



But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. – Matthew 15:9

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The file list on my computer tells me it's been over a month since I last wrote something for this blog. I would come home on Friday afternoon after giving my dad his bath and wouldn't feel like I had anything to say. So I wouldn't take the time to write. In some cases I didn't have time.

During that time they remodeled the bathrooms in our house. Hannah now has a shower that's easier for her to enter and that should be a lot easier to clean. It also has grab bars that will help as she gets older and has more trouble moving. She's even offered to let her mother use it, and has succeeded in convincing her dad that they need to move to a different house so they can have a handicap-accessible bathroom.

Her birthday was this week, and I had decided to get her a replacement blue-ray drive for her Play Station III. There are so many different models of that, however, and the one I got didn't have the right connections. So while I spent the money on her present she doesn't have the benefit yet. Frustrating.

In my personal devotions I've been reading the book of Deuteronomy. In places that can be a difficult book. It had long bothered me, particularly the places where it calls on the death penalty. "You must purge the evil from among you." That just didn't sit right with me.

Now one explanation of that is that one must consider the culture of the people in that part of the world. In recent years a shopkeeper and his employees were killed because they had displayed tomatoes and celery too close together, which potentially reminded people of male genitalia. In such a culture our "mild" penalties would probably seem permissive and decadent (and they do; that's Islam's major criticism of Christianity).

But here's another thought. In chapter 13 we read the requirement to stone to death anyone who suggests worshiping other gods. "Then all Israel will hear and be afraid, and no one among you will do such an evil thing again." (Verse 11)

Ask yourself this question. How well did that work? The people heard about the stoning of an idolater, and they became afraid, and nobody ever suggested idolatry again in Israel. Is that what happened? Clearly not, because in Elijah's day God could only name seven thousand out of about a million who hadn't engaged in idolatry. That's less than one percent.

Another explanation given for the approach God took with Israel is to point to the levels of moral development. On exiting slavery in Egypt, the people were at the very first stages of moral development and needed a system of rewards and punishments in order to do right and not fall back into the moral depravity of the nation that had enslaved them. That's promising, but I think there's something even more fundamental at work.

Could it be that God wanted to demonstrate to the universe that Satan's methods of force and coercion don't work? I think that's exactly what's happening with the entire history of Israel. God set up a nation of people with whom he had a simple agreement. "Obey me and I'll bless you, fail to obey and I'll curse you." He had both reward and punishment set up.

That's what we call the "old covenant." When Paul considered it, he concluded that the law was powerless to solve humanity's problems because it was weakened by the flesh. That's why God instituted a "new covenant" based on faith rather than force. Faith would succeed where force had failed.

Freedom, not the loss of it, is the solution to the problem of evil. Only faith, empowered by love, can produce humans who do the right things for the right reasons. Will that save everyone? Jesus didn't think so. He said only a few would be saved. Is that because God is particular and demanding and only a few will be able to "please" him?

Jesus didn't portray such a God. He talked about a God who went out of his way to accept returning sinners. No, the problem isn't with God, the problem is with sin and the power of the lie. Few people will find salvation because few people are willing to believe that freedom, not force, is the solution.

So how do you approach the "sinners" in your life? Are you willing to grant them liberty to do what they choose, even if that harms you? That's Godliness. That's righteousness.

Last night I read an article about the life of Dr. Paul Brand. From the description I gathered that he had a very positive view of God and of life even on this sin-ridden planet. So I believe it is possible to grant liberty to those around you and still live a joyful life. It's a struggle for me, because the lie dies hard.

So when I ask that God will bless you, I'm really hoping that you will find joy in Godliness and righteousness.

Sincerely,

Elkanah

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