

12 And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask 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 observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

14 To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. 15 Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today. 16 Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. 17 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. 18 He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. 19 And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. 20 Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name. 21 He is your praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. 22 Your forefathers who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky.

--Deut 10:12-22

The Offer of Life or Death

11 Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. 12 It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" 14 No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

15 See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. 16 For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

17 But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, 18 I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

19 This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live 20 and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

-- Deuteronomy 30:6-20

It is the custom of many preachers to begin their sermons with a joke. You may or may not have noticed, but this is not *my* custom, even if it does perk up people's ears and lightens the mood before I drive the nail home. Yet, even if this *was* my custom, the truth is, there aren't very many jokes out there about circumcision. Or if there are, they're not the kinds of things nice people like you want to hear on a Sunday morning.

This is because circumcision is a serious thing—as if you needed me to tell you that. It literally is a subject that cuts us to the quick—more so for men than women. Yet it is not merely an empty formality for some newborn babies (and some born again men!) but rather it is a symbol of one's dedication to God. Tattoos can be put anywhere on the body and will fade with time. Pierced ears can grow over again. But for a man, missing a bit of flesh over your most vulnerable place is representative of you at your weakest. And here, God is telling Israel that the most important thing is not just circumcision of the flesh, but of their hearts.

Over the last few months we have been moving through the Torah—otherwise known as The Teaching—at the risk of shaking off the remaining people who have kept up with the lectionary. It was a risk that we felt as pastors we should take, for the Bible is not just reader and preacher-friendly bits of good advice, but a story, and what's more, the story of God revealing himself. Thus whenever we read the Bible, the first question we need to ask is always “what does this say about God?” And, if we are honest, whenever we read books like Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy we tend to become judges of God, relegating Him to an image of a fussy old man in the sky.

Yet, as we have discovered, God's care for observance of the Law comes directly from the fact that Israel is not to treat God as though they could stand in judgment over Him. In fact, by carefully observing the Law, you would be hard-pressed to think of God as anything but completely Other to our human experience. God is not the Big Guy Upstairs, but a Holy God: Wholly different, wholly Holy. If we were to say one thing well about the Torah, it would be that Israel was to observe the Law because it witnesses to the character of God—His otherness, His justice, and His love.

However, in order to establish the meaning of the text, we need to look at the greater *context* of Deuteronomy—and understand that from the very beginning, following God has always *been* about the heart. The power to observe the Law—to choose life and to follow God—did not come from rigid self-discipline on the part of the Israelites. It came from circumcision of the heart, the secret and sensitive place where God meets with His people.

Although the Hebrew word for “heart” as it is used here could just mean the organ that circulates blood around our body, a better understanding of the word “*levav*” is as the seat of one's vitality, the inner self, the source of all our feelings and impulses. In other words, when God speaks of the heart, he means our passions, our dreams, our very thoughts. So when God demands a circumcised heart, he demands that our hearts be cut open and our innermost selves be laid before Him. It is telling that one of the most damning things the Bible could ever say about a person is that he or she has a hard heart, an uncircumcised heart—a heart that is neither open to God nor responsive to His leading.

Yet it would be all too easy to leave you here, to tell you to “be better”, “circumcise your hearts” and for heaven’s sakes, “choose life”. After all, have I not just said that a circumcised heart is the key to following God successfully? Yet, this sort of pronouncement leaves us all flat. If you are anything like me, you quickly realize that you *cannot* circumcise your own heart any more than a man might circumcise his own flesh. If following Christ were as simple as reading your Bible, praying, and avoiding the worst kinds of sin, we wouldn’t *be* talking about how distant from God we all sometimes feel, despite the practice of our faith. Why is it that many of us will come a discipleship group or Sunday morning service and still walk away feeling as though we have not met with God? Because our hearts are calloused, hard, and waxed over with fat.

The real Christian life is one of a deep plunge into icy water, the kind that snatches the breath out of your chest and makes you think “*whoa, I may not actually be able to do this after all.*” We despair when we hear God’s laundry list of nitpicky ceremonies and rituals that don’t make much sense. We are left cold when we hear of the consequential blessings and curses of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel. Yet pleasing God and following Him has never been about following the letter of the law, but of the *heart*.

Many of us approach our spiritual life like we might approach the idea of training for a marathon. There is the pain of the miles on a hard road. There is the discipline of getting out of a warm bed on a cold day. There is the promise of achievement should we train well—but above all else, there is the pleasure of the run, the feeling that we are enveloped in something greater than ourselves, the stillness that prolonged periods of

quiet will foster in our heart of hearts. Yet life with God is *not* exactly like training to run a race, for when it comes to walking with the living God, there is *no* accomplishment. For even as we draw closer and closer to God, and He to us, there is no sense in this life that we will ever “have made it”. We cannot point back to the end of the race and say “whew, glad that’s over—what’s next?” Yet if we can even squeak out in prayer from time to time—that we want intimacy with God—then what we are committed to is not a short-term fulfillable goal of “gettin’ in with God”, but a relationship that begins with the transformation of our hearts. And the only one who can transform our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh is the Spirit of God.¹

Too many of us approach our life with God and with each other like we might approach a New Year’s resolution. Some want to lose ten pounds; others might want to learn a new language—but for too many, the misleading “good Christian” answer will be to get closer with God, as though we might master our lives with him like we might master our bodies. Yet following God is not something to be mastered—he *is* the Master—and in the end, we are all led forward in continuing love and trust like little children taking their first steps.

The twist is that this is *precisely* the point that God wants to bring us to: continual humility and continual openness before Him. This is because He does not work according to our agendas or the ten minutes we might set aside for Him in the morning or night. A right relationship with God means being open to His continual

¹ Ezek 36:26-27

interruption and invasion. It means responding to Him not just when we sit slack-jawed and empty-minded in front of our Bibles, but when our colleagues gripe in the coffee room, our children throw a tantrum, or we are stuck in traffic. If you would follow Christ into relationship with the Triune God, you must prepare for it like you would a marriage, for you are not married just when it's convenient and you happen to be sitting with your wife—but *all* of the time, and everywhere. Your life with God is not a project you can work on like planning a vacation or building a patio. It is the gradual surrender of the battleground of your heart to the Spirit of God leading the Kingdom into the places you fear the most. And it is there, in our most painful places, the places that we are weakest and most ashamed of, that we meet God.

You have heard me speak often on the importance of humility before God. This is still true. Yet the understanding that we must bring now is that what we *can* do is to pray. We pray not knowing exactly what we mean when we pray it, but we pray that we be open to the Breath of God, His Spirit, to give us hearts of flesh and not of stone. Without the Spirit, there is no hope of intimacy with God. If you would forge ahead with your relationship with God in the same way you might follow your shopping list, you're hooped even before you begin. It is only in love and for love that relationship with God is possible, and this not from ourselves, but this love for God is *from* God. What remains, then, is that we return to the idea of a circumcised heart—that we are *happy* to follow God not out of obligation or guilt, but out of love.

This is the true meaning of repentance, the turning over of ourselves to God, to walk in His ways, and to begin to grasp the citizenship we have in His coming Kingdom.

Repentance is not just the outward form of adherence to the letter of the law, but *metanoia*, the change of our hearts and minds, the transformation of the seat of all our understanding and emotion to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

- 1.) When did you see God this week?
- 2.) How did this change your perception of who God is?
- 3.) If you could have God hear one thing from you today and respond to it, what would it be?