

## PAPER-THIN WALLS

When I was pastoring in New York, our church offices were separate from our worship space a few blocks away. As all office buildings are in Manhattan, our office was just one of many in the building, packed tightly up against the others, with paper-thin walls in between us.

I went to the office early one morning to find some quiet time to study and write my sermon the coming Sunday, hoping that I'd be the only one in the building.

I was, that morning, as pastor's often are when writing their sermons, searching the ether for a starting point, anything to jumpstart the writing process, but nothing was coming to me. So I decided to just sit in the quiet and think for a few minutes.

We'd recently had a new tenant move into the office next to ours. What they did, exactly, I was unsure of, but I knew that it involved sales. How did I know? Because every day from 9 to 5, I could hear the sounds of cold calls to prospective clients spilling over into our office space making our entire floor sound like the call center in the movie, *The Wolf Of Wall Street*.

But this particular morning, I had strategically arrived before all of that. None of the wolves had arrived yet, except for one.

How did I know? Because I could hear him screaming. One of the managers it seemed had come in early to get an evaluation off of his desk before he started the day.

I've witnessed a lot of different management styles in the workplace in my day. Every boss manages their company differently in a way that works for them, but I'd never witnessed anything like this before.

He was on the phone with one of his staff, giving them feedback on how they were doing at their job. And it was rough.

The things that were said were so cruel and inappropriate that I can't even recite them for you here. In a nutshell, the person on the other end of the phone had not met whatever sales quota they were given, and the manager was tearing them to shreds.

Humiliation, name calling, and deeply personal insults were being hurled at the person on the other end of the phone. And as I kept listening, I could tell that they had started crying, which made the manager even more furious, as he screamed at them calling them a baby.

It got so bad at one point that I almost walked over to the office next door to introduce myself and invite the guy to church— not for the right reasons, of course, but in hopes that my religious passive aggression might get this guy to quiet down and hang up the phone.

But before I could do that, as I heard the phone slam up against the adjoining wall between the offices.

Needless to say, I sat down that morning with nothing to jumpstart my writing, nothing from my life or experience to illustrate the topic that I wanted to share about that week.... but I did now.

## MITZVAH

Today we are looking at the Hebrew word, "mitzvah." It's a word we typically only know when it's attached to the the words, "bar" or "bat." Bar Mitzvah. Bat Mitzvah. These are parties that are thrown for Jewish girls and boys who have reached the age where they begin to participate in temple life.

But the word mitzvah has so much more to do with faith and life than just those things.

The meaning of this word is deeply important and we need to understand it if we are going to be able to understand why God asks what God asks of us.

The word, "mitzvah" in it simplest form means, "commandment."

There were 613 mitzvot (the plural of mitzah) given to the Ancient Israelites at Mount Sinai in the Old Testament.

This, of course included the Ten Commandments, but also other commandments like mitzvot to appoint a king, obey the sages, and provide interest-free loans, and to abstain from eating certain things, etc.

613 mitzvot. 613 commandments.

But here's where the word gets interesting. In common usage, the word, mitzvah means, "to do a good deed."

So it would be proper to say,

"Do a mitzvah and help Mrs. Murphy with her packages."

"Do a mitzvah and buy that guy some lunch."

"Do a mitzvah and tell the cashier that they gave you more change back than they were supposed to."

Any good deed in response to one of God's commandments is a "mitzvah."

If you're taking notes today, write this down.

God's commands are not compulsory, they are invitations to partner with God in the making of a better world.

## FOR COMMAND'S SAKE

And this is where the story about the angry manager at the office in New York comes into play.

It's clear, which method he had chosen to get his team member to obey his commands.

He chose compulsion.

He chose to use fear, intimidation, and threats.

And I'm certain that person on the other end of the phone made their quota the following week. But the bad thing is, in the process, they likely felt used, forced, and disposable. They likely went to work every day sitting down to do what they do,

not because they believed in the mission of the company they are working for, but because they were afraid of the wrath of the animal on the other end of the phone on Madison Avenue.

And though the employee's numbers may have improved, their sense of self and their sense of value was likely destroyed.

It's interesting to me that this is how we often think of God's commandments.

We're told that God loves us unconditionally, but deep down, we don't believe it. We believe that there are conditions. That we, too have a quota, and that all of this is pass and fail.

I grew up thinking (and this is still programmed into me if I don't catch myself) that God gives us commands for command's sake.

In other words, God commands us to do things, because he's the boss, and if I don't do it, I'm going to be punished, and so that's what motivates me to obey.

It's not up to me to question God's commands or ask why they matter. I'm just supposed to fall in line and make my quota.

But the true meaning of this word, "mitzvah" helps bring clarity to all of this confusion. This is why the word is so important.

The word mitzvah also carries with it the idea of "attaching or joining oneself to something." In other words, mitzvah joins the one who is commanded and the one giving the command, creating a shared experience.

That is beautiful. But not only is it beautiful, it's what we ought to be thinking every-single-time we read the word "command" or "commandment" in the scriptures.

It is God inviting us into partnership. To work with him, not for him.

This is why Jesus would say in the gospel of Matthew.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

- Matthew 11:28-30

A yoke is an apparatus that links two oxen together while they are pulling a load of some kind. And again, this illustrates "mitzvah" perfectly, because it carries with it the idea of "attaching or joining oneself to something." The one who is commanded and the one giving the command pulling the weight together.

Yes, there is a certain weight to faith. Yes, there is a certain burden to obeying God's commandments, but it's not something that is impossible to lift or to pull— we are linked to God who puts in just as much effort as we do.

The Apostle John would reflect this later in the New Testament when he wrote,

“This is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.”

- 1 John 5:3

When we look at them rightly, we see that

God's commands are not compulsory, they are invitations to partner with God in the making of a better world.

When God asks us to do anything, he has the entire world in mind. It's not just about you being where you need to be in relation to God. That's not how this was designed to work. That's just what we've made of it over the generations. Are we really so dull-hearted to think that fear based obedience can produce healthy spirituality?

This whole life, all of it, the entirety of our faith is about following the way of God because of what it does for the world, not to get God off of our backs. And if we're always only self-focussed in our walk with God, this may be why, because the commands are not for you to get yourself off the hook. The commands are for you to share God with the world by how you live and how you love.

## C L O S I N G

So, no doubt, God asks things of us in the scriptures. 613 mitzvot in the Old Testament— even more in the New. Not only that, but God may also ask things of

us in our conscience as we're going about our day. God may nudge us to be kind to someone, to share something with someone, or to contribute to some kind of cause that is doing good work in the world. It could be anything.

But how do we perceive those things? As a threat? As a "do this or else?" Or as God inviting us to join him in things that bring peace, renewal, and wholeness to the world?

The commandments are many, but they don't exist to review us or evaluate us, or to call us out on all that we aren't doing as we should. They are God saying to us, "This is what helps the world, and I need you to get under this yoke with me, so that we can do this together. We are in this together."

As you go out into your life this week, I want to encourage you to pause and think about that when your conscience nudges you concerning the doing of good in the world. Try to see it as an invitation, not an evaluation. Try to see it as a response to your *faith in God*, not your *fear of God*.

If you do, you may just find that the long lists of commands are not lists at all, but upgrades to a lifestyle that brings greater wholeness, peace, and restoration in the world.