

Deuteronomy 5-7

Holiness

Christ Church Selly Park

Sunday 20 October 2024

Covenant & Kingdom [6]

Treasured possession

I wonder what is your most treasured possession?

I'm not a sentimental sort of person, and I despise clutter – I suspect few of you will be surprised to hear either of those things! So I thought to myself, 'What's the thing I would find most emotionally difficult to throw away?'

And I came up with this *hold up dog chew*. It's a 30-year-old dog chew. ¶ As I was growing up, my parents were puppy walkers for Guide Dogs. I would often play with the puppies, and by and large Labradors love to play tug of war.

When I was packing up to leave home for the first time, I had a pile of clothes, bedding, stationery, kitchen stuff – and Dad walked in with this toy to take with me and remind me of home. It's moved house with me ever since.

It's a silly thing. It's years since my parents' house was my 'home', but this still reminds me of happy afternoons coming home from school and playing with the dogs in the garden.

Your most treasured possession might be something far more profound or valuable – but my point is this: *we* are **God's treasured possession** (7.6):

'For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his **treasured possession**.'

Deuteronomy 7.6 (NIV)

Think on that for a moment. God's people – called The Church – are **holy, chosen**, God's **treasured possession**. It's amazing.

What's more amazing is we are treasured by God not because we are particularly wonderful, or deserving of it – we are treasured not because we are special, but because of the one who treasures us, because *he* loves us.

That means we find God's call to holiness – our theme today – is sandwiched between God's grace, and God's love.

Grace (5.6)

Earlier in the service we hunted for the 10 Commandments. In the Church of England the first commandment is Deuteronomy 5.7: **You shall have no other gods before me.** Quite right, but that's not where God begins. The preface – or if you are a fan of Asimov's *Robot* series, the zeroth law – begins a verse earlier:

'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.'

Deuteronomy 5.6 (NIV)

The law begins not with arbitrary demands from a petulant deity but with a **J** *relationship*: **I am the Lord your God.** As Phil Knox told us a couple of weeks ago, when we see 'the LORD' in capitals like this it is translating YHWH, God's name. This is not just any god speaking, this is Yahweh; and he is '**the Lord your God**'; he is the God in relationship with his people.

Think about it: **J** if a stranger knocks on your front door to give you some advice or tell you to do something, you are – I hope – highly likely to ignore them! But if an old friend, someone you've known most of your life, does the same thing, you are – I hope! – much more likely to listen.

This God speaking, he is not just any god, he is ***your God***.

Second, God has already **brought** his people **out of Egypt**. The law God is about to give comes as a *response* to something he has *already* done – not as a way of earning his favour. This is more fully developed by Paul in the New Testament, but it's right here and goes all the way through the Bible.

In fact it starts even earlier. In the Garden of Eden God gives them everything they need *before* he gives his command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Always in the Bible God comes first; what God does for us always comes before the command. That means living God's way isn't how we earn God's favour, it's how **we continue in something we already have**.

Finally, the third thing this verse tells us is what we need most of all: rescuing. We need saving before anything else. Living God's way is hard – in fact it is not possible without God acting *first* to rescue us from **slavery**.

During the 200 years of the Atlantic slave trade about 50 million people were forcibly enslaved; today alone it is estimated that about 49.6 million people are living in modern slavery.¹

¹ See <https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/>.

But the truth is we all need to be set free from slavery: to sin, to our desires, to the beguiling and seductive world that tempts us away from God with half-truths and things that look good. And we cannot rescue ourselves – but the good news is that in Jesus God rescues us, he sets us free so we can live as he intended.

So **J** the law of Moses begins:

1. With a relationship between God and his people
2. With God acting first
3. With freedom from slavery

Obedience (6.4-9)

Although playing tug of war with Guide Dog puppies is fun, there's a lot more to Puppy Walking than that. After a year, when you hand them back for their proper training, they need to be fully house trained, walk on a harness, comfortable on public transport, in a car, and obey a handful of commands.

One of the standing jokes on the TV show *Clarkson's Farm* is the way Jeremy regularly issues commands to his two dogs – who completely ignore him. That is not the sort of training required by Guide Dogs!

And it is not the attitude required of God's people.

Let's skip ahead to chapter 6. In verse 4 we have one of the best-known passages in the entire Bible, quoted by Jesus **J**:

‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.’

Deuteronomy 6.4-5 (NIV)

Jesus would have prayed those words twice a day for his whole life, as many Jews do still today, based on verse 7. When Jesus called it **‘the first and greatest commandment’** (Matthew 22.38) he was not being in any way controversial.

The prayer is called the ‘Shema’ – we learned a couple of Hebrew words two weeks ago so here’s another. It’s the first word of the prayer: *‘Shema, O Israel – **Hear, O Israel.***’

Except it means more than ‘hear’. This is another verse, from Deuteronomy 28:

‘If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands that I give you today...’

Deuteronomy 28.1 (NIV)

In Hebrew it is something like, **‘If you Shema the Lord your God’** because the word means *both* ‘hear’ *and* ‘obey’.

That's why the following verses in Deuteronomy 6 are about getting these words into our hearts, teaching them to children, talking about them, learning them, reciting them daily, even writing them on **door-frames** and **gates** (6.6-9). These are not simply words to admire and appreciate: they are words to *obey*.

In his letter James famously makes this same point in a rather blunt but at least straightforward way **J**:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves.
Do what it says.

James 1.22 (NIV)

God doesn't speak so we can nod along sagely and then carry on as before as if nothing has changed. God speaks so we can hear *and obey*. These are the living words of God, entirely trustworthy and true, inspired by his Spirit so we might hear *and obey*.

How do you read the Bible? What is the attitude in your heart when you open it and start to read? I'll admit that sometimes in mine there's an awful lot of duty and not much else. It's no excuse it's simply reality – but we need to cultivate a *Shema* way of reading: to hear with a humble heart, *so we might obey*.

Love (7.6-11)

Remember this *hold up dog chew*? It's not much to look at, is it? I suspect most of you would simply throw it away if you found it lying on the floor. But me, if I found it on the floor, I would pick it up and put it back on the mantelpiece.

Maybe your most treasured thing is like that. Often what we treasure isn't the *thing* but the situation or person it reminds us of, whether or not the thing itself is valuable.

I'd be amazed if Dad can remember giving me this dog chew, and I suspect *he'd* be amazed to find out I still have it sitting in my study after all these years! It's pretty gross, but it is also priceless because of the love it points to.

Earlier I read these words from Deuteronomy 7:

'For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.'

Deuteronomy 7.6 (NIV)

Sounds great – but why? Why did God choose *those people*? Why has God chosen *these people* to be part of his family? Were they super awesome and special? Are we?

I'm sorry, but no. Moses carries on in verse 7:

The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand...

Deuteronomy 7.7-8 (NIV)

The Lord **set his affection on you**, Moses said, **because the Lord loved you.** ¶ He loves you, because he loves you. I imagine that's exactly the sort of profound thing you came to hear today (!).

Except it really, truly is, and is the solid ground on which we stand. If God's love for me were based on how I feel, on what I do or don't do, on how I worship him day by day – I'd be in big trouble. If God's love for me were based on whether I could obey hundreds of laws – I'd be in big trouble. If God's love for me were based on *anything* other than himself – I'd be in big trouble.

Then, and now, God chose you, he loves you simply because he loves you. Not because you are special or useful or beautiful or worthy or anything else. God loves you because he loves you.

That is why this third covenant is not called a covenant of Law.

Did you spot that in the reading? This is the introduction to dozens – hundreds – of laws and regulations. The covenant with Moses introduces the 10 Commandments. But it is not called a covenant of law.

Did you spot what it is called in the reading? Verse 9: it is called **his covenant of love**. Why? Because it is based on love – God’s love for his people. God’s love, which *transforms* his people.

There’s an old hymn by Samuel Crossman that starts like this:

My song is love unknown –
my Saviour’s love to me;
**love to the loveless shown,
that they might lovely be.**

Oh, who am I, that for my sake
my Lord should take frail flesh and die?

My song is love unknown (Samuel Crossman, 1664)

I think he had Deuteronomy 7 in mind when he wrote those words. God’s people then and now are far from perfect; Moses spoke these words after the people had wandered in the wilderness for forty years as a punishment for disobedience! And yet he says, **‘you are a people holy to the Lord your God’** (7.6).

It is God's love that does this. He makes us holy, and then helps us to live *as* his holy people – and gave the law to show what that looks like. The *Shema* is **the first and greatest commandment** – the rest of the law is there to help us see what it looks like in practice to love God with all our hearts.

Law

So come on – time for the big question. How on earth do we as Christians understand the law of Moses? What do we do with it? Does all of it still apply? If not, how can we tell which bits do and which bits don't? Presumably 'do not kill' is one we should obey (though many today are arguing even about this one...). But what about cooking a young goat in its mother's milk, or wearing clothes made of two types of material?

Trying to separate out the law into moral laws (how to behave), civil laws (how to run a country) and ceremonial laws (sacrifices, religious holidays) – I think is only slightly helpful. For one, it's not always obvious which category a particular law might fall into!

But more importantly, the New Testament seems to treat it as a unified whole. Noticing the laws are not all the same category is helpful – but not where I think we should start.

That's in 2 Timothy 3.16 **J**:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3.16-17 (NIV)

Ultimately the whole Bible – even the law, even the bits we don't like, even the bits we find hard to read or understand – the whole Bible is inspired by God. The whole thing is entirely trustworthy and true. So in a sense whether or not Christians have to obey the law of Moses misses the point, because however you answer that question, the fact remains: the law is Scripture.

Here's the conclusion from an entire book about this question **J**:

Paul's teaching about the law reminds us that our standing with God is not based on our 'doing', but on what God has done for us in Christ. It also teaches us that to please God we do not live under a code of law but rather under the lordship of Christ. But the law, because it is God's law, remains a key resource for our moral teaching.

Brian Rosner, Paul and the law, 209

This is along the lines of what Jesus meant when he said, **‘I have not come to abolish [the law and the prophets] but to fulfil them’** (Matthew 5.17). Jesus didn’t delete the law from our Bibles – in fact he quoted it as authoritative several times – but he did change the way we read it.

Instead of ‘law’ perhaps it is more helpful to see it as **§ prophecy** and **wisdom; § prophecy** because it points ahead to Jesus, to the gospel, calling God’s people to faithfulness; **§ wisdom** because it offers true insights into the character of God and what it looks like to live a life that is pleasing to him.

However we understand the law, one thing is clear: God calls his people to holiness. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5.7: **God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.**

Why? Because when God’s people reflect his character to the world, it brings him glory and praise. In his first letter Peter writes, drawing heavily on Deuteronomy 7:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

1 Peter 2.9 (NIV)

When the world meets a holy people, it sees a holy God. Asking why so many churches struggle in evangelism, JI Packer lays the blame not on words or technique, but on lifestyle and character:

If we want to be fruitful in evangelism, we must cultivate holiness of life.

JI Packer, Rediscovering Holiness, 35

I love that phrase **cultivate holiness of life**. Friends, holiness is not only for the occasional saint or the keen bean Christian, but for all of us. Paul puts it like this:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Ephesians 4.1 (NIV)

Holiness is what it looks like when God's people do that, when they live out their calling, when they reflect God to the world not the other way round. Holiness means to *Shema*: to hear *and* obey the Lord in Scripture. Holiness is God's gift to us *and* the way we respond to that gift. **Holiness is what faith looks like.**

The encouragement is: we *are* holy because God loves us and he makes us holy. The challenge is: are we cultivating a holy life, are we living a life worthy of so great a gift? And if not – why not?