

Renewing the Covenant

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Sermon Series:
Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 5:22-33

*God creates...
Sin destroys...
God restores!*

There is an ancient fable about six blind men who come upon an elephant. The first man touches its solid side and determines this elephant is very much like a wall. The second man grasps the elephant's tusk. "Ho! And what do we have here, so round and smooth and sharp? To me 'tis clear, this wonder of an elephant is very like a spear!" The third blind man takes the squirming trunk in his hands and concludes this elephant is very like a snake. The fourth reaches out his eager hand and touches its sturdy leg. "'Tis clear enough, this elephant is very like a tree!" The fifth man strokes its ear and determines this elephant is very like a fan. The sixth man seizes its swinging tail. "I see," says he, "this elephant is very like a rope."

Each one was partly right, but all were wrong. None of these blind men could accurately describe an elephant.

We have been preaching our way this summer through the Ten Commandments. We have parsed each command down into its constituent parts. Before we take leave of these commandments, I'd like to take a step back and see the whole elephant.

The Ten Commandments are part of a larger Biblical context. So, let's rewind all the way back to the beginning, to the book about beginnings—to Genesis itself.

Genesis teaches that God creates people for relationship. God fashions people to bear His image. People are given the unique capacity to know and correspond to God.

God creates, but sin destroys this God relationship. Human rebellion, which the Bible calls sin, puts distance between us and God.

God creates, sin destroys, but God restores. God, who is rich in mercy, initiates a covenant to restore us in this God relationship. A covenant is God's unilateral, unconditional and irrevocable means of restoring this relationship.

We conduct most of our business transactions today by means of contracts. A contract specifies an amount of money in exchange for goods and services. Whenever one party fails to keep its promise, the covenant is broken. If I fail to keep a doctor's appointment, I break the contract. My failure to honor the contract will likely make it more problematic next time around to secure an appointment with my doctor.

God doesn't establish a contract with people, God initiates a covenant. A covenant is more like the ties of a parent to a child than a doctor's appointment. When my kids were late for dinner, I didn't say, "Well, that's it. Pack your bags; you're out of the family." One member's failure doesn't destroy the relationship. A

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covenant isn't eradicated by one person's failure.

There you have it: God creates, sin destroys but God restores.

I love it when you stare back at me with those blank expressions. Some of you are politely wondering to yourselves, where on earth is he going with this sermon? I thought he was going to talk about the Ten Commandments? What does all this conversation about covenant have to do with the Ten Commandments?

The Ten Commandments specify the terms of the covenant. Do you want to know what it means to live in covenant relationship with God? It means worshipping no other gods and no idols. It means honoring God's name, keeping the Sabbath and respecting parents. It means no killing, adultery, stealing, lying or coveting.

According to Deuteronomy, the Ten Commandments were written on two stone tablets (5:22). Presumably, that means the first five commands were written on one tablet and the second five commands were inscribed on a second tablet.

The five commands on the first tablet are written expansively, a total of 303 English words within a span of five commands. These commands are distinctive in referencing "the Lord your God." These commands articulate the God-conditions of the covenant. In our hurry to get onto the really practical commands, we can breeze by the ones that focus on our relationship with God.

The commands on the second tablet, however, express the human conditions of the covenant. They are written in simple, unadorned style; 56 words in all. Each command on the second tablet is introduced with the negative "do not." Do not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie or covet.

The commands on the first tablet primarily address what it means to live in covenant relationship with God, while the commands on the second tablet specify what it means to live in covenant relationship with each other.

Jewish tradition maintains that the Torah, consisting of the first five books of the Old Testament, contains 613 laws, of which 248 are written in positive form and 365 are composed as negative prohibitions. When a lawyer asks Jesus which of these 613 laws is the greatest, Jesus answers, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind." Jesus then goes on to enumerate the second most important commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:34-40).

These commands are not original with Jesus. Rather, Jesus lifts them right out of the Old Testament. "Loving God with heart, soul and mind" is part of the great Shema every faithful Hebrew commits to memory (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), while the second reference "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" originates in the book of Leviticus (19:18). Jesus is not the first person to issue these two

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love commands; he's the first one to couple them together into one.

Jesus provides this lawyer with a splendid summary of the Ten Commandments. Love the Lord with all your heart, soul and mind—that's the first tablet. Love your neighbor as yourself, that's the second tablet.

Paul Simon, named by *Time* magazine in 2006 as one of the 100 people who shape our world, spoke about his religious perspective in *Rolling Stone* magazine. Simon said, "The only thing God requires for us is to enjoy life—and love. It doesn't matter if you accomplish anything. You don't have to do anything but appreciate that you're alive. And love, that's the whole point."

Paul Simon may be an accomplished musician, but a lousy theologian. There are things God wants from us beyond enjoyment. The Ten Commandments summon us to love God and neighbor with all our hearts.

When I committed the Ten Commandments to memory in Confirmation Class, they didn't particularly grab me. At the time, they seemed like a laundry list of rules and regs. But to regard these laws merely as commands misses the point. Conventionally, we call them Ten Commandments, but the Hebrew text speaks of them as Ten Words (Deuteronomy 4:13, 10:4; Exodus 34:28). We sometimes call the Ten Commandments "the Decalogue," which literally means "ten words." These commands are words to live by. These words impart life.

C. S. Lewis asked a boy what he thought God was like. The boy replied that he supposed God was the sort of person who was always snooping around to see if anyone was having a good time and immediately putting a stop to it. God is no killjoy! God creates life and knows best how life is to be lived!

In our Scripture lesson, Moses reads the Ten Commandments and says, "Keep these commandments, so that it may go well with you" (Deuteronomy 5:29). A few verses later we read, "You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you so that you may live and it will go well with you" (5:33).

Each command is eminently livable. The Ten Commandments are not only rules to be obeyed, they are words meant to be lived. God's words confer life!

We individualize these commands as a code for personal morality, when fundamentally they serve as ten conditions given to support community life. They are provided for everybody's welfare. Think of what kind of community we would become if everyone practiced these ten commands! God intends this church to be a place where marriages are valued, honesty is prized, parents are afforded special honor and life is held sacred, not only my life but your life as well.

By Jesus' day, these Ten Commandments had become a checklist of religious piety. Religious leaders called Pharisees employed this list to put their

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righteousness on display. Jesus saw through their phony-baloney piety and intensified these commands, so there would be no doubt about whether they could keep these laws perfectly. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder,' but I say to you anyone angry with someone else will be liable to judgment... You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery in his heart" (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28). I could go on, but you get the point.

It's impossible to keep these laws perfectly. That's why the Heidelberg Catechism, written in 1562, acknowledges that even the most devout among us make only "a small beginning in obedience through life."

You may be wondering: I'll never be able to keep these commands on my own. That's right, you won't, so don't even try! We will never be able to keep these commands by will power alone. Will power is insufficient to root out deeply ingrained sin. Ultimately, we depend upon God's grace in Jesus Christ to keep these commands.

As we endeavor to obey these commands, we become acutely aware of our sins and shortcomings. That's why we depend on Jesus Christ as our Savior from sin and submit to him as Lord to truly live a Christian life.

I mentioned David's sin with Bathsheba last Sunday. King David breaks all the rules—he

murders, commits adultery, lies, steals and covets what belongs to his neighbor.

Yet, he's also heralded as a man after God's own heart. How could he be a man after God's own heart, yet break the rules? The same way you and I can! We will never perfectly keep the laws, yet, by earnestly seeking after God, we begin to love God with all our heart.

You will find a purple tri-fold in the seat pocket in front of you marked "Covenant Making Dedication." You will find the Ten Commandments listed with some brief commentary extracted from sermons given over the past ten Sundays. We urge you to identify one or more commandments you would like to address in your life. You may want to select one among the first five and another from among the second five. You may use the space provided to indicate how you intend to keep these commands. There will be an occasion at the end of the service to dedicate your offering. You can also take this exercise home with you, to reflect on it further.

These commands are words to live by. These words are life!

