

God's law is about life.

Text: Deuteronomy 4:1, 2, 6-9 for September 2, 2018 by Pastor Bolwerk

Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. ² Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you. ⁶ Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." ⁷ What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? ⁸ And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? ⁹ Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.

Anyone who was at St. Matthew's open forum last Sunday heard us talk about a possible merger with Good Shepherd Lutheran Church. A merger would mean a dramatic change to our congregation. While that change may be difficult, a change can be a new start, a new beginning whether it is for a church or an individual.

We all face new beginnings in life. It could be starting a new school, a new job, or just a new phase in life. And when we start something new it's good for us to know what rules are that we should be following. We want to know the rules and regulations of our schools, our jobs, or maybe even a new town that we may live in. Rules may not always seem like something good. Yet rules are put in place to help things run smoothly; they help protect and direct people as they live and work together.

In this portion of Deuteronomy the Israelites were about to begin a new phase in their lives. Camped on the eastern shore of the Jordan River the people were getting ready to cross that river and take possession of the land God had promised them. But before they did God's prophet, Moses, reminds the people of the rules. These were not just any rules, these were God's laws given by God himself. Moses wanted the people of Israel to know that these commands of God were not given to be a burden. God did not give his laws to be a chain that God uses to manipulate people. Moses wants us to understand that ...

Theme: God's law is about life.

I. So don't change God's law.

II. Be careful how you keep it.

We want to be very careful about not changing God's law because God gave his law for our good. Moses said, "**And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today**" (v. 8)? These are 'righteous' decrees, that means they are good and right. They are good because they protect us as we live in this world. Think about what God's Ten Commandments protect: Life, property, relationships, a person's good name. His Commands tell us to respect authorities who are here to serve and protect us. But these commands are also good because they protect our souls. They help keep us in a right relationship with God. The Commands of God protect us by turning us away from the things that would lead us away from God and into hell.

This is why Moses goes on to say, "**Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God**" (v. 2). God wants to protect us with these commands, so to add to them, subtract from them, or change them in any way would take away that protection.

Yet how often do we live dangerously by doing just that. We change God's law by adding

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to it! We add to God's laws the phrase, "Everybody else is doing it!" For example: God's Fourth Commandment tells us to honor and respect the authorities of this world and follow the laws they put in place. Yet how often do we dishonor and disrespect the government authorities by speaking badly about them. And our excuse for doing this? It's because "Everybody else is doing it." Or how often do we drive down the road and find ourselves going ten miles-per-hour over the posted speed limit, but then we don't slow down? Why? Because "Everybody else is doing it."

But we do more than just add to God's laws, we also subtract from them as well. God's Eighth Commandment is meant to protect a person's reputation and good name. But how often have we subtracted from the Eighth Commandment by acting as if it does not apply to certain people. We feel it is okay ruining a person's reputation because: they treated us badly, or they hurt our family or friends. Maybe they were caught doing something wrong, so we feel they don't deserve any respect from us because their reputation has already been ruined.

God also says, "**Do not steal**" (Exodus 20:15). But we subtract from his command when we limit stealing to only possessions or money. So when we waste time on the job, even though we are still on the clock, we don't consider that stealing. When we don't do our best work, for our boss or our teacher, because we don't like them or we don't feel like working, then we have subtracted those things from God's definition of stealing.

Yet perhaps the worst thing we can do with God's law is when we change the meaning of that law completely. God says in his First Commandment, "**You shall no other God's before me**" (Exodus 20:3). And we take that law of God and we change it to fulfill our deepest desire, as we say, "Yes, I will have no other gods except me." We change God's law to fulfill our desire to be worshiped. We change that law, so we can put our will ahead of every else's, including God's.

At times the ways we add to and subtract from and change God's laws may seem so slight, so subtle. But the changes we make are still damaging, and the sins we commit are still damning. We change what is good into a license for doing evil. In doing so, we destroy God's good law and we destroy our relationship with the God who gave it. God's law is about life, but when we change his law we turn it into something that leads to death.

Moses is warning us about that trap! We need to listen to what Moses is saying and realize the danger we are putting ourselves in. Only when we recognize our sin, and the danger it presents to our souls, only then will we understand our need for help. And the only one who can help us is Jesus.

Jesus was born under that same law of God that we are. But Christ didn't come to change the law. Our Lord said, "**Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them**" (Matthew 5:17). Jesus came to fulfill everything that God's law requires from us. During his life Jesus perfectly kept every one of God's commandments; never adding, never subtracting, and never changing. Then, the only One who ever perfectly kept the law, died for our breaking of the law. Jesus gave up his life on a cross to pay for our sinful adding, subtracting, and changing of God's commands. Our sins were buried with Christ. The eternal death we deserved was taken away by his death. Trusting in what Jesus has done for you your sins are forgiven.

In repentance, we turn away from that sin of changing God's law. Jesus helps us see the law of God in a whole new light. He helps us see that God's law is about life. It is something that protects our life, and it is something we can use to show our gratitude to God for giving us eternal life. In recognizing the good of God's law we begin to understand that we don't want to handle it in the wrong way. God's law is about life, so you want to be careful how you keep it.

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Moses tells us that in keeping God's law there is wisdom. He said of God's Commandments, **"Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations"** (v. 6). When we follow God's laws with our lives we display God's wisdom to the world. And the world does at times recognize that. Moses said, **"the nations [...] will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this [...] is a wise and understanding people'"** (v. 6b). Following God's commands gives order and direction to our lives; it brings peace and stability to our families and our relationships. Not that our lives are going to be perfect, but our Christian lives often appear better, or at the very least different, to those who don't follow God. To the sinful world we often appear to "have it all together" while their lives are falling apart as they stumble around in their sin. Their lives often have no real goal, and no real hope.

When people see the 'wisdom' in our lives, which is really God's wisdom, they can become curious and want to know what makes us different. And when they ask, that gives us the opportunity to share not only God's law, but especially our Lord's gospel.

Being careful how we keep God's law means being careful in how we live. When it comes to displaying this wisdom of God in our lives Moses says, **"Be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them"** (v. 9).

Moses is both warning us and encouraging us. He is telling us not to forget these decrees and laws of God. These are the things we need to help guard our souls against Satan. We need these words of God to protect us from the powerful temptations of the world. God's prophet urges us to not **"let them slip from your heart as long as you live."** This means taking the time to review God's righteous decrees and laws, doing that whenever possible, even every day if you can. It means taking time to learn the words of God, committing them to your memory and applying them to your life.

And these laws and decrees are not just for you. Moses tells us to **"Teach them to your children and to their children after them"** (v. 9b). The only way to know the souls of our children and grandchildren will be safe, even after we are gone, is to make sure they know these life-saving commands as well as we do.

So teach God's Commands to others, even as you continue to teach yourself, because God's law is about life. Through his perfect decrees and commands God is working to protect your body and soul from all harm and danger. Through his powerful gospel God is strengthening your faith in Christ, forgiving your sins, and giving you the ability to carefully handle that precious Word of God. Use that ability as you live a life of thanks to your Lord. Follow God's Commands as he uses them to guard and guide your precious soul to heaven. Amen.