

Laws don’t change hearts. My one-year old son Luke is going through a stage where he is obsessed with the remote control. He loves the remote control! Whenever he catches a glimpse of the remote control he fastens onto it and heads right for it. But of course we can’t let him have the remote control because he pushes random buttons and messes everything up. So we take the remote away from him and say, “No, you can’t have the remote.” Now does that law, that command, change his desire for the remote control? No. He throws a fit. Because he wants the remote control. And laws don’t change hearts. Just because there is a law, doesn’t mean you want to obey it. God understands this better than anyone and so God changes us from the inside.

Our passage says, **“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and the people of Judah.” (Jeremiah 31:31)** Let’s start with the word “covenant.”¹ “Covenant” is a special word. It has the idea of a legal contract. It’s legally binding. So a covenant has the security of something that is legally binding. You can count on it because it’s legally binding. But legal contracts can be kind of cold and heartless and so the word “covenant” also has the idea of an “intimate loving relationship.” The best example of a covenant that we have now is the covenant of marriage. Marriage is legally binding and yet it is also an intimate loving relationship. Throughout the Bible if God wants to establish a relationship with someone, he makes a covenant with them. God made lots of covenants in the Bible. He made a covenant with Noah and with Abraham and with David. When God wants to establish a relationship with someone, he makes a covenant. In verse 32, God talks about the the covenant relationship that God established with Israel on Mount Sinai: **“The new covenant will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.” (Jeremiah 31:32)** When God rescued the people of Israel from Egypt he took them to Mount Sinai and he told Moses to come up Mount Sinai and God gave to Moses the law, the ten commandments, and he wrote those ten commandments on tablets of stone. But what was the problem with the Mosaic covenant? The problem was that even though the commandments were written on stone, they weren’t written in the hearts of the people. The problem with law is that it doesn’t give you any power to obey it and we can see that in the history of Israel. They consistently broke God’s laws. And we dare not say, “Oh, those foolish people of Israel. We have consistently broken God’s laws.”

The book of Deuteronomy is a rehearsing of all of the laws of the Mosaic covenant. And at the end of Deuteronomy God says, “If you keep all these laws, you will get blessings. If you break these laws you will have curses.” Deuteronomy chapter 28 lists all the curses of the covenant. The curses that would fall on the people if they disobeyed the laws. And one main job of the prophets, people like Isaiah and Jeremiah was to enforce the covenant. And so if you read through Jeremiah is kind of bleak because over and over again he says, “You are breaking God’s covenant and so the curses are going to fall on you.”

But then you need to ask, “Why would God give them this covenant in the first place? If God knew that laws don’t change hearts, then why did God give Israel a covenant filled with laws that he knew they wouldn’t keep?” Well first of all the problem is not with God’s law. God’s law is holy and righteous and good. God’s law is what is best for us. The problem is not with God’s law. The problem is with us. The problem is with our sinful rebellious hearts. And God gave us the law so that we would realize that. Romans 3:20 says, “Through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

¹ Parts of this sermon are developed from insights gained by Pastor Tim Keller.

Sometimes sin is sleeping within us so that we don't even know it's there. But then when we hear the law sin wakes up and makes noise and we realize that it is there. The law says, "Don't lust or slander or covet." And sin wakes up and says "Wait I'm not supposed to lust or slander or covet? Wait, I'm cursed if I lust or slander or covet?" When we sin against God's law then that activates the law's curse. The apostle Paul said, "The law brings wrath." "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law." It's the law's job to make us frustrated. It's the law's job to make us say, "I need a Savior."

You see the Old Covenant said, "If you keep these laws you get blessing. If you break these laws you get curses." But then Jesus came and he kept the covenant perfectly. He never once sinned. He should have gotten the covenant blessing. But you see one of the covenant curses in Deuteronomy is **"Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."** Jesus did everything right. He should have gotten the covenant blessing. Why did he get the curse? Because he took our curse so that we would get the blessing. That's the new covenant. Jesus did everything for you. He lived the life we should have lived. He died the death we should have died. Under the old covenant you had to do everything. Under the new covenant you have to do nothing: Jesus has done it all for you. Martin Luther once said, "The law says, 'Do this' and it is never done. Grace says, "Believe in this man," and everything is already done."

Jeremiah said, **"The days are coming" declares the LORD. "When I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah."**

The night before Jesus died he assembled his disciples and had a meal with them and after supper he took the cup and he said, "Take and drink. This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus' disciples knew Jeremiah's prophecy. When they heard Jesus say, "This is the new covenant in my blood" they must have gotten chills. We are seeing what Jeremiah prophesied! And when we take communion in a few minutes we will be tasting the reality of what Jeremiah prophesied.

Jeremiah lists the blessings of the new covenant. We will start at the end, **"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:34)** God forgives our wickedness. Not just our mistakes. Not just our sins. But our outright wickedness God forgives. And then he says, **"I will remember their sins no more."** Think about how hard it is to forget what someone has done to hurt you. But God really does forget. You really do have a clean slate. But it's more than a clean slate. A clean slate I could mess up again. And in the old covenant they had to make sacrifices every time they committed a sin. But in the new covenant there's only one sacrifice. And that one sacrifice covers all the sins you have committed or ever will commit. People are always shocked by that part of the Gospel that Jesus has forgiven all the sins we ever will commit. The gospel is shocking. It's amazing how much assurance the gospel gives us. But the legitimate objection that people have is, "But doesn't that mean that people can just then sin all they want?"

But here's the great thing about the new covenant: It changes us from the inside. **"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." (Jeremiah 31:33)** In the old covenant the law was written on stone, but it didn't change their hearts. In the new covenant God writes his law not on stone, but on our hearts. And he does this by pouring the Holy Spirit into our hearts. The apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians, **"You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. God has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Corinthians 3:3,6)** In the old covenant, the law came at us from the outside and we didn't obey it and when we didn't obey it that enacted the law's curse and the law killed us. But in the new covenant, the Holy Spirit changes us from the inside out so that we want to obey God's law. God's law kills us and then God's powerful Holy Spirit creates a new person. Through the Spirit God is changing us from the inside. Amen.