**The importance of the right attitude**

Text: Deuteronomy 9-11

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 10:12-22; Romans 2:25-29

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 211, 51, 131, 451, 533

**Series:** Deuteronomy (#7)

**Theme:** Though His servant Moses, the Lord calls His covenant people not to continue to be stubborn, but to have a heart attitude that willingly yields to the Lord’s will resulting in a life of worship in which He alone is most feared, loved, served and praised.

**Proposition:** Have a heart first and foremost for the Lord alone

**Introduction**

I was talking with a friend this past week. This is a person I don’t believe is a Christian as yet. They had experienced a religious life in the past and had sought to be very devout in how they lived. They had strictly practiced the ‘right’ outward behaviours, before largely dropping any interest in ‘religion’. This person said something like this to me ‘I don’t think that what is important is so much what I do, but more what is in my heart’. This made me think about the words of Jesus ‘*You are not far from the kingdom of God*’ (Mark 12:34). He said “*For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person*." (Mark 7:21-23)

In the extended last sermon of Moses to the nation of Israel gathered on the eastern border of the promised land, this servant of the Lord is explaining the law of God (1:5). In this good law there are many ‘statutes and rules’ (5:1), including the ten commandments, regulations about worship, property, warfare, marriage, and behaviour in business. The way in which the Israelites lived their lives was important. There are good behaviours and bad behaviours.

However, what is **most important**, most central and ultimately drives all our behaviour is inside of us. This is why Moses, in his sermon, repeatedly focusses on the heart attitude of the people before he gets into much of the detail of the law. The most important commandment of all calls for a heartfelt response to the covenant, faithful, saving, love of the Lord: “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*” (Deut 6:5).

The heart attitude of the second generation of Israelites, the descendants of those who had been led as adults from slavery in Egypt, needed to be radically changed. This is the central message of Deuteronomy chapters 9-11 and is summarised in these words: “*Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn*” (Deut 10:16). We are going to focus on the importance of the right attitude towards the Lord and His law under three headings:

1. A stubborn people
2. A circumcised heart
3. A life of worship
4. **A stubborn people**

Perhaps you’ve seen, or had the experience yourself, of taking a poorly trained, or just badly behaved dog for a walk on a lead. When the animal finds an interesting scent trail, digs it’s paws in, strains on the leach and won’t move your dog is being stubborn. He does not want to go the way you are trying to lead him. Just like when Balaam’s donkey saw the angel of the Lord and she just lay down under that false prophet. She wasn’t going to budge (Num 22:22-30). There’s a phrase in the English language ‘obstinate as a mule’ which describes a dogged determination not to willingly submit to the will of another.

Sometimes we speak of someone who is stubborn, uncooperative and unwilling to change as ‘having an attitude’. This doesn’t mean having a good attitude, but a bad one. In John Bunyan’s allegory of the Christian life, the character called ‘Obstinate’ is a resident of the City of Destruction. He had a bad attitude. He ran after Christian in order to bring him back. Obstinate was stubborn and he was disgusted with Christian for making a journey to the Celestial City that he thought was utter nonsense.

There’s a Hebrew word which occurs through Deuteronomy chapters 9 and 10 which is translated ‘stubborn’ in the ESV. This word literally means ‘stiff-necked’ (ref. Ex 32:9). In this section of his sermon Moses reminds Israel of how stubborn – how ‘stiff-necked’ - the people were when they made a metal idol. At that time, the Lord God had already given the ten commandments verbally. He had clearly instructed His people that they were not to make for themselves a carved image and that they were not to bow down to idols. Yet whilst Moses was up on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights, receiving from the Lord two tablets of stone with the commandments written with ‘the finger of God’, the people blatantly broke the 2nd commandment making a golden calf as an object of worship (Ex 32:4).

When Moses came down from the mountain, he broke the two stone tablets and then interceded for Israel over period of 40 days and 40 nights (Deut 9:18). Moses pleaded their case, **not** on the basis of their own goodness, but on the Lord’s covenant promise saying: “*Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not regard the* ***stubbornness*** *of this people, or their wickedness or their sin, lest the land from which you brought us say, "Because the LORD was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them, and because he hated them, he has brought them out to put them to death in the wilderness." For they are your people and your heritage, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm*.'” (Deut 9:27-29).

As they entered the promised land, the Lord was going to subdue the enemies of Israel ‘*a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim*’ (Deut 9:2) but he told them this was not because ‘*of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people*’ (Deut 9:6). Stubbornly resisting the Lord is being unrighteous. Israel had consistently ‘pushed back’ against God’s good will for them.

Being stubborn is an attitude which has been helpfully described as ‘the ugly side of perseverance’. It is true that there are many situations in life when it is wise and good to ‘stand your ground’, to ‘dig in’, and not to yield.

1. For example, it was essential that the Apostle Paul did not ‘*yield in submission even for a moment*’ (Gal 2:5) to ‘false brothers’ who did not hold to the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone.
2. In the spiritual conflict in which all disciples of Christ are engaged, the call of the Lord is to stand firm and to keep alert with all perseverance (Eph 6:10-18), not giving into the temptation to back down.
3. Whilst we may be tempted to grow weary of doing good, the Lord promises that ‘*in due season we will reap*’ if we do not give up (Gal 6:9).

This being said, for many of us, we can tend to view our stubbornness as something of a virtue – almost like a ‘badge of honour’. We can be quite proud of not yielding, even when we should. Once we’ve made our mind up about something, we refuse to be persuaded otherwise. We will argue and resist and will never give in to anyone even when we are in the wrong and they in the right. Standing our ground becomes more important than yielding to the Lord’s will and wisdom for us. This attitude of ‘I am always right’, ‘I never give in’, ‘I will not back down’ is in essence when a person pretends that they themselves are their own God. Nobody is going to tell them what to do. They are a law unto themselves.

This is idolatry. This is sin. This was the attitude which resulted in so much suffering, distress and delay in receiving the Lord’s blessings for Old Testament Israel. Brothers and sisters, friends, these things about the stubbornness of Israel, were ‘*written down for our instruction*’ (1 Cor 10:11) so that we would understand the importance of the right attitude to the Lord, which brings us to our second point:

1. **A circumcised heart**

How would you answer if someone asked you the question ‘do you take the Bible literally?’. I hope that you would say that you have a ‘high view’ of God’s Word and that you wholeheartedly believe that ‘*all Scripture is breathed out by God*’ (2 Tim 3:16). Much of the Bible is to be read literally for example: The historical accounts of the creation and fall of our first parents, God’s dealings with Israel and the nations in the Old Testament; The life, miraculous work, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ as recorded in the New Testament. Moses emphasises the importance of Israel having a ‘high view’ of the ‘statutes and rules’ of God’s Word saying, ‘*you shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God*’ (Deut 4:2).

However, it is **not true** that the whole Bible is to be taken literally; I don’t think anyone consistently does so, nor should they. For example, when Jesus said, ‘*I am the door*’ (John 10:7) He did not mean that he is a physical hinged or sliding barrier in an entranceway. When Jesus described His disciples as ‘branches’ (John 15:5) He did not mean that we are part of a physical tree. Likewise, when the Lord God speaks to Israel through Moses and says: “*Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn*” (Deut 10:16) He is not speaking of a physical surgical operation. It is an anatomical fact that the four chambered pump which circulates blood through your body does not have a foreskin like that of the uncircumcised male reproductive organ. *Circumcise the foreskin of your heart* is a metaphor which describes the non-physical reality of the inner attitude of a person. This figure of speech is clearly connected to sign of the covenant which the Lord first made with Abraham.

Physical circumcision was **never** a guarantee of a person’s spiritual condition, any more than baptism is now, but functioned as a sign pointing to the need for an inner attitude of love and willing devotion to God – a ‘circumcised’ heart. This is very clear throughout the Bible. For example: Esau, a circumcised man, was hated by God (Mal 1:3; Rom 9:13) and God promises to punish all those who are ‘*circumcised merely in the flesh*’ (Jer 9:25). The Apostle Paul, a circumcised Jew himself, understood that “*circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision*” (Rom 2:25), “*For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and* ***circumcision is a matter of the heart****, by the Spirit, not by the letter*” (2:28-29).

You might ask, well then what exactly is this non-physical circumcision of the heart? From Deuteronomy 10:16 we can see that it is ‘*to be no longer stubborn*’. Now, the opposite of being stubborn in resisting the will of the Lord is to be yielding, willingly submissive, and compliant to God’s law. The key message of this part of Moses sermon is a call from God for a change of heart attitude towards Him. Moses gives these reasons for a submissive attitude to God’s law in his message:

* The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords (10:17)
* He is not partial and takes no bribe (10:17)
* He protects the vulnerable – executing justice for the fatherless and the widow, loving the sojourner – the temporary resident who did not have the security of the citizen of the country (10:18).

Willingly surrendering yourself wholeheartedly to the Lord makes sense because:

* He is all powerful, there is no one greater than Him
* He is not fooled by outward appearances; He judges the heart (1 Sam 16:7)
* It is safe to yield yourself to the Lord because He protects and cares for those who have no strength of their own to rely upon.

Yet, despite all these excellent reasons to yield to the Lord’s will, you and I are naturally unable to fundamentally change our own inner being. The Bible puts this hard reality this way, speaking to those whose hearts were once ‘uncircumcised’: ‘*you were dead in your trespasses and sins*’ (Eph 2:1). We cannot perform spiritual heart surgery on ourselves.

Later in his sermon, Moses will give his listeners a window into the future, as the Holy Spirit inspires Him to prophesy about the time when the nation of Israel will experience God’s judgement in exile from the promised land because of their stubborn rebelliousness. Moses will speak of the Lord’s gracious restoration of His people promising that “*LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live*” (Deut 30:6).

Here is the deep mystery of the gospel, the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus. Only those whose hearts have been radically changed, being born of the Spirit of God (John 3:1-8), can enter His Kingdom.

The call to you today is to yield yourself to the Lord and not to be stubborn in resisting what you know to be His good will for you. Yet it is also true that you can only do this if the Lord first changes your heart to desire to love Him and worship Him, if He has done so then ‘*He is your praise. He is your God*’ (Deut 10:21). Which brings us to our third point:

1. **A life of worship**

Willingly yielding to the ‘*great, the mighty, and the awesome God*’ (Deut 10:17) is the wise response of praise and worship for any human heart, the consequence of which is abundant blessing from the Lord.

Moses explains how this would work out in the Promised Land: "*And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full*” (Deut 11:13-15). Physical productivity in the agricultural economy of Israel was **entirely dependent** upon the Lord who provided, or withheld, rain.

For Old Testament Israel, gathered on the plains of Moab, listening to Moses preach, they had only known the dry, barren wasteland of the wilderness over the past forty years. Before that time, their ancestors lived in Egypt where crops were irrigated and grew ‘like a garden of vegetables’ – as Moses reminds them (Deut 11:10).

The land that the Lord was about to lead them into was much more like the coastal hills of Banks Peninsula or Hurunui, completely dependent on natural rainfall, than many parts of the Canterbury Plains where the infrastructure of an elaborate irrigation scheme provides water for crops and pasture even in the driest of summers. Water from the sky was one of the blessings of obedience to the covenant which the Lord made with His people Israel.

To worship Him was to willingly yield to His good commandments and to obey Him because they loved Him. For Old Testament Israel, that blessing was experienced as a nation in terms of national peace, material prosperity, good health and military conquest of other people groups upon whom the Lord would bring His judgement for their wickedness.

For us today, the blessings of the Lord which result from willing obedience to His commandments as we live a life of worship include:

* Power - to ‘live your best life’ in Christ, to glorify Him and to be transformed to be more and more like the perfect human being in your character.
* Wisdom – to know how to live this life well. Such wisdom is readily available when we ask God in prayer (James 1:5).
* Peace – with God (Rom 5:1), with other people (Eph 2:14-18) and within yourself (Phil 4:7).
* Freedom – from fear (Heb 13:6) and anxiety (Phil 4:6) when we prayerfully trust in our Lord.

In his sermon, Moses was teaching the people of Israel that how they behave is important. Putting this another way: true religion is **not only** about the condition of the heart, how we live is also important. Our outward behaviour helps us to see whether our own heart is ‘circumcised’ and willingly yields to the Lord, or is ‘uncircumcised’ and remains stubborn, rebellious and proud.

From our text today, here are some external characteristics in life of a person whose heart has been circumcised by the Lord:

* A reverent fear of the Lord who alone is the awesome God (10:20).
* A willingness to serve Him (10:20).
* A wholehearted allegiance to Him – ‘holding fast to Him’ (10:20).
* A love for the vulnerable, those for whom the Lord cares (10:18). For us this includes those who do not, as yet, know the Lord and those who are not, as yet well connected to this local congregation.

A life lived with a circumcised heart is a life of willing submission to the Lord which is demonstrated by an active obedience to His law. A circumcised heart leads to a life of worship of the Lord God in every circumstance and situation (e.g. Col 3:17). This is the life that the man Jesus, the Son of God, lived on this earth. His complete willing submission to His Heavenly Father was such that “*He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil 2:8). Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev 5:5) has the strongest of characters. His perseverance is second to no one else, yet it can in no way be truthfully said that He has ever been stubborn. Rather, we could accurately say that His heart was ‘circumcised’.

Today He is calling you, unbelieving friend, to come to Him. To come and admit that you have been stubborn of heart and have so far resisted the Lord God your Creator. He calls you to admit and accept your true condition and to come to Him as you are; weak, needy and unable yourself to change your own heart to be able to love Him and willingly yield to Him. Jesus calls you to believe that He, the One whose heart is circumcised, has won for you all the blessings of a faithful son or daughter of God. He calls you to trust that He died in your place for your stubbornness, sin and rebellion against God.

Brothers and sisters in our Lord, Christ is calling you today to remember that He has fulfilled God’s good law on your behalf so that you can freely and willingly love God and serve Him with all your heart for He is your praise. He is your God (Deut 10:21). “*We love because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19). *“Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn*” (Deut 10:16). Have a heart first and foremost for the Lord alone!

AMEN.