

Basics of the Faith: Ten Words: The Law of God (5)
Nehemiah 8:1-12
July 26, 2020

For the past four weeks I have tried to show what these ten words from Moses' tables mean for us today. We have explored the demands that we worship God and avoid idolatry. Love God and don't make idols and don't bow down to them, was the command. We looked at the meaning of "not taking God's name in vain". We decided that this was not merely cursing. It means much more! It addresses the claim we make to be Christians and have no foundation or reality in our lives to back up the claim. God is asking us not to dishonour God's name in the world by false claims of allegiance. We saw that Sabbath keeping cannot be restricted to pious claims of respectability, as was so popular in the Scotland I grew up in. Keeping Sabbath is really meant by the Lord for our well-being. In the face of so much busyness on Sunday, keeping up the frantic pace of life society burdens us with, we can lose our souls. Rather Sabbath rest, God's rhythm of worship and rest from work: this is designed for our good, not as a straightjacket to imprison us. Finally, we looked at the second table of the law, the last six commandments, that prohibit dishonoring parents, murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and covetousness. We saw that all of these prohibitions were intended to protect the newly formed nation of Israel from collapsing into chaos. And they form the same function for our modern society.

In sum, we can say that these ten words were meant as a means of healing and preservation of us as individuals and as societies. And quite often, perhaps because of our philosophy of individualism, we want to read and meditate on these words as God's personal word to us. And of course, that is a legitimate need and pastoral purpose. But in a true sense, as we see from our reading today, the bible, including these commandments, were meant to be read in public.

In Ezra/Nehemiah we jump forward several centuries to a time in Israel's life that is very challenging. For seventy years they had been in exile following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC by the Babylonian army. Fifty years later Persia conquered Babylon and the Persian King Cyrus allows the first of three waves of exiles to return home. Each has been charged with the task of rebuilding the city. Over the books of Ezra/ Nehemiah we learn of the work of restoration under three different leaders

spanning a century. Under Ezra spiritual and social renewal is at the forefront, as well as the rebuilding of the temple. Nehemiah's task is to rebuild the walls. Each of the leaders, including Ezra and Nehemiah, face great opposition from the grandchildren of the families who had remained in Israel. Each of the leaders of the restoration, including Ezra/Nehemiah, only exacerbate opposition to the project by their hard-line attitudes toward the native peoples. It seems that they were viewed as unworthy of inclusion. And while the city is restored over those years the project seems to be doomed by the rejection of the Torah as a rule for their lives. But at least Ezra/Nehemiah tried to, not only rebuild the city, but to renew the spiritual and social life of the people under Torah. And that brings us to the final gathering and celebration under Nehemiah.

The people gather in the city square to listen to the Law of God and seem to receive these words as weighty words from God. We probably don't think of God's law as a means of healing. Rather we view these laws often as the rules by which we ought to live by, cold, heavy and weighty laws that stand over our heads. When I'm driving along and suddenly see an officer of the law on my tail, I feel the weight of law on my head. What have I done, is what jumps into my head! I might look down and make sure my seat belt is done up, or my phone is safely out of reach. Then again if I find myself surrounded by three masked men in an underground garage, I would wish that officers of the law could suddenly appear. If I'm doing something that violates the law of the land, the law can seem unreasonable, cold, harsh and punitive. But in the second case where I long for law enforcement, law becomes my friend and my salvation.

In what sense is law used in the bible? Here in Nehemiah Ezra the scribe reads the law to the gathering in the city square from early morning till noon. We don't know which passages from the books of Moses he read that day, but we know it wasn't restricted to the Ten Words. All the covenant promises and warning contained in the law, were addressed to their ancestors, and shaped by Exodus. Now centuries later these promises and laws are addressed to these returning exiles. For these families the law was a lost world, a world that had virtually disappeared a hundred years before. Their parents and grandparents had lived in Babylonian/Persian exile and all that bound them together was gone: the land, temple, and priesthood. But here they are listening to the Hebrew Bible being read to them and translated into their native language of Aramaic. The references to the Levites helping the people understand he

sense of the words probably refers both to the translation into their spoken language and to the meaning the ancient texts.

Today, we too need to understand that story, for it really is part of the bigger story that we are by faith plugged into. It is a story which contains healing words as well as warnings and regulations on how we ought to live as God's people.

Picture the scene! Ezra stands high up on the pulpit built by the people and invites the people to hear God's word. These are people who have lost the connection with this word from God and are now eager to listen to it. Their lives have been difficult, some having travelled from Persia to the homeland. Ezra opens the book and the people stand; he blesses God in prayer and the people respond: *Amen, Amen!* They lift up their hands in praise. They bow their heads to the ground and worship. This has all the atmosphere and drama of a re-covenanting ceremony. Here these people, who for the first time in their lives are standing before the Ten Words, are hearing its powerful message that has the ability to shape their existence. Notice that it is in community they hear the law. These are words for the community, not merely for private reading. The reading reminds them of their history and the stories of God's great acts through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Moses, Miriam, Joshua, all linked by God's call, by the law, by God's acts of salvation and grace. The law, therefore, in no mere catalogue of prohibitions, but a rich tapestry of stories of a people redeemed by a loving God who cares for them. These words embody the religious memory of a people called by God and shaped by God's law into a living community of faith. These words are alive for them.

But these words also tell the sad story of disobedience and the collapse of a dream. For the law of the covenant contains consequences for those who don't live by its laws. These folks listening to Ezra know too well the power of that law to fall on them in judgement. They have memories filled with the desolation which came to their ancestors after years of religious compromise. And it's possible that some of the warnings in Deuteronomy were read that day which spell out the consequences of failing to keep the law. These words of the Torah were blessing and curse, says Deuteronomy, blessing if they obey the commandments set before them, curse if they don't. As we have seen these laws were given for the well-being of the community, in their social, religious and political life. They were

not given to cause life to be shrunk, but to expand it. They were not given to restrict joy, but to enrich their lives.

Today we often think of the bible as a book for private reading. We need this reminder from Nehemiah that it is also a book for community listening, teaching and interpretation. It is the word that brought the church into being; it is the word that shapes its life and empowers it to go back out into the world in witness. Strangely, some think of the church as a hindrance to their spiritual growth. The church is either too judgmental and legalistic for our spiritual life, or it is simply irrelevant to modern life.

It reminds me of a story I read once about a monk who decided he was making no spiritual progress in the monastery. He told the other monks that they were holding him back, always doing things that angered him and thus interfered with his prayers. But when he left and settled in his own cave, and looking forward to perfect peace, he became frustrated over some small issue and hurled a bottle at the wall, breaking it in pieces. Now he saw that his anger was within him and would be there no matter where he lived. So he went back to the monastery and apologized to the brothers and began again. As Basil the Great wrote to his friend, *I have abandoned my life in the town as the occasion of endless troubles, but I have not managed to get rid of myself.*

The effect of this reading of the law on the people is quite amazing. They are reduced to tears. Ezra has to remind them that this is a holy day of re-covenanting and they ought not to weep, but to be filled with joy. Perhaps they wept over their failures. Or perhaps the reminders of what a difference faithful observance would have meant, moved them to tears.

Notice what the gathered community are asked to do. They are to go from the reading and prayers to eat and drink the wine and share it with those who have none. They are to have a feast of rejoicing. God is with them in their efforts to start over; so enjoy a party. They did so because the Law reading had reminded them of the covenant promise; it reminded them of who they were; it reminded them that law is not a stick to beat them into submission, but a gracious word from God. The law is a gracious, loving word from their God. They were the sheep of God's pasture; God was with them. The law was a word of life for them, as well as for us, full of weight and power.

Amen

