

Good morning. My name is Joshua Simmers and I am pleased to tell you that I am very familiar with McCabe, having grown up here from the age of 9 through my marriage. It is good to be home, and to be with you again. Pastor Rick asked me to preach today and I hope that we can take a little journey together.

And now, Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing in your sight, or Lord my rock, and my redeemer.

I wanted to spend some time with you reflecting on the law in the Old Testament, and see if it can recreate a framework for us to understand the Bible in its entirety, our lives, and actions. For me, life and theology are a lot about the questions we ask, and perhaps this can also affect – or omit, some of the questions we torture ourselves with. So our plan for today is this: look at the text, see how it affects our understanding, and then struggle all week long – well, all life long, to apply it.

I enjoy academia, so follow me through a little background so we can properly apply today's scripture together. It is placed in the middle of the narrative of God's people following and breaking away from God. Genesis – God loves and therefore creates us in God's image – and this is a very important point we'll come back to – we're created in God's image. So again, the big picture: God creates out of love, God's people love ...then break away. God loves and therefore calls people back and God's people love...then break away. Is anyone else seeing a pattern here? Adam and Eve came along, God continually acts through love in every action to bring his people close to Him after they sin, whine, forget him, etc.

Then in Exodus, after God's people grow from a family to a nation in slavery, God brings his people out of Egypt. Suddenly, there are a number of people in need of a little more concrete guidance, so God gives the law of Moses – pages and pages of commands, the beautiful book of Leviticus which most of us avoid. It has become a book I love very much, because I re-read the book in light of today's scriptures. The book looks like laws and consequences, more laws, and more rules; but in fact it is what the Israelites needed at the time to learn how to live in community, loving one another. Take a minute to look at Levi, 19:23, sprinkled in among all the rules of how to harvest, who to marry, when not to make love, how to sacrifice, is "love your neighbor as yourself, for I am the Lord."

Well, then we have the book of Numbers – and the saga has continued: God redeems in love, God's people break away. Finally, since they weren't "getting it", all Abraham's descendants who lived in Egypt died in the wilderness so Israel didn't get to the Promised Land until the generation who lived in Egypt died out. They just couldn't shake religious practice that was self-serving and seeking other gods.

Finally, we get to Deuteronomy and the 10 commandments – twice, if you recall. Maybe, just maybe, they could get by on 10 simple rules... This is one of the climaxes of the Old Testament – the big 10, the covenant!

And we see the people continue this trend – redeemed in God's same creative love and then breaking away.

Those who have heard me preach before know I cannot seem to do a sermon without interaction – and I have a little exercise for us as a congregation. We've been talking about the Law, and we've mentioned

the 10 commandments. We, as a congregation are going to see if we can name them – well, no, you’re going to do it, I got to write them down. Of course, it was just to make sure you don’t name them twice:

1 – though shall have no other Gods before me

2 – you shall not make idols

3 – you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God

4 - honor the Sabbath

5 – honor your parents

6 - though shalt not kill

7 - though shalt not commit adultery

8 – though shalt not steal

9 – lie

10 - covet

Okay, so we got X out of 10. We have what some call the “5 Books of Moses” with a series of laws and requirements, and we struggled to get the top 10 – the big ones, the summary.

Well, it is in this exact context that our scriptures come into play today. The Israelites were struggling with the numerous laws, the 10 commandments, and the big picture – not unlike us today. Chapter 5 of Deuteronomy lists the commandments we just attempted, and Louise is going to start in chapter 6. You can take a look at the rest of the chapters later if you would like.

Now, I want to thank Louise for coming up to read our first focal text for today:

Deuteronomy 6:1-5

These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, ² so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life.³ Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

And then Joshua asked me to say that there are chapters about impressing the commands on generations to come, the love of the Lord, more rules, and discourses on blessings and curses, and the story of how God had to give the commands a second time. But instead of reading all that I am going to skip to chapter 10, right after Jacob's descendants get the 10 commandments a second time. Deuteronomy 10:12-13 reads:

¹² And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

So after all this, after the numerous laws, after summarizing them into the 10 commandments, God says, “What do I want from you? What am I getting at? How simple is it? Fear and love me, listen to me, with all your being.”

And yet, we still don’t know what to do with that.

Many think that the Law was there merely to show us that we are in need of a savior, allow us to prove to ourselves that we could not do it on our own, and a reason to rely on and accept Jesus. I don’t think this perspective is fair to the Law or the intent behind it.

There are a number of places in Deuteronomy where the Law is referred to, and as summary reads: **to love the LORD your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul.**

To me, this leads us to a place of accepting the books of law through a new lens: it is a book about love. We cannot live our Christian life in isolation – the whole book is about how to live life in community. In a broad understanding, it’s not about the minute rules, it’s about how to love our neighbor.

As God is telling the people not to intermarry, for example, God simultaneously tells them to love the foreigner, love the stranger – as Israel was also once a stranger in a strange land.

Skip: (I want to take a moment, briefly, to ask the question, “What is worship?” Is worship what David did, dancing before the Lord? Is worship the songs we sing? Is worship killing a lamb to use in the temple? I think it is much more subjective than all of this – it really boils down to our loving each other.)

And the radical call of Jesus really is this simple – but that doesn’t make it easy. Do I have to love my crabby coworker, my finicky in-law, the new neighbor. I am in the military, what is it to love my enemy? Do you love your boss, the person in the next pew, your waiter? Moreover, what is it to love these people? How do we love?

Pause

Loving the Lord is very abstract – it is very hard to define or see. But loving each other is much more concrete.

Pause

Take a minute to see how this adds light or understanding the rest of the Bible. Cain and Able – it was about loving each other. The prophets – were they calling out secrets and warning of retribution, or were they saying simply, “you’re not loving each other – you’re not acting justly, you’re not loving mercy, you’re not walking humbly with your god.” What was John the Baptist talking about? – the Israelites were not loving each other. What did Paul write BOOKS about? – about loving each other, about being in congregations where we share selflessly, where fruits of the spirit are merely what enables us to love each other – and therein, loving God.

Our final scripture is a familiar excerpt from the New Testament – centuries upon centuries after where we left off in the Book of Deuteronomy. In this part of Jesus’ life, he was getting many insincere and legalistic questions – and he was constantly giving responses that said, “You’re missing the point.” And this is what is so telling about us, and what is so telling about Jesus. The Jews knew what Jesus came to say – it was there through every book, every Psalm, and every prophet. Jesus didn’t really bring a new message; God hadn’t changed.

Deuteronomy talks about loving the stranger in your land, those who are different, and sums it all up with simply “love God by loving others”. And this is my hope for us today – that by viewing the scriptures through this lens, and by viewing our lives through this lens, maybe we’ll be a little more in tune with the point.

Let me be bold, let me be clear, I am not only suggesting that the two greatest commandments are one in the same, but the *only* way we can love God, our true worship, is by loving each other. It is no coincidence in Genesis that we are created in God’s image – which is in itself a wonderful mystery. Let’s not be like the Pharisees and Sadducees spending our time asking if we physically look like God or how our make-up reflects God’s. It’s not about you. Let me repeat that: it’s not about you. If the person next to you is created in the image of God – and they are – it’s about them. We love our neighbor. That’s it – I would propose to you that we cannot love God without loving that which is created in God’s image.

Louise, thank you for being so flexible with today's scriptures.

³⁴ Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

³⁷ Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'^[] ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."