

A Commandment Greater than the Law

As noted previously Deuteronomy is more than a restatement of the Law of Moses; nevertheless, a significant portion does just that. In Exodus 20:1-17 God set forth the Ten Commandments as the constitutional framework which would govern the nation of Israel. Those statutes are restated in Deuteronomy Chapter 5. In summary those ten laws state that Israel:

1. Shall recognize that there is one, and only one, true God; and shall worship Him alone.
2. Shall not make any images of God.
3. Shall not use the Lord God's name in a vain manner.
4. Shall set aside the seventh day, the Sabbath Day, as a holy day; a day to remember the Lord.
5. Shall honor father and mother.
6. Shall not commit murder.
7. Shall not commit adultery.
8. Shall not steal.
9. Shall not bear false testimony against another.
10. Shall not covet that which is not his own.

All other laws were outgrowths of or expansions upon these ten, and the whole body became known as the Law of Moses or the Old Law. When Israel agreed to abide by them, the Old Covenant was established.

The laws of God were neither despotic nor capricious, as some critics like to charge. They were not arbitrary hoops through which Israel had to jump in order to receive a reward like dogs trained to do so for a bone. They were designed to turn Israel back to what all men had originally been created to be, and from which they had been corrupted, the image of God. Certainly God would reward His people for abiding in His laws. Moses taught them to "fear the Lord your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments... all the days of your life, [that]...your days may be prolonged (Dt. 6:2)." He further implored Israel to "be careful to do them, that it may be well with you, and that you may multiply greatly (6:3 ESV)." Reward was certainly a part of the covenant. But, just as God had a greater purpose in Israel than merely showering blessings upon them, God had a greater purpose in the Law than obedience.

The goal of the law may have been alluded to as Moses reviewed the day the Lord delivered the Law on Mount Sinai in the midst of fire, smoke, lightning, and thunder. The people were frightened and declared of all that Moses heard from the Lord they would "hear and do (5:27)." God seemed skeptical that they would be obedient as He declared, "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever (5:29)!" The thing that Israel needed to remain under God's care they seemed to lack... heart. They lacked the right kind of heart.

While God's objective in the Law could be aided by keeping it, the total is not found in the sum of its parts. The full expression of the Law is found in God's greatest and most profound command, one not delivered in the first proclamation: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You

shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength (6:4-5)." The object of the Law was not obedience, i.e. not a blind obedience that led simply to reward, but an obedience that led to a reformed life. The Law, if fully understood and faithfully practiced, would bring Israel to know, not merely know of, the God who loved them.

While the command to love God is the most profound of all God's statutes and, by Jesus' own declaration, the greatest (Mt. 22:36-37), love ultimately is not something that can be commanded. Love is an attitude of the heart. This attitude would have been aided by the Law if Israel could have seen that it emanated from the character of God. When Moses instructed Israel to fear the Lord and keep His commandments, he used the parallel expression "walk in all His ways (10:12)." To keep the laws of God is to walk with Him, i.e. act like God. Only when Israel would project in their lives the image of God would they find peace and contentment in their hearts. This internal peace would be necessary to abide in an earlier command, "Love your neighbor as yourself (Lev. 19:28)." Unfortunately Israel never moved past keeping statutes for rewards and they never experienced real contentment in their covenant with God. Without a change in their hearts they would develop a history of apostasy and punishment that would extend beyond the appearance of their long awaited Messiah. They would not even recognize Him when He came. The Law was not an end in itself; neither was the keeping of it. The Law was the embodiment of the greatest commandment, "Love the Lord your God (Dt. 6:5)," which was the reciprocal of "God so loved the world (Jn 3:16)." Israel never saw it.