

Red Sea Rule 2:

Be more concerned for God's glory than for your relief.

Psalm 106:6-12

June 14, 2009

This morning we are continuing a study that we began last week that is based on Robert Morgan's little book, *The Red Sea Rules*. When I first came across this book six years ago, I was not impressed. I thought, "Oh, here is another one of these simplistic Christian books that are so popular now. It probably offers some 10-step formula to make complacent Christians more comfortable. I'll bet that it is nothing but pop psychology covered with a thin veneer of carefully selected Bible verses!" Do you understand what I was thinking? I was not expecting much.

Then I opened the book up to the table of contents. I started reading down the list of the Red Sea Rules. I came to Rule #2: *Be more concerned for God's glory than for your relief*. I was stunned. It was like a bolt of lightning had hit me. All of a sudden my opinion of this little book took a 180-degree turn.

Two sociologists have proposed the idea that the dominant religion in America today is what they call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. (That's not a real catchy name for a religion, but it does summarize what is being taught in our culture and in many churches today.) Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Here is how these two sociologists explain it: "God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: He is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process." In other words, God wants people to be nice, but most of all he wants them to feel good about themselves. And you can rest assured that God does not want to bother you. He will leave you alone and let you do what you want. But if you really need him, then he's glad to step in and help out. That is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, and it is a pretty good description of the way that most Americans think about God.¹

Red Sea Rule #2 strikes right at the heart of that entire mentality! Be more concerned for God's glory than for your relief!

The Scriptural Teaching

Let's take a few minutes and think about that rule. *Be more concerned for God's glory than for your relief*. That instruction is not an invention of Robert Morgan, the author of The Red Sea Rules. It's a principle that we find all through God's Word. Look at what Jesus says as he contemplates his death.

"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" (John 12:27-28)

That's an incredible statement. Jesus knows that he's going to be crucified. His hands and feet are going to be pierced by nails, and he's going to be left hanging from a wooden cross until his life is sucked out of him. What does he say? "Father, glorify your name!"

Think about how Jesus teaches us to pray in the Lord's Prayer. What is the first request that we are to make of God? "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matt. 6:9). Most of us have recited those words so often that we don't give them much thought. What is Jesus teaching us to say in that prayer? "God, may you be glorified and honored as you alone deserve. That's the thing that I am asking of you first. That's what I want most of all. Hallowed be thy name."

¹ This analysis comes from Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009 reprint edition). See also Colin Hansen, "Death by Deism" at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/aprilweb-only/116-11.0.html>. Accessed April 22, 2009.

Look at an Old Testament passage that teaches the same thing. God speaks through his prophet Ezekiel in stark and startling terms. God is making a promise that he is going to rescue his people from Babylon, and he explains why he is going to rescue them. The reason he gives is not what we would expect.

Therefore say to the house of Israel, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: *It is not for your sake*, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, *but for the sake of my holy name*, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. *I will show the holiness of my great name . . .* I want you to know that *I am not doing this for your sake*, declares the Sovereign LORD.” (Ezek. 36:22-23a, 32 emphasis added)

What is God’s top priority? It is not the good of his people. It is his own honor and glory.

The Reasons behind the Teaching

I have had people say to me more than once, “God sure is selfish! All he’s concerned about is his own glory. Isn’t that selfish? If you or I said that all we were concerned about was our own reputation, God would think that we were being self-centered. How come he gets to be so selfish?”

Good question! It sure sounds like God is being selfish, doesn’t it? We need to think about that. We need to take a little time for some theological reflection. We’ve seen what the Bible teaches. How are we to understand and make sense of that teaching? Is God selfish in wanting to be glorified and honored and praised?

The reason that we struggle with this question is that we make what is called a “category mistake.”² We put God in the same category that we find ourselves in, and then we apply our human standards to God. Let me give you another example. One of the keys to mental health is a good night’s sleep. “Every person needs a good night’s sleep.” Would you agree with that statement? I would hope so. Therefore, it logically follows that God needs a good night’s sleep too. But none of us would say that because we know that God is not like us when it comes to sleep and rest. God is not in the same category. That applies to God’s honor and glory too.

Think about it this way. Who is the most important person in the universe? If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you will say that God is the most important person in the universe. Do you think that God knows that he is the most important person in the universe? If we know it, then he certainly knows it. Suppose that he decides that he is not going to act as if he is the most important person in the universe. What would that mean? That would mean that God is going to act in a way that he knows is not true. Therefore, God would be acting in a false and deceptive manner. But wait a minute! God does not act that way. He operates according to what he knows is true. Therefore, it follows that to be true and righteous God cannot deny his own worth.

Here’s what it all comes down to. For you and me to act as if we are the center of the universe is wrong because the world does not revolve us. But for God to act as if he is the ultimate value in the universe is good because he is truly the ultimate value in the universe.³

I know that is heavy theology, but it is worth considering. Let’s think about how that applies to our lives. Would you agree that life is better when you live according to the truth? Living a lie is counterproductive. It backfires on you.

We’ve seen an example of that in the news just this week. Did you follow the story about the man who called himself Clark Rockefeller? For years he passed himself off as a member of the Rockefeller clan. He even fooled his wife into thinking that he was a part of the

² Mark R. Talbot, “True Freedom: The Liberty That Scripture Portrays as Worth Having,” in Beyond the Bounds, ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjos Helseth (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 99.

³ John Piper. “Brothers, God is Love” in Brothers, We Are NOT Professionals. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 11-16.

rich and elite Rockefellers. But his lie finally caught up with him, and he was exposed as a total fraud.

You can only live a lie for so long. Sooner or later you are going to get into a lot of trouble. Living according to the truth is always better in the long run.

Since it is true that God is the most important person in the universe, you and I are going to find our greatest joy when we live according to that truth. Be more concerned about God's glory than for your relief. Make the glory and honor of God your goal, and the result will be that you will be far more content and happy in life than if you focus only on yourself.

Psalm 115:1 summarizes the idea.

Not to us, LORD, not to us
but to your name be the glory,
because of your love and faithfulness.

The Teaching of Psalm 57

Be more concerned for God's glory than for your relief. That's Red Sea Rule #2. Note how carefully worded that statement is. It does not say that you should have no concern for your own relief. It is not saying that it's wrong to do anything for yourself. That would be an overreaction to the self-absorption that characterizes our age. It's just that we are to be more concerned for God's glory than for our own relief.

Look at how David communicates what we are calling Red Sea Rule #2. In Psalm 57 David is in trouble. The title that is printed in our Bibles in small print says that David wrote this psalm "when he had fled from Saul into the cave." King Saul is out to kill David. David hides out in a cave in order to escape Saul. That's when he writes this psalm. He starts by telling God exactly what is on his mind.

Have mercy on me, my God, have mercy on me,
for in you my soul takes refuge.
I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings
until the disaster has passed. (Ps. 57:1)

David does pray for relief. "God, save me from Saul!" He is concerned about his own relief--and for good reason! Look at how he describes the trouble that he is in.

I am in the midst of lions;
I am forced to dwell among man-eating beasts—
whose teeth are spears and arrows,
whose tongues are sharp swords. (Ps. 57:4)

David prays for his own relief. There's nothing wrong with that. But David doesn't stop with that request. There is something more on his mind than just his own safety.

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
let your glory be over all the earth. (Ps. 57:5)

David continues in the following verses and writes about his own situation again. Then the psalm ends with verse 11 repeating what David has already stated in verse 5.

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
let your glory be over all the earth. (Ps. 57:11)

There is Red Sea Rule #2 in the life of David. Be more concerned about God's glory than your relief.

Living this Teaching

Living according to that principle really does make a difference. When you are facing a huge trial, instead of looking for someone to blame or instead of asking, “How can I get out of this mess?” ask instead “How can I honor God in this situation?” By asking that one question your whole perspective on life can be dramatically transformed.⁴

In The Red Sea Rules, Robert Morgan offers a profound insight with just four words. Do you remember him writing this sentence? “God doesn’t waste suffering.”⁵ There are four words really worth thinking about. “God doesn’t waste suffering.” In our trials we grow and develop into the people that God wants us to be. And it is in our suffering that we are often given the best opportunities to glorify God and bring him honor.

A couple of weeks ago Larry Roed spoke to us during our summer Sunday School hour. There were a number of things that he said that I found to be so refreshing, but one part of his story really stuck in my mind.

When Larry was in his early 20s, he was out on the town driving around with some friends. He was driving too fast and wrecked his car. As a result of that accident Larry became paralyzed from the waist down. He was in the hospital for months, but then he was able to return home. All of his friends immediately came over to see him, but after two weeks they stopped coming. He could no longer do the things that he had once done with his friends. They didn’t have much in common any more, so they stopped coming by the house to visit.

Larry would spend most of the day sitting in his wheelchair alone in his room. Somebody gave him a Bible, and he started to read it. God used that Bible. Larry said to us, “Don’t ever underestimate the power of God’s Word.” One day alone in his room Larry surrendered his life to Jesus Christ, and Larry discovered the joy of knowing Christ as his personal Friend and Savior.

Larry also started to develop a hope that God would miraculously heal him from his paralysis. He told us how he went to a series of meetings led by Kathryn Kuhlman. In the 1970s Kathryn Kuhlman was well known for her healing ministry. So Larry hoped that God would use Kathryn Kuhlman’s prayers to heal him. One night during those meetings Larry stopped and talked to a woman who was sitting in one of the aisle seats. He remembers her because she was Italian. The conversation wasn’t anything remarkable. They just talked.

The next night the pastor of the church rushed out to greet Larry when he arrived for that night’s meeting, and he told Larry how much that conversation had meant to that woman. He had been such an encouragement to her. That caught Larry totally off guard. It came as a complete surprise. Larry said that he suddenly realized that there was more going on at those meetings than he had thought. He had gone to those meetings just for his own sake. He wanted to be healed! But now he realized that God had purposes far bigger than just Larry Roed.

That’s what Red Sea Rule #2 is all about. Be more concerned for God’s glory than your own relief. “Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory!”

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on June 14, 2009 by Dr. Frederic Martin
expanding on The Red Sea Rules by Robert J. Morgan.

⁴ Robert J. Morgan, *The Red Sea Rules* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.