

Do We Still Need the Ten Commandments?

Text:

Deuteronomy 4:40; 5:16; 6:1-8

Therefore you shall keep his statutes and his commandments, which I command you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may prolong your days in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time."

"Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."

"Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Introduction:

The word "Deuteronomy" derives from Greek, and means the second law or the repetition of the law. Historically the book comes at the end of the life of Moses. The wilderness generation has passed off the scene and the new generation is now in position to enter the land of promise. The end of the book will record the death of Moses, but before he dies he has one last message to give to Israel. He begins in the first four chapters with a history lesson

reminding them of all that had happened since God had delivered them from Egypt. In chapter 5 he then begins the longest section of the book where he reminds them of the covenant God had made with them and the laws and statutes that went with the covenant. At the top of the list are the Ten Commandments which are the foundation of the law of God. In the three passages that I have read there is a repeated refrain. These are not the only times it is found in the book; in fact, it sets the tone for this entire farewell discourse. It can be summarized as follows:

- God is about to keep his promise and give you the land that he promised to Abraham long ago
- If you remember God's laws and his statutes and keep them and live by them once you are in the land
- Things will go well with you
- You will prolong you time in the land

What I want us to look at in these passages is the motivation God gives us for keeping his law and then look at the method he gives us to make sure that we do.

I. Our Motivation

The motivation that God gives Israel through Moses for keeping his law is that it might go well with you and that you might prolong you days in the land. Sometimes we read that in too personal a way. We say to ourselves: "If I keep God's laws I will have a good and long life." Now that isn't necessarily wrong, but it is not the major point that Moses is making. He is not addressing Israel as a collection of individuals, but as a people, as a nation. He is saying to them: "To the degree that you keep God's laws and live by them the nation will have prosperity, stability, and longevity." If you read on through the rest of the book he also tells them what will happen if the contrary becomes the case. He is saying your economic and social stability will depend on your faithfulness to may commands.

The question for us is: "Does this have anything to say to us?" Someone will, no doubt, say "Isn't this Israel and the Old Covenant?" "Isn't it different for us?" "Aren't we under grace and not under the law?" The answer to all three of those questions is "yes". But I think that it still has something to do with us. While the law of Israel is much more than the Ten Commandments, I am going to limit myself to them in the rest of what I have to say. The essence of what I have to say is this. To the degree that any nation or people conscientiously

live by the Ten Commandments they experience social, economic and political stability. When we live by God's foundational laws we inexorably experience greater stability and prosperity.

The primary reason for this is that God's law originates in his wisdom. God who created us knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows what we need, and his laws are designed to create an environment in which those needs are met. It is fascinating that over three thousand years after the Ten Commandments were given we are having a national debate about their public display. Anyone with even a minute knowledge of history should know that they have always been a blessing to any people who have lived by them. Certainly they have been part and parcel of the American experience from our inception as a nation to the present. It was not that long ago that they were included in many public school textbooks, and almost any person you talked to could recite them. It is to our shame that, at present, even many Christians are unable to quote more than half of the ten.

I propose that much of the chaos we are facing as a nation that we describe in economic and political terms is, in reality, ethical in nature, and can be traced to our ignorance and rejection of God's most basic laws. It would require a book to fully demonstrate this axiom, but let me illustrate what I am saying by using the second and the tenth commandments together. I choose these two because one comes from each of the two major sections of the Decalogue. The first part treats our relationship to God and the second our relationship to other humans. Some have suggested that we should display only the second half and not the first since what offends people about them is the reference to God. I contend that we won't get the second half right if we don't live by the first half. We will never put other human beings in their proper place and treat them with proper respect until we put God in his proper place and treat him with proper respect.

Some would say that if there is a commandment we no longer need it is the second. They would say: "certainly, we are not idolaters. We are enlightened. We do not worship wood and stone images." I disagree. This is, perhaps, the commandment we are the guiltiest of violating. The Apostle Paul defines idolatry in Romans 1 as "worshipping and serving the creature more than (or in place of) the creator." When we accord ultimate importance to anything other than God, we are idolaters. When the preeminent thing in our lives is anything other than God, we are idolaters. We may not worship carved images, but what about money, sex, and power. Timothy Keller speaks truly and succinctly when he says the human heart is an "idol factory". Once the human heart has created its idol; put something else in God's place it then begins to covet; to desire that which is off limits, and covetousness always finds a way to justify breaking any other commandment that gets in its way.

Now reflect for a moment on the crisis that we are experiencing in public life. Is it not at least in part because of the idolatry of human hearts? Is it not true that when a significant number

of people begin to act on the basis of covetousness, that greed begins to rule instead of responsibility? Does it not make sense that when we begin to substitute a self-centered existence for the law of God that teaches us to love God first and then to love our neighbor as ourselves that we create a cultural instability which, if not reversed, will eventually reach a tipping point from which it is impossible to recover? Is it really possible for us to experience cultural well-being and to prolong our days without respecting the law that our creator has written into the warp and woof of our existence? Indeed, only a total lack of wisdom would suggest that we no longer need the Ten Commandments.

II. Our Method

This being the case, how do we maintain respect for the law of God from generation to generation? This was the concern of Moses as he stood on the Plains of Moab and addressed the second Exodus generation. In the first paragraph of Deuteronomy 6, to this day Judaism's most revered text, he gives them a method. If their motivation for keeping the law was cultural and economic stability, the method for keeping it was inter-generational communication. To paraphrase, he says: "Not only must you keep these laws, but you have to be constantly talking to the coming generation about them. Within the context of life, you must always be pointing out that there is a right way and a wrong way. You must demonstrate the advantages of the right way, and point out the disaster that result from following the wrong way."

This method is hard to improve upon, but it only takes one delinquent generation for it to become dysfunctional, one generation that fails to teach its children. We must not be that generation. If we analyze the method as Moses lays it out we can identify two essential elements: first, the older generation must spend time with the younger generation, secondly they must always be teaching the ethical and theological significance of the experiences of life. Our classroom is life. As we live and work together we are always questioning, explaining, recalling and remembering.

When we do this we communicate to the next generation, not just the words of God's commandments, but the logic of God's law. We are not just saying: "Do this", or "Do that", but when you do this or don't do that this is the consequence, not just for you as an individual, but for an entire culture.

