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February 01, 2024
A Higher Standard

Readings for today: Leviticus 8-10, Psalm 32 [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I was always taught that leaders are held to a higher standard. As an Eagle Scout, I was held to a higher standard than a Tenderfoot. As a senior on the football and lacrosse teams, I was held to a higher standard than a freshman. As a leader in my college youth group, I was held to a higher moral standard than someone who just attended. As a Manager of Patient Access Services at Boulder Community Hospital, I was held to a higher standard than my employees. And, of course, as a pastor, I've always been held to a higher standard because of the nature of my position in the church.

It's why it's so painful when leaders fall. Over the years, I've been called to help in situations where pastors have failed. Sometimes it's a moral failing usually having to do with sexual sin. Sometimes it's a leadership failure usually having to do with the sin of pride. In either case, the fallout is brutal. The congregation suffers the most. Their trust is broken. Their faith is shaken. Their fellowship with believers is typically torn apart by division as people take sides. The pastor's family suffers as well. Especially in the case of sexual sin, there is often a divorce. The wife and children lose friendships and community as the pastor is no longer allowed to be part of the church. And then there is the pastor themselves. The damage to the soul of their leadership is almost incalculable. Not to mention the loss of a job or career or livelihood. Most refuse to walk the road of restoration and instead try to find ways back in without having to repent. It's painful to witness.

Nadab and Abihu are prime examples of what happens when leaders fall. They have been instructed by Moses in how to perform the sacred rites. They are entrusted with the worshipping life of Israel. Through their priestly actions, the people of Israel are given an opportunity to experience the glory of the Lord. There is no higher calling. Nothing more sacred or precious in ancient Israel than to be called a priest of the Living God. But they decide to do things their own way. They decide to offer "unauthorized fire" before the Lord. No one really knows what constituted the "unauthorized fire" but what we do know is it dishonored God. They deliberately presented something unholy before the Holy One and they paid the ultimate price. Fire came down from heaven and consumed them on the spot and they died "before the Lord." Their disobedience was so severe, their father, Aaron, and their brothers, Eleazar and Ithamar, were forbidden to grieve. Why did God treat them so harshly? Here is what He says, "This is what the Lord has spoken: I will demonstrate my holiness to those who are near me, and I will reveal my glory before all the people." (Leviticus 10:3 CSB) God will not be mocked. He will not be trifled with. He will not be taken for granted or treated with contempt. His glory and holiness are a double edged sword.

This is worth thinking about in our own lives. All of us hold positions of influence and power in some way, shape, or form in life. It may be in our homes. It may be at school or at work. It may be in our church or community. The greater the influence and power and leadership entrusted to us, the more God expects of us. The more He demands from us. And the greater the consequences when we fail. As Christians, all of us are called to a higher standard. The standard set by Jesus Christ. How are you seeking to embody that standard today?

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 11-13, Psalm 33

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February 02, 2024
Clean vs. Unclean

Readings for today: [Leviticus 11-13, Psalm 33](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

As I said a few days ago, Leviticus can be very challenging. Holy. Unholy. Clean. Unclean. Common. Polluted. Lots of words that we don't think much about in our own context and culture. This begs for some explanation. Scholar Gordon Wenham does a great job describing the distinctions in his commentary.

“Everything that is not holy is common. Common things divide into two groups, the clean and the unclean. Clean things become holy, when they are sanctified. But unclean objects cannot be sanctified. Clean things can be made unclean, if they are polluted. Finally, holy items may be defiled and become common, even polluted, and therefore unclean... . cleanness is a state intermediate between holiness and uncleanness. Cleanness is the normal condition of most things and persons. Sanctification can elevate the clean into the holy, while pollution degrades the clean into the unclean. The unclean and the holy are two states which must never come in contact with each other.” (pp. 19-20)

Why does all this matter? Because God's stated goal for His people is for them to be holy as He is holy. “For I am the Lord, who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God, so you must be holy because I am holy.” (Leviticus 11:45 CSB) Yes, in Christ the ceremonial laws of Leviticus have been fulfilled. We no longer need to worry about clean and unclean animals. (See Peter's vision in Acts 10 as an example.) We no longer need to fear being made unclean by touching lepers or coming into contact with the dead. Through His shed blood, Christ has not only washed us clean (in the Levitical sense) but also sanctified us permanently. This is incredible to think about as we read about the rituals the Israelites had to perform.

At the same time, the call to personal holiness has not been set aside. God still calls His people to be set apart. By thought, word, and deed. We are called to “be holy as He is holy” and to offer our lives as “living sacrifices” according to Romans 12. The moral law is still in effect. God still has expectations for His people. Sin is still serious and should not be treated casually. This is why Jesus spends a great deal of time talking about the heart in the Sermon on the Mount and Paul spends a great deal of time on the ethical obligations of Christians in most of his letters. As Christians, we no longer need to undergo elaborate rituals to maintain a state of cleanliness or sanctification before the Lord but we should undergo regular examination and confession of our sin in light of the Word of God.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 14-15, Psalm 34

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February 03, 2024
Fear of Disease

Readings for today: [Leviticus 14-15, Psalm 34](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

One of humanity's deepest fears is disease. Pestilence. Plague. Something unseen that steals life. We've all felt it. We've all struggled with it. If not personally then with those we love. Unseen proteins build up in the brain, robbing us of our memory. Unseen plaque builds up in our arteries, causing our hearts to fail. Unseen blood clots break loose, laying us low with a stroke. Unseen cells go haywire and we've got cancer. Unseen viruses infect and millions die.

I think of the rising anxiety and panic in the gay community in the early 1980's as a mysterious disease began to appear in different clusters around Los Angeles, New York City, and San Francisco. A new epidemic had been born that seemingly attacked the human immune system. As gay men began to die in ever-increasing numbers, the reaction was tragic. Preachers called it God's judgment on immorality. The government put quarantines in place and began stopping the infected at the border. Those exposed to the disease were isolated and ostracized as our society gave into her homophobic instincts. Thankfully, there were many who fought their fear and took action. Raising awareness and funds for research. Lobbying the government to institute more humane public policy. Developing more effective treatments that allowed those with the disease to live relatively normal lives and put an end to the stigma that isolated them from society. More recently, of course, we all know about COVID. A disease that has impacted just about everyone on the planet. Mass quarantines. Mandatory masking. Government bailouts to stem the economic fallout. Treatments and vaccines being fast-tracked in order to save as many lives as possible. Wave after wave of variants. Fears about the potential of overwhelming hospitals and other health centers. It's been crazy and it only illustrates how deep our fears run when it comes to disease.

The ancient Israelites were no different. They too struggled with all kinds of anxiety over disease. They feared what they could not see. What they could not understand. They had firsthand experience watching a plague burn through an entire village. They knew what could happen should disease be left unchecked. So they were meticulous. When someone's skin erupted, they were sent to the priest. When someone's home showed signs of mildew or rot, they were quick to respond. When mold started to grow on clothing, they wasted no time. Please note the goal was never to marginalize the sick. Never to tear down a home or burn a garment. The hope was always to restore. To trust God for healing and provision. However, there were times when extreme measures had to be taken to protect the rest of the village or community.

Thankfully we live in a time where medical miracles have become the norm. Modern medicine. Surgical techniques. Treatment options. These are signs of God's Kingdom breaking into our world. It is part of the dominion God originally intended for human beings. We were designed to be healers. To care for all creation. To mend that which is torn. To restore that which is ruined. To make the broken whole. This is why so much of Jesus' own ministry was one of healing. One of restoration. One of purifying the unclean. God desires that all should be saved and salvation impacts the whole person. God desires our healing from disease. Our healing from isolation and loneliness. Our healing from marginalization and ostracism. Yes, such healing may not come this side of heaven but it is always what God is working towards. It is what we should be working towards as well. This is the heart that beats behind the words of Leviticus.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 16-18, Psalm 35 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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February 04 2024

Readings for today: Leviticus 16-18, Psalm 35 ([video intro](#)) ([audio reading](#))

February 05, 2024
Loving One Another

Readings for today: Leviticus 19-20, Psalm 36 ([video intro](#)) ([audio reading](#))

Everyone is a fan of love. We all want love. We all need love. We all crave love. It's essential for the flourishing of human life. Without love, we fail to thrive. Without love, we struggle to connect. Without love, we become isolated, alone, afraid, and anxious. If we remain without love, our hearts fill up with hate, rage, and potentially, even violence. Violence against others. Violence against ourselves. Communities that lack love are fractured, divided, abusive, and exploitative in all kinds of ways. Nations where love is absent are chaotic, unjust, oppressive, and volatile. The lack of love in our world today creates all kinds of trauma and brokenness in our lives.

This is why God gives us a law. He is not only seeking to restrain our worst impulses as human beings but also seeking to create an environment where love is put into action. Don't glean to the edges of your fields. Why? Because you are to love the poor. Don't dishonor your father or mother. Why? Because you love your parents. Do not steal or lie. Why? Because you love your neighbor. Do not have sex with someone other than your spouse. Why? Because you love others and don't want them to be exploited for your own sexual pleasure. Give the land rest from agriculture. Why? Because you love creation. Offer pure offerings before the Lord. Why? Because you love the Lord. Such boundaries are not arbitrary. They are absolutely necessary to create the conditions for love.

Loving one another is not an abstract idea. It's not an aspirational idea or wishful thinking. Love takes concrete form in laws and regulations and policies and healthy boundaries that define relationships. The relationships might be familial or collegial or communal or civic. As much as we may resist them at times, they are essential for us to experience love or learn love or show love to those around us. The fact that we don't often associate laws with love - especially God's Law with God's Love - only shows how much we need them. As you read through the laws in Leviticus, I know many of them may seem archaic and strange. It's because they were designed to some extent for a far different world. Don't let that throw you. Instead, think about how such laws might promote the experience of love in an ancient near east context. Now think about the laws we live by in our own world. The moral law God has given us through His Word. The civic law we live by in our communities and nation. Prayerfully reflect on how such laws lead you to experience love and share love with others.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 21-23, Psalm 37

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February 06, 2024
Sacred Time

Readings for today: [Leviticus 21-23, Psalm 37](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I still remember the first time I celebrated the Day of Atonement. I was with my grandmother in Beijing, China. She belonged to a religious group that made it a point to celebrate all the Jewish high holy days and festivals. Each year, they would host “feast sites” around the world where church members could go to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles and the Day of Atonement. It was a day of self-denial. It was a day of prayer and fasting. It was a day when we basically engaged in little to no activity. I was twelve years old and I have to admit I found it very strange. I wasn’t sure I understood all the reasons why non-Jews would engage in Jewish religious practices. As I got older, I learned that my grandmother was part of a Christian cult who believed they had “replaced” Israel on some level. Not only that but they preyed on the elderly and widowed - my grandmother was both - and stole millions from the people who belonged to their “church.” It was a textbook case of spiritual abuse and my grandmother would eventually die, in part, from the guilt and shame of being part of it.

Though the views of the religious cult were abusive, manipulative, and highly destructive; they gave me my first introduction to God’s time. God’s time is not like our time. It is not time as it ticks away on a clock or watch. It is sacred time. It is heavenly time. It is time oriented around the first commandment which is to worship God alone. In the passage we read today, we are introduced to God’s time. He sets up the Sabbath. One day out of every seven in which we are to honor God with worship and rest. He sets up the annual feast days and festivals that will govern the life of Israel once they are in the Promised Land. These festivals center around the agricultural rhythms of the ancient near east. And they serve as a regular reminder to the people that it is God on whom they depend. He is the one who provides the rain and sunshine that allows their crops to grow and their herds to flourish. This is why they are to bring the firstfruits to the Lord. It’s an acknowledgement that God has the first claim on their lives.

As Christians, we believe the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus fulfills the true meaning of these ancient feasts. This is why we no longer celebrate them nor do we offer animal or grain sacrifices. However, that doesn’t mean we don’t hold to sacred time. Christmas, Easter, Advent, Lent, Pentecost, and Epiphany. These are the Christian feasts and festivals we honor and celebrate because they help us center our hearts around the life of Jesus. We continue to keep the Sabbath holy - though it is now held on the first day of the week because of the resurrection - for Jesus is worthy of all praise, honor, and glory. We continue to orient our lives around God’s time in order to remember all He has done for us. And we offer ourselves as living sacrifices now. Holy and pleasing to God as a spiritual act of worship. We’ve become the firstfruits of repentance and we acknowledge God holds the first claim over our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 24-25, Psalm 38

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February 07, 2024
Sacred Trust

Readings for today: Leviticus 24-25, Psalm 38

[\(audio reading\)](#)

Leviticus 25 is one of my favorite chapters because it gives us a snapshot of what life looks like under the reign and rule of God. If you've ever wondered what life will be like once heaven comes to earth and Jesus returns again, spend some time meditating on these verses. Consider the care God exercises over creation. Ponder God's perspective on personal property. Think deeply about God's special love and provision for the poor. Fundamentally, these laws are designed to build trust. Sacred trust.

Will you trust God to provide when you give your land a Sabbath rest? Will you trust the land to yield up enough of a crop on its own to feed your family and your livestock? Will you trust God to bless the land and make it fruitful? Allowing land to lie fallow for a period of time is important. It allows nutrients to replenish so it can produce during the years where you sow seed.

Will you trust God with your personal property? The Year of Jubilee was designed to serve as a reset for the people of Israel. All property was returned every fifty years to the original owners. Those who had fallen on hard times over the previous fifty years and were forced to sell off their inheritance as a result had the opportunity to get it back and start over. Those who had accumulated much and grown wealthy during the previous fifty years were reminded who truly owned the land and therefore were set free to be generous. While there is no evidence Israel ever declared a Year of Jubilee, the principle is a beautiful one. We are all essentially "stewards" of what we've been given. Everything we own is God's and is intended to be used for the blessing of others.

Will you trust God as you care for the poor? No charging him interest. No enslaving him for economic gain. No price gouging or huge markups to take advantage of his helpless condition. On the contrary, you are called to take him into your home. Care for him as you would your own. Treat him as part of the family. You do this to honor the memory of your family's slavery in Egypt and to honor the redemption of God.

Can you imagine how different life would be if we would follow these principles? Imagine a world where the church were on the frontlines of caring for creation, caring for the poor, and held all things in common. You actually don't have to imagine it. Just look to the early church. This describes the life they pursued and it's what gave their witness such power. From the first to the fourth century, the number of believers grew from a few thousand to almost twenty million! They literally conquered an empire! Not by military might but by the sacrificial way they lived. Look at the global church. They are following these very principles in communities all over the world. May our churches hear and respond to the call of the gospel! May our lives become a reflection of what it means to live in God's Kingdom!

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 26-27, Psalm 39

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February 08, 2024
Consequences

Readings for today: [Leviticus 26-27, Psalm 39](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

I'm a huge fan of the John Wick movies. I know they are violent and pretty gory but one of the main messages in the series has to do with the consequences a person faces for their actions. I grew up in a home with consequences. Good behavior was rewarded and bad behavior punished. Positive. Negative. Otherwise. There were always consequences to one's decisions and actions. It is tempting to read Leviticus 26 and assume the Kingdom of God works in much the same way. Follow God's rules and you will be blessed. Ignore God's rules and you will be cursed. Obey God and it will go well with you. Disobey God and life will get hard. The text itself promises rain, good harvests, great victories, and the abiding presence of God to those who are faithful and it warns those who are unfaithful of famine, drought, defeat, and abandonment.

There is a branch of Christianity that makes much of verses like these. They promise health and wealth to those who have enough faith. They challenge people to put God's Word to the test, treating the Bible like a book of magical incantations. They even go as far as to encourage people to use their obedience to get what they want from God. But when God refuses to be manipulated, they blame the victim. They tell people they obviously failed to be fully obedient or they don't have enough faith or they tolerate too much sin in their lives. It's a toxic version of the Christian faith.

So what can we draw from verses like these? They seem so clear. Their promises so sure. Like every passage in Scripture, we have to read them against the backdrop of the larger story. The covenant of works was first established with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were given clear instructions, a law to follow, and the promise of paradise. However, they disobeyed. In their disobedience, the very ground began to reject them. All the curses listed in Leviticus 26 came to pass as humanity was exiled from Eden into a broken, hostile, and sinful world. From this point forward, life would be chaotic and unstable. One could do all the right things but still experience the curse. One could do all the wrong things and seemingly receive the blessing. The world had turned upside down.

Only God can make things right and thankfully, He establishes the covenant of grace. Founded on His unconditional love and predestined according to His sovereign will, God reaches out to humanity. He clothes Adam and Eve after their sin. He saves Noah and his family from the flood. He taps Abram and Sarai on the shoulder in Ur. None of these people are perfect. None of them are able to keep the Law or earn the blessings promised in Leviticus 26. But all of them walk with God. Their hearts are hungry for more of His glory. More of His presence. More of His love. They want nothing more than to serve Him faithfully all of their lives. Sin prevents them from being able to do so perfectly but it never stops them in their tracks. Even more important, sin presents no barrier for God. He reaches out to them in spite of their sin, in the midst of their disobedience, in the face of their rebellion and He grants them grace. He rejoices with them when the rains come and harvests are good and their enemies are put to flight. He grieves with them when they face drought, famine, disease, and death. No matter where they go or what they do, God is with them.

God is with you as well, friends! He promises never to leave you. He is with you when you wake up in the morning. He is with you when you go to sleep. He is with you when you work. He is with you when you play. There is never a moment when you are alone. He sees every choice you make. He knows every feeling you feel. He watches over every action you take. And He is at work turning every decision towards His perfect will.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 1-4, Psalm 40

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February 09, 2024
Assignment

Readings for today: [Numbers 1-4, Psalm 40](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

As a young pastor just out of seminary, I struggled with my “call.” I am not sure what I expected. A voice from heaven? A burning bush? A pillar of fire? I had multiple opportunities to consider and didn’t quite know how to make a decision. So I asked an older, wiser pastor for his thoughts. He challenged me to stop overthinking things and instead simply focus on the “assignment” the Lord had given me. It was a great reminder to me that my life was not my own. My calling was not to build a successful career. God had singled me out for a special purpose and that was to serve His people. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

I thought about those words as I read the passage for today. The Levites are set apart for service to God. “The Lord spoke to Moses: “See, I have taken the Levites from the Israelites in place of every firstborn Israelite from the womb. The Levites belong to me, because every firstborn belongs to me. At the time I struck down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated every firstborn in Israel to myself, both man and animal. They are mine; I am the Lord.” (Numbers 3:11-13 CSB) Furthermore, the sons of Levi and their descendants are also set apart for specific tasks. The Kohathites are charged to carry the most holy objects from the Tabernacle. The Gershonites are to carry the curtains and the tent. The Merarites are to basically carry the rest of the equipment. Each of these sons and their descendants would shoulder this burden into perpetuity. They don’t get a choice. They don’t get to opt out. They are not free to move into another profession. As Levites, they have been redeemed. Bought with a price. Chosen by God to serve a specific purpose.

Everyone is born with a divine assignment. I know this may be hard to understand. After all, we live in a culture where we get to choose our profession. Choose, to some extent, our place in society. Choose where we will live and who we will live among. Most of humanity throughout history has not had the freedom to make such choices. And with such freedom comes an even greater temptation. We are tempted to believe we are the captains of our fate, the masters of our destiny. We are tempted to believe we are in control of our lives. We are tempted to believe we somehow are free from any “assignment” others might place on us. However, this is all a lie. God has a plan for each of our lives. His divine plan includes our assignment in His Kingdom. It’s a space only we can occupy because each of us is unique and, as such, have a unique contribution to make. What is your assignment? Have you asked God to show you His plan for your life in this particular season?

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 5-7, Psalm 41

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February 10, 2024
Cultural Distance

Readings for today: Numbers 5-7, Psalm 41 ([audio reading](#))

The Bible is full of rituals that seem strange to us. This is part of the cultural distance we must keep in mind as we read. What may have been normative for an ancient near east Israelite is certainly not normative for a 21st century American and vice versa. Of all the strange rituals recorded in the Bible, the one detailed in Numbers 5 has to be among the strangest. A woman suspected of adultery is put to a test whereby she has to drink bitter water to determine if she is guilty of committing adultery.

First and foremost, we need to remember the context. Women and men were not considered equals in the ancient near east. In fact, women were more property than they were people so we shouldn't be surprised at the patriarchal tone of the text. It doesn't make it right. It doesn't mean God is in favor of patriarchy. It simply means God is speaking to His people through the cultural norms of the day and revealing His sovereign will just as He does to this day.

Second, we need to remember the seriousness of adultery. Adultery was one of the "big three" crimes in ancient Israel. It was punishable by death along with idolatry and murder. The reason God lays out such harsh penalties is to protect the family. The family unit is the fundamental building block for God's chosen people. It is through the family unit that faith is passed from one generation to the next and the story of God's history with His people kept alive. God wants to protect the family at all costs and adultery puts the family at significant risk.

Third, God is a God of justice. Unlike the pagan cultures that surrounded Israel, God wanted to make sure that women were not cast aside on the jealous whims of their husbands. He wanted to protect women by providing a way for them to prove their innocence. He uses the cultic practices of the ancient world to place a hedge of protection around women to prevent them from being slanderously accused.

Finally, God is a God of honor. The honor of the wife and the honor of the husband and the honor of the family are of paramount importance to Him. Jealousy threatens the honor of the family as does suspicion, gossip, and whisper campaigns that human beings seem to take so much delight in. By subjecting the woman to a public sacred ritual, all potential dishonor is put to rest. Furthermore, the public nature of the ritual would also act as a deterrent to husbands who might be tempted to bring frivolous charges against their wives.

So what do we take away from our reading today? Well, it's worth pondering our own attitudes towards sexual fidelity in marriage. Do we guard our hearts and take adultery as seriously as God? Second, how can we protect the honor of our families in the way we think, speak, or act? How can we protect those we love from frivolous and slanderous accusations? Finally, we look to Christ who drank the bitter cup and took on the curse for us and we give thanks for His willingness to take our place.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 8-10, Psalm 42 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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February 11, 2024

Reading for today: Numbers 8-10, Psalm 43

[\(audio reading\)](#)

February 12, 2024

Taking God for Granted

Readings for today: [Numbers 11-13, Psalms 43](#)

[\(audio reading\)](#)

It's so easy to take God for granted. It's so tempting to treat God's miracles as mundane. It's so common for us to grumble and complain. It's like our national past-time. As a pastor, I have spent time with people who literally have it all. They are among the wealthiest people on the face of the earth. They have a loving spouse and great kids. They have a good career and meaningful work. But still they are not satisfied. Still they struggle with discontent. No matter how much God gives them, it never seems to be enough. The same was true for Israel.

Think of all God has done for His people. Delivered them from Egypt. Wiped out their enemies. Created a path through the Red Sea. Met them face to face at Mt. Sinai. Fed them with manna in the wilderness. Gave them water from a rock. One would think after experiencing such miracles that they would never lose faith. Not true. As their journey drags on and more hardships come, they forget what God has done for them and they begin to complain. The journey's too hard. They're tired of eating manna. Those closest to Moses - Aaron and Miriam - question his leadership ability. The scouts return with a report about giants in the Promised Land. And with each successive blow, the people's faith grows weaker and weaker. They have taken their eyes off God.

What about you? Have you taken your eyes off Christ? Are you feeling weighed down by the burdens you carry? Have you forgotten all God has done for you? Have the miracles He's performed become mundane? Do the blessings you've received never seem to satisfy? Accept the invitation of Christ. The author and perfecter of our faith. The One who promises to give rest to all who come to Him. The only One who can truly satisfy every longing of our hearts.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 14-16, Psalms 44

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February 13, 2024
Humble Leadership

Readings for today: Numbers 14-16, Psalms 44 [\(audio reading\)](#)

What qualities do you look for in a leader? What kind of leader do you vote for, follow, or admire? One can draw all kinds of conclusions simply based on what leaders are the most popular or who gets platformed. In politics, it seems clear that we admire the leaders who project the most strength. We look for leaders who have the guts to stand up for what we believe in and fight against our political enemies. We look for leaders who can score the most points, denigrating their opponents. We look for leaders who confirm our bias and affirm our worst fears. I see the same thing in business, education, and sadly, in the church as well. Those pastors who seem to be the strongest and most certain and most successful are the ones who get the most attention. Even though they also fall at an alarming rate, we excuse their behavior and restore them quickly to their positions of influence and power.

Now consider the leadership of Moses. The man is as humble as it gets. How many time does he save Israel through his prayers of intercession? How many times does he stand in the gap before God as their mediator? How many times does he fall on his face before the Lord in humility rather than fight back against those who reject him or even seek to stone him? He's simply incredible and it's because he has a healthy, God-centered view of himself. He doesn't think more highly of himself than he ought. He doesn't think less of himself than he ought. He simply thinks of himself less. That's humility. That's the very definition of humble leadership.

I do my best to follow examples like Moses. Thankfully, I've had several mentors over the course of my life and one of the qualities almost all of them shared was humility. Steve Hayner was the president of Intervarsity and the president of Columbia Theological Seminary when he took me under his wing. A more humble man I have never met. Bud Sparling was a pastor at the church I serve for over fifteen years. He was an incredible man with an incredible testimony and humble to the core. Don Bachman is a highly successful businessman and one of the most passionate believers in Christ I've ever been around but what strikes me the most from meeting with him for almost thirty years now is his humility. I can only hope to attain to the level of humility each of these mentors have achieved. They remind me of godly men like Moses. Godly women like Mary. Godly people who do not seek their own good but instead, seek to love God and love others with all their hearts.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 17-18, Psalms 45

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February 14, 2024
Confirmation

Readings for today: Numbers 17-18, Psalms 45

[\(audio reading\)](#)

One of the things I appreciate most about God is His willingness to give us signs. He doesn't just ask us to take Him at His Word. He actually provides tangible, visible signs because He knows how easy it is for us to forget or lose heart. Abraham and Sarah received the sign of a child in their old age. Jacob was given all kinds of visions in the night. Joseph clearly interpreted the signs when his brothers showed up before him after he became a ruler in Egypt. Moses was given the sign of a burning bush, a parting in the Red Sea, the pillar of fire and cloud, and manna from heaven. These signs were also given to Israel to bolster their faith as they made their journey to the Promised Land.

Over the last few chapters, Moses has had to deal with significant conflict. The people He has been called to lead have rebelled against him. His own brother and sister have questioned his authority. He has been accused of all kinds of things. But, as we've seen, he remains humble and intercedes every single time on behalf of the people before God. Most recently, Moses had to confront the rebellion of Korah. They sought to overthrow his leadership. And what does Moses do? Does he marshal his forces and march against them? Does he call God's people to take his side? Does he get angry and lash out? No. He puts his future in God's hands. He calls on God to give them a sign. And God causes the earth to open and swallow Moses' enemies. Tragically, the people blame Moses for the deaths of the family of Korah. Once again, Moses intercedes to save their lives. And that brings us to the passage for today where God confirms Moses' leadership by causing Aaron's staff to bud.

I have been a pastor for over twenty years now and I've seen my share of conflict. Leading God's people is not always easy. First and foremost, I recognize that I am chief among sinners. I am compromised myself in so many ways. And that makes it hard at times to know if I am leading from a place of humility or a place of pride. Second, the people of God are also sinners. Shocking I know! ;-). And when we gather as a church all we are doing is bringing a bunch of sinful, broken people into close proximity. Is it any wonder that sparks often fly? I've felt the sting of betrayal. I've had people try to destroy my career by making false accusations against me. I've been criticized more times than I can count, much of it probably warranted. Thankfully, God has provided godly men and women in my life who have confirmed for me - over and over again - my call to lead. They have encouraged me and blessed me as well as spoken truth into my life and held me accountable. In short, God has used them as living "signs" to let me know His call on my life has not come to an end.

What about you? What signs has God given you in your life? As you look back over the course of your life, can you see where God provided the right people at the right time? Or perhaps intervened in a particular circumstance? Answered a prayer? Performed a miracle? These are signs given to encourage you, dear friends, as you seek to follow Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 19-21, Psalms 46

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February 15, 2024

Lifted Up

Readings for today: Numbers 19-21, Psalms 46

(audio reading)

Today's passage became a lot more real to me a couple of summers ago when I was on a tour in Israel and Jordan. On the final day of our tour, I found myself standing on the summit of Mt. Nebo where Moses looked out over the Jordan River valley before he died. In addition to the beautiful church, a magnificent statue has been erected that combines the cross with the bronze serpent from today's story and has an inscription from the passage in John 3:14 that refers to Jesus being "lifted up" just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. Why is this reference important? John 3:15 states it plainly, "so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."

Our God is a God of salvation. Whatever else you may say about God, you must say this. From the beginning of Scripture until the end, God reveals Himself to be a God who saves. A God who delivers. A God who rescues His people. When the people of Israel complained to God - once again - about their conditions, He sent a plague of fiery serpents. The plague raged throughout the camp, killing many Israelites and they cried out for relief. So God directed Moses to craft a bronze serpent and "lift it up" on a pole tall enough for all to see. Those who had been bitten could look to the serpent and find healing, those who did not would find death. Interestingly enough, this same bronze serpent would later become an idol in the national life of Israel and it was destroyed under the reign of King Hezekiah as an act of faithfulness to Yahweh.

So much of the Old Testament foreshadows the eventual fulfillment of salvation history. It's why the New Testament writers filled their gospels and letters with allusion after allusion to the Old Testament stories. In this way, Jesus refers to Himself as the "bronze snake" who saves. He will be lifted up at the end of His life and that those who look upon Him in faith will live. How is Jesus lifted up? He is clearly speaking of His manner of death. He will be lifted up on a cross and put on display for all to see. Those who look to Him and trust in His atoning death will be healed of their sin for all eternity while those who look away will only find judgment and death.

Friends, the message of the gospel is very simple...Jesus came to earth to die and be raised and all who believe in Him will not perish but have eternal life. I love St. Augustine of Hippo's commentary on today's passage, "Just as they who looked on that serpent perished not by the serpent's bites, so they who look in faith on Christ's death are healed from the bites of sins."

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 22-24, Psalms 47

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February 16, 2024
The Sovereignty of God

Readings for today: Numbers 22-24, Psalms 47

[\(audio reading\)](#)

Believe it or not, there are some Christians out there today who want to limit God. They limit His love, reserving only for those who have been saved. They limit His power, suggesting that certain miraculous gifts have ceased. They limit His voice, arguing He only speaks to His those He has chosen. I have to admit it is baffling to me. I have been in lots of places around the world and heard testimony after testimony of former witch doctors, Muslim imams, and other thoroughly pagan people whom God has revealed Himself to through visions and dreams. I remember one such man vividly. He was a Muslim warrior from a violent tribe who had never heard the name of Jesus. God visited him in a dream one night and the man surrendered his life to Him. The very next day, he shared what he had experienced and 80 people from his village also gave their lives to God. He did not know the name of this God. He didn't have access to a Bible so could not read about this God. He only knew what had been revealed to him in his dream. A few nights later, God came to him again. Told him to show up at a particular town on a particular day where he would be met by visitors from a faraway land who would teach him all he needed to know. That's when I met him. He showed up at our conference out of the blue, dressed head to toe in a beautiful Muslim robe with a scimitar on his hip. He had walked two days to get to where we were holding our conference. Through a translator, he related his story to us and we were blown away yet again by the sovereignty of God.

I think of that man almost every time I read the story of Balaam. Here's a pagan witch doctor whom God uses to bless His chosen people. He is bought and paid for by a pagan king and God still speaks to him and through him. He is not part of God's chosen people and yet God uses him for His glorious purposes. Can there be any limit to God? Can God not do as He chooses? Can He not use who He chooses? God can speak through a donkey for goodness' sake! I love how the Psalmist puts it, "God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne. The nobles of the peoples have assembled with the people of the God of Abraham. For the leaders of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted." (Psalms 47:8-9 CSB) God reigns over all. God rules over all. There is no limit to His power. No limit to His love. No limit to His authority. No limit to His grace. God will use whomever He wills to accomplish His plans.

I am not sure why some of my friends seek to limit God. Perhaps they seek a God who they can always understand. A God who never acts in strange and mysterious ways. A God who is always safe and under control. But, as C.S. Lewis said so well, "He is not safe but He is good. He is the King." God's ways are higher than our ways. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. We cannot begin to grasp the infinite nature of His plans for us. But we can trust Him. We can have confidence that He always has our best in mind. We can place our faith in Him for while He may not always conform to our understanding, we do know He will never fail.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 25-27, Psalms 48

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February 17, 2024
Genealogies

Readings for today: Numbers 25-27, Psalms 48

(audio reading)

Today's reading is filled with a lot of names. The genealogies of Israel. Not easy reading. These are some of the harder sections of Scripture to get through simply because they feel so remote. After all, we don't feel a connection to these people or these particular tribes or these particular families. Sure, we acknowledge they are our spiritual mothers and fathers but there's very little information about most of these names so it's hard to feel any kind of tie. However, a careful reading reminds us that behind every name there is a story. And behind every story is a powerful testimony of God's faithfulness.

For example, consider the case of Zelophehad's daughters. "Zelophedad son of Hepher had no sons — only daughters. The names of Zelophehad's daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah." (Numbers 26:33 CSB) Their story is remarkable and worth diving into...

Five women appear before the gathered leadership of Israel at the Tabernacle to present one of the earliest recorded lawsuits in history. Their claim? Their father died without a male heir which means his inheritance is now in jeopardy. He was not part of the rebellion of Korah so they have legitimate standing to bring his case before the Lord. And they ask Moses to grant them their father's property rights so they can preserve the family line.

I cannot imagine the courage this course of action must have taken. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah knew very well that women did not have any rights in the ancient near east. Not in Israel and certainly not in the nations that surrounded them. Women were considered property in that time. Not even counted as human beings. At the death of their father or brothers or husbands, they were not entitled to any inheritance and were often left destitute. Fast forward a few centuries and we see this scene play itself out in the book of Ruth where Naomi loses not only her husband but also her two sons, leaving her to fend for herself.

So imagine you are one of these five women. Raised to believe you have no rights and your primary value is to bear sons to your future husband so his family line can be preserved. Now imagine making the decision to approach Moses and the gathered leadership of Israel in front of the Tabernacle itself to present your case. You know what you are about to do has never been done. You know what you are about to ask for has never happened before. You know there's a good chance your petition will fail but you courageously step forward anyway. You argue persuasively for the preservation of your father's inheritance and you make the audacious claim to be counted among your father's brothers.

I would have loved to see the look on Moses' face. Was it shock? Confusion? Did he smile at the women's boldness? There is no indication in the text one way or another. What we do know is Moses recuses himself and takes their petition to the Lord. This, in itself, is a strong affirmation of the women. And then there is the response from God. I have to believe their courage brought joy to His heart and He issues a new law for Israel. From this point forward, "When a man dies without having a son, transfer his inheritance to his daughter." (Numbers 27:8 CSB) A statute still used today as legal precedent by the American Bar Association.

The Bible is a history of God's interactions with many different human cultures. Human culture, by definition, is always corrupt and unjust. Thankfully, God condescends to speak to us through our unique culture but is also always at work bending the arc of human history towards justice. Towards

righteousness. Here is a clear case where God honors the rights of women, granting them a unique status when compared to other ancient near east societies. There is a direct line between the daughters of Zelophehad and Deborah who served as judge and spiritual leader for all of Israel. A direct line between the daughters of Zelophehad and the female disciples who gathered round Jesus and remained faithful to Him even to the end when all the male disciples had long since fled. A direct line between the daughters of Zelophehad and the women Paul affirms like Priscilla, Phoebe, and Junia who was “excellent among the apostles.” God is still doing this work today as women continue to be affirmed as strong and gifted leaders across all sectors of human society.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 28-30, Psalms 49 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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February 18, 2024

Readings for today: Numbers 28-30, Psalms 49 [\(audio reading\)](#)

February 19, 2024
Warfare in the Bible

Readings for today: [Numbers 31-32, Psalms 50](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

It's hard to read passages like the one we read today where the Lord commands His people to go to war. "The Lord spoke to Moses, "Execute vengeance for the Israelites against the Midianites. After that, you will be gathered to your people." (Numbers 31:1-2 CSB) It seems inconsistent with God's character. After all, if God is love, how could He command such violence? Did the ancient writers make a mistake? Did Moses not hear God correctly? Is this simply a theological justification for Israel's wars of conquest? These are important questions to wrestle with for sure.

However, it is also important we wrestle with these questions honestly and not anachronistically. It's simply dishonest to judge a culture from another time and place by our modern, 21st century American standards. First and foremost, we are just as violent and messed up as any culture ourselves so certainly do not have the moral high ground. Second, humanity has been at war from its inception. Violence seems hardwired into our very nature. I've read where some historians believe humanity has had four years of peace in her 10,000 years of existence. Four years! When you read books like *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee* by David Treuer or *Dominion* by Tom Holland, you realize very quickly that pagan cultures around the world were just as violent, if not more so, than Jewish, Christian, and/or Muslim cultures. Third, God has made an unbreakable, unshakeable commitment to work through humanity to bring about His will on the earth. This means He uses us in spite of us which is hard for us to keep in the forefront of our minds because we tend to see ourselves as fundamentally good despite all evidence to the contrary.

The Midianites were an early nomadic tribe known for violence, child sacrifice, slave-trafficking, and sexual license, among many other things. They were distant relatives to Israel through Abraham and his second wife, Keturah, but that didn't stop them from attacking their cousins. What took place was fairly typical in ancient near east tribal warfare. Blood feuds were very common and passed down from generation to generation which is why Moses orders the execution of entire families. He is seeking to put an end to the war with Midian once and for all. He doesn't want a new generation of sons to seek revenge for what happened to their fathers. By the way, we see a similar dynamic in play in the Middle East today between the Israelis and Palestinians. It's a modern blood feud that has lasted several generations at this point with no end in sight. As each generation comes of age, they seek revenge for what happened to their fathers and mothers which is why it's tough to see how such a conflict can possibly end peacefully.

Why does God allow or even sanction such violence? I am honest enough to say I do not know. What I do know is the Midianites were not innocent. Nor was Israel. Humanity is always compromised on so many levels. There is no such thing as a truly innocent human being. The fact that God chooses to work through us to bring about His sovereign will means working with us in all our sinful, broken, rebelliousness. If we have the courage to engage in honest self-reflection, we know the many ways we act selfishly and pridefully and even violently. We know the many ways we hurt or bring pain to others by what we say or don't say, do or don't do. We know the many ways we fail to live up to our own moral standards much less God's moral standard. Rather than stand in judgment on the people of the

ancient near east, the Bible calls us to humble ourselves and look within to see how truly similar we are to them with the hopes that it drives us to God for His mercy and grace.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 33-34, Psalms 51

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February 20, 2024
Divine Rights

Readings for today: Numbers 33-34, Psalms 51 [\(audio reading\)](#)

Americans as a general rule believe we are born with certain freedoms. Inalienable rights guaranteed to us by our Constitution. Among those are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The freedom of speech, assembly, press, and religion. In short, we believe no one has a right to tell us what to do or where to go or how to act. If we ever feel those rights are being threatened, we take action. We fight back. We sue. Nothing, it seems, will stop us from pursuing what we believe to be in our own self-interest. Can you imagine what would happen if God chose to do the same? After all, His rights were violated the moment Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. His rights are violated every time a human being engages in sin and breaks His law. His rights are violated when we worship idols and images of our own making. Ascribing to created things the glory due our Creator.

One of the real challenges in reading Scripture is to keep in mind the rights of God. God has the right to literally wipe out the entire universe and start over. God has the right to execute every man, woman, and child on the earth for their sin. God has the right to judge the nations and destroy them for their greed and lust for power. God has the right to do all this and more. So what stays God's hand? His endless mercy. His amazing grace. His unconditional love. His great faithfulness.

We are nearing the end of the Torah. The great story of the formation of God's people. The birth of a nation. God has rescued them from slavery in Egypt. He has exposed the emptiness of the idols of the greatest empire on earth. God has utterly broken Pharaoh who set himself up as a god. God is demonstrating His power and authority over all He has made and He is about to do the same as Israel enters the Promised Land. God is faithful. He will not let this world go. He will have His way among us. He will have the glory He deserves. He will make Himself known to the pagan nations of the earth. This is why God commands Israel to "drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you, destroy all their stone images and cast images, and demolish all their high places. You are to take possession of the land and settle in it because I have given you the land to possess." (Numbers 33:52-53 CSB) God has a right to our worship. God has a right to our total allegiance. God has a right to our faithful obedience. He wants nothing more than our whole hearts. Nothing less than our full devotion. Nothing else but our very souls.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 35-36, Psalms 52

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February 21, 2024
Vision for the Future

Readings for today: [Numbers 35-36, Psalms 52](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)



You are looking out on the plains of Moab. This is the view looking west from Mt. Nebo where Moses dies. On a clear day, you can see the Jordan River off in the distance as well as the city of Jericho. At night, you can see the lights of Jerusalem in the Judean hills. It's a truly awe-inspiring sight. We were there during the summer months when it was hot and dry so it doesn't look very appealing. Not only that but the Jordan River has been tapped for irrigation so no longer is as large which makes water in this region far more scarce than it would have been when the ancient Israelites first laid eyes on it.

As we close out the Book of Numbers and prepare to head into the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses casts a vision for the future of Israel. At this point in the narrative, we know Moses will not be entering the Promised Land. Israel will be going on without him. He's led them faithfully and well for forty years in the wilderness and now he is preparing them for what lies ahead. He is organizing them in such a way that they will be successful in the land. As we read yesterday, Moses makes sure to recount their journey so they remember what brought them to this place. He reminds them of the boundaries God has set for them as they prepare to occupy this new territory. Today, he sets aside cities and pastures for the Levites who will not be given a portion of land and he sets up cities of refuge as a way of protecting

the Israelites from the blood feuds that plague so many other tribes in the ancient near east. Finally, he confirms the inheritance for Zelophehad's daughters so the integrity of the tribal inheritance is maintained. These details may seem small or archaic but they will prove absolutely essential once Israel finds herself settled in the Promised Land.

These chapters also serve as a great reminder to us that God has a vision for our future and His vision includes taking care of everything down to final details. God has a plan for each of our lives and His will is not just general but specific. God promises to take all the experiences of our lives and the choices we make and use them to bring about His purposes. And what is true for us individually is also true for us corporately. God directs the courses of communities and cities and nations. As the famous Dutch statesman, Abraham Kuyper, once said so well, "There's not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is Lord over all, does not exclaim, 'Mine'!"

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 1-3, Psalms 53

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February 22, 2024
Generational Handoff

Readings for today: [Deuteronomy 1-3, Psalms 53](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

One of the real challenges for every generation is to hand off leadership. It's hard to give up power, influence, and control. It's hard to come to grips with failing strength and mental decline. It's hard to face our own mortality so we tend to hold on as long as we can. We see it in politics where leaders remain in office as long as possible, sometimes even until they die. We see it in business as founders of companies struggle to let go and let someone else take their place. We see it in the church as pastors can't seem to give up the pulpit. The examples across every sector of society are legion right now. So many of us struggle to follow the model John the Baptist set for us in John 3:30, "He must increase, so I must decrease."

If it's any consolation, Moses struggled with this issue as well. Over and over again, he pleaded with God to let him lead the people into the Promised Land. Finally, God got angry with Moses and told him to not speak about it again and instead hand his leadership over to Joshua, one of the two faithful spies who had given a good report when first sent into the land. "The Lord said to me, 'That's enough! Do not speak to me again about this matter. Go to the top of Pisgah and look to the west, north, south, and east, and see it with your own eyes, for you will not cross the Jordan. But commission Joshua and encourage and strengthen him, for he will cross over ahead of the people and enable them to inherit this land that you will see.'" (Deuteronomy 3:26-28 CSB) If Moses, the most humble man to ever live according to the Bible, struggled to let go, is it any wonder we do as well?

Raising up the next generation of leaders for God's people is essential to any healthy organization but especially the church. As has been said, the church is always one generation away from extinction. Pouring into those who are coming behind us is critical if the church is going to continue to fulfill her mission. As believers in Jesus Christ, we must take seriously the call to set future generations up for success. How do we do that? Through intentional mentoring and discipleship. Older believers taking the time and making the time for younger believers. Younger believers humbly seeking the wisdom of their elders. Each generation seeking to lift up and learn from the other. It's not easy. All of us are busy. All of us are running hard. All of us have other things we'd perhaps rather do. But is there any greater investment we can make? Think of the ripple effect we can have if we will take the time to come alongside those who are younger than us and help them learn from our experience. Think of the impact we can make on marriages and families as we pour ourselves out for those who are coming behind us. Think of the energy and excitement we will feel as we watch them rise up and take their place. Think of the joy we will have as we see them achieve great success. This is the same joy John the Baptist felt when He saw Jesus coming after him. It's the same joy Moses felt when he raised up Joshua to take his place. Friends, this is the joy God wants us to experience as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 4-6, Psalms 54

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February 23, 2024
The Purpose of the Law

Readings for today: [Deuteronomy 4-6, Psalms 54](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

Why does God give His people the Old Testament law? For centuries, people assumed it was a kind of roadmap to salvation. Follow the rules. Earn God's favor. Become righteous through your works. God will let you into heaven. I know that's a fairly simplistic reading but it largely holds true especially for those in the Protestant branch of the church. Martin Luther, as he processed his own existential angst, projected onto the biblical text his own flawed perspective of the Jewish understanding of the law and it tragically stuck. Thankfully, in the 1970's, a New Testament scholar by the name of E.P. Sanders finally took the Jewish identity of Jesus and the rest of the apostles seriously. He grounded them in their Jewish context and challenged the traditional interpretation of "Jewish legalism" and instead coined a new term to describe the relationship of God's people with God's law. The term was "covenantal nomism" and it is the argument that the first century Jews didn't believe in "works righteousness" rather they understood their obedience to the law flowed from a prior covenantal relationship initiated and established by God. In this way, it is very similar to how we understand the nature of grace and law in Christianity.

Covenantal nomism revolutionized New Testament scholarship because once you understand it, you see it all over the place. Consider these words from our reading today. "Carefully follow (the law), for this will show your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the peoples. When they hear about all these statutes, they will say, 'This great nation is indeed a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god near to it as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call to him? And what great nation has righteous statutes and ordinances like this entire law I set before you today?" (Deuteronomy 4:6-8 CSB) The emphasis here is not on following the law to earn God's love and favor but on following the law to show the world the people of Israel already enjoy God's love and favor. Moses continues, "But the Lord selected you and brought you out of Egypt's iron furnace to be a people for his inheritance, as you are today...He will not leave you, destroy you, or forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them by oath, because the Lord your God is a compassionate God...You were shown these things so that you would know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him. He let you hear his voice from heaven to instruct you. He showed you his great fire on earth, and you heard his words from the fire. Because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them and brought you out of Egypt by his presence and great power, to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you and to bring you in and give you their land as an inheritance, as is now taking place." (Deuteronomy 4:20, 31, 35-38 CSB) Over and over again, he is emphasizing the covenantal relationship God has established with His people as the inspiration and motivation for their obedience.

God's love and grace and mercy always precede the law. Relationship always takes precedence over rules. Even the Ten Commandments begin with the statement, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery." (Deuteronomy 5:6 CSB) We obey because we are loved, we don't obey in order to be loved. We obey because we've received God's grace, we don't obey because we need to earn God's grace. We obey because God has shown us mercy, we don't obey in order to gain God's mercy. Our obedience is simply the outward, tangible, concrete sign our hearts have been transformed by saving faith through our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 7-9, Psalms 55

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February 24, 2024
God's Treasured Possession

Readings for today: [Deuteronomy 7-9, Psalms 55](#) [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

One of the things I love most about God is His great faithfulness. God always delivers on His promises. God always keeps His Word. God will never abandon His people. Deuteronomy is Moses' last sermon to Israel. He has led these people for decades. They've seen incredible miracles. They've experienced hardship and suffering. Now they stand on the cusp of the Promised Land. They can look over the Jordan River and see the land God has given them. But they also know the land isn't empty. There are rival nations already living there. Pagan tribes who engage in all kinds of detestable worship practices. Driving them out will not be easy. It will require a long season of sustained warfare that will test their faith in God.

So Moses reminds them of all God has done. Reminds them of why they were chosen in the first place. I love his words. "For you are a holy people belonging to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be his own possession out of all the peoples on the face of the earth. "The Lord had his heart set on you and chose you, not because you were more numerous than all peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors, he brought you out with a strong hand and redeemed you from the place of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps his gracious covenant loyalty for a thousand generations with those who love him and keep his commands." (Deuteronomy 7:6-9 CSB) God tends to stand on the side of the weak. The oppressed. The enslaved. He takes the side of the poor, the outcast, the sinner. He did not choose Egypt or Assyria or Babylon or any of the other far more powerful Ancient Near East empires. He chose Israel. He was faithful to the oath He swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He refused to abandon His people to a life of slavery and death.

God is faithful. He keeps the covenant. He is steadfast in His love. He is the guarantor of our relationship. Why can we count on God? Why can we trust God? Why can we believe God? Because He is faithful. To Himself. Faithful to His own character and nature. God never changes. He is who He says He is. That is why His name is "I am who I am." Friends, no matter where life finds you today, God is faithful. He is with you. He will never leave you or forsake you for He is faithful.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 10-12, Psalms 56 (No devotionals on Sundays)

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February 25, 2024

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 10-12, Psalms 56 [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

February 26, 2024

Tithing

Readings for today: [Deuteronomy 13-14](#), Psalms 57 [\(video intro\)](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

When I first became a Christian, I was taught to give a tithe to the Lord. One tenth of all I made belonged to Him. Give it to the church. Give it to different ministries. Support missionaries. It didn't matter so much who you gave it to as long as it furthered God's Kingdom causes. My wife and I have never wavered in our commitment to give at least ten percent of our income to the Lord but when you read the Old Testament, you find out really quickly that "tithing" involves more than simply giving ten percent away.

Yes, the ancient Israelites were commanded to give ten percent to the priests each year. Since the priests were dedicated to the service of God, they needed the proceeds from the annual tithe to live on. However, it is clear from our reading today that the Lord commanded the Israelites to set aside a second tithe. This second tithe provided the food and drink for them to eat when they traveled to Jerusalem for the annual festivals. If they were close to Jerusalem, they would bring their food with them. If they were far from Jerusalem, they would convert it to cash and buy what they needed when they arrived. Then the Lord commands a third tithe. This one was to be given every three years and it was for the poor, the fatherless, and the widow. In other words, this was the welfare system of ancient Israel. So if do the math, the practice of "tithing" actually ends up being 23% a year!

So what principles should guide the Christian as they give? After all, priests and pastors make salaries. We don't have to leave our work in order to travel multiple times a year for annual festivals in Jerusalem. And our government provides a social safety net to take care of the poor in our midst. Does this mean we are off the hook? Not at all. Over and above the required tithes, the ancient Israelites also brought "freewill offerings" to the Lord. They would give above and beyond their ancient taxation system in order to further God's work in the world. And the New Testament calls us to do the same. The Apostle Paul - raised in the ancient taxation system of ancient Israel as a former Pharisee - writes these words to the Corinthian church, "The point is this: The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously. Each person should do as he has decided in his heart — not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver... You will be enriched in every way for all generosity, which produces thanksgiving to God through us. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God." (2 Corinthians 9:6-7, 11-12 CSB) Essentially he's talking about the principles guiding freewill offerings.

Frankly, I think the tithe is too low a standard. If the ancient Israelites - who were largely poor, agrarian farmers - gave generously above and beyond the required tithes, should not we - who live in one of the wealthiest nations in human history - do the same? It's why my wife and I have committed to growing our giving with each passing year. And here's what we've learned. The more we give, the more God entrusts into our hands. We simply cannot outgive God! He enriches us in every way so we can be even more generous. It's truly amazing and one of the most concrete way we experience His miracles on a regular basis.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 15-16, Psalms 58

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February 27, 2024
What is God doing about Poverty?

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 15-16, Psalms 58 (video intro) (audio reading)

What is God doing about poverty? I get that question all the time. I get it here at home when people serve at the Denver Rescue Mission or with Open Door Ministries in downtown Denver. I get it overseas when people see the starvation and life-threatening poverty so many in our world are living in. Without a doubt, poverty is a very real issue in our world today. Despite major advances in the global war on poverty - and the progress has been miraculous when one considers the over 1 billion people who have been lifted out of extreme poverty since 1990 - the struggle remains. Furthermore, this issue is complicated by how we define “poverty.” There are some objective measures defined by the World Bank and others. Extreme poverty is defined as living on less than \$1.90/day. Moderate poverty is less than \$3.10/day. But then there is this idea of “relative poverty” which measures the economic distance of an individual from a certain percentage of the median household income in a particular community. Our response to the problem of poverty will depend to some extent on which definition we are working from and this, in turn, will shape how we understand our reading from the Bible today.

In my travels around the world, I have personally witnessed extreme, life-threatening poverty. I have seen what this form of poverty does to a person. Physical bodies waste away from hunger. Lifeless eyes stare into the distance. Mothers beg me to take their newborn children. Men and women get high on khat to try to find some kind of escape. I have seen the effects of extreme drought and famine. I have seen what happens when crops fail or the rains don’t come. I have seen the graves of those who’ve perished in the violence that often ensues when resources become scarce. And though I acknowledge the truth of Jesus’ words, “you will always have the poor with you”, it doesn’t mean I like it or accept it. So what is God doing about poverty?

Thankfully, we know God cares deeply for the poor. We see His tender love and care on display in our readings from today. “There will be no poor among you, however, because the Lord is certain to bless you in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance — if only you obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow every one of these commands I am giving you today. When the Lord your God blesses you as he has promised you, you will lend to many nations but not borrow; you will rule many nations, but they will not rule you.” (Deuteronomy 15:4-6 CSB) The plain meaning of the text seems clear. If God’s people will obey God’s voice, contribute their tithes and offerings as commanded by the Law, and give generously to the foreigner, orphan and widow in their midst then the problem of “absolute poverty” disappears. However, it will be a continual process. A continual test the Lord will put before them according to Deuteronomy 15:11 (CSB), “For there will never cease to be poor people in the land; that is why I am commanding you, ‘Open your hand willingly to your poor and needy brother in your land.’ Each generation will have the opportunity to “be their brother’s or sister’s keeper” and provide the less fortunate in their midst.

Human society is unequal by definition. People are not all given the same gifts and talents. People are not all given the same opportunities. People are not given the same resources. Furthermore, there are forces beyond our control that make a huge impact on our economy. Natural disasters. Wars. Death. Disease. Famine. Drought. Availability of natural resources. All exact a toll. Throw in the fact that some human beings simply work harder and smarter than others and the gap between rich and poor only seems to grow.

God recognizes this very “human” trend which is why He demands generosity from His people. We who are blessed must in turn bless others. For our blessing did not come from ourselves but from God. He commands Israel to always remember their time as slaves in Egypt. To remain humble and compassionate towards those who have experienced economic hardship and therefore sold themselves into slavery to pay off their debts. When the Sabbatical Year comes (every seven years), they are to release their slaves, forgive their debts, and help them get started in their new life. “If your fellow Hebrew, a man or woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, you must set him free in the seventh year. When you set him free, do not send him away empty-handed. Give generously to him from your flock, your threshing floor, and your winepress. You are to give him whatever the Lord your God has blessed you with. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you; that is why I am giving you this command today.” (Deuteronomy 15:12-15 CSB) The Sabbatical Year serves almost as an economic “reset” as the wealth of the nation - which God has provided - is redistributed in a way that closes the gap between rich and poor. This effectively addresses the “relative poverty” of the country and provides hope and opportunity for those who wouldn’t otherwise have it.

It’s an open question how often Israel actually kept the Sabbatical Year or what practical application it could have in today’s global economy. But the principle remains. If we live our lives with the understanding that all we have has been given to us by God. All our wealth. All our talent. All our opportunities. Then it becomes a lot easier to live generously. To provide for others. To sacrifice our own lifestyles so that we might relieve the burden of poverty for those around us, whether they live next door or on the other side of the globe.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 21-23, Psalms 60

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February 28, 2024
Character is Essential

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 17-20, Psalms 59 (video intro) (audio reading)

The most important quality a person can possess is strong, godly character. But godly character does not form overnight. It's not something we stumble into. It doesn't happen by random chance. It requires development. A long obedience in the same direction. An intense focus every single day of our lives. The more influence and power a person has, the more important and impactful their character becomes. Those who lack godly character drag down those around them. Those who've taken the time to develop godly character lift everyone up. Everyone feels it from family to friends to neighbors to colleagues. Everyone knows it when they experience it.

This is why God sets the expectation that the most important practice a king or ruler can engage in is daily meditation on His Word. Listen to the directions God gives kings from the book of Deuteronomy again, "When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, take possession of it, live in it, and say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations around me,' you are to appoint over you the king the Lord your God chooses. Appoint a king from your brothers. You are not to set a foreigner over you, or one who is not of your people. However, he must not acquire many horses for himself or send the people back to Egypt to acquire many horses, for the Lord has told you, 'You are never to go back that way again.' He must not acquire many wives for himself so that his heart won't go astray. He must not acquire very large amounts of silver and gold for himself. When he is seated on his royal throne, he is to write a copy of this instruction for himself on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It is to remain with him, and he is to read from it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to observe all the words of this instruction, and to do these statutes. Then his heart will not be exalted above his countrymen, he will not turn from this command to the right or the left, and he and his sons will continue reigning many years in Israel." (Deuteronomy 17:14-20 CSB) What is the most important quality for a king? It's not the accumulation of wealth or power or influence, it's the cultivation of godly character. Each king is to make a personal copy of God's law that he will then read and reflect on every single day of his life. The goal is for him to learn to fear the Lord and obey His commands so he might remain humble and rule his people with righteousness. And we see this happen in Israel's history. The good kings exhibited a godly character while the evil kings lacked this important quality.

What about us? What about our leaders? What do we look for in the people who lead us politically, socially, economically, even ecclesiastically? What are the most important qualities we look for in a president or member of Congress? A governor or mayor or town council member? A leader in business or education? A pastor or other church leader? Is it godliness? Or is it power? Authority? Popularity? Influence? Wealth? Success? Tragically, we tend to look for anything but godliness in our leaders today. It's why we find ourselves in the mess we're in. We look for leaders who will tear down others, attack our "enemies", channel our outrage, prey upon our fears, and tell us lies we will believe. Sure, we can try to blame them but here's the honest, if hard, truth. They are simply a reflection of us. Their lack of character is a reflection of our own lack of character. We don't elect or vote for godly leaders because we lack godly character ourselves. And therein lies the fundamental problem in our world. In a democratic society, we get the leadership we deserve. Our system is perfectly designed - from top to bottom - to produce the kind of leadership we are getting right now. And if there is ever to be any hope for a change, it must begin with the people of God making the commitment to develop the character of God above all else.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 21-23, Psalms 60

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February 29, 2024
Cultural Distance and Difference

Readings for today: [Deuteronomy 21-23, Psalms 60](#) [\(audio reading\)](#)

It's hard to read the chapters assigned for today. They typically elicit confusion, frustration, and even anger at the way women and rebellious children are treated not to mention the laws governing sexuality. This is where the cultural distance between us and the ancient Israelites becomes most obvious. We don't have the same frame of understanding as they did in their day and so struggle to understand why God would allow such laws to exist. Furthermore, we have significant issues with some of these laws, considering them unjust to the core. So why does God command Israel to follow them? What's He after here?

The dominant cultural paradigm in the ancient near east - as well as the modern Middle East - is honor/shame. What this means is that the primary purpose of the law is not to determine innocence or guilt but to protect the honor of the family/clan/community/nation. This is why there is a premium placed on ritual purity because the greatest honor for a nation would be for their god to come and dwell with them. This is why we read the phrase, "you must purge the evil/guilt from your midst" over and over again. God wants to dwell with His people. God wants to walk with them as He once did with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God wants an unbroken relationship with them which means they must pay particular attention to maintaining standards of cleanliness. "For the Lord your God walks throughout your camp to protect you and deliver your enemies to you; so your encampments must be holy. He must not see anything indecent among you or he will turn away from you." (Deuteronomy 23:14 CSB) Why would God turn away? He turns away from the shame of our sin. The shame of our indecency. The shame of our behavior. All the laws listed in these chapters have to do in some way with honor and shame with the hope that Israel will hear and obey and thereby create an environment where God Himself can be present. By the way, the honor/shame dynamic is still very much a reality to this day in Israel and throughout the Middle East.

So what can we learn from these chapters? What's our takeaway? Especially since we live in a culture far removed and far different? The dominant cultural paradigm in the United States is innocence/guilt. The primary purpose of our laws is to determine who is guilty and who goes free. We are far more concerned with right or wrong than we are with ritual purity. And we seemingly have no desire to "purge the evil from our midst" as long as it doesn't "hurt anyone." Our goal is not to have God walk with us or dwell with us, we're doing just fine on our own. We actually prefer Him to keep His distance if we're honest. Despite our sin, God still pursues us. He wants to have a relationship with us. And that's why He sent His only begotten Son to "hang on a tree" and become the "curse" for us. "If anyone is found guilty of an offense deserving the death penalty and is executed, and you hang his body on a tree, you are not to leave his corpse on the tree overnight but are to bury him that day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance." (Deuteronomy 21:22-23 CSB) On the cross, Jesus took our shame and gave us His honor. He took on our guilt and declared us innocent. He became sin - who knew no sin - that we might become the righteousness of God.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 24-27, Psalms 61

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