

Adding and Subtracting

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Several years ago, Rod and I had the opportunity to see “In the Beginning” at the Sight and Sound Theater in Lancaster. From the first screen proclaiming, “In the beginning, God”, it follows Creation and the first humans up to the death of Adam (Gen. 1:1-5:5). In order to make an entertaining program, some additions needed to be made to the story to help move the plot and help those who may not be familiar with the Creation story to understand what was happening. Although these additions are appropriate to make an entertaining and coherent story for the theater, I wondered how such additions might affect us in our day-to-day walk with the Lord. I went to Scripture to look for answers.

In the Garden of Eden, before the fall of man, there was one simple rule – do not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam and Eve understood this. Unfortunately, so did the serpent. Being a wily creature, the serpent manipulated God’s words to cause Adam and Eve to sin. We find this story in Genesis 3:1-5:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from *any* tree in the garden’?”

²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵“For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

We know what happened next, Eve ate the fruit and then offered it to Adam who also ate. How did the serpent get Adam and Eve to disobey God? He added to God’s word when he said, “Did God say, ‘You must not eat from **ANY** tree in the garden?’” Such a seemingly minor change in wording, but look at the major damage caused by adding to God’s word.

Over the generations God’s people struggled with keeping His word. So much so that when God spoke to Moses in the desert He gave these instructions:

Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.

Did these words help? The Biblical record tells us the answer is - No. God’s people continued to add to His commands. How much of a

problem was this? Jesus' words when he was challenged by the Pharisees, from the Book of Mark, give us an idea:

⁶ He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

“These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

⁷ They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.’^[a]

⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

Over the years the man-made laws, additions to what God had commanded, had become more important to the people than the Law of Moses. By adding to God's word, what He had commanded had become lost in a maze of human rules and regulations which finally served to negate His Will among His people.

It should not be surprising then that Moses begins his discourse with the admonition to, “hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.” Right at the outset, Moses impresses on the people that God's decrees lead to life. And not just life for those who heard Moses speak, but the people were to be careful to, “Teach them to your children and to their children

after them.” These decrees were for God’s people in all places at all times, but they would need to remain pure and unadulterated by additions and subtractions made by men.

As the Israelite nation prepared to settle into a new land this instruction was of the upmost importance. They had already been exposed to different cultures and gods through their time of slavery in Egypt and while traveling in the desert. The influence of these other cultures and gods had begun to add and subtract from the Word of God. If the people were to experience the life God had called them to in their new homeland, they would have to hold fast to the true Word of God.

Fast forward several thousand years to the 21st century. There are new cultures and new gods in the digital age, but Moses’ words remain true. God calls us to life, but we must hold fast to His true word. When we add to or subtract from God’s Word, we are opening ourselves to trouble. Think about some things that are accepted as being true about God’s word, but are not.

How often have you heard someone say, “God helps those who help themselves”? It’s got the words God and help in it so it must be from the Bible, right? Wrong! The belief that this is true has pulled many away from God, thinking they have to help themselves instead of relying on God for help. If someone can truly help themselves, is there any

need for God? It can become a slippery slope to believing that we are so self-sufficient we don't really need God in our lives.

What about this one? "Money is the root of all evil". Not so! These words in 1 Timothy 6:10, tell us what is true, "for the LOVE of money is a root of all kinds of evil." Money is a necessity of life. Without money how does one buy food and clothing, or maintain a roof over their head? It is when money becomes one's all-consuming desire, that we begin to see the truth in Paul's words to Timothy. Lovers of money have resorted to all kinds of evil to fulfill their lust, from cheating on taxes, to trafficking in drugs and sex, to theft, even going so far as to murder for money.

Can you see that by adding to or subtracting from God's Word we open ourselves to all manner of trouble? In a day when we are bombarded by many different voices claiming to speak for God, how do we know if they are adding to or subtracting from the true Word of God. Again, Scripture has an answer for us. These words from 1 John can be helpful:

4 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the

antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

Just as Adam and Eve encountered a wily serpent in the garden who was able to seemingly use God's words to trick them, so there are serpents in our world today who would try to do the same. We can protect ourselves from these serpents by being aware of what God's Word really says. If we are knowledgeable of what the Bible says, we are less likely to fall prey to the serpents of this day who wish to draw us away from the life God has promised us.

While the additions to God's word made for an entertaining stage show at Sight and Sound, it is another thing entirely to properly represent the Lord in today's world. The world we live in needs to hear God's life-giving word. Let's make sure we are not adding to or subtracting from it so others might truly know the Good News we have to share.

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