

Today we are starting a new sermon series. We are going to be spending the Fall looking at some famous words in Deuteronomy 5 (also in Exodus 20) called the Ten Commandments—or more accurately in Hebrew, the “10 words.” 10 sayings that have been a bit of a bedrock for Christianity, at least in the western world for many years, that have somewhat fallen out of popularity.

I wanted to give us the opportunity to re-look at these famous words again as they are in their own context. Because when we do that, we actually see the meaning of these words amplified, when we look at them in the way that God sought to speak to Israel at that particular time.

And just to remind you of what we’re talking about, or in case you’re not familiar, here is a list—in very brief form—of the 10 Commandments as we have them in scripture. This is the way that they are often written on bookmarks or plaques or Bible covers.

This is how we’ve often seen them, in this format. It looks very much like a moral code, right? A list of things that we need to do. But when we see these words through the lens of an ancient Israelite, understanding how ancient people thought, it reframes the way that we think about these words.

We actually have the opportunity, now that we don’t hear or see these words as often anymore, to see them afresh to read them with a new light, and also to explore how as a new covenant people in Christ Jesus, these words are still relevant to us today—if in fact they are. That’s what we’re going to find out.

So for today, I’m going to be giving an introduction to these “10 words.” Because understanding the cultural river that these words are swimming in is very important. Understanding where Israel is in this part of the story—what they’re thinking about and what they’re looking forward to—is very important.

Because what’s necessary for understanding these 10 words is understanding why God spoke them in the first place. They are part of the instructions that God gave to the Israelites *as wisdom for living well in the land*, which demonstrated a very different kind of relationship between a God and His people than what we see elsewhere.

And it’s out of that place that we understand and see God’s faithful character then and still today. He’s the same God, but in a different context. And just as He called Israel to remember Him and remember who they are *in Him*, His desire for us today is the same. It’s always been the same.

Remember who I am; and remember who you are *in me*. **Read Deut. 5:1-6.**

Before we explore these words in Deuteronomy 5, let me give you a sense of what the book of Deuteronomy is about, because that helps us to grasp the significance of these words even more.

There's a scholar by the name of Cindi Parker (she's actually a part of the RCA, a sister church to our denomination). She recently did a class at Regent College this summer. She's an expert in the book of Deuteronomy. And she identifies that the book of Deuteronomy is a book that's all about remembering identity. Remember who God is and remember who you are as God's people.

Because the context of the book of Deuteronomy, she says, is that Moses is on the plains of Moab with the Israelites. So God delivered them from slavery, brought them through the wilderness.

And now finally they're standing at the edge of the property line, about to enter into the land of their inheritance, the land that God had promised to the patriarchs—to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This land has been waiting for them. It is the land in which God desires for them to live so that He can be their God and they can be His people; that He can be their king and live as one together.

So as Dr. Parker puts it, at this point in the narrative, it's as if Moses is acting like a coach at half-time. The whole team is in the locker room, and he pulls everyone together, and says, "Okay, you y'all sucked in the first half. We could've gone into the land, but we didn't. You grumbled, you complained. You didn't learn about God's character. You forgot who you were. *So let's pull it together.* Because if we go into this land remembering who God is and who we are in Him, then we have the opportunity to actually create something, a society in a place that has the potential to be like the Garden of Eden—where God's presence is among us; where there's harmony again between God and human, human and human, human and land. That's the potential here; that's the opportunity." It's a pretty good pep talk, right?

As we see here in the text, Israel is asked at the very beginning to remember what God has done for them, which has demonstrated to them the kind of God that He is. And *that knowledge* is to serve as their motivation.

So his isn't about blindly following a list of rules (legalism). This is about being in relationship with the God who has pulled them out of slavery and wants to live among them. These 'laws' or words of wisdom that we're going to spend the next ten weeks talking about are meant to be seen in light of who God is.

For example, the Israelites were asked to rest (the fourth word or commandment) because it was a way of remembering that their God wasn't a slave driver. He wasn't like the gods of Egypt. They were asked to care for widows and foreigners because *God cares* about widows and foreigners.

We have to understand the difference in motivation—because so much harm has been done by turning the Bible into a book of rules. We read the 'Law' and naturally think that it's law as we understand it.

Our whole world is accustomed to thinking about law as legislation. That's our cultural river. Laws that we are ruled and governed by—so that when a judge needs to make a court ruling, he or she cannot simply make a decision based on intuition. We don't want the judge to apply their own intuition about what is wrong because we expect the judge to rule based on the legislation that's been compiled for them.

But in the ancient world, intuition was exactly what was expected of kings and rulers.

Old Testament scholar John Walton has done a lot of work on this, and he says that because there wasn't defined legislation in the ancient world, ancient kings would instead compile a list of laws that demonstrated they were wise and could judge situations appropriately. The laws didn't get passed through a senate or need approval from anyone. They were simply to help establish order and bolster the king's status.

Let me give you an example. There's a famous stele, the Code of Hammurabi, which contains 282 sayings or laws on it—along with a very long preamble and postlude about how great Hammurabi is. It's a large stone, and on the top there is a picture of Shamash, the god of justice, one of many Babylonian gods, seated on a throne and extending a rod and ring to King Hammurabi (Babylonian King, 1750's BC).

Now, for decades, people thought that this was Shamash giving the king this long list of laws. But later it became clear that it was the other way around. The scepter and ring are Shamash's symbols of authority, and he's giving them to Hammurabi to affirm that he can govern and give laws based on this list of wise rulings that *Hammurabi* has presented to Shamash.

Which makes so much more sense, because in ancient religions, the gods didn't care about right and wrong. They didn't bother themselves with such things. The highest value was to have order in society. So Hammurabi compiles this long list of laws to prove that he is a good king. The statue is a means of propaganda for him. He's making a statement about his authority for everyone to see and benefit from.

"My pronouncements are choice," he says, "my ability is unrivaled." I have "secured the eternal well-being of the people and provided just ways for the land."

How different it is, then, when we come to the Bible—one of the only other 'law codes' we have—and notice that the God of Israel has not only set *Himself* up as King, which was unprecedented, but He's also inserting Himself into the matters of morality *and* proving *Himself* as a wise King who can establish order by giving the Israelites laws by which they can live—laws that yes, bolster His own reputation in the eyes of the nations around them, but *require the participation* of the Israelites to do so. They had to buy into it. Because the covenant, which is the foundation for this law, has bound them together in identity. Because He wants to live among them and be their one and only God.

I mean, it's no wonder that the Israelites struggled so much to remain faithful. Because there was no one else like this God. This was a completely unprecedented situation. There was no one else who sought to relate in the same way that he did. To redeem a people born into *slavery*. A God who wanted to be near to this 'nobody' people group. Who wanted to identify *this* people with Himself.

What an *opportunity* this was for Israel. Because here was a God whose most basic desire was that they would *remember* who He was and *remember* who they were in Him. V. 6: "*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*"

He kept saying it to the Israelites. 'This is our relationship. We see it all over the place, "I am your God; you are my people." Everything else was meant to flow from that understanding.

It's why the Ten Commandments begin with three sayings about their relationship with God, the fourth is an overlap, the transition moment, and the later six are about relating to others. How they related with others was meant to flow *out of* their relation with God.

And it's exactly why, in Mark 12, when Jesus gets asked by one of the teachers of the law, "*Of all the commandments, which is the most important?*" what does Jesus say? Notice, He doesn't quote from the Ten Commandments. He summarizes what every corner of the law was getting at.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." Love Him above all else. Everything you are, devoted to this God. And secondly, *"Love your neighbor as yourself."*

We'll talk more about this next week, but again, it was all about identity. Remember who I am, and remember who you are in me. This wasn't about giving Israel an exhaustive list of everything God cared about. These laws were a means, in that ancient context, of engaging with Israel in a way that they would understand and inviting the Israelites to walk with Him.

'Walk with me as your King. Learn from me. And in my presence, as I remain before you and you before me, face to face, you will discover *more and more* the way that is good.'

It's exactly what Jesus does in the sermon on the mount. The Beatitudes aren't a list of rules that tell us how to get good grades with Jesus or an exhaustive list of everything He cares about. They are illustrative of what the Kingdom of God looks like.

And just like Israel was meant to steep themselves in the Law, the more we steep ourselves in the wisdom of all of Scripture, the more we come to understand, "Oh yes, this is what our God is like. This is what He cares about."

So what relevance, then, do these ancient words have for us today? We are not Israel. We don't live in the same context or serve the same function. What role do these words serve in our faith walk? Because I think we all realize that taking these words at face value and using them as a check list doesn't lead to an increased devotion to the Lord.

I'm not worshipping any other god. Check.

I don't have an idol in my house. Check.

I haven't sworn lately (at least not out loud). Check.

I haven't gone shopping on Sunday. Except last week. Check.

I've been nice to mom and dad. Check.

I didn't murder, cheat, steal, lie (maybe a little one), or want a different wife. Check, check, check.

That doesn't deepen my connectedness to God. That way of reading them does not lead me to behold the face of God. And it's not even remotely how God desired for the Israelites to think about these words.

But for a long time, for centuries, the Church—in all of its many forms—has been seen (or has seen itself) as the steward of morality or moral standards. And the Ten Commandments served as a kind of foundation for that 'moral code.'

The church has the 'moral code' that everybody needs to know about and live by. So we'll put the 'moral code' in school buildings. On parliament buildings. And of course, hang it in every church. Because everybody needs to know that the church holds the keys to human morality. We've been given the scepter from our God to carry this moral authority.

And this lasted for centuries. Until it stopped working.

Dallas Willard notes that the church is no longer 'doing the job' of setting the moral standards for society. Because there's no longer trust in the institution. Everyone is now their own moral authority. In fact, people brag about leaving the institution but still holding onto the morals.

I met a woman recently who told me that she was raised a Catholic and finally 'got out' of institutional religion but held onto the values—as if that's the main thing to gain from Christianity.

Tons of non-Christian parents still want to send their kids to Christian education centers simply so that their kids can learn the values. I've heard of a principal who outright says to parents, "You need to be supportive of your child's learning. Because your child can't learn about Jesus here and then go home and be contradicted by you."

In other words, you can't adopt the 'moral code' disconnected from Jesus.

But that's what's happened. Because the 'moral code' has become a value system that is separated from the value-Giver. People critique the church for being about rules—which is fair—but now all they want to hold onto is the rules. And it's fascinating, because clearly people see value in it. There is something intriguing and captivating about the ethics of human morality as seen in the Bible.

But when the 'moral code' is paraded as a kind of propaganda for the church and divorced from the true key to human flourishing—the One who spoke these very words into being—then it remains simply a list of good ideas that people can choose to connect with the Him or not.

It's the fundamental problem of what-we-call legalism—seeing these words as legislation that we must abide by in order to prove ourselves and gain favour with God. Because what's so insidious about legalism—whether you're stuck in it or have discarded it—the impact of legalism is that it cuts the vein to *the Heart* of true flourishing.

The gracious compassion of God, who revealed Himself to a people undeserving of His attention, who sought at every turn to be in relationship with them, to use them as His means for bringing salvation *to the world*, to help them truly live 'the good life,' i.e. the life face-to-face with Him, in His presence, in His glory, in peace and rest and restoration.

It's why David said in Psalm 19, *"The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes."*

Really? we might ask. Law is refreshing? Joyful? Radiant? Why?

Because it's the Lord's. David's delight wasn't in the words themselves, but in the wisdom that revealed the beautiful nature and compassion of God Himself.

And that same God is offering the same invitation to us today through Jesus Christ. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of slavery, out of the darkness of your own sinful enslavement, who wrapped and delivered my grace to you in the gift of Jesus Christ. I've made *Him* King to govern you with peace and justice, and all authority has been given to *Him*."

"Remember who I am; and remember who you are *in me*. The way to flourishing isn't by proving yourself to me. It's in knowing me, living in My presence, being guided by My wisdom, and allowing me to *reveal to you, more and more* what my grace and compassion looks like.

"Because you are part of me, as I am in you. Our identity is as one. Let that be your motivation. Your rule of life. Your guide. Your moral compass.

"Remember who I am; and remember who you are in me."