

The Spirit of the Law

Deuteronomy 10:11-22

This morning we will again focus on the big picture here in Deuteronomy. Not so much the details of the history of the nation of Israel as the people of God are about to enter the promised land of Canaan. Not so much even the immediate context of the Old Covenant or Old Testament as a whole. But rather, the big picture that transcends the Old Testament. The big picture that goes beyond a mere history lesson. A big picture that is just as relevant today as it was in the day of Moses, an unchanging message.

Sometimes we can get bogged down, or confused, in understanding the relationship between the old and new testaments. Sometimes we can get confused about what in the Old Testament actually applies to us today, and how it actually applies. So today there should be none of that confusion, because the focus today from Deuteronomy 10 applies exactly the same way it did then. Nothing changes. Specifically with regard to what I have used as the title of this sermon, the spirit of the law.

Nothing changes. What we will study today about the law of God from Deuteronomy is exactly that same as what we learn from Paul or Peter, John or any other New Testament writer. The spirit of the law is exactly the same!

Now, please don't think that I will imply any sort of conflict or even tension between the spirit and the letter of the law. That's not my purpose. There is not conflict, not when the law and the gospel are both rightly understood. And the letter of the law is important, and we spent a full sermon on each of the ten commandments, focusing on that letter of the law. The direct and

immediate applications of the law. You can study the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms, which both have lengthy lists of what is required and forbidden in each of the commandments. And those are worthy objects of our study.

But this morning, our focus is more broad, more comprehensive. We're not going to look at one particular commandment or the other, but all of them at once. And my method is quite similar to Jesus' own way of explaining the law when he was asked about the most important commandment, a question intended to cause a debate and disagreement among those listening to Jesus' teaching.

Mat. 22:34 "But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. 35 Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" 37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

So if the whole of God's moral law is comprehensively summarized by just ten commandments, then what is the sum of those ten commandments? "The sum of the ten commandments is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves."

Our Catechism, of course, quotes that verse I read in Matthew 22. And the Bible gives us other helpful and useful summaries, comprehensive summaries of all the commandments that define what I am calling "the spirit of the law." What the law is all about in its very essence. For example,

Micah 6:8 “He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?”

We have such a summary this morning as well,

v.12 “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?”

Before we even look more deeply into those verses, though, I want to take a further step back and look at the motivation of our hearts when it comes to obedience to the law. In focusing upon the spirit of the law, I want to be clear about our proper motivation regarding the law. And the simplest and most direct way that I can put that, I believe, is to say that,

I. KEEPING THE COMMANDMENTS IS A RESPONSE TO GOD’S GRACE.

Now, I get hope that I get something of that idea into every sermon I preach. Something about the glorious grace of God in the gospel. And something about how we should respond to that grace. Every sermon, every text in the Bible. Every book, every chapter, from Genesis to Revelation. We should see and hear a declaration of the grace of God in the gospel, and we should recognize how we are to respond.

Just putting it that way is especially helpful, because it protects you from all sorts of errors and misunderstandings, including any thought that you have to earn your own salvation by your works. Or that by those works, by the performance of your law-keeping, you somehow achieve for yourself good standing before God or the forgiveness of your sins.

No, beloved. No, never. God’s grace comes first. And the whole of our salvation, the whole of our Christian life, is a response to that grace. That’s where we being this morning. With a particular emphasis upon,

A. A response to God’s electing love.

I’ve been hear long enough that you have heard this from me before, and you will continue to hear this from me, over and over again. Our commitment to obedience to the law is a response to God’s love for us, a love made so clear in what we simply call election. More simply, in John’s words,

1 John 4:19 “We love Him because He first loved us.”

1 John 4:10 “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

Every discussion of the use of the law in the life of the Christian has to be focused on this simple idea. In our law-keeping, we are simply responding to God’s love. And the greatest expression of that love is that doctrine is so sadly, and so frequently, argued about and debated among God’s people. The doctrine of election. Predestination. The doctrine itself, however, is very simple and straightforward. God chose us. And so we read,

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.”

In love he predestined us. In love he chose us. In his love, he

loved us. And that is what Moses was to teach the people of Israel,

v.14-15

Everything belongs to God. Everything in heaven and on earth. Including all the people of this world. But God delighted himself in this one particular people, these descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He chose to love them only!

v.15 “The Lord delighted only in your fathers, to love them.”

Or, in the plain language of the Bible,

Rom. 9:10 “And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac 11 (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), 12 it was said to her, “The older shall serve the younger.” 13 As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.”

What does all of that mean? It means that God chose us. And if you love Jesus and trust in him for your salvation, then God first loved you. And that is where law-keeping comes in. It is a response to God’s grace. It is also,

B. A response to the revelation of God’s glory.

Which is to say, it’s all about God. Everything having to do with our lives is a response to God’s own revelation of himself in all his glory. Just look at what Moses says to these people on the plains of Moab,

v.17-19

There are repeated passages in Scripture that proclaim and declare God’s glory, his attributes and all his works. Those passages are presented to us so that we might respond, with all

that is emphasized here in this text,

v.12 “...to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good.”

Why? What is the motivation for the obedience of our lives? Quite simply, it is a response of love to the revelation of God’s love and God’s glory. And, in that same context,

C. A response to God’s promise of salvation.

That is how and why we keep the law. That is the motivation for our obedience. A response to God’s work of salvation.

v.21-22

God has redeemed you! Therefore, he calls you to obey the law. And always remember, the ten commandments themselves begin with that reminder of his redemption,

Ex. 20:2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. 3 “You shall have no other gods before Me.”

I hope this big picture is as simple and as plain as it can possibly be. We obey the law, in the letter and the spirit of that law, as a response to the grace of God that is promised to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

Now, let’s look a bit more closely at the spirit of the law, with this idea at the forefront of your mind.

II. KEEPING THE COMMANDMENTS IS A MATTER OF THE HEART.

Never is the law merely an external duty or obligation. Never is the law satisfied by any mere outward appearance. That, of

course, was the great error and danger of the Pharisees of Jesus' day, whom he condemned quite severely, calling them "whitewashed tombs."

Mat. 23:23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. 24 Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! 25 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. 27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."

So what does the Lord require of you? Ultimately, the answer to that question is that he requires your heart. Specifically, as we see here,

A. Reverence for God.

v.12

Then, v.20

We read that the Lord requires us to fear him. The word means honor. Respect. Reverence. Not the fear of dread and terror, but the fear of worship. Not the fear of condemnation, but the fear of a son or daughter seeking to please our father in heaven. So the fear of God is closely associated with the delight of the heart in God. Perhaps the best word in our English

language is that word reverence.

Heb. 12:28 "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear."

You who trust in the Lord Jesus for your eternal life, this is your calling. Not merely some outward performance of duty. But a heart that gives to God the honor that is due his name. In that way, your obedience to the law is always a matter of your heart.

Deut. 6:1 "Now this is the commandment, and these are the statutes and judgments which the Lord your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe them in the land which you are crossing over to possess, 2 that you may fear the Lord your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged."

And with that fear,

B. Love for God.

I could continue to read in,

Deut. 6:3 "Therefore hear, O Israel, and be careful to observe it, that it may be well with you, and that you may multiply greatly as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you—a land flowing with milk and honey." 4 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. 6 "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

Love the Lord your God. That's the obligation of the law. That's the substance of the law. That's the spirit of the law. As I emphasized Jesus' words at the beginning of the sermon, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment."

Interesting, isn't it, that love is also the letter of the law. To emphasize, there is no conflict or tension between the two. So we read,

1 John 5:1 "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. 2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome."

Do you see how nothing has changed in the transition from the Old Covenant to the New. The outward expressions have changed, in terms of the ceremonial laws and in terms with the sacrifices and offerings of our worship, but the substance of the moral law hasn't changed. Nor the spirit of that law as it addresses your heart.

What does the Lord require of you, then? He requires your heart, offered to him as a living sacrifice. He requires the love and honor of your heart, a love and and reverence that brings about,

C. Service to God.

Service refers to something you do for someone else. It is defined as providing a benefit for another person, as contrasted with those who serve themselves. Those words really are inherently contradictory, aren't they? For if you are serving yourself, you really aren't serving at all. And so we read again,

v.12

And v.20 "You shall serve him."

If is so appropriate that we call our time of worship a worship service! We are offering our service to God, and in that context I often think of,

Rom. 12:1 "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."

The NASB translates that last phrase, "your spiritual service of worship." That's what God wants of us, that is what he requires. Not an external token or ritual, but the service of your heart. And then, finally, as a matter of climax, what God requires of you in terms of your heart is,

D. Humility before God.

Look at,

v.16

Now, what exactly does that phrase mean, "circumcise the foreskin of your heart?" Given the whole sentence, it must obviously mean the opposite of what follows, "and be stiff-necked no longer." We looked at that phrase "stiff-necked" two weeks ago in chapter 9.

Deut. 9:6 "Therefore understand that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people."

Deut. 9:13 "Furthermore the Lord spoke to me, saying, 'I have seen this people, and indeed they are a stiff-necked people.'"

Literally, if you remember, the Hebrew word has reference to

the yoke that oxen would wear when they were laboring. The idea was of a very heavy yoke, an oppressive yoke, and one that the animal could not overcome. The expression came to mean not simply the inability to change course, but the stubborn unwillingness to do so! So a stiff-necked person is defined as one unwilling to change, unwilling to repent, unwilling to admit wrong, unwilling to turn from wrong. In other words, stubborn. Hardened, and this same word is used when we read that God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” Stiff-necked and hard-hearted as synonymous.

The basic idea is stubbornness. Intractability. Obstinate. The idea is that you cannot be moved. You will not budge. You will not give up any ground, you will not back down from any decision you have made. You will not admit any error on your part, nor change your mind about anything at all. Stiff-necked. Stubborn. And rebellious. So we are urged, “be stiff-necked no longer.”

But look how Moses describes that exhortation. Verse 16, “Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart.” So it’s a matter of the heart. But in what way? What does that mean?

I still remember a preaching professor in seminary telling us as a class that we shouldn’t use this expression in a sermon, circumcision of the heart, because people wouldn’t understand what you are talking about. And I thought then, as I think now, that really doesn’t give people much credit for being able to understand a pretty simple analogy. And it doesn’t give preachers much credit for being able to explain anything.

So I’ll use the expression as Moses does, and explain it clearly. Obviously, the meaning of the phrase “circumcision of the heart” from the actual text is don’t be stubborn and rebellious. And here is why it is such an appropriate symbol. Circumcision is

to cut off the foreskin of the male organ, cutting off that which is symbolically unclean. Cutting off that which represents that which is unclean. In other words, cutting off sin. Cutting away that which must be removed to make someone alive who is dead in sin.

And so, when a person becomes a Christian, his flesh, his old man, is cut off. And he becomes a new creature. God cuts away the heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh, a living heart. That’s circumcision of the heart. Cutting off the old man, so that as a Christian, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you can put on the new man.

Circumcision of the heart means that God has to give you a new heart. In other words, you have to be born again to become a Christian. And to close that loop, when God gives you a new heart, you yourself are broken and humbled by the consciousness of your sin. That’s called repentance. That’s the evidence of a new heart. It’s call a broken heart, the brokenness of humility before the Lord.

And that is what the Lord requires of you. A broken heart of repentance for your sin, a broken and crushed spirit that leaves you with nothing to boast of in yourself. That’s what it means to circumcise your heart. It means to be born again. it means to be humble before the Lord. Humble and crushed by the awareness of your sin.

Psalm 34:18 “The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit.”

Psalm 51:15 “O Lord, open my lips, And my mouth shall show forth Your praise. 16 For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart

—These, O God, You will not despise.”

So give to God today that sacrifice, the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart. The humility of your heart that freely confesses your sin, and freely turns from that sin, in loving service to the God who first love you.

v.16 “Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.”

v.12 “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

Micah 6:8 “He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?”