

The Upside Down
Deuteronomy 5
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
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I wonder if anyone is familiar with the analogy of the flea and the acrobat? An acrobat experiences a tightrope very differently than that of a flea. For an acrobat a tightrope is one dimensional, one misstep, the slightest loss of balance and down they go. But a flea experiences a tightrope as a three dimensional reality. A flea can walk safely on all planes of the tightrope.

If this sounds familiar, it's probably because you too were caught up in this summer's captivating Netflix Sci-Fi Thriller *Stranger Things*. If you're not familiar, imagine *ET* meets *The Goonies* meets *The X-Files*.

It is the gripping story of the mysterious disappearance of Will Byers, and how his family and friends stop at nothing to bring Will back to safety. And what this gripping story presents is the possibility that there may be alternative dimensions of the same reality—different sides of the tightrope. What they call “the upside down,” an alternate dimension of the same place. The upside down is exactly the same as the reality we see, only inside it is very different.

Well, I want to suggest that this notion of varying experiences of the same reality may not be limited to world of sci-fi and theoretical physics. The idea that people can have very different experiences of the same reality has powerful theological applications, as well.

As an aside, anytime someone accuses pastors, your pastor, of being out of touch with popular culture, you can tell them otherwise.

We live each day as a part of God's reality, the reality of creation, human relationships, and culture. And God's reality is governed not only by the physical laws, but by the law that God has imparted to us. The Ten Commandments, as our children learn in Godly Play, are God's Ten Best Ways for human flourishing. But how we relate to God's law will have a dramatic impact on our experience of the world around us—you might even say that it's like living on different dimensions of the same reality.

We're in a series of sermons I've entitled God of Wonders, in which we are moving along a similar plane as our children in Godly Play. Each week, we are looking at the wonder-evoking stories of God's covenant making and covenant keeping with his people. Even today in Wabash, Indiana, we stand in the stream of these historic promises made to Noah, Abram, and now Moses.

Now, why does it matter that we hear these Sunday School stories again and again? Because without these foundational pieces we cannot get a full understanding of our need of a Savior, and we cannot understand how the promises made to you and me at the Cross are the fulfillment of promises made many centuries earlier. Promises of lineage, promises of meaning and purpose that offer humanity direction and a future, a future that is realized in Jesus Christ welcoming the whole of humanity into God's covenant family. Promises that help us make sense of the confusing and at times discouraging realities we all face. Because when we are standing with someone whose life is falling apart in one way or another, we are not without a word of hope, a word that reminds us that God is not distant,

but present; God is not ignorant, but God cares; God is not helpless, but God is powerful and full of mercy and grace. This is why these stories are valuable to us.

When we left off, Moses had led the Hebrews out of Pharaoh's grip. Only it didn't take long for the people to start getting nostalgic about their Egyptian captivity. Isn't this a great metaphor for addiction? In Egypt, life was miserable, life was hard, they were literally dying by the hands of their oppressor, but hey...at least we had food.

God knew that as Moses led his people from captivity to freedom—dragging their heels—it wouldn't take long for them to face the question when freedom comes, how will I live now? This is the same question every person who is freed from the grips of captivity of one sort or another faces. What does living in freedom look like?

In her wonderful book on the Ten Commandments, *Smoke on the Mountain*, Joy Davidman (CS Lewis' wife) writes: "You can't drown all the time." Her husband CS Lewis wrote in his Narnia book, *The Silver Chair*, when Jill is weeping, "Crying is alright in a way as long as it lasts but sooner or later you have to stop and then you have to decide what to do." Or in keeping with today's illustration, which dimension of reality will you choose to inhabit?

Standing in between the Promised Land, God's dream for them, with the memory of Egypt echoing in their minds, God's voice rings out, *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*. The first step in walking in freedom is recognizing which voice you are going to follow. And this voice, the voice of Yahweh, goes on to offer these Ten Commandments.

This morning, I want to offer four very real ways of seeing God's law in relationship to our hearts. Three of them offer realities that are distorted, appearing to be similar, but in fact are false realities, and one that offers the fullness of the life God has for his people.

The first possibility is the heart without God's law. So the issue is not *if* we shall live under someone or something's authority, but rather *which* external command will have its way with us. As the newly minted Nobel Prize for Literature winner Bob Dylan wrote, "You're gonna have to serve somebody, well it may be the devil or it may be the Lord but you're gonna have to serve somebody."

No sooner had Moses brought them Sinai and went up the mountain to hear from God, the people began to get restless. And fearing he would not return, they made an idol to worship. So all they did was exchange one false master for another. And whether the master is an oppressor who controls us from the outside, or whether our master is something that enslaves our heart (the drive to obtain more always: more possessions, status, degrees, approval, success), without something to anchor our hearts, we will scurry about looking for something to sooth our discontented hearts.

St Augustine famously wrote, "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee." John Calvin, wrote that "the human heart is an idol factory."

To this, God's voice calls out to us: *I am the Lord thy God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, you shall have no other gods before me*. In other words, tether you heart to me and my law and I will satisfy your impassioned, desiring hearts.

This is the first false reality, the worrisome heart.

The second alternative dimension is what I call the Civic Religion. This is when we want the commandments without the heart. You know, in our nation there is all manner of fuss made about the public displays of the Ten Commandments. They are a cornerstone of our nation's rule of law and as such need to be put on display in our courtrooms and in our classrooms. Which is fine, that's not what concerns me. What concerns me is that God's law was not given to us to be written on monuments of stone, displayed out on courthouse lawns or in civics classrooms next to Gandhi and Hammurabi. God gave them to be a gift to his people written on the doorposts of human hearts.

This morning, we began with a reading from Deuteronomy 6, a reading that begins every service of worship in the synagogues. *Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children...you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

This God who has covenanted himself to us in an eternal bond of faithfulness and love will not be pacified by convivial gestures honor. Frankly, I think God could care less if we have his law written in public places, if it isn't first written in the innermost places of our hearts.

What we read in the Ten Commandments is that God is intimately engaged with his people, God wants to have a personal relationship with his people. God is jealous in his passion for us, and anytime in Israel's history when someone or something came in between God and his beloved, it evoked a harsh and intense emotional response for God.

What we see in this reality is a God who is a cool, detached reality, who we remember in his statutes memorialized, who is sort of like a dispassionate bureaucrat in the sky. But the truth is that the God we meet in these commands is a God who will be honored, who will be obeyed, who will not be brushed aside or mocked. HEAR O ISRAEL, THE LORD OUR GOD, THE LORD IS ONE.

This is the second false dimension of God's law in our lives. The dispassionate monument.

Finally, the third false reality, and this is the most dangerous of the three, this is the law without the Gospel. In Leviticus 19, we read a beautiful summary of the law, only there is this nagging verse 2 that says "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." It's not until we take serious stock of what the law says and how serious and passionate God is for holiness and purity that we realize just how far from the mark we are.

And this leads in one of two directions. The first is we become so intensely zealous for keeping the law that we become holier-than-thou, self-righteous, and frankly insufferable. We begin to keep a running tally not only of our own righteousness, but we also develop this terrible habit of evaluating our own righteousness in relationship to others.

It was this very thing that drove Martin Luther crazy. How can we please a holy God when our actions are like filthy rags? The more I try to please him, the more I realize how woefully short I fall. All by itself, the law can only kill. But this wasn't what God had in mind even from the beginning.

As the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 3:28-29, the law was our guardian. The Greek word used here is the word *pedagogos* or teacher. I like to think of it this way: the law was our drill instructor.

This is the third false dimension the law as the unrelenting drill instructor.

Each of these three is an upside down dimension to God's great plan for our lives. And like Will Beyers, the young boy who is trapped in the upside down and unable to free himself from that place of decay and death, we too are trapped. We're trapped in our self-reliance—thinking that we can do well enough on our own: in our civil distance, void of any real transformation; and in our self-righteousness—in thinking that we've got what it takes. But the truth is that all of these are similar but false dimensions of the world we live in. They may look much the same, but the one thing they all share in common with one another is they are all traps. Once we find ourselves trapped there, the only way out is by the gracious hand of a Savior who enters into our dimension, taking us by the hand—sometimes even picking our limp lives up—and leads us into the beauty of true reality, Gospel reality.

This is exactly what the Gospel of Jesus Christ does. Jesus Christ takes the crushing burden of self-reliance and self-righteousness and by the cross and resurrection he says let me take that from you in exchange for my righteousness, my law—the law of Christ as Paul writes in Galatians 6. In Jesus Christ you are no longer under the law but under grace (Romans 6:15).

And once we have been freed by God's grace and forgiveness given for us on the cross, what does that free us to do? Follow the law. Huh?

When the Spirit of Christ sets you free from your sin by God's grace, you are free to discover the wonderful truth that for each of these commandments there is also an upside down, or perhaps we might say a right side up. Living in grace, we're free to see that each command has what a mentor of mine called "the grand positive." In grace, we're free to give up all our idols, all our pursuits to sit on the throne of our lives and live freely in faith to God. In grace, we're set free not to take the Lord's name in vain, but to let the joy and love and praise of God be ever on our lips. In grace, we're set free not just to not murder, but to honor and preserve life in all its forms. In grace, we're set free not just to not commit adultery, but to honor and preserve the sanctity of each other's marriages. In grace, we're set free not just to not steal, but to celebrate and give thanks for the good provisions of God and trust that we will have enough and what others have is a gift from God, too.

Do you see how this is true reality? It is not law without the heart, it is not the heart without law, it is not the law only to itself, but it is the law fulfilled, purified, and allowed to run free in the hearts of God's people.

Let me try and explain it with this illustration. Imagine a wild horse. There are three things you can do with a wild horse: 1. You can let it be and it will trample and destroy everything around it—that's not very good. 2. You can shoot it—no good either. 3. You can entrust that horse to the compassionate hands of the trainer who will lovingly guide and train the horse in safety and security so that it can truly run free.

Do you remember that scene from the movie *Secretariat* when in the Belmont Stakes Secretariat's own yells out from the stands as he thunders around the back turn, "Let him run, let him run"? This

is what it looks like to live freely in God's grace and have this beautiful, brief, all-encompassing law before you.

Let 'em run in your life, Church. Let the powerful hand of the risen Christ lift you out of the place where you're stuck and let him set you on the right path and let him run in your life.