

God Covenants  
Deuteronomy 6:4–12; 7:1–11  
Sunday, October 17, 2021

“If I have told you once, I have told you a hundred times!”

While we might not have said those exact words, those of us who have had to raise or in any way *deal* with children have at some point said some version of that.

“I keep telling you *not* to leave your clothes on the floor.”

“This is the *third time* I have told you to put away your iPad and go get ready for bed!”

“You *know* that you are not supposed to hit your sibling. We have talked about this *many times*.”

As a parent, you feel like if you just say the thing enough times, eventually it will soak in and take root – repetition breeds retention – and yet it *never does*. So we just stop parenting them, right? We just give up and say, “Alright, I quit. If you aren’t going to listen, you just go do whatever you want, and I’ll go do whatever I want.” We stop loving them and end the relationship with them if they aren’t going to listen to us, right? Of course not. Because there is a part of every parent that loves their children regardless of behavior. We may not *like* their behavior, but we love them *anyway*. And there is a part of us that keeps hoping they’ll get it.

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Let’s think about the book of Deuteronomy like that. After looking at Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, we get to Deuteronomy and think, “*Again?* This is just repeating the same laws we have already heard several times before!” It’s like God is saying, “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a hundred times! Thou shalt not....” And it’s not just the *laws*. The book of

Deuteronomy is big on *repeating*. Almost like repetition breeds retention. The first three chapters of Deuteronomy are just Moses retelling the whole history of the Exodus. Remember what we heard last week: the generation that actually *left* Egypt has died off in the 40 years that they were wandering in the wilderness. So Moses is retelling the story to people who did not live through it all. “First we went *here*, and *this* happened. Then we went *there*, and *that* happened.” For three chapters. It’s like when a TV show starts off with, “Previously on…” and then shows you the important things that have happened up to that point. That’s how Deuteronomy is starting off. “Previously in the Torah…”

Then Moses spends 40 verses in chapter 4 saying, “Listen to these teachings. Pay attention to these teachings. Obey these teachings.” The same thing, over and over again, for 40 verses. In chapter 5, Moses repeats the Ten Commandments. Then in chapter 6, again, we get, “Keep these commandments. Obey these teachings. Teach them to your children. Write them on your doorposts.” Chapters 7–11 all essentially say, “As you are going into this land, keep these commandments and obey God!” Chapters 12–26 state the commandments, the law that God is calling the people to keep. Then chapter 27 says, “Keep these commandments!” Chapter 28, “Obey God and keep these commandments!” It’s like the whole book is a continual reminder over and over again to keep the commandments and obey God as they go into the land that God is giving them.

Deuteronomy is all about *remembering*. Remembering the *law*. Remembering *God*. Remembering *what God has done for them*. Remembering *who they are* and *where they came from*. As it says, “Take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” It is all about *remembering*. Deuteronomy stresses the importance of loyalty to God and keeping covenant. And God’s covenant with Israel is summed

up in our first reading from chapter 6. This is one of the most central texts in all of Hebrew scripture. It's called the *Shema*. *Shema* is a Hebrew word that means *hear* or *listen*. So, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart." That is *Israel's* end of the deal; *their* part of the covenant. Love God and keep God's commandments. *God's* end of the deal is that God will give them this land and bless them in it. They will be God's people, and God will be their God. That is the covenant that God made with Israel.

And when the people don't listen – which we know they don't – when they *fail* to keep their end of the covenant, God just walks away, right? God finds a *different* people who *will* listen and obey. God says, "You're not going to listen? Fine. You go your way, and I'll go mine. We're done. Go do whatever you want." No. Because that's not how covenant works. There is a part of God that loves the people regardless of their failure to love God. Doesn't *like* their behavior, but loves them anyway and keeps hoping they will eventually *get it*.

The funny thing is, this is not a negotiation. There is no back and forth here. God is saying, "This is the covenant. This is the deal. This is what *you're* going to do, and this is what *I'm* going to do." It's almost like the people don't have a choice in the matter. *God* has established this covenant. And their only choice is whether they will be *obedient* or *disobedient* within that covenant. But their disobedience does not *negate* the covenant. It doesn't change the promises that are being made.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann talks about it this way. He says, "Let's say that you promise to mow my lawn, and I promise to pay you \$20. In a covenant, if you fail to mow my

lawn, I still pay you \$20.” Now, that is not the way that we are *used* to thinking about relationships. We’re used to, “You live up to *your* end of the deal, and *if you do*, I will live up to *mine*.” I mean, how many of us would keep paying the lawn guy if he just stopped showing up? We would come back and say, “No, no, we have a *contract*, so either you make this right, or our relationship is over, and I might even take steps to get my money back from you.” As Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are used to thinking in terms of *contract*, not *covenant*. But there is a massive difference between the two.

There is a theologian named Curtis Almquist who writes,

A covenant is not the same as a contract. A contract is a transaction, but a covenant is a relationship. A contract is about *interests* (what we *want*), but a covenant is about *identity* (who we *are*)...Contracts benefit, but covenants transform...In a covenant, two or more individuals, each respecting the dignity and the integrity of the other, come together in a bond of love and trust, to share their lives by pledging faithfulness to one another, to do together what neither can do alone. A covenant is about *relationship*, a relationship that invites and presumes a transformative change in both persons, both parties.<sup>1</sup>

In a contract two parties agree upon terms for how a relationship or exchange of goods or services will take place. If one party fails to meet the agreed upon terms, the contract is nullified. If I hire you to mow my lawn, agreeing to pay you a certain amount for your work, but you fail to mow my lawn, our contract is broken, and I owe you nothing. We can both choose to walk away from the relationship. In a covenant, though, the nature of the relationship is not dependent upon either side’s ability to uphold the specified terms. If we enter into a covenantal relationship in which I agree to pay you to mow my lawn, and you fail to mow my lawn, I still pay you. I keep my side of the covenantal agreement, and while I might urge you to fulfill your side, I do not walk away from the relationship. We work to preserve the “bond of love and trust.”

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<sup>1</sup> Br. Curtis Almquist, “The Covenant with Abraham and His Descendants,” Published online by the Society of St. John the Evangelist (March 8, 2009).

This is the kind of relationship we see with God and Israel. God has stipulated the terms of this covenant, and while Israel may or may not fulfill their end of the deal, their response does not make or break the covenant. Their disobedience does not break the relationship, and God does not walk away. Rather, what we see in scripture is that God continually calls them back, reminding them of the covenant. Because *God is faithful*.

And this is the kind of relationship that *we* have with God through Jesus Christ. Christ has made *us* a part of God's covenant with Israel. Through Christ *we* have been called to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our might. The problem is, so many Christians view the nature of our relationship with God as a *contract*, because that's how we're used to thinking. That if I do well and keep my end of the deal, God will love me and bless me, but if I mess up or make a mistake or am disobedient, then God will walk away from the relationship and be done with me. But God is faithful, even when we are not. God keeps calling us back, keeps forgiving us, keeps loving us. God works to preserve the bond of love and trust. God's love for us does not depend on how good *we* are. It depends on how good *God* is. And God was so committed to this – to *us* – that God was willing to *die* for it.

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The greatest challenge of our faith is to live that way with each other. To understand our relationships with each other not as contracts that can be broken if this other person doesn't live up to their end of the deal or if they do something I don't like. But as covenants that, just as God's covenantal love with Israel was extended to *us* through Jesus Christ, so we must now extend that same love to one another. Author Christine Pohl writes, "The God we worship and serve is one who has made promises to us, lives in a covenantal relationship with us, and is faithful even when we are unfaithful. Promise-making, promise-keeping, fidelity, and

commitment are central to how we relate to God and how God relates to us...so it should not surprise us that *making* promises and *keeping* promises are also at the heart of what is best in our human relationships.”<sup>2</sup>

Our relationships – with our friends, our families, our spouses, our children, our parents, our neighbors, our fellow church members, our *churches*, and even our enemies, those people with whom we *don't* get along, and they are *hard* to love – we are called to be toward them as God is to us. Our relationships with them are not an exchange of goods and services; they're not *transactional*. They are supposed to be *transformational*. We are called to bear with one another, even through the most difficult times. To keep *loving* one another. To keep *forgiving* one another. To preserve the bond of love and trust. To be faithful, even when they are not.

And that's the hardest part. Because it opens us up to being hurt and taken advantage of. But that doesn't just mean that we roll over and let them do it. In a covenant relationship, we keep calling them back and reminding them of the covenant. And that is hard, painful work sometimes. But we don't just break ties and walk away. We *can't*. Because *God* has brought us together. God has called us into covenant with one another. And just as God does not walk away from us when *we* fail to uphold *our* end of the covenant, so we cannot walk away from one another, because the nature of our life together is not *contractual* but *covenantal*, and our failures and disagreements with one another do not *negate* that covenant.

God did not say to Israel, “I *chose* you, and I *love* you because of how *great* you are.” God said, “It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that I set my heart on you and chose you – for you were the *fewest* of all peoples. It was because I love you. I have chosen

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<sup>2</sup> Christine Pohl, *Living into Community*, pg. 62.

you, chosen to love you, and that love will transform you.” God does not call us to prove ourselves or meet certain requirements or to change *before* God loves us. Rather, it is God’s love that brings about transformation in us. We cannot require others to change before we will love them. We are called to love them *as they are*, the way that God loves us. Because what if it is that love, that experience of grace, that brings about transformation? It is the hardest thing you will ever do. And at times it may feel like it’s *killing* you. And then you will understand a little bit more the love that God has for us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.