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# MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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## ***IN DEFENSE OF LIGHT***

If someone threatened your whole lifestyle, what would you do? If you are an American and someone tried to take away your basic freedoms, would you let them? I knew a man in California who taught a motorcycle safety class. He was staunchly opposed to motorcycle helmet laws. He would teach people to wear them, but opposed legally forcing them to do so. Personal liberty was so ingrained into him that he was willing to actively oppose any legislation that would limit personal liberty, no matter how much it might be in the best interest of public good.

Centuries ago a certain group of people were faced with just such a dilemma. The Jewish people had a long history of following the laws handed down from Moses through the rabbis. They did not always keep them perfectly, and God punished them when they did not. But ever since their return from Babylon almost 400 years prior, the Jewish people had, as a nation, kept the Law of Moses. When Alexander the Great conquered Palestine, he began overlaying Greek customs on the Jewish way of life. After he died, his generals and their descendants (the Ptolemys of Egypt and the Seleucids of Syria) fought for control of Israel. By the second century BCE, the Seleucids had control, and stepped up the Hellenization of the Jewish people. Laws were passed forbidding circumcision or worship in the Temple. The altar in Jerusalem was profaned. The Jewish way of life became virtually illegal.

There were two principal reactions to the spiritual genocide wrought by the Seleucids, primarily under Antiochus IV Epiphanes. One group of people, mostly of the upper classes, saw this as a way to consolidate their power and increase their wealth. They caved in to the new laws, even to the point of participating in the Greek games, which necessitated surgery to reverse their circumcisions. Some of these people bribed Antiochus into removing the proper High Priest and installing his brother instead. The Sabbaths and the holidays were abolished and the new High Priest ended the daily sacrifice. Greed was about to destroy the Jewish people, when even the Babylonian captivity could not.

The opposite reaction swung in defense of Judaism. Led by the Hasmonean priestly family, which became known as the Maccabees, the common Jewish

people revolted against their new leaders. This began when Matthias the Hasmonean killed a Jew who was about to sacrifice to a Greek idol. Matthias' son, Judah, soon took over the revolt and led a series of guerrilla attacks against Hellenized Jews, and eventually against the Seleucid army. The Maccabees inexplicably won the war. They fought for their way of life, and they were victorious. In the aftermath of the war they rededicated the Temple, an event celebrated every year in the holiday of Chanukah. (Chanukah begins the evening of December 15 in 2014.)

Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Matt 5:15-16)

These words were spoken almost two hundred years later. And almost that same amount of time after these words were spoken, the tradition was recorded that during the rededication of the Temple the priests only found enough oil for lighting the lamps one day, but that little bit miraculously lasted seven days. Thus the lighting of the menorah became a part of the Chanukah tradition. In the light (no pun intended) of what Jesus said about shining in the world, it is appropriate that this became part of Chanukah. The whole revolt against the Seleucid rule was an effort to let God's light shine in the world.

A part of the tradition of the Chanukah menorah is that it must be put in a window where all who pass can see it. The light must not be hidden, under a bushel or behind a curtain. Chanukah, then, is all about standing up for your faith, even when it might be unpopular. It is about letting your light shine, so that others will see and praise God.

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# 632111

Everyone likes it simple. The fewer the rules, the better. When I was in high school I participated in my only foray into the political arena. I was the press secretary for an organization called "Students for a Constitutional Convention." At the time, New Mexico's constitution had grown large and cumbersome because a lot of what should have been separate laws had been added as amendments to the state constitution. Our purpose was to call upon the legislature to call a convention to write a new, simpler constitution. After all, the United States Constitution consisted of only 4,453 words (including signatures), not counting the few amendments thereto; whereas the state constitution had grown to a volume of hundreds of pages. (We were successful in getting a new, shorter constitution written for the state.)

On 19 November 1863, a ceremony was held to dedicate the new cemetery at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where many who died in a three-day battle four months prior were buried. The principal speaker at that ceremony was one of the most famous orators of the day, Edward

## Following God pretty well covers a man from head to toe.

Everett. He spoke, as was the custom, for almost two hours, in a speech consisting of approximately 13,607 words. Few people, even those living shortly thereafter, remember what he said. He was followed by the President of the United States, Mr. Abraham Lincoln, who spoke just a few minutes in what, at approximately 268 words, is one of the most famous speeches in history.

In the same way, people want the "Reader's Digest" version of God's commandments. People asked Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment?" (Mk 12:28) They were following an established history of trying to reduce the basic principles of God's law down to one statement.

Rabbi Simlai said, "Six hundred and thirteen commandments were given to Moses, 365 negative commandments, answering to the number of the days of the year, and 248 positive commandments, answering to the number of a man's members. Then David came and reduced them to eleven [Psalm 15]. Then came Isaiah, and reduced them to six [Isaiah 33:15]. Then came Micah, and reduced them to three [Micah 6:8]. Then Isaiah came again, and reduced them to two, as it is said, 'Keep ye judgment and do

righteousness.' Then came Amos, and reduced them to one, as it is said, 'Seek me and live.' Or one may say, then came Habakkuk [2:4], and reduced them to one, as it is said, 'The righteous shall live by his faith.'" (Talmud, Makkot 23b-24a)

We don't need to look at all 613 *mitzvot* (commands), especially since even the rabbis cannot agree on all of them; just that there are 613. We don't even need to look at David's eleven in detail, although we can state what they are. After listing David's eleven basic principles, we may, however, look at those other reductions mentioned by Rabbi Simlai. Psalm 15, as mentioned, reads:

LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart. He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour. In whose eyes a vile person is contemned; but he honoureth them that fear the LORD. He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not. He that putteth not out his money to usury, nor taketh reward against the innocent. He that doeth these things shall never be moved.

### Six commands

"He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shaketh his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood, and shutteth his eyes from seeing evil" (Isa 33:15)

Isaiah lists six actions involved in following God. Five of those six involve body parts; the other involves the will. The feet, hands, mouth, ears, and eyes, and even the mind. That pretty well covers a man from head to toe.

In English it seems the first two are pretty much the same—walk righteously and speak uprightly. In truth they are quite similar. Isaiah recognized a difference, however. A man is to walk righteously, which may also be translated justly. This is a word that is also used to mean charity, but obligatory rather than voluntary giving. Walking in the right, just, and caring way is important to dwelling on high. But how does that differ from speaking uprightly? In that phrase, the adverb comes from a word meaning level or even. Justice should be administered evenly, but it is used rather to describe speech. While one is to walk in justice, his speech should be measured and balanced. Perhaps these two phrases equate to the old saying, "walk the walk and talk the talk." What we teach should be the same as how we live. Jesus warned that some of the Pharisees did not live by this rule. "All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe

and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not." (Matt 23:3)

The next two are also very similar. Despising gain through oppression and keeping one's hands from bribes relate to gaining wealth at the expense of others. Gain well gotten and well used is valuable. Obtaining what you want through oppression or bribery is not. Samuel described the taking of bribes as blinding the eyes. (1 Sam 12:3) When a bribe enters, justice flees. One cannot walk justly while taking a bribe. Gaining money through oppression, though, is being just as blind to God. Perhaps the best-known example of this is found in 1 Kings 21. Ahab, King of Israel, desired a piece of land to which he had no right. To obtain the land, he had Naboth, its owner, killed. Then he could appropriate the land to the crown. And what was prophesied against Ahab because of this? Only that he would die, his descendants would die young, and his wife would be eaten by the dogs. Such is what is in store for the one who does not despise gain through oppression.

Finally, Isaiah says the one who would be lifted up should stop his ears from hearing of blood and his eyes from seeing evil. We have to be careful what we let into our minds, either by hearing or seeing. Stephen Sondheim wrote, in *Into the Woods*, "Careful the things you say, Children will listen. Careful the things you do, Children will see." Well, that is true of more than just children. What we hear and see affects us more than we suspect. There is a reason violent video games and pornography are not rated for children's consumption. Perhaps they should be removed from adults as well. Hearing of blood and seeing evil. It does affect us.

## Three commands

"He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Mic 6:8)

Micah includes the justice/righteousness that Isaiah mentioned. He adds two other attributes, however. He says that justice must be tempered with mercy and humility. Everyone wants justice for the other person, but most would rather have mercy extended to them. God is a just God, but he is also merciful. He was able to meet the demands of justice, while extending mercy. Jesus became the sacrifice for sin, who had no sin, so that God could be merciful to those who accept him.

We want justice, tempered with mercy. But we also want it dispensed with humility. We don't want a judge who is so proud that he does not identify with us. Such a judge is less likely to deal mercifully. Again we look to God through Jesus. "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." (Heb 4:15) Jesus humbled himself, and so became one who could interpret us to the judge.

## Two commands

"Keep ye judgment and do righteousness." (Isa 56:1)

Isaiah had a thing about justice and righteousness. Perhaps that had to do with the society in which he lived. Nevertheless, he condenses his six things down to the first two that he had mentioned. After all, these are the foundations of how we deal with other people. Taking bribes and hearing of blood all hark back to these two principles. If we deal justly and charitably with others, we will get along better with others. More importantly, if we do so God will deal with us in the same way.

## One command

"Seek me and live." (Amos 5:4)

"The righteous shall live by his faith." (Hab 2:4)

"And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and

# What we hear and see affects us more than we suspect.

with all thy strength: this is the first commandment." (Mk 12:30)

It seems the simpler we make things, the harder it gets. Reducing God's will down to a single statement makes life harder, not easier. It is easy to keep 613 laws, especially when many of them deal with sacrifices that are no longer made. It is much harder to understand all the ramifications of a simple statement.

Seek God. Easy to say; not so easy to do. God is not far from us, but he is so vast that we cannot see the forest for the trees. Just when we think we have him pigeonholed, we find another aspect that takes us out of our comfort zone.

The just shall live by his trusting. But we find it hard to trust even God. We want to do things our way. Even little children go through a phase of "I do self." We believe we will trust God with the big things, but if we don't trust him with the little things, how can we do so with the big things? Trust is not easy.

And love? Loving God with everything we have is a big order. All our heart, soul, mind, and money? Wait a minute. I can handle the first three, but my money is mine, isn't it? To seek what is best for God rather than ourselves goes against the concept of self-preservation. It is un-American. But that is what Jesus said was the distillation of the law.

We like things simple. But, oh, if it were really that simple.

# **WHAT'S IN YOUR CLOSET?**

When I was growing up, a “walk-in” closet was only found in expensive houses. What we had could better be described as “reach-in.” My two brothers and I shared a closet that was about half the width of the room. That was about the space I take up for myself today. In addition to my three suits I have multiple dress shirts, almost a dozen shirts for events at work, and a six-month supply of t-shirts from places I stopped overseas, Special Olympics, the blood bank, events at church, and some that I just like. That doesn’t count the ones I have culled because they are worn out, no longer stylish, or duplicates. And my closet is hardly unusual in America today.

I once rented a house with no closets. It was built in an era when all your clothing was folded into one piece of furniture variously known as a wardrobe, chiffarobe, or armoire. Few people would look at such a house today. What is now common was once a sign of wealth.

In Bible times, few people had more than a couple of sets of clothing. In Genesis 27:15, Rebekah took “goodly raiment” of her son Esau and put them on Jacob. An equally accurate translation would be “precious clothing.” It may be that this set of best clothing was in the house because Esau was wearing his only other, working, clothes to go hunting in. This might be the ancient version of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “Sunday best” clothing.

There were times that payment was to be made in clothing. Samson got cheated, and owed thirty undergarments and thirty changes of garments. Joseph gave his younger brother five changes, as opposed to one each to his other brothers. When Naaman was seeking a cure for his leprosy, the King of Syria sent ten changes of

clothing with him as payment for the cure; and after Elisha refused payment, his servant Gehazi settled for asking only two changes when he went out to cheat Naaman.

Today thirty changes of clothing might be considered a lot, but ten or two might be considered a paltry sum. Consider, though, what it took to create one set of clothing. After a sheep was sheared, somebody had to card, sort, and spin the wool. Then it had to be woven and, perhaps, dyed. Finally, it had to be sewn by hand into a garment. Even three hundred years ago in Santa Fe, people paid huge sums to send to Mexico City for the latest fashions, a trip that took six months each way. Meanwhile, they wore clothing made of tanned hides because that was quicker, and lasted longer than cotton or woolen clothing. It wasn’t until the Industrial Revolution that the cost of clothing began to go down.

Ten changes of clothing. Most Americans have at least that many in their closet. Many have many more. But there are many who might feel lucky to have two changes. There are many people on the streets of our cities that would be happy to have Esau’s “best garment,” or any extra garment for that matter. This is not to say that everyone should just empty their closets; that is a choice each person has to make. Some might point out that Samson killed thirty men just to get their clothes. We shouldn’t go so far as to imagine that we are killing people by possessing clothing. On the other hand, if the cost of one change of clothing is a life, how much more should we be grateful that we have ten, or thirty, or more changes of clothing. If having two changes is being abundantly blessed, how blessed are we?

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