

Be No Longer Stubborn

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[0 : 00] God, we pray that you will indeed change our hearts to make us like you.

For Jesus' sake, Amen. So now, what does the Lord your God require of you?

That's the question that begins the passage we're looking at today in Deuteronomy chapter 10.

Over the last four weeks, we've begun looking at the book of Deuteronomy.

And it would be a fair question to ask, well, that's all very well, but what in practice does it mean?

Because the last four weeks, though they've had some practical application, by and large, they've been sermons about God.

So now, what does God require of us? Because in the book of Deuteronomy, the opening chapters are really about God. And it's the middle of the book, from now onwards, if you like, that gets down to the practical response.

[1 : 17] Given all that's gone before in those nine chapters, and for us, those last four sermons, so now, what does God require of us?

What does it all boil down to? Fundamentally, it's not really a list of do's and don'ts. But rather, it's responding and relating to a God who is known.

To a God who is as described in the preceding chapters. And that's why those chapters are there.

To tell us about God, to tell us about what he's like and what he's done, and therefore, how to respond to him.

So we saw a few weeks ago, in the beginning of Deuteronomy, that God is a faithful God, keeping each and every one of the promises that he has made. And Israel can trust him to keep his promises.

And then we saw in Deuteronomy 6, the fact that God is a generous God, who lavishes good things on his people. The God who is giving his people a land that has everything laid on for them.

[2 : 21] A land that's got towns already built that they don't have to build, vineyards and olive groves already there, cisterns that they don't have to cut. It's all there. God is a generous and lavish God.

And then two weeks ago, we saw the fact that God is a God who is like a father, disciplining his children, educating them or training them in the ways in which they must go, knowing that he is the God who provides for their every need.

And then last week, we saw how God is an extraordinarily merciful and forgiving God. The God who forgives his people their sins. Even the worst of all the Old Testament sins, the making of an idol, a golden calf, God forgave out of his great mercy.

That's the sort of God that Israel is called to respond to. Their response and our response to God will never be right if we don't understand what God is like.

If our view of God is wrong, then our response of God will not be right either. So often I hear of people say that they do what God requires, or they live good lives, or something like that.

[3 : 35] And yet, it's obvious from what they say, and what they do, that they've got very little conception of what God is really like. They don't seem to be people who read the Bible, or who are involved in church, or who listen to sermons, or are in Bible studies, and grapple with what is God like.

Because if we don't know what he's like, we'll never respond to him properly. You think of buying Christmas presents for people. The hardest person I have to buy a Christmas present for is my brother-in-law.

Because I don't really know him very well. I don't know what books he'll really enjoy. I'm beginning to learn that over the years. Or what music he likes, or what jumpers he'd wear, or things like that.

I know him a bit, but not as well as my parents, or my sisters, or good friends. If we don't know somebody well, we won't know how to please them. And it's the same with God. We need to know him well, if we are to please him, in our lives. And that's what Deuteronomy 1 to 9 has been about. This is what God is like.

[4 : 40] In effect is what it's saying. Now we get to the practical things. Today's sermon is about the general principles of how we respond to God. In two weeks' time we'll pick up from chapter 12 onwards, and deal with some of the specifics of how we are to respond to God.

But for today it's the general principles that are in a sense the introduction to the specifics, which are coming later. So then, what does the Lord require of us?

What will it be that pleases him? The passage today began, So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you?

And five things are listed. To fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today. They're the five general principles of how we are to respond to God. Five verbs. To fear, to walk, to love, to serve, and to keep.

[6 : 00] To fear God is not an expression of terror. It's not a bad thing to fear God. It's not the word to be terrified or frightened or scared.

But rather, to fear God in the Old Testament is a very positive thing, and indeed in the New Testament as well. It is at least to show reverence and respect and awe at Almighty God, recognizing that he is the universal creator.

He is God of gods, and Lord of lords, as this passage goes on to say. And hence we are to fear him. But it's more than that as well. To fear God in the Old Testament is something that comes from a relationship with God.

It's not that we fear an unknown God, but rather it comes from relating to God and knowing him as the universal God, the creator of all, the God of gods, the Lord of lords.

And we know him as that God. And we fear him. In some ways, fear of God in the Old Testament is the sort of, the seed which brings forth the fruit called faith.

[7 : 11] It's interesting that very rarely in the Old Testament are we told that people have faith in God. In the New Testament, time and again, have faith in God or have faith in Jesus Christ or trust him or believe in him.

But it's very rare in the Old Testament. What is more common and seems to take its place is the command to fear God. Fear in the end gives way to faith when the content of God is filled out so that we know our Lord Jesus Christ.

But fear is positive. It's relational. We fear a God whom we know to be the universal sovereign. Secondly, where to walk which suggests direction, purpose.

Notice that it's to walk in all God's ways. Not to walk in the ones we choose or to walk in the easy ones or the ones we like to do but to walk in all of God's ways.

And it's about behaviour and it's about action. If fear is about an attitude, this is about the action that stems from that attitude. Attitudes and actions going together.

[8 : 21] God is not wanting us to just do the right thing. He's wanting us to do the right thing accompanied by an attitude of right response to God in fear and love.

And of course love combines both action and attitude. Love we talked about three weeks ago in Deuteronomy 6. It's not a gooey sentimental feeling.

Certainly not something like love is defined today. But rather an act of the will. A decision to love. Which is both attitude and action combined together.

And of course we love because God first loved us. It's a reciprocal response to God. It's because he loves us that we are called to love him. But if we don't know that God loves us, then it will be impossible for us to love him in return.

Then fourthly is to serve God. Literally the word means to worship. So often we've got this wrong as Christians today.

[9 : 26] We think worship is about singing songs or hymns. Or that worship is about a quiet atmosphere or silence. It's to do with a quietness in worship gathering together on a Sunday morning.

But you see, worship is a much bigger concept than that. And if we think that when we worship God we're meaning 9.45 on a Sunday morning for about an hour and a quarter or an hour and 20 minutes if it goes a bit too long, then we've actually limited what worship really is about.

Worship is about all of life. It's about service of God. And everything we do is to be worship of God. Sometimes people complain about some of the things that we do in church and say that they're not very worshipful.

That complaint betrays an inadequate view of what worship is. Because worship is not about organs rather than pianos.

It's not about quietness rather than noise. It's not about listening rather than speaking. Sometimes people say the greeting of peace as we'll share later on is breaks up the worship.

[10:39] Well it's wrong because greeting one another with a Christian greeting of peace is part of our worship of God. If we don't like it then admit, well I don't like it but it's actually part of worshipping God and it's a good thing to do.

Worship is more even than just our Sunday mornings. Because what I do on a Monday morning is part of my worship and service of God as well as on a Sunday.

And the same on a Monday night or a Tuesday morning. When we're involved with our work and our negotiations with work colleagues and people we do business with that should be part of and seem to be part of my worship of God.

So how I do it is because of my relationship with God. The same with our leisure time. How we relate to those with whom we have leisure. How we spend our leisure time. Our attitudes and actions involved with our leisure.

Our family. Our relationships with parents or children or grandchildren. Whatever it is that involves our time during the week. All of it is our worship and service of God.

[11:43] The final one in this list is to keep the commandments and decrees of God. because obedience is part of responding to God. Something that we don't like to talk about and something that we probably play down a bit as Christians obeying God.

Seems to be very harsh. Seems to be something that's a bit of a hangover from Victorian times or something like that. And yet time and time again throughout Old and New Testaments we are called to obey God and obey his commands.

Notice that here our obedience of God is for our own well-being at the end of verse 13. It's not just for God but it's for our good as well that we obey him.

All of his commands. It's not a pick and mix. But so often it seems that the church is under pressure to dismiss many of God's commandments as though they're irrelevant to today's age and permissive society.

Certainly many of the Old Testament commandments are reinterpreted in the light of the New Testament and the coming of Jesus Christ. But many, many more still are valid and over the next few weeks we'll be looking at some of them in the sermons in the mornings on the central chapters of Deuteronomy.

[13:01] If we're to put all this together then what God is requiring is total allegiance to him. It's not a half-hearted allegiance or a begrudging allegiance but it's all-embracing for all of life to fear God to walk in all his ways to love him to serve him and to keep his commandments.

There is none of our lives that will fall outside our response to God for everything we do is in part our response to God. Total allegiance to God.

That's an impossible demand. none of us can fully meet that. And in the light of what we've seen in recent weeks about Israel we wonder almost what is the point of this impossible command because the Israel to whom it's directed is an Israel which has sinned and sinned badly and time and again remember the statements last week from the day I first knew you or from the day I took you out of Egypt until now you've been a stubborn stiff-necked rebellious people.

What hope is there that Israel is now going to do these things? What hope is there that Israel will fear God to walk in his ways to love him to serve him and to keep all his commandments because Israel is stubborn and stiff-necked time and time again it has failed God.

And yes it's true that God has forgiven Israel its sin as we saw last week but that is only half the story. Forgiveness is only half the gospel.

[14:45] Very often if we hear people express what does it mean to be a Christian they will say it means to be forgiven for your sins because of Jesus' death on the cross and true that is and central that is but it is only half the story because there is more.

The question is that being forgiven what now will Israel do? Will it change? Will it be different? Or will it just continue in its sin and rebellion and stiff-neckedness?

There is no suggestion that Israel can change. And yet at the middle of this chapter that we are looking at today comes a very important verse.

Verse 16 Circumcise then the foreskin of your heart and do not be stubborn any longer.

What an extraordinary command that is to circumcise the foreskin of your heart and be no longer stubborn. It's a recognition of Israel's failure.

[15 : 58] In the preceding chapters we saw last week Israel is described as being stubborn or literally it is stiff-necked. So now they are being told that that is their problem that is the root cause of their problem change it.

But what does it mean to change it? How can they change it? And why does God through Moses say circumcise the foreskin of your heart? What an odd command?

If I were to say to you I want you to go home today and circumcise the foreskins of your heart what on earth would you do? If you are like me you would probably be unsure what you are supposed to do.

Can we really do it? What is it about? We probably know that in the Old Testament the Jews the descendants of Abraham were commanded to circumcise themselves that is the men.

Back in Genesis 17 that is introduced that all the men who are descended from Abraham are to be circumcised and that is to be a sign of their allegiance to God.

[17 : 03] That is a very odd thing really. Have you ever wondered why the sign of belonging to God should only apply to men and should be private that nobody would ever see?

What is the point of having a sign of belonging to God that no one would ever see that would be so private? Why not have a mark on the forehead or something on your hand? Why circumcision?

In the chapter that preceded that in Genesis 16 Abraham had sexual relations with his wife's maid Hagar it produced a son called Ishmael Abraham thought that at last he was able to produce the heir that God had promised 25 or so years before that he was wrong God rebuked him he told him in effect that this was not his heir that he had to wait for God to keep his promise that he would give Abraham and his wife Sarah a son and circumcision was introduced as a sign of allegiance to God and trust in God but it was also a rebuke because it's at precisely the point where circumcision comes into play that Abraham had failed God he'd indulged in sexual relations with his wife's maid in order to bring about God's promises so Abraham and his descendants are commanded to be circumcised as a rebuke for Abraham having taken upon himself fulfilling God's promises he'd failed to trust God that's why circumcision is the sign of the covenant it's the sign of having to trust God and not to take upon oneself the promises of God so circumcision then comes to stand for

I guess the cutting away of pride the cutting away of rebellion the cutting away of stubbornness and trying to do for ourselves what God has actually promised that he would do so when we come to Deuteronomy 10 and it says circumcise the four skins of your heart it's now applying metaphorically what was there physically back in Genesis 17 but really all it's doing is getting to the root of what Genesis 17 and circumcision was all about in the first place that is trusting God that is being open to God and not being proud and taking upon oneself the promises of God Paul expresses this in Romans 2 and he says for he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly nor is true circumcision something external and physical he is a Jew who is one inwardly and real circumcision circumcision is a matter of the heart so then if we were to ask the question how do we treat a stiff neck the answer is open heart surgery and it's God in the end who will do that you see the circumcised heart is a heart that is sensitive to God's demands it is sensitive to the fact that God has chosen people for himself it is a heart that is responsive to God's love a heart that is attentive to God's promise a heart that is submissive to God's command a heart that is productive of God's fruit of righteousness it is a heart that is receptive to the grace of God's forgiveness is that a description of your heart is your heart attentive submissive responsive to God later on we'll be singing oh for a heart to praise my God a heart from sin set free a heart that's sprinkled with the blood so freely shed for me a heart resigned submissive meek my great redeemer's throne where only Christ is heard to speak where Jesus reigns alone a humble lowly contrite heart believing true and clean which neither life nor death can part from him who dwells within a heart in every thought renewed and full of love divine perfect and right and pure and good your life revealed in mine is that our heart before God in the Old

Testament there is a recognition that the heart does not change in Deuteronomy it's clear that Israel's heart does not change it doesn't circumcise its own heart and at the end of Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the Old Testament in Jeremiah and in Ezekiel and in other places in the prophets there is the promise of God that one day he will change people's hearts but not yet but when we get to the New Testament we find that God does it and he does it through Jesus' death on the cross for when we think of Jesus' death on the cross we often just think that his death was to bring us forgiveness but as I've said that's only half the story because Jesus' death on the cross does much more than that it actually gets to our heart and changes it in Christ you also were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ and you were buried with him in baptism in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead and you who are dead in trespass and the uncircumcision of your flesh

[22 : 47] God made alive together with him that's a powerful death that Jesus died it's not just to forgive us and leave us as we are but it's to forgive us and change us and it's all through the power of the death of Jesus on the cross 2000 years ago it's an extraordinarily powerful death to think that Jesus dying on a cross 2000 years ago can change my heart today and yet that's true that's how powerful Jesus' death is the power comes through his death and the means is through the spirit of God as we read in 2 Corinthians 3 but Israel's hearts were hardened for to this day when they read the old covenant that same veil remains unlifted because only through Christ is it taken away yes to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed now the Lord is the spirit and where the spirit of the Lord is there is freedom and we all with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory into another for this comes from the Lord who is the spirit imagine your life is like a house and each room is an area of your life your leisure your work your relationships and so on many people think that they've got to get their house right before they can ever let God in but of course we can never get it perfect because God is perfect

God wants to come in as it is and so the opening of the door and allowing God to come in is in a sense the forgiveness he says I forgive you the mess that your life or your house is in but I come in that's the first half but you see God doesn't stop there he then gets about the business inside us of cleaning it up changing us changing our heart that it may be right and that's the process we're all engaged with if we're Christian people for God's come into us he's forgiven us and now he's on the clean up job day by day week by week year by year as we grow as Christian people God is changing us and cleaning us up from the inside out is God doing that sort of clean up job on you or not many Christians are not involved in a change process it seems sometimes it's because we think of forgiveness too cheaply we say to God well thank you

God for forgiving me and we carry on with our lives unchanged that's a bit of an abuse of what Jesus has done for us on the cross sometimes I hear it said that oh we're too old to change I'm too set in my ways in the end that's heresy because we're never too old to change because God's power is even greater and indeed all of us whether young or old whether young or old in years or young or old in the faith we are to keep being changed by God that's what he's on about in our lives so whether we're nine days or ninety-nine years God is wanting to keep changing us from the inside out sometimes some of us might be worried about letting God in about losing control but remember it is for our good as the writer of Deuteronomy said in verse 13 sometimes our resistance to God changing us is really our pride coming to the fore our stiff neckness still there no I don't want God to take charge of my life

I don't want God to change me I'm happy with who I am it's hardly a Christian view it's an abuse of Jesus Christ death on the cross but sometimes we might be frustrated by our lack of change as I am often I think sometimes we get frustrated that God hasn't changed us as we want to be changed that we aren't yet approaching perfection but in the end that frustration is itself a sign that God is at work in us for if we weren't frustrated by that lack of change we would be saying in effect that God is not working in us the frustration itself is an evidence that God is at work cleaning us up the clean up job is God's work in us in the end it's his work that comes through the death of Jesus on the cross and it comes through the spirit dwelling within us who would not want to be changed by God who would not want to do what the

Lord requires given this gracious God the God who has done so much for us the God who is utterly faithful and dependable in every promise he's made the God who is generous in lavishing upon us

every blessing in Jesus Christ the God who is like a father training us and gently bearing us and carrying us on to maturity the God who is so gracious in forgiving us even all of our worst sins why would we not want to respond and do what the Lord requires of us Charles Wesley again captured this thought so well we're going to sing these words shortly but let's think about them in the light of this passage and see whether we mean it as we sing in our prayers to God love divine all loves excelling joy of heaven to earth come down fix in us your humble dwelling all your faithful mercies crown come almighty to deliver let us all your grace receive suddenly return and never never more your temple leave you we would be always blessing serve you as the hosts above pray and praise you without ceasing glory in your perfect love finish then your new creation pure and sinless let us be let us see your great salvation perfect in eternity changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place there to cast our crowns before you lost in wonder love and praise let's sing those words for ourselves hymn number 217 that ive their ive ought two