, "forgive us our sins as we forgive the sins of others." A gracious spirit replaces a competitive spirit and the desire to love and serve others replaces the desire to get the better of them. We learn to love one another as Jesus Christ has loved us.

One of the greatest examples of biblical love—of someone who put serving others ahead of everything else—was Ruth. A citizen of Moab, one of Israel's fiercest enemies, Ruth dedicated herself entirely to loving and serving her mother-in-law Naomi, who was an Israelite from Bethlehem. When Naomi was widowed and Ruth's own husband died, Ruth dedicated the rest of her life to taking care of her mother-in-law. She promised her, "Where you go I will go and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your god my god. Where you die I will die and there I will be buried." Now that is pure, unconditional love. And we admire it, but we're not inclined to practice it. Who among us would do what Ruth did? Who would dedicate their entire lives to taking care of another person? Very few, I suspect. A host of rationalizations would leap to mind as to why such a commitment would be unrealistic. "It's just one person and there are others who need help as well." "It isn't good to for a person to be taken care of: they'd be better off by learning to take care of themselves." "Anyway, we don't have the time to take care of them and we have other responsibilities." We could go on and on coming up with reasons why we couldn't make such a commitment. But they all pale in the light of Ruth's simple words: "where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay."

Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die and there I will be buried." End of the conversation. There is a power in love which transcends all other things, because like forgiveness, love springs from God's heart and anything that comes from God is perfect.

Forgiveness and love are two sides of the same coin. God loves us and forgives us and His love and forgiveness have the power to transform us into new creations—people who are capable of loving and forgiving others. The deals we make apart from God are finely wrought stratagems of mutual exploitation. They are part and parcel of the competitiveness that drives man's behavior in a fallen world. The new deal that God offers us is simply to accept his forgiveness and love and share them with others. The first kind of deal is a zero-sum game in which everybody ultimately loses. God's new deal is an eternal blessing where everyone wins. You pick the better deal. Amen.