

Looking out to the vulnerableMay 10, 2009 - Deuteronomy 10:12-22, James 1:27

“What am I supposed to be doing?” It was Mother’s Day many years ago. I was a teenager experiencing my first paid job – a busboy at a hotel in Calgary. A busboy is not a boy who sits on the bus and gets paid for it. To bus can means to clear and set tables in a restaurant. But for some reason, they had me start on Mother’s day, one of the busiest days of their year. They had two mother’s day buffets that day. Every employee was so busy, they didn’t have time to tell me what to do. So I just stood in the corner of the banquet room for much of those meals. I would ask other employees “what am I supposed to be doing?” Some would say restock the cutlery.” Customers would ask me, “Could I get some coffee.” So I would look for coffee and take a coffee pot out not knowing how to pour or that I wasn’t supposed to take that pot. Someone else reserved it for another table.

I didn’t know the hotel so I couldn’t direct people to where they needed to go. I didn’t know the kitchen so I couldn’t find replacement forks, knives or cups when needed. I was totally lost that whole day while all the people enjoyed a wonderful meal. So I

wandered around trying to be useful. At the end of it, the supervisor came up to me and said “Great job Tom. We’ll see you in a couple of days.”

“What,” I thought? I have no clue what I’m supposed to be doing? Thankfully, the next shift, I had someone who showed me all that was involved in keeping a coffee shop kitchen running. I’ve found that Mother’s Day was not the only time I wondered “what am I supposed to be doing? Why am I here?” Life brings us times which raise those questions. They’re reorganizing things at the office. New management has taken over. So what will that mean for your job? A new coach comes to the team. You used to have this specific role. But she changes things and now you don’t know what you’re supposed to be doing. The family changes. A loved one dies; a new member joins the family – a baby; an in-law; an adoption; you have to move. Now where do you fit in? A relationship ends. What about those dreams and plans? An illness changes your life situation. You or your loved one can’t do some of the things you used to do. So now what are you supposed to do? You’re facing retirement. You’ve looked

forward to it for many years. But now it's here. You're not sure what you'll do with that time or if you can make it on that income.

Then there's the church. What are we supposed to be doing now? This question confronts us through different stages of life. It does not simply go away once we find Christ. Life throws us curveballs that disorient us or cause us to question what it's all about.

But thankfully, God does not leave us alone in this endless and sometimes empty quest. In fact, His Word points us back to our ultimate life purpose again and again. Today, we're going to discover what we are supposed to be doing individually and as a church. And we'll see God provide what we need to fulfill this purpose. So I've come up with a somewhat cryptic central truth for today's message: **God's character compels His people to the 3 C's.** I'm not talking about seas like the Mediterranean, Red Sea and Baltic Sea. I'm talking about 3 words that begin with the letter C that lay out God's purpose for our lives.

This continues our series on "Looking out in prayer and ministry to our community and the world." About 3000 years ago, God's people looked over into a world the Lord wanted them to

conquer. He wanted them to take the Promised Land to set up a society unlike any other of that time. God's people would follow His laws and live out His will.

But before they crossed into this land, Moses, their leader prepares them with several messages. He will not cross over with them because of his own sin. The Lord provided new leadership in Joshua. So Moses reminds them of God's grace and God's law. He reviews the 10 commandments. He describes what it would be like for them to "Love the Lord their God." He repeats God's call to drive out the pagan nations that currently dwelt in the Promised Land. He reminds them to guard against forgetting the Lord.

Moses also reminds them of their historic rebellion against God. Remember your fathers made a Golden Calf to worship at Mount Sinai? Remember how your fathers doubted God's power to enable them to conquer the Promised Land? In fact, if God based His favor on their actions, He had every right to abandon them and look for another people. But God mercifully stayed with them, sustained them and would carry them into the Promised Land. So after all these reminders of God's grace, Moses summarizes what God required of

them in response. He lays out what they were supposed to be doing.

It is here we will discover how God's character compels His people to be 3 Cs in response.

We have looked at this text several times. It summarizes the call of the Christian's life in Old Testament language. In fact, we have touched on this text in the last few weeks with our save the planet series and even last Sunday in the message on favoritism. So I encourage you to go back to this text often if you've lost your way or forget what you are supposed to be doing. Look with me for the 3 C's and then we'll think about how to respond to God's call here.

Deuteronomy 10:12-22 NIV

Fear the LORD

¹² And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

¹⁴ To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. ¹⁵ Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today. ¹⁶ Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. ¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. ¹⁸ He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the

alien, giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹ And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. ²⁰ Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name. ²¹ He is your praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. ²² Your forefathers who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky.¹

God's character compels us to the three C's.

C #1 - The Lord's goodness compels us to God-focused

Commitment. The Lord's gracious and merciful acts in our lives require a wholly devoted life to Him.

Moses refers to the Lord's goodness in the first 2 words of verse 12. "And now." In light of what the Lord has done, in response to all I've spoken, what does the Lord your God ask of you?" But the NIV's translation of the Hebrew "Shaw-ale" with the word "ask" is weak. It's actually a stronger word than "ask;" more like "require, demand, compel." If somebody asks you to do something, you might agree to do it or you might politely decline. If they require you to do it then there is a much greater force behind the request. That Moses says

¹ New International Version, [International Bible Society](http://www.internationalbiblesociety.org), Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984

here; “what does the Lord require of you?” and now, in light of all God has done, here’s what He is requiring.

It’s not like the Lord is going to come down and force the Israelites to comply. But Moses is saying “when you consider the incredible weight and volume of all God has done on your behalf, how else can you respond but with a compulsion to meet His requirements. Moses has really laid out the Gospel for Israel. Now he describes the appropriate response.

Then there is that three letter word that seems so out of place. Verse 12 “And now, O Israel, what does the Lord ask of you BUT.” Some of your translations say ONLY. When you consider the weight of what follows, it seems like this word does not fit. “What does the Lord require but to fear the Lord your God, walk in all his ways, love him, serve him with all your heart and all your soul and observe the Lord’s commands.” Only that? What are you talking about Moses? That’s a total life commitment! There’s no half-hearted agreement there!

You’re right. This requirement demands all of us. So “but” or “only” cannot mean just a little or small thing. It must mean it is

simple to understand though incredibly difficult to do. It’s not simple as if easy. If such obedience were easy, there would be little need for the rest of the book of Deuteronomy with its chapters full of encouragement, warning and promise.

But the requirement is not confusing or hard to understand. There is one and only God to whom we owe obedience. So theological confusion about many ways to God is wiped away. The moral confusion about what is right and wrong is swept away. It’s really quite simple to understand but difficult to live out.

I don’t have time to do all 5 aspects of totally devoted life to the Lord. But the first one is often misunderstood or disregarded.

Fear the Lord your God. We get our backs up right away because we don’t want to worship a God we have to fear. We want a buddy and someone we are comfortable with. But we must be careful to not project negative fear onto the positive fear called for here.

One commentator puts it this way. The nature of fear depends on the object of that fear. When we fear someone or something that we know is evil, powerful, and perhaps “out to get us,” then our reaction is all too familiar. It either causes us to tense up, or it causes the

adrenaline to flow so we can carry out remarkable feats of strength to survive. But what happens when you fear someone whom you know has your best interest at heart? When you fear someone who loves you, such as God himself, that very fear somehow becomes altogether different. It becomes reverence, a feeling of awe in the presence of divine love and power. It makes us want to surrender our will to God's will—"to walk in all his ways and to love him and to serve YHWH your God with all your heart and with all being" (Deut 10:12). This kind of "fear" casts out fear of the negative kind."

Total commitment to the Lord involves a life totally devoted to Him. Moses emphasizes the totality of the commitment by continually using universal terms – all his ways; all your heart; all your soul. When we give our lives totally to the Lord, it is for our ultimate good, Life as He designed.

And why does God call us to this simple yet total commitment to Him? Is God a control freak? Does God like imposing rules on others? Look at the last phrase of verse 13. Total commitment is hard when we've been led and perhaps lived sketchy commitment. "I'll be there if I have time, and there's nothing on TV, and nothing better

comes along, and I'm not too tired, and I feel like it at the moment, and the weather is okay; if that all comes together, I'm committed. If we let our motivations for commitment to Christ depend on how we feel, it'll be pretty shaky. Our motivation for total commitment comes from pondering the Lord's goodness.

For those of you who are Christians here today, can you just think back over your life 5 years or 10 years or over the total years you can think of? Think about times when the Lord's goodness or mercy obviously flowed into your life. When we stop to consider that we are hopefully moved to again live a life wholly devoted to Him.

A simple yet wholly devoted life to the Lord does not earn our salvation or merit before the Lord. Nor will it compensate for His mercy or in some way make Him a debtor to us. But a life totally committed to the Lord indicates we have taken to heart all the Lord has done for us and is to us. And from His righteousness, empowered by His Spirit, we can ask Him to do in us the very thing he commands. God's goodness compels us to commitment.

C #2 - The Lord's greatness compels us to Confession. (14-16)

Moses declares the Lord's awesome ownership of the universe and election of small little Israel compels us to turn from stubbornness towards Him. (Verses 14-16). We just referred to these verses in the "Saving the Planet" series. We saw that verse 14 describes the Lord's supremacy over the universe. To God belongs not merely heaven, but the highest heavens. The earth and all in it also belong to him. God is beyond every personal need. So if God were to seek companionship, surely He would choose the great and powerful nations and great and powerful people.

But verse 15 tells us "he set his affection on your forefathers." He delighted in them. He loved them despite their rebellious hearts. Here is this deep mystery that though God owned the entire universe, He set his heart on this little family of 70. As Christians, the New Testament reminds us of the greatness of God and the love of Christ again and again. "Love one another as I have loved you." "God demonstrated his own love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

So you'd think that the appropriate response called for would be praise or love or some appreciation directed towards God. But

what does Moses say in verse 16? "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer." What on earth just happened? Moses lets off a double barreled blast calling for repentance. It's like he's saying your election by the Lord is not so much a privilege but an awesome responsibility.

Notice that this verse dispels any notion that the Old Testament taught works salvation. Circumcision was an outward symbol that was supposed to represent an inward heart commitment. When Hebrew brought their son's to be circumcised, that mark served to remind the son of his family's commitment to the Lord. It was an outward symbol. But it was the condition of the heart that mattered.

There is an interesting historical fact that reveals an even greater force to Moses' words in verse 16. It's likely none of the males standing before Moses that day had been physically circumcised. In Joshua 5:2-7, the book immediately following Deuteronomy, the Lord commands Joshua to circumcise the sons of Israel. Their fathers were circumcised. But though they were physically circumcised, they proved to have hard hearts towards God. They rebelled against him and disbelieved him. They all died in the

desert. One proof of their rebellion against God was they never had their sons circumcised as a sign of acceptance of God's covenant. So Moses says to a physically uncircumcised people, spiritually circumcise your hearts – cut away the hardness in your heart toward God. Though you do not have the physical sign of commitment to the Lord, ensure you do the more important spiritual commitment in your heart. “Remember the greatness of God. Remember He owns everything yet He set His affections upon you. So don't close your heart to Him. Set apart your heart to the Lord and don't follow in stubbornness of your fathers.

The same call goes out to us today. Because of God's greatness, we need to confess a closed heart and stubbornness. Some of you here today have never turned to Christ and put your trust in Him. All mankind is obligated to obey the moral law of God. Yet none of us keeps this law completely and perfectly. Measured by God's standards, we all have sinned and fall short of giving God glory all the time. So we all need a savior to cover or atone for our guilt. Then we need the Spirit to enable us to obey. But we do not have the Spirit until we confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe

in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead. You must come to Jesus and throw all your trust in Him. By grace, through our faith, God will pour forth His Gospel; forgiveness; right standing before Him and the Holy Spirit into your life. Then you will begin the lifelong journey with Christ towards a wholly devoted life filled with continual confessing. None of us gives glory to God all the time. Will you come to Christ today in faith? At the end of our time together, you will have an opportunity to respond.

Christians, have you ever thought about why people close their hearts to God? Sometimes, it's simply a case of rebellion against Him. Or it might be doubts about God's goodness and greatness. It can be especially tempting to doubt God's goodness when we go through tough times. We might ask “why did God allow this to happen? Why doesn't God bring relief? Isn't God powerful enough to change things?

Friend, if you hurt today because of something in your life, do not believe the devil's lies about God's goodness. Satan twists facts about God. He planted doubt in Eve's mind about God's goodness and he continues to do the same today. When those thoughts come,

we must remember God's great works in the world, in history and in our lives.

I have had the privilege over the past couple of weeks to see some of our own people display this intentional remembrance of God's goodness. From both Ileen Guilliford and Dick Trembath, whose spouses passed away after a long battle with Alzheimers and Dementia, I have not heard one complaint against God. Though they have gone through very intense times, they proclaim the goodness of God through them. That's been an amazing testimony to witness hearts open and pliable to God's hands. If you have been struggling with the goodness or greatness of God lately, will you ask the Lord to reveal His greatness. Ask Him to remind us of His goodness. Then confess any hard heartedness or stubbornness towards Him.

So God's character compels the three C's. His goodness compels commitment. His greatness compels confession.

C #3 - The Lord's loving justice compels compassion. (17-22) Verses 17-19. We looked at this text just last week. Verse 17 - For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords. He does not

show favoritism or accept bribes. Moses proclaims that God is supreme compared to other so called gods.

So in the Ancient Near East, if you wanted to get something done through the supreme lord, you had to bribe him. You had to make it worth his while to get what you wanted.

But our great God would not accept bribes, nor would He show favoritism. Remember last week we learned that partiality or favoritism literally meant to "receive the face" or "lift the face." Then you judged based on that external appearance. In the ancient royal court, the king lifted the face of the defendant before pronouncing sentence. Then he could show favoritism based on what he thought he could get out of the defendant.

But our great God will not consider that. He looks out for the most vulnerable members of society; the fatherless; the widows; the resident alien or foreigner. In fact, He defends the cause of the fatherless, the widow and loves the alien giving him food and clothing. The supreme Lord has supreme compassion for the least in human society.

His compassion must lead to our compassion. “And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.”

This is like the second greatest commandment; “love your neighbor as yourself.” To walk in God’s ways means to follow God’s lead in compassion.

Here is where the rubber meets the road. We can say we’re committed to God. We can confess our stubbornness to God. But our action on behalf of the vulnerable is one of the greatest proofs that we’re actually God’s children. We can attend a worship service and argue for truth. But if we think that’s all there is to following Christ, we’ve missed it. The Bible repeatedly teaches compassion and care for the vulnerable marks true believers.

Old Testament Professor Dan Block writes:

Like later prophets, Moses says nothing here about religious rituals. Like Samuel, he believed that obedience to the ways superseded sacrifice (cf. 1 Sam. 15:22-23). Like Amos, he believed that the practice of justice and righteousness took precedence over the noise of festivals and offerings (Amos 5:21-25). Like Hosea, he believed the Lord found greater delight in personal relationship with him than in sacrifices of every sort (Hos.

6:6). Like Micah, he viewed true piety to be demonstrated not in extravagant sacrifices, but doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with the Lord (Mic. 6:8). Like Isaiah he believed that if no concern was shown to the marginalized, no worship offered would impress the Lord (Isa. 1:10-17). Like Jeremiah he believed that acceptance with God depended upon ethical behavior, rather than attendance at the house of God (Jer. 7:1-15). This perspective is found also in the Psalms, which emphasize that acceptable worship is preconditioned by lives that demonstrate covenant commitment to the Lord and to one’s neighbor (Pss. 15, 24).

And this paradigm carries through to the New Testament. Jesus tells off the Jewish religious leaders for tithing mint and dill and cummin, but neglecting love for God and one’s neighbor; Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42). James is in perfect step with Moses when he declares that “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (Jas. 1:27). The same is true of Paul, who calls on believers to offer themselves as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1), and then spells out in detail what this means (Rom. 12:1-15:13).

Furthermore, it is tempting for evangelicals to think that creedal statements of faith provide the surest test of devotion to Christ. However, this text reminds us again that true faith is not demonstrated so much in the defense of truth as in the life of truth.”

To reflect the heart of God, we need to see the people around us and act to help them. Many of you are doing this – through Mustard Seed, with your neighbors; in Honduras; at Kindred House; through the Pregnancy Care Center; at youth events; on Sunday mornings when someone stands alone. It starts with recognizing the heart of God and responding with love to the outsiders.

I have started reading lately about a man who was 30 years ahead of his time. Francis Schaeffer was a Christian apologist in the late 1960’s and 70’s. Charles Colson writes this about him.

*“Schaeffer saw that relativism and existentialism, advanced by European intellectuals was infiltrating mainstream American thought. He argued eloquently that Christianity was a worldview. He talked about commitment and the authority of Scripture when all around us the institutions of authority were crumbling.”*² He was, in short,

contra mundum, “against the world for the world.” But though he was known worldwide, Schaeffer didn’t let this fame go to his head. He had a deep compassion for lost people. He and his wife Edith set up L’Abri community in the mountains of Switzerland where atheists, agnostics and skeptics would come from all over the world. The Schaeffers would have meals with them and listen to people’s quest for meaning. Then Schaeffer would patiently and respectfully put forward the case for Christ.

He did not allow his great intellect to distance himself from people, especially vulnerable people. He gave a sermon called “no little people” where he lays out his strong sense of the dignity of all people. “He was just as content to share the gospel with one or two as he was preaching to hundreds and thousands. He was just as willing to spend time with the maid or the janitor in a hotel as he was to go and talk to the president or someone considered important in the eyes of the world or the church. He treated people, whoever they were, with dignity and compassion.

This led him to the work of child evangelism, for to him children were just as significant as adults, just as precious, just as

² Charles Colson, in the Foreword of “He is there and He is not Silent,” by Francis Schaeffer. (Tyndale, Carol Stream Ill., 1972, 2001), ix.

worthy of receiving our time and effort.” Schaeffer noted this about other Christians. “There is a certain gentleness about really great Christians. There are many ways to observe this, but perhaps one of the best is to notice the tenderness for children in some of the great warriors of the past.”³ In a similar way, you and I are called to respond to God’s great compassion by showing great compassion to others, especially the vulnerable. You’ll here more about how we might collectively do that on May 31st.

But today, we again ask what are we supposed to be doing? God’s goodness compels us to a simple yet totally committed life to Him. His greatness compels us to confession. His loving justice compels us to compassion.

How will you respond?

- *I’m renewing my commitment to you Lord.*
- *I confess my stubbornness to you Lord.*
- *I want to receive you as Lord.*
- *I desire to reach out in compassion Lord.*

What are we supposed to be doing? God’s goodness compels us to commit. God’s greatness compels us to confess. God’s loving justice compels us to compassion.

³ “He is there and he is not silent,” xx.