

# What Does the Lord Require of a Nation?

## SERMON BACKGROUND STUDY

July 5 & 6, 2008

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### Deuteronomy 10:12-13; 17-21 (NRSV)

<sup>12</sup>So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, <sup>13</sup>and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.

<sup>17</sup>For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, <sup>18</sup>who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. <sup>19</sup>You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. <sup>20</sup>You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. <sup>21</sup>He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen.

### *The same passage, but from Peterson's The Message*

So now Israel, what do you think GOD expects from you? Just this: Live in his presence in holy reverence, follow the road he sets out for you, love him, serve GOD, your God, with everything you have in you, obey the commandments and regulations of GOD that I'm commanding you today—live a good life.

GOD, your God, is the God of all gods, he's the Master of all masters, a God immense and powerful and awesome. He doesn't play favorites, takes no bribes, makes sure orphans and widows are treated fairly, takes loving care of foreigners by seeing that they get food and clothing.

You must treat foreigners with the same loving care—  
remember, you were once foreigners in Egypt.  
Reverently respect God, your God, serve him, hold tight to him,  
back up your promises with the authority of his name.  
He's your praise! He's your God!  
He did all these tremendous, these staggering things  
that you saw with your own eyes.

*We gather today to give thanks to God for our nation. What does God require of us?  
What sort of nation does he hope we will be?*

We celebrate the birth of the United States of America and are grateful to be part of this great country. We take pride in the USA, even as we pray that we will be able to do an ever better job of realizing our hopes for justice and peace. We are a nation of diverse ethnicities, religions, and cultures bound together by a common commitment to a national constitution and the set of laws which flow from it. Our allegiance is to the nation not to a person. But the idea of one's allegiance being to a nation or a constitution is relatively rare in human history.

For most of history, humans have identified with others by means of a common ethnicity and limited geography. The allegiance to one's tribe was expressed as loyalty to the tribe's leader, often a king.<sup>1</sup> Of course, since not all tribes had the same power, some tribes came under the control of other tribes, giving birth to both empires and to slavery.

Consider the Jews of Jesus' day. They saw themselves as a single ethnic people, the family of Abraham, bound together by a common allegiance to the LORD God and inhabiting the land given them by God. Nonetheless, they were forced to tolerate Herod the Great and his

### Parallel Translations

Our understanding of the Bible is often improved by reading a passage in more than one translation, for none are perfect.

Here, I've printed the Deuteronomy passage from the NRSV, a fairly literal translation, along with Peterson's paraphrase. I think that you'll see that the two together provide a richer reading of the passage. Just bear in mind that the freer a translation, the more the meaning of a passage is provided for you and Christians' understandings of the author's meaning sometimes differ.

<sup>1</sup>The Athenian democracy and the Roman Republic are exceptions that prove the rule.

sons, pretenders to the throne of David. Worse, the Jews had been forced into the Roman Empire, living under the iron hand of Caesar, who was the *paterfamilias*, the head of the family. The Jews were such a troublesome people to the Romans that they were legally exempt from the requirements of the growing Caesar cult. Their allegiances to God and to Caesar did not rest comfortably together.

Yet, though the Jews were determined to show that their loyalty was to God not Caesar, they also were often blinded by their commitment to their ethnic tribe, to a common DNA, as we'd put it. They too easily forgot that they were to be the ones through whom *all* the families of the earth were to be blessed. It had always been about a shared faith in God, never about a common ethnicity or even a land. Sadly it was difficult for most Jews, and even many Jewish-Christians to accept Paul's mission to the Gentiles, i.e., to those outside the tribe.

These issues of conflicting loyalties are with us still. Who am I first? An American? A Christian? A Texan? A white man? An older man? I read all the time about so-called "identity politics," meant to slice us and dice us in order to get our vote.

We have to remind ourselves that we, those who have faith in Jesus Christ, are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people," (1 Peter 2:9) transcending country, race, gender, age – all the lines we use to divide ourselves. My first allegiance is to the LORD God and I am ever grateful that I live in a country that does not often put my allegiance to the test, for I fear that even if I'm able to see the test, I may not pass it.

*What does the Lord require of us?*

So what is it then that the LORD God asks of me, of his people, of all peoples and of all nations? More than three millennia ago, Moses spelled it out for the Israelites before they entered the promised land: "Live in his presence in holy reverence, follow the road he sets before you, love him, serve GOD, your God, with everything you have in you. Obey the commandments and regulations of GOD . . ." (from Peterson's *The Message*). Though this expresses the covenant that God was making with Abraham's family and no other peoples, it still embodies the God-given ways in which all people are created to live.

When we come to the Old Testament, it is easy to get lost in all the talk of priests, rituals, and unusual practices. But when we learn to read it with a God-shaped heart, we see that it is about learning to love God and one another. Really loving. Even the rite of circumcision, the sign of the covenant given to Abraham, is only a signpost to the heart. "Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart," Moses tells them (10:16).<sup>2</sup> God doesn't play favorites or take bribes. God looks after the widows and orphans. God even takes care of the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. God's people are to love strangers in the same way. For the Jews, and hence for us all, life is to be one long training class on loving as God loves.

As Jesus would teach more than a millennia later, true love is lived out, it is practiced – it lies in the doing, not the feeling. Let's take a look at some of the "love-practices" that Moses spells out in the sermon called Deuteronomy.

- The Israelites are to set apart a tithe of all their agricultural production. "The resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake." (Deut. 14:22-29)
- Every seventh year is to be a Sabbath year in which debts are to be forgiven. The people are always to be open-handed with those in need and willing to lend. God cautions them that they are not to get stingy as the Sabbath year approaches when debts will be forgiven. They are always to give liberally and ungrudgingly. (15:1-11)
- Hebrew slaves and indentured servants are to be freed in the Sabbath year and given help toward their new life. (15:12-18)
- Judges are to be appointed. They are to judge fairly and honestly. They are not to play favorites or twist the law. "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue . . ." (16:18-19).
- If the Israelites see their neighbor's livestock wandering away, they are to do something about it, not turn a blind eye. This is about the pro-active caring for others. (22:1-4)

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<sup>2</sup>Circumcision was the ultimate boundary marker between the Jews and non-Jews. Moses wants the Israelites to see that even this marker is meant to point them to the larger of a God-shaped heart.

- They are to lend without interest. If they make a vow, they are to keep it. They can eat the grapes or corn from a neighbor's vines or field – but only what they need on the spot. There is sharing and then there is stealing. (23:19-25)
- If a poor person pledges their cloak as collateral for a loan, the cloak is to be returned to them at sunset so they don't have to be cold at night. A widow's garment is never to be taken in pledge. (24:12, 17)
- The wages of poor and needy workers are to be paid each day. (24:14-15)
- If some of the harvest is accidentally left in the field, it must stay there so it can be picked up by the "alien, the orphan, and the widow." Likewise, some olives are to be left on the trees and grapes on the vines. (24:19-22)

All this shapes for us a concrete image of how we were created to live. It is a way of life and love to which all people are called, even those who have not yet come to know Christ. These laws and teachings are a portrait of a world transformed by justice, mercy, and kindness. It is the world we are to seek now and it is the God-given world to come.

### Making Sense of Deuteronomy

It surprises people to learn that Deuteronomy is the most quoted OT book by the NT writers. The book can seem so foreign to us. Yet, its message is deep and everlasting, helping us to see what it means to live in covenant with God. The phrase, "the structures of covenant life" summarizes very well the focus of the last half of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. God had chosen a people and promised them a land. In these books, God tells his people how they are to live in covenant with him. He tells them how they are to worship him, how they are to organize and administer their society, and how they are to build relationships among themselves. Thus, nearly all aspects of the community's life are touched by God's word: the foods they are to eat, the ways they are to dress, the sacrifices they are to make (and not make!). Though we usually translate the Hebrew word, *Torah*, as "Law," our word "instruction" would be closer to what they meant. The Law was not simply a list of rules for managing an orderly society; rather, the Law showed the Israelites, the chosen people of God, how they were to live in relationship with the LORD, the one true God. The Law also marked the Israelites as God's people, different from all others. The odd dietary laws, keeping the Sabbath, the practice of circumcision, and so on were all membership badges worn by God's people, setting them apart from all the cultures around them. In an important sense, they were the badges of the covenant.

Here are a few things to keep in mind as you read Deuteronomy.

- Though the book contains many laws, it is much more a book of the heart. Look for the spirit of the law, the instruction given by God to Israel. Notice that the book reads much more like a sermon than some sort of legal code.
- In its structure and much of its language, Deuteronomy is a treaty/covenant between a king and his people, in important ways a standard ancient near-eastern treaty. They both have preambles, a reminder of all the things the king has done for his people, laws/regulations, blessings that come from keeping the law, and curses that will flow from breaking the laws. But, of course, Israel's covenant was not with some earthly king, but with God himself, the one true god.
- The Law given by Moses was seen as a delight by the Israelites, not a burden. The Law is God's instruction to Israel on how they are to live in relationship with him. There is one God, one people, one land, one place to worship, and one law.

## READING WITH HEART & MIND

Next week, we begin the stories of Jacob and his sons. These readings are good preparation.

**Monday, Genesis 12:1-9** God puts in motion the rescue plan that will culminate in Jesus.

**Tuesday, Genesis 15** The first covenant with Abraham. He will have a son.

**Wednesday, Genesis 18:1-15** God visits Abraham and Sarah. They will yet have a child!

**Thursday, Genesis 21:1-21** Sarah gives birth to Isaac. Ishmael must leave.

**Friday, Genesis 22** The testing of Abraham. God tells him to sacrifice Isaac!

**Saturday, Genesis 24** Isaac finds a wife, Rebekah. She will bear twins, Esau and Jacob.

## Sermon Notes

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### ***Growing Up Jesus***

***A look at the lives, beliefs, and practices of Jews in Jesus' day***

***A new Something Else series that begins July 20***

What was it like to grow up in Jesus' world? Learning to be better readers of the Bible means learning it to read in full, living color. And that means coming to Scripture with a better appreciation of the historical and cultural context. In the case of the gospels, we need a better handle of what it was like to be a Jew in Jesus' day. In this series, we'll look at a full range of questions that swirl around the lives, beliefs, and practices of first-century Jews. You'll be surprised at how much your understanding of the gospels will be deepened. There will be plenty of surprises along the way!

**Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning**

### ***St. Andrew Author Series***

***Rev. Michael Dowd: Thank God for Evolution***

***Thursday evening, July 17, at 7pm in Wesley Hall***

This promises to be an interesting and perhaps controversial evening. Michael Dowd is an ordained Church of Christ minister and has written a successful book, *Thank God for Evolution*. His website states: "[he is] exploring the reasons why it is now possible to view evolution as a spiritual process; how current science shows that evolution is not meaningless blind chance; and practical methods for using evolutionary insights to achieve greater personal fulfillment. As a Christian minister, Dowd especially tries to address "the concerns that Christians have about evolution, but this book contains insights that will appeal to all people of faith and of no faith."

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. Our loyalties are sometimes pulled in many directions. This study focuses on the conflicting loyalties of flag and cross. The early Christians' loyalties were sometimes tested by Caesar, as they were supposed to visit the temple of Caesar, pay homage to him as a god, and leave a required offering. Many refused and paid the consequences. Yet, Peter still wrote, "Fear God. Honor the emperor" (1 Peter 2:17).

When, if ever, have you struggled with your loyalty to America and your loyalty to God. Do you think that it can be hard for many Christian Americans to acknowledge that there is any tension at all? Why do you think this would be? How can we get better at seeing the genuine tensions that arise from our loyalties, whether it is the tension between flag and cross or the tension between our biological family and our family in Christ? How would you counsel a young Christian trying to resolve some of these tensions?

2. Read over the list of "love-practices" that I culled from Deuteronomy. What are three themes that you find common to these teachings? Which of the teachings would be most difficult for you to follow? Why would the "big" stuff be intermingled with the seemingly "little" stuff? Is the "little" stuff really little? How could we translate these practices into our own lives? You might go down the list one by one and see if you could create a teaching suitable for our world that would flow from these ancient instructions. Be specific . . . Moses certainly was!