

“Slaves to Common Sense”

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2 Chronicles 31:2-8:

²Hezekiah assigned the priests and Levites to divisions—each of them according to their duties as priests or Levites—to offer burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, to minister, to give thanks and to sing praises at the gates of the Lord's dwelling. ³The king contributed from his own possessions for the morning and evening burnt offerings and for the burnt offerings on the Sabbaths, New Moons and appointed feasts as written in the Law of the Lord. ⁴He ordered the people living in Jerusalem to give the portion due the priests and Levites so they could devote themselves to the Law of the Lord. ⁵As soon as the order went out, the Israelites generously gave the firstfruits of their grain, new wine, oil and honey and all that the fields produced. They brought a great amount, a tithe of everything.

⁶The men of Israel and Judah who lived in the towns of Judah also brought a tithe of their herds and flocks and a tithe of the holy things dedicated to the Lord their God, and they piled them in heaps. ⁷They began doing this in the third month and finished in the seventh month. ⁸When Hezekiah and his officials came and saw the heaps, they praised the Lord and blessed his people Israel.

This seems like a fairly serene passage. Everyone is generously giving and tithing, and everyone seems happy. But if we're honest with ourselves it's probably the kind of passage that we are easily suspicious of when we hear it. We know through experience that this passage could easily be twisted into someone's idea of a tool with which to put a guilt trip on us. How many sermons have we all heard about giving more money in order to be more blessed? So we come to this scripture, bracing ourselves for a warped message about God's economic will for our lives. We build up a shell of

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resistance to those who would dare to speak to us about money in the church. And by doing so, we miss the rich message that the scripture has to offer. But the question remains, what *is* this passage of scripture communicating? Is this really a scripture that God wants to shame us with, or is there something deeper going on here? Why are the people giving? What are the events that brought them to this point?

William Golding wrote a book called *Lord of the Flies*¹. The story takes place in the midst of a war. A transport plane carrying a group of boys is shot down over the ocean and crashes on a deserted island. One of the main characters, Ralph, is a natural leader. He commands order, and the boys follow him. Everyone has a role: some are hunters, some are supposed to maintain the signal fire for rescue, while others, like Ralph, function as overseers and maintain order. But then something bad happens. A ship passes by the island without stopping, because the signal fire is not lit.

Ralph is furious that this has happened and gets angry at Jack, the leader of the hunters, because he was supposed to be in charge of the signal fire. But Jack doesn't seem to care. In fact, Jack has become obsessed with hunting and decides that life isn't so bad stranded on the island. To add to Jack's power and influence, some of the boys think they have seen a beast on the island, and the idea of a beast lurking in the jungle is frightening. As a hunter, Jack takes charge and begins to send out expeditions to hunt for it. He doesn't care about being saved anymore. He begins functioning on instinct, on what he sees as the common sense of survival. He abandons Ralph's order and morals, and leaves, taking most of the boys with him.

Just as Jack abandons morality and leads the boys astray, we read in 2 Chronicles 28 about a 20 year old named Ahaz, who becomes king of Judah...and abandons God. The Scriptures give us a simple introduction to Ahaz. **“Ahaz did not do what was right in the eyes of the Lord”** (Chronicles 28:1). We're told at the very beginning that he is worshipping Baal, the fertility god of Ahaz's time. Worship of Baal wasn't just bowing to an idol. It involved perverse sexual encounters with prostitutes as part of worship, shattering the Lord's intention for human sexuality and relationship. But

¹ William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (New York, NY: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1954).

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Ahaz doesn't stop there. He burns incense to other gods and even sacrifices some of his own children in pagan rituals.

Now, at that same time Judah was in conflict with the nations of Israel and Aram, and Ahaz sent his army into battle, but because of his unfaithfulness, God allowed Ahaz's army to be defeated, and 120,000 of his soldiers are killed in one day. This was a heavy defeat. It was a real problem that needed a real solution, and Ahaz needed a way out. So he applies some instinct and common sense to assess the situation, and comes up with a plan. He sends word to the king of Assyria, telling him that he will pay for their help in battle. Ahaz robs the temple and gives the wealth over to Assyria so that they will save him from his enemies. But apparently the king of Assyria only gives him more trouble. His military campaign was failing, and allying himself with Assyria wasn't saving him, so what else could he do?

And then he comes up with a new solution.

He figures out that he was defeated by the king of Aram because that king was worshiping gods who gave the Arameans victory in battle. Therefore, if Ahaz worshiped those same gods, then perhaps he too could be saved. So he makes one final decision as king of Judah. He goes up to the temple of the Lord and shuts the doors. No longer will the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob be worshiped. He does everything he can to expel Yahweh, and goes to work, setting up high places and altars to these foreign gods so that these gods will see their worship and grant them victory in war.

In *Lord of the Flies*, there is a character named Simon. While the chaos on the island reigns, he finds himself alone and exhausted on a mountain, and he begins to have a strange vision where he thinks he sees the Beast of the island talking to him. The Beast says, "There isn't anyone to help you. Only me. And I'm the Beast...Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill! ...You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? ...I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are the way they are?"² Simon understands. The boys on the island were preoccupied with fearing a mysterious, monstrous, and externally demonic beast, when in reality the beast was

² Golding, 200.

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among them in their cruelty, their hatred, and their violence. The beast was among them in their “common sense.” In fact, maybe the Beast is a beast of common sense. This Beast had found all its power in the common sense of practicality and functionality.

And once we let it loose, it takes us captive.

This Beast was in everything that Ahaz did. He continually made choices based on what he logically thought should work. Ahaz gave into the common sense of a warped cultural value system rather than trusting in God. The Chronicler tells us that no good that comes from the reign of Ahaz. He dies, leaving a war-torn Judah in moral, spiritual, and physical ruin.

But we aren't like Ahaz, are we? We aren't like Jack. We would never shut the door on God and worship something else. At least that's what we tell ourselves. So how easily we miss the overarching problem that Ahaz was absorbed into. Worshiping idols was just a symptom of Ahaz's true disease, and while our symptoms may look different, the disease is the same. We find ourselves becoming embedded into a flawed value system—whatever that system may be—in such a way that the symptoms we exhibit seem so normal that we don't even notice that we're sick.

If we doubt this fact, then perhaps all we need is to look at something as simple as advertising. There are ads in magazines, newspapers, the internet, on park benches, on television, and in the movies, all pitching products that we “need.” And so we live our lives, associating at least a portion of happiness with the accumulation of possessions. We find ourselves becoming just as absorbed into our cultural system as Ahaz was into his.

Hardly even realizing it, we are indoctrinated with a message that isn't from God at all, but from the world. We listen to the noise for so long, that we can't hear the voice of the Spirit at all anymore. Instead, we hear the deafening voice of the culture that determines how we live every day at work, school, and at home. The voice of the Beast that imprisoned the boys of the island resonates in our collective consciousness, enslaving us with each new choice we make. We even start interpreting Scriptures only in ways that allow us to live the way our system tells us to live. So we keep accumulating, we keep guzzling, we keep using, abusing, consuming, achieving...and

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sinning. We say to ourselves that survival in the world means that sometimes we have to compromise.

That's just common sense.

And before we know it, we've slipped into the trap of Ahaz. What we hear about on Sunday is gradually divorced from how we function in the real world. So, while we aren't building a shrine to Baal in the basement, we do find ourselves worshiping something other than God. We become slaves to sin. We die as Ahaz died. We shut the doors of the temple and we listen to the blaring noise of our culture that drowns out the voice of God. Then, suddenly, we turn around and find that we do not do what is right in the eyes of the Lord.

Ahaz reigned for 16 years. The people of Judah knew 16 years of unfaithfulness, 16 years of rebellion, and 16 years of Ahaz's brand of "common sense." But for Judah, in the midst of a gigantic mess, hope appears. Hezekiah assumes the throne as king of Judah, and the passage begins by saying, "**Hezekiah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord**" (2 Chronicles 29:2).

Things start to change, and in fact, the first thing that Hezekiah does as king is to reopen and repair the doors of the temple of the Lord. His father, Ahaz, had shut them, but they did not remain shut. Try as hard as he might, Ahaz could not actually expel Yahweh from Judah, even while sin ran rampant in the land. With the opening of the doors of the temple, God's power begins to seep out among the people again. Not because the temple or the doors had some sort of magical power, but because the people were listening to the Lord again. Through that listening, we see Hezekiah purifying the temple, preparing for and celebrating the Passover among the people, and then gathering the people for worship of the one true God. So, we come back to chapter 31, where we started. We see that it is in the midst of brokenness and lost identity that the people gathered together again for true worship. They gathered to remember who they were.

And so they gathered to give.

The people of God gather to give to God out of love. The gift is a gift of faith in the midst of turmoil. Many of us today are truly living in the midst of economic danger

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and insecurity, and we understand turmoil. We are constantly aware of the danger of unemployment, unpaid bills, and lack of resources. But there are other dangers - the dangers that loom in the sole pursuit of our own security. Even under the rule of good king Hezekiah, bad things were ahead for these people. Hezekiah himself would do things that would later contribute to Judah eventually being conquered by Babylon and deported. The line of kings would be broken and Jerusalem would be left in ruin. The potential for problems is still there. Real dangers are looming on the horizon. But at this moment, as they have rediscovered their God, they break free from the magnetic pull of what has been common and they engage in an uncommon joy.

They give.

They give in the midst of turmoil, they give in the midst of unrest, and they give in the midst of fear. They give because it's a natural expression of their worship of Almighty God. The gift itself reflects the very character of a loving God who would sacrifice everything for his people. This nature of God was fully realized in Jesus Christ, who taught that living in the Kingdom was dying to the world – that taking up a cross and following him was actually a painful pursuit. The pain of his cross became our good news by saving us from death and hell.

Jesus came to break sin's stronghold on our lives and to invite us into a very different way of living. He taught that a poor woman who put a small copper coin into the offering gave much more than the rich, who gave out of what they had, publicly dumping their wealth into the offering plates. But Jesus didn't go by the common sense of the culture. His claims about himself got him nailed to a cross, and when common sense said that Jesus was nothing but a corpse, he rose, breaking even the hold of death.

If we truly recognize this, then perhaps we will start to see a little more clearly that a love for God requires something from us. Good stewardship isn't just about robotically giving our tithes, contributing to a building fund, or giving to Faith Promise. Stewardship is a way of life. It is a life that starts to enact the Kingdom of God right here and now, with love and generosity that takes what God has blessed us with and gives it back.

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Our love for God means a love for the ministries of the church, a love for the marginalized, and a love for the mission of making disciples in all nations. Money is only a part of what we give. We also give God our entire self and allow him to break the chains of sin that bind us. To be a worshiper of God is to be a steward of what God has given us, and to be a steward of God is to live a life of love directed towards Him, and felt by the world.

Giving in this way goes against the world's established structures of common sense. In fact, understanding the blessing of God in this way totally rebels against the noise of the world, which is constantly blaring at us to buy and consume. Instead, the Kingdom of God, illuminated to us in that moment of Judah's gift, and ultimately through Christ, ushers us into a new and alternate reality—one that has a different set of values and one that rejects the world's common sense. In the Kingdom of God, we find something more powerful, more radical, more revolutionary, and more subversive than common sense. It is a way of life that reflects the very nature of God. It is a way of life demonstrated by Hezekiah and the people. It is a way of life that Jesus embodied in everything he said and did. It is a way of love.

And God's love *always* overcomes the common sense of the world.