

Deuteronomy 6

The Ten Words

Reading: Deuteronomy 5:6-21

We have spent considerable time setting out the framework of Deuteronomy in the first few very important chapters. They are not mere stories of Israel's history but stories that are vital to put the rest of the book in their context. I cannot emphasise that enough and we need to return again and again to the first four chapters for our bearing.

I would like to put in a preamble of my own before going on. Some years ago we were in Edmonton, Canada to visit our daughter who is living there. It was an unusual winter and the snow did not stop coming down. The snow plough were working day and night to push the snow off the highways to the sides. When the sides were full, the two lane highway became a one lane highway and the snow kept piling up. It simply covered the roads from side to side. I was driving and I said to my daughter. I know how to keep the car on the road, but I need to know where the road is. Now the commandments are God's way of telling us where the road is. It is God's grace to us. If we were not told where the road is, it is easy to fall off the cliff. It is also like swimming between the yellow flags on the beach. It is for our own good.

After the preamble, Moses began this second section of Deuteronomy with the Ten Commandments. Many people outside of the church will know something of the Ten Commandments. They know it as mere legalism and not as the grace of God. The Ten Commandment may be called law, but it is really grace as we have argued the point many times before because that is not the way we think.

This morning we will look at the first three commandments. Next week we will deal with the grossly misunderstood fourth commandment regarding the sabbath day. The rest of the commandments will be dealt with the week following.

The First Three Commandments

⁶ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ⁷ you shall have no other gods before me.

⁸ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁹ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, ¹⁰ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

¹¹ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

These Ten Words can be divided into two sections. The first four relates to the way we honour our God who is creator and redeemer. The last six relates to the way we honour our fellow creatures (humanity). The fifth commandment to honour our father and mother is the link between the two. Our fathers and mothers are pro-creators as they have been given the gift of pro-creation by the creator.

The Ten Words		
Worship the only one God	Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy	Honour your father and mother
No idols		You shall not murder
Do not use the name of God in vain		You shall not commit adultery
		You shall not steal
		You shall not bear false witness
	You shall not covet	

We may call them laws or instructions, but these Ten Words define the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people. These Ten Words form the basis of all the laws that follow.

The Ten Words of the covenant relationship

¹³ He declared to you his covenant, which he charged you to observe, that is, the ten commandments (*words*); and he wrote them on two stone tablets. (Deut. 4:13)

I have referred to the Ten Commandments as the Ten Words (Decalogue). This is the Hebrew terminology which is not brought across in the English because it is easier for people to understand this passage as commandments. I feel that the expression 'Ten Words' gives a closer meaning to what Moses was saying than the term, 'Ten Commandment'. Of course they are the commandments of God, but they are also the 'Ten Words of the Covenant Relationship'. In calling them the Ten Commandments, we are fixed on the idea that the commands lead to the establishment of relationship. This idea seems unmovable. In calling them the Ten Words, we imply they are the terms of the covenant relationship which has been established before. This distinction is important.

Before getting onto the ten words, Moses again emphasised the purpose of these words with the need to hear. We want to get away from these Ten Words to something more interesting and often only speculative. In certain church tradition, they repeat the Ten Words every Sunday. It is often helpful as we forget these words so easily. Our society and often or church culture shows that. The second verse of the old song, 'Tell me the old old story', says,

Tell me the story slowly, that I may take it in,
That wonderful redemption, God's remedy for sin.
Tell me the story often, for I forget so soon;
The early dew of morning has passed away at noon.

We need to hear the words of God and that is why we gather together. The reason for hearing and knowing these commandments is that we may live accordingly. It is not theory but practical living. However, there is something prior to this and that is the covenant God made. It was made with Israel's ancestors, but it is for all generations and for us today. The covenant relationship precedes the commandments. The commandments spell out the way in which the covenant relationship is to be expressed. In so doing we come into the fullness of the blessing of God.

The law as the image of God

The words of God are the commandments of God. That is why the Ten Commandments are referred to in the Old Testament as the Ten Words. The words that God spoke reflect the nature of God. A theologian, Alex Motyer gave us this important statement. He said that man is the personal living image of God; the law is the written, perceptual image of God. What this means is

that humanity is created in the likeness of God in order that they will be able to relate and have communion with the creator God. Humanity is to reflect the nature of God in a living way. However, because of sin humanity no longer reflect that image. They have gone to seek another image, the image of prosperity and success. They need restoration and God provided that through the cross of Christ.

The law is the written perceptual image of God. It reflects the nature of God while humanity has failed to do that. That is why we find the laws of God so strange and bewildering. The psalmist appreciated the word of God. They are like to honey to him.

¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
¹⁰⁴ Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way. (Psalm 119:103-104)

We cannot and do not see God in a material way and that is why it is difficult for us to know Him and to relate with Him. However, He is in the word and has revealed Himself there for us. We need to see in the commandments the nature of God and not just merely the need to obey them. If we can see that the commandments reflect the image of God and we have been restored to the image of God through the cross, then that confluence is the enabling to obey the commandments.

The First Commandment

⁶ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ⁷ you shall have no other gods before me.

This first commandment undergirds all the teaching of Deuteronomy – ‘you shall have no other gods before me’.

Why should we honour our God? The common answer is because He is creator, if we acknowledge that, or that He is all powerful. Of course God as the all-powerful creator is what is commonly acknowledged. But there is more. This first commandment is preceded by a reminder, not of God as creator, but of the God who brought them out of Egypt. Creation is assumed, but redemption is not. It is the redemptive aspect that is emphasised. Of course, we worship God as creator, but He is also redeemer and most people would not acknowledge that. That is because we do not acknowledge our sins and our need of redemption. Moses started the commandments with these words, ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery’ (v. 6). Israel, in her history, cannot avoid this fact. They were slaves of Pharaoh for four hundred years and that fact is etched into Jewish minds. For us, we were enslaved in our sins and have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. That is why this fact is so important in our lives. And because of this, we ‘shall have no other gods before me’. Jesus further added, ‘you shall worship the Lord and Him only shall you serve’, (Matt. 4:10), and ‘you cannot serve God and mammon’ (Matt. 6:24). Jesus was repeating the first commandment.

We need to see this first commandment in the context of the days of the Israelites. They would be changing from a nomadic life to an agricultural life. They would till the land and grow crops. In doing so, they would see the rising and dying of nature, the spring and the autumn, the summer and the winter. With this pattern they would be attracted to the fertility cult of the Canaanites. They need to remember that ‘they shall have no other gods than Yahweh’. Yes, they would be planting at the same time as everybody else and they will harvest the same time as everybody else. They would be using the same tools and methods of farming as the Canaanites, but the similarity should end there. They need to avoid following the apparently successful culture of the

day enmeshed in the fertility cult and temple prostitution, and to depend solely on the promise of God.

It is the same with us. It is only too easy to follow the culture of success in our day with the manipulation and people and markets. We will certainly use the same technology, put our money in the same bank, and again that is where our similarity ends. We need to avoid the spin culture of our day. I do mean that we should be unsuccessful, but that success should not be pursued as the god of our lives, putting our creator and redeemer into subordinate place.

The Second Commandment

⁸You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁹You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, ¹⁰but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

The Second Commandment is an extension from the first. If the creator God is the only one we worship, then it does not make sense to use created materials to represent the creator. Furthermore, the making of an object out of created materials connotes the idea that we have become the one creating the deity. That puts us in control of the deity who will do as we command. This is the reversal of the created order and an expression of our sin. The commandment here goes beyond created matter. Nowadays, most of us do not worship any image, but the worship of leisure and pleasure is no different. It is also another form of idolatry, and so is the worship of our houses and gardens. Anything we put first in place of the creator God is idolatry.

²⁰Assemble yourselves and come together,
draw near, you survivors of the nations!
They have no knowledge—
those who carry about their wooden idols,
and keep on praying to a god
that cannot save.

²¹Declare and present your case;
let them take counsel together!
Who told this long ago?
Who declared it of old?
Was it not I, the Lord?
There is no other god besides me,
a righteous God and a Savior;
there is no one besides me. (Isaiah 44:20-21)

The creator cannot be represented by the matter He has created. Any form of the creation cannot represent the creator, not even analogies. If we use them we need to know their limitations. We cannot use any form of the creation to explain the creator. That is to guard us from getting locked into the world that God has created. That would be the loss of transcendence. Our technological age locks us out of any sense of transcendence. However, there is one exception. The creator has expressed Himself in words. We read in John's Gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' That is the only permissible expression of God, i.e. in word and therefore the Ten Words. Moses was chastised severely because he failed to show to the people of Israel the power of God's word when he struck the rock. That is why we communicate the truth of God in words, i.e. preaching. That is why we come to the word, i.e. the bible. That is why we expressed our faith in doctrines. However, we also need to be careful that we don't turn these things into idols. Theology can become an idol. Our worship of the bible and not the God contain therein can be an idol. We call that bibliolatry.

We often use logic and argument to reason to God. There is limitation in the argument of logic. It remains very much on the human plane. Poetry enables us to transcend the limitation of logic.

The Third Commandment

¹¹ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

This is better known in the KJV, 'thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain.' What is to take the name of God in vain? It is the wrongful use of the name of God. It is using the name of God for our authority. It is to use the authoritative name of God to achieve one's purpose. In other words it is the manipulation of God's name for one's end. We have so often used the name of God to justify the things that we do. We do not need to look far for these justifications. Lives have been taken or maimed in the name of God.

Secondly, there is an apparent sense that there is power in the use of the name of God. It borders on magic. 'In God's name I command you' is a phrase that is sometimes used, but is it truly the power that God would use in that situation?

There is a penalty for doing this. Don't use God's name to authenticate our actions unless you know for sure that it is so. Even then, we need to have a separation between the perfect will of God and our perception of that will. When someone says, 'This is what God wants me to do', he is really saying that he thinks that is what God wants him to do. We need to make that distinction otherwise we will be using the name of the Lord in vain.

The Ten Words of the covenant relationship start off with these three which are the most important. The first grounds the whole list – no other god beside Yahweh. Anything that we put in first place other than our redeeming God is therefore idolatry, whether an image is present or not. And the name of God must not be used to further our aims and purposes.

If we have not got three right, then it is quite pointless looking at the other seven because the other seven hinge on this. He is my Lord, my only Lord, the Lord who created me and redeemed me.

Some Possible Outlines of Deuteronomy

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34
1 st Speech				2 nd Speech																		3 rd Sp		Last Acts & Death of Moses									
Preamble	Historical Prologue				Stipulations																		Sanctions		Deposit of Documents & Public Reading								
Israel at the place of decision				The decision spelled out														The outcome of decision															
Preamble	Experience of God in history		Call to obey God's law	The Basic Demands: Total allegiance to YHWH				Detailed Stipulations (unpacking the 10 commandments in order?): Life in the New Land										Curses & Blessings		New Covenant & Moses' Death													
				10 Command	Exclusive loyalty demanded	Lessons from history		The life of worship 12:1-16:17 I,II III IV			Leadership 16:18-18:22 V	Civil order 19:1-23:14 VI VII		Misc. Laws 23:15-25:19 VIII IX X	firstfruits & tithes	Curses	Blessing & Curses	New Covenant for the future		Moses' blessing & death													

1 Preamble Failure to enter the Land	5 10 Commandments	8 Do not forget YHWH	12 II Central Sanctuary	16 (cont) The Judges	19 VI Protecting innocent life [Cities of Refuge, etc]	23 (cont) VIII Stealing	27 Curses from Ebal	29 Moab Covenant	33 Moses blesses the tribes
2 Desert Wanderings Sihon Defeated	6 Shema	9 Israel's stubbornness <small>Not because of Israel's righteousness Golden calf</small>	13 I Warning against other gods	17 V The Judges (cont) The King	20 VI Limits on killing in Warfare	24 IX False Witness	28 Blessings & CURSES	30 Cursed-repent-be blessed Choose Life!	34 Death of Moses
3 Og Defeated Division of Land (Moses won't enter)	7 Drive out Nation Chosen so obey - blessing	10 New Tablets Fear YHWH	14 III The purity of the people Tithes	18 V Levitical Priests The Prophet	21 VI Laws about Life & Death	25 X Coveting	31 Joshua at succeed Rebellion predicted		
4 Call to Obey <small>Horeb-Creation-Egypt Moses-people Exile-Return</small>	11 Love & Obey YHWH a blessing & a curse		15 IV Care for the poor Firstborn animals	22 VII Sexual relations within families		26 X Firstfruits & Tithes	32 Song of Moses		
			16 IV Feasts	23 Exclusion from the assembly					