

**Sermon for Sunday, June 17, 2012**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Caring for Society**  
**Deut 4:4-8, Matt 5:13-16, 1 Peter 2:13-14, 17**

*Deut 4:4 ...but all of you who held fast to the LORD your God are still alive today .5 See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. 6 Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." 7 What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? 8 And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?*

*Matt 5:13 You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. 14 You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

*1 Peter 2:13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.... 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.*

Our series is "Caring for" and most weeks the topics are obvious: caring for our mind, body, emotions and neighbors. But caring for our society? That sounds paternalistic. Does "society" want our care? No one minds if we take care of ourselves, but who wants our values and programs?

Yet there is something about the church and something about Americans that make us aim high, for something grand. The Christian believes Jesus is the Light of the world. The Bible says the gospel of Jesus, King and Redeemer, should go to the end of the earth.

Americans sometimes have a similar view of their nation. The name for it is "American Exceptionalism." Exceptionalism means we think we're different from other nations – Netherlands, Brazil, Malaysia, Hungary. We are a light to the world. Some say we're light as a Christian nation. Others say we are the source of democracy or the prosperity that comes from a free society and technical prowess.

Recall the vision of John Winthrop, the Puritan who helped found the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Before the pilgrims left their ship, he preached this: "Consider that we shall be as a city set on hill... the eyes of all people are upon us."

And Woodrow Wilson said, "The mighty task before us is to make the United States a mighty Christian nation, and to Christianize the world." Then the Stars and Stripes could become "the flag, not only of America, but of humanity."

But these high aspirations raise doubts. Historians agree that Woodrow Wilson's projects failed badly. Winthrop had doubts too. His full statement: Consider that we shall be as a city set on a hill... so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work... we shall be [scorned] through the world.

George Washington also hoped that America could be exceptional. In his farewell address, he summoned Americans to a life of good faith, justice, "peace, and harmony with all." He called it an "experiment... recommended by every sentiment which ennobles human nature" but asked, "Alas, is it rendered impossible by our 'vices'?" Even as he expressed his hopes, he doubted them.

We understand the mixture, in both Winthrop and Washington, of this blend of high aspiration and doubt. "It would be great... But can we pull it off?"

In the main, the hopes of Winthrop are long forgotten. Most Americans might still call themselves Christians, but not many want a Christian nation. We can give thanks that many of our laws are consistent with biblical principles. God gave Israel three principal leaders - prophet, priest and king. They either worked together or corrected each other. America's government looks a little like that. Congress, the presidency and executive, and the courts can collaborate or correct and limit each other. Both forms of government recognize that it's dangerous to concentrate power because people are prone to sin.

Yet we are attracted to the idea that we can be a light and with good reason. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." Paul told Titus: "In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity... so that those who oppose you may... have nothing bad to say about us" (Titus 2:7-8, New International Version (NIV)). In fact, all disciples should live faithfully "so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior" (Titus 2:10, English Standard Version (ESV)). Jesus *is* Savior; how can we beautify that?

We adorn the gospel. When I was a teenager, a missionary stayed at our house for five days. My mother was so excited because she dearly loved this woman. When she arrived I felt that her features were so plain that it was almost hard to look at her. Five days later, I knew her, loved her, and felt that her face had changed in those five days. She was almost pretty because her life beautified her.

So we beautify the gospel and shed its light in the world. But what kind of influence should we have on society? Should we work to change governmental and corporate structures? How might we achieve it? Is there a program? Should we lead reform movements, start programs and organizations? Pass laws?

But people say we can't legislate morality. Maybe we should keep it simple – love the people around us and let the Lord do what he wills with it.

Of course, we can do both – work in public and with people right before us. We can see this in the Old Testament and New Testament. In the Old Testament, God's people lived as a covenantal nation, under God's law. God's good law transformed society. In the New Testament, believers are scattered. We are a "holy nation," but a nation without borders or armies. Peter: we are "scattered... aliens and exiles among the nations" (1 Pet. 1:2, 2:9-11).

## **1. Faith and society in the Old Testament – a model for the world**

Balaam said of Israel, "I see a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations" (Num 23:9). That doesn't mean Israel was different in every way. Israel lived at the crossroads of Egyptian and Babylonian cultures. Naturally, their food, clothing, shelter, work was similar to nearby nations. They ate hamburgers and drank Coke like everybody else.

Actually the law changed some elements of Israel's culture - food and clothes changed somewhat. Israel shared institutions like marriage – and polygamy and slavery. Polygamy was far less common in Israel and the Bible shows that it didn't work. Jacob was a miserable bigamist and Solomon's polygamy ruined him.

**Slaves** were everywhere in the ancient world; there were some in Israel. Slavery lasted a lifetime in the nations. In Israel it lasted six years. Israel's slaves had status, rights and protections unheard of elsewhere. They were part of the religious life of Israel. They worshipped, celebrated Passover, rested on the Sabbath. Above all, the civil law protected them. In the other nations no law regulated how a master treated his slave. The slave was his property. One might as well regulate how a person sleeps in his own bed and eats his own bread.

But Israel's law said that if a master beat and injured his slave or knocked out a tooth, the slave must be avenged – and set free (Ex 21:26-27). In Israel a slave is human, not subhuman or half-human. He has dignity in body and soul.

So Old Testament law virtually neutralized slavery as an institution and sowed the seeds of its radical rejection in much later Christian thinking. It was radical, not revolutionary. It poisoned the roots of slavery rather than chopping its branches.

I hope you see the implication. When we look at our society, our work, our families, we often see structural problems so pervasive that it seems impossible to fix or cure the problem. We think, "It's hopeless." In antiquity, slavery was that hopeless problem – woven into the fabric of every society. It was impossible to eradicate. So God's law modified it, limited it, reined it in, poisoned its roots.

We see similar things in society: unemployment, deficits, sexual ethics, the rights of unborn children. You probably see similar things at work, in your family. It seems hopeless, but don't give up! Ask "How can I improve things a little?" Rein in, modify, limit the problem. Sow some seeds. Pray for eyes to see, courage to act.

Recap: Sometimes Israel was much like the nations. Sometimes it broke subtly with the nations. And sometimes Israel was completely different. It offered a radical new model for society, a new paradigm for life. In Deut 4:5-8, Moses said:

*See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering... Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.... And what other nation [has] such righteous decrees... as this body of laws I am setting before you today?"*

The way God told Israel to manage the land is a good example. First, God said, "The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants" (Lev 25:23). Some kings claimed to own all the land, so the people were all the king's tenants and debtors. God says that He is the owner, and Israel his tenants. Therefore they must use His land as He says. No one can do 'whatever they please' with the land. No one could simply take or buy land. Everyone had rights and responsibilities:

- To work the land and to give it rest. To harvest, but to leave some for the poor.
- To give a tenth of fruit to the poor and to the temple and priests.
- To work faithfully, but not constantly, endlessly.

Because God distributed land generously and widely, no one had the right to hoard it. The family had first right to purchase land if anyone became poor and needed to sell. And every fifty years, land went back to its original owners. Period!

The land was a gift to all, held in trust from God and for God. No serfdom. No endless debt-bondage. Instead one had a right to work one's land. A wide distribution of land meant a wide distribution of wealth, work and dignity. No one could make the absolute claim "This land is mine." Rather, "God has given this to me."

Question: What vision of society, what principles motivate these laws? Who benefits from them? What interests do these laws protect? What powers or abuses are restrained? Answer: These laws taught Israel to love God and to love their neighbors. These laws said: God first. We acknowledge that we are not our own. He gave us life. God first also means the king is not first. The people trump the king or the powerful. Let me spin it out:

The laws of Israel's neighbors said that the king, his clients and their property first. But if land belongs to the people – to families and clans - then common people are more important than the king. The rights of commoners trump the desire of the rich and powerful to accumulate more and more. You may think this is obvious, but no.

I remind you that even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people in England were hanged for stealing sheep. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American horse thieves could be hanged for stealing horses. Many ancient codes specified death for stealing. Not Israel's. People over property! A thief died only if he stole a person – kidnapping.

We can live by that principle today. I know that many of you do. A business leader says, "I'll do anything to avoid layoffs." He institutes a four day work week when business is down. He goes to overtime when demand is high. It costs money, but it puts people first. It's God's way; he is pleased.

If the people own the land, it changes things. Farmers and shepherds, families and clans, have priority over the king and the nobility. The law protected the dignity and prosperity of ordinary people. Every fifty years, all land reverted to the first owners. That meant freedom and dignified work for ordinary people.

A contrast: King Ahab of Israel won at least a stale-mate or draw in an all important battle in 853 B.C. as he co-led a coalition that faced against the mighty Assyrians. Politically, it was his greatest moment. The Bible says nothing about it.

Instead it tells a story, from the same time, about Naboth, a farmer who had the misfortune to live next to Ahab. Naboth had a beautiful vineyard; Ahab wanted it. He offered to buy it or trade other land for it. Naboth said, "You don't understand: it's my family's heritage. I can't sell it." So Ahab had him killed. Consider: the Bible tells this story, not the story of his greatest military achievement. The way he treated farmers is more important to God.

God cares for his people one by one. That's why Moses says people from other lands will hear God's law and marvel, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.... And what other nation [has] such righteous... laws."

We're not naïve. Law alone won't preserve or reform a society. If people want to bend or work around the law, they usually can. If enough people ignore, even flaunt laws, they become unenforceable. In

practice, law reflects a compromise of ideals and what leaders think they can implement. Laws enforce a minimal standard and we surely need more than the minimum.

### **Legislate morality?**

Still, Israel's laws are a model for the world. They show us we can work in the public arena. In America we have the great privilege of electing our legislators. We can petition them to pass good laws. We can and should make the case for life-giving laws in the public arena.

People say, "You can't legislate morality." That is nonsense and foolishness. A great deal of legislation protects property, which is a moral issue. Government funding rests on moral judgments. If we fund a war or fund a school or help the unemployed, or uninsured, we make moral decisions.

When the penal code says thieves, swindlers go to jail, we legislate morality. When people say, "You can't legislate morality" they mean legislation imposed on a majority by a minority is doomed to fail. If disobedience is common enough, laws are unenforceable. Prohibition and jay walking prove this in different ways.

But we can pass moral legislation. We even pass laws about marriage. We say children can't marry in order to protect them. That's a good moral decision. Some states have laws banning same sex marriage. All states have laws banning polygamy because it hurts the family and harms children. If we can pass one marriage law, we can pass another. In America, everyone has the right to make their case, build a consensus, and pass laws that let people flourish.

The Old Testament as a whole teaches three things. First, in external culture – food, clothing, shelter, transportation, communication, believers will probably look like the people around them, as Israel generally did.

But the deep structures can and should be different. When there is entrenched evil, like slavery, we may be unable to eradicate it, but we can rein it in, slow it down, argue against it, poison the roots. But sometimes we can tackle the big issues and change the world as Israel's laws did regarding land. Why not? Everyone is trying to change the world. No reason not to try.

This three-fold approach should work for fathers. Expect your kids to look like everyone else in some ways – food, clothing, electronics. Where you see a huge problem – something we can't eradicate – try to rein it in, limit it. Sometimes say: We are going to aim to be a model here – change our world.

Let's aspire to that. Yet the New Testament has a cautionary counterpoint. There is no nation quite like Israel today. Peter calls believers a holy, spiritual nation scattered throughout world. We are kind of like Kurds or Aborigines – we have no land that's our own.

## **2. Faith and society in the New Testament – a light to the world**

With very rare exceptions, Christians live in lands that don't claim God's law as their law. Christians are almost always in the minority. Jesus names three things that can happen when disciples try to follow Jesus while living in a secular culture. He moves from the negative to the positive:

- We may suffer **persecution**. Persecution was certainly common for Jesus and his first disciples. And it's still common in the world today.

- We may be **salt**. In antiquity, salt retarded the decay of food. So the presence of a disciple can rein in the evils of society.
- Better yet, we may be **light** for a darkened world. The light may shine for individuals or for society as a whole. Best, the good life of a disciple may lead people to glorify God the Father, as they look to the source of an excellent life.

## Salt

I want to focus on salt and light, not persecution. We use salt to flavor food. But in Jesus' day, before refrigeration, people used salt to preserve meat, to prevent decay. We live in a pragmatic society. Moral standards are low; people improvise. A salty disciple doesn't improvise. Today, the mere presence of a moral person can prevent moral decay.

Pastor's experience: Do you know how often people start to tell a joke or a story and stop saying, "Oh, I can't tell this; you're a pastor." That's almost trivial.

At work, at school, the mere presence of a solid, godly, respected person stops cruel plans or vicious talk. People know they can't say or do certain things when that man or woman is around. So we are salt – we retard the decay.

Jesus says, "Have salt in yourselves" (Mark 9:50). That is, preserve the distinction between yourselves and the world. The greater the difference, the greater our influence. The more secular society shapes us, the more we lose our saltiness.

## Light

Jesus says, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). He is "a light for the nations" (Isa 49:6). Here Jesus tells his followers, "You are the light of the world" (5:14). If we "walk in the light as he is in the light" (1 John 1:7), we are the light of the world.

Like salt, light can lose its effect. No disciple should hide his light. Jesus says that "a city on a hill cannot be hidden." In days before electric lights, when light from oil or candles was costly, no sane man would hide a light. Instead, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds" and give light to all (5:14-16).

We aren't the light, but we share God's light. It's impossible to gaze directly upon the sun high in the sky. But we gaze easily at a full moon, which reflects the light of the sun. Likewise, many people find it difficult to gaze directly at God. Then a disciple can be their moon – they can see God's reflected light in us.

We've been through four years of economic stress. Some of us have lost jobs or homes. Cars, vacations, and retirement plans all disappear. Marriages are stressed; some have ended because prosperity was their hidden glue.

Sadly, some of us act just like everyone else. We hold onto our wealth, our things, more tightly than ever. If we lose things we think "I want it back" and do anything to get more. There is no salt or light, no model of life, in that.

We are salt and light if we ask, "Did I start to live for things? Did I follow the crowd in thinking the

prosperous life is the good life? What made me think I would never have to pray for my daily bread?" Shouldn't we pray, "Lord I've lost a lot, but open my eyes to people who have lost more. Help me open my hands to the poor. Help me distinguish wants and needs. Help me remember that half of the world scrapes by on two or three dollars a day.

I must say one more thing: sometimes a Christian is all but powerless. That's true politically and socially, at work and at school. Sometimes it's true even in marriage and the family. We feel we have no power. What then? 1 Peter 2 says, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right... Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king."

The king is the emperor. That year it was the emperor Nero, but it could be any emperor who mixed selfishness, cruelty and some adherence to his duty of protecting the borders and ensuring the rule of law. In a word – even the worst rulers do some good. They punish evil and reward good and deserve honor them for that. Submit to local governors – the authorities you see and know – too. They do some good too.

Peter gives four terse commands in 2:17. We love God's family and we fear God – holding the Lord in that great and final awe. Meanwhile, we respect everyone and honor the king or emperor. How so? It probably meant "Go to the required celebrations of the emperor once a year. Don't pray *to* him, but pray *for* him." Sometimes it's fine to keep our head down and fit in.

The way we follow Peter varies from nation to nation. In an autocratic nation, submission is clear enough. In a democracy the nature of our government shapes the way we submit and honor. Our law tells us we have a right and duty to choose our leaders. So examine the candidates themselves and their policies and vote people in or out of office. But we honor rulers, even while we vote against it.

So we can care for society. Let the superficial go. Change what you can, go big when you can. And one more thing – never put too much hope in laws or reforms or social. Laws and reforms are good but not final. No law redeems, no reform lasts. There is too much folly, too much sin, in humans. We need Jesus – the best lawgiver, the boldest reformer, the best King, the tender Savior, who forgives when we fail. It begins now, and there is more to come.