

The Commandments of the Lord

M. W. Bassford, 2-20-11

We live in a country where people don't like to be told what to do. Americans make a big deal out of how independent we are, and how we have the right to live our own lives exactly as we please, and how as long as we aren't breaking any laws, nobody gets to tell us we ought to be doing differently. In a sense, all of that is accurate. The laws of this country enshrine toleration and freedom, and we benefit from that as much as anybody. After all, if we lived in medieval France, for instance, and the authorities found out about our worship practices, we would likely receive a house call from the Inquisition, and if that didn't work, we would probably have a crusade called against us.

However, despite the Constitutional rights that every American possesses, there is another and more important sense in which we are not free to do as we please. The law of this time and place is not the only law that governs our conduct. Every person in this country, and indeed every person everywhere, is responsible for obeying the eternal law of God. In this life, God does not coerce people to obedience. His true church never attacks unbelievers with fire and sword. In the life to come, though, everyone will be held accountable for their obedience or disobedience.

As we study the Scripture, we must remember that this law is what we are dealing with. Even though the Bible helps us to live better and happier lives, at its core, it is not a self-help book. Even though it faithfully records the history of God's people since the beginning of time, it is not a history book meant to satisfy our detached curiosity. It is a law book. This evening, then, let's consider Moses' thoughts on the commandments of the Lord.

Our Lives.

Naturally, as we ponder this law book, the first thing that we must do is to **OBEY** it. Let's look for a moment at the implications of Deuteronomy 6:1. Simply put, God gave us the law because He wants us to obey it. This is another thing that our culture has difficulty grasping. In American society, we elect our lawmakers. We have the right to tell them what laws we want made, and if they don't listen to us, we have the right to vote them out and elect a new bunch who will hopefully listen better. Unsurprisingly, a lot of people try to apply this same general practice to the law of God. They go through the word and decide which of God's laws they like and don't like. They obey the ones they like, toss out the ones they don't, and replace the laws they've gotten rid of with new laws. That's all well and good, except that God did not set up His church as a participatory democracy. Instead, it is an absolute monarchy, with God as the King and us as the subjects. He is not interested in our thoughts on which laws are good and which ones are bad. His perspective on us is very simple. Either we are obedient or we are disobedient, and all of the wannabe lawmakers fall squarely in the disobedient camp. We must obey, period, end of story, or else we can expect to share the fate of all the other lawbreakers.

This should logically lead us to **FEAR** God. Moses explains in Deuteronomy 6:2. When we obey His word, we show that we fear Him. When we disobey, no matter how else we cover it, it proclaims that we do not fear Him. This too is something that the people around us don't get. They don't believe that God should inspire fear at all. Logically speaking, this is something that they have to believe. After all, they basically ignore His law in favor of doing whatever they want, and that's not something they would do if they were afraid of Him at all. If you're scared to death of the junkyard dog, you don't go play in the junkyard. Instead, they construct a God in the image of their own desires, a God who is so loving that He's wimpy and gutless, and they live their lives free from the fear that He will punish them.

That might be the God of these people's imaginations, but it is not the God of the Bible. God is not wimpy and gutless. He is a consuming fire, and He will pour out His wrath and indignation on those who do not fear and do not obey Him. We've got a couple of electricians here, so I'll put this another way. God is like a high-voltage power line. That power line always operates according to the laws of electricity. If you're working with that power line, you have to constantly keep those laws and the danger of your situation in mind. All it takes is one second of sloppiness or inattention, and zap! you're dead. God is the same way. We must obey His laws because He is so fearsome.

Of course, all the possible consequences aren't negative. If we do obey Him, we can expect to **RECEIVE HIS BLESSING**. Moses describes one aspect of this in Deuteronomy 6:3. This is another sense in which God is like a high-voltage power line. The power itself is neither harmful nor beneficial. The same jolt of electricity that might stop a worker's heart can also power hospital equipment that will save lives. It's all in whether you obey the rules for interacting with that power. God is not like us, brethren. He does not change, nor does He fail in His appointed purpose. Those characteristics make Him a deadly enemy, but they also make Him the best friend anyone can have. Just as we can be absolutely certain that He will take His vengeance on the wicked, we can also be certain that He will reward the righteous. If we follow His commandments, we place ourselves in the category of the righteous. We will do well personally, and our numbers will be multiplied as others are moved by our example to seek our God together with us. We can find forgiveness for our sins, and we can claim eternal life, simply by doing what God has asked.

This takes us to one of the crucial differences between God and powerful forces of nature. Electricity doesn't have any choice about helping us when we use it properly, but God did. He could have been actively hostile to us, or at the least indifferent. Instead, He chose to devise a system of faith in which He will give us incalculable blessings that we could never earn for ourselves—all this because He loves us. For this reason, we should also **LOVE THE LORD**. In perhaps the most famous verse in all the Old Testament, Moses makes this clear in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. God is certainly to be feared, but He is also to be loved. Before we ever existed, God decided to create us because He wanted someone to love. His love provides every good thing we enjoy in this life. It is evident in every breath we take. His word tells us what is good and leads us on to Him as the highest good. Every lovable mental and spiritual trait that anyone possesses, God has to the greatest possible degree. Ultimately, this is the best possible reason for our obedience. If we only fear the Lord, that will teach us to do the minimum that we believe is necessary to avoid judgment. However, if we love Him, and serve Him on that basis, that love will lead us to give Him everything that we have to offer, so that He might be glorified.

Our Lives and God's Laws.

Our quest to love God inevitably takes us back to His word, which is why we must **LOVE THE LAW**. Look how Moses puts this in Deuteronomy 6:6. The things that he taught them weren't to be flushed from the brain just as soon as the Israelites were done listening. Instead, they were to take these things into their hearts. We know what it's like to love a concept and make it a part of us. I'm sure that many here are gladdened these days by the knowledge that somewhere far, far south of here, the Cubs and the Sox are beginning spring training. When the season starts, I know that a lot of you, if asked, would be able to give me the current batting average and/or E.R.A. for every player on your particular squad. You'll have a pretty good idea of whether they're going to be able to bring home the pennant this year, but you'll still track the result of every game. Why? Because that team is on your heart. That's the way the law of God needs to be on our hearts all the time. Only with that kind of devotion can we be the people God wants us to be.

As part of that love, we must **TEACH OUR CHILDREN**. Moses describes this eloquently in Deuteronomy 6:7. As he explains it, the law of God is to be a constant topic of family conversation. Is this true in our families? When we're in the car, heading out to Chili's to get something to eat, are we going to have at least one conversation about the Bible? When we finish watching a movie, is that movie inevitably followed by a discussion of its spiritual implications? Do we teach our children how to study the word as diligently as we teach them to swing a baseball bat or shoot a basketball? Do they ever see us studying? Do they know that if they want to talk about God, they can come to us and know that we will be eager to have the conversation? This isn't something we can do right for a week or two and then forget about it. This is a way of life, and if we want to truly teach, it has to be our way of life. As we've seen before, this crucial duty was one the Israelites often failed in. If we want our children to go to heaven, failure is not an option.

Our whole spiritual energy, though, can't be devoted only to our children. Instead, we must **DWELL ON THE LAW** ourselves. Look at how Moses puts this in Deuteronomy 6:8. Amusingly enough, the Jews, especially the Pharisees, took this literally. They wrote Scriptures on little scraps of paper, put the scraps in little boxes, and strapped the little boxes to their heads and their hands. They were called phylacteries. Sadly, the Pharisees missed the point. Even as they wore these Bible passages all the time, they missed the moral instruction that the passages were meant to give.

God never meant for this to be taken literally. Instead, He meant that His people should know His word like the backs of their hands, and that the Scripture should be on their minds all the time. This is no less true for us than for the ancient Israelites. The best way to describe where we need to be is that the Bible needs to be the thing we're thinking about when we aren't thinking about something else. We might be finishing a project at work, and thinking about that, or talking with our families over dinner, and thinking about that, but then, when we're by ourselves, between activities, we're thinking about the Bible. We're meditating on the word. This doesn't mean that we're engaged in active study all the time. After all, sometimes just a verse or two can give us enough to think about for days and days. This can't be something we force ourselves to do. It has to be who we are. We have to love the word enough that we dwell on it.

Finally, we must **PROCLAIM THE LAW**. We learn this from the last verse of the context, Deuteronomy 6:9. Once again, this was a figure of speech that the Israelites took literally. Even today, I believe that Orthodox Jews will have passages from the Bible painted on the doorposts of their front doors. Once again, that wasn't really the point. God doesn't give a hoot about some Scripture written by the entrance to a home if the Scripture isn't followed in that home. Nor does He care if a city has painted the passage on the gates of the city in some gorgeous, precise script, if the city isn't dedicated to following the Lord. God has never been impressed with outward show. He cares about the heart.

So it is for us today. This passage tells us that in our homes, we must speak openly about our Lord, and live openly according to His will, so that it's just as obvious to anyone who comes through our front door as if it were written on the door. In our church, we must reveal His will so plainly that anybody who has even a casual acquaintance with us knows that we are a people who honor the word of God, as if we wrote it over the auditorium door in letters two feet high. If anybody who knows us has any doubt whom we serve, we have failed. Let's proclaim God always, in everything.