

Living as God's Covenant People
Studies in Deut. 1-11, #3

"The Demand of the Covenant"

Deut. 5

--CEFC 6/11/17

I remember Susan telling me about a conversation she had with a friend
who said she had quit going to church.
When asked why, she said it was because all going to church ever did for her
was make her feel guilty.
Week after week she left downcast and depressed, so she gave it up.

I can sympathize with the woman—
Why would you ever want to do that to yourself?

But what are we to make of this kind of experience? /

For one thing, that woman may have felt guilty because she was guilty.
I don't know,
but if that's the case, then the church is not to blame.

For you see, I'm sure that the purpose of the church, and my purpose as a preacher,
is not to make people feel good about themselves.
The purpose of the church is to proclaim the truth.
And if you feel guilty in the bright light of the truth,
then so be it. /

But I suspect that if guilt is all Susan's friend ever felt,
then her church may not have been proclaiming the whole truth.

For sadly there is a half-truth going around
that is very widespread and widely believed--even in churches.
It is the belief that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is,
in its essence, a system of morality--a code of ethics--
It tells you how you ought to live.

Religion is a matter of keeping the Ten Commandments
or living by the Sermon on the Mount.
It's about doing the best the you can;
living a good life;
obeying the law.

For most people, this is what the Bible is all about--
The Bible presents a moral system.

That's why you find so many young parents
who are totally indifferent to spiritual matters themselves
but who send their kids to Sunday School.

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They want their kids to acquire "**values**"--
 they want them to have some moral standards.
 What else is religion good for if not to instill ethical behavior.

Even the now illegal practice of posting of the Ten Commandments
 on the walls of public school classrooms seems to have had this assumption--
 If you want to teach morality then teach religion,
 for religion is essentially a moral code.

Now, here I am this morning preaching on those Ten Commandments--
 the very essence of religion in the minds of many.
 Some of you may already be thinking about
 how guilty you're going to feel when I get finished.

Perhaps that's how you ought to feel,
 but that's not my motivation this morning.

For even as I preach on the Ten Commandments
 the main thing that I want to impress upon you
 is that the Bible is not about morality.

Let me say it again:

The Bible is not about morality.

Does that surprise you?

In fact, the God of the Bible is opposed to moral systems--
 if by that you means some collection of autonomous rules and regulations for living.

Moral systems are always man-made--
 even when they incorporate biblical truths.
 Moral systems lead to legalism--the listing of do's and don't's.
 And legalism states that if I can just do the "do's"
 and not do the "don't's",
 then I will be right with God.
 The Pharisees of Jesus' day had a moral system.

This sort of system is a form of self-justification
 based on self-righteousness.

That's not what the Bible is about.

So, reacting against that false view of the Christian message
 as a system of morals based on law,
 some people crawl out of one ditch, cross the road,
 and crawl into the ditch on the other side.

They want to eliminate any notion of obedience to law altogether—
 "No," they say, "Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven."
 God accepts you just as you are,
 and if you just accept Christ as your Savior,

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then how you live doesn't matter."

Doesn't the Apostle Paul tell us that we are saved by God's grace,
and **not** by the works of the law?

In the **Old** Testament, they say,
God gave the law,

but it was just too hard for people to obey.

So in the **New** Testament God made an easier way to get to heaven
through faith in Jesus.

We don't need the law any more—Jesus put an end to the law.
The law of the Old Testament has been put aside,
and Jesus' law of love has taken its place.
Yes, all we need is love.

From the ditch of **legalism** we have moved to the opposite ditch of **license**—
a rejection of **any** place for law in the Christian life—
a view also known as antinomianism.

To quote John Stott:

"Legalists **fear** the Law and are in bondage to it.
Antinomians **hate** the Law and repudiate it."¹

This second viewpoint is also very common in our day—
it's sometimes called "cheap grace"—
for it is a form of Christianity that demands nothing.
It never mentions Jesus' call to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow him—
no, it's a gospel of self-fulfillment—
it's about how Jesus can come alongside you and make you successful—
in your business, in your marriage, in your family.

This gospel releases us from all those "shoulds" and "oughts" that deaden our spirit.
No longer should we talk about **sin** or even **duty**—
for our only duty is to ourselves—
to pursue that which will fulfill our own needs and desires.
The Ten Commandments, if they are mentioned at all,
become merely ten suggestions that we can take or leave as we like.

And the result of this emphasis,
in this country and in other places in the world, I must say,
has been a very flabby form of Christianity.
It leaves Christians as salt without flavor,
good for nothing,
and the church with no backbone to stand against the tide of culture,
becoming indistinguishable from the world around it.

Legalism and license—
Christianity as a system of morality,

¹Cited in Begg, *Pathway*, p. 28.

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as prescribed by each commandment.
(I'm sorry if I disappoint some of you by not doing that.)

I'm afraid that to some extent that could simply encourage the legalistic mindset
illustrated in the story about W.C. Fields--

Perhaps you've heard it--

It is told that W. C. Fields,

the actor, who was widely known for his dissolute and depraved lifestyle,
was once found reading through the Bible with great earnestness,

quite to the surprise of his friends--

When asked what he was doing reading the Bible--he replied--

"Loopholes, loopholes, just looking for loopholes!"

Rather than just a list of do's and don'ts,

I want us to see the Ten Commandments

as a part of the gracious purpose of God to create a people for himself,
who live in a loving relationship with him and each other.

Let's not mistake Christianity for morality,

Let's not simply go away from here feeling guilty,

looking for loopholes--

This morning, let's receive the whole truth as our gracious God has revealed it to us.

Deut. 5:1--"**Moses summoned all Israel and said:**

'Hear, O Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today.

Learn them and be sure to follow them.

The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb."

I. First, I want you to notice the *context* of the Law--

the law was given as a part of God's covenant with Israel.

As we said a couple of weeks ago, a covenant is an agreement between two parties

establishing the terms of their relationship.

And the covenant God made with Israel was one in which

he, as the superior party,

sets forth the stipulations that Israel, the inferior party, must accept.

This was not unlike what the rulers of vast empires in the ancient Near East would do

with the small vassal kingdoms that came under their control.

But this divine covenant was unlike those treaties

in that this covenant was completely a consequence of God's grace.

The Lord took the initiative in calling this nation to be his own people—

he carried them on eagles' wings and brought them to himself

to be his treasured possession.

He gave them birth, and then he gave them his law.

You could say it was like the implicit covenant

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but a personal charge given to a particular people.
 V. 4—"The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain"—
 it was a personal encounter.

Nine times in these 16 verses of the Ten Commandments
 we see the words, "**The Lord your God**"--
 he wasn't addressing the Canaanites or the Amorites--
 These were God's words to his people.

Notice that the fourth commandment is grounded
 in Israel's own experience of God's grace--
 v. 15--"**Remember that you were slaves in Egypt
 and that the Lord your God brought you out of there
 with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.
 Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.**"

Or again in the fifth commandment,
 the reward is directly tied to God's particular gift to Israel--
 v. 16--"**Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you,
 so that you may live long and that it may go well with you
 in the land the Lord your God is giving you.**"

This isn't an autonomous moral system--
 This is the appropriate response to a holy and gracious God,
 who has acted in redeeming love to make this people his people.
 The Ten Commandments must be seen in the context of the covenant,
 in the context of a relationship between God and his beloved people.

These laws were given to a particular people--
 but our text makes it clear that those people were not limited
 to those who heard the voice of God from the fire on Mt. Horeb.

Almost that entire generation had died by the time Moses spoke these words,
 and yet he can still say in vv. 3,4--

"**It was not with**
 [and here we must understand an implied "only"]
**It was not only with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant,
 but with us, with all of us who are alive here today."**

The covenant lives--it was made with the nation as a whole,
 and Moses can rightly identify those whom he was addressing near the Jordan River
 with those who stood on the mountain forty years before.
 The covenant belongs to them, too.³

And, as we shall see shortly, in a new form, it belongs to us as well.

³Cf. Keil-Delitzsch, ad loc.

This is the context of the Law--the covenant the Lord made with his people.

That's the first thing, and perhaps the most important thing
we must understand about the Law from our text this morning.

II. But notice, secondly, the Purpose of the Law.

This comes out in the final words of the chapter--

**"So be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you;
do not turn aside to the right or to the left.
Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you,
so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days
in the land that you will possess" (vv. 32-33).**

How were the Israelites to view the Law of God?

Not as a burden
but as a gift.

Its purpose was their prosperity.

God's law was given to lead them into God's blessing--
the experience of life itself, lived to the full.

But how many people think of God the way that the skeptic H.L. Mencken
thought of the Puritans--

"A Puritan," he said, "is someone who is afraid that
somebody somewhere is happy."

That's ridiculous--both about the Puritans and about God.

The Law is given so that things might "**go well with you**"--
that's said both in v. 16 and v. 29.

The purpose of God's law is not to make you feel guilty,
it is to lead you to life.

As we heard earlier in the words of the Psalmist--
Ps. 19--

**The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving 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.
The ordinances of the Lord are sure [true]
and altogether righteous.**

**They are more precious than gold,
they are sweeter than honey.**

**By them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.**

The older and more experienced I get,
the more I become convinced of this--
You ignore the law of God at your own peril.
Oh, how much trouble people could avoid
if they simply lived as God prescribes for us!

Our God is no tyrannical dictator,
giving random and arbitrary orders to satisfy his own whims.
The Lord made us--he knows how we are meant to live.

Do we ignore God's law on the sanctity
of the sexual relationship within marriage?
Then we suffer—experiencing things like teenage pregnancy, abortion,
broken marriages, and so it goes.

Do we ignore God's law against the disordered love we call covetousness—
Then we suffer—becoming slaves of our passions,
deceived into thinking that our happiness will come
in the possession of more things.

Do we ignore God's law on the necessity of honesty?
Then we suffer—with lives filled with mistrust, hostility, hatred,
broken relationships, instead of intimacy.

We could go on--
I used to think I had to be apologetic about God's righteous standards.
No more.

The results speak for themselves--
the purpose of God's law is our prosperity--
that things may go well for us in the land God has given us,
that we may live in fellowship and love with God our Creator,
our Redeemer,
our heavenly Father.

When you think of the Ten Commandments,
think about God's desire for your life--
Do you think that he is afraid that
somewhere or sometime you might be happy?
Is that why he puts these demand upon you?
Of course not!

God's plans and purposes for you may not always be what you had in mind,
they may not all be pleasant.

But if you are his child,
you can be sure that they are ultimately for your good.
Obey God and live life to the full—that's the message of the covenant.

Isn't that Jesus said—

John 10:10—"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;
I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

III. But notice the effect that the giving of the law
had on the people of Israel--

vv. 23-26—

"When you heard the voice out of the darkness,
while the mountain was ablaze with fire,
all the leading men of your tribes and your elders came to me.
And you said, "The LORD our God has shown us his glory and his majesty,
and we have heard his voice from the fire.
Today we have seen that a man can live even if God speaks with him.
But now, why should we die?
This great fire will consume us, and we will die
if we hear the voice of the LORD our God any longer.
For what mortal man has ever heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire,
as we have, and survived?"

When these people encountered the awesome majesty of God,
they were afraid.

This, in a sense, is a corrective to what I have just said.

God's law is given for our good--
but the God who gives that law is not our servant.

He is not to be trifled with--
He is a great and awesome God--
he is glorious and majestic.

If he were to manifest himself in his glory right here and now in this room
we would all fall to the ground in dread.

As we said last week, we can't separate the law from the law-giver.
These are not autonomous rules--
they are commands from a living God
who demands from us a response of awesome respect and fear. /

The Lord takes note of Israelites' reaction to him--
"I have heard what this people said to you" the Lord says to Moses.
"Everything they said was good.
Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me
and keep all my commands always." (vv.28,29)

"Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me
and keep all my commands always."

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

Or as one writer has put it, "The fear of God is the soul of godliness."⁴

True religion is not simply a matter of keeping the Ten Commandments
or the Sermon on the Mount, as so many believe.

It is coming to know the God who speaks to us in this way,
the God who has the power and authority to command us in this way;
the God whose holiness and majesty cause us to bow in reverent fear.

"Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul," Jesus said.

"I will tell you who to fear--

fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt. 10:28).

As we said last week,

we ought to have a healthy fear—or reverence—for our God.

As we read in the New Testament book of Hebrews:

"It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

The Israelites had seen the glory and majesty of God--
they had heard his voice from the fire.

No wonder their leaders came to Moses and said, in v. 27--

"Go near and listen to all that the Lord our God says.

Then tell us whatever the Lord our God tells you.

We will listen and obey."

They wanted someone to shield them from the full fury and force
of the voice of God.

So Moses stands in the gap--

v.5--**"At that time I stood between the Lord and you
to declare to you the word of the Lord."**

Moses became the mediator of the law--

the mediator of the covenant of God with his people.

The Lord is gracious in allowing this kind of arrangement,
recognizing the weakness of the people.

And we will see God's grace at work in this way
even more clearly in chap. 9.

But here we see Moses, the prophet of God,

the one whom **"the Lord knew face to face"**--

acting as God's instrument to bring his word to his people.

But even Moses was not without fault--

as we read last week, he himself had angered the Lord,

⁴J. Murray, Principles of Conduct, p. 229.

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and he would not be allowed to enter into the promised land.

Moses failed to live as he ought--and we know that Israel failed, too.

**"Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me
and keep all my commands always."**

But their hearts were not so inclined—

they didn't keep the law,

and the law was broken--by all God's people in every generation.

That's the story of the whole Old Testament, isn't it—

a story of the failure of Israel to live in faithfulness to their God.

This law, embedded in this covenant, was never fully obeyed—

it remained unfulfilled in human experience.

The law pointed to a relationship with God--

a relationship of complete love and obedience—

a relationship that was never realized.

In that sense, this law must be seen as a prophetic ideal--

Its prophetic nature of the law was declared by Jesus himself--

Jesus said that "[t]he law and the prophets prophesied

until John [the Baptist]" (Mt. 11:13).

The law looked forward to something that was still to come.

And what the law pointed to remained unfulfilled,

until one who is greater than Moses

appeared on the scene--

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets," Jesus said

I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt. 5:17).

The Lord made a covenant with Israel,

but the Lord himself had to fulfill Israel's side of the agreement.

So he sent his own Son to be the embodiment of Israel.

Jesus' life and ministry was a fulfillment of all that the Law spoke about--

all that the law required of God's people.

Jesus lived out the relationship of love that the law pointed to—

living in full faith and obedience to God.

And if it was through Moses that the law came to Israel,

It is through Christ that the law comes to us.

He is now our mediator.

Jesus was not just a law-giver like Moses—

he was also a law-keeper--

he was himself the incarnation of the Law.

He was all that the law pointed to

realized in a human life.

Jesus was the only man ever completely faithful to the God of the covenant--

In Rom. 10:4 Paul says that Christ is the "*telos*" of the Law—
 a word that means goal,
 finishing line, fulfillment, culmination.

Just consider these Ten Commandments as they come to us through Christ--

1. In the first commandment,
 the Law says, "**you shall have no other Gods before me**"—

And in the Gospels we read:

**"The Devil in the wilderness showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world
 and all their splendor and said,**

**"All this I will give you,
 if you will bow down and worship me."**

But Jesus said No to that temptation--

**"Away from me Satan!" Jesus said, "For it is written:
 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"**

Jesus did just that, being obedient even to death on a cross.

2. In the second command, the Law says, You shall not make an idol in the image
 of any created thing--

But Jesus himself is the image of the invisible God.

John tells us that "**No one has ever seen God,
 but God the only Son, has made him known**" (Jn. 1:17).

"**Show us the Father,**" the disciples asked.

"**He who has seen me has seen the Father,**" Jesus replied.

3. The Law says, You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.

When we use God's name we invoke the person of God—
 we call upon him to act.

In misusing God's name--
 we attempt to manipulate God for purely personal ends.

Jesus refused to manipulate God for his own advantage.

Though he was in danger when his enemies came to arrest him
 in the Garden of Gethsemane,
 he refused to call on his Father to send him twelve legions of angels
 for his protection.

Though he faced death, he prayed, "**not my will but thine be done.**"

4. The Law instructs Israel to keep the Sabbath Day holy.

The law of the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant between the Lord
 and his people Israel.

But Jesus as the Son of Man proclaimed himself Lord of the Sabbath.

He inaugurated a new Sabbath rest--

he brought the salvation toward which the law of the Sabbath pointed.

5. The Law says, Honor your father and your mother.

We see in the Gospels that Jesus not only honored his heavenly Father;
but even on the cross he was careful to see to the well being of his earthly mother,
as he entrusted her care to his beloved disciple.

6. The Law says do not murder--

Jesus taught that even anger in your heart was like murder.
And Jesus even forgave those who nailed him to the cross.

7.. The Law says do not commit adultery--

Jesus taught that even lust in your heart was like adultery.
And this law reflects the fact that God has created us to live
in faithful covenant relationships
which are themselves reflections of his covenant relationship with us.
Jesus is the ultimately faithful covenant partner.

8. The Law says do not steal--

Jesus not only doesn't steal from others, he gives to others.,
giving his very life.
Jesus said, **"Give to the one who asks you,
and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."**

9. The Law says, Do not give false testimony against your neighbor--

Jesus said, **"Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No.'**
and his favorite expression was **"Truly, truly I say to you . . ."**
**"Heaven and earth may pass away,
but my words will never pass away,"** he declared.
Jesus is the truth, and he can be trusted implicitly.

10. And as for coveting, the last commandment,--

coveting comes from an inner dissatisfaction,
a discontentment with our circumstances,
and ultimately as failure to trust
in the gracious providence of God in your life.

When Jesus in the wilderness was tempted to turn stones into bread,
he refused to covet what his Father had not given him.

And Jesus said,

**"Why do you worry about what you will eat or drink or about what you will wear.
For the pagans run after all these things
and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.
"Seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness
and all these things will be given to you as well."**

Jesus came to fulfill the Law.

The Epistle to the Hebrews puts it like this:

Heb. 3:5,6--"Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house,
 testifying to what would be said in the future.
 But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house."

"Faithful as a son"--That's what the law is all about--
 living faithfully as a son.
 And that's what Jesus did, to fulfill that law.

The Ten Commandments are meant to be understood in that context--
 The Sermon on the Mount is meant to be understood in that context--
 The context of the covenant--
 the context of God's love for his people whom he loves like a father.

We cannot understand the Law of God without looking to Jesus.
 --he embodies its meaning.
 he lives out the relationship to which it points.

And on the cross he died as the righteous sacrifice
 for our failure to live as God's covenant people.

The gospel message declares that when we turn to Jesus Christ in faith
 we are joined to him as our representative.

What is true of him becomes true of us--
 we share in his righteousness,
 we enter into his covenant relationship with the Father;
 we are adopted into God's family,
 and through him, and by the Spirit,
 we share in **his power** to live as a faithful son of the Father.

The law, as it comes to us through our mediator Jesus Christ,
 shows us what love looks like—
 and how we can become more like Christ
 and enjoy a relationship with the living God

There is a story in Jewish tradition that focuses on the covenant
 and the Law--

"To what may this be compared?" asked the Rabbi.

"To the following:

A king who entered a province said to the people, 'May I be your king?'
 But the people said to him,

"Have you done anything good for us that you should rule over us?'

What did he do then?

He built the city wall for them,
 he brought in the water supply for them,
 and he fought their battles.

Then when he said to them, 'May I be your king?'
 they said to him: 'Yes, yes.'

Likewise, God.

He brought the Israelites out of Egypt,
 divided the sea for them,
 sent down the manna for them,
 brought the quails for them.
 He fought for them the battle with Amalek.

Then he said to them, 'I am to be your king.'
 And they said to him, 'Yes, yes.'⁵ /

The Lord made his covenant with Israel on Mt. Horeb--
 And he has made his covenant with us on Mt. Calvary.

Instead of a rescue from the slavery of Egypt,
 he has rescued us from the slavery of sin and death.

Instead of an earthly city,
 He has provided us an eternal kingdom,
 He has given us spiritual riches,
 He has fought our battles--
 Now he says--"I am to be your king."

And your response?

Is it "Yes, yes"?--

Will you follow him?

Will you allow him to rule over you?

will you appreciate his law as his gift to you--

will you respond as a son or daughter in faith to your loving Father?

Don't reduce your religion to a moral system--

Understand the gracious work of God--

Enter into a relationship with him through Jesus Christ.

Are you feeling burdened by guilt this morning?

Has the reading of the Ten Commandments

exposed the shallowness of your morality?

I urge you, don't leave here feeling guilty.

We worship a God waiting to take that burden,

eager to give you forgiveness and freedom,

and to bring you into a living relationships with himself—

"For the law was given through Moses;

grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

The truth that convicts us of our moral failure

is also a truth that declares a divine grace—

God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ.

⁵Mekilta, Bahodesh 5, cited in Gowan, Bridge, p. 197.

Prayer--

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Living as God's Covenant People
Studies in Deuteronomy 1-11, #3
June 11, 2017

"The Demand of the Covenant"
Deut. 5

**I. The Context of the Law—
God's Covenant with Israel**

**II. The Purpose of the Law—
God's Desire for our Prosperity**

**III. The Effect of the Law—
The People's Fear of God**

**IV. The Mediator of the Law—
Moses
... and Jesus the Messiah**

Jesus is
"the *culmination* of the law" (Rom. 10:4)

"For the law was given through Moses;
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17)

Sermon Discussion:

"The Demand of the Covenant"

Deut. 5

- Why would God be against "systems of morality"?
- How does posting the Ten Commandments on the wall of a public school classroom distort what they are?
- What is the purpose of the law according to our passage? What was it intended to do for the people? Do you see that as its purpose in your life?
- How did Jesus fulfill the law? What difference does that make for us? How does he deliver us from the curse of the law?
- We are no longer under the condemning power of the law—but that does not make us "lawless"—we are under the "law of Christ" (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19-23). What does being under the "law of Christ" mean for us?