

Deuteronomy 14

What does the LORD your God require of you?

Deuteronomy 10:12-11:32; Micah 6:6-8.

We have now come to the end of Moses postamble after he had reminded them of the Ten Words and stressed its importance. He also summed up the Ten Words in the *shema* which we have seen is the most important exhortation. That is why the *shema* was recited by the Jews and emphasised by Jesus Christ. Paul re-interpreted it in the context of the community struggles in writing to the Corinthians. Going on from there, the failures of the past generation of Israelites were highlighted by Moses so that this present generation would not repeat them.

We also saw how Aaron incited the people to erect the golden calf while Moses was on the mountain receiving the tablets of the covenant from the Lord. When Moses came down from the mountain, he was horrified by what he saw and smashed the twin tablets. The covenant was broken. Following the breaking of the first pair of the tablets of the commandments of God and the giving of the second pair of tablets, Moses was drawing to a close this postamble before going into the details of the practice of the commandments. We saw how the second pair of tablets was hidden in the ark, not to be seen by human eyes. There is now a hidden-ness of the word. We must accept that. Our human intellect will not be able to fathom it. The revelation of the word would then be given through the priests. The ark would be carried by the Levites (priests) and they were charged with the duties of temple worship and the teaching of the word of God. We know now that this practice has been superseded by the coming of Christ, our Great High Priest who mediates the word to us through the Holy Spirit.

In closing this section of the postamble, Moses put to the Israelites this question, 'What does the Lord require of you?' We need to read this as coming from a man who had led the people for the past forty years, having put up with all their fears, anxieties and murmuring, and having been prohibited from entering the Promised Land because of his ineptitude, and a man who had faithfully served the Lord and the people. He did not want to see them fail a second time and was desirous that they would be faithful to the Lord who had delivered them from Egypt and was leading them into the fulfilment of the promise. These were the parting words of love from one who would soon leave them to be with the Lord.

What Moses was expounding here is the importance and the practical application of the *shema* which is the sum of the Ten Words. We see this repeatedly in the section of the post-amble of the Ten Words. What does the Lord your God require of you? That is also the question put to us. The answer is in the *shema* – to love the Lord and as a corollary to that as Jesus pointed out, to love the neighbour.

Firstly in loving the Lord, we may say that there are five responses that Moses mentioned. In fact there is only the one response in loving the Lord. It is the response enshrined in the *shema*.

¹² So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to **fear** the LORD your God, to **walk** in all his ways, to **love** him, to **serve** the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to **keep** the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.

The answer is simply this. 'Only to **fear** the LORD your God, to **walk** in all his ways, to **love** him, to **serve** the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to **keep** the

commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees.’ Notice the order of the five verbs - fear, walk, love, serve and keep. The keeping of the commandments comes last, that is not to say that it is of least importance. The verbs can be summed up as attitudinal and practical. It is the attitude that leads to the practical. The first thing is to fear the Lord. It is not one of uncertainty and trembling but of reverent acknowledgment. Only then can we walk in His ways, and that is the very conforming to the very nature of God. We do not need to say more on loving God as we have been saying that over the past sessions. To love and to serve are one and the same thing. To serve is to worship and that must come as a result of the response of love. When all these coalesce then the keeping of the commandments follows naturally. I remember attending my first lecture in university. The professor told us that attending his lectures was compulsory and passing the examination was automatic. That gave me great confidence. The fear and the love of the Lord precede the keeping of the commandments. Trying to keep the commandments without the love of the Lord would be mere legalism or pharisaical. That is like trying to pass the exam without attending the lectures or reading the texts. This statement from Moses does not mean two requirements, but one. To love the Lord and to keep his commandments are one and the same thing. You cannot have one without the other.

Let me repeat that the *shema* is the sum of the Ten Words and we know that it also includes the love of the neighbour. We will see how Moses continued to highlight this.

For our own well-being

¹² So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, **for your own well-being.** ¹⁴ Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, ¹⁵ yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. (Deut. 10:12-15)

We often think that in following the commandments of God, we are doing it for God. In a sense that is true because ‘the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you’. These commandments are the gift of God to us and they are given to us for our own good. If that is so why is it that we do not see that? The simple answer is our sin which is a veil over our eyes. Why is it that we ignore the gift of the Sabbath? Why is it that we covet and steal? It is our self-will, a will that has departed from God, and we drift into egocentricity. We have not been grateful to the God who created us and redeemed us through His Son on the cross. We do not see the Ten Words as commandments that were given for our own well-being. It is very much like the commands we give to our children. When we command our children in love the commands are given to them for their own good. It is not hard to see that. They disobey to their own detriment. It is the same with the Ten Words.

Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart

¹⁶ **Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart,** and do not be stubborn any longer.

Moses also identified the problem in not following the commandments of the Lord. It is our stubbornness or self-will, our egocentricity. That is the problem of sin and as Moses clearly identified here, the problem of the heart. Is that not the tenth commandment? We know well the first nine, but often ignored the tenth because we cannot control it. We can give a semblance of worshipping God and loving the neighbour, but who can tell what is in the heart, even in our worship and acts of charity? Moses rightly said, ‘circumcise the foreskin of your heart’. A fibrous pericardium (the thickened covering of the heart) has to be incised, speaking medically.

It prevents the heart from beating effectively, and beating in time with the heart of God. We cannot do that ourselves. It is God who circumcises our hearts as Moses said.

⁶ Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. (Deut. 30:6)

Love your neighbour

¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸ who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ¹⁹ You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²⁰ You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear.

When God had worked in our hearts and incised the thickened pericardium, the fibrous covering of the heart, we will also honour our neighbour the stranger, the orphans and of widows. Notice how this love for the strangers was put side by side with the love for God. The first and second commandments that Jesus said are one and the same commandment.

That was the first task of the early church as told to us in Acts. Again we see that the oneness of the community of God's people and the worship of God were one and the same thing (Acts 2:43-47). In fact in the early church because of this conviction of the love of the community, the apostles were spending so much time doing that that they risked the neglect of preaching the word and so the re-organisation of the community with a second tier of leadership (Acts 6:1ff).

The reason for this requirement

²¹ He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. ²² Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

Just as the Lord delivered Israel for slavery in Egypt, in like manner, we need to exercise justice for those in bondage and suffering. This is the starting point for our faith. This is the starting point for all that we are about. Our faith is not about what we can do for God. It is all about what He has done for us. If we do not start there we will get everything wrong. He is our God and He has redeemed us through His Son, Jesus. More than that, He continues to work in our lives to sort us out. We need to know that.

The prophet Micah

Our minds are so full of what we can do for God and this is because of our sense of guilt. Hence in order to remove this guilt we resort to offerings and sacrifices. That was what Israel did in their worship of God. Their guilt remained. Their hearts were not right with God. The foreskin of their hearts was not circumcised by God. They came to their worship with lots of offerings and that did not please God, not at all. That is why Micah wrote this.

"With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and **what does the LORD require of you**
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8)

‘To walk humbly with God’ is to walk in union with Him acknowledging all that He has given and restored in us. It is ultimately a heart matter and that is what Deuteronomy and the rest of scripture are all about.

What does the Lord require of you?

The response to the commandments is of course the keeping of the commandments, yet it is not merely the doing. However, the commandments were given because of the love of God and hence first response to commandments has to be love – to love and serve (worship) the Lord your God with all your heart and soul. The keeping of the commandments follows from the love of God because it is from our union with God that He gives to us the enabling to keep His commandments. Hence, Moses repeated himself when he continued in this section.

¹ You shall love the LORD your God, **therefore**, and keep his charge, his decrees, his ordinances, and his commandments always. (Deut. 11:1)

It is our love for the Lord that leads to the keeping of the commandments, ‘love the Lord, **therefore** ...’. This must be the order of things. One does not start with the keeping of the commandments and hope that it will lead to the love of the Lord. Neither do we try to keep the commandments with our own efforts because we cannot. Hence, we do not start with the keeping of the commandment but with the love for the Lord, and our love for the Lord comes only because of the love God has for us.

Moses was continuing with his exhortation to the Israelites so that they would not make the same mistakes again, mistakes that would be costly like the one at Kadesh-barnea. We have seen how he exhorted them to keep close to the Lord and not move outside of the words of the covenant, i.e. the Ten Words. To continue with his exhortation he resorted to history, reminding them of two things. One was the grace of the Lord to them in delivering them from Egypt and the other was the mistakes of the past. The latter was not so much as to dig at them for their errors, but in doing so highlighted the grace of the Lord. There are always lessons from history and we need to tell those stories, not only of our success but also of our failure. We must not be afraid of those stories of failures because in telling them we are reminded of the grace of God. So we see that in all that Moses was hitting at, it was grace that is pre-eminent. He then gave them a glimpse of the blessing that was to come. From beginning to end it is all about the grace of God, without which we would be simply impotent.

These are the two issues raised by Moses here as to why we should love the Lord.

1. The deliverance from Egypt. This has to be the centre of all the reasoning and exhortation to the Israelites to follow the Lord. It all has to start with what the Lord has done. He goes before us in all things. He precedes us in life (creator) and restores us (love us while we were yet sinners).

² Remember today that it was not your children (who have not known or seen the discipline of the Lord your God), but it is you who must acknowledge his greatness, his mighty hand and his outstretched arm, ³ his signs and his deeds that he did in Egypt to Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and to all his land; ⁴ what he did to the Egyptian army, to their horses and chariots, how he made the water of the Red Sea flow over them as they

pursued you, so that the Lord has destroyed them to this day;⁵ what he did to you in the wilderness, until you came to this place;

2. The punishment of Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab. They led a small number of people against Moses and Aaron. Their rebellion was against the servants of the Lord and the Lord dealt with them harshly.

⁶ and what he did to Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab son of Reuben, how in the midst of all Israel the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, along with their households, their tents, and every living being in their company;⁷ for it is your own eyes that have seen every great deed that the Lord did.

This story of Dathan and company is told in Numbers 16.

¹ Now Korah son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—descendants of Reuben—took ² two hundred fifty Israelite men, leaders of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men, and they confronted Moses. ³ They assembled against Moses and against Aaron, and said to them, “You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?”

This was arrogance and jealousy. Moses was clearly called by the Lord to execute the delivery of the Israelites from Egypt. Now that the task had been achieved, a leadership challenge ensued. One of them, Korah, was a Levite charged with the duties of the priesthood. This was the charge from the Lord to the tribe of Levi. Korah was not content with that. He wanted more say in the leadership. He asked why Moses had exalted himself above the people. Can we hear the voice of egalitarianism? Is it not the current thinking in our land? It was there three and a half thousand years ago. It is the problem of sin and jealousy ever since the beginning.

It is a long chapter and I will not read it through. I will run through the struggle and the punishment that followed. Moses was obviously distressed by this and sought wisdom from the Lord. He called those involved together, but Dathan and Abiram would not go. They were indeed very arrogant. They have exalted themselves above the call of God.

Moses was well aware of his calling by the Lord. He should be after having led the people of Israel out of Egypt and into the desert. Furthermore after forty years of journeying through the desert and having received the tablets of God's covenant, he certainly knew his calling and what he was doing.

The three self appointed leaders refused to repent and accept Moses' authority. The earth opened up and swallowed them up together with all who stood on their side. This could well be a giant sink hole.

This may seem harsh, but we need to see that in relation to the problem. It was the self-interest against the will of the Lord. As I have said previously, egocentricity is incompatible with the gospel. The golden calf had to be destroyed. The self has to be absorbed into the self (being) of God because it had firstly proceeded from Him and must find its fulfilment in union with Him and not otherwise. Self-will cannot co-exist with the will of God. Self-will has to go. We see also in the account that in playing to the self-will, the truth of the matter was distorted to justify the self.

The self will always alter the facts to suit the argument. It is no different here. The land that God was leading the Israelites to is said to be 'flowing with milk and honey'. What it means is that the land will bring prosperity to the Israelites because of the presence of God with them. Egypt was indeed prosperous in those days. And so, Dathan and Abiram referred to Egypt as the land

flowing with milk and honey (v. 13). From a worldly point of view, they were not wrong. They had reasoned from what they knew and what the human hands can do to bring about prosperity. They had come from the prosperity of Egypt and while they were travelling in the desert, they were certainly not in the land flowing with milk and honey. They were comparing the temporary difficult time they were going through with the worldly (Egyptian) prosperity they left behind, and they did not have a vision of the future to come. That is the problem we have today too. We cannot see what the Lord has promised and even if we do, we do not really believe it, just like Dathan and Abiram before. We have equated human achievement with the work of God. Yes, God does work through human channels, but we need to distinguish this from the work of purely human counterfeit, a work of the devil.

The relation of obedience and blessing.

Moses also introduced the reality of blessing and punishment here. He would deal with that in greater detail towards the end of the book. It is in this context that we see punishment and blessing as parts of the covenant of God. It must. In commenting on this passage in relation to blessing and obedience, E J Woods wrote, 'Both (*blessing and obedience*) are always held in tension throughout Deuteronomy as opposite sides of the same coin' (p. 177). What that means is the on the one hand we have obedience and on the other side is the blessing.

So in order to set the records straight, Moses referred once again to Egypt and contrasted that to the unconditional blessing of God. Indeed Egypt was prosperous, but that prosperity was totally the effort of human engineering. They had plentiful water from the Nile delta and that was harnessed that by massive human effort – slavery.

⁸ Keep, then, this entire commandment that I am commanding you today, so that you may have strength to go in and occupy the land that you are crossing over to occupy, ⁹ and so that you may live long in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give them and to their descendants, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a vegetable garden. ¹¹ But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky, ¹² a land that the LORD your God looks after. The eyes of the LORD your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. (Deut. 11:8-12)

In response to the accusations from Dathan and Abiram, Moses argued that the prosperity of Egypt was produced by an extensive artificial irrigation powered by slave labour. He contrasted that with the rain from heaven. The comparison was between the result from man-made effort and the ease of receiving the gift from the Lord. In Egypt they had to irrigate the land by pumping water which they did by foot power. When they got to the Promised Land it would be a land flowing with milk and honey with rain from the heavens. Egypt was not.

The prosperity from human effort must not be equated with the blessing from the Lord. We tend to do that today. Success will bring in the money and money can also buy success. It is all in the human equation. The rich and the powerful can make things happen, but it may all be in the human plane and have nothing to do with the Lord. Egypt was successful and powerful. This was the result of slave labour, but that is not quite the land flowing with milk and honey. We need the rain from heaven sent by God, and not the artificial irrigation from human effort.

Our engineers may build bridges for us, but the only bridge to God is through the man Jesus Christ. Our engineers may build houses for us, but the only dwelling place with God is through the man Jesus Christ. Our engineers or programmers may set up a GPS for us, but the only GPS to God is through the Ten Words.

Moses was exhorting the Israelites to keep to the way of the Lord. Here, Moses was referring very clearly to the *shema*. We saw how he hinted at the *shema*, but here he made an obvious reference to it.

¹³ If you will only heed his every commandment that I am commanding you today - loving the LORD your God, and serving him with all your heart and with all your soul - ¹⁴ then he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil; ¹⁵ and he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you will eat your fill. ¹⁶ Take care, or you will be seduced into turning away, serving other gods and worshiping them, ¹⁷ for then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and he will shut up the heavens, so that there will be no rain and the land will yield no fruit; then you will perish quickly off the good land that the LORD is giving you.

¹⁸ You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. ¹⁹ Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ²⁰ Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, ²¹ so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth. (Deut. 11:13-21)

Moses was repeating here much of what he said in chapter six with reference to the importance of the word of God. Here, before he finished this address to the Israelites, he repeated it again. Hence its importance. They were not to forget the word of God and they need to make every effort to bring that to the fore of their memory. Why? As we have said before, the word and the Sabbath go together. The Sabbath is God's gift to us and during the Sabbath, we come before God and His word, the word of life that keeps and sustains us in Him. Move away from the Sabbath and the word, and we will slowly drift away from God into the waiting arms of the evil one. It does not take long. It took Aaron less than a few weeks to erect the golden calf.

In this passage, Moses linked obedience to future blessing. It would seem from a superficial reading that the blessing of God is conditional on human obedience. We need to refute that notion right away. However, that is not to say that there is no need for obedience to the word of God and that obedience is not linked to the blessing of God. What I am saying is that our obedience does not bring about the blessing of God. It is not the trigger for God to bless us. If that is so then it would make humanity the controller of God's blessing and God would no longer be sovereign. As I have said before we are participants in the blessing of God. We need to see the blessing of God as flowing from His creational blessing. We had talked about that before including the use of the word 'if', and I will not go through it again here.

So we may see blessing in two modes as suggested by McConville, an American theologian. One, the blessing that is creational and not dependent on human responses, and two, continued blessing when humanity live in obedience to God and is following the way of the Lord. We need to distinguish between these two modes and not confuse them. Let me repeat again. Our obedience is not the trigger for the flow of God's blessing as Jesus said 'God will send His rain on the just and the unjust'. It is His grace to His creation. It does not activate the grace of God.

Now we come to what we may call the second mode of blessing, the relational blessing or the continual blessing of God when we live in Him. God made a covenant with Abraham and his posterity. This is unilateral, initiated and sustained by God. Furthermore, God will ensure its fulfilment. That does not mean that we will then sit back, relax and enjoy the service. That is non-relational. The covenant is relational and in all relationships, there need to be responses. It is not like the song from *Le Miserables*, 'I love him, I love him, but only on my own'. That is a sad song. The covenant is given by God and the covenant includes a response. What we are examining here is the nature of that response.

The book of Deuteronomy contains references to blessings and curses. We need to start to deal with these issues at this stage. This is a difficult issue in Christianity. We can hold on to grace and ignore these issues of blessings and curses. On the other hand, we can give heed to the issues of blessings and curses, and very often, degenerate into legalism. Both are unsatisfactory and we need to wrestle with this and be able to hold together the grace of God and the blessings and curses that are part of the covenant. Making a distinction between the conditional 'if' and the relational 'if' is a good start.

The covenant is relational and by this we mean a relationship between persons, the persons of the Godhead and humanity and the inter-relationship within humanity. That is the *shema* which we have considered in some detail. Relationships entail responses which need not be equal. Consider the relationship between parents and children. That is an unequal relationship. Parents give and the children receive. It is all giving on the parents' side and all receiving on the children's side, at least until they have grown up and become independent. I am speaking materially here. The response from the children is that of acknowledgement and obedience, which the response of love is. Yet that obedience is not the trigger for love from the parents. We all know that. How is it that when we come to the things of God, we have a different framework? Could it be that we have imported that from other religions?

The proper response to love deepens the relationship of love. The response or retaliation to evil accentuates the evil and gives it its victory. Here lies the contrast and the life we need to live. The proper response to love is the acknowledgement of the giver of love and the covenant He initiated for us. The covenant contains within it the grace of forgiveness and the path outlined for us to walk on. The covenant also provides the grace of forgiveness for deviation from this path and subsequent restoration, not that we do it purposefully. That is not to say that there will be no consequences. We know that David received forgiveness from the Lord for his sins, but there were great turmoil in his family. His son, Absalom tried to kill David to get the throne. There was also incest within his family. We need to face up to those consequences of our sins. They are the curses. We need to face up to the judgement from the Lord. They are the judgement of mercy and proceed from His grace. We need to see that. Otherwise, the grace of God will be understood as do what I like and that is called licentiousness. That cannot be the case.

So while we speak of the grace of God and second chances, we have also spoken of the judgment. We have seen the judgment of the golden calf, the judgment of Dathan and Abiram, the judgment of the lack of faith at Kadesh-barnea, and of course, Moses himself was judged for his ineptitude at Meribah. Just as forgiveness is part and parcel of the covenant, so are the blessing and judgement. We love the blessings of God and they flow from His grace, but the judgments of God flow equally from His grace. They are the judgements that bring about restoration. We may think that God was harsh with Moses, but in His grace, Moses was shown the Promised Land even though he could not enter into it.

I want to bring to you a quotation from the Tyndale Commentary. 'And so the total blessings of the land were not a reward for faith, but were enjoyed and appropriated by a life of faith and obedience in the light of the Lord's covenant of love made with the forefathers' (Tyndale Commentary, 179), a reference to Deut. 7:12-13.

That was in the light of the covenant of love made before and so here the reference is to future blessing of the life of faith. We see the continuous flow of God's love and grace to us from

creation to the end of time. And so the warning to take care not to be seduced by dazzling lights and the things that are not of God.

The image I like best here is the book of Moses lying right beside the ark of God. It speaks volumes to us. This is the image I want to leave with you as I conclude this section of the study on Deuteronomy. The book of Moses contained records of the failures of Israel. This record would stand as a 'witness against them'. Yet it is not a record to torment Israel. As a record of their failure, it was there to highlight the grace of God to them. Israel would always fail the creator and so programmed into the covenant of love is the grace of forgiveness if only Israel (and us) will turn towards God to receive it.

The Ten Words of the covenant relationship will remain hidden within the ark and carried by the priest. Today, we have our Great High Priest who carries within Himself the very words of this covenant and He sits side by side with us, with every failure and sin that resides in us. It is the great great grace of God to a weak and fragile humanity who only needs the slightest trigger to turn away from Him. It is the power of His word that keeps us to His side. Let us not forget that it is not our human effort or our righteousness that brought us this blessing of God. It is His sheer grace and we are asked to be obedient to Him in order to continue to remain in the flow of His blessing to us. Let me say again that our obedience is not the trigger for His blessing. His law is His grace to us to remain in the flow of His blessing.