

The New Deal

In *Psalm 8*, David asks God: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"

It's a good question: What is man?

According to David, man was created by God to exercise stewardship and dominion over His creation.

"You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet!"

So the Bible defines man in terms of his relationship with God.

But there have been many attempts to define man apart from his relationship with God, and the results are sometimes confusing and sometimes amusing.

The 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.*"

Hmmm.

One 19th-century zoologist insisted that the only scientifically accurate definition of "man" was: "*featherless biped.*"

Contemporary evolutionists believe that man is a highly complex result of the random interactions 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.

From a secular perspective, Truman was pretty close to the mark.

Human beings have always been avid deal-makers.

The earliest samples of writing ever discovered are deals—covenants and treaties made between individuals and tribes regarding property boundaries, military alliances, trade agreements and the like.

And what is the definition of a deal?

A deal is an agreement struck between two or more people, each of whom is trying to get the better end of the deal.

“A” tries to get more out of “B” than “B” gets out of “A”—and visa versa.

Deals are the end result of a process known as negotiation, which is a polite word for civilized combat.

Deals are the lifeblood of the business world.

Manufacturers make deals with wholesalers, wholesales make deals with retailers, and retailers make deals with customers.

Unions negotiate deals with management about terms of employment for their members.

Real estate agents broker deals between property owners and people who want to buy property.

You probably bought or leased your car from an automobile dealer.

But just as people are avid deal-makers, they are equally avid deal-breakers.

Politicians make deals with each other which they promise to honor—until a better deal comes along.

Josef Stalin described the political world pretty well when he said, “Promises are like pie-crusts: they are made to be broken.”

Our personal lives are filled with deals as well.

We have spoken and unspoken deals with our spouses, our children and our friends.

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 good at making them don't.

Is there anything wrong with making a living by 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 a way that human beings have developed to compete with one another in a fallen world where trust comes at a premium.

There IS one important thing to understand about deal-making, however, and that is that it's a closed system—a zero-sum game.

The energy in the system remains constant; at the end of the game, the equation has to balance.

For every winner there has to be a loser.

But there's another way to deal with one another, and that's to let God in on the deal.

When two or more gather together in God's name rather than in the name of competition, 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 generated and people become focused on securing their mutual benefit rather than on competing with each other.

They become a fellowship rather than a balancing act.

God made two very different kinds of deals with mankind.

First he made a two-way deal with the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

That deal was simple: He gave them laws to obey and promised them that if they obeyed those laws they would be blessed but if they disobeyed them they would be cursed.

Of course the Israelites failed to keep their part of the deal: they not only disobeyed God's laws, they stopped dealing with God and sought pagan gods to deal with.

God knew that His people would do this because He knew his people.

He knew they were stiff-necked and rebellious and that they would resent his commands and break them.

He also knew that they would turn to pagan gods and try to deal with them.

He knew that all this would happen but He made the deal with them anyway

He did it because He wanted them to learn the hard way that they couldn't keep their part of the first deal and they would be open to a new deal He had in mind for them.

And in the fullness of time, God announced His New Deal.

According to this New Deal, instead of sending a curse on them for failing to keep their part of the old deal, he would make them a new deal.

He would send His Son to take the curse for their disobedience upon himself.

His Son would become their Scapegoat.

The name of this Scapegoat would be Jesus, whose Hebrew name meant "salvation."

The New Deal he was offering would be called Grace.

The Law, which provided that a man's sins would be punished by death, would be replaced by Grace, which provided that a man's sins would be forgiven and that he would enter eternal life.

God would deal with men through grace and not through the law.

In Paul's words, man would "not be under the law, but under grace.

Grace would be complete, effective, and eternal.

It would apply to his past sins, his present sins, and his future sins.

It would be abundant, free and unconditional.

God offered us this grace, because he knew that it was the only thing that could turn a human heart from rebellion to obedience.

Paul wrote: *"Although you were slaves of sin, you were obedient from the heart to that form of doctrine to which you were entrusted, and having been set free from sin you became slaves of righteousness."*

Grace would turn a man from a rebel into a servant.

Grace would replace competitiveness with love, and the desire to serve his neighbor would replace the need to get the better of him.

Today's Old Testament lesson furnishes us with a perfect example of gracious behavior in the character of Ruth.

Ruth, who was a citizen of Moab, one of Israel's oldest and fiercest enemies, willingly embraced the faith of her mother-in-law, Naomi, who was an Israelite from Bethlehem.

Both Naomi and Ruth had lost their husbands and when Naomi decided to return to her home in Bethlehem, Ruth volunteered to take care of her mother-in-law for the rest of her life.

"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."

In these words Ruth gave us the perfect model of grace: pure, unconditional love.

Ruth promised to faithfully serve her mother-in-law in love for the rest of her life.

Amazing grace.

Does this offer of lifelong loyalty and faithfulness on Ruth's part seem unrealistic to you? Even foolish?

Would you do the same?

Would you place so high a value on another human being that you would commit the rest of your life to taking care of them?

A host of rationalizations leap to our minds as to why we might not.

After all, there are many people out there who need our help—why should we help only one?

And won't helping them just enable them to stay helpless when they ought to learn how to stand on their own two feet.

Wouldn't they be better off learning to fend for themselves?

We could come up with lots of reasons why such a commitment would be inappropriate.

But they all pale into the self-justifying excuses they are 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 grace which transcends all other powers because grace springs from God's heart and anything that comes from God is perfect.

Trust and grace are two sides of the same coin.

We trust that God's grace will change our heart and God trusts us to love our neighbor with our new heart.

We trust that our love will change our neighbor's heart and he will love his neighbor as we have loved him.

That's how God's New Deal works.

Back in 1933 Americans were suffering from an economic depression.

Unemployment was skyrocketing, people were losing their homes, banks were failing and for many families, starvation was knocking at the door.

Our president, Franklyn Roosevelt, came up with a plan that he called a "New Deal" for Americans—a deal he believed would lift the country out of the depression.

The plan provided that the government would assume new regulatory powers over several sectors of the economy: the stock market, the banking industry—even employment practices in the private sector.

The government would serve as "an employer of last resort"—giving jobs to tens of thousands of unemployed workers.

To this day, historians and economists argue about whether it was the New Deal or the Second World War that lifted America out of the depression.

One thing is certain: it significantly increased the power of the federal government, giving birth to a trend that continues to this day.

Some say that's a good thing; some say it's a bad thing.

Since it's a human thing it's probably a little of both.

But there is no downside to God's New Deal.

A life lived under Grace is far, far better than a life lived under Law.

The deals which men make with each other are in the final analysis, competitive strategems.

They produce winners and they produce losers.

They are zero-sum games which don't change the status quo but merely shuffle the cards in preparation for the next deal.

But with God's New Deal, there are only winners.

Amen.