

“Rooted in Love”

Fifth Sermon in a Six-Week Series

Deuteronomy 5:1-21 and 6:4-9

New Revised Standard Version

**This manuscript is a guide; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

How do you picture the Ten Commandments? As big clay tablets lifted high in the 1956 hands of Charlton Heston? As a chiseled stone monument controversially placed in the lawn of a southern school or civic building? As ancient words buried in the pages of your Bible?...Or do you feel them as truths inscribed within the depths of your heart?

How we view the Ten Commandments is pretty important. Because they are words that define us as a people of faith...and whether they *confine* us or *refine* us makes all the difference.

In our scripture passage today we have some of the most powerful and hopeful news in all of the Bible...but we'll miss that if we just think of these as rules to be broken and then asked for forgiveness for...or worse, as rules that have no relevance for us today.

The truth is, the Ten Commandments are a ticket to freedom...freedom *from* fear and oppression and freedom *for* love and liberation. To understand this we need to back up a bit in our story.

The green Moses we met last week, who was just receiving his call from God, is now a well-seasoned for his people. In fact, he has led his people out of the land of Egypt through the exodus - a defining moment in Israel's history. It was a moment of liberation from slavery...truly harsh, physical labor, mind controlling and spirit demeaning “your-life-is-not-your-own”-enslavement.

This past August marked 400 years since slavery began in the United States, when the first slave ship docked in Virginia. Our national conversation around reparations is long overdue. How does a country begin to make amends for four centuries of oppression cast

upon the descendants of the millions of Africans who were trafficked and enslaved in the United States?¹

Because you see, the first slave shipped docked 400 years ago, but then it was almost 250 years before slavery was officially outlawed in the U.S. in 1865 via the Emancipation Proclamation. What followed was 100 years of Jim Crow segregation...which means that officially sanctioned racial oppression in our country actually lasted over 300 years. This enculturated systemic racism still exists from the effects of segregated schools and redlined neighborhoods and pay inequity and mass incarceration and more. This cumulative effect has created a significant wealth gap that still exists today. In 2016, a Federal Reserve report determined that the median net worth of a white family was ten times greater than that of a Black family.²

Why is this important to today's text? Because from our own country's history we know that freedom from slavery

doesn't necessarily mean freedom from the forces that continue to enslave.

Look at the Israelites. They've been liberated from slavery. Moses has led them through the Red Sea, out of Egypt and into a new life. But just like we've seen in our own country's history, their lives were not all the sudden "free" because their hearts and living memories were still living under the effects of slavery. They are struggling with their own identity and believing they are the beloved children of God that they and they are dealing with lingering systemic effects of their enslavement.

They've been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. And it's in the midst of this lostness that we come to this passage in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is basically like one really long last sermon from Moses to his people as they stand on the edge of the Promised Land looking in longingly...but not quite there yet...because they are not yet ready to enter.

¹ Astrid Kayembe, "Why, After 400 Years, We're Finally Talking About Reparations For Slavery," *Refinery 29* (31 Aug. 2019), accessed on October 6,

2019 at <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/08/241883/truth-told-reparations-slavery>.

² Kayembe, *ibid*.

This is not the first time the 10 commandments have been given, of course. The first time was in Exodus 20...on Mount Horeb (also called Mount Sinai) immediately following Israel's deliverance from Egypt.

Why are the 10 commandments given again?

Well, we get one big clue right at the beginning of chapter 5. Moses convenes all the people and says, "*Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently.*" This implies they have not yet been learned or observed, right? It doesn't say "renew" or "remember"...it says "learn and observe." *The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today,*" (Deut. 5:1-4).

On the face of it, this statement is actually not true, right? This moment comes 40 years later; Moses' listeners here cannot be the generation with whom God made the covenant at Mount

Sinai/Mount Horeb...as these are their children, the second generation. All of that first generation died in the wilderness, we're told, because of their lack of faith and trust in God. Their inability to be *rooted in love* in such a way that they trusted "God was for them" and not against them...well, it caught up with them. Which, granted, is understandable, no doubt, after you've been enslaved...I imagine it's hard to trust anyone - even God - after such oppression.

The truth is, it's not this listening generation, but it's their ancestors that God made the covenant with at Horeb. But Moses is speaking a deeper truth than a historical truth, right? Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant but *with us who are all alive here today.*

In other words, history is history but we are still God's people and this gift is given again because it's not been properly passed down as it was intended...for whatever reason...in fact, maybe it wasn't passed down because of

the pain inflicted - but today, here *you* are.

This covenant is given to every subsequent generation, not just the first generation who came out of Egypt, but to their children and grandchildren and even to us, right? We who are here today.

It's worth noting that the Hebrew language emphasizes things by repetition, not by piling up adjectives. And so, the phrase, "*but with us, who are all of us alive today*" literally says in Hebrew: *But with us. We. These. Here. Today. All of us. The Living.*"³ (You get the point? It's *all* of us!)

And I think there's a bigger truth about scripture in this verse. Scripture is not about Abraham and Sarah and Ishmael and Isaac OR Jacob and Rachel and Leah OR Moses and Aaron and Miriam - it's about *us*...where *we* find ourselves in this story.

In other words, when we hear about God giving Jacob a new name, we hear God giving us a new name. And when we hear about God freeing the people, we hear about ourselves being freed.⁴

Which brings us to the verse that proclaims the gospel good news - what is commonly referred to as the preface to the first commandment of "*you shall have no other gods before me*" (v7) which is verse 6: "*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery/bondage.*"

This is the good news. Freedom. Freedom from enslavement. Freedom to live.

Now the positive corollary to the commandment "*you shall have no other gods before me*" (Deut. 5:7) is what we read in Deuteronomy 6: "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,*

³ Rolf Jacobson, Craig R. Koester, and Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "NL Podcast 375: Hear O Israel," *I Love to Tell the Story* (29 Sept. 2019), accessed on Oct. 6, 2019 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.as

[px?m=4380&lect_date=10/06/2019&lectionary=rcl&pd=c=6](https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.as?m=4380&lect_date=10/06/2019&lectionary=rcl&pd=c=6).

⁴ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

and with all your might,”
(Deut. 6:4-5).⁵

It's important that Deuteronomy 6 follows Deuteronomy 5 and not the other way around. This does not start with *“Love the Lord your God”* as if the demand *“you better love”* comes right up front. Rather, it starts with this good news gospel: *“I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery/out of bondage.”* It starts with God's gift, with God's action, so that any talk that comes later about what it means to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and might means to love the God who frees you and whose initiative and love has given you life in the first place.⁶

Having been freed from Pharaoh, who thought *he* was the people's Lord, the Lord is now saying to the people *“you don't ever have to serve another human Lord; I alone will be your Lord.”* This is good news, first and last. And that's why in the Jewish ordering of the ten words or

commandments, the first word is simply, *“I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”* Period. End of sentence. We Christians add on the part of having no other gods except the Lord God...but for the Jews, just believing that the Lord God is the one who brought them out of the land of Egypt is the first word that must be taken to heart.⁷ It is the foundation for being rooted in love. Honestly, none of the rest of these commandments or rules matter if this first statement isn't true, right? If this first gift of God's love and liberation had not been given?

So let's pause here for a moment and think about this gift and whether or not you've actually received it and accepted it. Have you accepted the grace from God that frees you from your bondage? We are all bound up in something from time to time. And most of us find ourselves ensnared in some kind of unhealthy habit or circumstance continually.

⁵ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

⁶ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

⁷ Rabbi Ronald H. Isaacs, “The Ten Commandments,” *My Jewish Learning*, accessed on Oct. 6, 2019 at

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-ten-commandments/>.

Are you feeling bound by anything today? Enslaved? Ensnared? Unable to live and move and think and feel and believe freely because of a false narrative or lie that you've been telling yourself or that the world's been telling you?

Bondage can look like a lot of things. It can look like living in fear. Or living in self-doubt. Or living in pessimism. Or living in abuse - verbal, physical, or spiritual. Or living in despair. Or living in hatred. Or living in jealousy. Or living in the constant state of go-go-go, produce-produce-produce, work, work, work. Or living with addiction. Or living with co-dependency. Or living in resentment. Or living in regret. Or living in _____ (you fill in the blank).

If you don't feel totally free today, ask yourself why. Sometimes we struggle to even name what is tying us down or weighing us down...but until we name it and acknowledge it it's really hard to let God free us from it. But freedom and grace and a second or third or fourth chance is what God is waiting to give us...right now and each and every day.

If nothing else, accept this good news that the Lord your God is the One who has led you out of bondage and will continue, again and again, to free you and lead you...no matter how many times it takes or how many years it takes. If the story of Scripture tells us anything, it tells us that God doesn't give up on us. And it tells us that we can't do it alone...we often can't free ourselves from ensnaring and bondage ourselves. We have to ask for help. Even if you don't know any step after the step of asking for help, if you know enough to right now that you need to reach out and ask for help then please, find someone you trust and reach out and ask for help.

After we understand and accept this first gift of freedom: "*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt out of the house of bondage (or slavery)*" - which is an act of liberation...then the question becomes, *well what does this life of freedom look like?* How does this life of freedom take shape? Oh, well, by not getting back into idolatry and making calves out of gold to worship (or by not making gods out of

our stock market accounts that we check more frequently than we open scripture)...that's not freedom...that's another form of bondage; that neglecting the sabbath day by working every single day seven days a week...that's not freedom, that's bondage; that by perpetuating a society where people celebrate lies and false witness...that's not freedom, that's bondage to fear and deception, etc. You see, all of the commandments that follow become this outworking of the question: *what does freedom actually look like?* The freedom that God has given us as a liberated people?⁸

You see, to be rooted in these rules of God's people is to first and foremost understand that we are rooted in the love of God has for us...the God who leads us out of bondage, out of slavery. The God who wants us *all* to be free.

And these laws show us and teach us how to live like free people. Sometimes we have a tendency to look at laws like this as restrictive. As one scholar pastor put it, "*I'm*

afraid that our society has gotten more and more individualistic and permissive and looks at any sort of law like this as restriction on freedom rather than as actually what true freedom looks like." But true freedom is loving God, loving self, and loving others and that's what these laws help us do. God knows we can't do it on our own...we've proven that! We need basic guidelines.

There are many ways to classify and categorize the 10 commandments, and we could spend a year unpacking them. One of my favorite ways to think about them comes from the Jewish philosopher Abraham ben Chiyya, who after placing the first commandment apart ("*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage*") as an umbrella that makes all the other commandments possible, then divides the remaining nine into the categories of *thought, speech, and action*, and according to *relations between humans and God, humans and*

⁸ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid.*

*his family, and humans and human.*⁹

So, he says there are three commandments related to THOUGHT, how we think:

2nd: *You shall have no other gods* (between us and God)

5th: *Honor thy father and mother* (between us and our families)

10th: *You shall not covet or be jealous* (between us and others/the general public)

Next it moves to how we SPEAK...how we use our words...and there are two commandment here:

3rd: *You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain* (between us and God)

9th: *You shall not bear false witness, or lie* (between us and our families and the general public!)

Finally, we turn to ACTION...things that are related to what we do. There

are four commandments in this category:

4th: *Remember the Sabbath Day* (between us and God)

7th: *You shall not commit adultery* (between us and our families)

6th and 8th: *You shall not murder and you shall not steal* (between us and other people)

All of these rules or commandments are meant to help us have healthy boundaries with God, with our family, and with the world...to live more free and freeing lives in thought, speech, and action. Not to restrict us, but to allow us to live into our fullest God-given potential.

And perhaps what is most important then, once we have a grasp of these ourselves (at least in terms of knowing them much less living them) is to teach them to our children. Deuteronomy 6 is very clear about this. Parents know that to show their children love is to create rules and structure for

⁹ Isaacs, ibid. (Modified slightly from his original thinking - reclassified "thou shalt not murder" commandment.)

them where they can grow both roots and wings.

The same is true for us as God's beloved children. How are you binding these words on your heart? Are they written on the doorposts of your home? Are you speaking of them in the morning and at night with your children and also with your partner and friends and coworkers and neighbors? And speaking of them may mean calling each other out when we need to or doing some self-evaluation of our own speech and actions and thoughts or seeking justice for those who need an advocate.

The gospel good news is not meant to be held in secret. It must be passed down - lived out loud and spoken out loud.

And these commandments are meant to help us create an ethical and theological framework with which to evaluate ourselves and the world as Christians and people of faith. Because if we haven't worked out such a framework for ourselves, then how are we ever going to pass it on to our kids?

When you look at all that is going on in the world and work to determine what *you* think and believe about things...ask yourself:

- Is this decision or policy or statement honoring the life of each and every human?
- Is this decision or policy or statement creating avenues for rest and rejuvenation for all people?
- Is this decision or policy or statement made from a spirit of liberation or out of a spirit of malice or jealousy or greed?
- Is this decision or policy or statement based on lies or false witness or based on fact and truth?

Receive the good news that God is the one who leads us, guides us, liberates us, instructs us. No one else. No human oppressor can take that role away from God.

And having received that good news, root yourself in that love and go live it with all of your heart, soul, and might...leave no stone unturned and leave no person without whom you have shared this good news. There's too much at stake for the good

news to sit dormant in this book
(*point to the Bible*) or in our
heads...it must come alive in
all that we believe, think, say,
and do.

Amen.