

Sermon 102, The Danger of Counting, Exodus 30:11-16

Proposition: The power of counting is a proper part of humanity's dominion and of the worship of God, but when not modified by acts of financial devotion and dependence, it can become extremely dangerous and even damning.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, in case you haven't noticed, we live in the age of Big Data. The most popular class offered to undergraduates at Harvard University is now Introduction to Statistics. It enrolls more than seven hundred each year, out of a total undergrad population of about six thousand. Oh, and there I am too, rattling off statistics with which to make my case. Maybe most statistics are indeed made up on the spot, but the fact that you feel you need statistics to make your claim credible says something about the era in which we live.

You may not have realized this, but the Bible directly addresses the concept of Big Data, particularly in terms of the basic idea behind it, which is that counting allows control and is thus a legitimate part of humanity's mission of taking dominion. That said, though counting is a legitimate part of taking dominion, it is a dangerous thing to do.

You may have thought Big Data was dangerous. You're right; it is. According to Scripture, it is far more dangerous than the mainstream naysayers of our day claim. But the solution to the threat posed by the power of Big Data is also radically simpler than you would guess. As we'll see, the numbering of God's people unleashes plague and demands atonement —

atonement which takes the form of giving money to God in a curiously regressive tax. For us, the application is simple: make sure that your exercise of power through counting is matched by acts of financial devotion. Let's dive into the text.

I. The Basic Point

I hope you noticed this basic point in the passage we just read: A census is dangerous.

A. A Census Is Dangerous

The danger is identified in v. 12 as the coming of "plague." If you remember back to the LORD's threats against Pharaoh in Exodus 7, the translation "plague" is not accurate. The English word comes from the Latin *plaga*, meaning "strike" or "blow." And that is what the Hebrew word means as well. The danger inherent in a census is the danger of God smiting you. The ten smittings or the ten blows of Ex. 7-12 are memorable for ruining Egypt and bringing about the Exodus. But Yahweh's blows are not just directed against Pharaoh and His other enemies. He also smites His wayward people when they get out of line. The classic example of a census gone wrong is David's ill-advised attempt to go, number Israel in 2 Samuel 24. The narrator chooses to end the books of Samuel with this episode, though it was probably not the last event in David's career. Why? So that he can end his book with a story in which God's faithfulness pulls Israel through despite Israel's unfaithfulness. God's faithfulness preserves the people from a worse "plague" or strike when David, incited by Satan, goes to number Israel. God's faithfulness also lets the plague lead directly to the choosing of a site for the temple, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.

Do you see how some of the same themes emerge in that story, particularly in its Chronicles variant — the same themes that we find here?

Now, before we go on to talk about those themes, especially the connection between paying for the worship of God and numbering the people of God, I want to discuss the burning question that all of you are asking right now: *Why is a census so dangerous?*

The fact of the matter is that Scripture never says. We don't know for certain why a census is dangerous. And so we turn to natural revelation to try to come up with an answer. What makes a census dangerous? One common answer is that censuses are associated with military power, military power is a common idol, and thus censuses can lead to idolatry. Something like this seems to have been the trouble in David's abortive census and the following plague in which (count 'em) 70,000 people died.

The flip side, also from natural revelation, is that a state without a census is in even bigger trouble. It is the job of the state to provide for the common defense and promote the general welfare. Those operations, in turn, require taxes and borders and bureaucrats. You can't collect taxes if you can't keep track of who your citizens are and where they are. To live in a state that does not know whether you belong to it is to be at the mercy of other states, and of lawless individuals to boot.

Zooming out a bit, the point seems to be simply that, even apart from the idolatrous aspects of the state and its military power, taxation power, etc., a dangerous element remains. I would put it like this: Of all the powers of the human being, one of the most powerful is

mathematical power. The power to count is dangerous, because knowledge is power. Something that can be counted is something that can be controlled. Something that cannot be counted is something beyond human ability to deal with. Hence our system of land titling (township 45 north, range 72 west), our issuing of VINs and ISBNs and IP addresses and SSNs and EINs and TINs and driver's license numbers and license plate numbers and phone numbers and SKUs and ticket numbers and encryption hash keys and credit card numbers and bank account numbers and routing numbers and many, many other counted, numbered, and thus controlled aspects of human life.

Oh, I didn't even mention the ubiquitous house numbers and zip codes that rationalize, define, and map the physical geography of our world. Guess where the house number was invented? Oh, that's right — post-revolutionary France, under Napoleon, so that the military draft could be sure that they had not missed any homes. And then there is the BMI and the Paris Climate Target (2 degrees Celsius) that together rule many aspects of our lives.

Brothers and sisters, did I mention that we live in the age of Big Data? Numbers are everywhere. Everywhere. The weather has been reduced to an exact temperature and wind speed and barometric pressure. Prosperity has been boiled down to the Federal Funds Rate that gooses or stalls the economy (it's currently 4.75% and rising, but the economy is still goosed except where it's stalling). The chance that Biden will win in 2024 is 29.41%, according to a quick search for current bookie's odds on the upcoming presidential election. I could go on, and on, but I think the point is made. One of the major wells from which humanity has been drawing its power lately is this well of numbering that grants control.

Again, this is a legitimate exercise of our dominion. We can't stop doing it. But, as with all the other aspects of our dominion, we can and do abuse it royally. It being one of our most powerful tools, its abuse is correspondingly one of the most dangerous pastimes of the human race. As Mark Twain put it, there are lies, damn lies, and statistics.

How do we abuse this power? I think immediately of my brother-in-law's brief tangle with a Chinese propagandist on Twitter. Jared wrote that Taiwan can protect itself by placing a self-destruct mechanism inside TSMC's world-beating chip foundries, thus killing the goose that lays the golden eggs should China ever attempt to invade. This propagandist's response was "When 1.4 billion try to do something, no one can stop them." Talk about a naked example of confidence in sheer numerical strength!

B. But Can Be Made Safe

Well, brothers and sisters, the half-dozen verses of our text speak three times of how the danger of counting can be avoided. We will talk about that in a second, but first I want to highlight that the danger can in fact be avoided. In one sense, this point does not need to be belabored. We are so used to living in the numbered and controlled world that we hardly think of it as dangerous anymore. We regard the opposite — the unnumbered, the unclassified — as the true source of chaos and danger. When your speedometer stops working, you feel a real tug of anxiety: Your progress can no longer be reduced to a number, but you can still be judged and controlled by a number should a passing cop determine that you are exceeding the allotted number of miles per

hour. But brothers and sisters, in the Biblical paradigm it is important to note that the numbered and controlled is the source of danger, but that it can be made safe. Numbering does not have to be hazardous to your spiritual health, not if you do it right.

C. By the Payment of Atonement Money

How, one might ask? By the payment of atonement money. We'll talk about how the text describes that in a moment. But notice that you don't protect yourself merely by counting accurately, or by storing the information in a retrieval system that allows you to access very detailed information instantaneously. You don't protect yourself by having an ethics committee that regulates how the data can be used or who has access to it. You don't protect yourself by inscribing a right to be forgotten, or a right for individuals to access their file and see what you have on them. The threat comes from Yahweh and the protection is protection against Yahweh. The protection takes the form of atonement money, paid to the LORD via His priests and His tabernacle.

How on earth does that work? I would suggest, brothers and sisters, that it works like this: You will handle your power as a numbering creature rightly when you use the power to give money to God. The power to number must not be decoupled from the need to give, thereby signifying that you are a dependent creature.

We like numbers because numbers put us in charge. Giving takes us out back out of charge and signifies very clearly "I am a dependent creature. I cannot protect my own life with my numbering power. I need God to protect me."

That, my friends, is the sermon in a nutshell. Numbers give power, power gives delusions of omnipotence, and only the use of the power of numbers to give to God and acknowledge our dependence on Him can protect us from the soul-destroying consequences of worshipping numbers.

II. The Nexus of Five Themes

That said, there is more in this passage, and I want to take a deeper look. We actually have five different major themes coming together here.

A. The People of God

The first is a theme that recurs right through Scripture, indeed, that can be found on pretty much every page. That is the theme of the people of God. These rules about counting are applied directly to the sons of Israel. No word directly on whether the rules also apply to the Gentiles. I would say that they do, and that one of the Gentiles' problems is that they ignore these rules.

Anyway, what does this passage tell us about the people of God?

1. Counting Worshipers

The first thing it says is that there is going to be an occasion of counting worshippers. Just as Deuteronomy says "You will have kings," so Moses says "You will have censuses." Every year our church is supposed to fill out a statistical report and send it to denominational offices in Atlanta so that the denomination can count average attendance, number in Sunday school, total giving denomination-wide, and so on. One of you tells me that her private vice is to count the

attendance each Sunday. For the record, I don't do that. I certainly notice full vs. empty, but I deliberately avoid putting a number on it and thus controlling and tracking it.

Well, the Lord acknowledges that this is something humans will do. You can find numbers of all those who identify as Christian, and all those who identify within Christianity as our kind of Christian. The latest stats say that there are 2.4bn Christians in the world.

To count like this is not wrong. It's just dangerous. We can all too easily be like the Chinese propagandist and say "When 2.4bn decide to do something, no one can stop them." The LORD is reminding us here that we need to say "No matter how many we are, we are dependent on God, not on our numerical strength!"

2. Regressive Tax — Equality in God's Sight

As the rabbis pointed out long ago, this tax is regressive. By making everyone pay a half shekel ("the rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less"), the poor bear a greater tax burden in proportional terms. What is the point? That among the people of God, all are equally responsible to their Creator and equally in His debt. The rich and the poor may be different in socioeconomic status, but they are not different in spiritual status.

B. The Act of Numbering as Exercise of Godlike Authority

We have talked a great deal already about this second theme. To number something is to control it like God controls the world — well, almost. You can make the numbers say anything; you can massage the data. There is a lot of faked data out there. It's like being God, except not in truth but in lies.

C. The Need to Pay

The central theme of the five that appear in this short passage is the theme of needing to pay. God only mentions the danger, the plague or strike, once. But He mentions the necessity of paying four different times.

1. Ransom (*kopher*), v. 12

The first term is *kopher*, referring to the price of a life or a ransom payment. The act of counting, by which you assume power over the thing counted, actually puts you into God's power. To be released you have to be ransomed. The ransom is not a large one — it's a mere half shekel. But you do have to have something to offer to God to pay to get your life back.

2. Offering (*terumah*), vv. 13, 15

The second term used to describe this ransom payment is *terumah*, which means exactly what we mean by "offering" in a contemporary church setting. "We're going to take an offering" — that is, we are going to accept funds that God's people give to Him to be generous like Him and keep His church going. This word appears twice. Amazing how the same payment is both a ransom and an offering — both something you have to pay to save your life, and a gift that is dedicated to God.

3. Atonement Money (*kesep ha-kippurim*), v. 16

The final term to describe this payment may be the most enlightening of all. It is called "silver of atonement," or "atonement money." In other words, not only are you ransoming your life by giving an offering to God; you are paying for atonement to be carried out on your behalf.

If you notice, the verse begins and ends with the language of atonement. The money per se does not make atonement. Rather, it makes atonement through its place in supporting the ongoing ministry of the tabernacle.

D. The Funding of the Tabernacle, v. 16

That's where the theme of payment bleeds into the theme of funding the tabernacle. In later Israel, as mentioned in the NT, this atonement money was actually regularized into a half-shekel annual tax that all Israelites had to pay in order to sustain the ongoing ministry of the temple. Jesus Himself paid this tax, though with a statement that as the Son of the King He ought to be exempt from taxation to support His own household establishment. But the Exodus text before us does not mention how often this tax should be collected.

Regardless, the way in which the money atones is that it supports the ongoing work of the tabernacle, which is atonement for our lives. Our lives as sinners are forfeit; the tabernacle is an institution built around washing away sin, paying for it.

This idea of paying to remove sin made its way into the medieval Roman Church and was one of the things opposed by Luther. But here it is, with a biblical pedigree. I would only note that the rich were not allowed to give more for the purpose of atonement. There are other gifts mentioned in Exodus, and the rest of the Bible, but they are not linked to atonement. Your max budget for indulgences was half a shekel; your minimum budget for indulgences was the same. Everyone had to pay, and it was linked (in this text) not to the ongoing maintenance of the tabernacle, but to the one-time risk of being smitten by God.

E. A Reminder for Yahweh of His People, v. 16 with 28:12, 29

One major function of Aaron as priest was to bear the names of the sons of Israel before the LORD as a memorial. This monetary payment associated with the census serves the same purpose. It keeps the tabernacle functioning and thus is a memorial — something that reminds the LORD of His people.

We have Big Data so that we don't have to remember numbers. It allows us both to control and to forget. But the census payment was so that God would remember. More important than us knowing how many of us there are is whether God remembers us.

III. The Application

So what do we do? The application is two-fold.

A. Data Is Dangerous

Data is dangerous. While not exactly trespassing on God's territory, it is certainly an exercise of god-like power.

B. Numbering Must Never Be Separated from Contributions to God

And thus, never separate your numbering from contributions to God. I would put it this way: When you balance your checkbook, cut the tithe check that same day. When you count up the size of your tax return, decide what charities and churches you are going to contribute to. When you take inventory of the food in your freezer, invite someone over to share it with you. When you learn statistics about this, that, and the other — particularly about religious participation — let that influence your focus in discipling your children.

A data-driven Christian? I think so — certainly a data-driven giver. When you count, give. When you exercise power through numbers, exercise humility by giving back to the Lord. Don't buy indulgences, but do contribute to the needs of the saints. We no longer offer atoning sacrifices; the work of the church is never said to be atonement in the same way that it was the work of the tabernacle. Instead, let your contributions lay up treasure in heaven to be a memorial for you before God. Amen.