

"Hold Fast to Him"

Have you ever spoken with someone from a different religion and had them try to convince you that their religion is compatible with Christianity? I've had that conversation numerous times with people from all sorts of religious or spiritual practices. Usually the conversation starts with the person sharing something about their views, then they learn I'm a Christian, and then they share about something their religion has in common with Christianity. Often it's some supposed favorable view about Christ. How one of their leaders said some positive things about Jesus. Like he was an influential prophet, or something like that. Or sometimes it's a more mystical connection. Like a common one is about "light;" a lot of religions talk about some sort of inner light inside us, and well Jesus said he was the light, so the person might claim that their religion complements Jesus' teaching.

And yet when you investigate those religions a little further, you end up finding that they don't have that much in common at all. They might throw some props to Jesus because that's the in thing to do, but at the heart of it, they are either proclaiming a different god or a different message.

How ought we to respond to such conversations when we encounter them? If we are in the world talking with people about Jesus and people's religious convictions, we will have these conversations. Many might even try to get you to embrace these other view as something complementary to your faith. They might want you to add some of their spiritual practices into your Christian faith. How will you respond?

Well, this passage addresses this sort of question from the perspective of the old covenant. As we understand how this was to be handled in the old covenant, we'll then think about how this applies to us under the new covenant. And so let's spend some time this morning thinking about how to respond to people who try to draw us to different gods or different faiths.

And so let's look at this passage. This passage is essentially dealing with the first commandment. That's the commandment where God says, "You shall have no other gods before me." This chapter basically describes what this should and shouldn't look like. What it should look like is simple: complete devotion and service to the one true God. This is the God that Israel knew because he had done all these mighty things in their lives. He had brought them out of Egypt and safely through the wilderness. They knew God personally. He had made a covenant with them. And so we see what keeping the first commandment looks like in several places here. Verse 4 summarizes it. They are to walk after the Lord and fear him, keep his commandments, obey him, serve him. I like how verse 4 ends. They are to hold fast to him. That's the substance of the first commandment; holding fast to God.

But this passage primarily is talking about the opposite. It's warning against *not* keeping the first commandment. It's talking about threat of people coming and enticing people away from the one true God to false gods. It's forbidding Israel from being driven away to other gods. And so this passage essentially shows both aspects of the first commandment. It describes what it's like to keep the first commandment, holding fast to God. And it describes what it's like to break the first commandment, by going after other gods.

Essentially this is all describing the threat of apostasy. It's turning away from God and your faith to other gods or another religion. That's why the first

commandment is so central. It's not just some moral failing that you commit. Things like murder or stealing are serious more failures. But they aren't necessarily apostasy. They may result from an apostate heart. But breaking the first commandment is a direct action of rejecting the one true God and going after something false.

And so this passage envisions different scenarios that could be a temptation for Israel concerning this commandment. These are hypothetical examples that Moses gives the people to help them be on guard against the different threats that might come before them. The first scenario envisions a false prophet coming and deceiving the people with signs and wonders to drive the people to other gods; that's verses 1-5. The second scenario envisions a family member or close friend comes to you secretly to drive you away from the one true God; that's verses 6-11. The third scenario envisions an entire city having been led astray by a few wicked men, driven to false Gods; verses 12-18. The keyword repeated in all three scenarios is "entice;" verses 6, 11, and 14 all describe what happens as the people being enticed to other gods. Literally in the Hebrew, it's the idea of being "driven away" to these false gods.

And so these are the situations in view in this passage. There will be different kinds of threats to apostatize. Israel will find temptations to turn away to other gods, false god's that they have not known. Instead they should hold fast to the one true God that they have known. So what's God's assessment of this? How does he view these temptations? And what response to these threats does God demand of Israel?

Well, God's assessment is pretty straight forward. Verse 14. This is an abomination. To turn from the one true God to worship false gods is an abomination. There are lots of things described as sin in the Bible. But some things are put in terms of abominations. This is the Bible's way to say how utterly offensive something is to God. And what could be more offensive, more appalling, more abominable to God, than his people turning away from him. His people who he has loved and cherished and nurtured; for them to leave him for another, is an appalling thing. It's bad enough for pagans to worship false gods in the first place. It's even worse when his own people desert him. Just think how utterly offensive and repulsive it would be to you if your spouse cheated on you; just the mental thought about it; then you can begin to think of how God views our own spiritual infidelity.

But it's not only an abomination to God. Verse 17 uses the phrase "accursed things." It's talking about all the things in this apostate city that would need to be utterly destroyed because of their sin. This phrase "accursed things," literally means the things under the ban, or, the things devoted to destruction. This is holy war language in the Hebrew. It's the same language God used when he commanded Israel to destroy all the pagan nations in the Promised Land. They were to utterly destroy them, bringing divine judgment on some specific nations in the Land. And so in the case of this Israelite city turning from God in the Land, they end up in the same fate. God says they will become devoted to destruction, just like the pagan nations who lived there before them. That's because the Promised Land was to be a holy land. Only the holy people of God could live there. If a city turned away to false gods, they'd suffer the same fate as the pagan nations before them. That's why verse 15 calls for their utter destruction.

This is why God essentially calls for the same sort of thing in the first two scenarios, on a smaller scale. When a whole Israelite city turned away from God, they were to utterly destroy it. But when it was just a single person as in the first two scenarios, then the judgment was death. The person who turned away to

other gods was to be put to death. Again, the point is that the Promised Land, was supposed to be a physical holy land. As a physical nation, they were to be fully devoted to the one true God. Thus, apostasy was to be punished by death. This would be a deterrent to other Israelites; verse 11. But even more so, look at the principle in verse 5. "So you shall put away the evil from your midst." The NIV translates it as, "Purge the evil from among you." They were to be a holy and pure community that followed God faithfully. Any apostates among them would mar that purity and holiness of the community. And so, they were to purge the evil from among them.

And so this was the response God demanded of Israel in this situation. They were supposed to recognize how God was using this threat of apostasy to test them. That's what verse 3 says. That's the perspective they were supposed to have in all this. When one of these three scenarios presents itself, or something similar, they should see an opportunity to show their love for God. They were to show their faithfulness to God. God would use this to test their love for him.

And so notice some of the details of how God tells them to respond. There's actually several important things Israel is told here in terms of how to respond to these temptations. The first one is in verse 3. "You shall not listen to the words of that prophet." In other words, if a false teacher comes to them, they shouldn't even give them the time of day. They shouldn't entertain their teachings. As soon as they learn that the person is trying to get them to turn to another god, they should stop listening right then and there. Why? Are they being closed-minded, just putting their heads in the sand? Well, no. Remember what God's saying. He's saying that they had already come to know, personally, the one true God. They'd experienced God firsthand. There's nothing anyone could say or do that would change what they already know to be true; that their God was the only true God. This is true, even if the the prophet comes doing signs and wonders. That's amazing to think about. The false prophet might apparently do signs and wonders, but if they call people to a false god, then they must not even be listened to. No matter what it appears they are doing, their message can't be right, because the people already know the one true God.

I like how God makes the same point in verse 8. This is under the scenario of a family member or close friend coming to you. Look at all the different ways it says to not accept what they're saying. Don't consent to him, listen to him, pity him, spare him, or conceal him. You know, you might be more inclined to give your close friend or family member a hearing on this. But God's saying that if they call you to turn away from God, then he emphatically makes it clear; don't listen to them. Don't entertain this apostasy.

Again, the opposite response is verse 4. Cling to the one true God. Hold fast to him. In the midst of false prophets, or anyone trying to lead you astray; the solution is to hold fast to the one real God who you know to be true.

And as a people then, they were to bring the judgment of death upon the offending souls. We mentioned this already. But notice again, how this is to be a response of the people. When stoning the individual, it was a community thing; vs 9. All the people were to get involved in this serious judgment. Of course, this wasn't to be some rash witch hunt sort of thing. Verse 14 talks about some of the due process that's being assumed in all this. That's flushed out in other places in the Torah as well. They were to carefully investigate and search out such matters before acting. Witnesses would be involved. But at the end of the day, this was something Israel as a whole had to enact. This was discipline in the highest level. A permanent excommunication for God's people through capital punishment in the old covenant.

Well, how does this passage apply to us in the new covenant? The church today doesn't go around killing its members who apostatize. Are we doing something wrong? Well, no. In the new covenant, there's a shift that takes place. The typologies from the Old Testament find their fulfillment in Jesus. What Israel represented in the Promised Land was a sort of foreshadowing of heaven. It was supposed to represent heaven in some shadowy, imperfect, sense. That's why the land was called a holy land at the time. That land was kept physically holy with the sword. That's why apostasy was met with capital punishment. That's why cities that deserted God were met with the "edge of the sword," verse 15. In heaven, we know, there will be no sin and no sinners. All will be faithful to God. This provision of capital punishment in the old covenant sketched a picture of this in advance.

But in the New Testament, we see a shift. The people of God are no longer confined to a single nation of people in specific geographical location. No, the gospel is being brought to all the nations. Churches are being formed in all the cities and nations throughout the world. The Old Testament painted a visible picture of what the church is now *spiritually* on earth. The church is to be spiritually the holy people of God. And so now we don't use capital punishment to deal with apostates. We use excommunication instead.

That's actually what we see Paul doing in 1 Corinthians 5. He's dealing there with someone whose actions weren't consistent with their Christian confession, and wasn't willing to repent. Paul called for excommunication for this person. Excommunication is to remove the person from the membership of the church. They are then treated like they are a non-Christian. The church no longer recognizes them as a Christian. Instead the church preaches the gospel to them, calling them to repent. And in 1 Corinthians 5:13 Paul quotes the Old Testament to make his case. Paul says, "Purge the evil person from your midst" (NAB). That's a reference to verse 5 of our passage, and several similar verses in Deuteronomy. Paul can appeal to the physical judgment of death under the old covenant as a foundation for the spiritual judgment of excommunication. That's because excommunication is the spiritual equivalent of what went on in the Old Testament. Now the church in the new covenant is a spiritual community of believers. Its weapon has changed. We don't strike with the physical sword anymore. Our weapon is a spiritual sword. The sword of the Spirit. The Word of God.

But don't let that take away from the seriousness of what's going on in excommunication. God still sees apostasy as an abomination. He still sees it as the path of destruction, an accursed thing. To be cast out of the church in excommunication is saying that your state is one of destruction and death. That if you don't repent and return to the LORD, when judgment day comes, you will be accursed. You will go to hell. Of course, it's fitting that in the new covenant excommunication affords the person the chance to yet repent and turn to the Lord. That was an opportunity that didn't exist in the old covenant; when you were stoned to death, well, you were dead. But how fitting that in the graciousness of the new covenant, this serious matter of apostasy lends yet another opportunity to find God's grace in Jesus Christ.

And so let us too be aware of these sorts of threats as Christians. Threats of apostasy still exist today. The types of situations that we might find ourselves in are not that much different today. Think about the three scenarios in this passage. Think of the false prophets and dreamers performing signs and wonders to lead the people astray. Well, the New Testament warns the church of false prophets and antichrists that will come and try to lead the church astray. Jesus said in Matthew 24:24 that they will even perform great signs and wonders to try to deceive

the church. We must not follow these false leaders who try to give us a different God or a different Christ, just because they appear to have done some miraculous thing. Don't be deceived. Match their message with God's Word. If it doesn't match up, then don't accept it, even if they do signs and wonders.

And think of the family or close friends described in this passage who will try to lead people astray. Well, don't forget Christ's words in Matthew 10:36 where Jesus' says that a person's enemies will come from his own household. Jesus recognizes that not everyone in a family is going to accept Christ. Surely most of us know firsthand that not all of our loved ones are believers. Many I'm sure would have us to forget our faith. Some very forcefully put that pressure on us. But we can't let the pressures of family or friends turn us from Jesus. And yet certainly this can be one of the strongest pressures in our life when a close family member or friend urges us to turn away from God.

And remember the third scenario here in this passage; with whole cities turning from God. Well, in the new covenant, God's people aren't identified with a city anymore. They are identified with the church. And the church is identified both as a whole, and as local congregation of believers. For example, you don't see Paul writing his epistles to the city of Ephesus or Galatia, but to the churches and believers in those cities. But that's where this third scenario finds a fitting application. Sometimes whole churches can go astray. Just think of the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. Several of those letters warn the churches against the threat of apostasy. Christ threatens to bring judgment against them. Well, we might find ourselves in that sort of situation. Where we see whole congregations fall away from the Lord. We must not pretend there is no problem. We must not treat a church as a legitimate church if they have actually become a synagogue of Satan. The larger church must act with the Sword of the Spirit.

These things threaten to affect us all. That was the point in the old covenant. The holiness of all Israel could be jeopardized. We know how idolatry spread among Israel when the people didn't follow what's outlined in this chapter. Heresy can spread in our churches too if we turn a deaf ear or a blind eye because we don't want to rock the boat. God calls us to exercise church discipline in protecting the purity of the church. It's for the best for the church, but also for those who have gone astray and placed their hope in the wrong things.

Paul gives a very specific application of this in the book of Galatians. We recently studied this in our Thursday night Bible study. The example threats I just mentioned were rather a broad set of things. Apostasy can come in different forms. But arguable the worst threat is what Paul describes in the opening verses of Galatians. Paul uses a similar sort of conditional scenarios like we see here in Deuteronomy. But he does it because the Galatians had a real threat before them. He speaks hypothetically in Galatians 1:8, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed." Paul just got done stating that he was ordained an apostle, not from men, but through God the Father and through Jesus. That's a pretty high set of credentials. But he says that if even he, an apostle of God, or if even an angel from heaven, were to give a different gospel, let him be accursed. And then in the next verse he moves from the hypothetical to address a real concern before them. Galatians 1:9, "As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed."

Let him be accursed. These scenarios Paul mentions have the same outcome as those in our passage from Deuteronomy. Let him be accursed. But notice what Paul's specifically concerned about being compromised. He's concerned about the gospel

being compromised. In our passage from Deuteronomy, the concern is that people would stop following the first commandment. As foundational as that law is, for us as Christians, there is a threat that's even more foundational. That someone could turn us away from the one true gospel. You see, the first commandment is law. It's one that we, apart from Christ, have already broken. Before we were a Christian, the one true God, was not our God. The only reason we have come to follow the one true God, is because of the gospel. If the gospel is compromised, we have no power to keep any of the laws, the first commandment, or any of them.

So do you see how serious of a threat this was for Paul? Do you see how serious of a threat it is to us? We must not compromise the gospel. We must never turn away from the one true gospel to anything else. There is no other gospel. People today will try to make the gospel about so many things. But Paul summarized the gospel wonderfully when he said that Christ gave himself for our sins, that he might bring us deliverance from this present evil age; Galatians 1:4.

This is the sweet life giving message of the gospel. We have found forgiveness and grace in Jesus Christ. We have eternal life only through him. We were under God's judgment, deserving death, and he freely forgave as we turned to his son in faith. This is the gospel. This we must preserve. If you are a Christian, if you've tasted of this amazing grace, how can we make the gospel into something else? How can we even entertain anyone who would come to us with something else? People want to make the gospel about so many things. The gospel is not a call to social justice. The gospel is not a promise of earthly prosperity. The gospel is not about uniting together every religion to find the truth in each of them. The gospel is not patriotism. Now the gospel might bear fruit in some of these areas. Some of these things may result from the gospel. But the gospel is that Christ came to save sinners through *his* work, so that we could receive eternal life as his gift to us. He calls us to believe and trust in him.

Brothers and sisters, we want to stand up against all the threats of apostasy in our midst. We want to be concerned about all of them. But the chief threat of apostasy is that someone tries to give us a different gospel. But there is only one gospel. And only one Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 4 calls Israel to hold fast to God. That we must do. But the power to do that comes in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us then hold fast to the gospel. Let us hold fast to Christ.

And let us be willing to stand up with the sword of the Spirit against any antichrists that may rise up in the church. The antichrists are those who turn you away from the true Christ and the true gospel. We must be willing to stand up in those hours. Jesus has told us those hours will come. They are already here. If not in our front door, then certainly in all the neighborhoods around us. We must be on guard. We must be willing to act. But may we go forth not in our own strength. But in the strength of Jesus Christ. Wearing his spiritual armor, and using not earthly weapons to fight these battles, but the spiritual weapons we've been given. The Word of God; prayer; righteousness; truth. Christ and all the testimony of him. Be encouraged, that if we go with Christ, we will not fail. Amen.

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