

## A Free and Holy People

Deuteronomy 5  
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Brief Intro: In the Old Testament the 10 Commandments are at the center of God's will for his people. But what do these rules mean for Christians today? This message explores the meaning of the 10 commandments and God's power to change our hearts in Jesus.

1. Welcome
2. Introduction
  - A. I want to show you a picture here, and I've got a question for you. **Keep off the Grass sign.** How many people are thinking, "Oh, ok, that's fine, I guess I'll just around the other way." How many people now really want to walk across the grass?
  - B. Different people respond to rules differently, but we've all got 'em. My sister got married about a year before Amy and I did, and after she'd been married a month or two, I was talking to my sister, and I said, "So how's marriage?" She said marriage is when you find out about rules you have that you never knew you had. The first time her husband put something plastic on the bottom rack of the dishwasher, he found out that was against the rules.
  - C. One of the things Christian people struggle with is the role of rules in our relationship with God. Some people are very rules oriented and say, "What are the rules I'm supposed to follow? Let's just make them clear and do it." Other people live like there are no rules at all. Some people are pretty interested in how well other people are obeying the rules.
  - D. As we take the next step in the Big God Story today, we come to a very interesting point. We're talking about probably the most famous set of rules in the world today, the 10 commandments. They're so famous that most people have heard of them or heard some of them no matter what kind of background you come from. But today we remember that they're part of story. They're not just 10 arbitrary rules. They're not even just the best 10 rules ever. They're part of a story and part of relationship. The Bible calls them a covenant between God and Israel. **He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets. Deuteronomy 4:13.** An agreement, they're part of the relationship between God and his people. And this comes right out of last week's story. God saved Israel from slavery in Egypt. He rescued them. He set them free. And now they live according to his rules. "In our relationship, I am the God who saves you. And you are the people who obey me. For our relationship to be good, you need to obey these commandments."
3. Here's the question for today: Is that still true? Is that still the case in our relationship with God? If we are going to be a free and holy people in relationship with God, will the 10 commandments be our rule?

4. A closer look at the 10 commandments
  - A. They are both vertical and horizontal. Did you know that the 10 commandments fall into two basic groups. One about God and one about other people.
    - i. First “table:” No other gods, don’t take my name in vain, honor the sabbath I gave you.
    - ii. Second “table:” Honor your parents, don’t murder, don’t lie, don’t steal, don’t cheat on your spouse, don’t covet others peoples stuff.
    - iii. When Jesus said that God’s greatest commandment was actually two things: Love God and love your neighbor, he was teaching us this same idea. Both the 10 commandments and the teachings of Jesus say that our relationship with God matters and our relationship with other people matters to God.
  - B. They’re meant for our freedom.
    - i. Might seem strange at first, to those of us who don’t particularly like rules, that rules are meant for freedom. But it’s true. God’s laws are part of a story of freedom.
    - ii. Do you know the first line of the 10 commandments: **“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” Deuteronomy 5:6.** Our God is the God who sets people free, and this law is part of Israel’s freedom.
    - iii. We can understand this in our culture. The United States, like many other western countries, is a nation of laws. We have laws to protect and advance our freedom. While some people might think that stop sign is an encroachment on their driving freedom, really we know that it increases our freedom to drive safely.
    - iv. So God’s law is meant to protect us from each other. Instead of a wife who is trapped by her husband’s infidelity, God law prohibits adultery. Instead of people who are trapped by fear of violence and theft or false accusations, God prohibits murder and lying and stealing. He wants His people to live freely and at peace. God’s commandments are part of a story of freedom.
  - C. They’re meant to make us holy, which means different from other people and set apart for God.
    - i. These laws weren’t like how everyone else lived. Other people worshiped all kinds of images of God. Our God said don’t do be like that. Worship me, not a picture of something powerful that you think is me. Other people had no sabbath day to remember their God and to give rest to the people who served them. God said, don’t be like them, remember that you were slaves in Egypt and I set you free, so tend to your relationship with me and give rest to the people who work among you. Other people used sex in promiscuous ways, God said, Don’t be like that. Honor one another with faithfulness and honor the way I’ve created you for each other. Come out of all those lifestyles and be holy...and free.
  - D. These commandments are meant to make us holy, they’re meant for freedom, and they tend to our relationship with God and with one another.
5. God’s law is a good thing, but they’re part of a story, and the story doesn’t end here

- A. This is what Jesus said too. In his most famous teaching, called the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Matthew 5:17** He didn’t come to say that the first part of the story was wrong, that there was something wrong with God’s law, but he came to bring to it a fulness that it didn’t have before. And we can see what he meant by looking at a few examples.
- i. He showed tremendous grace toward sinners. One of the things Jesus was most famous for was welcoming sinners into his community. People who knew Jesus but didn’t follow him were always complaining, “He welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So we know that one part of fulfilling the law meant showing grace to people who broke it.
  - ii. And while he welcomed sinners, he sometimes had conflicts with people who were really good law followers, because Jesus knew that being a free and holy people in relationship with God meant more than outward obedience to rules. Some of the greatest rule followers in the world were the Pharisees that Jesus met. They loved God’s law. They made a career out of interpreting God’s law. But Jesus told them once that they were like whitewashed tombs. You look good on the outside, but you’re dead inside. Fulfilling the law doesn’t just mean following external rules.
  - iii. Jesus taught that real obedience to God began at the heart level, but that’s a very challenging thing to hear. Let me give you an example of what Jesus said about God’s law: **“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. Matthew 5:21-22** ...not one of Jesus’ easiest teachings
    - a. Reveals: God is interested in a deeper obedience. He doesn’t just want outward conformity to a minimum morality. Interested in what’s happening at the heart level.
    - b. Reveals: We’re not always on the right side of God’s law. And so the law also threatens and accuses us. With just the 10 commandments, we might deceive ourselves into thinking we’ve done those things. As part of preparing for this sermon, I read a blog by a well known atheist comedian. He gave himself a grade on the 10 commandments and scored a perfect 10 out of 10. But when you read the sort of thing that Jesus said about obeying God, you see that He raises the vision of a free and holy life to beautiful heights (not just no murder, but no judgmentalism, anger, or vengeance, that’s a beautiful vision; I love that vision), but he also exposes that we can’t do it, not on our own and that we are open to God’s just judgment. So the Bible also says, **I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. Romans 7:10-11**

- B. So God's law may be a good thing, but for sinful people like you and me, it's also a death sentence. And if the Big God Story ended with God's law, that would be the end of my story. Wouldn't it be the end of your story?
- i. But that's not how the story ends. In fact the Bible says that followers of Jesus don't live by the law anymore. It's not that we are lawless and God doesn't care how we live. But rather, God intends for us to live by the Spirit instead of to a list of rules.
  - ii. The Book of Galatians says, **So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Galatians 5:16-18.**
  - iii. It's not that how you live doesn't matter. Of course it does. God would have to stop loving you and stop loving the people around you if he were going to stop caring about how we live. It's just that a list of commandments doesn't have the power to change us.
- C. Let me tell you a story about the difference between rule obedience and heart obedience. It's a story of two different guys, trying two different ways to live lives that honor God. They're both pastors of really big churches in the United States with really big church staffs. I listened to them having a kind of informal interview or conversation together, and one of them asked the other about the rules they had for men and women on their staff. There have been plenty of scandals over the years that have hurt churches and hurt our witness. So the first guy says, At our church we've got a policy that a man and woman just don't ever do anything one one one. They don't travel together, they don't drive together, they don't meet in an office together unless someone else is there. We just care so much about getting this right that we're willing to enforce this. The other guy says, you know, we've had men and women working together in the highest levels of leadership in our church since it began years ago. And we'd just be so handicapped if I could never do a planning meeting with one of our female leaders. And then he told a story. He said I'll never forget this breakfast I had with another pastor in a hotel restaurant. He had been serving his church and giving his life to that work. But he got caught up in something he shouldn't have and he had an affair. And it cost him everything. He lost his ministry; he lost his wife and his relationship with his kids. He lost the respect of his friends. And he was a broken man. And as he told me about it in that restaurant he broke down. And he didn't just cry; he sobbed. Loudly. He was out of control and people were looking around at us. And in my heart I just said, I don't ever want that to happen to me or my church or my family. And I'll do whatever it takes to avoid that. And that's just way more powerful for me than any code of conduct we could write.
- D. I'll never forget that story because I think it illustrates what the Bible teaches us about being free and holy in Christ. It's not that we shouldn't be smart and careful to avoid risky or tempting situations. Of course we should. But rules can't change your heart, and we need is a heart change.

- E. Maybe your picture of Christianity has been a picture of rules. Do this, don't do that. Try harder. But Jesus never said try harder. Jesus said, "Come closer." Come closer to me. Rules can never change your heart; rules can break your heart, but Jesus can change your heart and take you to a place rules never can.
6. I think the Bible leaves us with two different words today. Two different take-home messages.
1. The first one is addressed to us in our guilt. God's call to holiness exposes the brokenness in all of us. But Jesus came for people like you and me. He came for the prostitutes and the tax collectors who had no illusions about their holiness. He stepped into the case of woman about to be stoned to death for adultery, and drove away her accusers. He saved her life and called her to a new life. In just a minute, I'm going to lead us in a prayer of confession and forgiveness, so that we can tell God the truth about ourselves and hear from the God the greater truth of His grace and power to save.
  2. The other take home message is a message of surrender, surrender to the Spirit of Jesus. We've been driving the train in our own lives for too long. Maybe even using the law to justify it. I'm a good person. I don't lie; I don't cheat; I don't steal. But Jesus has so much more in mind for us than that; Jesus has the power to rewrite our stories. If you're ready to give up on minimal obedience and trade it in for radical love, then it's time to lay down your life and say "Jesus, you lead. Draw me close to you. Show me your will. Show me who needs love, who needs care, who needs grace. I've checked off all the boxes I want to check off. I'm ready for love."

PRAY