

“The Freedom of the Law”
Deuteronomy 5:1-4; 6-21
Rev. Michael J. Poulos
October 15, 2023
First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
use by permission only

This morning we continue our journey through the Old Testament, this time landing in the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 5 - the passage where Moses gives the 10 Commandments to the people. We have covered a lot of ground since the opening chapters of Exodus and the story of Moses. A quick summary before we turn to today's passage: though Moses grew up in Pharaoh's household, he becomes a fugitive after he kills an Egyptian who is abusing a Hebrew slave. Frightened for his own life, Moses flees from Egypt, gets married in Midian, and tries to start his life over as a nobody. But one day while he is tending his father-in-law's flock, Moses has a conversation with God at a burning bush. Yes, a burning bush! Despite all of Moses' objections, God calls him to go back to Egypt and free the Hebrew people from slavery. Despite his initial protests, Moses agrees to be God's leader. The job is not easy, but after a series of plagues Pharaoh lets the people go. But soon Pharaoh changes his mind, and so he sends the Egyptian army to chase the Hebrews into the Red Sea. Moses raises his staff, the waters are parted, the Hebrews are delivered, the Egyptians are drowned, and so the people begin their trek through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land.

As they begin their journey Moses makes a visit to Mt. Sinai, the place where he receives the 10 commandments, as recorded in Exodus 20. Those of us old enough to remember the great movie with Charlton Heston playing Moses can visualize the drama of fire and smoke and broken tablets. But did you know that when you fast forward some 40 years later, the people are still in the wilderness? This journey has taken much longer than initially expected, and now there's a new generation of Hebrews - the children and grandchildren of those who were slaves in Egypt. Moses is quite old, and before the people cross over into the promised land their beloved leader gives his farewell sermon. The whole book of Deuteronomy contains the speeches Moses gives the people just as they are preparing to enter the Promised Land. Though Moses will not be able to go with them, he wants them to listen again to God's Word. Let us do the same as we turn to the passage together:

Deuteronomy 5:1-4; 6-21 (NRSVUE)

Moses convened all Israel and said to them: “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire... And he said:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of

parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so 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.

You shall not murder. Neither shall you commit adultery. Neither shall you steal. Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor. Neither shall you covet your neighbor's wife. Neither shall you desire your neighbor's house, or field, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

When you hear the words “The Ten Commandments” what comes to your mind? What image or story do you associate with the ten foundational rules of the Hebrew faith? As I have mentioned before, I know many of us remember watching Charlton Heston as Moses in the epic 1956 movie called [The Ten Commandments](#), shown on Easter weekend every year. When I was a kid in Sunday School, I also remember when my class had to memorize the ten commandments. And when I got older and studied the Presbyterian Book of Confessions, I remember how many of the old statements of faith talked a lot about the commandments.

This past Wednesday I asked two different groups the same question: when you hear the words “The Ten Commandments” what comes to your mind? The first group was the Wednesday Bible Study group. Carolyn told us how as a child growing up in the Crossnore Presbyterian Church, she remembered seeing the Ten Commandments every Sunday, prominently displayed behind the preacher who stood in the pulpit. The Bible Study group expressed some grief over the declining influence of the Ten Commandments in our world today - that they are not allowed to be displayed publicly in our courtrooms, that many in our society no longer value their moral guidance. Later in the day on Wednesday, I asked our kids choir what they knew about the Ten Commandments, and I got a very different response! Though Miguel remembered the story of Moses going up on the mountain to receive them, that was about all that the group could say about them.

Over the centuries many Christians have been guilty of dismissing the Hebrew law, believing that when Jesus came he did away with the importance of the old commandments - that he had freed us to follow something new. But that could not be farther from the truth! Remember as a Jewish teacher Jesus taught his disciples, “I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it” (Matthew 5:17). Jesus did summarize the law and the prophets, saying that we are to “love the Lord our

God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves” (Matthew 22.37-40). But I believe this summary does not give us permission to simply ignore the Ten Commandments, as they have much to offer us as disciples of Christ today.

When we read the Bible it's tempting to think of it as a list of rules to follow - that if you strive to be good and follow the rules, you will be rewarded and get to go to heaven. And if you don't, well then... you will be punished... maybe in this world and definitely in the next one.

Consciously or not, this is the story many of us have accepted as true, and it's the reason why many of us (including myself) continue to try and do good things. This week I learned that the great 1956 Cecil DeMille film The Ten Commandments was not the first one he produced. In 1923 he made a silent film of [the same title](#) that told a fictional story of two brothers - one who followed the commandments like his mother had taught him, and the other who did not. The one who chooses not to follow them ends up dead, having lived a corrupt and tragic life. The good brother ends up as a hero. The film was inspired by a story that began with the line, “You cannot break the Ten Commandments—they will break you.”

While this 100 year-old silent film received much critical acclaim, I believe it misses the heart of the Biblical message. **When it comes to our relationship with God, the scriptures tell us there's nothing we can do to earn or merit our standing with God.** We are saved only by God's grace and mercy, not by any good works we might do - not even by scoring a 90% or higher on our ability to follow all of the rules. In our passage today, before any of the commandments are even listed, God reminds the people of their relationship status.

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. I made you a people when you were stuck in bondage, when there was no hope for your deliverance. So in response to what I have done for you, I am inviting you to live into a covenant that will bring you life, a relationship of love and freedom. **You are not given all of these commandments so that if you follow them you will be worthy of my love. No, my relationship with you comes first!** You are given these commandments as an expression of my love for you. They show you what it takes to live a life of freedom and abundance.”

While there could be a whole sermon series on each of the 10 commandments, I want to lift up only one for us to focus on this morning - the 4th commandment about the sabbath. In recent years scholars have come to reclaim the importance of the sabbath commandment. It really gets to the heart of things, serving as the hinge between the first three commandments that have to do with our relationship with God, and the last six that have to do with our relationship with our neighbors. In fact, of all the commandments this is the longest one. God does not simply say, “Take a break on the 7th day!” but rather gives us much more to think about.

When you compare the commandments listed in Exodus 20 and the ones here in Deuteronomy 5, the main difference is the sabbath commandment. In Exodus the reason to rest has to do with the story of creation - since God worked for 6 days to create everything in the heavens and on earth, and then rested on the 7th day, then so should we (Exodus 20.8-11)! But in today's passage we hear something different. The sabbath day is to be observed as a day of rest because of what God has done for us: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5.15).

For too long Christians have dismissed the sabbath commandment as simply a Jewish thing, or as something that is not really applicable to us today (Kara Root, [Working Preacher, 8.18.19](#)). We used to have blue laws that kept us from buying things on Sundays like alcohol and cars, but those have mostly been done away with. While Chick-fil-A closes on Sundays the rest of the commercial world stays open and busy seven days a week. And with online purchasing available to consumers 24/7, the idea of taking time off on a set day each week seems to be unrealistic to do.

Whether you are retired or still working at a job, we all have a tendency to define ourselves by what we do. It's usually the first thing we ask someone when we meet for the first time. "Tell me, what do you do?" Or if someone is retired, "What did you do before retiring?" Something seems to be baked into our American culture, with deep roots in the Protestant work ethic, that values busy-ness and production over rest and simply being. I can't tell you how many newly retired people have told me they are busier now than ever before! **Though each of us may be wired differently, and find rest in different forms of hobbies and recreation, I do believe we tend to fall short of the freedom God intends to gift us through the sabbath commandment.** In our digital world where we are tethered to our phones and screens, work is always at our fingertips and it's easy to act as though the world can't run without us. A [2017 study](#) says the average American checks their phones 80 times a day while on vacation! I wonder what the average is in 2023.

Yet the call to rest one day in seven seems to be as important today as ever before. Presbyterian preacher [Kara Root](#) puts it like this:

"One day in seven, God says, you stop all work. You do this because you are not to be defined by your output. One day in seven everyone rests, and all distinctions that you erect to define your value and measure your worth disappear—old, young, rich, poor, slave, free, citizen, foreigner—you are all simply and completely human beings, alongside one another, all beloved children of God."

For us to really believe this good news - that we are God's beloved children not because of what we do but simply because of who we are in relationship to God - to really trust in this truth takes the courage to stop - to take time out of our days for rest - to follow the guidance that Joan Gray lays out in the [Sailboat Church](#) book - to stop all our frantic rowing and instead wait for the winds of the Spirit to blow our way. Instead of seeing the commandment to keep the sabbath as a rule enforced from on high, this morning I invite you to embrace it as an invitation to live not as slaves but as free people - people who can share that freedom with others whom God loves as well - people who can walk in the freedom Christ intends for us all - the freedom of God's law which is both a gift and delight.

Thanks be to God. Amen.