

Deuteronomy 6v1-9

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Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 00] In Greek mythology, Orestes' father is killed by his mother.! And as he thinks about what to do,! he finds himself on the horns of a dilemma.

Two different gods are making contradictory demands.! On one side, Apollo says he must avenge his father by killing his mother. On the other, a different god, Irenaeus, says killing your mother is wrong no matter what.

Orestes has two contradictory divine commands. What is he to do? In many ways, we find ourselves in a similar tension in our culture today.

In lots of ways, we are stuck between competing ultimate values that are vying for our loyalty.

Competing values that are held up as ultimate that are vying for our loyalty.

Consider the issue of speech. We know freedom of speech is a good thing, but we also know that language can have terrible consequences. The way that language is used can have terrible consequences.

[1 : 08] And we also know that the idea of hate speech is a very slippery term. It seems that in our day, the idea of hate speech is something that disagrees with what I think. So we're caught between conflicting loyalties, freedom of speech on the one hand, and restricting certain kinds of speech on the other.

What to do? Another example could be the question of happiness. We like the idea of being free to do what makes us happy, and we really value caring for others.

Happiness, caring for others. But what if my happiness causes someone else to be unhappy? A very simple, infantile example in some ways. Let's say I enjoy tap dancing on the wooden floor of my first floor flat.

If you live in the flat downstairs, you aren't too keen on me doing what makes me happy. So we're caught between conflicting loyalties. Again, the ultimate value of happiness on the one hand, and the ultimate value of caring for others.

On the other, what to do? We could go through lots of examples. The question is, the question for us is, when ultimate values collide, what do we do? Which one is right, and how do we decide?

[2 : 22] One way is to say that no one is right. There's no overarching order or theory that holds everything together. Let's call this, let's say, atheism. And we pretend that there's no objective right or wrong.

Now, some people talk in this way, of course, there are people who identify as atheists, but they don't live out their atheism consistently. Because it can only work in real life.

The no one is right idea can only work in real life if everyone plays by the same rules. And the very point is that we don't. If you're a passionate environmentalist, for example, you hold this view because you think it's right.

We're not saying no one is right because I'm right on this area. Another way is to say that, well, look, everyone's right. All ultimates are equally true and equally good.

But what that does is it leads to a kind of anarchy, as everyone does as they see fit. And again, the individualism of our day means that this kind of talk is common. Everyone's right.

[3 : 26] Everyone has their own truth. But again, we don't live that out. If you're a passionate environmentalist, again, you think it's positively wrong to, and you could fill in, use a plastic straw, or burn fossil fuels, or whatever it might be.

You think it's wrong to do that. Now, often with the everyone's right approach, when our worlds collide, we do this thing. It's a kind of, let's split the difference. We come up with a compromise where we say, well, look, we'll just all get on.

But you can't do that because where we have ultimate values, they belong to whole worldviews. They're not just an isolated idea. They're connected to other ideas. They're connected to a whole worldview.

And worldviews aren't just something that we think about. Worldviews aren't just ideas that we have. A worldview is something through which we think about everything.

And what this means is that where our ultimate values conflict, we can't just agree to disagree. Greta Thunberg won't split the difference on fossil fuel.

[4 : 33] The Muslim won't split the difference on eating halal. One value system must be imposed on the others. It must be. Like Orestes' rival deities, we're stuck in the middle.

Isaiah Berlin put it well when he spoke of the fact, quote, the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another.

He's talking about the idea that we have these great, grand, ultimate convictions, ultimate ideas, and they're in perpetual rivalry with one another.

Most people hold the views that they do because they believe that this is the best way to live. This is the good life. It's the best for them. It's the best for others. It's the best way to create a harmonious society.

That is why people believe the things that they believe, certainly those that have thought it through. But that's not how it's working out, is it? With all of these conflicting ideas going on in our world, in our culture, it's not working out that we see much harmony around or we see people flourishing the way we might want to.

[5 : 46] Douglas Murray talks about how we seek to, quote, find meaning by waging a constant war against anybody who seems to be on the wrong side of the question, which it may itself have just been reframed and the answer to which has only just been altered.

He's saying that the reason for this, quote again, unknowing in some people, he's saying not everybody thinks this through. It's unknowing in some people. It's deliberate in others is to embed a new metaphysics into our societies, a new religion, if you will.

What Douglas Murray understands is that this war is about competing worldviews. It's about whole systems of thinking that are in conflict with each other. And like I say, they're not bringing the peace and the cohesion and the human flourishing that we desire.

The question is, is that even possible? Is cohesion and human flourishing and peace even possible? Well, of course, as Christians, we think that it is.

We believe that it is. And so that takes us to our text this evening. Deuteronomy chapter 6, verse 4, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

[6 : 55] You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise.

You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. One Old Testament commentator has called these verses, quote, The fundamental truth of Israel's religion and the fundamental duty founded upon it.

The fundamental truth has to do with the nature of God as one, verse 4. The fundamental duty is the response of love which God requires of man. I want to focus on this fundamental truth.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. I have one point this evening and it's this. A coherent and consistent life is possible because God is one.

A coherent and consistent life is possible because God is one. Christianity says that there is such a thing as right and such a thing as wrong. There are things called truth and goodness and there is a consistent and coherent moral order in our world because those things all flow from one source.

[8 : 20] They all flow from the God who is one. Now, obviously, we affirm the trinity of God. The unique confession of the Christian church is that the God who is one is at the same time three in persons.

When he sends his disciples into the world on their disciple-making mission, Jesus tells them to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Biblical Christian monotheism, one godness, embraces both the one and the three, but there is one single divine essence.

Here's what an early church father said, No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three. No sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one. When I think of any one of the three, I think of him as the whole. When I contemplate the three together, I see but one torch and cannot divide or measure out the undivided light. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but when we ask the question, what is God?

He is one. One undivided divine essence. Now that means we shouldn't think of God as being made up of parts. A bit of holiness here and a bit of justice there and so on.

[9 : 38] He is what theologians call simple. Obviously that's not an insult. If we were to describe a person as simple, we would be either pitying them or insulting them or they're a bit simple. It is a theological term describing the absolute being of God.

There are no distinctions within his being. Whatever is in God, God is. So he is not just good but goodness itself. Truth and justice and mercy and love.

God does not merely possess those things but he is those things and each attribute is identical with his being. Here's Augustine.

For God to be is the same as to be strong or to be just or to be wise. That which is justice is also itself goodness and that which is goodness is also itself blessedness.

Now, if your head is spinning at this point, that's no bad thing. We are talking about the eternal God. It takes time and deep reflection on these things in order to begin to grasp them and we're always only beginning to grasp them because he is the infinite and eternal God.

[10 : 45] But we start here because this is not just lofty theology for its own sake. This unity, this perfect consistency in God is vital when it comes to how we think about what it means to honor God in the world.

To live as Christians in public. For one, when the culture is hostile to our Christian faith it is actually the simplicity of God that grounds that precious hope that we cling to in Romans 8.28.

When things are tough to know that all things work together for good, for those who love God and are called according to his purpose is a comfort. Because God is goodness he can make this promise.

This is Mark Jones the theologian. But his goodness is also his power so that he is powerfully good. Yet he is also wise so he is powerfully good and powerfully wise. Add to this that God is unchangeably powerful and wise and good or his power is his goodness is his wisdom is his unchangeability.

End quote. Now what that means is we can trust that all these things are working together for our good because our God is all of these things all of the time and all he does flows from that.

[11 : 53] Our security comes from the fact that there is no conflict in the being or the mind or the action of God. He is one. So that's wonderfully encouraging for us and grounds our security in him.

But I want to suggest as well that this also applies to how we should think about three other areas. the first of which is authority. Authority. If our culture is a battleground of competing ultimate authorities which I think we can see that it is what a relief it is to know that we actually only need to go to one place.

There is no need for us to play different authorities off against each other because God has spoken in his word. There is a law that is given by the creator of the world that teaches us what we should do or not do in the world that he has made.

Christians throughout history agree that God's law has to be interpreted carefully. We consider the place of the law in salvation history and how the coming of Jesus fulfills that law. So you know when we start if we were to talk about the law of God in our culture those popular criticisms that come our way about the Old Testament verses that people don't seem to like or that seem a bit outdated or a bit arbitrary like the Levitical prohibitions around eating shellfish and wearing clothes from mixed fibers and people say well what do you do with that?

It's the smoking gun isn't it for the smart critic? But of course those things are all very easily explained if people take time to read the Bible on its own terms. There are questions about interpretation but because God is the one true and living God His law is universally applicable.

[13 : 40] All the cultural relativism no one is right everyone is right all of that dissolves. There is someone who is right and it's the God who made it all the God who is one and we need to see as well I think that God's law if we were to go and speak to people in our culture today about implementing God's law they would immediately I think assume that we were trying to introduce something incredibly draconian and controlling and restrictive but we need to realize God's law is

much less restrictive than the law of our land today.

Ten words ten sentences fleshed out in some case laws no more than a few pages compare that with British law the UK tax code is 15 times the length of the Bible the ten commandments given by the finger of God are the highest revelation of God's natural order and it is a law that promotes human flourishing not least because it affords so much freedom where God's law obligates us we must do it but where it doesn't we are free that is surely why James can call the law of God the law of liberty now to be clear I'm not advocating breaking the law of the land someone comes to me and says well there are no yellow lines in the Bible so I can park where I want I don't recommend you do that but I'm just pointing out that our law in Britain today is way more restrictive than

God when it comes to what we can and can't do that's of course before we come to the liberty that it offers against the cultural censorship we experience it feels at every turn where the Bible doesn't bind you don't let anyone else scold or burden you where you come from or what you have are yours by God's design don't let anyone convince you that you should feel guilty because of what God has given you even if they shout how dare you or you're stealing my dreams now this probably doesn't mean that we want to bring the book of Deuteronomy across lock, stock and barrel into the law of the land today without respect to the changes that have come through the death and resurrection of Christ the Bible as a whole has a remit for the state but it also promotes other areas of authority like the family and the church even the individual conscience no one thinks it's the state's job to legislate on every sin submitting to the law of God doesn't mean swapping traffic wardens for say envy wardens or greed wardens at its most basic it simply means that because God has spoken and because God is one where his word obligates us we are obligated and where it doesn't there is liberty first area where oneness applies is authority the second area where the oneness of God is relevant is regarding ethics ethics

Christianity promotes a coherent way of living that flows with the fabric of the way that the world was designed it's really important to see that the oneness of God means that the cosmos makes sense now it's very true that human sin has messed with the smooth running of things and there will always be moral dilemmas to be wrestled through but at root there is a moral ethical philosophical cohesion in the world because it springs from one mind every single world view that we come up against that we that we encounter promotes a vision of the good life the world view that people hold the way they put the world together the way they put their thinking together about the world is a vision of the good life they adopt that view because they think that that is how peace and flourishing and all those good things will happen because the world is the way it is so let me just clarify that when people talk about why they live the way that they do they're saying because the way the world is you need to adopt this set of ethical norms you need to behave like this if it's all going to work if you want to flourish as an individual if we want to see society blossom we should all adopt X approach to what we eat or don't eat or how we treat others or don't treat them or how we use our time and money and so on but as I said at the start this inevitably creates this collision of ideas of virtues and we flip flop between them because they never seem to be able to fully deliver for us and the reason for this is that they can't only the Christian vision of the good life which is life that is truly life the Lord Jesus says only that can deliver because only Christian ethics are consistent with the fabric of the world that God has made and where an ethical system does seem to be consistent with the world as it has been made whatever the person professes to believe they have adopted a Christian ethic on that thing and that is why by the way people who deny the existence of God can do right things and can do good things it is because they are made in God's image that God is truth and justice and so on and their behavior is chiming with his design whatever someone professes to believe when they speak the truth they are borrowing

[19 : 13] Christian capital when they act in a way that is just they are doing so on the basis of God's world and God's instruction even though they don't realize second area is ethics the third area where the oneness of God applies is salvation because there is one God there is only one way to salvation the father planned it in his life death and resurrection for us and for our salvation the son achieved it and the spirit applies it that means we only need to go to one place to receive it the one God salvation is received by putting our faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ and can I say if you are not a Christian and you're interested in this you're looking into it this is where I want you to focus this evening if I can urge you to consider this there is one

God he has created a way of salvation through his one true through his one son and that's the only place that you need to go every other theory every ultimate authority that is presented in our world

is a salvation project of sorts like I say it's the way to the good life but all of those ultimately fall short either because we can't measure up to the standards so that the vision of the good life that is held out is get to this standard and you can have it or it is all of our expectation all of our desires all of our longings and we put them into this thing and it lets us down because it can't bear the weight of our expectation it's way more straightforward with God go to Christ give him your sin and get from him eternal life go to Christ and find freedom from your sin and freedom to live as God has called you go to Christ and receive the Holy Spirit who enables us all to live well in the world hear oh Israel the Lord our God the Lord is one when you start to grasp the implications of the oneness of God lots of things make sense there is liberty and that liberty leads to joy and so what follows in our passage well you would want to love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your might and so to bind his words on your heart because there is one God we have a coherent and a consistent life that is held out to us it's not only possible it is given to us in the Lord Jesus let's pray together we have a coherent