

All Saints Talk for Sunday 9th July 2023

Sermon Title: **'Loving God, loving others'**

Tom Yacomeni

The 11th in our series 'Journey to the Promised Land'

Reading: Deuteronomy 10:6-22

⁶(The Israelites travelled from the wells of Bene Jaakan to Moserah. There Aaron died and was buried, and Eleazar his son succeeded him as priest. ⁷From there they travelled to Gudgodah and on to Jotbathah, a land with streams of water. ⁸At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister and to pronounce blessings in his name, as they still do today. ⁹That is why the Levites have no share or inheritance among their fellow Israelites; the LORD is their inheritance, as the LORD your God told them.)

¹⁰Now I had stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights, as I did the first time, and the LORD listened to me at this time also. It was not his will to destroy you. ¹¹“Go,” the LORD said to me, “and lead the people on their way, so that they may enter and possess the land I swore to their ancestors to give them.”

¹²And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

¹⁴To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. ¹⁵Yet the LORD set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations—as it is today. ¹⁶Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. ¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. ¹⁹And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. ²⁰Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name. ²¹He is the one you praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. ²²Your ancestors 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.

Over the past couple of months our sermon series *Journey to the promised land* has been following the early history of God's people through Genesis, Exodus and Numbers. The journey began with the call of Abraham to depart from his Father's household to go to an unknown destination. He set out in faith and after purchasing some land near Hebron, Abraham was buried there along with his wife Sarah and then his son Isaac., Abraham's grandson Jacob relocated to live in Egypt when famine struck because his son Joseph had miraculously risen to power under Pharaoh. Fast forward 400 years and the Israelites had multiplied so much that they threatened the Egyptians and were enslaved in response. Cue Moses, whom God called to lead his people out of Egypt and bring them into freedom. After the dramatic story of the Exodus and the parting of the Red Sea (strictly the 'Sea of Reeds'), the Israelites could have headed straight for Canaan to claim the promised land of their Ancestors. But the challenge was too much for them and they rebelled against Moses and the leadership, grumbling that it would have been better to stay back in Egypt. So for 38 years they wandered in the wilderness until the grumbling generation had all but died out. We saw how God used life in the wilderness to teach the Israelites to trust him again. He provided their food, water and security until the time approached for them to finally prepare to cross the Jordan. And this is where we pick up the story today in Deuteronomy. The Original Hebrew title for this book actually means 'The Words' because it records the last words of Moses and his valedictory speech as he prepares the people to enter the promised land.

In 2008 Randy Pausch published an amazing book called 'The Last Lecture'. In the forward he writes:

"I have an engineering problem. While for the most part, I'm in terrific physical shape, I have ten tumours in my liver and I only have a few months to live. I am the father of three young children and married to the woman of my dreams. While I could easily feel sorry for myself, that wouldn't do them or me any good. So how to spend my very limited time?

As a lecturer at Carnegie Mellon University Randy decided that he would try to leave a legacy for his children in the form of a videotaped 'last lecture', written to teach his children what I would've taught them over the next 20 years. He continues:

I knew what I was doing that day. Under the ruse of giving an academic lecture, I was trying to put myself in a bottle that would one day wash up on the beach for my children. If I were a painter, I would've painted for

them. If I were a musician, I would've composed music. But I am a lecturer, so I lectured.

Deuteronomy is Moses' *last lecture*, trying his best to distil all that would be important for Israel over the coming years for them to maintain their identity, calling and commission as the chosen people of God in the world.

Our passage today is perhaps the central focus of his speech. And his words have reverberated down the centuries of both Jewish and Christian faiths, because at the heart of the matter is the matter of the human heart, and where our anchor point is for our spiritual and moral character.

For centuries since God's covenant with Abraham, the sign of the Jewish identity was circumcision, the permanent cutting of the male foreskin soon after birth. It was a tribal identifier, but for Moses, outward physical identity was not enough on its own. In Verse 16 of chapter 10 he challenges all God's people to adopt not just outward religion, but actually adopt an inward posture of humility: 'Circumcise your hearts, therefore and do not be stiff-necked any longer.' Paul echoes this in Romans 2v29 that for Christians, the attitude of the heart is far more important than any physical token of religious affiliation: 'A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.²⁹ No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

For years the Israelites had wandered around in the desert wrestling over who would be in control of their lives and their destiny. Would they submit to God's guidance and leadership, or would they keep hard-set on their own desires and plans? We still face that same decision in our lives today. Do we try to remain master of our own destiny or are we willing to let God lead us and guide us – perhaps sometimes into places that are challenging or awkward? What is the posture of your heart? Is it hard or soft, bowed in submission or hard set looking for control?

It took nearly 40 years for the Israelites to be soft-hearted enough to be willing to follow God and to obey his commands fully– to get them ready to steward the fruitfulness of the promised land.

Jesus said that God is still looking for people who are fruitful – growing in obedience, love and kindness towards God and other people. Moses sums up the same sentiment in verse 12-14:

¹² And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, 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?

The King James puts the question like this 'what does the LORD thy God require of thee?'

The prophet Micah asks the same question: 'what does the Lord require of you?' and he simplifies the answer with what has become known as the Micah mandate: 'To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.'

Moses' original commission to Israel lists 5 keys for fruitful living reminding the people that it is *for their own wellbeing*

- Fear the Lord
- Walk in obedience to him
- Love him
- Serve him with all your heart and soul
- Observe the Lord's commands

In other words, Moses exhorts God's people to centre themselves on the Lord, and that is the key to a fulfilled and fruitful life. When God is your focus, you can trust that all will be well with your soul.

And yet that is only half the story isn't it. Because despite Moses' wonderful speech and exhortation to the Israelites – the rest of the Old Testament shows they failed miserably trying to fulfil it.

Yes, they entered the promised land, yes, they battled for years and gathered in worship, they eventually established a monarchy like the other nations around them, but time and time again, they could not fulfil Moses' commission. They went their own way, struggling with episodes of selfishness, violence, and corruption.

Israel eventually fell into civil war – Israel's tribes fighting amongst themselves, as well as all the nations surrounding them. The only time there was relative peace was in the reign of Solomon when the temple was built and Israel prospered. But he didn't finish well, even 700 concubines wasn't enough to satisfy him!

Our good aspirations alone are no match for the challenges posed by the world, the flesh and the devil.

There is not even one of us who can love God and love others consistently as the Lord requires. We cannot do it. Everyone screws up. Politicians screw up, Police forces screw up, Church leaders screw up too.

Which is why Jesus had to come.

He answered the question 'what does God require of us?' in a new way.

John 6v28: 'Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

The name Jesus means 'God Saves'. To believe in Jesus is to throw ourselves on the mercy and forgiveness that God bought and paid for.

So instead of us self-helping ourselves into God's presence, faith in Jesus allows us to get right with God despite our weakness and sin. In Christ, God himself gave us the leg up we need.

It is the combination of Moses' command to centre our lives on loving God and loving others, along with the power of forgiveness and grace revealed in Jesus that has literally transformed the world.

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Church, not only as a visible witness but also as a gift for the church to enable Christians to actually live the way he wants us to, in devotion to God and with clean hands and a pure heart.

Sometimes we overlook what an extraordinary transformation Christianity has brought to the world. Tom Holland, the historian and former Atheist wrote that it was while he was initially excited to study what he thought would be the glamorous wonders of the ancient world, he then realised how cruel and utterly barbaric the prevailing cultures were at the time: He studied Greek and Roman culture particularly but concluded:

'This is a really terrifying alien world and the more you look at it, the more you realize that it is built on systematic exploitation... In almost every way, this is a world that is unspeakably cruel to our way of thinking and this worried me more and more.

Since Holland found the world he lived in to be so radically different from that of ancient Rome and Greece, he asked himself where those values came from? Our commitment to values of human dignity and equal rights didn't spring from a vacuum. After extensive study, he concluded that they grew out of Christianity and that 'most people are oblivious to the way in which the West's Christian heritage has shaped modern education, healthcare, music, art, literature and the scientific revolution, to name but a few'.

The life of Jesus explained through the words of the Bible have touched every one of us in ways we cannot begin to imagine:

“Compacted into this very, very small amount of writing was almost everything that explains the modern world and the way the West has then moved on to shape concepts like international law, concepts of human rights, all these kind of things. Ultimately, they don't go back to Greek philosophers, they don't go back to Roman imperialism. They go back to Paul. His letters, I think, along with the four gospels, are the most influential, the most impactful, the most revolutionary writings that have emerged from the ancient world.”

Moses exhorted people to love God and love others, Jesus paid the price that we can receive grace, forgiveness and start each day with a clean page. The Holy Spirit was given so that we could be filled with power to share the message and live a life of love. He is still transforming lives today – if we are only willing to ask! So let's pray and ask now.