

Sermon for July 1, 2018
Independence Day Week
“God’s Requirements”

Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-21

“What does the Lord your God require of you?” That’s a good question! If we believe in God, then we want to know what God wants of our lives. We are impelled to ask that question and diligently seek its answer. God gave Israel an answer early in its existence.

The book of Deuteronomy was a record of the law that God gave to the Israelites to follow when they entered the Promised Land. Israel had been in slavery in Egypt and through ten plagues, the Passover, and a parted sea God liberated them out of a slavery based on their race and led them to the wilderness. In Deuteronomy God gave this band of escaped slaves a civil code of law. But it is also an example of the moral code of the God who created the world. It both points to and is derived from the one who authored the distinction between right and wrong.

So, in the early chapters Deuteronomy it asks the rhetorical question: “What does God require of you?” And it gives an answer both in general terms and in particulars. The passage we read this morning is the general answer. I won’t try to go through the next 24 chapters to delineate the particulars.

So, what does God require of Israel? The first thing is to respect and love and serve God. No surprise there. We should put God first. But does this just mean that we don’t worship idols or fail to thank God for every breath?

What is significant is the way this serving of God is defined. First God is described as one who shows no partiality, or prejudice. God is the one who acts justly for the orphans and the widows, the voiceless and powerless in their society. God is also the one who loves the stranger, the alien, and God provides food and clothing for them along with the widows and orphans.

So if Israel is serving the God who does all that, what are they to do? If they are following a God who shows no prejudice, they are to do the same. If they are serving a God who feeds and clothes the poor and powerless, then they are to do the same. They are also to love the stranger, the outsider, the alien in their midst. God reminds them that they were aliens in Egypt and refugees in the wilderness. God cared for them in their need, and rescued them from slavery, so they should follow God’s example and show the same love for the alien.

So why am I preaching on this passage so near the 4th of July? I am preaching on it because it is one of the texts that the Book of Worship suggests for the 4th of July. Which seemed curious to me. After all, America is not Israel. It is not even an analogue of Israel. Israel’s first commandment was “You shall have no other gods.” America’s first amendment includes freedom of religion: freedom to have whatever gods you want!

America is not Israel, but the church is. Paul in the book of Romans talked about the church being grafted into the tree of Israel.¹ These values spoken to Israel apply to us, the church today. So as Christians in America what does it say to us?

What does God require of Christians in America? These requirements apply to us as individuals and congregations and denominations. But I also think they apply to us, a citizen within this country. We are called to hold up these values within our society and to our elected leaders.

So American Christians, what does God require of us? First and foremost, to place God first. As Christians in this society we should seek to serve God with our whole being. Jesus said that this was the greatest commandments. Our relationship to God should define all that we are and all that we do as Christians. It should even affect our economic and political actions.

And a part of following God with our whole being is seeking to be as unbiased as God is. That is often easier said than done. We want to be free of prejudice, but often our actions are influenced by prejudiced attitudes that we are sometimes unaware of. We live in a society that is filled with biases based on race, gender, lifestyle, and culture. These biases are implicit in the structure of our country and its culture. America began by saying “All men are created equal.”² Then we proceeded to define all slaves as counting as only 3/5 of a free person³ and assumed that women should not be allowed to vote. We attempted to fix both of those injustices with Amendments to the Constitution,⁴ but their initial existence shows how deep seated these biases are within our national psyche and American culture.

As Christians trying to be faithful to God, we need to seek to find these biases within ourselves and repent of them. The trend today is to try to deny that these biases even exist. To do so is to deny our history, current events, and our human nature. Studies have demonstrated over and over again that these implicit or subconscious biases exist in all of us.⁵ Current events like the arrest of African-Americans for doing nothing but sitting in a Starbucks, or in their own home in a nice neighborhood⁶ are proof of this bias, not to mention that disproportionate number of African-Americans wrongfully killed by Law Enforcement.⁷ The vast number of powerful men being taken down by the #MeToo and #timesup movements, shows the pervasiveness of sexist biases too. As Christians we need to stand up to these prejudices by first finding them in ourselves, and then calling attention to them in our society. Some may dismiss that as being “politically correct.” No, it is not. It is being Biblically correct and morally correct; just plain right as opposed to wrong. We all, no matter what race and gender, are created in the image of God and should all be treated with respect!

What does God require of us? This passage also explicitly says that we are to care for the needy and the alien. It specifically talks of widows and orphans. These were the people who have no source of support because they had no man to care for them in a patriarchal society. The laws of Moses provided social structures that helped to provide for them, but it was a meager existence. The “widows and orphans” also represent for us those in our society who are without a voice as well as the materially poor. We should seek not only to support them as a church, but to lead our country to find ways of care for them that does not stereotype or demean them.

As a part of this, we are also called to “love the stranger.”⁸ Deuteronomy goes on to remind Israel that they were once strangers in the land of Egypt. We were all once strangers. With the exception of the Native Americans, our ancestors all came, or were brought here, from somewhere else. We have tried to embrace this ideal of "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore, Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"⁹ But often we have not. Policies and stories of prejudice against German and Italian and Irish immigrants not to mention immigrants from other parts of the world are rampant in our history. And stereotypes of those seeking to immigrate today are rampant as well.

One concern is our treatment of refugees. These are people who have been driven from their homes because of war, violence, or persecution. Often, they were persecuted because of their religion or ethnic background. As Christians we need to seek to love these people created in God’s image. And this church has done that by adopting a refugee family from Vietnam in the 1980’s and by welcoming the ESL program for refugees into our building now. But as a country we can do better. For decades the United States has received 100,000 to 120,000 refugees a year through the UN refugee program. Last year the U.S. received less than 30,000¹⁰ and this year the number of refugees has been capped at 45,000. Tens of thousands of the most vulnerable people on the planet, that we have been able to help in the past, are being turned away! On top of that people seeking asylum on our southern border are being arrested and many who came with children had them taken away. As Christians we need to repent of these injustices and call our nation to repent as well!

What does God require of us Christians in America? We are required to love God first. We need to follow the example of our God and love our neighbor by seeking to be unbiased. We are to care for the needy and the stranger, for we were once strangers in a new land.

To do this we need to acknowledge our own prejudices and repent with the help of the Holy Spirit. Repentance, admitting our faults and turning to God, is the first step. The Biblical word for repent means to have a change of heart. Our hearts need to be transformed so that we place God first, then seek to love all God’s children

What do we need to repent of? Our own biases and prejudices, even the ones we may not be conscious of. We also need to repent of our complacency about the plight of impoverished people here and of refugees around the world. God requires nothing less of us.

¹ Romans 11

² “Declaration of Independence”

³ “The Constitution of the United States of America” Article I, Section 2

⁴ 13th & 19th Amendments

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Implicit_stereotype

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Louis_Gates_arrest_controversy

⁷ <https://www.vox.com/cards/police-brutality-shootings-us/us-police-racism>

⁸ Deuteronomy 10:10

⁹ The New Colossus

¹⁰ “Refugee admissions to U.S. plummet in 2017,” Alan Gomez, USA TODAY, Published 3:28 p.m. ET Jan. 3, 2018