

Deuteronomy 10

The Greatest Commandment – On this hang all the law and the prophets

We are in the post-amble section after the Ten Words. I want to use these five sessions to complete this section, i.e. Deuteronomy 6-11. The chapters that follow deal with the elaboration of Ten Words. I am spending a lot of time talking in general about the commandments. There is an important reason for doing things this way. The reason is that we are very keen on knowing what the commandments are so that we can go on to fulfill them. This satisfies the ego and gives us a sense of personal achievement, and perhaps we can collect some merit in the process. That is the human context, and may I add, the sinful human context because we think that by observing them we would have achieved something. That is precisely not the purpose of the commandments. I am not saying that we do not need to obey the commandments. My point is this. The commandments are given in the context of a relationship. If all we see in the commandments is that in obeying them, we would have scored credit for ourselves, then we have missed the point of the commandments.

I finished with the *shema* and the greatest commandments last time, but there is more to that. When Jesus commented on the greatest commandment, He added this clause, 'on this hang all the law and the prophets'. We need to see what Jesus meant by that.

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ **On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.**" (Matt. 22:34-39)

This statement comes at the end of Jesus' answer to the Pharisees regarding the greatest commandment - 'to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind'. Jesus added a second to that – 'to love your neighbour as yourself'. We have said that they are not two separate commandments but two parts of the one commandment and that is to love God with our whole being. Our sinful nature has split that one commandment into two separate ones.

The reason why they are not two commandments is that creationally, man was in union with God. There was that oneness between humanity and the divine. Sin breaks that oneness. Redemption restores that oneness. That was possible by the incarnation of the Son. God has now become man in the person of Jesus Christ. He is both God and man and that is not abstract theology. It is practical theology. Just as the dual nature of Jesus as the God-man cannot be separated or confused, in the same way we cannot separate or merge these two commandments to love both God and man. They are two parts of the one commandment. That is why the second cannot stand alone without the first as secular humanism is now doing. We need to start with the first and that is to love God with the whole of our being. By this shall all men know you are my disciples, not just because you have love one for another, but firstly because you love the Lord with the whole of your being. That must be our starting point.

Just briefly, for those who are interested in some theological excursion, there is a creed by the church fathers in AD 451, the Creed of Chalcedon or the Chalcedonian Creed. It goes as follows.

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a

reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning Him, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us. (Chalcedon Creed, AD 451)

It emphasizes the two natures of Jesus Christ which is not to be confused or separated.

I have referred to the context of the commandments in Deuteronomy. It is not humanly possible to obey this great commandment unless God circumcise the heart.

⁶ Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. (Deut. 30:6)

This being the case, then the second part of the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves must also be understood in the same way. It flows from the first and is also God-enabled. Can we truly love our neighbor without loving the God who created humanity? Can we also love God without loving our neighbour? What this means is that obedience to this command is God-enabled. Giving our bodies to be burnt in no way means that we are fulfilling this commandment.

These two commandments sum up the book of Deuteronomy. The commandment to love God with our whole being comes at the end of the Ten Commandments in chapter 5. To love our neighbour follows as a consequence of the first. The two go together, like hand in glove. Without the first the second cannot stand alone. Yes, we know that people who do not acknowledge God have done lots for humanity. We call that altruism. Yet there are those who say they love God but do not love their neighbour. We call that hypocrisy.

Coming back to what Jesus said, 'On these two commandments hang all the law and prophets', we need to mention briefly what is meant by the law and prophets. Firstly, what is meant by the law? The law was given by God through Moses. It includes of course the Ten Commandments, the moral and ceremonial laws as given to us in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. We cannot and must not see these commandments like we see the laws of our society today, given to control and maintain order. The laws express the nature of God. They show to us who God really is.

Who are the prophets? The prophets are spirit-filled people who spoke the words of God. The words that they spoke are from the Spirit of God. They received the words of God first and then spoke them to the people. When the people of Israel turned away from God, He sent prophets to speak to them so that the words would turn them back. In their sin, they hated the prophets and sought to kill them. They hated God and the words He spoke through the prophets.

The greatest commandment in the context of Deuteronomy is what God is doing. Jesus did not say this when He quoted from Deuteronomy, but we are certain that He implied it. If not, why did He add, 'on this hang all the law and prophets'? Moses told the Israelites that it is only by the 'circumcision of the heart' that this commandment can be carried out and not otherwise. In other words, the fulfillment of this great commandment is by the work of God in us. It is not a matter of human achievement.

The words of God are the commandments of God. That is why the Ten Commandments are referred to in the Old Testament as the Ten Words. The words that God spoke reflect the nature of God. We have seen that man is the personal living image of God; the law is the written, perceptual image of God. What this means is that humanity is created in the likeness of God in order that they will be able to relate and have communion with the creator God. Humanity is to reflect the nature of God in a living way. However, because of sin humanity no longer reflect that image. They have gone to seek another image, the image of prosperity and success. They need restoration and God provided that through the cross of Christ.

The law is the written perceptual image of God. It reflects the nature of God while humanity has failed to do that. That is why we find the laws of God so strange and bewildering. The psalmist appreciated the word of God. They are like to honey to him.

¹⁰³ How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!
¹⁰⁴ Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way. (Psalm 119:103-104)

We cannot and do not see God in a material way and that is why it is difficult for us to know Him and to relate with Him. However, He is in the word and has revealed Himself there for us. We need to see in the commandments the nature of God and not just merely the need to obey them. If we can see that the commandments reflect the image of God and we have been restored to the image of God through the cross, then that confluence is the circumcision of the heart and the enabling to obey the commandments.

Some of the laws we have in our society no longer reflect the image of God. It reflects the sinful nature of man. It is now based on the rights of the individual. The laws of Deuteronomy are not so much concerned with the rights of the individual, but to show concern for the other. Much of our laws are based on vested interest of the individual.

It is not love and law, but love in the law. That is why after the Ten Commandments were repeated in chapter 5 of Deuteronomy, Moses told Israel,

⁴ Hear (*shema*), O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-8)

‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.’ This is the *Shema*, the call to Israel to hear. This is the central prayer in the Jewish prayer book and the first section of scripture that a Jewish child learns. It is the most important part of the Jewish worship. This is the centre piece of the book of Deuteronomy. This is the sum of the Ten Commandments. That is why this is the greatest commandment as Jesus called it. Everything hangs on this. Jesus was referring back to the *Shema* in Deuteronomy. He added the second part to the commandment in the *shema* because He is both God and man.

Everything hangs on this fact that the Lord is our God and He alone. He is the one who circumcise our hearts to enable us to conform to who He is, i.e. keeping the commandments. That is how we ought to see the commandments, not simply to obey them. We need to see in the commandments the nature of God, who He is, and it is He alone who enables us to conform to them. All the law and the prophets hang on this. If we see merely the need to obey them

then we are playing into the human ego and that does nothing for you. You may feel a sense of accomplishment, but that is about all. It does not go beyond the four walls and onto God.

What is the meaning of all these?

²⁰When your children ask you in time to come, "What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?" ²¹then you shall say to your children, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²²The LORD displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. ²³He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. ²⁴Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. ²⁵If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right." (Deut. 6:20-25)

What is the meaning of these commandments? Why is it important to instruct our children and what is the content of that instruction?

We have the popular opinion in our society that we should let the child grow up and choose their religion or their faith. Is this attitude a right one? Has the child the ability to make that choice? God's covenant is for all peoples and for all generations. If we do not teach our children and remind them of what God has done, not only in the world that He has created, but also in our own lives, then we have failed them. We need to teach these things to our children and to our children's children.

There is a problem when we read this. We can only hold on to things that can fit into the framework in our minds. Because we are sinners we are not able to hold on to the things of God and instead contort it into our sinful framework. So now what happens when we read this text? We read it like this. We blot out the main answer to the question and make the response as the main answer because in our sinful state we think contractually. What we need to do firstly is to read it without the response. That is not to say that we ignore the response. We need to get to the first thing first. The response is preceded with the word 'then'. In other words, it is because of what God has done, then the response. The response does not precede what God does. We cannot think in terms of what we do, and then God responds to us with the blessing. Yes, God does bless the righteous, but we will see that later.

The descendants of Abraham, Jacob and his eleven sons and families went down to Egypt because there was a famine in the land. They had earlier tried to kill their brother, Joseph, who by the hand of God was spared and sold as a slave into Egypt. He rose to a position of power and was entrusted to prepare for the coming famine. That was why Jacob and his children's families went into Egypt. They were looked after well at first, but a later Pharaoh did not like them and made them slaves for over four hundred years. God then raised Moses to lead them out of Egypt and here they were on the threshold of entering the Promised Land. That is why they were instructed not to forget what God had done for them in their history. This is the real meaning of the commandment. It was given because of a prior relationship with Israel. It is because of this prior relationship that Israel was asked to observe the commandments.

Let us look at a similar credo when the Israelites present for their worship. When they bring their offering before the Lord, they are to make this confession.

⁵you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our

oppression. ⁸The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deut. 26:5-9)

Here the creed goes further back to the beginning, to the call of Abraham, the wandering Aramean. God called Abraham to be the father of this great nation for the fulfilment of His purpose of mankind. Abraham had no son till a very late age and this again was by the hand of God when both he and his wife, Sarah, were past the child bearing age. His son, Isaac, had twin boys, Esau and Jacob, who struggled for supremacy. Jacob was deceitful, but he was the choice of God. Well, we need to re-examine our construction of the framework of obedience and blessing. I am not advocating deceit, but what I am saying is that our failure does not annul the purpose of God. Abraham failed at many points in his life and these were recorded, not to humiliate him, but to show the sovereignty of God's covenant. Jacob and his children's families then went to Egypt because of the famine in the land.

Both creeds affirm what God has done firstly. It did not start with a statement of their obedience because they could not. God is our creator and redeemer. All that we are and have, have been given by God. That is our starting point. What we have done in our sinful state is that we start with what we do and make God the respondent. What I mean is this. We think that the blessing of God come only because of our obedience just like the way we read this passage.

I have asked this question. Did the Israelites enter the Promised Land because of their obedience? Answer is no. They entered the Promised Land because of the promise of God and in spite of their disobedience. This promise of God is what we call the covenant. The credo expresses what God did for them as a result of the covenant. This is the confession that they must never forget for all times. Why is that so? It is because the covenant of God stands for all times.

The redemption theme must never be forgotten. For the Israelites, it was the delivery from slavery in Egypt. For us it is the delivery from the slavery of sin through the cross. This will be remembered in eternity as it is the path that the covenant of God took – the humanity and divinity of Christ – on this hang all the law and the prophets.