



Missing the Purpose

Ex 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Ps 19; Matt 21:33-44; Phil 3:4b-14

Purpose is something that is easily altered or even thwarted. It has been said that over time institutions begin to exist for self-preservation. Over time, we forget what things stand for and why they were created. We forget historical purposes and lay our new rationale for those things we hold dear. We look at our vehicles as something other than replacements for horse and buggy transportation. We look at housing as much more than shelter from the elements. We look at sports as something other than recreation and friendly competition. We look at church as something other than a training ground for serving God. Have we thwarted or simply missed the purpose to which we were called to Christ Jesus?

Not too long ago, there was a big push to post the Ten Commandments in public spaces. The idea of some was that the nation was departing from God's will, due to relegating God further and further from the public, governmental sphere of life. Public recognition of God and sanctioned display of God's commandments would chart a corrective course. There is a greater point to God's instructions than their mere acknowledgement. Organizers knew this, but far too often the effort failed to get past the push for display with little true corrective action.

If we read today's text carefully, we may find that it lists more than ten commandments. Some read the text as nine commandments, some as many as fifteen, depending on how particularly we categorize or enumerate them. One or as many as four commandments regard the Sabbath. As many as three commandments regard the unique worship of *Yahweh*. Getting the number right, however, is just another rabbit to chase. Deuteronomy lists the commandments a little differently than Exodus, the Jews considered 613 commandments in the Torah, and Jesus summed them up in two. More important than numbering, posting, or memorizing them is using them according to their purpose: that we honor God, that we honor our parents, and that we honor one another.

This was a basic framework for life. It was not the end-all-be-all. It was not much more than a summary to get one started in the path of *Yahweh*. Through following God's will, the nation was to live the reality of *Yahweh* before the nations. The commandments were to flow out of the special relationship of *Yahweh* with the people. They were to be a nation of priests before the world. They were to announce in their corporate and individual living that *Yahweh* was different from all other claims of divinity. Many of these laws were not even unique, having been set forth by Hamurapi in an earlier period. What was unique was the God by whom the people were called in covenant. Legal codes and political structure were not so important as living up to the priestly covenant identity.

Paul spoke to his legalistic heritage. From his perspective, Judaism had settled into a question of placing greater concern over tradition, heritage, and culture than upon serving God. He knew all about having the right standing in Jewish society. He knew his lineage, an important marker of one's identity. He was trained in the right school, having learned Jewish traditions and heritage properly. He was zealous in fighting for the purity of tradition, heritage, and observance of ritual. He had all his I's dotted and T's crossed from an historical, theological, and legalistic perspective within Judaism. There had still been something missing.

Deep down, he had come to some recognition that there was more to life with God than memorizing all the right facts, accepting the regulated truths, being born in the right family, and working

zealously to protect and advance his heritage. All those things were important to advancing himself, not to advance the purposes of God. They were about protecting his station, status, and security in the world, rather than promoting the very purpose of being the people of God. It went back to the issue of that sticky little line about taking the name of God in vain.

We tend to interpret that in much the same manner as the superstitious of Paul's heritage. We think it has something to do with the pronouncement of a word or the abuse of a name. Rather, taking one's name was much more related to the idea of a wife taking her husband's name upon marriage. If we are to call ourselves the people of God, the bride of Christ, we are to make that a reality, rather than an empty phrase devoid of substance and faithful relationship. Taking God's name is about calling ourselves the people of God, living after God's will and in God's service. If that is nothing more than a means to advance our security, it is a statement made in vain.

Jesus' parable was a reminder that there was a purpose in place for those called God's people. With the name came responsibility for service—service that produced results. Oh, the nation was busy and involved in their worship and study routines. They attended services at the synagogue, sacrificed at the Temple, and celebrated all the appropriate feasts. In the process, however, they were failing at reaching out to bring the nations around them under the banner of God's covenant of grace.

They were focused on themselves. They were thinking of privilege, standing, and their own collective of personal security. They had lost sight of the purpose of the covenant that made them God's people. They were to be a nation of priests before the world around them. They were to reflect the love and character of God before a world in need. Instead, they had focused their attention upon themselves and cared for their own desires rather than represent God to the world. The parable carried a sharp rebuke. It called them to be faithful or lose that to which they were clinging.

Judaism had become a shell that no longer stressed the purpose in God's covenant. It had been reduced to a system of legalism, rite, ritual, and routine. It had become a tradition or a cultural identity rather than a means to serve God and care for others on God's behalf. It promoted itself and its own preservation rather than the purposes for which God had designed it. It had missed God's purpose and needed some radical interference to call it back to God's design.

All too often the church has faced the very same issues. Generation after generation, we must be called back to the purpose of being God's people. It is not about buildings, musical styles, or pleasing our own. Being the people of God is about producing results to the credit of God's purposes.

It is not the building that is sacred—it is the gospel of Christ Jesus. It is not the style or selection of music we sing that matters—it is the purpose of God to whom we lift our praise. It is not the comfort of the pews, the decorations of the sanctuary, or the architectural period of our structures—it is the lives changed as a result of our proclamation.

If we focus too much on what happens within these walls, we miss the purpose of being called church. If we focus too much on the routines and rituals that grant us comfort, we miss the purpose of Christ Jesus' death on the cross. If we focus too much on ourselves, we miss the purpose to which we were called—to bear fruit for God's use. How closely will we align our lives with God's purposes?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*