



Minutes With Messiah

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BORN TO DIE

Every one of us who has been born, and that is all of us, eventually understands that we are likely going to die. It is a fact of life. The moment we are born we start dying. Imagine, then being born knowing that your whole purpose is to die. Most of us wonder at some time what we are doing here. What is the purpose of my life? We don't often think that the purpose of our life is just to get us to our death. But for Jesus that was his purpose. He wasn't born to live; he was born to die.

That is not to say, however, that the life of Jesus had no meaning. If that were true, then he could have lived sin-free for about twenty years and died without teaching or healing. Instead, he felt the need to teach his disciples, so that they could teach others after his death. If the gospels are any indication, though, much of this teaching came in the last few weeks of his life. Almost two-thirds of the gospel of John takes place in the final week before the resurrection. Over half the book of Matthew follows Matthew 16:21,

From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.

It seems that Jesus felt that only one subject was the most important for him to teach about. That was his death.

Healing was an important part of his ministry. But that was because it established who he was; it let people know of his authority. In spite of what many would have us believe today, social benefit was only a minor part of Jesus' teaching. The bulk of his teaching was about "the kingdom of God," whether that was the church (most of the time) or heaven (occasionally).

Some today ask, "Shouldn't we take care of the homeless and poor in America before sending aid abroad?" They imply that not helping these people is a sign of weak Christianity. (And that ignores that they are talking government aid, and that there are poor people all over the world.) An example of what Jesus taught shows their (sometimes intentional) ignorance of the priorities Jesus held. Three of the gospel writers tell this one story. (Matt 26; Mark 14; John 12)

Shortly before the Passover when Jesus was to die, a woman, identified by John as Mary the sister of Lazarus, came to Jesus during a dinner. She opened an expensive container of ointment and poured it on Jesus. The disciples, particularly Judas Iscariot, objected that the ointment could have been sold for a large sum and distributed to the poor. (Judas considered himself one of the poor that the money should go to, but the other disciples also objected to her actions.)

And Jesus said, Let her alone; why trouble ye her? she hath wrought a good work on me. For ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but me ye have not always. She hath done what she could: she is come aforehand to anoint my body to the burying. (Mk 14:6-8)

Helping the poor would have been a good thing, but it was not a priority. His death was a priority. They could help the poor later, because they would still be there. Jesus taught that his death was more important than any teaching about helping the helpless.

Jesus was not born to teach; he was not born to do miracles. He was born to die. The reason this is true is that all the miracles in the world cannot save anyone. All the teaching of Jesus, his immediate disciples, and every Christian since cannot save except in that the teaching is about the death, burial and resurrection. If social benefit could save us, then God could have stopped with the prophet Amos. He taught the importance of good works. If teaching could save, then the prophets would have been sufficient for us. It is the death of sinless Jesus that saves. It was his resurrection that confirms his authority to save. Of all the people ever born, Jesus was the one who was born to die.

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ARE THEY THE SAME?

The longest-running franchise on television is *Law and Order*. Fans debate which of the various series is better (although the original is clearly the winner). One thing fans don't often debate is why the name is paired like it is. Yes, the original series used the pairing to divide the hour-long show into two parts: Law, where the crime was committed and a defendant was arrested; and Order, where the trial was held. But that doesn't answer why those two terms were paired in the first place.

The law is full of these doublets (and an occasional triplet) that sound like they are essentially the same term. Common examples include: cease and desist, aid and abet, hue and cry, due and payable, full faith and credit, null and void, and lewd and lascivious. Many people have executed a "last will and testament." Even the common wedding vows include "to have and to hold, from this day forth and forevermore." That is a double doublet. Where did these pairings come from? In many cases they are combinations of English/German and French or Latin terms. Centuries ago, when England was a land of two languages (Saxon English and French), or even earlier when the Germans dominated the Holy Roman Empire which spoke Latin, legal documents

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included both terms to make the meaning clear to all concerned. After all, if you spoke one language and the opponent spoke another, it might make it easier to understand that to abet was the same as to aid. Over time these legal pairings continued, even though they now constitute a separate language known as Legalese.

The Bible is full of pairings and triplets as well. In some cases, though, this is because the Hebrews did not use rhyme in poetry, but rather parallelism. They would say the same thing in two or more ways for emphasis. An example might be 1 Kings 8:58.

That he may incline our hearts unto him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, and his statutes, and his judgments, which he commanded our fathers.

To the English mind, there is little difference between commandments, statutes, and judgements. There may be shades of meaning, but they all seem the same. But are they?

Commandments

When we think of commandments in the Bible, what first comes to mind are the Ten Commandments. It is possible, in some cases, that the word might be limited to those. Thus the difference between commandments and the other two terms would be that you have the Ten, and everything else. This would lend a special holiness to these commandments that most Christians and many Jews might not be willing to give. Is it more important to refrain from perjury than it is to provide for widows and orphans? Are Christians still obligated under the Ten Commandments, *per se*, and therefore obligated to observe a day of rest on Saturday?

Even most rabbis do not limit the commandments to the Ten. The Hebrew word used here is *mitzvot* (plural of *mitzvah*). The rabbis say there are 613 of these commandments, although some rabbis differ on what should be on the list and what should not. Today you are likely to hear a Jew refuse payment for a service with the phrase, "it is a *mitzvah*," meaning it was done as a good deed rather than an obligation for which one would expect payment. Thus a commandment is something God expects man to do because it is the godly or right thing to do.

Others, based on Leviticus 4:13, say a commandment is a prohibition, a "thou shalt not." That verse talks about "commandments which ought not to be done." This seems, though, an extreme interpretation not borne out in scripture. The verse is usually translated without a comma, which would then make this limitation obvious. "Commandments, which ought not to be done" would explain commandments, but without the comma it is to be understood as limiting a portion of the whole set of commandments. Scripture refers to "the Ten" as all being commandments, and yet two of these are things that must be done rather than not done.

One other interpretation is that a command is not legislative in the same sense as a statute or a judgement. It is similar to the distinction between illegal and unlawful. A law says not to commit murder, so to do so is illegal. Another law says to cross a street at an intersection, so jaywalking is unlawful (not following the law) but not illegal (expressly prohibited by the law). If your mother tells you to be home by 10 p.m. that is a command, but if the city has imposed a 10 p.m. curfew that is a statute. If a

person found guilty of a crime is allowed to go to work, but must be in his residence between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., that is a judgement.

Perhaps the easiest way to look at the term *mitzvot* is to view it as an overall term, with the other two in the verse falling under its umbrella. All of God's commands are to be kept, and to do that we have to keep his statutes and his judgements.

Statutes

What is a *choq* (roughly pronounced coke)? That is the Hebrew word translated statutes. How does it differ from a command or a judgement? Even the rabbis have trouble with that question.

Generally speaking, interpreters of Hebrew determine a statute to be a law of God for which there is no clear or easily understood meaning. We generally understand the reasoning behind the prohibition against murder. God specifically explains the reason for Sabbath observance for the Jewish people. But what is the reason behind the law of the red heifer?

Numbers 19 specifies that an unblemished red heifer was to be slaughtered before the high priest. The high priest was to sprinkle part of the blood before the tabernacle seven times. Then the heifer was to be burned along with cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet stuff. The ashes were to be collected. Anybody who touched a dead human body had to be cleansed by being sprinkled with water containing these ashes on the third and seventh day after contacting the corpse.

This was the law because God said it was the law. Why was it the law? Nobody can give a reasonable explanation. Even Christians who can usually relate sacrifices and rituals to the death of the Messiah have difficulty explaining this law.

Looked at it in this way, we can relate to the *chukkim*. What child hasn't heard, when asking why they should or should not do something, "because I said so?" This shuts down all argument. The parent is saying they don't have to explain the reason to the child. The parent may have a perfectly good and logical reason for the command or prohibition. They may understand the harm or benefit that could eventually result, but the child isn't ready to hear the reason. "Why do I have to take math; I won't use half of this stuff in my life?" It would do little good to reply, "Because it is teaching you how to think in an orderly way." It is easier to say, "Because you have to." Sometimes God knows why he tells us to do something, but we aren't ready to understand the why.

Judgments

Justice separates anarchy from civilization. Without justice there are no limits on what people can do to each other. The word "judgments" (*mishpatim* in Hebrew) in the verse in question is sometimes elsewhere

translated "justice." If the statutes are those laws that we cannot easily understand the reason for them, the judgments are those that can be understood, because many of them have the explanation built in.

"Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee." (Ex 20:12) "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image ... for I the LORD am a jealous God." (Ex 20:4-5) We can understand that murder, theft, and covetousness are violations of human rights and decency.

Judgments, though, may be much more than this. They are justice, what is right because it is inherently right. Judgments include not only the crime but also the sentence. Whoever sheds a man's blood, by a man his blood will be shed. The sentence may be expressly stated or merely implied, but it is clear that God will execute a sentence for disobedience.

Judgments, or justice, demand equal treatment for all. "Ye shall have one manner of law [*mishpat*], as well

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for the stranger, as for one of your own country: for I am the LORD your God." (Lev 24:22)

The basis for justice, of course, is that God is just. While God's justice may be tempered with mercy, God cannot be anything but just. Failure in that attribute would be to acknowledge and encourage sin. That would make him less than God. It is what, according to some proves the existence of God and disproves the "survival of the fittest" form of evolutionary theory. The latter says that I must do what is best for me, even if it is unjust toward another. Sometimes I might understand that to let someone who offends me live could ultimately be in my self-interest. Sometimes I might not understand that, and murder or vengeance appears to be right. But because God is just, even those who do not believe in him understand that some things are wrong, regardless of self-interest.

Commandments, statutes, judgments. It may be that these are parallel terms used just for emphasis. It may be that commandments represent the executive, statutes represent the legislative, and judgments represent the judicial in a triune understanding of God that is reflected in the United States Constitution. In any case, walking in these three attributes reflects our inclination to follow God. Otherwise we have anarchy, and each of us must watch his own back. I'd rather have God watch mine.

LUCKY CHARMS

Amulet: an ornament or small piece of jewelry thought to give protection against evil, danger, or disease. A lucky charm or talisman.

Ancient Egyptian royals who had died went through an elaborate ceremony of mummification. The procedure took forty days for removing the moisture, usually using natron as a desiccant. Then the body was wrapped in linen, which could take another two weeks. Included among the linen wrappings were several amulets of gold. Among the most common were the heart scarab (to protect the heart), the “two finger” amulet places where the incision was made to remove the inner organs, the Isis knot (to give the deceased breath again), and the Wadjet eye (“eye of Horus”; for healing and protection). These amulets were intended to protect the deceased in the afterworld, but ultimately led to the desecration of their bodies. Because grave robbers (and Egyptologists of the 1800s AD) knew that these gold ornaments could be found in the wrappings, the mummies became targets of greed. Grave robbing was big business in Egypt even into the twentieth century. The purpose of the amulets actually backfired on the wearer.

Many societies use amulets to ward off sickness or danger. The Ghost Dancers of the Paiute and Lakota wore “bullet shirts” that would supposedly protect them against soldiers’ bullets. Several variations of Buddhist ritual use amulets. Jewish phylacteries were never intended to be charms, but Jewish mystics quickly adapted them to that purpose. Even among Christians we find the Saint Christopher medal, relics, wearing a cross, and

forwarding certain e-mails or Facebook posts. Some Christians decry the use of these amulets, but would unwittingly replace them with their own amulet.

One popular song says, “When you don’t know what to say, just say Jesus.” This expresses the belief of many Christians in Jesus as an amulet. If Jesus is the son of God (which he is), then surely his name possesses a certain power. Do you have to believe in Jesus? No, you just have to believe that using his name will bring you protection or healing. If you get in trouble, just say, “Help me, Lord Jesus.” You might need to have at least a little faith that he will do so, or maybe not.

Even in early church history we find that some people thought Jesus was merely an amulet. Paul experienced some of these people in Ephesus.

Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth. (Acts 19:13)

Among these were seven sons of a high priest named Skeva (the left-handed). When they tried to expel a certain evil spirit in this way, the man with the spirit beat them up, saying “I know Jesus, and I know Paul, but who are you?” Their attempt at using Jesus as an amulet backfired on them, much as the Egyptian amulets turned on their users.

The name of Jesus has power. Prayer has power. There is nothing wrong with trusting in that power. That trust, however, needs to be constant rather than intermittent. Otherwise Jesus becomes just an ornament.

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