



I Love God's Law

Deuteronomy 10-11

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Thank you. You all have been so kind to us this morning. I'm especially excited to be here with you for the second service. I know it's your first service for the day, but it's our second. I've never done this before. My wife can testify—every Sunday night I always say, “Man, I wish I had another chance. I know I could do better if I could just have another chance at the sermon.” And I get it—right now! So this is going to be much better than the first service. (Don't tell them.)

Before we get into God's Word I want to say something you already know. I just want to remind you of how very blessed you are to have a pastor like David Sunday serving you week in and week out. He is a role model to me, and I want to be a pastor like David. He is humble and loves God with all of his heart, and loves and serves God's people out of that love. I want to be like that, and I'm thankful to God for David.

I am going to preach today on God's law. I don't know what happens to your heart when you hear that the guest preacher is bringing a sermon on God's law. We've probably all had the experience—not here, but surely at other churches—where you hear a sermon and it seems that the only thing accomplished is that another stone gets dropped into your backpack. You feel heavier going out than when you came in. Maybe if you know you're about to hear a sermon on law, you're bracing yourself for a boulder to be dropped in your backpack. I hope it doesn't feel that way. I want to talk about God's law in a way that helps us all feel lighter through the grace that is in God's law.

I love God's law. I love it! It's my desire to be like that Psalm 1 guy. His delight is in the law of the Lord; he meditates on that law day and night. He's a law guy, but he's a delighting law guy. He loves God's law. I want that for me, and I want that for you as well—and I'm excited to be able to preach on this topic.

I do want you to know a little of my background. I wasn't always a lover of God's law, because I am a recovering Pharisee. I'm not that any more, by God's grace, but I know there's a little tiny Pharisee that still lives in my heart who tries to assert himself. So I'm a recovering Pharisee, always trying to battle against the legalist within me.

I used to be a law abuser. Pharisees are law abusers, and I didn't think the words "law" and "love" could go together. I thought those were separate categories. There was a stretch of my life when I hated God's law because all it did was condemn me. I couldn't live up to it, so I just hated it. I mean, who wants a constant reminder that you can't live up to God's standard.

There was also a time in my life where I just thought God's law was irrelevant to the Christian life. I had been unhelpfully taught that law and grace are two separate things. You either have grace, or you have law—either New Covenant or Old; either New Testament or Old. I was taught that law and grace are completely opposite.

God has opened my eyes and my heart to see that this is not a helpful way to think about God's law. If you think that way, you're not going to be delighting in it. You're not going to be celebrating it. You're going to try to stay away from it to be near grace. And I'm telling you they go right together. We can love and celebrate God's law, and at the same time we can just rest in God's grace. They go together.

So just to be clear: when I refer to God's law, I'm referring to each and every commandment that God issues in Holy Scripture. I love them all. There are a lot of them in there. I love all the commandments in the New Testament; I love all the commandments in the Old Testament as well.

I love the commandments like, "Keep in step with the Spirit and do not gratify the flesh." That's a law—a commandment. I love the law that says, "Go out into the world and make disciples." It's a commandment. I love the laws that tell us to refrain from eating bats. That's a law in the Bible. It says, "Don't eat bats."

There are laws in there that tell us how to clean our walls when our houses get leprosy. There are a whole bunch of laws like that in Leviticus 14. I love those laws and all of God's laws. I want you to know, I find all of God's laws relevant to me as a New Covenant follower of Jesus Christ—every one of them. The bat one, the house leprosy one—all of them.

But here's the thing. This can be complex, but it's important for us to recognize that under the New Covenant, some of God's laws—while they may be relevant still—they get applied differently than they did under the Old Covenant. I want to give us a simple way to approach what can be a complex topic, about what applies and what doesn't, or how laws differ in the way we apply them today.

Some of God's laws can be thought of as situationally binding. Some laws He issued were binding for a particular time and situation in redemption history. Other laws can be thought of as eternally binding. God issued that law and He expected His people to obey it yesterday, today—even in heaven. So there are two different types of laws.

Let me give you an example from my own life. If I take my family to the beach in Milwaukee, and there's a sign that's regularly there which says, "E Coli count is high today. You should not go in the water." When that happens, I issue a law to my children: "Kids, don't go in the water."

That command is situational, and all my children understand instinctively, without me explaining, that it's situational. None of them say, "What? We never get to go in the water again the rest of our lives?" They know it's only to be applied under a particular set of temporary circumstances.

But even though the situational command is temporary, there's a binding principle behind that law that's always relevant to my children and to me as their dad. The principle behind it is: Dad doesn't allow his kids to go into the water when it's dangerous. Okay? That's the principle that's always true, and that gets applied situationally depending on the context.

The food laws in the Old Testament are like that. They are no longer binding on us today under the New Covenant. We can now eat all the bats we want. That's fine. Somebody in the first service came up afterwards who actually had photos on his phone of him eating bats. (Some of you can guess who I'm talking about.) You can do that under the New Covenant.

But there's a principle behind that law that continues to be relevant to all of God's people, which is that God intends His people to live clean, pure and holy lives, set apart from the rest of the world in ways that are noticeable. Our lives should look markedly different from the lives of those outside the household of faith. One of the ways He did that is to set up food law as a hedge to set His people apart, unto Himself. God's people should still look separated and set apart, but no longer is it done through food laws.

But other laws I issue to my kids are not situational. If I say to my kids, "You may not lie." Or if I say, "Kids, be marked by kindness when you interact with other people." Those commandments are not dependent on the circumstances. They are always binding on my kids. I don't have to reiterate them every time we go out in order to make them think, "This is a situation where we're not supposed to lie." They're never supposed to lie. It always applies.

Hopefully that's a helpful way to think about different types of laws in the Bible. Certain laws had a situational role to fill. Laws related to the sacrificial system were pointing forward to and preparing the way for the arrival of the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world

(John 1:29). Civil laws and food laws put up hedges around God's people, preserving the distinctiveness of the line of Abraham and preparing the way for the coming Messiah.

So a lot of the laws in the Old Testament found their ultimate fulfillment and purpose in Jesus Christ. Therefore God's people are no longer required to keep them in the same way. It doesn't mean they're pointless or irrelevant and we can just skip over them. But they were situational and they found their fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Other laws were not situational, but were rooted in God's character and were therefore binding no matter what, no matter when, no matter where. When God says, "Thou shalt not lie," it's because God Himself is not a liar. This commitment to the truth is part of God's unchanging moral character; therefore He expects His people—created in His image and likeness—to reflect His commitment to the truth. It was true in the Old Covenant; it is true in the New Covenant; it will continue to be true in heaven. God's people are people who love the truth and don't speak lies.

That's all I want to say about the different types of laws. This is not the point of the sermon, but I just wanted to mention it because it can be confusing. I want to reiterate that I love God's law—all of God's laws—yet I recognize that different laws get applied in different ways under different circumstances based on redemptive history.

Having said all that, I want to read from God's law, from the book of Deuteronomy. The word itself means "the second law," and it's the second reiteration of the law of God to the people of God. In the first half of Deuteronomy 10, Moses is interacting directly with God. He is getting a replacement set of the Ten Commandments. Remember, Moses in his anger had broken the first copy of the Ten Commandments, so now God has written another set for him. After he receives these, he addresses God's people concerning the law. We'll pick the story up in Deuteronomy 10:12, but first, let's go to the Lord and ask for His help.

Holy Father, You are a great and awesome God, and You are not to be trifled with. We come before You now with hearts that are reverent and that tremble before Your Word. I pray that You would, by the power of Your Spirit, illuminate this text of Holy Scripture that we might hear it, understand it and apply it.

I ask that by the power of Your Holy Word You would change and shape us. Cause us to look and smell more like Jesus Christ our Savior as a result of the time we spend now meditating on Your Holy Word. I pray that each of us would walk out of here delighting in Your law just a little bit more, seeing it as the means of grace and blessing and love that it is.

Lord, I feel compelled to pray that if there's anyone here that is like I was—a Pharisee, someone bound to legalism—would You just pick that lock or break it open and release them. In Christ's name. Amen.

Deuteronomy 10, starting in verse 12. This is Moses speaking to the people of God, and this is God speaking to you:

¹² And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but 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 and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good? ¹⁴ Behold, to the Lord your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. ¹⁵ Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. ¹⁶ Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. ¹⁷ For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. ¹⁸ He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹ Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. ²⁰ You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear. ²¹ He is your praise. He is your God, who has done for you these great and terrifying things that your eyes have seen. ²² Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven.

^{11:1} You shall therefore love the Lord your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always.

There's a lot in there about God's laws. There's a lot in there about obeying God's laws. But, I hope you notice, there's also a lot in there about love, about God's love toward us and our love back toward God. It's essential for us to keep these two together—law and love. They must stay tethered together, and that's really the whole point of this message.

By way of illustration, let's think about how earthly families work. Have you ever observed a family where there is obedience but there is no love? Have you ever been part of a family like that? It's so tragic. That is how I would describe the family that raised me. God has done a miraculous work of grace in my parents and they're not like that now. A household like that happens when one or both of the parents is domineering and authoritarian. They want a well-ordered home. They put a higher value on obedience than building a loving relationship with their kids. If the kids obey, they gain approval and things go smoothly in the house. It's not the same as love, but at least there's a certain level of approval. If they disobey they get punishment and that is how the house is ordered.

So those kids learn to conform their behavior to the rules. They know what it takes to make things go smoothly and they conform their behavior externally. But inside they're seething. Seeds of bitterness have been planted in them. Typically what eventually happens—and did happen in my case—is the kid rebels. “I’ve had enough of this law-keeping.” Damage is done to the relationship—sometimes permanently. By God’s grace, in my case it wasn’t permanent damage, but it definitely happened in my home.

So that’s obedience without love. What can happen then is the pendulum can swing over the other way, and you find households that say, “All right then—law is out and love is in. I’m just going to let my kids do whatever they want. I’m going to let them be their own people. I’m not going to tell them what to do. I’m just going to leave them alone.” No law—only love. You’ve probably known parents like that.

As an adult parent I tend to swing that way, I think to compensate for my upbringing. My wife is constantly having to remind me about that tendency, because we need both. You know as well as I do that love without law just prepares the kindling. A spark is going to hit that and you’re going to have just as big a problem as the other situation.

A household is supposed to be a place where there are relationships built and grounded on unconditional love. But at the same time it’s also a place where kids develop character and integrity, while learning to obey laws. You have to have both. A home must be rooted and grounded in love, yet where rules are established and enforced. They’re not mutually exclusive.

It’s not always easy to get it just right, but we know that those two things must go together. They’re not optional. It’s not, “Well, I’ll do that and you do that.” No, you have to have both if you’re going to have a healthy household. I think we all instinctively recognize that. That’s pretty common-sense parenting.

I want to take that now and apply it to our relationship with our Heavenly Father. Have you ever observed someone whose relationship with God is all about obedience and not really much about love? It’s all about what they do, all about the lists they make, the stuff they do and don’t do. That seems to be the substance of their Christian life. I’ve known lots of people like that—I’ve been a person like that—and it is tragic.

It’s so sad to see someone relating to God the Father like that, to think the primary thing God expects from us is obedience. “Here’s a list—obey it.” They are missing out on so much of the richness of Who God is and how we can relate to Him. People like that often just search Scripture for the rules. “Give me the rules. I need a list with empty boxes next to it, so I can check them off as I do them.”

Sometimes those people refer to the Bible as “God’s Instruction Manual.” If you do that, that’s fine. I’m not judging you. But it’s telling when we just want a list of instructions that we obey in order that it might go well with us. That doesn’t fully summarize what the Holy Word of God really is.

Although people like that would probably give lip service— “Oh yeah, God loves us and we’re supposed to love Him in return”—the real driving force, the thing that motivates them in their relationship with God, is obedience. “Give me the list and I will obey it.” So functionally that becomes obedience without love. This becomes one of those households that are so tragic because they’re not bursting with love but are all about obedience and rules.

Then some people turn around—I did this very thing—and say, “All right, fine. Rules are out. Law is out. Love is in. God’s all about grace. So don’t talk to me about the law. I don’t want to hear about the law. I just like that grace stuff.”

But listen: if God didn’t give us laws, He would be such an unloving parent. He would be that parent that says, “I don’t care if you brush your teeth or not. There’s the toothpaste. There’s the toothbrush. You be your own person. I don’t care—do what you want. I don’t care what you watch. I don’t care what you eat.”

That’s not a loving parent and that’s not the way that God parents. He loves us enough to give us laws and to enforce His laws, to instruct and guide us through His law. But He always, always administers His law to His people in the context of a loving relationship.

So often as parents this is where we’re different from God. We try to get it right, but we don’t always enforce the law in a way that’s rooted in love. We try to, but we don’t. God always gets it right. He always administers His law in the context of a deeply loving and sacrificial relationship.

One summer when I was in college I worked at a hospital that was a full-time residential hospital for children ages 5-13 who were autistic and had other significant issues they were working through. I was there to just help out and serve. One of the things that was explained to me—for some of the kids, not all of them—was that what made their lives really hard was they had a hearing issue where certain tones or pitches, which would sound normal to you and me, would sound to them like an air horn being blasted into their ears. So you’d just be speaking normally and would accidentally hit that tone, and it would just trigger them and set them off. It would make life really difficult for them.

As I was thinking about that, I realized that some people read the Bible like that. The “law people” read their Bibles and the commandments just trigger something like an air horn going off in their heads. “Obey the law! Do the law! This is the commandment. I’ve got to do this.” It

becomes the way they read their Bibles—life's instruction manual. "Give me the list. Give me the laws." They miss the covenant love, grace and forgiveness.

But the "love people" can do the same thing, just in reverse. They read their Bible and it's the grace and forgiveness passages that are like an air horn. It's all they see. They miss the fact that in the context of all this love and grace and forgiveness, God has issued us a whole host of commands for our good, but He expects us to delight in and obey them. You've got to have both.

So look again at some of these verses we just read in Deuteronomy 10. Starting in verse 12, look for both law and love:

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but 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 and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good?

Now drop down to chapter 11 and see the same thing in verse one: "*You shall therefore love the Lord your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always.*" Go all the way down to verse 22. "*For if you will be careful to do all this commandment that I command you to do...*" What is it? "*...loving the Lord your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him.*"

Then one more. Particularly important for our purposes here is the way this is stated in verses 15 and 16 of chapter ten. This is one of the high points of Deuteronomy. It says, "*Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day.*" Now keep reading. "*Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.*"

Okay, do you see that? Do you see the connection there? In verse 15 he says, "Listen. God set His heart in love on you." Before that he says, "God owns everything—the heavens, the earth, everything. It's all God's, and God has set His heart in love on you." Then right after that he says, "Therefore, you circumcise your heart toward Him. God set His heart in love on you, so therefore you circumcise your heart toward Him."

All of the Israelites would have immediately understood the metaphor because they understood circumcision as a physical thing. They would have expected him to say, "God set His heart in love on you. Therefore, make sure that your men circumcise themselves. Obey the law—practice circumcision." But he doesn't say that. He says, "God set His heart in love on you. Therefore, circumcise your heart. Have a circumcised heart."

In other words, obeying the law externally by just physically being circumcised is not what God's after. He's saying, "I don't want external obedience if it's not coming from a heart that's

been circumcised, a heart that's fixed in love on Me. I don't want your obedience just with your hands or feet. I want you to obey with your heart." Which might look the same on the outside, but it's an entirely different thing to be obey with your hands versus obeying from the heart.

So God is saying, "Look, I do want you to obey Me. I am issuing laws and I want you to obey Me. But I want you to love Me and I want your obedience to flow out of your love for Me. You can't leap over the love part and jump to obedience and think that you're doing it right—because you're not." If I could summarize what I think the point is here, I would say it like this: the law of God is an expression of the love of God, and the keeping of the law needs to flow out of our love for the Law Giver. It's not just about the law—it's about the Giver and our love for Him. That feels clear to me. I think I understand that. So the question I ask myself is why do I so consistently get that wrong? If that's so obvious and easy to understand, why do I so often get that wrong? In order to make sense of that, we've got to go way back to the beginning, to the Garden in Genesis, to the first law and the first breaking of the law.

The first thing we need to remember, now that we're in the Garden, is that the law of God is not a result of sin. It's not a result of the fall of man. The law of God is an expression of the love of God, and the law was present even before sin entered the world. Listen to Genesis 2, starting in verse 16. God says, "*You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat*"—that's a law—"for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die"—that's a consequence.

See, this is law—an expression of God's love—not a punishment. It's not entirely like if I would say to my young boy, "Elliot, you may surely play with every toy in the living room, but you may not stick your head in the fireplace. For on the day that you do so, you will surely die."

Now, I've never exactly said that to my son, but that's the point. I mean, that's what's going on here, right? That law is an expression of my love for him. If I didn't love him, I wouldn't care where he stuck his head. But I do love him, so I make a law not to do that, but I do let him do these other things. I don't make that law because he's a sinner. He is a sinner, but I don't make that law because he's a sinner. I make it out of my love for him.

With the first law, sin hadn't entered the world yet, but God was putting up these hedges of protection—expressions of love in the form of a law. The law is good. Did Adam and Eve keep it? No. They didn't. Do you and I keep it? No, we don't. So from the moment of the first transgression of the law, all of humanity has been tempted to abuse the law and use it for a purpose for which it was never intended.

The law is good. It is an expression of God's love. It is intended to protect, guide and keep us in a place where we can thrive. It's good for us. We're supposed to keep it out of a love

relationship with the Law Giver. Once it's broken, everything changes. Not that God changes; we change.

It used to be that God walked with humanity in a close, deep and personal relationship. After the law was broken, that changed. Consequences:

- We got kicked out of the Garden.
- We lost our intimacy with God and we all intuitively feel that loss. Everyone you've ever met feels that loss.
- We all know that we need God, but something's wrong. We're far from God, alienated from Him.
- We have eternity in our hearts, but we don't have the eternal God in our hearts.

Everyone feels that. They may not see it that way. They might not use those words, but everybody feels that loss and alienation from God because of our law-breaking. And here's where so many people make a fundamental mistake. It's exactly where I went wrong. We tend to think, "All right. Because it was my law-breaking that got me into this mess, if I can get really good at keeping the law I'll get myself out of this mess."

It's a classic mistake that has shipwrecked so many souls, and it's not even logical. If you think about that, that reasoning does not make sense. No amount of law-keeping going forward could retroactively fix the law-breaking that you did before. It doesn't work that way.

Apply it in a different way: Let's say I rob a bank and in the process I kill a guard. Then let's say I decide to go straight. I'm like, "I'm never doing that again." Well, that commitment—"That was a bad idea. I hope I live a good life from now on"—doesn't undo what I've done. It doesn't atone for my law-breaking in the past if I decide to start keeping the law going forward. It doesn't fix the problem. More law doesn't undo the law-breaking that has happened in the past.

So in the aftermath of the very first sin—the first transgression of the first law—God's solution to the problem was not more law, but grace. Right? For law-breakers like us, the solution is not more law, but grace. And that's exactly what God gave us. He basically says to humanity, "Listen, there are going to be consequences for this transgression because it's serious. But ultimately I am going to fix this problem, not you. And the way I'm going to fix it is by grace, not law."

So God pronounces a curse on the serpent, a curse on the woman, a curse on the man. And in the context of the cursing He inserts this promise—just tucks it right in there: "One day the seed of this woman is going to take care of the serpent, crush his head" (Genesis 3:15). That's grace. That's not law. That is grace.

It's so easy to miss that point. We should be resting in grace—God taking the initiative to save us—receiving the promise of grace AND keeping the law out of love for the Law Giver. It's not that we rest in grace and then throw the law out the window. We rest in grace, and then out of our love relationship with the Law Giver, we obey the law.

But instead our thinking goes, “Well, I wrecked my relationship with God by breaking the law, so I'm going to fix the relationship by being really good at keeping the law.” That is the essence of legalism. That's what that little Pharisee in my heart whispers to me—and God won't stand for that.

That's law abuse. The law is good. Good things can be abused, and that's law abuse. We got ourselves into this mess, and guess what? God is going to fix it. Not us. When we try to fix it we just keep digging ourselves deeper and deeper and deeper into the hole.

Remember the command to circumcise your hearts in chapter ten, verse 15? It says, “God loves you, therefore circumcise your heart.” You can love Him back, right? You can't even get that right. That's not a surgery you can perform on yourself. It's not like God just gives you a scalpel and says, “Circumcise your heart. Go for it. And then you'll start loving Me.” But we're so ridiculous. We try to do it ourselves. Just staying in the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy, God Himself has a solution to that problem and it doesn't involve us circumcising our own hearts.

Turn with me to Deuteronomy 30:6. This is arguably the most important verse in Deuteronomy. Look at what it says:

And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

God is going to take care of even that part for us. There are no self-circumcised hearts. We'd make a mess of it. So God says, “Even on that issue, I'm stepping in and taking over. I will circumcise your heart and enable you to obey My law out of love for Me, instead of turning it into something I never meant it to be.”

That's a beautiful thing. It's all over the New Testament, but we need to understand it's in the Old Testament too. It's not a new idea. God tucks that back in the law as well.

When I think about this, a story that almost always comes to my mind is a story that Jesus told about the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). We all know that story is about love—the love of the waiting father. It's also about law. I don't know if you've ever thought about that story this way, but the prodigal son is a story about law as much as it is about love.

You'll remember that the younger son didn't want to be under his father's law and authority. He wanted to be in charge himself. So he broke the relationship and left. He said,

“Give me my share of the money and I’m outta here.” He broke the law essentially, left the household and broke the relationship.

That’s a picture of each one of us. Fallen humanity, in our unregenerate state—none of us want to submit to God’s rule. We all want to be the one in charge. We break away from Him so we can be on the throne. We raise our fists and rebel against His authority.

Eventually things go from bad to worse and the son gets in this horrible place. God opens his eyes, and he realizes, “Look at what I’ve degenerated into. Look at where I was, and look at what my authority has brought me to.” He has this moment of clarity when he “comes to himself” and realizes, “Whoa. I’m eating pig food. I used to be living with a loving father. I’m going back there.”

That’s a picture of God’s grace. Only God can open our eyes to see what self-mutilation and damage we do to ourselves when we try to make ourselves a law unto ourselves. So his eyes are opened, but here’s what he decides: “All right, maybe if I go home and serve him, if I go home and keep the law, he’ll take me back. Not as a son, of course. I blew that. But maybe he’ll take me back as a servant. If I obey the law I can at least go back as a servant, even though I wrecked the son thing.”

So he goes home. He’s been practicing his speech, right? Jesus tells it twice in the story, so you know that the son is working on this to say it just right. He gets home and he says, “Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and before you. I’m no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”

You can just picture the scene: The father says, “No way! You’re my son. You’re not going to move back in here and act like a hired servant. Are you kidding me? You’re my son. You’ve always been my son and I love you, boy. Not one day has gone by when I didn’t go out on the porch and look out on the horizon and watch for your return.”

You know in the story. On the day when the son does come home, the father pulls up his robe and runs out to meet him. He’s so excited. “Son, I love you and you’re not going to earn your way back in by being a servant in this household. I already forgive you right now. You’re my son. So, son, let’s go have a party.” They throw a party. They sit at the table and have a feast. And the father says, “What was dead is alive again. He was lost and is found.” It’s so happy at that moment you just want the story to end there because you’re bursting out of your seat.

But then the sour-faced older brother—the law-keeper—shows up, right? And all of a sudden this dark cloud comes over the story. This guy is not happy. He’s a law-keeper, and he says this to his father. “Look.” (That’s not a particularly respectful way to address a dad.) “Look,

these many years I have served you and I never disobeyed your command. Yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends.”

See, he's a law-keeper. “Never did I break one of your commands.” But only on the outside, only with his hands. Clearly this is not a circumcised heart speaking to the father. His obedience is not flowing out of love for his father. His obedience is flowing out of, “Where's my goat? I want to have a goat. I want to have a party with my friends. What have I been obeying you for, if not to get a goat?” That's what's driving this guy.

Now, we don't know if the older law-keeping son came around or not. I wish Jesus had continued telling this story, but He doesn't. He just stops it there and leaves you hanging. The younger once-rebellious but now humbled son is inside the house, seated at the table, enjoying the feast. And the older, law-keeping but proud and self-righteous son is outside, on the porch, missing the feast.

We don't know what happened then, but sometimes I like to speculate. Here's what I think. I'll bet the younger son's heart, every time he heard his father call him “son” that was just like music to his ears. I'll bet his heart just exploded with joy. “He called me son. He's my dad. He took me back into the home.”

I'll bet he loved it when his father asked him to do stuff. He would say, “Okay, Dad, what do you want me to do? You want me to do that? Great! I can't wait. As you wish. I'll gladly do that. I would love to do that for you. Anything else you want me to do?” Not so that he could earn his dad's forgiveness, right? There's no question that he was already forgiven. But because he was thrilled to be back in the household under his father's loving and good authority. Don't you feel that? Don't you identify with that? Isn't it good to be in the household? Isn't it good to be under the loving authority of our Father?

I imagine that older son became more and more bitter, more and more self-righteous in his obedience, until eventually his hard-hearted law-keeping ends up driving him away from the household. I hope not, but that's a very real danger when you're obeying the law without a circumcised heart. There's all the difference in the world between obeying the law to get something out of it and obeying the law out of love for the Law Giver. It's the difference between being circumcised only on the outside and being circumcised in your heart.

Elisabeth Elliot tells this wonderful story that makes this point. It's about Jesus and His disciples, but it's made up, so don't try to look it up in your Bible. Here's how it goes. One day Jesus is talking to His disciples and says, “Guys, I want you to carry a stone for Me.” No explanation. Just, “Guys, I want you to carry a stone for Me.”

So the disciples start looking around for rocks. Peter's a practical sort of guy, so he looks around and finds a pebble. He puts it in his pocket. "Okay, ready to go." So they walk all morning. At about noon, they all sit down and Jesus says, "All right. Get your rocks out, boys." So they get their rocks out and put them in front of them. He says, "Okay, lunch time," and He turns them all into bread.

Peter just has this little bite for lunch and he's still starving. So after lunch Jesus says, "Okay, I'd like you to carry a stone for me." Peter's like, "Got it." He's looking around and he finds a big boulder. He picks it up, throws it on his shoulder and Jesus says, "Follow Me." Peter is staggering under the weight of this boulder and the sun is beating down. But all he can think about is dinner. "This is going to be awesome. I'm going to have a feast."

So finally it's about dinner time and they arrive at their destination. He takes them to a river and says, "All right, everybody. Throw your stone into the water." So they all throw them into the water. Then He turns to them and says, "Follow Me," and He heads off. They all begin to walk. And Peter is just fuming. "What?!" Jesus looks at him and sighs. He says, "Don't you remember what I asked you to do? Peter, who were you carrying that stone for? I asked you to carry it for Me, but you were carrying it for you."

I like that picture. It's memorable. I like it because it displays what can so easily happen when our law-keeping degenerates into something that we do for ourselves. "I'm keeping the law not for God, but for me, for what I can get out of it." That's external circumcision without having a circumcised heart. It's a recipe for disaster, for bitterness, for failure, for resentment.

The point I've been making is that our law-keeping must be grounded in and flow out of genuine love for the Law Giver. Our desire to do His will needs to be rooted in a loving covenant relationship with Him, not in some sort of misguided effort to earn His favor, to get on His good side or pay Him back for the grace He's given us.

It's not about that. We're already in a loving covenant relationship with God because of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We don't need to obey the law in order to pay Him back. We do need to obey the law out of a loving relationship with the Law Giver. And that makes all the difference in the world.

So as we wrap up, I just want to make this as practical as possible. What is the practical application here? What do we go out and do? On the one hand it's pretty simple, right? Well, we obey God's law. There are lots of laws in the Bible—we obey them. That's what we do.

But it's not that simple because so easily that will just become law abuse again. It's not just about obedience. If you just make it about obedience, you miss the point. It's about love and

our loving relationship with the Father. So here are some steps that we can do by way of practical application.

First of all, know the law. You can't even begin to obey God's law if you don't know it. God has revealed Himself in His Word; He has revealed His law in His Word. It's important for us to know what God says. It's important for us to know what God expects of us. I don't even see how you can have an opinion about the law if you don't even know what the law is.

So the first thing we have to do is know the law, know our Bibles, know what God says. In Deuteronomy 11, beginning with verse 18, there are those powerful verses about the importance of knowing God's Word:

You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

God is serious about us knowing the content of His law. He's revealed it to us, and He wants us to know it. Okay, so that's the first thing. You've got to know it. But just knowing it isn't enough. The Pharisees were law guys. They knew the law frontwards and backwards. So just knowing it is a good start, but it's not enough.

So here's what you need to do next, after familiarizing yourself with the law, with God's standard, with God's expectation. Recognize your own damnable rebellion against God's law. Just feel the weight of that. You and I have not kept God's law. God is good and righteous. He's made His law known, but we broke it.

You and I should soberly reflect on the fact that no amount of law-keeping now—making up my mind to do better next time going forward—is going to make up for all the law-breaking that I did in the past. This is not like, “All right, let's all have a New Year's resolution moment and make up our minds to get out there and do better next time. Let's go.” That's not going to cover up for all the law-breaking that we did in the past. Feel the weight of that. We're in a dangerous predicament. We need to recognize that you and I have dug ourselves into a hole out of which there is no digging.

Then once you've felt the weight of that, don't stay there. You've got to go there, but don't stay there. Don't stay in that hole. Receive God's grace and forgiveness through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Receive it. Let God lift you up out of that hole that you could not climb out of yourself. Jesus lived the righteous law-abiding life that you and I failed to live. Jesus died the death that we were supposed to die, so that in Him—by grace and through faith—we are counted

as righteous law-keepers in God's eyes already. He sees us as forgiven sons and daughters of the true King, welcomed home and treated like family.

Then and only then...you can't skip from one to four. You can't leap here. But only then we begin to live lives of humble obedience to God's law, loving God's law, delighting in God's law, meditating on God's law and obeying it with circumcised hearts full of love for the Law Giver Who saved us and issued forth His good law for us.

We are empowered by the Holy Spirit Who now dwells in us and Who writes God's law on our hearts and enables us to keep it. Then we begin to delight in obeying God's law, receiving it as the goodness it is from a good and loving Father. Then we are empowered by the Spirit to obey the law and to love the Law Giver.

Over and over again in Deuteronomy the metaphor that's used is to "walk in His way." Over and over that life of obedience to God is called "walking in His ways." Not struggling, not striving to impress God, not trying to earn His favor—just walking with Him. Enoch walked with God (Genesis 5:24). Noah walked with God (Genesis 6:9). Adam and Eve walked with God (Genesis 3:8). And because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, you and I can walk with God in obedience to Him.

That's how you grow in your relationship with Him. If you try to serve Him as a servant, you'll never deepen that love relationship with Him. But if you walk with Him as a heart-circumcised, Spirit-filled follower of Jesus Christ, then you'll grow in your knowledge of Him. You'll know Him better. And as you know Him better, you'll love Him more. And as you love Him more, you'll delight to obey Him more. And on and on and on it will go.

It's like an upward sanctification spiral, right? You know God more, you love God more, you obey Him more, and then upward and upward it goes, all the way until He brings us home to be with Him. Removed from the presence of sin and delighting in Him for eternity—that's where we're headed. That's the call God has on our lives and that's the empowering He puts on us in order to live it out day by day. God's law is intended to help us with that, but only if we obey it out of love.

Would you pray with me? Holy Father, You are such a good, good Father. I am so thankful that You're not like earthly fathers, that You never administer Your law in a way that is devoid of love. I'm so thankful that You love us enough to give us the law. Father, I'm thankful first of all that You opened our eyes to see that we were eating pig food. Then You welcomed us back home, called us sons and daughters, sat us at the table and threw a party. I'm so grateful for that.

I pray that when we hear You call us sons and daughters, that our hearts would leap, and that when You issue forth commands, it would be pure joy to obey our Father, the one true living God. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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