



# MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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## A PARKING TICKET

Many years ago I had a job giving out parking tickets. Part of my route involved giving out tickets in two-hour-parking areas. One day I was ticketing a car I had ticketed a couple of times before. It was regularly parked outside a particular office. When I gave a ticket the last thing I put on the form was the license plate number. That way, if the person came out before the ticket was completed they could move their car without paying the two-dollar penalty. I was a nice guy. On this particular occasion I had finished writing the ticket, including the license plate number, and was putting it under the windshield wiper. The owner of the car came storming out of her office and rudely asked me not to give her a ticket and she would move the car. I politely explained that once I had completed writing the ticket I was not allowed to take it back; if she had come out even a minute earlier I could have let her move the car. I further explained that she was clearly in violation, and even if she had come out earlier I was within my rights to give her the ticket. She angrily said, "You know, I think you get a buzz out of doing this. I bet you would ticket your own grandmother." I calmly replied, "No, ma'am. My grandmother doesn't drive. But I have ticketed my father five times." At that, she snatched the ticket from her windshield, stormed back into her office, and I never had to give her a ticket again.

This is one of my favorite stories about things that have happened while I was working. Maybe it is because I am surprised at how professionally I kept my demeanor throughout the incident. Probably it is because it was truly funny as it was happening. Nevertheless, there are some lessons we can learn from this incident.

One such lesson is that people may transfer their anger at themselves to some other person who is close at hand. That is why some bars in old western movies show a sign saying, "Please don't shoot the piano player." People who know they have overparked take it out on the parking attendant. In the same way, people who know they have sin in their lives sometimes take things out on the one who points out their sin. It is an occupational hazard for preachers. Jesus knew that this would happen. "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake." (Matt 5:11) Perhaps this is how we are to judge the

world (1 Cor 6:2). The world sees our righteousness, and their consciences are so moved that they try to vilify us instead of emulate us.

A second lesson is that people sometimes make assumptions that may or may not be true, but they often don't want those assumptions verified. This person attributed an action that, if it had been possible, was probably true. But verifying it only exacerbated the problem. As we teach others about God, we need to avoid making these assumptions ourselves. Do we judge that a given person will not respond? Do we think someone is not worth teaching? We may find that a person will not respond to our teaching, but we are still under obligation to teach. "The Lord GOD hath spoken, who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8) James condemns those who make judgements based on assumptions of wealth or poverty. "My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons." (Jas 2:1, read the whole context.)

A third lesson from this story may be that there is a time for repentance, and a time when repentance is no longer possible. Had this lady decided to move her car a few seconds earlier she would not have had to pay the fine. The merciful parking attendant (me) gave her ample chance to make good her violation. My God is more merciful than I am. And yet, even he sets limits on his mercy. "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained." (Acts 17:30-31) "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Cor 6:2)

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# LEGISLATING MORALITY

The old adage says you cannot legislate morality. This was the rallying cry against prohibition. It is now the battle cry of those who want to legalize “victimless” crimes like prostitution, gambling, and drug use. The idea is that you can make laws about what people can or cannot do, but you cannot make laws about what they think. You may make the sale, purchase, and possession of alcoholic beverages illegal, but you cannot stop people from wanting to drink alcohol.

For the most part, this is true. Our laws are generally meant to legislate actions, and let the people think what they will. People are not required to agree with the laws; they are just required to act or restrict action in a certain way. Censorship notwithstanding, people cannot act as the “thought police” because they do not know what others are thinking. They can only judge actions. God, on the other hand, knows our thoughts. He can legislate morality, and has done so.

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant nor his maidservant nor his ox nor his

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If all the commands are stated in “love God,” all the negative ones are in “don’t covet.”

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ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's. (Ex 20:17)

Neither shalt thou desire thy neighbour's wife, neither shalt thou covet thy neighbour's house, his field, or his manservant, or his maidservant, his ox, or his ass, or any thing that is thy neighbour's. (Deut 5:21)

## Legislating thought

These passages from the law given to the Jewish people are designed to restrict thought. The other nine of the Ten Commandments all legislate action. That this commandment concerns the thought and not the action is evident from the other commands.

This command says not to desire. It doesn’t say you can want your neighbor’s wife, but just can’t have her. There is another command for that, the one against adultery. It does not say you can want your neighbor’s car or big-screen television, but just can’t

take them. There is already a command about stealing. When Ahab sought Naboth’s vineyard, the semi-legal execution of Naboth was not the only crime; the desire for the property was forbidden, even if Ahab had not violated the command against murder.

How can God legislate our thoughts? He is the only one in a position to do so, because God’s Spirit is able to know our thoughts.

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

Someone might say, “But we can’t control what we think. How can God hold us liable for an unintended thought?” That is the beauty of what God commanded the Jews. It was not mere thought that God legislated. He knew we see and hear things that negatively affect our thoughts. That is why the command did not cover all thought. His command dealt with only those thoughts that linger and grow. There is a difference between casual thought and covetousness. It is the difference between “nice car” and “I have to have that car.”

Covetousness is more than an occasional thought. It is more than just a want. It is a desire. It is a thought that remains in the mind long enough to encourage action.

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. (Matt 5:21-22)

## First and Last

Perhaps there is a reason that this was the last of the Ten Commandments. Hillel was once asked to teach the entire law while standing on one foot. He replied, “And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. All the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.” (Compare Matthew 22:35-40) If all the commands are stated in “love God,” all the other negative commandments really come down to this one. “Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.” (Jas 4:2) Perhaps God gave this last because it was a summary judgement, in both the legal and practical senses.

There may be another reason to conclude the Ten with this commandment. It may be last because it brings the Ten full circle, back to the first. This commandment directly relates to the first.

I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. (Ex 20:2-3)

Covetousness is a symptom. Underlying covetousness is a lack of trust in God. A lack of trust in God is a lack of faith in God. We desire, and act on those desires, because we do not really believe that God will give us what we need or want. One who steals a man's car, or wife, does so because he does not believe God will give him those things. As James said (quoted above), he doesn't have because he doesn't ask. He doesn't ask because he doesn't trust God to answer. James makes a good case for the idea that God would bless us even more abundantly, if we would only ask.

Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matt 6:31-33)

Do we believe God when he says, "I am the Lord?" If he is who he says he is, then he can provide anything we want or need. If he "sendeth rain on the just and the unjust" (Matt 5:45), how much more will he do for those who trust in him! To covet, and especially to act upon that desire, tells God that we don't accept his rain, and don't expect anything else.

## Keeping up

People sometimes try to split hairs. We try to justify our own actions by saying we really don't covet. Some say, "You shouldn't covet your neighbor's new boat, but there is nothing wrong in wanting one just like it." That is a very fine, legalistic distinction. It may certainly ease one's mind about certain desires, but it may not be true.

There is an attitude called "keeping up with the Joneses." (The phrase comes from a comic strip from the early part of last century, in which the title characters, incidentally, never actually made an appearance.) The modern equivalent of the phrase is "keeping up with the Gateses," in reference to computer mogul Bill Gates. The principal symptom of this attitude is an attempt to live like the neighbors (or a celebrity) who appear to have higher social standing and wealth than the person trying to keep up with them. The result of the syndrome is that people live beyond their means, often going into serious debt, in

order to appear to have more than they really do. (See "A House in La Jolla" in the November, 2004 Minutes With Messiah for an example of such a person.)

When God told the Jews "thou shalt not covet," he may have been concerned with more than just preventing them from breaking other laws. He may actually have been legislating an attitude.

When the command says not to covet your neighbor's wife, or ox, or ass, or his servants, it may be that God is saying not to covet being like your neighbor. Don't just refrain from coveting his specific herd of oxen. Refrain from coveting having a similar herd. Don't just keep your hands off his wife and servants. Don't even desire to have such a wife or that many servants. Because the attitude of keeping up causes us to live beyond what we reasonably can afford, it is another sign of lack of trust in God. Perhaps we are where we are financially because God knows that we could not handle more. Perhaps we are where we are financially because we have not been able to handle more. In either case, wanting to be someone we are

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not is telling God that we don't trust him to know what is best for us.

When I was young I watched "Tennessee Tuxedo" cartoons. One recurring segment was "Tudor Turtle." Tudor (or Tooter) always wanted to be someone else, and was given the chance to be by his friend, Mr. Wizard the Lizard. Inevitably something would go wrong and Mr. Wizard would save the unfortunate turtle at the last minute. Then he would always give him this (rarely heeded) advice: "Be chust vhat you is, and not vhat you is not, for folks that does this is the happiest lot." Maybe Mr. Wizard was familiar with Exodus 20. If we are satisfied with where we are, we will not covet what is our neighbor's.

We common folk may not be able to legislate morality. We have such a problem with morality ourselves, how could we dare to impose it on others? Human morality, moreover, is such a changeable thing. One person's morality may not be the same as another's. On our own we cannot establish a moral standard for ourselves to keep, much less others. On the other hand, God is the ultimate arbiter of morality. He is, by definition, goodness. Because he is morality, he has the right to legislate it. The Tenth Commandment shows that he is willing to do so. He can make such laws, because he can enforce them.

# OF, NOT IN

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. (Eph 2:8-9)

There are those who will tell us that this verse means that man has no part in his own salvation. Not only does God choose ahead of time whom he will save, unless he gives you faith you cannot believe. Man, without God specifically gifting him with faith, can never know God on his own. But is that what this passage really says? Whose faith brings salvation, anyway?

Paul does not explain faith in detail to the Ephesians. Either they had received instruction about saving faith from Paul's own lips, or they had another source of such teaching. One such source might have been the letter to the Galatians. In that letter Paul explains more about saving faith, which might shed some light on this passage.

Some people might wonder why the question was asked, above, about whose faith brings salvation. Of course, they would say, it is our faith. After all, we are the ones who have to believe in Jesus. Whether God grants us the faith or we are able to develop it on our own, is it not our own faith that saves us? According to Paul, apparently not. In Paul's explanation to the Galatians about saving faith, all but one time he talks about the faith *of* Jesus. Only twice does he mention faith *in* Jesus.

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. (Gal 2:16)

Paul clearly states that those who believe in

Jesus are justified, but not by their faith. Justification, the act of declaring a person to be righteous, comes by the faith of Christ Jesus. What does this mean? Jesus trusted God. That trust enabled him to die for mankind. "But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." (Php 2:7-8)

It is true that even in this passage we have faith in Jesus. Paul later tells the Galatians that faith in Jesus makes us God's children (Gal 3:26). It is that by which we have access to the justification that is by the faith of Jesus.

It is strange that people will teach that we are saved by faith only, and yet ignore Paul's description of what is involved in faith in Jesus. "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal 3:26-27) The "for" in verse 27 inextricably ties immersion to faith. Paul is saying that immersion into Christ *is* faith in Christ. Just as Jacob "became" Esau to his father by putting on Esau's clothes and some hair, so we become Christ, in a sense, by putting on Christ through immersion in water. God looks at us and sees his son. And because of the faith of his son, he considers us to be righteous.

Based on the letter to the Galatians we can reread the passage from Ephesians. By grace are you saved by faith, and not your faith but Christ's. His faith was God's gift to us.

In Galatians 3 Paul talks about the faith of Abraham being imputed to him as righteousness. In contrast, he says that the faith of Jesus is imputed to us as righteousness.

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