

THE LAW IS OUR TEACHER

Deuteronomy 31:24-29

²⁴ After Moses finished writing in a book the words of this law from beginning to end, ²⁵ he gave this command to the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD: ²⁶ “Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God. There it will remain as a witness against you. ²⁷ For I know how rebellious and stiff-necked you are. If you have been rebellious against the LORD while I am still alive and with you, how much more will you rebel after I die! ²⁸ Assemble before me all the elders of your tribes and all your officials, so that I can speak these words in their hearing and call the heavens and the earth to testify against them. ²⁹ For I know that after my death you are sure to become utterly corrupt and to turn from the way I have commanded you. In days to come, disaster will fall on you because you will do evil in the sight of the LORD and arouse his anger by what your hands have made.”

Luke 6:27-37

²⁷ “But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. ³⁷ “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

Message:

THE SEASON OF LENT IS A GOOD TIME FOR US TO REFLECT ON THE TIMES IN OUR LIVES WHEN WE HAVE FAILED AT SOMETHING. THAT'S RIGHT: LENT IS A GOOD TIME TO THINK ABOUT OUR FAILURES. OF COURSE WE'RE RELUCTANT TO DO THAT, NOT ONLY BECAUSE WE'RE ASHAMED OF OUR FAILURES BUT BECAUSE WE LIVE IN A SOCIETY THAT WORSHIPS SUCCESS AND SCORNS FAILURE. AND WE DON'T LIKE TO FEEL ASHAMED AND WE DON'T LIKE TO FEEL SCORNFUL. SO BE BURY OUR FAILURES IN THE PAST AND WORSHIP SUCCESS ALONG WITH EVERYBODY ELSE. SUCCESS IS A GREAT IDOL IN AMERICA. AND

TO UNDERSTAND HOW THIS CAME TO BE, WE NEED TO GO BACK A LITTLE IN HISTORY.

BACK IN THE 19TH CENTURY, THERE WAS AN AMERICAN AUTHOR BY THE NAME OF HORATIO ALGER. HORATION ALGER WROTE IMMENSELY POPULAR NOVELS ABOUT ALL-AMERICAN SUCCESS STORIES—PEOPLE WHO THROUGH HARD WORK, DETERMINATION, COURAGE AND HONESTY LIFTED THEMSELVES OUT OF POVERTY AND ACHIEVED MIDDLE-CLASS RESPECTABILITY. HIS NOVELS TRUMPETED THE VIRTUE OF WHAT CAME TO BE CALLED “SELF-DETERMINATION.” SAYINGS LIKE “PULL YOURSELF UP BY YOUR OWN BOOTSTRAPS” AND “WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE TOUGH GET GOING” AND PHRASES LIKE “RAGS TO RICHES” CAME OUT OF ALGER’S STORIES AND BECAME ICONS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN WAS CELEBRATED MORE AS THE MAN WHO WORKED HIS WAY FROM A LOG CABIN TO THE WHITEHOUSE THAN AS THE MAN WHO WON THE CIVIL WAR AND FREED THE SLAVES. THE PRODIGIOUS GROWTH OF THE AMERICAN ECONOMY DURING THE LAST HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY SEEMED TO PROVE THAT THESE VALUES WORKED AS THE WORKING CLASS BECAME MORE AND MORE AFFLUENT AND TURNED INTO THE MIDDLE CLASS. “PULLING YOURSELF UP BY YOUR OWN BOOTSTRAPS” AND “RAGS TO RICHES” ARE STILL PART AND PARCEL OF THE AMERICAN DREAM”—THE PROMISE THAT IN AMERICA ANYONE WHO IS WILLING TO WORK HARD ENOUGH CAN BE ANYTHING HE WANTS TO BE.

DURING THE SAME TIME AS ALGER WAS PUBLISHING HIS NOVELS, CHRISTIANITY WAS SPREADING LIKE WILDFIRE IN AMERICA. BETWEEN 1800 AND 1850 A NEW PHENOMENON CALLED REVIVALISM SWEEPED THE COUNTRY. ITINERANT PREACHERS WOULD VISIT COMMUNITIES AND LEAD WORSHIP SERVICES CALLED REVIVALS. THEY WOULD PREACH FIERY SERMONS ABOUT SIN, DEATH, HELL AND SALVATION IN JESUS CHRIST. AFTER THE SERMON, PEOPLE WOULD BE INVITED TO COME FORWARD AND PUBLICALLY PROCLAIM THEIR FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST AS THEIR SAVIOR. THIS CAME TO BE KNOWN AS THE “ALTAR CALL” AND IT’S STILL PRACTICED IN MANY CHRISTIAN CHURCHS TODAY.

REVIVALISTS PREACHED THAT IN ORDER TO BE SAVED, A PERSON HAD TO MAKE A DECISION TO FOLLOW JESUS CHRIST AND THEN ANNOUNCE THAT DECISION PUBLICALLY. PAUL HAD WRITTEN: *“IF YOU BELIEVE IN YOUR HEART THAT JESUS IS LORD AND CONFESS WITH YOUR LIPS THAT GOD RAISED HIM FROM THE DEAD, YOU WILL BE SAVED.”* AND THAT’S WHAT THEY DID. LATER, IN THE 20TH CENTURY, THE EVANGELIST BILLY GRAHAM WOULD PREACH ABOUT MAKING A “DECISION FOR CHRIST” AND FOLLOW UP HIS SERMON WITH AN ALTAR CALL.

THE POPULARITY OF ALGER’S NOVELS ABOUT THE VIRTUE OF SELF-DETERMINATION AND REVIVALISM’S EMPHASIS ON MAKING A PERSONAL “DECISION FOR CHRIST” HAD AN ENORMOUS IMPACT ON THE AMERICAN

CONSCIOUSNESS. DECIDING TO DO SOMETHING, MAKING A PLAN FOR HOW TO DO IT AND EXECUTING THE PLAN—THAT WAS THE KEY TO SUCCESS.

LATER IN THE 20TH CENTURY DALE CARNEGIE WOULD CALL THIS “THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING.” IT WAS NOT ONLY THE KEY TO PERSONAL SUCCESS BUT THE KEY TO BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL SOCIETY. AND AS FAR AS MATERIAL PROSPERITY AND PROGRESS IS CONCERNED, IT’S WORKED OUT PRETTY WELL FOR AMERICA. IT’S JUST NOT HOW THINGS WORK IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD, EVERYTHING IS REVERSED: WE DON’T MAKE A DECISION FOR GOD; GOD MAKES A DECISION FOR US. IN HIS GOSPEL, JOHN WROTE: “...*TO THOSE WHO BELIEVED IN [JESUS’] NAME, HE GAVE THE RIGHT TO BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD—CHILDREN BORN NOT OF NATURAL DESCENT, NOR OF HUMAN DECISION OR A HUSBAND’S WILL, BUT BORN OF GOD.*” [John 1:12] IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD, GOD DOES THE DECIDING, GOD DOES THE PLANNING, AND GOD EXECUTES THE PLAN.

WE ARE NOT THE DOERS; WE ARE “DONE UNTO.” WE ARE NOT THE PLANNERS; WE ARE THE PLAN. EVERYTHING IS REVERSED.

THE PROBLEM IS THAT A LOT OF PEOPLE MIX THE TWO KINGDOMS UP AND THINK THAT WHAT WORKS IN THE KINGDOM OF THIS WORLD SHOULD ALSO WORK IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD. THAT WE SHOULD DECIDE WHEN TO BECOME BORN-AGAIN CHRISTIANS. THAT WE SHOULD MAKE A PLAN THAT WILL ENABLE US TO STOP SINNING AND BECOME MORE CHRISTLIKE. AND THAT IF WE WORK HARD ENOUGH AT EXECUTING OUR PLAN, WE CAN TURN OURSELVES INTO ONE OF THE SHEEP RATHER THAN BE ONE OF THE GOATS WHEN THE FINAL JUDGMENT COMES AROUND. BUT IT DOESN’T WORK THAT WAY.

SELF-DETERMINATION IS A FINE QUALITY WHEN IT COMES TO LIVING LIFE IN THIS WORLD, BUT IT WON’T GET YOU ANYWHERE IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD. WE MAY BE ABLE TO RAISE OURSELVES UP BY OUR OWN BOOTSTRAPS IN THIS WORLD, BUT IN HIS KINGDOM, GOD DOES THE HEAVY LIFTING. UNFORTUNATELY, THE CONVICTION THAT IT *IS* UP TO US TO GET THINGS DONE IS SO INGRAINED IN OUR FALLEN NATURE THAT GOD HAD TO TEACH US HOW TO ABANDON IT. HE DID THIS BY GIVING US THE LAW.

THE LAW’S COMMANDS ARE CLEAR ENOUGH: DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT LIE, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER AND ALL THE REST. AND WHEN WE HEAR THIS LIST WE ARE SOMEWHAT COMFORTED BY THE FACT THAT WE DON’T MAKE A HABIT OF DOING THESE THINGS. WE DON’T STEAL OR MURDER OR LIE (EXCEPT FOR WHITE LIES, OF COURSE) OR COMMIT ADULTERY OR ABANDON OUR PARENTS. SO WE SCORE PRETTY WELL AND GIVE OURSELVES A LITTLE PAT ON THE BACK.

BUT THEN GOD MAKES IT CLEAR THAT THESE RULES DON’T ONLY APPLY TO WHAT WE DO AND SAY, BUT TO WHAT WE THINK AND FEEL AS WELL. TO WHAT WE WOULD SOMETIMES LIKE TO DO—AND EVEN IMAGINE OURSELVES DOING. JESUS SAID, “*YOU HAVE BEEN TAUGHT THAT ANYONE WHO COMMITS MURDER*

IS LIABLE TO JUDGMENT. BUT I SAY TO YOU THAT ANYONE WHO IS ANGRY WITH HIS NEIGHBOR IS SUBJECT TO JUDGMENT." [Matt. 5:21-22] SO IN GOD'S EYES, TO NURSE AN ANGRY SPIRIT TOWARD ANOTHER PERSON IS A FORM OF MURDER.

JESUS SAID, "YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID, 'DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.' BUT I SAY THAT ANY MAN WHO LOOKS UPON A WOMAN TO LUST AFTER HER HAS ALREADY COMMITTED ADULTERY WITH HER IN HIS HEART." [Matt. 5:27-28]

TO FEEL LUST IS A FORM OF ADULTERY. TO WANT TO HAVE WHAT BELONGS TO YOUR NEIGHBOR IS A FORM OF STEALING. TO FEEL RESENTFUL TOWARD YOUR PARENTS OR CONSIDER THEM A BURDEN IS TO DISHONOR THEM. TO GO TO CHURCH RELUCTANTLY MERELY TO COMPLY WITH THE 4TH COMMANDMENT IS TO SIN AGAINST THE SABBATH.

ALL THESE ARE SINS AGAINST GOD'S LAW. AND GOD COMMANDS US TO KEEP HIS LAW PERFECTLY—NOT ONLY IN OUR WORDS AND ACTIONS BUT IN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS AS WELL. *DEUTERONOMY 27:26: "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT CONTINUE TO DO EVERYTHING WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW."* AND JAMES ADDS: "...WHOEVER KEEPS THE WHOLE LAW AND YET STUMBLES AT JUST ONE POINT IS GUILTY OF BREAKING ALL OF IT." [James 2:10] THOSE ARE THE RULES. HOW ARE YOU DOING SO FAR?

HERE'S THE PICTURE AS SUCCINCTLY AS I CAN PUT IT: GOD HAS GIVEN US STRINGENT LAWS AND COMMANDED US TO OBEY THEM PERFECTLY IN ALL THAT WE THINK AND SAY AND DO. BUT WE ARE BORN WITH A SINFUL NATURE THAT REBELS AGAINST GOD'S LAW. THEREFORE THERE IS NO WAY WE CAN KEEP GOD'S LAW PERFECTLY. AND THE PRICE OF FAILURE IS DEATH, FOLLOWED BY ETERNAL SUFFERING. GET THE PICTURE? WE MUST KEEP THE LAW BUT WE CAN'T KEEP THE LAW.

WE ARE HOPELESSLY LOST AND BOUND FOR DESTRUCTION. THAT'S WHAT THE LAW TEACHES US. ALL THE SELF-DETERMINATION IN THE WORLD WON'T GET YOU OFF THE STARTING BLOCKS IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD **BECAUSE YOUR SELF IS THE PROBLEM. YOUR SELF IS OPPOSED TO GOD.** LEFT TO YOURSELF YOU ARE DOOMED TO AN ETERNITY OF WEEPING AND MOURNING AND THE GNASHING OF TEETH WHILE A WORM GNAWS AT YOUR INNERDS.

NOW I'M AWARE THAT THIS KIND OF LANGUAGE IS REFERRED TO THESE DAYS AS "FIRE AND BRIMSTONE" PREACHING—AND YOU DON'T HEAR MUCH OF IT. TO SAY IT'S OUT OF VOGUE, WOULD BE AN UNDERSTATEMENT. IT IS CONSIDERED UNSOPHISTICATED, JUDGMENTAL AND OUTDATED. AND YOU KNOW SOMETHING? IT IS UNSOPHISTICATED, JUDGMENTAL AND OUTDATED. BUT IT'S ALSO THE TRUTH.

CONTEMPORARY MAN SAYS: "WHO BELIEVES IN SATAN ANYMORE?" THE ANSWER IS: JESUS DOES. WHO BELIEVES IN HELL, WHERE THERE IS WEEPING AND THE GNASHING OF TEETH? JESUS DOES—IN FACT THOSE ARE HIS VERY WORDS. AND IF JESUS BELIEVES IT, WE WOULD BE WELL-ADVISED TO BELIEVE IT TOO. WE CANNOT POSSIBLY SAVE OURSELVES FROM DEATH AND HELL THROUGH OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW.

THE OBVIOUS QUESTION IS, WHY WOULD GOD WANT TO TEACH US THAT? WHY WOULD HE GIVE US LAWS THAT WE CANNOT POSSIBLY OBEY? AND THE ANSWER IS THAT HE WANTS TO SHOW US HOW MUCH WE NEED HIM. HE WANTS TO SHOW US HOW WICKED WE ARE SO THAT WE WILL BEG HIM TO MAKE US RIGHTEOUS. AND WHEN WE DO TURN TO HIM AND CONFESS OUR WICKEDNESS, HERE IS HIS ANSWER: *"BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR THEY SHALL BE SATISFIED."*

THE GREATEST GIFT WE CAN EVER RECEIVE IS GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS AND ALL WE HAVE TO DO TO RECEIVE IT IS CONFESS TO GOD THAT WE NEED IT AND WANT IT. BUT FIRST WE HAVE TO GIVE UP ON OURSELVES. THAT IS WHY I URGE YOU TO SPEND SOME TIME DURING THIS SEASON OF LENT CONSIDERING YOUR FAILURES. IF YOU ASK THE HOLY SPIRIT TO HELP YOU IN THIS SEARCH, HE WILL GUIDE YOU. IF YOU'RE LIKE ME, YOU WON'T HAVE A PROBLEM IDENTIFYING AREAS WHERE YOU HAVE FALLEN SHORT OF THE MARK. AND WHEN YOUR FAILURES ARE REVEALED TO YOU, CONSIDER THEM TREASURES, BECAUSE THEY WILL POINT YOU TO GOD WHO IS THE SOURCE OF ALL BLESSINGS.

AMEN.