

## Deut. 5:1-15 sermon Tregear 22.5.2022 - The Law protects but it does not save

I want to imagine. You've been a slave all your life. Everything you do is determined by the slave master, the hours you work, the amount of sleep you get, who you can marry, how many children you can have and so on. Suddenly you are free. You've crossed the Red Sea. You are standing 3 months later at the foot of Mt Sinai or its other name, Mt Horeb.

God has redeemed you. You are his people. He is giving you his commands, his principles for wellbeing if you like. You want to live well in the land God is giving you...well here's how you do it.

God hands down to Moses 10 words

The 10 commandments are incredibly significant on their own; God puts them on stone; they're put into the ark as a constant reminder – they summarise all the other laws.

Remember God has called us to an exclusive commitment with him. – it's like marriage - It's only going to work if both parties are committed to working at their relationship.

And so God says in v. 6 – that he is the Lord and he's the one who brought them out of Egypt, out of slavery. The demands of the law are based on who God is (***I am the Lord your God***) and on what God has done (***who brought you out***). Really important point here. God is saying , "You've seen what I have done. I have saved you out of Egypt, out of slavery. I have redeemed you. Now as my people whom I love this is how I want you to live." And remember, this is the one true God who created us; he

knows how we best live. These 10 laws, are to be your guide, your instruction. Obey them and live abundantly.” The commandments were given to Israel, not so they could perhaps gain salvation by keeping them, because God had **already** redeemed or saved them but this was how they were to live in the light of that fact.

Just a couple of things about the 10 commandments. They alone out of the laws in Exodus, Deuteronomy and Leviticus were written by God onto two tablets of stone; they alone were to be put into the ark. They were, therefore, the very core of the covenant that God had with his people. The rest of the laws come out of these 10 commandments; they set forth the principles on which the other laws were set. So I’ve decided to have a closer look at these laws.

And this is where we come back to my opening words. The Israelites have been liberated. How are they to organise their community life and preserve the benefits of their new freedom? In a sense the ten Commandments are like a Bill of Rights. We’ve got to remember that Israel had been subjected to slavery and all the harsh life that that involved. Although the commandments appear to be framed negatively, you know, “You shall not do this, you shall not do that..” they are actually remarkably positive in protecting and preserving the blessings of the freedom that God has achieved for them.

We’re going to look at the first 4 commandments today and then the last 6 next week. Well, let’s get into it.

**No.1 – You shall have no other gods before me.** This first commandment comes logically after all we saw in chapter 4 doesn’t it? Yes, other nations worship other gods, even though they are not gods in reality; they are blocks of stone or wood, they cannot speak or hear. Israel, you came out of Egypt, a nation that had lots of

these so-called gods. This first command is to remind you that I am the one true god as I have shown to you and I am exclusively committed to you; so you are to be exclusively committed to me.

Another possible translation of this command would be “You shall have no other gods **as rivals to me.**” Because what is at stake here is not just believing philosophically, oh yes, I believe one god exists. What God desires is one absolute loyalty in our actions and lives; our absolute trust. Have a look at v.6 – this is a specific God, not a vague divine being. No, this is the Lord God, the one who brought the Israelites out of Egypt. It’s not a vague idea that you interpret how you like. The Lord God has spoken, has revealed himself. God has no other “face” if you like. And the Lord God has especially shown himself in Jesus – there is only one God.

**No.2 – You shall not make for yourself an idol – v.8-10** – These first 2 commands are often linked together as one. And that makes sense. They were not to worship other gods and so logically not to make images of them to worship. But this command is also more likely to be aimed at prohibiting the making of images of Yahweh, the Lord God. Don’t make images of Yahweh. Here are a few reasons for this. Firstly, remember from last week. The Lord God is a speaking, living God. A carved statue is lifeless and doesn’t speak. Something that can **do nothing** is no image of the God who can do all things. It’s interesting to note, therefore, that when God comes down to dwell among us he comes in the form of a human who is the only creature made in the “image” of God – something to ponder over.

Here are 2 more thoughts. Remember last week in chapter 4 God as the speaking God, reveals, addresses, promises, challenges, confronts, demands – he’s communicating to us in many ways. Any attempt to turn The Lord God into a voiceless statue effectively gags God. Idolatry then is fundamentally an escape from

the living voice and commands of the living God. As Moses will point out later, Canaanite idolatry had done nothing to establish a just and caring society in Canaan. On the contrary, idolatry allows injustice and cruelty to flourish, because it does not challenge the human inclination to oppression and violence. Yahweh, the Lord God, is the liberating God who brings up out of Egypt, the God who works justice and demands justice. So don't make statues because making statues is going to stop the voice of the God who speaks.

Here's a second thought. Yahweh is the incomparable God. You can't compare him to anything or anyone else. Remember that section at the end of chapter 4 – who can do all the things that God can do? – no other God. Since there is nothing in all creation to compare with who Yahweh is or what he has done, then it's pretty stupid to make an animal or fish or sun image and say this is Yahweh. No created thing can function satisfactorily as an alternative to the living God – a lesson that human beings have not learned in spite of countless generations of trying.

As we look through v.8-10 we see that thought again that God is a jealous God. His jealousy is part of his covenant commitment to his people. He's committed himself exclusively to the Israelites, to us, and he

requires exclusive loyalty in return. And it's right isn't it that God should demand our exclusive loyalty. God is completely committed to loving us, so it is right that he should demand that all rivals to be excluded. Just like in a marriage, a covenant relationship between a man and a woman, we would expect the husband to be jealous for his wife to be faithful and vice-versa. This covenant relationship really means something to God – he's absolutely committed to us, more than a husband and wife to each other. As I'm reading Deuteronomy and the absolute statements being made by God I realise this becoming a Christian isn't just "Oh well I think this

is a good idea” Or “I think Christianity’s the best option out of a bunch of different religious options.” When we acknowledge God’s lordship and repent and trust him to save us through his death on the cross, we come into his family. We are committing ourselves to the one who has committed himself totally to us. For us, too, it needs to be total commitment. The unique, incomparable , only living God makes necessarily exclusive claims and has the right to all our love. What does that mean for my life each day? In the years to come?

If jealousy is God’s love protecting itself, then the desire and direction of that love is seen in the phrases in v.9 & 10. Sin, and especially the sin of idolatry, reaps its reward in the living generations of those who practice it. In an Israelite extended family with children, mum and dad, grandma and grandpa and sometimes great grandpa and ma the effects of one generations failure in covenant loyalty would detrimentally affect the succeeding ones, who would grow up without the teaching and with an idolatrous example and environment. It sounds like God is harsh “punishing” the generations, but it actually is the natural consequence of disloyalty to God. But look at v.10, God’s agenda for loyalty is to bless the family for two , three , four generations?? No, for a thousand generations – that’s a very , very long time, basically forever. Such is the nature of God that he speaks of punishment in terms of just one person’s living memory but when it comes to covenant love and blessing it’s for an unimaginable long time.

In summary, Commandment one and two are the foundation of all the commandments. They also point to the truth that idolatry is the fundamental human sin. The central part of our fallenness is that we choose to reject the authority of our creator God and we put something else in God’s place to be our authority, other things that we trust, other systems and values of our creation. So we’re going to sing a song in a while from Jeremiah: *My people have committed two*

*sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.* And that's disastrous because it will fail. God has made us to receive living water from him.

**No.3 – You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.** ( literally, *You shall not lift up the name of Yahweh your God to worthlessness.*) Don't make his name worthless. In ancient society someone's name was an indication of their character. There is also the thought, though, that slaves were branded with the name of their owner. To bear the name of Yahweh means to claim him as one's owner. Yes, swearing using God's name; being careless with his name is wrong but bear in mind that whenever we who bear his name dishonour him by our actions we misuse the name of the Lord. It's far more than just swearing – it's our whole lives.

**No.4 – Keep the Sabbath day holy.** This command is seen by many commentators as the command in the middle – it points back to the first three commands – we have a sabbath, day of rest from our normal routines so that those routines, our work or our need to make money are halted and we remember that we are created for relationship with God – so we don't want to make work and making money an idol, something that we put before God. But this command also ties in with the next 6 commands. It's how we are to treat others. It reminds us that everyone is to have a rest, not just those who are better off economically. Notice how the command is phrased, at the end of v.14, *“so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do.”* The benefit of the Sabbath was not just to enjoyed by the wealthy Israelite landowners, while dependent labourers continued to work. No, everyone, even the foreigner, non-Israelite was included. The key things about Sabbath was that we remember who we are – that we are made for relationship with God. This command has the most explanation around it. v.15 – remember that you were slaves and God

brought you out. He rescued you from 7 days a week work; he gave you the command like the original Genesis pattern of having the seventh day for rest.

So what do you do on a Sabbath? I've struggled with this. I try to take a 24 hour period and do things that are refreshing and different from the other days. Sunday wouldn't really work for me, so I've been trying Wednesday from 9am till Thursday 9am. One of the things I do is keep away from my desk. If I can go out that is a refreshing thing for me. But there is no rule. Pete Scazzero says there are 4 things to consider with a Sabbath –

1. **STOP** – this helps me to remember my limits. We stop because God is on the throne, assuring us that the world will not fall apart if we cease our activities. Are there still things to do? Yes. Will there still be things to do when I die? Yes. Can God still manage quite well without my help? Yes. The core spiritual issue in stopping revolves around trust. Will God take care of us and our concerns if we obey him by stopping to keep the Sabbath?

Wagon train story

2. **REST** – God rested on the seventh day after creating the world. So what do we do? How do we rest? Do whatever delights and replenishes you. It might be rest from work, but it could also be rest from technology or decision making or busyness. When we stop and rest, we respect our humanity and the image of God in us.

3. **DELIGHT** – Delight in what we have been given by God – particularly creation. Slow down and take delight in the food you eat; the beauty of a tree, a plant, the sky. Take delight in people. Pete Scazzero expresses it

this way – “I ask God for the grace to leave the frenzied busyness around me and be a contemplative presence for others.” Sabbath delight invites us to healthy play. The

word chosen by the early Greek Christian leaders to describe how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit had a perfect, mutual indwelling in the Trinity was “perichoerisis”. It literally means “dancing around.” Creation and life are, in a sense, God’s gift of a playground to us. Whether it be through sports, dance, games, looking at old family photographs, or visiting museums, nurturing our sense of pure fun in God also is part of Sabbath.

**4. CONTEMPLATE** – I love the way Pete Scazero expresses this. “Pondering the love of God remains the central focus of our Sabbaths. Normally Sabbath involves worship with God’s people and every Sabbath also serves as a taste of the glorious eternal party of music, food and beauty that awaits us in heaven when we see him face to face. On every Sabbath, we experience a little taste of something greater that awaits us. Our short earthly lives are put in perspective as we look forward to the day when God’s kingdom will come in all its fullness and we will enter an eternal Sabbath feast in God’s perfect presence.”

It’s good to plan your Sabbath – how can you spend these 24 hours and keep God at the centre? Lots of possibilities. I’m going to send some of the ideas of Scazero to you to look at in my email tomorrow. But ask God to guide you how you might spend Sabbath.

In all of this keep remembering that these commands are given to us to live as God’s people. Keeping the commands won’t save us, because we cannot keep the commands. Only one man has done that – Jesus. When Jesus was asked to summarise the commands what did he say, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with everything you have and love our neighbour as yourself.” It’s about our hearts that lead to our actions. Follow Jesus my friends; look to him to help you love God and your neighbours.