

Take Two More Tablets

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Sermon Series:
Deuteronomy

Selections from
Deuteronomy 9 & 10

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It seems as if today we have medications for just about everything. From sleeping aids and cholesterol reducers to anxiety tamers and a dizzying array of treatments for various forms of "dysfunction." Our airwaves are bombarded with ads for drug treatments. No longer are prescription medications the purview of the medical professionals. Now, pharmaceutical companies are appealing directly to the consumers in hopes of winning over some serious business. And serious business it is. Last year, 24 million prescriptions were written for just for one sleep aid, Ambien. Almost ten percent of the country got a prescription LAST YEAR just for that one drug. The drug companies are keeping Madison Avenue in business. In 2002, the pharmaceutical industry spent 16 billion on marketing. Gives new meaning to that old phrase, "Take two and call me in the morning," doesn't it?

A few thousand years ago, Moses was told to take two tablets, but they didn't come in a bottle with a childproof cap (which apparently only children can successfully open!). Those two tablets were the core of the Jewish law. We spent quite a few weeks this summer carefully reviewing each of the ten commands and the variety of implications they have for our lives. But as our text for

today indicates, Israel came within a thread or two of never receiving those commands.

From what the Bible tells us, we know that Moses spent 40 days up on Mount Sinai, also known as Mount Horeb. And, while most of those 40 days are shrouded in mystery, we know that Moses came down the mountain with the two tablets in hand. We also know that God had basically told Moses to get his butt down there and see what trouble the Israelites had gotten into while Moses was up on the mountain. And boy, were they in a heap of trouble! Apparently, while Moses was gone, God's people had decided that they needed a golden calf to worship. In Exodus, it says, "As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him." So they convinced Moses' brother, Aaron, to melt down their gold earrings and fashion them into an idol. How ironic, of course, that without even knowing it, the people had violated the first two commandments. They had created an image to worship and they had turned away from the one true God. Needless to say, God was none too happy. The Bible says that God was actually stewing in anger and ready to destroy the people.

God was understandably upset, but I'm not sure we could say that God was surprised. Last week, we talked about how Israel had been

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stubborn and had repeatedly provoked God's anger. One translation uses the phrase "stiff-necked," which says to me that they just wanted to go their own way, except that going their own way seemed to always take them OUT of God's way. Sound familiar at all?

Moses comes down the mountain and he's got the tablets, and he is so frustrated with what he sees that he SMASHES the tablets and literally destroys the commandments in front of the people. Then he takes Aaron aside and gives him one of these "what were you thinking?" conversations. You know what I mean—the ones we have with our children, our spouses and our employees. The one where you just want to reach out and grab someone and shake him in an effort to shake some sense into them, though it rarely works.

Rembrandt captured this scene in a very convincing way with this painting. In the painting, Moses holds the tablets above his head, ready to smash them to the ground. But what I love about this painting is that I think he really captures a sense of sadness in Moses' face. I know that art is certainly subjective, but when I see that image, I get the impression that Rembrandt was trying to picture Moses as saying, "Oh, not again!" The Bible tells us that when Jesus approached Jerusalem he looked at the city and he cried because the people had not followed God's desire for their lives. I think that Moses might have exhibited that

same sense of sadness when he looked down at what God's foolish people had done.

Moses basically pulverized the golden calf Aaron had fashioned and poured the dust into the river. But Moses then prays for the people and prays that God would basically let go of the anger—the justified anger that God has toward the people. And, in response to Moses' plea, the Bible says that God "changed his mind" about what God was going to do to the people. In fact, God not only spared the people, but He created two more tablets for them to keep as a reminder of God's grace and mercy. And thank God that those two new tablets symbolize the way God deals with you and me.

One writer says that in this story God's love overwhelms God's justice. God doesn't put aside justice. God overwhelms justice with love.

A husband and wife had been married for about fifteen years, and they were having a growing number of disagreements, so they agreed to address this problem by developing a "fault" box. For one month, they would keep track of the ways they irritated each other, and then, at the end of the month, they would read each other's boxes and try to address the problem. The wife was diligent in putting notes such as, "socks not in the hamper," "wet towel on the floor," – you know the list. The husband was decidedly less diligent in keeping track. At the end of the month, they opened the boxes, and the husband learned quite a few things about his

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behavior and the way it affected his wife. But when the wife opened her box, on each message slip it simply said, "I love you."

Friends, I can't tell you how grateful I am that God doesn't keep an accurate count in my fault box. God forgives and forgives and forgives. On each slip in my fault box, God writes, "I love you, my child." And to the children of Israel—God heard Moses' prayers and went back and created two new tablets, as if to say, "Take these and call me in the morning." All will be better. Friends, I honestly don't know why God does it—but thank God, He does.

This past Friday, our children's ministry presented a version of *Godspell* here on this stage. They did a fantastic job, and you saw some of the images on the screen this morning. In that musical, Jesus shares several parables with his disciples, one of which is the parable of the unforgiving servant. Jesus tells the story of a wealthy landowner whose servant owed him 10,000 talents, and he could not repay that sum. The owner forgave that whole debt, but then the servant, who had been forgiven, went out and beat up and imprisoned a man who owed him 100 denarii. Now, of course, the numbers 10,000 and 100 are relative, not exact. But in today's world we're talking about the difference between \$10,000 and \$20,000,000,000—give or take a penny or two! And Peter asked Jesus, "...should I forgive some-

one 7 times?" And Jesus responded with "...70X7." Again, the numbers are symbolic, with 7 being the numeral of perfection (70X7 really means infinity, not just 490). Four hundred and ninety would be easy compared with what God expects of us in the forgiveness department. And the reason God expects that level of forgiveness from us is because our forgiveness is a response to the forgiveness we have RECEIVED from God.

God let Moses come back for a second set of tablets, symbolizing God's gracious forgiveness. The story is told of Thomas Edison, when he was working on the lightbulb, that it took a team of men 24 hours to put ONE lightbulb together. When that first lightbulb was finished Edison gave it to a young man, who nervously carried it upstairs. You guessed it! Because of his nerves, he dropped it and it shattered. That team of men put another one together, and Edison handed it right back to that same young boy. Just like the quarterback who goes right back to the receiver who dropped the pass, God comes right back to us with a vote of confidence and forgiveness when we drop the pass.

Frankly, some days we drop more than we catch, but God never gives up on us. Frankly, I don't know why. We give up on each other. We give up on ourselves. But God says, "Take two more tablets and call me in the morning." It will be a new day.

Let us pray ...

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Forgiving God, we give you thanks that second chances are what you're all about. Help us to take those second chances and use them to begin anew, letting you faithfully guide our paths through the wilderness we call life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.