

Love and Law (Deuteronomy 5:1-21)

When I began my time with Chick-fil-A, I was quickly introduced to the “Core 4,” the four practices that form the baseline of all interactions with guests in the restaurants. The Core 4 are: Smile, Make Eye Contact, Speak Enthusiastically, and Stay Connected. These are not just nice ideas; these are required behaviors. To violate the standards of the Core 4 is considered a dereliction of duty and grounds for termination. They are simple, foundational behaviors that make a pleasant time for everybody involved. They are **not merely rules to be followed but practices to be deeply internalized**. The requirements make possible generous and sincere interactions with other people. Something similar happens in the world of serious athletes. Sure, you need some talent. But you also need discipline and rules. The basic behaviors make possible the freedom of athletic excellence and achievement.

In our Christian tradition, we have long held the Ten Commandments to be the baseline of our ethical behavior. They are not words designed to repress and stifle but to set free. The Christian church has always believed that a life built on the Ten Commandments is a life of great freedom and joy. Can you imagine living in a world where the Commandments were taken seriously? A world in which people not only refused to murder but stood for the protection of life? A world where sex was celebrated in the confines of a happy male-female marriage and the vulnerable were protected from predators and pornographers? A world where God was worshiped in Spirit and truth? A world where we were each grateful for what we have and did not envy the success of others? It is a breathtaking vision.

As Moses stood before the people on the Plains of Moab, as they were poised to claim their inheritance in Canaan, **he reminded them of the Ten Commandments**. The Commandments had first been given to Israel forty years prior when they had been camped before Sinai. In the ensuing years, the people had refused to enter the land and a whole generation had perished in the wilderness. The younger generation was about to claim the inheritance

that God had promised to the people. Moses made it clear at that time that the covenant that God had made with the people at Sinai was not a mere curiosity of the past. It was **a living, breathing relationship for the people at that very moment**. Moses unleashed a rhetorical torrent to let them know that the covenant was theirs, even all these years later. Hear again his words from verse three (in the NET translation, which I think does a good job of bringing across the urgency of the Hebrew text): “He did not make this covenant with our ancestors, but with us, we who are here today, all of us living now.” Notice the repetition. In Hebrew, the first person plural suffix is repeated three times, representing a classic tool of Hebrew emphasis. The Ten Commandments were not nice ethical reflections from the past, Moses suggested, but key ideas for life right now. Even pushing the biblical story forward, **we find that the early Christians saw the Ten Commandments as not mere relics of the past but vital ethical information for the present**. For example, we find that Paul is clearly thinking of the Ten Commandments when he is listing a catalog of vices in 1 Timothy 1:8-10:

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane [echoes of the first three commandments], for those who strike their fathers and mothers [fifth commandment], for murderers [sixth commandment], the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality [seventh commandment], enslavers [eighth commandment], liars, perjurers, [ninth commandment] and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine [wrapping us back around to the second commandment]...

Paul understood that the Ten Commandments did not simply vanish with the coming of Jesus. Instead, Jesus perfectly fulfilled these commandments in his own life, died for our violation of these commandments, and then, having been resurrected, gave us his Spirit so that we could progressively grow in obedience to these commandments through moment-by-moment dependence on him. The Ten Commandments still speak with authority.

We must observe something interesting about how the law works in Deuteronomy. According to Moses's representation of the covenant, **the law works on various levels**. We might say that the law is incredibly simple. It is summed up in 6:5 – “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Taken with the statement of Leviticus 19:18 – “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD” – we now have the sources of the simple statement of Jesus found in the gospels. The greatest commandment is to love God and a second one like it is to love your neighbor. This is a summary of the whole law stated in a simple manner.

But we must recognize other levels to the law. Deuteronomy contains much more than the statement of 6:5. We also find lots of other laws to be observed and learned from. There are very specific cases in which God's commandments are to be applied. **And in the middle position between the simple command to love God and the varied applications of God's principles, we find the Ten Commandments**. They represent a kind of middle ground between the simple and the complex. The Ten Commandments point back to the simple love command and forward to the developed ethical practices. And in Deuteronomy, we often find the three levels of law tangled together. Let me give a simple example of this varied approach.

Deut. 13:1-5. “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you

leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So, you shall purge the evil from your midst.”

See the simple statement. The people are to love God with all their hearts. At stake is also fidelity to the first commandment – no other gods before me. But how does that work in practice? They must purge out the false prophets who try to lead them into idolatry. This is what they were to do with idolatrous prophets. To lead the people in idolatry was a capital offense because it was an act of treason against the covenant Lord. Yes, love the Lord with all your heart. Yes, obey the first commandment. And then, if false prophets come, handle this matter seriously. **Notice how the law is explained from the simple level all the way to the specific level.** It is all of one piece. By the way, we cannot use this text to condone killing people today. The situation has changed. In a democratic society, we must endorse religious freedom. However, the church must be fierce in her defense of boundaries of doctrine and behavior. A failure to defend against falsehoods is a violation of the first commandment and a failure of love for our God.

How about another example? The eighth commandment says that the people are not to steal. This is developed in a specific way in **19:14** – “You shall not move your neighbor’s landmark, which the men of old have set, in the inheritance that you will hold in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess.” Do you see how the law is working on more than one level? To love God means honoring the way in which he has divided and given the land as an inheritance. So, don’t steal your neighbor’s land – following the eighth commandment – by moving the boundary marker. To move the boundary marker is to hate both God and neighbor. It all ties together. Many more observations could be made about each of the Ten Commandments. They all reduce to the simple commandment to love God and develop into more concrete regulations and behaviors.

The point that I want to convey to you today is that **the Ten Commandments still work like this now, and we need all the layers of law if we are to be a people who come into our inheritance in Jesus Christ.** We need the simple truth of “love God and love neighbor.” We need the basic ethical foundations of the Ten Commandments. And we need to be able to develop these commandments into applied ethical practices in our

day-to-day lives. There are dangers on all sides. On the one hand, we can become cold, heartless legalists, the kind of people who nitpick over specific behaviors but have no true love for God or others. On the other hand, we can fall into hedonism. In this danger, we claim to love God even as we refuse to follow any of his commandments. In many ways this is the more dangerous situation today. It is far too common for contemporary Christians to engage in all sorts of selfish and foolish behaviors and then follow them up with a statement like, “But God knows that I love him and that is all that really matters.” But it simply does not work that way. Our love for God must flow out into our business practices, our sexuality, our choices of entertainment, and our treatment of family members. Our loving and merciful God is also the sovereign Lord who tells us the true way of life.

The Ten Commandments are not a burden. They are the baseline of lives lived for the glory of God. **They also remind us of our guilt before a holy God.** The only remedy for this guilt is the blood of Jesus Christ. If you do not know the power of the blood of Jesus to wash away guilt, then don't let the day end without finding peace with God through faith in Jesus. The way is open, and the invitation is for you.