

Sunday June 4, 2023

Lesson 1: Stay In Your Lane

Scripture: Deuteronomy 28:1-2,14; Matthew 5: 17-20

Context:

Today we start our summer curriculum, “Inspired By God.” In this first lesson of our first unit, “The Rich Literature of the Bible,” we will look at various genres in the Bible and how the Old Testament connects to the New Testament. Thus, each lesson will contain a scripture passage from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Today we will focus on the theme of covenant and how covenantal law should function in Christian life in the twenty-first century.

The Old Testament passage comes from the book of Deuteronomy. The passage focuses on the establishment of covenant and the ceremony the Israelites go through to prepare for this commitment. In terms of content, all the material points to the good things to come out of the sanctions of covenant, encouraging obedience to the divine instruction by pointing to the good things that grow out of that obedience, and discouraging disobedience by describing its disastrous consequences.¹ This is a theme which starts in chapter twenty-seven as Moses brings about the law and what it does for the Israelite people. In chapter twenty-eight, the focus is less on the act of choosing and is more upon the specifics of what will happen dependent upon Israel’s choice.² Israel hears what will happen as they say yes to God and the goodness of what covenant will bring to the people. God will be faithful and thus invites the people to be faithful as well.

The New Testament passage comes from one of the gospels, the book of Matthew. The context is part of Jesus’ sermon on the mount where he gathers with those who want to hear teachings on the Law and what God asks of them. This section explains his relationship with the Law and also gives us the first clues into his identity as the one who fulfills the obligations of the Law in the Christian tradition.

The central part of the verse comes in verse seventeen with the word *plerosai* which means to fulfill. The use of the word indicates Jesus came to fill those laws both in his practice and also in his expanding the Law into application for the peoples’ lives.³ Jesus goes on to make statements about the Law and how they will not pass away. For the gospel writer Matthew recording these words, the sincerest test of belonging to Jesus is ethical behavior.⁴ And thus the people who follow Jesus must have the rigorous behavior standards and be focused more on devotion to him than the attacks of their opponents. The Law cannot be used a weapon because Jesus fulfilling the Law pushes the initial understanding and demands even more than the Law.

¹ Miller, Patrick D. “Deuteronomy.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 193.

² Ibid.

³ Hare, Douglas R.A. “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 47.

⁴ Ibid., 48-49.

Application

When we think of hot topic buzz words, little do we think of the word covenant. In fact, covenant is far from the list when we consider all the political and social words of the day. It is far more fun and exhilarating to express what we believe or have an opinion about issues rather than to talk about covenant. In fact, covenant seems rather boring. Yet when you look at what the word covenant means, it should raise the hair on our necks and give us goosebumps as we consider how the violation of a covenant of God plays out in life today in the Christian world.

This past year, I had the privilege to teach at Huntingdon College both an Introduction to Old Testament class in the fall and then an Introduction to New Testament class in the spring. Never have I truly seen how important the word covenant is than in teaching students about what God brings to relationship with humanity through the promise of covenant. From the beginning of the Abraham saga to the promised crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, God has constantly told humanity of how the Lord will be faithful unto us. Even when we fail, God will not fail us and constantly invites us to consider our faithfulness to the promises we make to God.

I have come to find the most illustrative example of how to talk about covenant is to compare it to a contract. When I do this, my business major students perk up because this is their lane. A contract is an agreement between two or more parties about something which will be done or given in exchange for a service. If one party violates the agreement, or one cannot fulfill the obligations, then the contract is broken and the relationship ceases to exist. Contracts can be a good thing; they help us hold each other to account and in the business world, they help with efficiency and productivity.

Yet covenant is something completely radical because in an unconditional covenant, like God makes with humanity, even when one party fails, the other does not. There is still the promise of life and love, and there is still grace given even when one party fails. A covenant is riskier business because the odds are one party might be more inclined to break the covenant than the other.

Thus, we see front and center who the weaker party is when it comes with covenant and God today. Humanity is awful with covenant because it demands something of us and often, we do not want anything to cramp our style or force us to submit to a higher power. We like the idea of being consumers, finding a better deal so if we must figure things out, we do not have to think or try or give of ourselves. We like things our way on our terms with our names loud and proud as the ones in charge. We box God in our image and cannot see the power of promises and trust.

For those of us in the Christian church today, covenantal law should be up front and center in how we see ourselves and in how we order life together. Followers of Jesus should be the first to see how breaking covenant is dangerous because when we do it, we may not be zapped with bolts of lightning and honestly everything might seem okay. Yet we come to discover how breaking promises we made to God and to others can end up bringing harm to ourselves, the greater Christian body, and our witness to the world. We are called to stay in our lane, keeping the promises we made to God and letting God sort out the rest.

I will never forget going through the ordination process to become an Elder in the United Methodist Church and the length of time it took to do so. At times, it felt laborious and tedious. There were so many sessions and meetings. You had to cross your t's and dot your i's.

Yet today I am ever so grateful for the journey because it taught me about the power of covenant. In our meetings and writing we would often have to reflect on the tenets of the Christian faith: the Triune God, the significance of the sacraments, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. As we read books and studied scripture in tandem with practicing ministry, I started

noticing God at work in ways I had not noticed before. God was being faithful showing me to trust the journey and to see how God would help me bloom as I learned of the power of promises of saying yes to God. It is one of many reasons I am proud to be a United Methodist Christian as there is a method to how we do life together and I am grateful for how being a United Methodist Elder invited me to consider my vows prayerfully and faithfully before I took them.

Today I wish the church would pay a better job of watching ourselves and the promises we make to God and to the body of Christ. If we promise to serve God in a certain church, then we should do it in the good times and the rougher times. For clergy, when we make vows, we should keep them and in the difficult seasons, remember how God has always been with leaders in struggles in early Israel and the early church. I have seen so much hurt in the past several years because we have forgotten how covenant is not about us or what other people do. Covenant is about God and what Jesus asks of us. He asks for our yes to be yes and our no to be no. He will take care of the rest and as the who comes to fulfill the law, he reminds us there is no greater love than what he gives to us.

Why do you think covenant is counter-cultural to the world we live in today? How is God faithful even when we are not faithful? What promises have you made to God and the church? How can we remember covenant daily? Who are people who model covenant well to you?

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