

The Fifteenth Sunday of Pentecost

September 6, 2015

Prayer of the Day: O Lord Jesus Christ, preserve the congregation of believers with your never-failing mercy. Help us avoid whatever is wicked and harmful, and guide us in the way that leads to our salvation; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day: Alleluia! “Your words became a joy to me, and the delight of my heart.” Alleluia! (Jeremiah 15:15).

Sermon Text: Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

What was your reaction when we read through our First Lesson? A part of me found God’s words as positive. He promises life. He guarantees earthly blessings in the form of land and respect. He says that our Christian lives will lead people to himself. Overall, his words give me another reason to praise him. Yet, another part of me really struggles with what he says. Maybe the struggle is not mine alone, but something that you also face.

We come across two commands: “Listen to my decrees and laws!” and “Observe them very carefully!” Then those commands are backed by an even sterner command: “Do not add to my teaching; do not subtract from it.” As I read over these words, I look around and see how the world’s definitions on morality have only grown broader. I see individual people push back against leadership. I watch television shows which [I imagine] are pretty accurate in portraying present-day life. I can reflect on my own life, how my words have changed to better address certain situations, how my actions change to demonstrate better care, how my mindset has changed from a teenager to an adult. Then I read these words “Keep my laws; observe my commands!” or, put in another way, “Do not change my commands!” These words do not come from an earthly king or some influential speaker; they come from God himself! It only increases that struggle warring inside: how do I view God’s unchangeable words in an ever-changing world with ever-changing situations.

Like I said earlier, maybe you have experienced that same struggle. Perhaps you face it right now. You face some life change and wonder: **WHY LISTEN TO THE WORD OF THE LORD?**

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8

¹ Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. ² Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you...
⁶ Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” ⁷ What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? ⁸ And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

I wonder if the Israelites were wondering that very same thing. Their life was about to change.

At the time of our reading, that Israelite nation stands on the shoreline of the Jordan River, their eyes surveying the wide expanse of land on the other side. They had been waiting for this moment for over 40-years. For 40-some-years of their life, they had to set up tents and pack up tents. For 40-some-years, they strapped on their sandals to continue their 1,000-mile walk over sand and stones, up hills and down hills, around enemy nations and through enemy nations. For 40-some-years, they gathered God-given manna and quail. For 40-some-years, they dreamt about this place called “home,” but had never once touched or sat in or looked at this place called “home.”

Now they stand here. All that separates them from “home” is a river less than a mile wide. Life is going to change. Their lifestyle—what food they eat and what clothes they wear—will change. Their routine—their cycle of morning duties—will change. Their careers and jobs will change.

Yet, one thing will not change. God tells us: **Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.** These Israelites received God’s Ten Commandments, a civil law governing their political life, and a law instructing them how to worship. Even though God gave these laws while they had a desert-living-lifestyle, these commands were not going to be left behind at the Jordan River. Those commands were coming with them into their new life.

WHY LISTEN TO THE WORD OF THE LORD? Does it seem that God’s commands would no longer apply to an entirely new setting with entirely new neighbors, new landscape, new promises? I mean, even today people push to change the United States’ Constitution— and that document is only 239 years old! God’s commands are thousands of years old!

WHY LISTEN TO THE WORD OF THE LORD? It just feels like some things would no longer apply, right? Yes, God’s statement is clear: “Do you not know that you are a temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you?... Therefore honor God with your bodies” ([1 Corinthians 6:19-20](#)). Yes, Jesus pleads with you: “Do not give up worshipping with your fellow believers” ([Hebrews 10:25](#)). Yes, Jesus warns you: “Watch your life and your doctrine closely” ([1 Timothy 4:16](#)). Yet, do you ever find yourself creating reasons as to why those words are really not all that important? How easy to find the ways people defile their bodies, turning it over to nights of excess, as funny!— and maybe even pass along our own stories. How often that little voice calls every-Sunday-worship a church rule— something people made up— and not God. We may think it does not matter what we believe about Scripture as long as we are genuine and kind people.

Is it not a struggle to keep and do everything God commands? Yet, is it a struggle because God’s commands appear to not apply today or because we say they do not apply today?

Do you see what happens when you say God’s Word must be changed—whether in your personal life or in public? If you add something you want to hear, then who has decided to change whose word? If you subtract a command that seems outdated, then

what have you said about God's original command? You see, to change even one letter of God's Word declares that you have some authority to tell God what you will and will not believe.

What does that authority say about your status before God? That you have more authority than God! That in the end you decide what will bring yourself into heaven. That God is no longer needed to save you. That God's Word is no longer needed at all. If we believe that we do not need to **Listen to the Word of the Lord**, then we say that we do not need God any longer.

My dear friends, remember **WHY** we **LISTEN TO THE WORD OF THE LORD**. God says: **Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you.** Did you catch the promise God makes? **WHY LISTEN TO THE WORD OF THE LORD?** *So that you might live.*

How? Because only the Word of God has changed your eternal outcome—and Jesus changed it for you. Your Savior lives in a world changing all around him too. He meets many who live in bodily sin. He meets people who find no reason to worship God. Religious leaders want him to approve changing God's Word to allow for another way into heaven.

Yet, Jesus keeps and does everything God commands. His body is free from sin. He worships regularly— as his custom. He does not add or subtract to God's commands. Never once does he demand that his heavenly Father listen to him, but rather he humbly listens to his Father—even when the Father's says that Jesus must suffer and die.

There on the cross, Jesus endures what you and I deserve for anytime we listen to our own words above God's Word. Yes, he endures our punishment *so that you and I might live*. He tells you that three days after his death. He comes out of his grave and proclaims to you that very real truth: you and I do have life because Jesus listens to the Word of the Lord.

That changes our perspective on how treat God's Word. We listen to it because our Jesus has removed all those times we did not listen to it. Because God's unchanging Word is still in effect, we gladly listen to it.

So, why keep and do God's commands? As we just said, you will have the guarantee of eternal life. Yet, here is a second reason: you **Listen to the Word of the Lord** *so that others might live*.

That is what God says: **Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations...** Did you catch that? You display wisdom and understanding to the world around you; the world calls you wise and understanding! You might not feel like you possess this wisdom, but you are wise. In fact, you are truly the wisest among all the people on earth because you possess the only thing that truly matters: the forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life.

Yes, many people are smarter than us. Nuclear physicists map out hypothetical theories. Scientists put people into space. Economists can diagram a complex economy in

the simplest of terms. While these people give us many earthly blessings, what does this plain knowledge gain in the end? Can sending a person into space send a person into God's heaven? Knowing investment strategies— is that going to safeguard someone from hell? Better yet, does this knowledge remove sins from people? No. These human blessings help us on earth, but their wisdom ultimately fades away. Only God's Word— words which you know and have— those words never fade away.

Because you possess those words, it means that you are wise. Yes, that thinking still sounds weird. The reality is, this verse does contradict what our world considers "wise" because God's definition of "wisdom" is different than the world's definition of "wisdom." So, it means that you will stand out in this world. People might ask: "You still hold to all the Word of God? But so many people believe that it has contradictions in it!" "You believe that you will go to heaven simply because Jesus died for your sins? So many can only 'hope' for heaven; they have no certainty that they will end up there! How do you have that a real hope?" "How is it that your life appears so orderly?"

You know, sometimes people ask those questions because they do not hear the answers today. Think of all the broken hopes and promises the world hands them. Think of how many are wary and skeptical of trusting someone else's words. Think of how many churches openly add and subtract from God's commands. The world only changes God's perfect word into more imperfect, untrustworthy words!

So, as you live in this world, people will look at you differently. They will be amazed at what you tell them or how you live your life. Some might even say: **"Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?"**

Yes, your words will sound different because God's Words are perfect Words for imperfect people. Have you ever pondered that? How you stand out because you stand on God's unchanging promises? You know, even after Israel moved into their long-awaited land, they stood out. The nations all around them heard how their God brought them from Egypt, through 1,000 miles of desert, and into a new land. Then some of those heathen nations were introduced to the saving faith in the one true God. **LISTENING TO THE WORD OF THE LORD brought life to others.**

Yes, we come across that stern command: "Do not add to my teaching; do not subtract from it." Yet, it is not negative, not binding, not slavish. No, by holding to God's entire Word, Jesus set us free from sin. Now we cling to that Word above all things. Yes, the temptation to change the Word will always be there. Your life changes will entice you to put our thoughts above God's Word. Yet, remember how you cling to that Word because it brought you life eternal and still reminds you of that truth in this earthly life!

Remember that you now stand as this bright light, this fragile vessel holding something so precious. Cherish the wisdom you get to share with all the world. Pray that God uses you to bring that wise understanding to many others.

What reasons to **LISTEN TO THE WORD OF THE LORD!** *so that you might live, so that others might live.*