

Rev. Kenneth J. Rodrigue
St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
1 September 2024

Sermon on Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9

Worship Theme:

FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST OBEY HIS LAW FROM THE HEART

Following Christ is not simply a matter of outward observance of laws. It is a matter of the heart. The Law was given so we could see God's heart and demonstrate how his heart has affected our own. The followership Christ seeks flows from hearts that have been radically transformed by God's law and gospel.

Sermon Theme: "It Comes from the Heart"

Grace, and mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen!

Do you ever have moments in life when you wonder, "Where did THAT come from?" Maybe it's a student in your classroom who is always struggling to grasp the material, and then out of nowhere one day they make the most profound observation you've heard all year, and all you can say is, "Where did THAT come from?!" Or maybe you're in the middle of having a great day with your family and all of a sudden the 2 year old goes from laughing hysterically to having the temper tantrum of their life, and all you can say is, "Whoa! Where did THAT come from?!" There are so many things in our lives that seemingly either come out of nowhere or come from a very unexpected place.

Today we have an opportunity to learn from Deuteronomy ch. 4 as it explains God's Law and his expectations for how we will treat it. We often tend to focus more heavily on the parts of God's Word that make us feel good, right? Places where God talks about Jesus our Savior and where he says how much he loves us and watches over us and protects us and has a place in heaven waiting for us, and those are all incredibly important messages from God's true holy Word that we absolutely need to hear and believe!

But if those are the ONLY parts of God's Word we ever hear and pay attention to, Deuteronomy 4 might be a bit of a shock to our system: "*Now hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them. Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God. Observe them carefully.*"

Whoa. Where did THAT come from?! That doesn't sound quite like the kind and loving God we're used to hearing about; this sounds more like a "dictator-in-the-sky" of sorts! Not only does he make commands and laws, but then he insists incredibly strongly upon them – "*hear them, follow them, keep them, observe them, no adding or subtracting* – never change them, only do them!!" How could a good God be so demanding? And why would a good God have so many rules to follow? Is he even a good God at all – where did all THAT come from?!

But perhaps we misunderstand God and his Law because we misunderstand the purpose of God's Law. God did not give his Law so that we would suffer or as a way of asserting his dominance over us. Admittedly, it could be very easy to see God's Law that way because it's a long list of "dos and don'ts" that we know are impossible for us to perfectly keep and obey. We have far much more experience breaking God's Law than keeping it.

Just look at the 10 commandments for example. We must not have any gods or #1 things in our lives except God himself. We can never use his name in a way he doesn't like. We are supposed to set aside time every week to honor and worship him. We are to honor and listen to anyone in a position above us. We should do everything possible to protect human life, never putting an end to it and not even hating another person! We can never think, do, or say anything sexual outside of marriage. We are not allowed to take anything from anybody else, not even little things. We can't say anything bad about anybody else. And we aren't allowed to even wish for someone else's stuff, never mind actually taking it.

That's what the 10 commandments sound like if we're focused just on the Law aspect of them – a list of "do this, don't do that". It sounds like God is making impossible demands of us – after all, who of us can possibly say we've perfectly kept every single one of those laws?! We know the answer. We know we haven't faithfully "*heard them, followed them, kept them, or obeyed them.*" And we've all certainly blurred the lines here and there to justify some questionable behavior in our lives, either *adding to or subtracting from* these laws and commands of God. But it's so unfair, right?! Where did THAT all come from, God?! It's insane!

Yet the answer to that question is perhaps the most surprising part of God's Law: it doesn't come from a place of malice or selfishness or a desire to make everyone's lives miserable unless they do what God wants; no, **It Comes from the Heart.** God's Law comes from his LOVE for us!

In a world where following what the Bible says has become incredibly unpopular, that's a hard thought to wrap our minds around. But it entirely reframes the purpose of God's Law for us. Does God want us to obey every one of his commands? Yes, of course – otherwise he wouldn't have given them. But he doesn't tell us to obey them so that we rise in status before him or so that we somehow gain or earn good things in this life or the next. No, God gives his Law to protect our lives and to show us what he intended human life on earth to be like.

Let's go back to the 10 Commandments for a moment and look at them through that lens. What does God want our lives to be like? He wants to be the one and only God we have because he is the only real God and he is the only God who will ever love people enough to save them. He wants his name to be used properly because when it is, other people get to learn about this gracious Savior God too. He wants us to set aside time to be with him every week (every day, really!) so that he can strengthen us with his Word. He wants us to properly honor the people he has put into our lives to also watch over, protect, and provide for us. Every human life is unimaginably valuable to God and he wants us to treat human life with that same value and respect. Sex is a gift God has given to be used and enjoyed within the

most intimate human relationship of husband and wife. God not only values our lives, but also the physical earthly blessings he has given to us and he doesn't want people to wrongfully take anything he has given to someone else. Not only is God's name important, but he also protects our names and reputations, placing great value and importance on them. And he wants us to be content with the blessings he gives, not even thinking about or desiring to have the blessings belonging to someone else.

Whoa – where did all THAT come from, God?! That's an entirely different spin on why God gave his laws and commands – not as an unbearable burden to crush us in life, but as a way of keeping us safe and close to him for time and eternity. **That Comes from the Heart** of the God who created us for a perfect holy relationship with him. After the Fall into Sin, we needed God's Law spelled out more clearly for us, and in mercy he did just that. His laws were in place, but instead of withholding them from us, he clearly shows them all in his Word. And instead of demanding perfect obedience from a fallen human race, God himself entered the human story and kept his own laws and commands on our behalf and in our place. Now a perfect record is already accomplished and entered before the Eternal Judge – and that perfect record has your name and mine on it. That was the mission of the long-promised, long-awaited Savior Messiah; and that's the mission Jesus perfectly fulfilled.

This amazing gift from God causes these words from Deuteronomy 4 to make much more sense in the context of God's Law – *What other nation (or "people") is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? ⁸ And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?* These words were originally given to the people of ancient Israel, but they are no less true for us as God's people today: The LORD our God is near us, and he has given such righteous decrees and laws to us, and how blessed we are because of them!

Now when we look again at the rest of Deuteronomy 4, it sounds so much less harsh and unbearable and so much more wonderful and desirable. When we remember everything Jesus accomplished for us and the forgiveness he won for us by his life, death, and resurrection, our lives become full of opportunities to thank God for our new life in Christ. One of the best ways we do that is by following his commands and laws and living the kind of life God designed for humanity to live.

Because we still live in a fallen sinful world, no doubt we have concerns about this new life – what will it mean for the way of life I'm so used to having and so comfortable with, will I end up missing out on chances to do fun things, will I lose close relationships with people who don't agree with this, will it be really hard... But dear people so valued and so loved by the LORD, there is nothing this world can offer us that is greater than what God has already given us in Christ. Israel was promised a special land as their home on earth, a land the LORD their God was leading them to. We've been promised an even greater eternal home in heaven, never because of what we do, but all because of what Jesus did. And the

laws and commands of God are designed to keep us closer to him and farther from sin so that the devil doesn't pull us away from this priceless eternal inheritance.

So we gladly and joyfully obey the laws God shows us in his Word, not because we are forced to do so, but because we can't imagine living our lives any other way than the way God desires for us. That's our new person living the new life God has given to us by faith! And we eagerly pass these words on to other people around us too, people of any and every generation – to our grandparents, parents, people from our own generation, children, grandchildren – so that we all together *do not forget the things our eyes have seen or let them fade from our hearts as long as we live*. Our lives are changed forever by God's work within us – now we want to openly reflect that in everything we do. And where does THAT come from? **It Comes from the Heart** – a heart forever loved and graciously renewed by Jesus. Thank you, LORD, for your priceless gifts to us. Keep us close to you and your Word all the days of our lives, until we see you face to face in unending glory! Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.