

# Mercy to Idolaters

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Date: 24 January 2007

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please be seated. Can everybody hear okay at the back? Is that all right? I'm just wanting to check because it doesn't quite sound loud enough to me, but if you can hear, that's fine.

And let's pray as we come to look at both chapters 9 and 10 tonight in Deuteronomy. God our Father, your word is light.

Your word is truth. We pray that the light and truth of your word will shine in our hearts, will lead us to Jesus, will lead us in paths of faithful obedience.

For your Son's sake. Amen. There out in the darkness, running, fallen from grace, God be my witness.

I never shall yield till we come face to face. He has his way in the dark, but mine is the way of the Lord. Those who follow the path of the righteous shall have their reward.

[ 1 : 05 ] And if they fall as Lucifer fell, then the flame and the sword. And so it has been, and so it is written, on the doorway to paradise, that those who falter and those who fall must pay the price.

Well, so sang Inspector Javert in that great musical, Les Miserables, based on the Victor Hugo novel. Javert sang those words as he was chasing the criminal, Jean Valjean.

It was a futile chase in a way. If you know the story, at least in the musical, Valjean takes pity on Javert and then escapes. The great moral dilemma for Javert, the officer of the law, is that crime must be paid for by the criminal.

Justice must be done. And in the end, his moral construct in his head cannot cope with, and in a sense collapses in on himself, because he cannot cope with the changed character Valjean, and he cannot cope with mercy.

And so later on he sings, Damned if I'll live in the debt of a thief, damned if I'll yield at the end of the chase. I am the law and the law is not mocked. I'll spit his pity right back in his face.

[ 2 : 34 ] Shall his sins be forgiven? Can his crimes be reprieved? And the answer for Javert is no. Though the answer for Victor Hugo is yes.

You see, for Javert, like many, God is a God of justice, and crime must be paid by the criminal. God is, in a sense, little more than the mechanical distributor of reward for the righteous, like Javert, and punishment for the criminal, like Valjean.

It's a very common view of God. You're either forever guilty, or forever self-righteous. And yet we know that, in a sense, pulling us in the opposite direction is another common, valid view about God. That his justice alone is somewhat intimidating, and that God is a God of mercy. We saw these two views put together in Deuteronomy chapter 4, a couple of Sunday nights ago, I think it was.

Deuteronomy 4.24 talked about God being a jealous fire, and 4.31 that God was a merciful God. And for many, God is like the pendulum that swings between what they perceive as those two extremes.

[ 4 : 01 ] God is the God of mercy, God is the God of justice. And in a sense, how God will relate to us depends, maybe even by chance, on where in the pendulum swing God is when he confronts us.

The extreme of mercy, or the extreme of justice, or somehow perhaps conflicted somewhere in between. The trouble is with this view that sees the extremes as dichotomies, and almost in competition, and certainly in tension with each other, is that how God will relate to us, is that justice or mercy, can almost look fickle or capricious, can almost look arbitrary.

Mercy and justice are actually false dichotomies in the end. If we see them simply as extremes in tension, then God ends up in some internal, almost schizophrenic, bipolar conflict within his own mind about how he will distribute justice or mercy to the various people of history.

What we see in the Bible is that God's mercy demonstrates his justice. They are not in fundamental conflict with each other. His mercy does not compromise his justice, nor his justice compromise his

mercy either.

Indeed, what we see in the Scriptures, both in the old, which we'll see tonight, and certainly even more patently in the new, is that God's mercy and his justice are wonderfully and faithfully consistent.

[ 5 : 38 ] They're not in competition with each other. And indeed, God's very consistency lies at the heart of the union of mercy and justice and lies at the heart of the biblical portrayal of God.

1400 BC, Israel is on the verge of the promised land. We've seen several times in the chapters leading up to this, that exhortation to cross over the Jordan, to conquer the land, to defeat the nations who are within the land.

We see that command reiterated at the beginning of chapter 9, verses 1 to 3. Hear, O Israel. Yet again, that exhortation, not only to hear in your ears, but to heed in your hearts, in effect.

You're about to cross the Jordan, conquer the nations. It refers to the Anakim, the giants whom we saw a few, in fact, I think the first Wednesday night of this series, in chapter 1, where Israel expressed its significant fear at the Anakim giants who inhabit the land in front of them.

In the ancient world, a world of many gods and a world of somewhat national gods, conquest over another nation or city-state was often regarded as either the superiority of your God over another and or the reward by your God for your own power or strength or righteousness in some way.

[ 7 : 04 ] So that victory was some vindication for you as a people and defeat was retribution from your God or perhaps the defeat of your God by a stronger, more powerful God of another nation.

So that if God brings victory by one nation over another, punishing therefore that nation, the flip side of that must be your own righteousness in some way, your own vindication by God.

That would be the temptation that Israel would face when they conquered the land. A temptation that God, through Moses, addresses even now, before they even cross the Jordan and have victory.

He wants them to know in advance that that equation of vindication or punishment is actually not the case. And verses 4 and 5, in particular of chapter 9, say this in the most striking and clear way that you can imagine.

Verse 4, When the Lord your God thrusts them, the nations in the land, out before you, do not say to yourself, literally don't say in your heart, it is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to occupy this land.

[ 8 : 25 ] That's the temptation. We are righteous. And our righteousness has been vindicated by God by giving us victory over the Canaanites and the Amorites and all the people who live in the land.

That's the temptation. But, verse 4 goes on, It is rather because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is dispossessing them before you.

Now we dealt a little with that moral dilemma of war and God punishing wicked nations last week, last Wednesday, when we saw chapter 7. Here it's made explicit as well, the nations are not innocent nations but are wicked nations.

And as we saw last week, fundamentally their idolatry lies at the heart of their wickedness, their refusal to acknowledge that God is God. But by the end of verse 4, we might say, yes, okay, they may be wicked, but then surely that means that we, Israel, are righteous.

Verse 5, It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you're going in to occupy their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you.

[ 9 : 35 ] Now again, in a sense, that just reiterates chapter 4, verse 4. But God is hammering home this point because it's such a temptation. The heart is fickle.

We've seen that already in a couple of previous talks or sermons on these chapters of Deuteronomy. And here again, there would be the temptation of a boastful heart, the uprightness of our hearts.

Verse 5 puts it as. But notice how verse 5 ends. In order to fulfill the promise that the Lord made on oath to your ancestors to Abraham, Isaac and to Jacob.

Why is God giving Israel the land? It is not vindication of their righteousness. It is punishment of the nations that are in the land. It is also God keeping a promise made to Abraham 500 or 600 years before these words were spoken by Moses.

God keeps promises. He keeps them in the end regardless of the recipients of the promise. He doesn't make a promise to Israel on the grounds of Israel's righteousness or its worthiness to receive the land.

[ 10 : 48 ] He made a promise to Abraham that was in a sense inexplicable. We saw that in chapter 7 as well. And it's a consistent theme through Deuteronomy. And it will come back again tonight for us at the end of this chapter.

Verse 6 is like the nails in the coffin of the argument. Know then that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land to occupy because of your righteousness.

That's the third time in three verses that that's been said. Hopefully by now Israel's getting the picture. But interestingly nothing has been said about Israel. It's not because of your righteousness it's their wickedness.

It still leaves open the interpretation that okay but if they're wicked we must be at least better than them. Then verse 5 said it's actually because of the promise.

But now verse 6 underscores the significance of this argument when it goes on to say for you are a stubborn people. End of verse 6.

[ 11 : 50 ] That is in effect Israel you're no better than the other nation. Of course that throws up the moral dilemma of why punish them and why give the land to these people when they're not worthy of it.

Because God's keeping a promise. God's faithfulness is actually a bigger concept most important concept in the scriptures in a way. In a sense God's faithfulness is what ultimately brings together justice and mercy in the actions of God in scripture.

Israel does not deserve the land. So its gift of the land is an act of mercy or an act of grace. It is in a sense a free gift.

It is in a sense an Old Testament picture of what the New Testament calls grace. Undeserved gift from God. They're no better than anyone else.

Just like we are not believers because we're better than those who are not believers. We are chosen by God before the foundation of the world in Christ. A choice that is not in any way grounded in our worthiness righteousness moral rectitude or anything like that at all.

[ 13 : 09 ] The issue is God keeps promises even promises to sinners. The trouble is though that self-righteousness is such a pervasive sin.

We saw on Sunday night just gone in chapter 8 verse 17 the very real danger that in the land as their wealth increased and multiplied Israel would boast in its pride of its power to get that wealth. Look back to verse 17 of chapter 8. Do not say again literally in your heart my power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth. Now in chapter 9 another facet of pride or self-righteousness is being attacked by God's words to Israel through Moses.

You see like ancient Israel we too covet being able to claim some worthiness before God. We like to think that somehow we deserve God's favour that somehow God's mercy to us we've at least provoked in some way or contributed towards a bit like a bring and share lunch where we've contributed at least a little bit and God's done the rest.

But of course the scriptures actually from beginning to end make it clear that salvation is all of God our hands are empty we contribute nothing.

[ 14 : 39 ] And that in effect is the theological argument even here. Israel is no better than this wicked nation indeed the rest of this chapter at some detail and length will actually in effect show that Israel is equally wicked maybe even worse than the nations that are in the land.

That is their moral worth is not just even a little bit better that will give them some grounds of boastfulness none at all. It is all of grace and as the great hymn says nothing in my hand I bring so it is with Israel.

Well as if to pull the carpet completely out from under their feet Moses goes on in this chapter to rehearse Israel's past record of sin. This is hardly a great pep talk if you remember back to the first Wednesday night of Deuteronomy 1 2 and 3 this is not motivation based on your past victories this is actually the sort of thing that you'd want to be obedient or faithful horrib is the one you'd expect that is it's the place where they heard God's voice it's the place where they saw the clouds and so on associated with God's presence on the mountain it's the place where they received the Ten Commandments you would think of all the places this might be the place where they would be obedient and faithful but of course it's not the case we know if we read Exodus it's not the case and

Moses is going to rehearse that terrible sin here in these verses the sin of the golden calf in many ways Mount Sinai or Horeb as it's called in Deuteronomy usually is the high point of God meeting with his people in the Old

Testament in many respects it's the event to look back to but as we know all too well it was the place of Israel's worst sin oh the sound is changing as I speak but it sounds better now well done Jeff thank you whatever we've gone wrong so verses 8 to 11 just recount some of those things Moses had gone up the mountain to receive the stone tablets and so on story that we know well those tablets of the Ten Commandments inscribed by the finger of God etc and at the end verse 11 says of 40 days and 40 nights the Lord gave me the two stone tablets the tablets of the covenant and then the Lord said to me get up go down quickly from here for your people whom you have brought from Egypt have acted corruptly they have been quick to turn away from the way that I commanded them they have cast an image for themselves

Moses knew none of this but God knows and God sees and so presumably at the end of perhaps the high point of Moses' life 40 days with God atop Mount Sinai all of a sudden it comes literally in a minute crashing as he's told of the sin of his people at the bottom of the mountain this is serious sin indeed it's a breaking of the first two commandments something that earlier in Deuteronomy Moses has been at length to argue that Israel must not commit again especially in chapter four but in the ten commandments rehearsed again it's an act of idolatry which in Deuteronomy at least is regarded as I think the worst sin that you can commit a sort of brazen and deliberate turning your back on God to worship something that is not a God creation of human hands it's hard to imagine a worse sin that is God and the people of

[18:25] Israel have come into a formal relationship at Mount Sinai a relationship that is a covenant relationship a pledge of God to them and them to him as we see in Exodus 24 for example an exclusive relationship but one that's been corrupted by Israel's sin the word corrupt in verse 12 corruptly is a strong word and it's hard to imagine a worse sin in a worse place the human analogy that comes to my mind is that imagine you're at your wedding reception and the spouse whom you've just married is actually somewhere else in bed with somebody else that's actually the seriousness of what's going on here making a golden calf is like getting into bed with somebody at your wedding ceremony at your wedding reception in effect it's grotesque to even contemplate that but that's actually the that's not even the depth of Israel's sin but it's the best human analogy that I can come up with and God's response to this is wrath anger verse 7 verse 8 words of wrath and anger that are very strong words in verse 8 a very rare word but very strong word for wrath it's the threat of annihilation

God is going to destroy Israel and wipe it off the map wrath doesn't mean uncontrollable rage like when something goes wrong and you thrash around your car or your garage or hurl china around the kitchen or whatever it is this is not that uncontrollable rage nor is wrath hate necessarily wrath is God's righteous response to evil wickedness unrighteousness it is a measured response actually in a way yes it's furious and yes language of jealousy and fire is used but not because it's uncontrollable or capricious this is wrath that is righteous wrath strong and fierce yes but provoked entirely by something that is unrighteous and wicked in verse 12 a great verse Moses is told by God get up go down quickly your people have done this thing badly your people whose people are they well they're

God's people actually here is God disowning them we see that sort of language a few times in scriptures you know not my people in Hosea and so on and that's what God's doing to use an Australian football analogy God has handballed I should have found a football here there's one down here he's handballing the ownership of Israel over to Moses Moses they're your people whom you brought up they're nothing to do with me is what God is in effect saying here very strong language indeed when we recognize how often even in Deuteronomy let alone say at Mount Sinai and Exodus you are my people my treasured possession your people Moses you brought them up from Egypt go down quickly now I'm about to destroy them in effect and verse 14 he repeats that threat of annihilation and of course Moses as he goes down throws out the two stones of the covenant the ten commandments on each and destroys them showing the broken relationship like tearing up your marriage certificate in effect is what's going on here to remind us that this is not an isolated incident that it's one of many from the day they left

Egypt to the day they've arrived at Moab where Moses is now addressing them a period of about 40 years verses 22 to 24 mention just some of the place names of some of the other places that you

can look back in Exodus and Numbers and so on Tabra Massah Kibroth Hatava etc Kadesh Baniyah the spies incident as well and then verse 24 the summary you have been rebellious against the Lord as long as he has known you balancing in effect the summary of verse 7 when Israel conquers the land in the future they have no grounds for self righteousness yes it's the wickedness of the nations that God is punishing verses 4 and 5 made clear and 6 but it's not their righteousness they are as bad as the nations indeed if not worse yet why has God persevered with them why weren't they destroyed 38 years ago at Mount Sinai simply because Moses prays simply because Moses prays if ever you doubt the power of prayer as people say the worth of praying this is a passage that surely is convincing that God actually changes his mind when people pray God's not calling Moses bluff when he says I'm going to destroy them God's not testing Moses let's see what you're going to do now I'll say that I'm going to destroy them let's just see if you're going to respond the right way no he's not playing games his wrath is real their sin is real he's got every right to obliterate them and annihilate them indeed Moses has a lot to gain from their destruction because God says to Moses I'll start again with you you'll be the patriarch of them all great temptation I would have thought but Moses prays Deuteronomy's version is an abbreviated version of Exodus 32 to 34 it condenses all those three chapters in effect and it highlights in [ 24 : 18 ] Deuteronomy the prayer that is the prayer actually should have taken place a few verses earlier than it does in verse 25 onwards but it's held over we're told Moses prays then it goes into the summary again of what happens their ongoing sin in the different places and then as if to build to the crescendo and the climax comes the content of the prayer at the end of chapter 9 Moses prays it is a prayer for mercy it is not a prayer full of excuses you know when we I was going to say a child but when we do something wrong we want to make an excuse oh I'm sorry but you know somebody provoked me to do it it's the government's fault I didn't realize what you meant I forgot what I was doing I was in a hurry no excuses here see Moses doesn't say to God God there are a few reasons why they've done the wrong thing I was away a few days and you know that 40 days really that's quite a long time to be away

Moses has no excuses for the people he doesn't try to cover up for them at all it's a prayer for mercy without excuse which is actually what our prayers of confession or repentance ought to be and yet so often we hedge about our confessions and repentance at least in our head with oh yes I know I've done the wrong thing but I was under pressure I was under a lot of stress the money's not good etc etc etc no excuses there's no appeal here to they'll do better next time let them learn from their mistakes they'll do better next time I'll show you Moses says none of that he's not like one of those naive cricket managers of England for example he doesn't nor does he actually go and say look they're very sorry for what they've done of course they weren't there's no excuse no appeal other than simply an appeal for mercy but there's a fourfold basis of this prayer that I think is critical for us we're meant to learn from it because we're given the content of prayer that is it could have simply said a

Moses prayed and God held back and didn't punish them but because we're given the content of prayer indeed the content of prayer is actually repeated from Exodus as well we're actually meant to learn about prayer and about God's actions from what Moses prayed not just that he prayed and there are four things about this prayer in verses 25 to 29 or literally really 26 to 29 the first is the basis of praying has to do with the purpose of God and here we come back to the football God handballed Israel over to Moses and said your people notice what Moses prays in this prayer verse 26 Lord God do not destroy the people who are your very own possession whom you redeemed in your greatness whom you brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand and if you jump down to verse 29 for they are the people of your very own possession whom you brought out of out by your great power and by your outstretched arm Moses has handballed them straight back to God where they belong and he's done it twice actually at the beginning and the end of the prayer they are yours God your purpose was to create a people for yourself that's what you've done they are yours you can't just handball them out and disown them it's a very brave prayer when you think about it actually Moses was told to get out of the mountain and go down and he disobeys God in effect at this point by staying and interceding for Israel pretty brave thing of Moses to do the second thing in this prayer is an appeal to God's past work you brought them out of Egypt you've redeemed them verses 26 and verse 29 again that is God's begun a work for these people and and the implication is in the prayer that will be in vain if God destroys the people so he Moses is appealing here to the past work of God for the benefit of Israel in this prayer so God's purpose to create a people God's

work already done thirdly God's character as faithful in verse 27 we see this remember your servants Abraham

Isaac and Jacob now Moses is not saying remember that they were great people and that this would be a shame for their legacy if Israel and their descendants were destroyed there's nothing none of that about remember them why because God made promises to them that's the issue we saw that referred to again of course back in verse was the beginning of the chapter verse 5 and so many times in Deuteronomy you see what Moses is saying God keep your promise you made a promise to Abraham to Isaac and to Jacob about their descendants keep it yeah we might want to be a bit technical and say well if he obliterates Israel but starts again with Moses Moses is descended from them so therefore that's okay but in one sense that's that's that's not quite right the promise was to Abraham through to Jacob through to Isaac and then to Jacob and then to all of the branches of the descendants and so to start again with

[ 30 : 06 ] Moses would actually compromise that original promise the way that promise the promise is never reiterated to an individual child of Jacob for example it stops at Jacob and then is all the sons of Jacob and then all their descendants so Moses is saying God be faithful keep your promise keep your promise to Abraham Isaac and Jacob and he says at the end of verse 27 and pay no attention to the stubbornness that's the word that was used back in verse 6 of this people and their wickedness and their sin the word wickedness was what was used to describe the nations already in the land back in verses 4 and 5 see putting Israel on that parallel pay no attention is in effect saying have mercy there is no excuse there's no mitigating circumstances just pay no attention to it but be faithful to your promise and therefore don't destroy the people the fourth ground of prayer here is in verse 28 we've seen God's purposes for creating a people his work already done his character of faithfulness and then finally God's honor or reputation in the world in verse 28 otherwise the land from which you have brought us that is Egypt but it's not even named here might say because the Lord was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them and because he hated them he's brought them out to let them die in the wilderness two things ascribe to God that are untrue there one that he hated them and then the first one in the wrong order then and God was not able both of them are untrue because God is able to bring them into the land and he doesn't hate them he loves them indeed Israel itself grumbled that God hated them earlier on chapter one at the spies incident in verses 27 and 28 we saw that a little while ago but notice the grounds of prayer here it's for the sake of the honor and glory of God that Moses prays he doesn't pray for the benefit of Israel he doesn't pray for his own benefit he prays for God's work already begun his faithfulness to those promises etc and the honor of God's name because of course if

Israel is defeated in the wilderness and dies off and is destroyed at Mount Sinai by God the Egyptians will rub their hands with glee and the Canaanites in the land well they'll hear about it and they'll rub their hands with glee as well and the Edomites would probably be fairly happy and the Moabites and the Ammonites and everybody else and what would it say of the God of Israel impotent and hateful one or the other or both another of which is true now there is a prayer for mercy grounded in the faithfulness of God and the reputation of God in the world they are good motivations by which we are to pray for mercy it seems to me it's not selfish but God-centered as I said Moses had a lot to gain and he doesn't bargain with God for his own benefit at all indeed he bargains for God's benefit bravely disobeying

God's command to go down the mountain straight away I think there's a model there for how we ought to be praying for ourselves for our churches especially when our we and our churches fail I mean after all that's the context here of failure and sin on what grounds do we pray for mercy when we fail when a church fails when fellow Christians fail or the church is struggling or weak or whatever often we're praying that our church will be happy and united for our own benefit because we'd like to be part of a happy united church we want to be part of a growing church for our own benefit but actually there's bigger motivations here in praying so when of course in the west or anywhere in the world when the church is small when it is racked by moral failure by idolatry or compromise or heresy or whatever the world looks on and laughs at God the world dismisses God and thinks he's impotent he's nothing so we must pray for ourselves and pray for our churches not for our own sakes but for God's sake and of course we must pray that

God keeps on with us and keeps on with the church not for our own sake but for the sake of God's faithfulness to the promises that he made even to Abraham which still stand today as the New Testament in so many places makes very clear well the result of Moses prayer is that Israel is not

destroyed chapter 10 in one sense should just be the continuation of chapter 9 without even a chapter break or heading break probably and even though in one sense it doesn't say and God answered Moses prayer and he stayed off his execution of Israel his instruction at the beginning of chapter 10 makes it clear that that's in effect what's happened at that time the Lord said to me carve out two tablets of stone like the former ones why the former ones were broken the relationship was in a sense torn up and God is saying well let's start again that's the answer to prayer let's start again and so let's start again with two tablets of stone and make an ark of wood and we're going to put it inside the ark and it will be an ongoing reminder of the relationship that is being restarted here as a result of the prayer of Moses and in verse 4 of chapter 10 then God wrote on the tablets of the stone the words as before the same words there's an emphasis here on the same words it's not a new relationship in the sense of something a bit different we're going right back to where it was exactly the same again and then in verse 5 Moses turned he came down from the mountain he put the tablets in the ark that he had made and there they are as the Lord commanded me the relationship still stands and then in verses 6 to 9 it's in brackets here so sometimes we sort of tend to skip over that and wonder how it actually fits into this but the Israelites journeyed well skip over the place names for now the point of the paragraph is they've got a future they're heading towards the promised land is the point of the brackets of verses 6 to 9 and as well as that there is a reference to Aaron who was also prayed for back in verse 20 so again implying that Moses prayer for Aaron was also answered and then in verses 10 and 11 or at least I'll read verse 11 the Lord said to me get up go on your journey at the head of the people that they may go in and occupy the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them that is the relationship is still there God has heeded the prayer and he hasn't destroyed Israel and as severe as God's wrath was going to be and indeed often is God's mercy is equal to it we see here that there is no sin too great you cannot imagine a worse sin in Old

[ 37 : 30 ] Testament than the one of the golden calf God had every reason to destroy Israel no sin is too great for God's mercy that's a great encouragement for us because if you're like me you know either yourself or other Christians who are plagued by guilt sometimes because that's the work of this of the devil the adversary who's wanting to plague us with guilt all the time no sin is too great for God's mercy and indeed here it is embedded in the Pentateuch of the Old Testament no sin is too great for God's mercy even without a sacrifice you know we often think that the Old Testament mercy is so bound up with the sacrifice of animals and the throwing around of blood not a drop of blood here simply a prayer and there is mercy because there is sacrifice but Moses doesn't offer that one it comes much later here we find the the greatest sin but forgiven with the greatest mercy now the New Testament of course fills out in a sense the the structure or the economy of how Moses prayer works how can a righteous God show mercy is he simply persuaded by Moses rhetoric on his knees well mercy doesn't come cheap mercy comes at a high price and though

Moses may not have understood the economy of how God's mercy works we do because it was revealed to us 1400 years after Moses in the words of the New Testament yes there is justice sins are punished by God without exception justice to the full but there is at the same time mercy because Jesus took the punishment for the sins of God's people justice and mercy perfectly matched perfectly meet together because of the faithfulness of God to his promise when Jesus hung on the cross not in compromise not in competition not intention but in a perfect harmony in God's moral economy that is perfect you see the grounds of mercy for Moses as he prays in the end I suspect unbeknownst to Moses it actually works because of the cross of Christ 1400 years later that's why God could show mercy yes it's an a faithfulness to promise that's why Jesus came out of God's faithfulness to the promise to Abraham Moses appeals to God's faithfulness to promise it's why Jesus came it's why he died it's why justice and mercy can meet so perfectly because God is faithful and it's his faithfulness to his promise that drives him to perfect justice and perfect mercy found on the cross but it doesn't stop here you see forgiveness is not the final word sometimes I think we we can be guilty of thinking that the cross is about forgiving our sins and the promise of heaven but the cross is more powerful than that and indeed God's mercy is more powerful than that as we see as chapter 10 continues yes the relationship is restored as the first 11 verses of chapter 10 say and in a sense the next few verses reiterate that again we see here the key commands repeated five of them in verses 12 and 13 what is the Lord your God require of you let's boil it down to its essence fear not being scared but fear that is in a sense faith in God as God secondly walk in all his ways thirdly and centrally love him something we saw in detail in chapter six serve the Lord

your God with all your heart and all your soul and then finally fifthly keep the commandments they're overlapping terms we ought not to try and distinguish exactly what each of the five means as though they're they're completely separate ideas not at all they're overlapping terms because by piling one upon the other there's this rhetorical persuasion about what it is to love God come on this is what it is when you boil it down to fear God obey all his commandments love him serve him keep his commandments they're they're overlapping terms there's a rhetorical purpose to that of motivation and persuasion they're relational ideas as well and so when you boil it down we're in a relationship with God it's not just about slavishly doing what he wants us to do it's about getting to know him so that we know how to please him like in a marriage relationship the more you know the person the more you want to please them and you know how to please them so it is with our relationship with God of course and of course Moses then goes on to motivate again by reminding them of God's love for Israel so in verse 14 although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God the earth and all that is in it 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 there is both love and faithfulness

God set his love on Abraham inexplicably and because of that he loves Israel and he's faithful to that promise to Abraham and therefore he acts with faithfulness to Israel the trouble is if we stop here isn't it all going to happen again why isn't Israel going to make another golden calf I mean in one sense half of Israel does under the reign of King Jeroboam centuries later because what we've seen is forgiveness and mercy we've seen the relationship we resume in one sense we're just wound the clock back 40 days we might say and if Israel could commit a golden calf sin at Horeb at Sinai the very point of meeting with God well why aren't they going to do it next week tomorrow later today even what's different to this point nothing's different actually at all apart from the fact that they've received another hefty dose of mercy that's not the first one they've received either their sin was to be stiff-necked back in verse 6 like a stubborn ox or whatever that you try to yoke to do a job and it's stiff neck means it's trying to refuse to go the way that you're directing it it's lacking in submission to your will and so on so how are you going to treat that stiff neck do you do what I do and go out to Sens in shopping town and have a little massage of your neck and shoulders and so on and last for about 10 minutes and still stiff and sore the next night and so on well you see forgiveness is only half the story it's always only half the story the problem is as verse 16 makes clear is the heart circumcise then the foreskin of your heart and do not be stubborn or stiff-necked any longer well there's probably a slightly odd anatomy there that the heart actually affects a stiff neck but putting that aside the issue is the heart it's an issue that we ought not to be surprised about remember back in chapter 6 love the lord your god with all your heart soul and strength and then we've seen the danger of the heart in chapter 7 verse 17 the heart wrongly will lead to fear do not say in your heart chapter 7 17 said that these nations are more numerous than I am and chapter 8 17 shows that the heart that is prone to pride do not say in your heart that my strength and my power has gotten me all this wealth and chapter 9 verse 4 shows the heart that is prone to self-righteousness as well so chapter 9 verse 4 says do not say in your heart it's because of my righteousness that the lord's brought me in you see three times in three chapters we've seen how fickle the heart is how weak it is how wrong it is how so easily it turns away from what is right into fear or pride or self-righteousness in those three instances so what is needed is a heart change which the language of verse 16 very evocatively says circumcise the foreskin of your heart well there's the command let's do it let's circumcise the foreskins of our hearts can you do it wonder what you do would we all go and find a sharp knife we all go to bill or someone and ask who's a doctor and ask how am i going to do this do we need a heart surgeon what do we need circumcise the foreskin of your heart what an odd thing to command the idea of circumcision goes back of course to abram in genesis 17 circumcision was to be assigned for the men of israel descended from abram along with the male associates of his households and so on slaves etc why it was a sign of the covenant promises to god but why circumcision after all it's private you wouldn't see would apply to men only why not say put a fish symbol on your forehead i mean some of us do that on our cars why not get everybody to put a fish symbol on your forehead at least everyone would see it then why circumcision even there in genesis 17 well remember genesis 16 abram's been doubting that the promise of a descendant will come true what does he do he has sexual relations with his wife's maid called hagar good thing bad thing genesis 16 doesn't make too much of a moral analysis of that but it's a bad thing sarah is his wife abram's given up trusting the promise and he's taken it into his own hand so to speak to produce an heir okay god

you can't do it for me i've waited a few years i'll get one for you and in a sense the command of circumcision in genesis 17 is a bit of a rebuke to abraham because it's it's a mark at the very place where he tried to fulfill god's promise for god that is in a sexual relationship circumcision in a sense is to be a reminder that we trust god not ourselves in a sense symbolically it was to make somebody responsive to god's promises with faithful obedience rather than hard to that and unresponsive but of course circumcision even in genesis 17 is just an outward sign because you and i know without deuteronomy that it's the internal heart that's the real problem you see deuteronomy 10 16 actually now gets to the the real heart of the problem which is the heart and it drives us to where genesis 17 is just a symbol of the real issue is changing the heart and making it responsive to god's promises and it full of faithful obedience so let's circumcise our hearts the heart's the source of sin the trouble is we don't know what to do we can't do it can we clearly it's a metaphor clearly we're not meant to pick up a knife and stab it in our hearts or something like that but we can't actually change our hearts we're helpless to do that deuteronomy 10 commands it when we get to deuteronomy 30 it promises it the lord your god will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your offspring what deuteronomy 10 commands deuteronomy 30 promises in the future what deuteronomy 30 promises jesus delivers because nowhere in the old testament has hearts circumcised it's always promised language varies in different parts of the old testament what deuteronomy says is the circumcised heart ezekiel says is a new heart of flesh not stone and what is the same as what jeremiah says is the heart with the law written on it it comes in the new covenant or the new testament so what deuteronomy 10 commands deuteronomy 30 promises and what deuteronomy 30 promises jesus delivers and we see that in the new testament for example in colossians chapter 2 where we discover that those who are believers in the lord jesus christ by being associated with him have had our hearts circumcised because we are in him in his death burial and resurrection so when we believe and trust in the lord jesus and his death burial and resurrection for us our hearts are circumcised it doesn't mean instantaneously we're perfect but our hearts have been changed what jesus delivers the holy spirit applies to use the language of the end of romans 2 for example the real circumcision is not a physical thing but something by the spirit or a spiritual circumcision it's our identification in the death and resurrection of jesus that leads to our hearts

being changed you see then how powerful the cross of christ is it's powerful not just to forgive us our sins and leave us unchanged that would still be powerful but it's powerful also and necessarily to change us on the inside so that one day we will arrive at heaven's gate not only forgiven but perfected from the inside out by the same power of the cross of the lord jesus christ the question then becomes in the light of these exhortations in deuteronomy chapter 10 are your hearts circumcised are your hearts being changed by the circumcision of god's spirit applying the power of the cross into your hearts don't for one minute think that you don't need that change and don't for one minute think that you can affect that change yourself with all the best intention in the world we cannot helpless we are empty handed we are the powerful grace of the cross of christ is what moises is prophesying what jesus delivered and what you and i need most the same cross where wrath and mercy perfectly meet the same cross that came about because god kept his promises to abraham because he's faithful the same cross that came about because god is concerned about the honor and reputation of his glory and his name in the world why jesus died why we can be forgiven and why our hearts can be circumcised let's pray our heavenly father indeed we thank you for your mercy to us a mercy at high price through the costly death of your son on the cross a mercy that doesn't compromise your holy justice and judgment a mercy which we do not deserve we thank you lord god for your powerful grace not only to forgive but to change our hearts and we long for the day when we will be finally and fully perfected in your presence thanks to the power of the death of jesus for us amen