

“Our Need for a Mediator”
Deuteronomy 5:22-33
November 27, 2022
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

Last week we came to the end of the Ten Commandments. This week we continue on with what follows the Ten Commandments, as we hear from Deuteronomy 5:22-33

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Moses said to the people:

²²“These words [that is, the Ten Commandments,] Yahweh spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me. ²³And as soon as you heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes, and your elders. ²⁴And you said, ‘Behold, Yahweh our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man, and man still live. ²⁵Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of Yahweh our God any more, we shall die. ²⁶For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire as we have, and has still lived? ²⁷Go near and hear all that Yahweh our God will say, and speak to us all that Yahweh our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it.’

²⁸“And Yahweh heard your words, when you spoke to me. And Yahweh said to me, ‘I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken. ²⁹Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever! ³⁰Go and say to them, “Return to your tents.” ³¹But you, stand here by me, and I will tell you the whole commandment and the statutes and the rules that you shall teach them, that they may do them in the land that I am giving them to possess.’ ³²You shall be careful therefore to do as Yahweh your God has commanded you. You shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. ³³You shall walk in all the way that Yahweh your God has commanded you, that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you shall possess.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, you are our portion,
and so we commit ourselves to keep your word.
We ask you with all our hearts to show us your favor,
and be gracious with us according to your promise.
When we consider our ways,
turn our feet to your testimonies.
And as we hear your word now,
give us a sense of urgency to conform ourselves to it,
so that we act on it without delay.
Grant this we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:57-60]

Introduction: Recognizing Our Need for a Mediator Anointed by God

We have an interesting passage here, this morning. Moses has been recounting the events of Mt. Sinai to the second exodus generation. These are events that happened primarily to the parents of those he is now speaking with. And he has just finished telling them of the giving of the Ten Commandments. And then he tells them how their parents, in response to God drawing close to them in this way, announced that they could not themselves draw close to God, but they needed a mediator. They needed someone who would stand between them and God, and bridge the gap between them. Otherwise they feared they would be destroyed.

Now, what's interesting about this is that in our culture, if someone were to say that they could not draw close to God because they feared that the very presence of God would destroy them, then our culture tends to have one of two responses to that.

One response is to say "No, no, no – if that's how you feel, then you've misunderstood what God is like. God is not scary. God is not scary or overwhelming. God is just warm and soft, like a teddy bear. You can draw close to him on your own, and everything will be fine – and if you ever feel otherwise, then you've simply misunderstood what God is like." That is one common sentiment in our culture – what we might call "spiritual liberalism."

The other response is to say that if we feel unworthy or unable to draw close to God, then we need to make ourselves worthy and able. If you don't feel holy and righteous enough to come into God's presence, then you need to get your act together, and become more holy and more righteous. You need to fix yourself, make yourself good, strengthen yourself spiritually, and then you can come before God. This is a common sentiment that we might call moral or spiritual conservatism.

These are the two spiritual frameworks that are generally on offer in our world: either a God who is easy for anyone to approach, or a God who demands we get ourselves together before we come into his presence. What's interesting is that in our text, neither Israel nor God, put forward either of those solutions.

While our text this morning agrees with certain intuitions of each of those perspectives, it also deeply disagrees with both of their solutions.

And so, in our text we see that both Israel and God seem to affirm the view of spiritual liberalism that people can and should draw close to God here and now, just as they are. After all, God himself had already drawn close to Israel – he obviously expected to have a relationship with them ... and not just at some point later on, when they were stronger or holier, but right then and there.

But at the same time in our text, Israel recognizes that they cannot simply stand before God's presence on their own. Listen again to their words in verses twenty-four through twenty-seven – they say: “Behold, Yahweh our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire. This day we have seen God speak with man, and man still live. Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of Yahweh our God any more, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire as we have, and has still lived?”

Israel here voices a reality that anyone who earnestly tries to draw close to God soon sees: We cannot just stroll into the presence of the Almighty Maker of the universe. While we were, in fact, made for a relationship to God, his holiness and his power are too much for us to bear on our own. And when we see him aright, we rightly fear that we would be destroyed by his presence.

So our text agrees with the impulse of spiritual liberalism that we were made for a relationship with God right here and now ... but then it disagrees with the view that we can simply walk into God's presence on our own.

At the same time, our text has a similarly mixed response to the morally conservative perspective. It clearly agrees that our conduct matters. We see that in verse twenty-seven, where Israel pledges to obey the commands and the moral precepts of the Lord. God cares about how we live and so Israel pledges itself to obedience to God in every area of life. But at the very same time, Israel doesn't see their moral improvement or their spiritual disciplines as the prerequisite for their relationship with God. For one thing, they recognize that they already have a relationship with God, even though they have much more spiritual growth and moral improvement ahead of them. For another, they don't here mention any idea that once they have applied themselves to God's instruction more diligently, then they will be able to walk into God's presence themselves. That's not the plan they lay out here.

And so Israel agrees here with the intuition of moral conservatism that we are called on to submit our lives to obedience to God's commands for us ... but then it disagrees with the view that such obedience will secure a safe approach to God for us.

Which of those tendencies – moralism or liberalism – do you see more of in yourself? Is your default to see God's approachability or to see his otherness? And do you see how our text this morning both affirms some of their intuitions, while also denying their spiritual solutions? Do you see how our text both affirms that God is holy and other, and that we should have a real relationship with him here and now?

That is the tension of the text.

And then, to answer that tension, our text holds out its own solution. It is Israel that first proposes it, interestingly, and God who then affirms it.

And the solution that is proposed is a mediator. We see that in verse twenty-seven. Israel proposes that Moses act as a mediator between them and God – bridging the gap between them, and being the means by which they can relate to one another. And strikingly, God agrees. In verses twenty-eight and twenty-nine God says: “I have heard the words of this people, which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken. Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, that it might go well with them and with their descendants forever!”

It's not often in the Bible that God says, “I have heard the words” of Israel, and “they are right in all that they have spoken.” That’s not a common response from God. But it’s what we see here. Israel has rightly understood what they need. And what they have said they need is a mediator – one to stand between them and God, and to enable a relationship between the two.

And God then agrees to appoint Moses to that role. God reaffirms his desire for a relationship with his people. He reaffirms the importance of their seeking to obey his commandments. And reaffirms that what his people need is a mediator between themselves and him.

And as we see that truth held out in this text, and we consider it in the larger story of the Exodus and of Scripture as a whole, then we see four reasons why we need a mediator between us and God – four things that will go wrong if we neglect that truth.

When we approach the God of the Bible, we need a mediator anointed by God:

- lest we be destroyed in judgment,
- lest we be overwhelmed by the infinite,
- lest we look to others as our mediator, and
- lest we try to be that mediator ourselves.

Lest We Be Destroyed in Judgment

So first, as we approach the God of the Bible, we need a mediator anointed by God, lest we be destroyed in judgment.

And here, I think it’s important to remember where our text comes in Deuteronomy. It comes right after the giving of the Ten Commandments – the giving of God’s moral expectations for his people.

It is true that God’s display of power overwhelmed the people – and we’ll get to that in a moment. But the content of what God spoke to them mattered too. Because that content explained to them one of the challenges of drawing close to God. The content was the Ten Commandments. And our text begins with that reality. In verse twenty-two, that’s what Moses draws attention to.

The moral expectations of God are in view here, and one reason we need a mediator between us and God is that otherwise we will be destroyed in judgment. Because God is holy and righteous, and we are not. Because God has called us to reflect his character, as described by his law ... but we have instead broken his law. We have fallen short of being the kind of people he has called us to be.

And Moses knew this. Part of why Israel needed a mediator was because God was holy, and they could not stand in his presence. In fact, even to be close to his presence required sacrifices – which Moses offered. Moses knew that as their mediator, he had to offer sacrifice for the people, in order for them to be able to draw closer to God. The people had fallen short. They had sinned. They had broken God’s law. And judgment was due. But Moses, along with the Levitical priesthood, brought forward sacrifices, which were to receive the penalty that Israel deserved, on their behalf. Israel needed a mediator to offer sacrifice on their behalf, lest judgment for sin fall on them.

But ... as the author of Hebrews reminds us ... those sacrifices of bulls and goats which Moses and the priests offered were not so much the substance of what Israel ultimately needed, as they were a picture of what Israel ultimately needed. They pointed forward to something greater. They pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ. [Hebrews 10]

Where Moses offered animals to atone for Israel’s sin – to atone for the ways they had fallen short of God’s law and his holiness – Jesus Christ offered himself. Whereas an animal had less value than a human being, Christ offered himself as a true man, and as a fitting substitute for us. He, as our Mediator, took the penalty that we deserved on the cross, so that through him we could enter the presence of God without being destroyed in judgment.

Whereas a liberal view of spirituality says we have no spiritual debt before God, and a conservative view of spirituality says that we can pay that debt off ourselves, the Bible reminds us that our debt is real, but we cannot pay it. It is beyond our means. We need another to step in. We need a mediator, lest we be destroyed in judgment. Moses gave us a picture of such mediation. But Jesus Christ gave us the substance of that mediation.

And so, when you see your own guilt and you see God’s holiness, you need to remember this: That where you have a need, God, in the gospel, has provided. Christ has come to be your Mediator, to pay for the debt of your sin and to reconcile your relationship with God. In fact, that is why he came.

And so the first thing we see as we consider our text is that as we approach the God of the Bible, we need Jesus Christ as our Mediator anointed by God, lest we be destroyed in judgment.

Lest We Be Overwhelmed by the Infinite

Second, as we approach the God of the Bible, we need a mediator anointed by God, lest we be overwhelmed by the infinite.

After all, it's not just their sin that Israel cites here as to why they need a mediator, but it's also God's overwhelming power. It is the glory and the greatness and the voice and the fire of God that they list in this passage. God is immense – he is infinite and eternal in his being and in his power ... and we cannot handle him as he is – it is too much for us. And so we need a mediator.

And this is different from the last point we considered. Because whereas that need was rooted in our sin, this need is rooted in our nature. And it's not that our nature is bad – God, after all, made us to be finite ... but rather it's that our nature requires God to bridge a gap if we are to relate to him.

And this has always been the case. Moses himself described the need for a mediator not as a temporary thing, but as an ongoing thing. In Deuteronomy 18 he pointed to how God would raise up a prophet like him in the future, for the very reason Israel had identified here in our text – that God's people need a mediator if they are to relate to him. [Deuteronomy 18:15-19]

In the short-term that role was filled by various prophets, but then, in the fullness of time, it came to be filled by Jesus Christ. But as Christ took on that role, it's important to note that he did not just take it on as a task to be accomplished and then set aside, but he took it on as a calling that would last into eternity.

Christ's work as mediator was not limited to his earthly ministry when he died for us upon the cross and rose again. But rather, he continues to serve as our Mediator – he continues to make intercession for us, to send his Holy Spirit to us, and to work in our hearts and our lives. Jesus Christ, even now, as he reigns in heaven, serves as our Mediator. [Bavinck, *RD*, 24.685]

But his work as Mediator doesn't stop there either. It continues not only through this life, but also into the next one.

It's a striking thing, when you look to the end of the Bible, and the picture it gives us of eternity. At that point, our sin is atoned for. Our sinful nature is done away with. We are made perfect. There is no more death or crying or sickness or pain anymore. Christ has accomplished what he set out to do in our redemption. And so you might think that at that point Jesus would step aside – that once he's redeemed us, we don't need him anymore. But he doesn't step aside. At the resurrection, in the New Heavens and the New Earth, Christ, the Lamb of God, remains central.

Because even then, even as we come into the fullness of our fellowship with the Triune God, even then our relationship to God will continue to be mediated through Christ. Even at that time when, as the Apostle Paul puts it, we see “face to face” and “know” even as we have “been fully known” [1 Corinthians 13:12] – even then, even when we are made perfect, our relationship with God will continue to be through Christ. Even then, we will know the Father through the Son. Christ will continue to be our Mediator. [Bavinck, *RD*, 2.190]

And this is in part due to our nature, and God's. God is the infinite Creator. We are his finite creatures. As Herman Bavinck puts it: “The distance between the Creator and creature is much too great for human beings to perceive God directly. The finite is not capable of containing the infinite.” [Bavinck, *RD*, 1.309-310]

“The Son,” Jesus Christ, Bavinck writes, “is not only the mediator of reconciliation [...] on account of sin, but even apart from sin he is the mediator of union [...] between God and his creation.” [Bavinck, *RD*, 4.685; See also Bavinck *WWG*, 548]

Even in the New Heavens and the New Earth, Christ is so central, that, as Bavinck puts it: “eschatology [...] is rooted in Christology and is itself Christology.” [Bavinck, *RD*, 4.685]

In other words, Christ’s role as Mediator is not limited to his reconciling work between us and God because of our sin, but he is also the One who bridges the gap between an infinite God and his finite creatures. Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man. He is therefore able to bridge the gulf between us and God like no one else could. And that will remain true even into eternity. [I am indebted to Cory Brock’s article “Revisiting Bavinck and the Beatific Vision” for pointing me in the direction of the above citations from Bavinck’s *RD*]

It is through Christ that we see God. It is through Christ that we can draw close to the Triune God.

What this means is that when God feels too “other” to you – when you feel the weightiness of his infiniteness, when it is impressed upon you how much his wisdom is above your wisdom and how much his ways above your ways, when the chasm between creature and Creator feels so wide and so deep to you ... then, in those moments, you need to remember this truth. In those moments you need to remember that you have a Mediator. In those moments you need to remember that Christ is both fully God and fully man – that Christ stands in the gap, bridging the chasm, so that we might draw close to God and not be consumed by his power and might.

And so the second thing we see as we consider our text is that as we approach the God of the Bible, we need Jesus Christ as our Mediator anointed by God, lest we be overwhelmed by the Infinite.

Lest We Look to Others to Be the Christ

Third, as we approach the God of the Bible, we need a mediator anointed by God, lest we look to others to be that mediator for us.

And this is a tendency whenever we forget or reduce the unique role that Jesus Christ plays in our lives.

We often feel the need for a mediator between us and God. But if we fail to see how Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of that, then we may begin to look to another.

And when we do that, the results can vary. Sometimes that is a formula for abuse, as a leader seeks to take on that role in our lives, and then demands the honors and rights that are rightly due only to Christ. But other times, the result is not abuse but disappointment and disillusionment, as the people we place this weight and hope on let us down in one way or another.

In a recent article, Tim Keller pointed out this pattern in some who had walked away from the Christian faith. Keller considered those who had abandoned their faith after a prominent Christian leader whom they had especially revered had had a moral failing or turned out to be a hypocrite.

First, Keller acknowledged that when such things happen, some level of disillusionment is “unavoidable and natural.” But then he pointed out that when one’s faith is deeply shaken by such things, it may indicate a deeper problem. To explain, Keller cites a sermon by the Scottish preacher Robert Murray M’Cheyne, in which M’Cheyne points to our tendency to sometimes raise Christian leaders to the level of idols. It is a pattern we see in the Scripture itself, as people go from trying to worship the Apostle Paul one moment, to stoning him the next [Acts 14]. Keller writes: “M’Cheyne argues here that while deep grief and disappointment over a fallen leader is natural, if one’s faith completely evaporates over it, it may be that your faith was resting more in the leader than in Jesus himself, and therefore there was a kind of idolatry going on.” Or ... to put it a little differently ... perhaps you were looking to that leader as your mediator with God more than you were looking to Christ as your Mediator with God.

And that tendency is not limited to Christian celebrities, or leaders we admire. We can do this with a Christian parent or a Christian spouse, or a Christian mentor we look up to who has played a key role in our spiritual lives. And while the Lord may use such people in deeply significant ways in our lives, those people are still not our Mediator with God. That is true for a number of reasons, not least of which being that no mere human being could bear that weight. And that truth was evident even in the life of Moses himself.

Written into the Biblical story is that while Moses gave us a picture of the mediator between God and us, he himself could not ultimately fulfill that role. Though the Bible tells us that Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth [Numbers 12:3], even he had a moral failing before the Lord that led to his being barred from entering the Promised Land. We heard a wonderful sermon on that last Sunday night, from Pastor Rayburn, and if you weren’t here for it, I’d encourage you to listen to it on our website. But for our purposes this morning, a key take-away of that story is this: Not even Moses could bear the weight of being the mediator between God and God’s people. If that was true of him, then how could you expect it of any other person in your life?

No mere mortal could bear that load. It calls for one who is not only human, but also more than human. It calls for one who is fully human and fully God. It calls for Jesus Christ. And we must look to Christ as our Mediator with God, lest we place a burden and expectation on another person that they could never bear.

And so the third thing we see as we consider our text is that as we approach the God of the Bible, we need Jesus Christ as our Mediator anointed by God, lest we look to others as our mediator and find in them disappointment and disillusionment.

Lest We Try to Be the Christ Ourselves

Fourth and finally, as we approach the God of the Bible, we need a mediator anointed by God, lest we try to be that mediator ourselves.

This tendency – to try to be the mediator between people and God ourselves – to try to be the Christ – can take many forms. But one of them is when we try to help others ... but we misunderstand our role in the process.

I was reading a book recently, recommended to me by another pastor, that argues that this is especially a problem for pastors. Though I would argue that it's not only a problem of pastors. Maybe we do it with more people. But I think that many of us have this tendency with someone in our lives – maybe a particular friend, or with our children, or our spouse, or a family member, or someone we get connected to through a ministry.

Christopher Ash describes the tendency like this – he writes: “Our problem so often is that we want to punch above our weight. The great Scottish minister William Still puts it like this:

‘Some meddling ministers want to sort everybody out. God is not so optimistic. There are some who will die mixed-up personalities, and they may be true believers ... Don't try to do the impossible. Know your limitations, and know what God is seeking to do in the world and what part in it He wants you to play ... Most people [Still continues,] crack up because they try to do what God never intended them to do. They destroy themselves by sinful ambition, just as much as the drunkard and drug addict. Ambition drives them on.’”
[Quoted in Ash, 61-62]

Now ... note what Still seems to be talking about when he says “ambition” here. It's not ambition for fame or for wealth or even for personal success. It's ambition to help people. But how can ambition in trying to help people possibly be a problem?

Well, it becomes a problem when we shift from thinking that we can build people up and bear their burdens and be God's instruments in their lives as they seek make their way through this broken and sinful world ... to thinking instead that we can fix people: either by thinking that we alone can set people on the right spiritual path, or by thinking that with our help people can experience the fullness of spiritual healing in this life. That is the flawed and destructive ambition that Still is pointing out here. And he reminds us that if we give in to that ambition, we are likely to “crack up” as he puts it. Because we can't handle that burden. We are not cut out for it.

But where do you see yourself doing that? Who in your life do you tend to approach as if you yourself, by your own power, could set them right spiritually, where they have gone wrong? Or who, in your life, do you tend to think, could experience full spiritual healing and wholeness in this life if they would just follow your directions or accept your help? Is it a friend or a sibling? A child or a spouse? A fellow church member or troubled acquaintance? In whose life do you tend to take on this role as if you yourself could be the mediator between them and God?

Christopher Ash reflects on this tendency like this – he writes:

“My Wife Carolyn and I have a little informal liturgy we use when one of us is burdened by some distressing pastoral need and longs to be able to sort it out and solve the problem for the person concerned. A crisis of faith, an entanglement with the world, a troubled marriage, a dysfunctional family, a distress, inveiglement into some idolatry ~ whatever it is, we long to be able to set the person back on track of strong faith and consistent godliness.

“And yet we can’t.

“So Carolyn says to me, or I say to her:

Remember, there is only one Saviour of the world; and it’s not you, and it’s not me.” [Ash, 62]

Ash continues:

“Peter Adam wrote to me to say he had recently spent an hour and a half with a young Christian worker and said to him repeatedly, ‘God has already appointed his Messiah, and he did not appoint you.’” [Ash, 62-63]

Now, the Bible tells us that we are to be Christ’s instruments in the world, we are to be his hands and feet, we are to be his Body, his Bride – all of that is true. We have an important role in what God is doing in the world. But we are not to try to be Christ himself. There are hard limits on what we can do. Ultimately, we cannot be the mediator between God and other people. We do not have the power to bring them into God’s presence if they resist him. And we do not have the power to make their lives new. We are not the Christ.

Are there relationships in your life where you need to remind yourself of that? Are there relationships in your life where you have gone beyond your calling – beyond your call to be Christ’s ambassador or Christ’s instrument, and have tried to be Christ himself in someone’s life? Do you see how you cannot bear the weight of that?

Moses couldn’t do it – and he was appointed by God himself. You can’t do it either. Neither can I.

For “there is only one Savior of the world; and it’s not you, and it’s not me.”

Conclusion

Instead, the Savior of the World is Jesus Christ.

And that is reason for giving thanks.

It is why we can have hope for our relationship with God and hope for God’s work in this world.

We can have hope for our relationship with God because God really is as powerful and as holy as the Bible says he is. But he has also made a way for us to relate to him – to draw close to him, to truly know him. He has overcome our sin in his death and resurrection, and he has bridged the gap between his infiniteness and our limitations in his incarnation. And so, through Christ, we can know God both now and for all eternity.

And we can also have hope for our relationships in this world. On the one hand, as important as others are in our lives, we do not need to look to them to be our savior. They can be a help to us, they can be a real gift to us, but they need not be the source of our ultimate hope and security. And similarly, we need not shoulder that responsibility in the lives of others. God has given us many

responsibilities. But he has not called on us to be the Messiah for anyone. And that should be a relief.

We have a God who is high, and holy, but who also draws close to us. And that is a truth we remember as we enter, today, into the season of Advent.

There are many distractions in this season. There is a lot going on. But let us not lose sight of the deepest truths of it. We are a people in need of a mediator, to bridge the gap between us and God. And Advent is a reminder that God has not only promised to do just that, but that in Christ, he has done just that.

That is the miracle of the Nativity. That is the hope of Christmas.

Let us be thankful for it.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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