

The unfolding of your words gives light.

The Perseverance of the Saints

Deuteronomy 4:1-40

Introduction

A genuine struggle today for the disciples of Christ is this: "Does following Jesus mean I have to obey the Old Testament law?" You may think you have this matter figured out, but please consider three different views of law-keeping held by professing Christians in our day.

The first is called "legalism." That is a word that gets thrown around too much and is usually defined improperly. Legalism is our word that describes those who think they can achieve or maintain a relationship with God based on their obedience. Specifically, they think obeying the commands of Torah will earn them a place in heaven.

The second view is called "antinomianism." It means "against the law." Antinomians take the New Testament statements that we are no longer under the law to mean that obedience to commands is not a part of the Christian life. An antinomian might say something like this: "No law but love, no creed but Christ."

Lacking a better name, I will call the third view "biblical." The biblical view of the commands of God is that their keeping is the only legitimate response of being redeemed. Parents do not call children to obey house rules so that they can become part of the family. They call their children to obey house rules because that is what being a part of the family looks like. As children mature their response should increasingly spring from a relationship to the parents who have provided them so much.

Legalists and antinomians misunderstand texts like the one we are studying today. One thinks keeping the commands of God brings salvation and the other thinks we should ignore those commands. Please understand this if you are a legalist: no animal sacrifice or obedience to a command ever brought someone into a relationship with God. Salvation has always been by grace through faith—even from the time of Adam and Eve's fall. Please understand this if you are an antinomian: obedience to the 613 commands of Torah were not a burden to the believers in Israel. This is why the psalmist could sincerely say, "O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day."

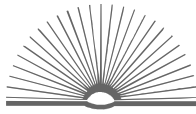
The call to keep the commandments of God is not limited to the Old Testament and was never a means of coming into a relationship with God.

Keeping the law was never a burden to those Old Testament saints who loved God. It was their delight—even the offering of sacrifices. The biblical meaning of being under grace instead of law is not that obedience to the commands of God is no longer important. It is that we need not go about seeking to establish our own righteousness. The burden of the law is on those who think their law-keeping will merit life. The law does not give life and never did.

This brings us to Deuteronomy 4. One of the key words of Deuteronomy is "listen" or "hear" and Chapter 4 begins with that expectation. It says, "Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you." Notice that there is no promise of eternal life here. Keeping the commandments of God was the only safe way to interact with this God in his world and in the land he had given his people.

This chapter offers both positive and negative reasons why the people of God should obey his commands. Before listing them, I emphasize again that God never offers salvation in exchange for obedience.

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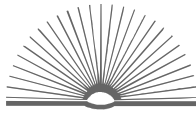
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- The people of God should obey his commands because they remember what happened to those who did not. Moses told the nation that taking possession of the Promised Land was contingent on listening. In verse two the people were warned not to add to or take away from the word of God (See Revelation 22:18-19). The incident at Baal-Peor was when the sons of Israel joined in an ecumenical worship service with the Moabites. The willing Attention Deficit Disorder was the result of a low view of God's commands. They thought they could pick and choose which commandments were important. The men sucked into the pagan worship and judged by God are a perpetual reminder to the people of God of how we should reverence God's word.
- The people of God should obey his commands because the obedient lifestyle influences others. Verses five to eight show that keeping God's laws has an impact on others. Outsiders would look at the lifestyle of Israel and see more than a lifestyle. They would see, according to verse seven, the nearness of God. They would see him responding to their prayers. They would look on the people of God and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."
- The people of God should obey his commands because God is jealous. Twice in this text (verses 12 and 15) Moses reminds the people that God never revealed himself in a form. By nature, sinful humans want to worship things they can see or touch. But this God reveals himself as a spirit. The personal words from Moses in verses 21 through 24 are personal words that call to mind the consequences of his own sin. It is unclear what connection Moses' sin in striking the rock had to do with the present warning against idolatry, but he does conclude the thought saying that "the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God." A jealous God is to be taken seriously.
- The people of God should obey his commands because God is gracious. Verses 25 to 31 are a prophecy of the future apostasy of the people of Israel. He predicts utter destruction for idolaters. He predicts captivity in pagan lands. But he also predicts a return from captivity. He says, "in the latter days you will return to the Lord your God and listen to his voice." Forgiveness and restoration are not based on the obedience of men but on the character of God. People return to God because he does not forget his promises. Where sin abounds, grace super-abounds.
- The people of God should obey his commands because there is no god like him. Moses calls the people to recognize that God's dealings with this nation are unique in all of human history. None but Israel heard God speak from the midst of the fire and survived. None but Israel had been delivered from its enemies by great signs and wonders. None but Israel received such a clear revelation of the living God. None but Israel had the personal attention and discipline of this God. None but Israel was empowered by God to drive out nations that were greater and mightier.

We may differ in the way we apply the commandments of God in these days since the temple system was destroyed and the Gentiles have been gathered in along with the Jews to be the covenant people of God. We are not, however, given the option to ignore God's word. Here are some concrete applications that will demonstrate your commitment to obeying our great God:

1. Do not be ashamed when unbelievers see how different you are. What is wrong with blessing the Lord for your food in a public place? The Lord Jesus and the

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- apostle Paul did. What is shameful about declining an activity everyone loves in order to gather with the people of God? The people of God come from every tribe, tongue and nation, but the commands of God are, of necessity, counter-cultural. Hearts that are submissive to God breed lives that are humble, pure and loving. You cannot help but stand out when you live that way. As 1 Peter 3:15 urges us, "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence."
2. Actively teach your children the word of God. It has always been the plan of God that we live the life he has given us to live as an example to our children and outsiders. That lifestyle, however, was never intended to replace active instruction. It is noteworthy that the instruction of Ephesians 6 to fathers that says "do not provoke your children to wrath" continues with what is apparently the opposite of provoking your children to wrath: "bring them up in the instruction and admonition of the Lord." The people of God are not to allow their children to grow up. We are to bring them up.
 3. Find the delight of repentance. We talk about how difficult it is to confess our sins, to admit that corruption in idolatry of our hearts. But repentance is sweet because it springs from the sweetness of God. It is sweet, not because we have straightened ourselves out, but because God is faithful to his promises. Return to him. Do not simply remember the height from which you've fallen. Remember the delightful one who sits on the heights.

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