

DEUTERONOMY – THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

To remind us of last week a quiz to start with

- I. Deuteronomy is the fifth book in the Old Testament which means it is the last book in what is called what? (The Pentateuch – which means what – “The Five Scrolls”)
- II. Genesis – Deuteronomy we have the story of the beginning of God’s people in the Old Testament and it begins with one man being chosen and called – which was who?
- III. God makes a covenant with Abraham – there are two big promises in that covenant – what are they?
- IV. At the beginning of Deuteronomy there are many descendants – but they are not in the land. It is not because God couldn’t keep that particular promise but why?
- V. The Israelites were in the wilderness for 40 years – a whole generation.
How long was the journey from Horeb (Mount Sinai) to the edge of the Promised Land?

But now at the beginning of Deuteronomy God says that it is time to break camp – get on the move – and it is time to enter the Promised Land.

The book of Deuteronomy is mainly speeches – or sermons – by Moses preparing the Israelites to enter the Promised Land. These are the last words of Moses to God’s people as the last chapter in the book records the death of Moses.

The first sermon from Moses is in chapters 1 – 4 where he looks back to lessons learned and then in chapters 5 – 28 we have a very long sermon where Moses explains how they should live as God’s people once they are in the land. So he explains and teaches God’s commands and His law to the Israelites.

It is this section that is the focus of our series.

The challenge before us is this. We are New Testament Christians – this is the Old Testament. We are not the nation of Israel about to go and literally, physically take possession of the land. So we have to read and apply what we read in Deuteronomy through the eyes of the New Testament – with the perspective of all that Christ has done – and attempt to apply it to us now both individually and collectively.

In the introduction last week it was emphasised that we are not saved by works – not by keeping God’s commands and laws – it is by grace – through faith in Christ – so that no one should boast.

This is worth saying and underlining every week during this series lest anyone thinks “Ahh – we are saved and are the children of God if we keep all these commands and laws that Moses gives us in Deuteronomy”. No – if you think that - we will have failed in explaining what this is all about.

But, it is also wrong to say that we can just ignore the commandments and laws and say that they have absolutely no relevance now – and thus Deuteronomy is a book we can just ignore. To quote the New Testament and Romans 15 verse 4:

“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope”

That includes Deuteronomy – it is written to us now to encourage, strengthen and to give us hope.

Today’s passage is Deuteronomy 5 verses 1 - 22 – famous passage as we have the 10 commandments – so let’s hear them now.

READ DEUTERONOMY 5 verses 1 – 22.

So, the people of Israel have reached a critical moment in their history.

God has led them out of slavery from the land of Egypt – led them through 40 long years in the wilderness – they are now on the verge of Jordan – ready to go into the Promised Land. It is a new beginning – a fresh start – a critical moment in the life of God’s people.

Moses begins this particular talk by looking back to the time when at Horeb – which is Mount Sinai – God made a covenant with the Israelites.

What is striking is that most of those who were there 40 years previously were now dead – but Moses declares this:

“It was not with our ancestors that the Lord made this covenant – but with us, with all of us who are here today”

Because God speaks out of time and into the present – what He said then speaks to us too now – to the descendants of Abraham – which we are through Christ. The commandments may have been given thousands of years ago – but the most important thing about them is that they explain who we essentially are - not simply what we should or should not do.

The Israelites are about to enter the Promised Land and Moses is preparing them. Why should He at this momentous point go back 40 years to that time at Mount Sinai when God spoke out of the fire and cloud and

gave them the 10 commandments?

I think it is because there was something the Israelites needed to know as they headed into the land with all its challenges and the understandable fears that they had. It is that this unique, majestic God is good – He had treated them with so much grace and favour – so they needed to believe this and to trust and cling to Him.

To highlight this, there is something we must not miss when it comes to the 10 Commandments.

It is that they don't actually begin with a command – but rather with a description. What do I mean? Look at verse 6:

“I am the LORD your God who brought out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery”:

That is a statement - which is then followed by the commandments.

It tells us that the God who gives these commands is one of revelation and redemption.

A God who reveals. Please note that when it says “I am the LORD your God” that the word “LORD” is in capital letters. It is the best translation of the name God chose to give himself which is “Yahweh” – revealed to Moses at the burning bush – and is the name God chose to reveal the uniqueness of his character. It means “to be”, that He is entire and complete in Himself, He transcends all things, He is not dependent, He is wholly other. God spoke and revealed himself to Moses and then to the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

Not only a God who reveals but a God who redeems.

In verse 6 he introduces Himself as the one who brought them out of Egypt – out of the land of slavery. He had liberated them from that which oppressed them – He set them free – and by doing so showed His power and His amazing grace.

So before we have the commandments God reminds his people that He has chosen to reveal who He is and He has chosen to redeem and rescue them.

Then we have the commandments – what can we say about them?

For me the Ten Commandments are one of the greatest blessings the world has ever received.

They describe the world as God has made it – they are His instructions as to how things work. They are not given to restrict us or to rob us of fulfilment and fun – no, quite the opposite.

In fact we are told why they were given just across the page.

Deuteronomy 6 verse 24:

“The LORD commanded us to obey all these and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today”

Four words to apply to the commandments which I hope you will remember:

“WE MIGHT ALWAYS PROSPER”

Wonderful summary as to why they were given to us.

They are both individual and interconnected. They begin with our relationship with God – then move into our relationship with each other – an order that is significant. For when we get the vertical relationship with God right – the horizontal relationship with each other will follow.

As Augustus said: “Love God and do what you like”.

In other words Love God and therefore His commands.

Each command deserves a sermon in itself – but don't panic – I am not going to attempt to put 10 sermons into one – but rather have decided to focus upon the first commandment:

“I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery..

YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME”

To understand the full significance of this first commandment lets – as we always must – remind ourselves of the context – and that is what actually awaited the Israelites as they were about to go into the promised land.

As they were about to enter the land of the Canaanites the Lord was well aware that there would be many different gods available to them - gods they would be attracted and drawn to.

So before they enter the land, God – through Moses – makes it abundantly clear to them that they are a called and chosen people – a holy nation – uniquely set apart to Him and for Him – and accordingly they must avoid any involvement with the gods they will encounter in the land of Canaan.

“You shall have no other gods before me”

At the very beginning of the 10 commandments it is made clear that on the basis of who He is and on the basis on what He has done – He will accept no other gods before or beside Him.

There is a very good reason for this.

We need to know what the nature of idol worship was in the land of Canaan.

It is well documented from sources outside of what we have in Scripture that the Canaanite gods made desperate demands on those who chose to worship them. It involved sexual promiscuity and debauchery because they thought this pleased the gods of fertility – it would somehow bring blessing.

It also – shockingly – involved the sacrifice of human life – including children. They were burned in fires and killed on altars to satisfy and appease the gods.

Why?

The belief was that these gods were linked to nature – to the sun and the moon – and as survival depended upon the harvest each year the people would do anything to get the gods to give them what they desperately wanted. If it didn't work – if the harvest failed – the people would do more and more to get what they wanted and needed – leading ultimately to the sacrificing of human life itself. The people in Canaan were literally enslaved to these idols – controlled by them.

So God says to the Israelites as they are about to enter this land:

“I have taken you out of one form of slavery in Egypt – now don't return another form of slavery in the land of Canaan.”

The striking thing about the gods in the land of Canaan was all they did was take, take, take – demanding more and more – but never ever delivering.

Now, you may be thinking:

“Well, that was a long time ago – we have progressed a very long way since then – we are now sophisticated and enlightened – we do not build altars or shrines – we do not worship the sun or moon – we certainly would not even contemplate the sacrifice of human life to appease the gods”

Of course, that is true.

But does it mean that idolatry is not relevant to us now.

Does it mean that the first two commandments are rendered irrelevant now because we are so sophisticated and advanced?

Are there not modern, much more subtle – but no less spiritually deadly – idols that we need to be aware of?

If we understand idolatry as us choosing to give everything to something or someone in order to get back something we want and need then I would say that idolatry is as much a threat to us now as it was to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the land of Canaan.

So what may be our modern idols?

Image, status, money, career, education, reputation, pleasure – the list goes on does it not?

There are so many gods available to us – there are a wide variety of forces operative in our world that demand our allegiance. We find them very attractive – we find what they offer very desirable and if we don't guard our hearts we will be drawn to them, we will want to derive benefit from them and we will seek to placate them. They have the power to win the devotion of our hearts.

There is a connection between these and the idols that were found in the land of Canaan and it is this – they will take, take, take- but they will never ultimately deliver. Because whatever the idol – ancient or modern – they are powerless to provide. But they will enslave – for slavery is inevitable if we worship and give ourselves to worship of idols.

For the Israelites as they entered the land of Canaan – they were told to avoid the gods in that land because their motto was quite simple:

“TAKE, TAKE, TAKE”

To counter that they were reminded of the commands of the Lord who had revealed Himself to them and rescued them and whose motto is

“GIVE, GIVE, GIVE”

He spoke to the people of Israel saying:

“You will discover in the place you are going to a wide variety of gods that are worshipped – but they are no gods. I only am the Lord your God – you must learn to differentiate between what is good and true and right – and what is false, wrong and ultimately destructive.

Remember – You shall have no other gods before me.

Remember – the commands I give you are given that “You may always prosper”.

Something else about the gods in the land of Canaan that is contemporary and relevant for us now. The first commandment is foundational because God can never be one – even a favourite one – among several deities.

In the land of Canaan idol worship may have been very demanding – but it was never exclusive. There was the worship of many different gods – you could chose the bits you wanted from some and bits from others.

This was widely accepted – it was permissible – it was normal.

What was not normal or acceptable was the idea that the god you worshipped was exclusive and was the only God.

Does that sound contemporary?

Because of that, is it not tempting to acknowledge with our mouths the uniqueness of the our God – but in our hearts to be giving ourselves to other modern deities that will make big demands upon us, that will lead us to sacrifice those things that are precious and will lead to compromise and a divided heart.

Thus we need to be thinking upon and taking very seriously this first great commandment.

I have no time to highlight the other commandments except to say I wish I could as it is amazing how comprehensive and relevant they are. Put together they deal with the right attitude to our creator, to ourselves, to family, with our neighbours – covering all our relationships.

These commandments are given that we might always prosper – that God is good and he wants to bless His people to be a people free from the pain and damage of hatred, adultery, theft, lies, jealousy and envy that is so corrosive. There are no winners in a society like that and it is God's will that we are free of that.

The commandments are like a compass that gives direction, they act like a thermometer that measures our spiritual devotion, they are like a bridle that gives restraint to a wayward horse, and they are like a mirror that shows us the reality of our own hearts.

The commandments are obviously to be found in the Old Testament.

We are New Testament believers. We are always to look at the Old Testament through New Testament eyes – particularly how we view what is there in light of what Christ has done.

So, I want you to think upon this and discuss in two's or three's:

"I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.
You shall have no other gods before me"

How do we read this command in the light of what Jesus has done?

Is there a connection between the giving of the 10 commandments and the giving of Christ as our saviour?"

So – first question:

"How do we read the first commandment in light of what Jesus has done?"

The statement before the first command reminds us that God reveals himself and brings rescue and redemption. In the New Testament we have the ultimate revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

We have rescue and redemption too through Him. Not from the slavery of Egypt – but from the slavery of sin. We have been redeemed – bought with a price – which is the blood of Christ – and because of that He deserves our full devotion and we are not to put any other gods before him.

Second question – is there a connection between the giving of the 10 commandments and the giving to us of Christ as our saviour?"

Here is my take on that!

The Israelites that in keeping the commandments that they would always prosper. But read on throughout the rest of the Old Testament and you discover that they couldn't keep them – they kept breaking them – particularly in going after and giving themselves to other gods.

In that respect, we are no different to the Israelites are we?

Can you say you keep the commandments perfectly, all the time?

When you consider too that Jesus equates hatred in our hearts to murder and lustful thoughts to adultery – I would say that to say we can keep them perfectly makes us very self-righteous or just deluded.

At the end of Chapter 5 this is what the lord says through Moses:

Read chapter 5 verses 32, 33.

Is not the truth that like the Israelites we are not always careful – we do turn to the right and to the left – we do not walk in obedience to all that the Lord has commanded?

But do not despair. Do not think "I am therefore destined to fail".

That is not the good news of the gospel.

We are not to see the 10 commandments as an entry code, a rule book we have to keep to get into the kingdom – a kind of test we have to pass - even though, inevitably, we will fail.

They are not that. The 10 commandments cannot be a way of getting into the family because in the Old Testament they are given to those who already in the family – they had already been rescued and redeemed. Grace came before the law in the Old Testament. So the commandments are not the way to gain salvation – it is not “keep these and you will be saved.”

No – it is by grace – through faith in Christ – so that no one should boast.

The commandments humble us because if we are honest we cannot keep them. If we are honest we will admit “I do not keep God’s law” “I cannot keep God’s law” “I do not even want to keep God’s law”.

This makes us realise we need a saviour – it drives us back to Jesus where we will find forgiveness and grace and strength.

At the beginning of this talk I highlighted Deuteronomy 6 verse 24 where we are reminded that in keeping the commands we will always prosper. They are always for our good because God is good.

I will finish with the next verse 25:

“And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us that will be our righteousness”

The Old Testament shows us we cannot keep the law – so we can’t be righteous in keeping it perfectly.

But what is revealed to us in the New Testament is that Christ is our righteousness – and through faith in Him we are righteous in the sight of God. Yes, we should revere the commandments – and alongside that we should rejoice in the righteousness that Christ gives us.

That is our calling now in the light of all that Christ has done.

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS

1. I want to suggest an exercise. Without having the Bible open (except for the leader) can the group recall the 10 commandments in order?

Use this to encourage everyone to learn them.

2. Do you think there is a significance in the order and structure of the commands?

If so – what is it?

Are they all equal in their importance?

What do they tell us about the lord who gave them?

3. Do you see the first commandment as foundational – the one from which the others build upon? If so – why?

4. Discuss what modern idols we need to be aware of and how we can guard our hearts from being drawn to them?

What are the warning signs and symptoms we need to be aware of?

5. How do we read the first commandment in light of all that Christ has done?

Is there a connection between the giving of the 10 commandments in the Old Testament and the giving of Christ to us in the New Testament?

If so – how does affect our attitude to the commandments?

