

Freedom to Obey
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The prophet Samuel tells a humorous and sobering story in 1 Samuel 4-5. The Israelites are at war with a neighboring nation, the Philistines. They've just lost a significant battle. So the elders of Israel come up with a new plan. They decide to try and use the ark of the covenant, a holy vessel representing the presence of God in their midst of his people, as a lucky charm.

They don't pray and ask for God's help. There's no expression of humble dependence on God. In their mind, God was a religious thing, an "it" they could deploy at their discretion to get the victory they wanted. God must not be helping us win this battle because we have yet to bring him here, so they thought. No surprise, the Philistines defeat the Israelites again and this time, they capture the ark.

Rejoicing in their triumph, they bring it to the city of Ashdod. 1 Samuel 5:3, "Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon." We've got the magic now. One more god in our collection, under our power. Listen to what happened next.

1 Samuel 5:4, "And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD." Yahweh tolerates no rivals. The Philistines, however, conclude Dagon simply needs a little help! "So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him."

Why? Because the One True God before whom are all our ways and to whom every one of us will give an account does not stand idly by when we put other gods before his face. He requires absolute loyalty. He demands absolute loyalty. He deserves absolute loyalty. He will not share his glory with another. He will not give his glory to another. And if we try to use him or manipulate him to get the goodies we want, he will bring the entire, idolatrous enterprise crashing to the ground.

1 Corinthians 8:6-7, "There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. However, not all possess this knowledge..." And that, my friends, is why

the law of God, given to us through the gift of his Holy Word, is such a gift. It confronts us with the God-ness of God, the supremacy of God, and exclusive worship he deserves as a result!

We're prone to think of God's law as a bunch of religious rules. Do this. Don't do that. God's laws are shackles on our freedom. Limits on our self-expression. Barriers to happiness. Deuteronomy 4:44-5:7 paints a radically different picture. **Obeying God's law requires absolute loyalty to God's Son through the liberating power of God's grace.**

It's not about keeping a bunch of random rules. It's about loving God first and best. And it's not something we do to earn God's favor. It's about living in the freedom God has graciously won for us through the redemption that is ours in Christ Jesus. We may live at a different moment in redemptive history than Israel, my friends, but the spiritual message Moses delivered to them is the same message we need today.

1) OBEDIENCE IS REQUIRED BY A FAITHFUL GOD (4:44-49)

When someone in authority over you makes a rule, it can feel like they just want to control you. They're not interested in doing good to you. It's a power play, an entirely unfortunate imposition. We can mentally gear up for as much when we read in Deuteronomy 4:44, "This is the law that Moses set before the people of Israel. These are the testimonies, the statutes, and the rules, which Moses spoke to the people of Israel..." Oh boy. Here we go. Another list of rules. What does God want to make me do this time?

Except that's not at all what Moses does. He doesn't launch into rule #1. In verses 45-49, he summarizes the history of Israel's relationship with Yahweh that he just finished reviewing in chapters 1-4. He's acutely aware that in order for Israel to hear, learn, and obey God's law for what it is, she needs to know something about the God who gave it to her in the first place, namely, that he's a faithful God. Obedience isn't required by a power-hungry, maliciously controlling God. It's required by a faithful God, a kind and merciful God!

What does the end of verse 45 say? "Moses spoke to the people of Israel when they came out of Egypt..." Forty years earlier, the Lord did something amazing for his people. He rescued them from the hand of their human oppressors! It was an act of salvation they could not earn and did not deserve. And now they're standing "beyond the Jordan,"

about to cross into the land of Canaan God promised their forefathers he would give them. The banner over the last 40 years says, “Lord, haven’t you been good!”

A glorious future is in sight, but so is Israel’s persistent tendency to go her own way. Yes, God saved her from Egypt. But that didn’t alter the orientation of her heart. The geographic detail in verse 46 reminds us of as much. She’s “In the valley opposite Beth-peor.” That’s an allusion to Numbers 25 where Israel started to worship the Canaanite idol Baal after indulging in sexual immorality with the women of Moab. It’s a case study in unfaithfulness to God, a sharp contrast to God’s faithfulness to her, and what makes his continued faithfulness to her in verse 46 all the more stunning!

Yes, Israel is “In the valley opposite Beth-peor.” But that very place is also “In the land of Sihon the king of the Amorites...whom Moses and the people of Israel defeated when they came out of Egypt.” God’s salvation in her life was not a one and done thing. The Exodus from Egypt was not the end of the story. It was only the beginning of one faithful act of divine deliverance after another. Case in point, the very land on which she was standing belonged to a pagan king until the Lord delivered him into Israel’s hands!

And by giving Israel their land, what was God doing? He wasn’t strutting his stuff. He was keeping his promises. The first phrase in verse 47, “And they took possession of his land,” points back to Genesis 12-13 where centuries earlier God promised to give Abraham’s descendants a place to dwell in, a land of their own possession where they could experience the joy of life with him.

Yahweh is merciful when Israel rebels. He continues to save even after she’s done her best to run the opposite direction! He’s a faithful God. Every one of the geographic boundaries in verses 48-49 declare as much in a delightfully tangible way. Israel, behold the faithfulness of God in your life! It’s not a theory. It’s a reality, as real as the slopes of Pisgah.

Earlier this morning we sang of the faithfulness of God to us in the gospel. The marvelous news that God sent his Son into the world to reconcile us to himself that we might know the joy of living as his people, in his place, under his rule. Where Israel looked back to Egypt or the slopes of Pisgah and beheld the faithfulness of God, we look to the cross of Christ and say with the saints who have gone before us, “Haven’t you been good!” Yes, Moses gave them a law, testimonies, statues, and rules from God himself. But don’t miss the context lest you question the motive of the Lawgiver. Obedience is required by a faithful God.

2) OBEDIENCE IS AN EXPRESSION OF RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD (5:1-5)

Deuteronomy is all about the nature of God's covenant relationship with his people. So it's no surprise that as Moses finishes his first speech in chapters 1-4 he circles back to the covenant-character of the whole. Deuteronomy 5:1, "Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the rules that I speak in your hearing today, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them." Why? Because (verse 2) "The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb."

We have all sorts of relationships in this life. Work relationships. Neighborhood relationships. Family relationships. Relationships with pets. Relationship with the mailman. Listen. Relationship with God isn't another one in the bunch. It's an entirely different sort of relationship because it's a covenant-kind of relationship, a relationship built on oath-bound promises.

The closest analogy we have on a human level is a marriage relationship. It's built on promises or vows. Promises of faithfulness. Vows of fidelity. It's not commercial or transactional – I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine. It's covenantal – Come what may, I will remain faithful to you. It was God's promise to Israel. It was her responsibility toward him.

So why would Moses remind Israel of the covenant-character of her relationship with God before he begins a 22-chapter explanation of what it means to obey God? Because obedience, at its core, is more than behavioral. It's relational. It's not primarily about keeping a list of rules. It's about relating to God in the right kind of way, fulfilling our relational responsibility toward him. Throughout Scripture, obedience to God is an expression of relationship with God.

Moses highlights three implications of the covenantal character of Israel's relationship with God in verses 3-5. First, it's enduring. Of the millions of people listening to him, only 2 had stood before Mt. Sinai 40 years prior. The rest were 2nd generation Israelites who grew up in the church, so to speak. Yet what does Moses say to them? Verse 3, "Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant (in a not only kind of sense), but with us, who are all of us here alive today." Covenant relationship with God isn't just a thing for your parents. It's an enduring invitation God holds out to you too, my friend.

Second, it's intimately personal. The LORD spoke to Israel at Mt Sinai out of the blazing fire of his holiness, establishing a relationship with her, in a "face to face" kind of way.

The same word appears again in verse 7 when the Lord literally tells Israel to have no other gods “Before his face.” It’s not a distant relationship. It’s a close relationship.

Finally, as a covenant relationship, it’s mediated. In verse 5 Moses says, “I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD, for you were afraid?” They were acutely aware that the God with whom they had to do was a transcendent and holy God who had every right to consume them on account of their sin. As sinful men, we cannot draw near to him live. We may only come in the way he proposes and makes possible.

Friends, God hasn’t stopped establishing covenant relationships that are enduring, personal, and mediated. That is exactly what he offers us today through the gospel. The New Covenant in his blood is immeasurably better than the covenant he established at Sinai because it’s built on better promises! Promises to forgive all your sins. Promises to give you a new heart and a new Spirit with power to obey. Promises built on Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection as the faithful covenant partner who fulfilled all of Israel’s covenant responsibilities as the perfectly obedient Son.

Jesus is the “One mediator between God and man,” infinitely more effective in his ministry of atonement, intercession, and instruction than Moses (1 Timothy 2:5). For he does more than deliver God’s Word. He is God’s Word, the Word Made Flesh, the Son of God incarnate. In Christ, God has literally spoken to us in a “face to face” kind of way, with a clarity God’s people had never known before. By trusting Jesus, following Jesus, looking to him alone to satisfy your soul by making you right with God, you can receive the eternal blessing of covenant relationship with God.

The call to obedience in Scripture, no matter where it appears, never arises in a vacuum. It’s always in the context of relationship with God because obedience is an expression of relationship with God. Obeying God is about a whole lot more than what you do or don’t do. It’s about what you do or don’t says about the way you’re relating to Him. In your case, Christian, it’s about your posture of heart toward the God who purchased you for himself at the cost of his own blood.

3) OBEDIENCE IS ENABLED BY THE REDEEMING GRACE OF GOD (5:6)

Moses is about to launch into the ten words or ten commandments, the essential core of the law God gave Israel. And though we are not under the Mosaic law in a covenantal sense because Christ fulfilled it, it remains no less authoritative for the church today. The

question we must ask with every one of these commandments is this: “How does the person and work of Christ both transform this command and enable us to keep this command?”

That’s not an arbitrary imposition on the text of Deuteronomy. Interpreting God’s commands in light of God’s redeeming work is baked into the very fabric of the passage before us. Look no further than verse 6. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” It’s more than a preface to the 1st commandment. It’s the frame, the historical context, for the whole list!

Notice three things here. First, God establishes his authority as a Lawgiver by telling Israel, “I am the LORD...” What God requires of us in order to experience the joy of life with him is built not on what we think is reasonable but on who he is. All we’re about to study in Deuteronomy is not a history of religions or a cultural model of spirituality we can update with the times at our leisure. It’s a reflection of his unchanging character.

Second, who is the LORD, Israel? He’s not just a God. He’s “your God.” In his great mercy, the self-existent One drew you to himself. He sovereignly acted to make relationship with you a reality. Relationship with Yahweh wasn’t your idea, Israel. God chose you. God set his affection on you. It wasn’t like you were going through a dating app of deities and when you got to the Lord, you swiped right. No. God pursued you. He made a covenant with you. You are his and he is yours.

Third, what has the LORD your God done for you? “I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Having resolved to be her God, what did Yahweh do? He unilaterally acted to give her life. She didn’t meet him halfway. It was something God did for her when she was helpless, powerless, and incapable. The exodus from Egypt was all about God using the strength of his arm to bring her out of slavery in Egypt’s house and into the freedom of life in his house.

Her physical slavery in Egypt is a picture of our own spiritual slavery to sin and death. The slavery from which Christ and Christ alone can deliver you, friend. John 8:34–36, “Jesus answered them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’”

Our sinful nature is like a car that’s completely out of alignment. It won’t stop pulling off the road and driving you into a ditch. That’s what our slavery to sin is like, which is what

makes freedom in Christ from slavery one of the sweetest blessings of the gospel. It's also a blessing we need to think about very carefully because we often get the whole notion wrong.

We tend to think of freedom in a negative sense. It's the absence of external constraints. Freedom is what you have when other people quit telling you what to do or not do so you can finally do you. The biblical vision of freedom is radically different. It's not merely freedom *from* something – be it the power of the world, the flesh, or the devil. It's freedom *for* something, freedom to serve the Lord.

Deuteronomy 5 doesn't end with verse 6 "I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." End of story. Have a great life doing you. No! What immediately follows the glad news of deliverance from slavery in verse 6? The ten commandments in verses 7-21, the call to serve and obey the Lord!

Friend, if you can hold onto this biblical principle, it will change the way you think of God's law. Biblical freedom is not freedom from the need to obey. It's freedom through power to obey. It's not freedom from obedience. It's freedom for obedience. Only when you're running hard down the path of obedience to God's Word are you really and truly free. Why? Because that's when you're living the way you were created to live.

When you think of freedom that way, God's law isn't an obstacle to freedom. It defines freedom. It's not primarily about what we cannot do. It's about what we get to do! We get to live! We get to serve the Lord. As long as Israel was enslaved in Egypt, she wasn't free to serve the Lord. As long as we are enslaved to our sinful flesh, we're not free to serve the Lord either. And that is precisely the freedom Jesus won for us at the cross.

Galatians 5:1, "For freedom Christ has set us free." Free to serve. Free to find out what pleases the Lord. Free to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel. Free to keep God's law, not because we're trying to earn salvation, but because we have already been saved! And because that is the entire reason Christ saved us in the first place, that we might be a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Jesus didn't keep God's law on our behalf so that we wouldn't have to worry about obeying God's commands. He lived, died, and rose from the grave so that we can freely and joyfully run in the path of God's commands! Freedom to obey is the goal of our redemption. It was true under the Old Covenant. And it is immeasurably more true

under the New! The grace God has lavished upon us in Christ Jesus is the only power strong enough to enable us to obey the Lord.

The blessing of salvation, both then and now, is not a reward for obedience. It is what enables our obedience and compels our obedience. Christopher Wright says it well. “The commandments were given to Israel not so they could perhaps gain salvation by keeping them, but because God had already redeemed them and this was how they were to live in light of that fact.”

That’s why I’m excited to linger in this portion of Deuteronomy. We’re going to devote an entire sermon to each of the 10 commandments so we can understand how they have been fulfilled in Christ and how the gospel empowers us to keep them.

4) OBEDIENCE CONSISTS OF ABSOLUTE LOYALTY TO GOD (5:7)

I want to spend the last portion of our time this morning focusing on the 1st commandment. It’s found in verse 7. Because “I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery,” how then must you live? “You shall have no other gods before me (or before my face).”

At a basic level, the 1st commandment means we must flee idolatry. As we’ve seen the last few weeks in Deuteronomy 4, an idol is anything or anyone that we love and serve more than we love and serve the Lord. Our hearts can take nearly anything and make it an idol – health, wealth, pleasure, power, you name it, we’re tempted to worship it.

But here’s where we need to dig a little deeper. Many of the commandments come in the form of a prohibition. Don’t do this or don’t do that. But embedded in the prohibition is an equally critical admonition. Do this instead!

John Calvin says it this way. “In forbidding us to have strange gods, he means that we are not to transfer to another what belongs to him.” In other words, the first commandment means more than avoiding idolatry or setting no false gods before his face, so to speak. It means, in a positive sense, giving the Lord the worship that rightly belongs to him! What does that practically look like? Calvin identifies four helpful categories: adoration, trust, invocation, and thanksgiving.

First, it means adoring or praising God for who he is. It means delighting in his perfection, extolling his excellencies, declaring his worth and value, giving him our

loudest praise and deepest admiration. It means there is nothing I stand in awe of more than him. Second, it means trusting God. What gives you confidence it's going to be a good day or a good week or a good year? Is it your business plan, your new job, or the faithfulness of God? Honoring the first commandment means all our strength for today and hope for tomorrow comes from our confidence in the steadfast love of the Lord.

Third, it means invoking or calling upon God in every hour of need. When you're in trouble, who do you call? Is your first instinct to pray, to cry out to the Lord? Or do you start a group text? Can we say help to God by saying help to people? Sure. But the absence of consistent time in prayer or only praying once you've exhausted all your other "options" reveals we are not giving God the worship he deserves.

Finally, keeping the first commandment means giving thanks to God. Gratitude is a wonderful barometer of the soul. If you look at your life, look at your kids, consider your friends, or consider your church, and cannot think of something in each of those areas for which you can sincerely thank God, you can safely conclude you have stopped giving God the worship he is due. Why do I say that? Because he is at work all around us, brothers and sisters, in all places at all times. But when other gods take hold of our heart, we don't see it. We become blind to what the Living God is actually doing.

Obedying the first commandment consists of absolute loyalty to God. On this side of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, that means all our adoration, all our trust, all our invocation, all our thanksgiving, is directed toward Christ and Christ alone. For he is the one in whom the glory of the Triune God is most fully and clearly revealed. As Hebrews 1:3 says, Jesus is the "Radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature."

On a very practical level, that means religions like Judaism or Islam are not keeping the 1st commandment simply because they are monotheistic. "Having no other gods before me" isn't about confessing a transcendent being. It's about confessing Christ is Lord.

CONCLUSION

Obedience is required by a faithful God. Obedience is an expression of relationship with God. Obedience is enabled by the redeeming grace of God. And obedience consists of absolute loyalty to God. It was true in Israel's day. It's still true in our own, my friends.

Obedying God's law requires absolute loyalty to God's Son through the liberating power of God's grace.

He will not tolerate any rivals before his face. And he graciously warns us to not try and set any up before him. He has shown us the light of his face in Christ. May that glory, Jesus' glory, be the splendor that captures our gaze and thrills our souls. One of the great confessions of our faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, says it this way:

“What does the Lord require in the first commandment? That I, not wanting to endanger my very salvation, avoid and shun all idolatry, magic, superstitious rites, and prayer to saints or to other creatures. That I sincerely acknowledge the only true God, trust Him alone, look to Him for every good thing humbly and patiently, love Him, fear Him, and honor Him with all my heart. In short, that I give up anything rather than go against His will in any way.”