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Exodus 24:12, English Standard Version.

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Putting teeth in the Two Great Commandments.

Here is Exodus 24:12 from the English Standard Version:

¹² The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”

In the original Hebrew, the word that is translated as “law” is *Torah*, and the word that is translated as “commandment” is *Mitzvah*, which is translated roughly to commandment, but also can mean “a good deed”. Notice that the commandments, rather than being rules that people must follow blindly, are specifically defined to be the way to perform good deeds in life. The Ten Commandments, therefore, in the eyes of God, tell us how to lead a good life. They are not punitive. They are positive. Importantly, the law, in the eyes of the Israelites and later the Jews, is the Torah, the first five books of our Bible – and the core of Hebrew Scripture. Consider what Paul writes in Galatians 3:23-25:

²³ But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

This is the New King James version, and I chose it because it is the most literal translation of the common translations. Note the last word: “tutor”. Other good words to use here would be “trainer” or “teacher”. We often think of Paul as saying that now that we are followers of Christ, we no longer must follow the law. Our faith frees us from the burden of the tedious Jewish laws. Remember that Paul is a Jew. What he is saying is that we have faith in Christ now, and he changes our relationship with the Torah. It was our tutor, our teacher, until Christ came, and now we are justified, saved, by faith. We are no longer in need of that teacher, the Torah. The Torah kept God alive in our hearts. The Torah gave us a path to living good, holy lives, until the Messiah came, and we obtained lives of faith.

We have been taught to ignore the Torah, at least with respect to its “laws”, its rules of behavior. Even Jesus Christ said:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Jesus seems to make it very clear that the Law, meaning the Torah, including the Ten Commandments given to Moses, and all the warnings of the Prophets, are

superseded by his two great commandments. But it doesn't literally say "superseded". Rather, the implication is that if you do follow these two great commandments, you will find yourself following all that is crucial in the Torah, at least in the eyes of a follower of Jesus. But there is more in the Torah than just the Ten Commandments and countless rules about daily life, such as not planting two kinds of seed in one field, not wearing clothing of two different types of fabric such as linen and wool, and not killing a burglar during the day – but rather, only at night. The Israelites and later the Jews were surrounded by pagans. The People of God were constantly falling into the pagan practices of their neighbors. A life heavily organized around religious law kept God in their minds and gave them a strong sense of spiritual community. Moreover, if we look at the Torah, we find things that are very useful for us today. And it might not be immediately obvious as we rush through our daily lives, that these laws directly follow from Jesus' commandments.

Consider this from Numbers, the fourth book of the Torah, Chapter 35. It appears in a discussion about the evilness of murder:

³¹ Moreover, you shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer, who is guilty of death, but he shall be put to death.

If you think about how often politicians negotiate away what are otherwise inflexible laws, this law that the Israelites were bound by God to follow, is

intriguing. We do often set evil people free in exchange for something that we consider to be the best for the common good. We do set brutal killers free in exchange for the release of hostages or other prisoners. How often do we compromise our morality for the sake of political or social expediency?

This is from the beginning of Chapter 19 of Leviticus, the third book of the Torah. It introduces a section on keeping the Sabbath, making offerings to God, and giving generously to the poor:

***19** And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.*

This says that we should strive for the impossible: to be as holy as God. Being holy literally means that we set aside our lives for a divine purpose, for the honor of God, to follow Jesus Christ in everything we do. It means that we are constantly vigilant, maintaining a spiritual self-awareness in everything we do. The Hebrew word for holy means “set apart”. To truly follow this order given to Moses by God, we should dedicate our lives to our faith. This is an unobtainable standard. We should strive in life to come as close as we can to this goal. This is how we truly, as Jesus commanded, love God with all our heart, soul, and mind.

In Deuteronomy 24, the fifth and last book of the Torah, we are given some very powerful orders about giving. This was delivered by God to a people who lived

mostly by farming. For us today, we must use our creativity in interpreting it for people who live by different means than agriculture.

¹⁹ “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. ²⁰ When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. ²¹ When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. ²² You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.

We are to remember all that God has given us, just as the Israelites were to remember how they were freed from the Egyptians. When we, in everything we do, keep the poor, the lost, the visitor in mind, God will indeed bless our work.

In Deuteronomy, in Chapter 11, we are given instruction on how to treat someone who is in need and then how to treat them later, when, because of their need, they are in debt. We begin to see how central giving is to the People of God.

The commandment to be generous is repeated over and over in the Torah.

⁷ “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, ⁸ but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. ⁹ Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, ‘The seventh year, the year of release is near,’ and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you, and you be guilty of sin. ¹⁰ You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹ For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command

you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'

There is a lot here to unpack. We are to take note of anyone in financial trouble around us. We are to lend to him. This, of course, must be taken from a modern perspective, but the point is that we provide tangible help to someone in need. We are to keep an eye on our heart and make sure we don't get resentful or arrogant. The "*seventh year release*" refers to an ancient Israelite practice to forgive all debts every seven years. This is a fixed seven-year cycle for everyone: every seventh calendar year is a year of release for all debts, for everyone. You are to forgive debts with an open, gracious heart. This passage also points out that there will always be poor people, and so you are never free from helping the poor. This help that you give without any resentment and in fact, with joy, is real giving of your own personal assets. There is a reward: God will in turn bless you and bless all that you undertake in life. We see the value that the Israelites and then the Jews had for the blessing of God. It was not some abstract Sunday morning concept.

Indeed, there is something that we gain by going this extra incredible mile and sticking to even the most difficult to follow laws of God. This is from Chapter 19 of Exodus, the second book of the Torah. Moses is at Mount Sinai. God is speaking, and we get a clearer view of the reward for being holy:

⁴‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

God first reminds Moses that he miraculously led them out of Egypt. Now, he is saying that he expects the People of God to keep all his laws – all of them – but that in return, the Israelites will be treasured by God. From a spiritual perspective, they will form a holy nation. God tells Moses to pass this on to the people, in his name. Does our nation meet this standard? Do we even strive for it at all?

The notion of giving was blended into every aspect of their lives. They had slavery in ancient Israel. Slavery often had economic roots, but most of their slaves were not Israelites. Still, and this isn’t to excuse slavery, which was widely prevalent in the ancient world, slaves were treated far more humanely than slaves in America were treated. Slaves frequently obtained permanent freedom. This is from Deuteronomy 23. We see that they had a law that was the opposite of the fugitive slave law of the United States:

¹⁵“You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. ¹⁶He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him.

There is much, much more in the Torah about living a holy life. There is a lot more detail than we put into Jesus’ two, simple commandments. But if we think

about it, surely, those commandments in a general sense, do imply all that we have looked at today. Perhaps we should start studying the Torah to see how we can enhance our state of holiness, how we can bring ourselves closer to God and live gratifying lives of faith. It can be hard to find the common moral thread when reading the Torah because so much else is blended in, including the history of the Hebrews who escaped Egypt, entered Canaan, and became the Israelites, as well as many laws that are not relevant to us today. But the Torah contains a strong set of requirements that is set for the People of God, and bit by bit, we can pull it together. We discover that God held his people to a standard that is much higher than what we in the United States hold ourselves to today. God is not the central focus of the lives of Americans. There is a lot that we can learn about truly being followers of Christ by reading the most ancient of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures.

Let me finish with one more quote from the Torah. This is from Leviticus, Chapter 19. It offers us a standard that we certainly do not meet in today's U.S.A.:

¹⁵ "You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor."

One of the goals of the Torah-based system of law was to truly enforce that second law of Jesus: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. Would we favor the wealthy in our legal system by allowing people with money to buy their way out of trouble

by hiring the most expensive legal help? Would we set free someone who happens to be in a politically correct or a politically powerful situation - but who has committed a crime that significantly harmed someone?

I spoke a while back with a rabbi. He told me that Judaism is a religion of justice and compassion, just as much as Christianity. I told him that this is certainly reflected in the Torah. Although it's not immediately clear to a Christian reader, while the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew goes through Joseph's line, the genealogy of Jesus in Luke goes through Mary's line. The two family lines show that Jesus is a descendent of King David through both his father and his mother. The Gospels do not describe Jesus as coming to Earth as a man so that he could start a new religion. His followers did that. Jesus, as a man, was born, died, and was resurrected as a Jew. Jesus himself was a man of justice and compassion to the nth degree. He taught from the Torah in the Temple. When we study the Pentateuch, which means "five scrolls" in Greek, and what Jews call the Torah, we learn what it means to put some teeth in the two great commandments of Jesus. Please pray with me.

God, your son Jesus lived his earthly life as a Jew. He studied the Torah as he preached in the Temple. Guide us as we learn to expand our faith, deepen our dedication to living by the ways of Jesus, and strive to be holy. May we honor the Holy Book used by Jesus the Messiah. Amen.