

What We Were Created For

Series: Requirements for Humanity

by Steve Zeisler

In my travels this summer to Timor, Indonesia, and various parts of California, I have viewed the Pacific Ocean from different vantage points. The environment of swirling clouds, blue skies and brilliant sunsets that frame the ocean is captivating. These scenes created by nature bring to mind the provocative statement that Jesus made about weather in Matthew 16. Speaking to a group who had gathered to hear his teaching, Jesus commented on their ability to forecast the weather. When the sky is red in the evening, he said, one knows it is going to be good weather; when it is red in the morning, bad weather is indicated. He said, "You know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but you do not recognize the signs of the times." They did not understand the plan of God unfolding before them.

The Signs of the Times

In this age, forecasting the weather is accomplished with the aids of satellites and televisions, ways that people of the first century could never have imagined. Likewise, we make predictions about sports, economic trends, and social patterns. As we near the end of this decade, I am sure the popular press will reflect on the important events and contributions of the '80's in an examination similar to the recent 20-year anniversary of Woodstock. There will be much speculation on what the future decade will bring.

Our generation is skillful at asking those kinds of questions, but we, like Jesus' audience, fall short in understanding the signs of the times from God's perspective, seeing the hand of the Lord, and knowing the heartfelt needs of our contemporaries. I hope this next series of messages will have the effect of revealing God's plan and helping us understand the contemporary world so as to discern the signs of the times. I propose to do that by examining some of the rudimentary principles that God sets forth in his word, particularly through the Ten Commandments.

Many of us as Christians are a bit ambivalent about the law of God, those commands declared from heaven and written on stone on Mount Sinai centuries ago. Instead we hear the Apostle Paul's words in the New Testament that we are "dead to the law." We have the tendency to lose the law's foundational significance for us today. I want to review the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, to ponder many issues the Lord delineated to Moses. Those themes will expose the nature of our world today as much as they ever have.

Ethical Consensus

My purpose in this message is to do an introduction to set the stage for the various themes that are raised in the Ten Commandments. First, let me suggest that we live in an age that is post-biblical in its thinking. More than ever, American culture at the end of the 1980's has lost whatever moorings it had in thinking biblically. Not too long ago there was a general consensus in this culture as to what things were ethical and what things were not. That is not to say that people a

generation ago were obedient to the law, but that most people were raised with the same sense of what was right and what was wrong.

Unfortunately, that plumb line is largely missing today. For instance, the idea that marriage and parenting go together is widely disclaimed today. For many, being a parent has nothing to do with being married, and hasn't at any point in their lifetime. The notion of family consisting of a father, mother and children is aggressively denied today by many. The definitions have changed; families consist of whatever an individual determines.

People do not look at life with agreement, let alone act on that agreement. Not long ago it was true in this country that abortions were performed in secret, away from public view. They were against the law, and were viewed in shame. Now, however, it is those who would rescue babies from abortion that have to meet in secret. It is they who are hounded by the courts and the law for their behavior. The world does not look the same; there is no agreement as to what is right.

A similar trend is observable among educational institutions. Great universities in this country were founded by people who loved the word of God, not only to extend their knowledge of scripture, but their knowledge of everything in the worship of God. There was a recognition that God is the Creator and that all creation is good and should be studied. Unfortunately, we live in a world today where most organized educational institutions are terrified of biblical faith and view it as intellectual poison. For example, they see public prayer in an educational setting as a menace that must be rejected.

Guided by the Law

In so many areas we must conclude that the ethical system most people had previously agreed upon has been lost in this country.

Thus, I think that our examination of the law is critically important because those with whom we interact, our neighbors and friends, are lost. They do not even know the diagnosis of their problem let alone where to go for the cure. Our children are growing up in an age in which they will not know what direction to reach for help when things crash around them.

The Ten Commandments are essentials for human existence. They comprise the great themes that men and women need to understand. They challenge us with issues of life and death, sex, family, work, neighbors, and honesty in speech and thought. If we would act on the issue raised by Jesus to "discern the signs of the times," we need to think together about the great themes raised in the law of God.

Although we are no longer under the law if we are in Christ, the law has never ceased to be a guide for those who in loving response and repentant hearts want guidance to express their love. Thus, it stands as a firm and helpful guide for us. The apostle Paul called the law a "tutor," a pedagogue that would lead us to Christ. As the law exposes our sin, we may repent. It then serves as a guide to say, "I love you" to the Heavenly Father.

Three Reasons to Learn the Law

Next week we will begin speaking about specific issues in the Ten Commandments, but in this message I want to point out three ways to think about the law, three reasons for its existence, and three answers it offers to the important questions of what it means to be human.

1) What we were created for:

First of all, the Ten Commandments operate somewhat like an owner's manual for an appliance or an automobile. God, the manufacturer, has made us a certain way, and we work best if we follow the Manufacturer's instructions. Our Creator made us in his image. He began with his own nature, investing it in his creation to form humanity like himself. He then has offered us directions to both what he is like, and what we are like, made in his image, so that we can function to the best of our ability.

Jesus used that exact line of thinking when a question was put to him about divorce. The issue was raised as to how men and women should relate to each other in marriage. Can they be divorced under certain circumstances? The questioner knew that the Law of Moses addressed divorce, marriage, and adultery. Since it is specific on the nature of marriage and the sanctity of marriage, this was a proper discussion for the law. Matthew 19:3-6:

Some Pharisees came testing him saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause at all?" And he answered and said, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female and said for this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh. Consequently they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."

Jesus went all the way back to the beginning, to the creation. He was saying the law describes the way we were made and is an instruction in our formation. Therefore, when we understand the themes of the law we are going back to the owner's manual to align ourselves with that for which we were intended.

The Joy of Discovery

The result is that we will regularly have the joy of discovery when the themes of the law are made plain to us. Have you ever experienced the joy of discovery? Perhaps someone informed you and opened your eyes to a possibility that was unknown to you, and all of a sudden there is a delight, a sense of wonder.

I had a friend in college who had polio as a young boy, causing some paralysis in his leg. He was raised in a home that greatly (almost exclusively) valued education. Speaking in the modern idiom, I might describe him as a "nerd," since he spent most of his time in libraries and similar study environments. When someone suggested to him in his early twenties that he might try running, he rejected the idea since his ailment had formerly precluded any kind of athletic involvement. It came up enough times, however, that he actually began running a little, and then took up distance running. Running was an aspect of the world that was totally different from anything he had ever experienced. It became a source of tremendous enjoyment in terms of health benefits and relationships with other people. The potential for the delight he experienced was there all along, but he had not discovered it until someone opened his eyes to the possibility.

While we were vacationing with my parents this past week I was able to share an afternoon with the three most important women in my life—my mother, my wife, and my daughter. I realized how many opportunities are available to my daughter, none of which were available to my mother, and only a handful to my wife. My daughter has wider permission to try things, to adventure into areas that were previously confined to the masculine realm. There are more opportunities. Doors are open in a way they were never opened to my wife, and certainly not my mother.

It is delightful to be given permission to experience a new possibility. The law has that effect for us. It is God's way of saying, "You were made for this. You don't have to live on a lower level than this."

Respect and Wholeness

Let me show you how this works. Some years ago, I visited a jail to teach the scriptures to a fellowship of prisoners. I was talking to one man who had been a thief most of his life and was in prison as a result. He explained the joy he had after coming to Christ in having honest character. He was thrilled that the Lord had wrought the change in him, that now his word was absolutely his bond. Those in the fellowship knew that he could be trusted, and expressed their confidence by leaving their goods in front of him.

As he understood the scriptures and his transformation in Christ he realized that he did not have to live as he had before. He did not have to manipulate, use people, or grasp for what he did not have. It was an honor for him to look at other people's faces and realize that he was trusted, that he had a good name. It was the law of God ("do not steal") that opened the possibility of being a man who was respected by others, not from whom others wanted to disassociate themselves.

I read the testimony of a woman who was sexually abused as a youngster, and later went into prostitution. After coming to the Lord, she married and had children. The article centered on her response to God's transformation in her outlook towards sexuality. For the first time in her memory she realized that sex could be attached to love and the creation of a family whereas it had previously been attached to money, manipulation, violence, and sordid behavior. It was like a news flash. It is the law of God that makes that possible and says, "This is for what you were made. This is what the owner's manual had in mind. This is why we are the way we are."

Jesus responded to the Pharisees and said, "What did the Creator intend from the beginning?" One of the ways we find out the answer to his question is to hear the truth of God's word, the law taught clearly. We experience the joy of discovery, and discover that for which we were made. We do not have to live on a more inferior basis than that.

2) Identifying a Redeemed Community:

A second way the Ten Commandments can serve us is discussed in Deuteronomy 4:32-40:

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth, ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire as you have and lived? Has any other god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testing, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds like all the things that your Lord God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

You were shown these things so that you would know that the Lord is God; beside him there is no other. From heaven he made you, hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, you heard his words from out of the fire because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them. He brought you out of Egypt by his presence and his great strength; to drive out before you nations, greater and stronger than you, to bring you into their land, to give it to you as an inheritance, as it is today.

Acknowledge and take to heart this day, the Lord is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other. Keep his decrees and his commands which I am giving you today, so that it may go well with you and your children after you, and that you may live long in the land which the Lord your God gives you for all time.

What is described in that wonderful preaching of Moses is the creation of a redeemed community by the powerful acts of God. He is specific in his message: You were slaves in Egypt. You had strong enemies occupying the land. God freed you from slavery and drove out the nations that were stronger than you. He gave you a place as a redeemed community. The result is that you should keep his law, you should acknowledge the Lord (Deu.4:39), and do what he says (Deu.4:40).

Our obedience to the commands of God is what marks us as a redeemed community. It is not our greatness, our strength, what we can do for ourselves or our organization. We are the recipients of the wonderful grace of God. What marks us as his is belonging to one another. What makes us a community is that we joyfully agree to do what he says. We obey our Commander.

When our family visited Disneyland last week we saw several people wearing San Francisco Giants baseball hats. We'd smile knowingly at each other in recognition as we walked by. Here we were in Dodger-land, infiltrating the land as it were. One could mark who was part of the community, the Giants' fans, by the hats they were wearing.

The early Christians used the Ictus, fish symbols, as a mark of their fellowship in the community. Often a believer would draw a semi-circle on the ground; if a stranger were a Christian, he would draw another semicircle to connect them in the form of a fish. In the midst of a culture that persecuted Christians, it set them apart.

It is all too easy to fake those kinds of identifications. Anybody can learn to draw fish in the dust of the ground. There could be slippery Dodger fans masquerading in their Giants hats, knowing that the Dodgers are going nowhere this year while the Giants are winning. It does not prove anything because those kinds of markers are superficial.

Obedience and Character

What is not superficial, however, is character. That was Moses' point in Deuteronomy: God has redeemed you. You are members of one another. What marks you as belonging to one another is that you are engaged together in keeping his commandments. You have agreed to live the same way. You are following the same commandments. Honesty in speech, honor to parents, respect for marriage, life and property, and worship of Christ are things that will increase in those who belong.

What marks us as redeemed is the fact that obedience to the law will continue to form our character. It is not the external identifications, but obedience to the Lord. Therefore, the law will serve us in that way as well. It not only helps us to discover that for which we were made, but it binds us together as a chosen community. It marks us off from the slavery of Egypt from which we were taken and from the strong enemies on every side around us. It gives us a place to stand and binds us to one another because we are joined together in knowing the Lord and doing what he says.

3) In Their heart I Will Write It.”

A third value of the law is seen clearly in Jeremiah 31:31:

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law within them and in their heart I will write it, and I will be their God and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach again each man his neighbor and each man his brothers saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

In Christ, we find our hearts have been changed and are being changed so that what we call out from deep within is what the law of God teaches. It is no longer an external law, but righteousness from the inside, written on our hearts.

I have done quite a bit of premarital counseling since I have been a pastor at this church. Depending on the needs of the people, there are many things that take place in such a setting. It tends to be a series of sessions regarding biblical principles, ways to go about a relationship, teaching communication skills, and learning to understand each other as mates. When David Roper was counseling with Leslie and me before our marriage, he told us about a habit he had developed over the years during his commute home from work. There was a certain place on the freeway that he mentally made himself stop thinking about his day and began praying for his family. By the time he finally got into the house, he was not so burdened and concerned about work, and he was in a better frame of mind to communicate with his family. I appreciated such practical advice.

Those sorts of things can be useful to people early in a marriage or those who are in a period of marital difficulty. It is also true, however, that if you are committed to letting love teach you over the course of time, those sorts of techniques and externally imposed bits of wisdom become less necessary because you have learned to love the real person with whom you are sharing a life. You have learned to know what they are like, to anticipate their pain, and share their struggles. As love grows over time it requires fewer "How-to's" offered by books and counselors and becomes more natural, coming from the heart.

This is the essence of Jeremiah's message. The law begins by speaking to us from a distance, telling us about ourselves while giving us guidance to our goal. It helps us who love God to know how to love him effectively. Hopefully, as time goes on, it requires less conversation and becomes more natural because we are more sensitive to the Spirit. We no longer have to regiment ourselves, as it becomes the thrill of our heart to live as we ought to live. The law will serve us in this way. It will begin externally to us, but it will increasingly become that which is our very desire from the inside.

Delight in the Law of the Lord

Psalm 1 deals with the themes that I have been suggesting we will find the law accomplishing for us. It describes a tree being planted by streams of water. Trees were created by God to thrive if they have water and nutrition coming up through their roots. A tree that does not wither is a tree that is planted in the best place for its created nature. If we as God's people love his law it will make us like such a tree. It puts us in line with our creation, allowing us to be what we were intended to be. Psalm 1 also talks about distinguishing the man of God from the wicked who care nothing about God. The one who loves and obeys the law is different from the world and is marked as a believer. Lastly, it talks about delighting in the law of the Lord. We are not to obey from a distance, but are to inwardly appreciate the law so that it grips our hearts.

**Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.
But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.**

He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.

Whatever he does prospers.

Not so with the wicked. They are like chaff that the wind blows away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

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