



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon on the Old Testament Lesson for Quinquagesima Deuteronomy 10:12-11:1

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I want to look this evening at today's Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy. Before we get into the lesson itself, we need to know a little bit about the book of Deuteronomy. This is the last of the five books we call the Pentateuch, sometimes called the five books of Moses, because they were substantially written by Moses. The first is Genesis, followed by Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and finally Deuteronomy. Genesis begins the story and tells us about the patriarchs and God's covenant with them. Exodus tells the story of how, at God's instruction and under his protection, Moses led the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt. Most of the book of Exodus sees the Israelites camped at the base of Mt. Sinai, where Moses received the law and the instructions for building the tabernacle. Leviticus, the third book, is where most of the legal code given to Moses is recorded. When we think of the "law" we usually think of the ten commandments, but there was a lot more to it than that and Leviticus is where most of the law is recorded. Numbers, the fourth book, is where the story picks up again as the people leave Sinai and arrive at the Promised Land. Numbers is also where we read about the people's sin and doubt, how because of their lack of trust in God to help them to conquer Canaan, the people were cursed to wander for forty years in the wilderness. With the exceptions of Joshua and Caleb, who hadn't lost faith, all the Israelites over 20 years old were barred from entering the Promised Land, so the people wandered on the doorstep for forty years until the previous generation had died. At that point, God took them back to the east bank of the Jordan and got them ready to march in and take their inheritance. Moses wasn't allowed to enter either, and so it's in Numbers that Joshua is declared to be his successor. Everything was ready. That's where Deuteronomy picks up.

Literally Deuteronomy means "Second Law". It's basically a sermon—or a series of sermons—by Moses to the new generation of Israelites. Remember, their parents who had come from Egypt are now all dead. The only ones left from that generation are Moses, Joshua, and Caleb. These people now ready to invade Canaan were either children when their families left Egypt—and now they're in the forty to sixty age range—or they were born during their parents' wanderings in the wilderness. If they remember the Exodus, the Red Sea, the giving of the law at Sinai, it's just a faint memory. So Moses assembles the people and gives them this book-long exhortation. He reminds them of the law, he reminds them of the great and mighty deeds of God, and he warns the people not to make the same mistakes their parents had. He teaches them that they have no reason to make the same mistakes. They've seen God's miraculous provision and care for them up until now, so it should only be natural for them to continue to trust him as he takes them into a new phase.

Up to this point in Deuteronomy, Moses has reminded them of all these things. In the previous chapter he had just reminded them about the incident their parents had with the golden calf and of how God had given him the tablets of stone with the law written on them. Now he asks in 10:12-13:

**And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?**

After explaining the covenant to the people and then summing up the last forty years of God's dealings with the people Moses is asking the all-important question: What do you do with all this? What does God require of you? And the answer that distils all this down into just a few words is: That you fear the Lord, that you walk in his ways, that you love him, that you serve him, and that you keep his commandments. But what does all that mean? There are two questions raised in all that are on my list of "Top ten most frequently asked questions": What does it mean to "fear" God? and "Do Christians really have to keep all God's commandments?"

The first of those questions is especially important, and especially so in the context of Moses' question here. What does it mean to "fear" God? I remember a young lady who visited our parish in Portland and thanked me for not preaching "hellfire and brimstone". She said she had come from a church tradition where everyone was taught to live in perpetual fear of God—that at any minute he might turn on them and choose to squash them out of existence for some sin they'd committed. Friends, to fear God is not necessarily the same thing as to be afraid of him. To fear God, in the biblical sense, is to live before him with awe and with respect.

When I used to repair computers, I also repaired monitors. Things are different now that everyone's using LCD's with computers, but back when everything used a cathode-ray picture tube, we techs had to be thoroughly trained in high-voltage safety. There's enough voltage in an old monitor or TV to stop your heart. I saw a fellow tech knocked across the room once because he accidentally touched a cracked transformer. If you work on monitors or TV sets, you learn what you can touch and what you can't. You learn to always have the business end of the thing (the back) facing toward you when making adjustments and you watch the screen through a mirror so that you don't have to blindly reach around to the back where the high voltage is. Now, was I *afraid* of the high voltage in the monitors I worked on? No. I understood how electricity worked and I understood how to work with it. Did I have a healthy *respect* for that high voltage. You bet I did.

That kind of respect is a bit like how we need to understand "fear" in the biblical sense. We have no need to be afraid of God as some sort of arbitrary and capricious deity who might have a bad day next week and suddenly decide to wipe us out for kicks. That's the sort of god that the ancient Greeks worshipped. They were just like us—usually the worst of us—but immortal. One of the reasons God has given us the Scriptures is so that we can know his character, and those Scriptures teach us that he isn't arbitrary or capricious. He's rational, he's loving, he's caring, he's gracious and merciful and they also teach us that he is holy and just. The Scriptures teach us what is pleasing to God and what is not, what he punishes and what he rewards. Our God

is a God who can be and who wants to be known by us. He's not a mysterious deity. He's not a volcano god whose motives are unclear or to whom we sacrifice virgins hoping that they *might* assuage his anger.

On the other hand, though, we have to be careful. What we learn of God in the Scriptures is infallible, but that doesn't mean it's complete. God is knowable, but this side of eternity—and even, I dare say, on the other side of eternity—God is not *fully* knowable. He is infinite; we are finite. We forget that, and when we do and when we stop fearing God, we have a tendency to put him in a box. In the world, every time I approach a certain vending machine, I know that a looney plus the buttons "C" and "4" will always result in the machine dropping me a Coffee Crisp. Sometimes we start thinking this way about God. My tithe on Sunday, plus daily Morning Prayer, plus obedience to this or that set of commands is always going to result in God giving me such and such blessing. We do it when we want certain things in life; we do it when we've sinned and want our guilt assuaged; we do it when we want an answer to a particular prayer; we even do it when we worship and are looking for a certain feeling or subjective assurance that the Holy Spirit is with us.

Brothers and sisters, this is what we see the Jews doing throughout the Old Testament: I offer the required offering, I make the required sacrifices, I follow this set of rules and I can expect God's blessing. Moses knew that men and women are prone to thinking this way and so he says in verse 14:

**Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it.**

He's Lord of the cosmos. He's bigger than anything we can conceive. No matter how well you know God, you can't put him in a box. Whenever we force God into a box, we stop living in fear of him. That's when we *tame* him, so to speak. We make him predictable according to our rules of how we think he should be and act and operate. We become presumptuous. Instead of coming to God presumptuously and instead of trying to please or placate him with the externals of religion and moral observance, Moses says:

**Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.**

What he's saying is that religion—faith—needs to be a matter of the heart. Anyone can circumcise his foreskin and bear the outward sign of the covenant just as anyone can be sprinkled with water at the baptismal font and call himself a Christian. Faith is deeper than that. A religion of external forms is for placating volcano gods and petitioning divine vending machines. A religion of externals is used to approach a god whom we might know *about*, but whom we can never possibly know *personally*. Moses calls us to let the covenant sit more than skin deep. Let your *heart* be circumcised. Let the covenant take over the seat of your passions. External circumcision (or baptism) may put your hands and feet to work for God, but an inner circumcision (or baptism) will commit your heart to God and that makes all the difference. When the heart—the seat of our passions—is behind what we do, we serve God not for our own benefit, but because we love him—we love him because he is our Creator and our Re-Creator.

Moses even tells us that it's useless to approach God with externals. He says in verses 17-22:

**For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.**

Lest we wonder how what it means to circumcise our hearts, here's the answer. He reminds the Jews of his mighty acts on their behalf. He reminds them that they were once sojourners in Egypt. The fact that they were once in such a position, means that they ought to have compassion for others in the same predicament. But they ought to have a love for God in their hearts too—love for him because he is so compassionate and because he is their Saviour:

**You shall fear the LORD your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise. He is your God, who has**

**done for you these great and terrifying things that your eyes have seen. Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.**

If there's no feeling for God in your heart. If your circumcision seems only to be external, remember the things that God has done for you. Worship and devotion are the natural responses to the things we feel for God and the feelings of love and thankfulness we have for God are the natural result of his might and saving deeds for us. As I said when I preached on this subject in the context of worship: When you meet a bear in the woods, you don't manufacture the emotion of fear in order to get your feet running in the opposite direction. Fear is the natural emotional response to the bear and the feet running is the natural physical response to your fear.

A devotion to God rooted in a circumcised heart is the natural spiritual result—the natural consequence—of emotions in the heart—emotions of love and thankfulness—that themselves are the natural result of the salvation God has offered each of us in Christ and of his ongoing care for us. The feelings are something we can manufacture. They simply *are* and if they *aren't* we need to spend some time meditating on the saving acts of God, meditating on the Scriptures and the person of God—on his perfection, his holiness, his righteousness, his love, his mercy, his grace.

If we truly have come to know God and as we have experienced the salvation he offers us, then the final exhortation Moses gives in our lesson can only come naturally. In 11:1 he says:

**You shall therefore love the LORD your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always.**

Let us pray: Lord, you have taught us that whatever we do without love is worth nothing: send your Holy Spirit and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of love, the true bond of peace and all virtues; for without love whoever lives is reckoned dead by you. Grant this for the sake of your only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.