

"That You May Live"

Last week we finished the historical introduction to the book of Deuteronomy. But the historical introduction is really to set the context for the heart of the book. The heart of the book is about the law. It's Moses retelling the terms of the covenant to the next generation before they finally enter the Promised Land. We'll be there. The book now begins to turn to think about the law. And at this point, it's a bit of introduction to the importance of the law. Next chapter will get into the heart of the law as it goes through the Ten Commandments. But this chapter will start out by telling us how good the law is.

And so this chapter really pushes the goodness of the law. Is that how you think about the law? When you think about the law of God, do you think about it with delight or as a burden? Well, as Christians, we've realized that we fall short of keeping God's law. That we need the forgiveness of sins that comes in Jesus. That we need Jesus' to keep the law on our behalf. Well, that's right. That's a good to recognize. Certainly the Israelites should have recognized that. Many of them didn't, though some of them did. But none of this takes away from what we see here. The law is a good thing. It was vitally important for Israel. And it continues to be very important to us, even though we know that we are saved by grace. And so today I'd like us to look at what this passage has to say about the law. We'll look at the seriousness of the law, then we'll consider its benefits. Lastly we'll think about life according to the law, and also according to the gospel.

So let's begin first thinking about the seriousness of the law. Moses in this chapter definitely wants us to understand the seriousness of the law. You see, realize that when we talk about the law here, we're really talking about a covenant. This law is a binding arrangement with Israel. This is a solemn contract or treaty that's been put into place between God and the Israelites. God had claimed this people as his own special nation. And so he had made a covenant with them. The book of Deuteronomy is telling us the details of that covenant. In fact that's why the book started out with a historical introduction. That's actually the way covenants at that time started out. The Suzerain, the Lord or greater party in the covenant, started out a covenant with a historical claim over the other party. Imagine a great king that had saved a people from being destroyed by another nation. That great king would make a covenant of peace with that people he had saved. That great king would be the suzerain in the covenant, and he would begin the covenant by retelling the story of how he saved that people. Well that's essentially what God has just done through Moses. He reminded the people about all that God had done for the people up to this point. The point is that they owed their lives and everything to God.

And so notice in this passage how the law is intimately connected with the covenant. Essentially the law becomes the stipulations of the covenant - it's what the people are now required to do in order to keep the covenant. And so look at verse 13. This specifically tells us that we are talking about a covenant here. God had Moses declare the covenant to them. In a brief sense, that covenant is captured in the Ten Commandments. That's mentioned in verse 13 as well. But of course the next verse goes on to say that God had Moses explain all the various statutes and judgments that had

been given to the people. And so there were lots of various laws in the covenant, and yet there was a sense in which the Ten Commandments were the summary of the covenant.

That's likely why God had them engraved on two stone tablets. It used to be thought that there were two tablets where you had some commandments on one tablet, and the rest on the other. But current scholarship today actually tends to think otherwise. We've discovered that the practice back then when a covenant was made was to make two copies of the covenant, one for each party. Each copy was essentially a formal witness and testimony for each side to keep their part of the covenant. Well, that's likely why there were two tablets. They were probably identical copies, each containing the entire Ten Commandments, one for God, and one for Israel. Of course, they were both then placed in the Ark of the Covenant. Since God was dwelling with Israel, it would make sense that both copies be kept together.

We also notice that we're talking about a covenant in verse 2. It says, "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take anything from it." This has also been recognized by scholars today as covenantal language of the day. It was a very formal warning against trying to alter the terms of the covenant.

So these are markers in this passage that tell us the law given to Israel was intimately connected with the covenant that God had made with them. That makes the law serious. The law was not just some set of loose principles to guide their life. It was a binding contract on them. They were being obligated to keep the covenant laws. God cared enough about his law to bring it to his people in a very serious way. Keep in mind, God's law, in terms of his standard of righteousness, always existed. Even before Mt. Sinai, people inside themselves knew the law, but of course people suppressed that voice of truth within themselves. But now at this time, God was giving his law to Israel in this very serious and formal way. They were to keep it as the terms of the covenant.

Of course this doesn't mean that they were to be eternally saved by works. Nor does it mean that Christians should ever think that we can be saved by law keeping. We'll talk more about that at the end of the sermon. But we learn something about the law when we see how serious God was here about it. The law is a good thing. It's important. It's important to God. And so it should be important to us. Even if we've come in the New Testament to a clear revelation that we are not saved through law keeping, that doesn't change the fact that God really, really cares about his law. He cared enough to make it a fundamental part of the old covenant. And even in the new covenant it's a fundamental part. Just remember Jeremiah 31:33. God says there that in the new covenant, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." Again, I ask, is that how you think about the law? As Christians in the new covenant, God still has a vital role for the law in our lives. Keep that in mind as we continue to look at the law today in this passage.

And so let's turn to look now at the benefits of the law according to this passage. Moses really paints a picture of how good the law is. Look first at verse 6. If Israel closely follows God's laws, it will mean wisdom and understanding for them. And so that's the first benefit I want to mention today. God's laws give wisdom and understanding. Just think of the Proverbs. The first several chapters talk about the importance of gaining wisdom. One thing the Proverbs tell us is that the fear of the Lord is the

beginning of knowledge and wisdom. Well, basically Moses is saying something similar here. Obeying all these various laws that God has given the people is that path to wisdom and understanding. If we want to grow wise and full of knowledge, we should strive to carefully observe God's commands. Of course, to do that, you have to carefully study the laws in the first place. But then you, of course, you also need to learn how to do them. How to keep them. Certainly we can relate to this as well as Christians. We grow too as Christians as we learn God's laws and seek to obey them more and more.

Another benefit of keeping the law is in verse 7. It talks about the nearness of God. Moses is suggesting that through the law, and through this covenant that God has made with Israel, that God will be near to them. The result is that they can call upon God and have confidence that he will hear them. Well, one quick example of this in the old covenant is all the ceremonial laws. The old covenant was full of laws that facilitated how the people drew near to God. For example, the law that required the high priest to enter the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle with a sacrifice for sin, was one way of God drawing near to his people. Another example we'll see later in Deuteronomy was that once God brought the people into the Promised Land he was going to designate a special city there to be his own, where the people could draw near to him in worship. Of course, we'll learn later that this is Jerusalem, where the temple would be constructed. Of course, you have things like the Second Commandment that tell the people that God is not to be drawn near to through man-made idols. And so the point is, that God's laws also directed the people how to worship God and how to draw near to him. That's another benefit of the Law; it brings God and his people together. Isn't that what we are all doing here today? We're coming together as God's people based on the laws and principles given in the Scriptures that tell us how the New Testament church is to worship and approach God. We don't just make up how to worship God. We worship him and draw near to him in the ways that he commands us in his holy laws.

Another benefit of keeping the law is connected with these last two benefits. We see Moses reference it in both verses 6 and 8. As the people are diligent to keep the law, they will become a great nation. All the other nations around them would see what God's law was doing in their midst. How it was making them a wise people. How they had a God who was near them, who answered their prayers. They would learn about the laws that governed Israel and see their wisdom. In other words, a benefit of keeping the law is that they'd be a witness to the world. Their obedience to the law would shine as a light to the nations. That's of course similar to what Jesus commanded in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." And so another benefit of the law is that those who keep it are a witness to others of the one true God who gave the law. That was true for Israel, and it's true for us.

A last benefit to mention here is found in verse 1. And this is a pretty significant one that we'll have to flush out. It says in verse 1, "That you may live, and go in and possess the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you." There's a sense in which their life was connected with obedience to the law. The opposite example is then immediately given in verse 3. Moses refers to the Baal Peor incident. That's when a number of Israelites broke God's laws and engaged in idolatry and died in a plague from God. You can read about it in Numbers 25. But the point of the example is that sin results in death. On the other hand, God promises life upon obedience, specifically life in the Promised Land. ~~And so in one sense, this~~

~~benefit of life is especially focused on physical life in the Promised Land. It's not as much as about keeping the law to find eternal life in heaven. Now there's certainly a connection, but the most specific promise is that keeping God's laws will have immediate benefits for them to live well in the Promised Land.~~ And I think this is more than just the practical benefits that come along with godliness; though I think it does include that. We'll see at the end of the book of Deuteronomy a long list of blessings the people would find as a nation in the Promised Land if they obeyed God's laws. And so that's a benefit of keeping the law, literally good life in the Promised Land.

Now as New Testament Christians not living in the Promised Land we have to make sure we rightly understand and apply this benefit to us today. And we'll do that by addressing the last point for today. I want us to turn now to think about living life according to the law, and also according to the gospel. And by the way, those aren't mutually exclusive. Let's talk through this.

You see, the law is a way to live. God really wanted Israel to love his laws and live them out. And I think he has that same heart and desire for us. Just look at verse 1. Moses is teaching them the law it says "to observe". Teach to observe. There's an educational component to that and an application component. Teaching and observing. Verse 9 goes on to make such a plea to their hearts, and to our hearts. "Take heed to yourself." "Diligently keep yourself." Don't forget the mighty things your eyes have seen - the miracles and power of God. Don't let them "depart from your heart all the days of your life." Instead, lay them up in your hearts. Pass on what you've learned. Live it out, and tell it to the next generation. Entrust the laws of God to your children and your grandchildren!

Do you see the appeal to our hearts here? The law should be something we are passionate about. It should affect all we do. Our life and our living should be tied up with the law. We should do it that we may live! But herein lies the danger. Here's where I think Israel made a mistake. And it's a mistake that we have to be careful to avoid. You see, when we hear something like verse 1 that tells us to keep the laws that we may live, we can fall into a works righteousness mentality. We can heed the plea to our hearts from verse 9 in a wrong way. And I think that's what the New Testament tells us that many of the Israelites ended up doing. In the words of Paul from Romans 9, they stumbled.

You see, there are two dangers here when you read this passage. On the one hand, you could try to earn your way to God through your own works. You could try to be fully righteous by your own law keeping. And the end result would be your failure. That's what happened with Israelites at Beth Peor. They trusted in their own righteousness, but then fell in sin, and death was the result. That's what would happen to the Israelites later when they sin against God and break his covenant. They'd end up in exile under his curse. And so one danger in reading this is that you think this tells you that you can be righteous by your own works, by your own law keeping. But just even one single sin is all it takes to break God's standard of perfect righteousness. Israel's history testifies they couldn't keep the law perfectly. Our own life history shows the same thing.

The other danger is that you take a passage like this and think you're okay with God because you've attained some basic external righteousness by outwardly keeping the law. In other words, you keep the law in some relative

way. You look around at unbelievers and say, "Wow, I'm a pretty good person. I haven't murdered anyone; I give my tithe; I keep the law. I'm a righteous person by my own good works." That was the problem with many of the Pharisees during Jesus' earthly ministry. The danger with that attitude is that it fails to recognize the complete demand of God's law on our lives. That it pierces even our hearts. That no matter how well we might externally appear to keep God's law, we still fail to realize its full demand on our lives. That even when our outward actions seem to keep the law, our hearts and minds betray us with sinful thoughts and lusts.

Both of these dangers can be summarized up with the words of Paul in Romans 9:32. He says that Israel stumbled because they thought that they could get righteousness by their works. That by following the laws they'd be able to attain righteousness. But Paul says that was the wrong approach. They stumbled. They stumbled in their approach to the law, and ultimately they stumbled over Jesus when he came saying that their righteousness wasn't enough. And look at the result of their bad approach to the law. All the good things that's said about the law here - they weren't realized by Israel. Just go down the list.

I started out by saying that the law was a serious thing so that God made it a fundamental part of the covenant. Well, Jeremiah 31 says that Israel broke the covenant. This passage says that if Israel kept the law they'd be full of wisdom and understanding. Well, they ended up rejecting this wisdom, as you see them later ignore the prophet after prophet that God sent to call them back to his laws. This passage says that they were supposed to be near to God through the law, but their sin of course separated them. So much so that God would later become sick of all their sacrifices. The very sacrifices that were commanded in the law to cleanse them from their sin. But their approach was one of let's happily sin and just offer up a sacrifice afterwards. That didn't please God and so God's Spirit left his temple in Jerusalem according to the book of Ezekiel as the people were conquered and brought to exile. That was a very visible sign of how God was *not* near to them! This passage says here that their law keeping was supposed to be a witness to the nations of how great of a nation they were. Instead the book of Lamentations describes how they later became the opposite of that - scattered among the nations. They had been captured by the nations and were now basically the laughing stock of the nations. In all this they did not find good life in the Promised Land. They were instead removed from the Promised Land in exile.

This goes back to what Paul said in Romans 9. They approached the law in the wrong way. They approached the law with an attitude of works righteousness. They acted liked they could earn their way into a right standing before God. Paul says that's the wrong approach. For Israel it meant that they didn't receive all the good benefits of the law described in this passage.

So what would the right approach to the law be? Well, Paul says that the right approach is to find righteousness *by faith*. Paul in Galatians says that the law was meant to lead us to Christ. The law should teach us that we can never measure up to God's standard of righteousness on our own. That we need another way. And Scripture says that other way is through faith. Ultimately faith in the Messiah that would bring God's grace. Faith that is counted as righteousness. When we believe and trust in Jesus, our faith is counted in place of our righteousness. That's because it looks to Jesus and his righteousness. His righteousness is credited to our account. We're seen as righteousness, but it's not a righteousness inherent to ourselves, but one

that comes through faith. Jesus' righteousness becomes our righteousness. That's how God sees us, if we are a Christian. The New Testament says it well in John 1:17. "The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

Grace. A gift. You see, the Israelites should have recognized that their life needed to be about grace. Just look again at verse 1. God promises life in the land that "The Lord God of your fathers is giving you." "Giving you." You see, it's even right here in this passage. Even in the Old Testament, they weren't to forget about grace. It was God's grace that was bringing them into the land. That's good news. Gospel, so to speak. And so in response they were to learn and live God's laws out. Their way of life was to be the law, but not a law to earn God's gifts. But a law in light of God's gifts. They were to strive to keep the law out of faith in God, not in trying to earn God's favor. They needed to recognize their need for God's salvation, instead of trying to justify themselves before God by their works.

Saints of God, the law of God is a good thing. We ought to live by it as Christians. But of course, we live by it in light of the gospel. We live according to the law *and* according to the gospel. The gospel tells us the good news that we are right before God as his gracious gift - the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. A gift received by faith. And then in light of that faith, we look to live according to God's laws.

And so we should see the inherent goodness of God's laws. We as Protestants sometimes put the law too far in the background. I think that's because we forget the full biblical teaching about the law. We tend to focus on those passages that tell us the bad news. Like where Paul refers to the law as the "law of sin and death" (Rom 8:2). That's a strong statement. But the point is that the law points out our sin and death by the fact that we don't keep the law. But don't forget that Paul himself also say that the law is holy, and just, and good (Rom 7:12).

And so the key for us is that we rightly approach the law. If we do, then we can have the sorts of benefits of the law that are pictured here in this passage. This passage points out all the sorts of benefits that are ours who seek to keep the law. But we must approach it correctly; by faith, not by works. Of course, the benefits of the law are as I said here pictured. They are pictured within the context of the old covenant, pictured as types and shadows of the good things to be revealed with the coming of Christ.

And so for us, for example, our benefits of keeping the law are not as a nation to show off to the other nations. We don't operate from just a plot of land in Palestine. No, the church today exists throughout the world, and so we ought to live in such a way that all the world can see the many benefits of living out God's laws. But let's do that, not in a way that's hypocritical to our faith. In other words, we don't hold ourselves out to the world as those who keep God's laws perfectly. No, we make it known that we live by grace through faith. That we are not perfect, just forgiven. And it is that very grace that makes us want to keep God's laws. Because God in his grace has changed our perspective on the law. It no longer seems to be a burden, but more and more we see it as a delight. That is the source of our strength, and wisdom, and understanding. May non-believers throughout the nations see this and praise God as they too come to know the one true God.

So I urge each of us to practice verse 9. Take heed to yourself. Really look at your heart and attitude toward the law. Seek to really learn God's

law. Seek to really live it out. When parts are hard for you to accept, pray for God's heart and mind. Pray that you'd love his laws as much as he does, and understand the wisdom and justice in each of them.

And realize that this is what we are setting out to do. We are going to be really getting into the heart of God's law as we study Deuteronomy. I hope you really can apply your hearts to this study. Really look to learn and live out God's law. Again, not to be saved, but because you are saved.

As we do this, it will require a bit of discernment. When we look at this book, we'll see different aspects of God's law that we need to interpret in context. Moral principles that are always directly applicable and binding upon us. Civil laws and judgments that were more specific to Israel as a civil government, but still helpful for us to learn from. And ceremonial laws that find their fulfillment in Jesus, like the sacrifices and kosher food laws. We'll need to rightly handle all the aspects of the law under the old covenant as we study this book. But if we do rightly handle the law as we study this book, then our passage for today reminds us that there are great benefits to the law. The law is good. It expresses God's own heart of righteousness. Let's continue to look for our heart to resemble God's heart more and more. And that too comes by faith in God's grace given to us in Christ. Amen.

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