



"The law given from Sinai was a civil and municipal code as well as a moral and religious code. These are laws essential to the existence of men in society and most of which have been enacted by every Nation which ever professed any code of laws."

—John Adams

02-Sep-05

The Thin, Frail Line

In the huge water bowl that is the city of New Orleans now, the looting began not long after the worst of Hurricane Katrina had passed. Some of those who had stayed behind to weather the storm ventured out into the still wet and windy streets and began plundering grocery, electronics, clothing stores - anywhere unguarded items sat "free" for the taking. Authorities were overwhelmed by rescue operations and damage assessments to pay much attention to the millions of dollars of merchandise being pilfered in plain sight.

On Wednesday, TV viewers across the nation woke up to the news that someone had taken a potshot at one of the rescue helicopters near the Superdome, and that several pilots refused to land after they saw gun-toting individuals in the crowd below them. That same day, a sniper interrupted a patient evacuation at Charity Hospital with several shots, and someone opened fire at the rear of the hospital not long thereafter. The same hospital had earlier been forced to move its patients to higher floors to escape looters down below. New Orleans police informed CNN that groups of armed men roamed the city at night, and that officers were removing ammunition from gunshops to keep it off the streets. Only 2,800 National Guardsmen were available to restore order in the city on Wednesday, though as many as 24,000 were expected by next week.

The situations at both the Superdome and the New Orleans Convention Center became tense and potentially explosive as the days wore on. Authorities promised food, water,

CGG Weekly: The Thin, Frail Line (02-Sep-05)

medical assistance, and basic hygiene supplies, but there was little to go around. They pledged buses to take the refugees to other shelters, but the slow process and frequent disruptions ratcheted frustration and anger to the breaking point. Dead bodies, crying infants, sickness, and human feces added nothing helpful to the growing discontent.

Consider these conditions in contrast to a mere week before. In one day, a thriving city of a half-million people endured nearly complete devastation. Its infrastructure was destroyed to the point that even basic services - electricity, water, sewer, transportation, communication - functioned at a bare minimum, if at all. Relief of any sort had to be trucked in from hundreds of miles away, as the 75-mile swath of the hurricane's destruction stretched far to the north. Yet, Katrina's almost unfathomable power had cut or clogged many nearby land and watery arteries, making movement of goods and services almost impossible. As London's *Telegraph* so succinctly phrased it, New Orleans swiftly descended into a "pre-industrial" condition.

Almost as quickly, the thin, frail line between civilization and anarchy began to crumble. The suddenly primitive conditions brought out many individuals' basest natures. The book of Judges describes a similar situation in Israel before a monarchy brought order to the nation: "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" ([Judges 21:25](#); [17:6](#)). Any thoughts of "all for one, and one for all" were quickly submerged under loud and insistent cries of "each man for himself."

How far is any one of us from acting out of pure selfishness? In reality, that is all that lawless behavior is; it is base human nature desperately trying to preserve itself and get as much for itself as possible without concern for anyone else. It falls at the far end of the spectrum from God's way of life, the way of give and loving concern for one's neighbor ([Matthew 22:39](#); [1 John 3:16-19](#)). This is why the apostle John defines [sin](#) as lawlessness ([1 John 3:4](#)); it is failure to consider and conform one's actions against God's standard of behavior. Paul informs us that "the carnal mind [human nature] is enmity against [hostile to] [God](#); for it is not subject to the [law of God](#), nor indeed can be" ([Romans 8:7](#)). Anarchy, as we have seen in New Orleans, occurs when the majority of human conduct devolves to each person deciding for himself what is best, despite any recognized standard - and the Devil take the hindmost!

Now is a good time to consider how a disaster like Hurricane Katrina would change our behavior. Would we continue to abide by the laws of the land - and the laws of God - or would we become a law unto ourselves? Would we rise to the occasion or sink into the chaos of disorder? Would we lend a hand to others suffering with us, or would we be like Ishmael, "his hand . . . against every man" ([Genesis 16:12](#))? Would we cooperate or compete?

Each of us would like to think of himself as a good person, one who would always do the right and honorable thing. But perhaps the looters and shooters in New Orleans thought of themselves in the same way just a few days ago, and look how they are behaving now! Severe trials can pressure a person into doing things he never imagined doing before they hit, and this is why godly behavior is a matter of *character*. One's true character surfaces in tough times, and to be effective, it must be developed **before** the calamity strikes.

The crisis at the close of this age "is nearer than when we first believed" ([Romans 13:11](#)). What kind of character will we have to work with when it arrives? Will we endure on the strength of [faith](#), [hope](#), and [love](#), or will we buckle under the onslaught of selfish human nature and let out the ravenous, depraved beast of lawlessness? Now is the time to thicken the veneer that separates us from the depths of human carnality, and we do that by strengthening our [relationship with God](#) ([James 4:7-10](#)).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Antidotes to Fear and Depression](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

In this message on overcoming anxiety and fear of the future, Richard Ritenbaugh suggests that since September 11, anxiety, fear, depression, and panic disorders have increased dramatically in America, characterized by feelings of loss of control, and hopelessness for the future. The key to overcoming the fear of loss of control is to admit that God is in control. If we have our priorities straight (Matthew 6:33) God will take care of the anxieties we encounter. If people do not have God's vision of the future, they will end up in aberrant behavior, eventually leading to death, but happy and blessed are they who keep God's direction.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Divine Protection Today?](#)

by Staff

Does God protect His people even today? Indeed, God's arm has not been shortened!

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