

The Elementary Things

Galatians 3:27-4:7; Hebrews 7:1-10

I occasionally have a chance to talk to younger men and women about how to hold their lives and families together in an environment that has more and more swirl every time you look. It has become so common for people like me to bewail how the world is changing that it has almost become boring, so I will spare you another dissertation on what I think has gone wrong and instead I will try to treat you to the one word I think is key if anyone wants to keep his life from becoming a train wreck.

The word is patterns. There are patterns of thought and outlook, patterns of time and rhythm, patterns of habit and discipline, patterns of relationship and authority, given to us by God, that, to the extent we learn and observe and obey them, they will preserve our lives from the chaos that might engulf us if we try to invent the whole package ourselves. And in most cases, it's not rocket science. The first principle of life, contained in the first of the Ten Commandments, is that God is God and we are not.

In fact, the first four of the Ten Commandments are about God and worship.

First, only God should be worshiped. Nothing and no one in our lives should be allowed to eclipse him.

Second, we shouldn't imagine that we can invent what God is like. No image we fashion, no notion we imagine can be substituted for what God tells us about himself in his Word.

Third, God wants no insincerity in the worship we offer him. We either love him and love the people around us and love the truth God stands for... or it isn't real worship and it won't be accepted. Ask Cain how that works!

Fourth, if God is God, he gets to set the rhythm for our lives. Every seven days, when and where God's people worship him, we present ourselves. No exceptions. Period.

The point being that if we won't recognize God first, won't let him define himself, won't give him our whole hearts, won't listen to his metronome, all the other patterns he offers us are that much harder to learn and keep. But there are other patterns beside who and how and when we worship.

Fifth, there's Dad and Mom. The Bible teaches that our whole trajectory in life is based on the sort of love and respect we cultivate in our hearts and show our Mom and Dad.

Sixth, do we respect and preserve and defend peoples' lives? All ages from conception to the grave. Do we resist the temptation to let disagreement and injury boil into hatred and violence? As people draw further and further into private universes, keep your eye on this one!

Seventh, do we respect marriage? Are we loyal to our own spouses, and respectful of other peoples' spouses and families?

Eighth, do we respect other peoples' property? Do we keep ourselves from taking and using what isn't ours? Like I said, not rocket science!

Ninth, do we tell the truth, particularly when someone else's reputation is at stake?

Tenth, do we keep our hearts from wanting things and going places that are not right and not ours. Because what we want in our heart shapes what we become and affects the way we treat people even if we don't physically wrong them.

These Ten Commandments are the basic, elementary patterns God gave to keep our feet on the ground, our keels in the water. It's funny though. I read Exodus 19 and 20 to make sure I was hearing God correctly and I noticed that when God appeared on Sinai, the Israelites were tempted to rush up the mountain to experience the cloud and swirl and angels for themselves. The danger was so great that God had Moses and the Israelite leaders build a wall around the base of the mountain to keep the people a safe distance from the Almighty.

But once Moses taught the people these ten elementary patterns of life, the wall became unnecessary. The text tells us that the people were filled with fear and were happy to let Moses stand between them and this holy, demanding God. The point being that the patterns God gave us to keep are an approximate affair. To the extent we live by the commandments, our lives will be relatively sane and functional and fruitful.

We will be blessed and become a blessing to the extent that we live by God's commandments. But we will never satisfy them. In *Call the Worship*, Paul calls the patterns God gave us the "*elementary things*", not in the sense that they are easy, but because they are basic, essential if we want any sort of rhyme or reason in our lives. Life will make sense, society will hold together if we attend to the patterns that came down to us from God's mountain. But the patterns, in and of themselves will not save our souls.

To save our souls, we need to be led into worship, we need to be taught a gospel of love and faithfulness, grace and forgiveness by Someone greater than ourselves. Which was a problem if you were Abraham almost 4000 years ago. Because humanly speaking, Abraham was first in everything having to do with God. He was the man God chose to begin, to set into motion that plan that would save us all, people from every nation, from the sins which turn our lives into train wrecks.

The problem being that Abraham's own life was already boiling toward a train wreck. The man whose descendant was supposed to save the world had no descendants. He had an adopted nephew, Lot, who was so unimpressed by Abraham's faith that he left home to make a life of his own in Sodom of all places. And Abraham was just returning from rescuing his nephew when God brings across his path this strange, mystic character named Melchizedek, a righteous king, our text tells us, God's own priest, 400 years before Moses would appoint any priests for Israel.

Now the point here in Hebrews is not that Melchizedek is anything other than human. He is not Christ come early or some sort of angel sent to lead a worship service. I expect that Melchizedek had a dad and mom and all the rest that comes with a human family. The point here is that we don't read any of that in Genesis because the Bible presents Melchizedek to us as a forerunner of Christ. The point is that Abraham, great as he was, needed a communion table just like ours, needed a Savior just like Christ.

And in that day and age, Melchizedek, sins and all, served as a picture of Christ, just as Isaac and Joshua and Samson and David and Jonah, sins and all, would serve as pictures of Christ as the gospel story unfolded in the Old Testament.

In other words, whatever the patterns and commandments do to keep our lives sane and balanced and whole, we still need a Savior to lead us into true worship, and into the grace and power that gets us past the wall and into the presence of the Almighty. Funny thing! It's only after Melchizedek and the communion table that God appears to Abraham in Genesis and promises him more descendants than there were stars in the night sky. And Abraham believed and God declared him "*righteous*", sins and all.

The Old Testament depicts Lot from start to finish as pretty much a train wreck. But Peter in the New Testament was inspired to describe him as "*righteous Lot*". Three distinct times, Peter remembers Lot as righteous. The point being that we become righteous, not by observing the patterns and commandments flawlessly, but by faithfully responding to the Savior and the story that the communion table tells when we go there with open, teachable, humble hearts.

The question Paul wrestles with in our Call to Worship is: “If life is about finding a Savior and believing a gospel, than why Moses, why Sinai, why bother with commandments and patterns and principles that no one but Christ has ever entirely mastered?” Paul answers the question by painting us a picture of a rich father, who wants his children to understand and appreciate the wealth that will one day be their’s. So what does he do? Well, if he’s smart, he doesn’t start them as vice presidents.

He makes them learn the business from the ground up. He starts them out as janitors and receptionists. He teaches them to sweep the floor and answer the phone and deliver memos and replace the bottle in the water cooler. Because he knows that a vice president who’s never been out there, who knows nothing about what’s hard and dreary and thankless, who’s never dealt with a customer or seen what people do or heard what people think is worthless to a business.

It turns out that God is indescribably wealthy, immeasurably generous, and really, really smart. He knows that an essential ingredient to inheriting a household is understanding and taking to heart those “*elementary things*”, the essential principles that hold the household together and define who each person is and what each person does. So Moses and Aaron, Priests and Prophets and Kings and Peasants all spent centuries teaching and preaching and living the elementary things, what it meant to belong to God’s household. And it’s all good, so long as we remember that patterns by themselves are not enough.

Melchizedek was sent early and Christ came late to remind us that no matter how well we serve, no matter, how great we are in God’s household, we are beholden to a Savior who is the point of the exercise and to whom owe our love and worship, our tithe and offering, our whole lives. Love him, trust him and the patterns come into reach and become our delight.