Ten ways to live your best life

Text: Deuteronomy 5:1-21

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Matthew 5:21-30; Deuteronomy 5:1-21

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 160, 139, 452, 119:97-104, 204, 528

Series: Deuteronomy (#4)

Theme: The covenant between the Lord God and His people is renewed as the ten commandments, first given at Mount Sinai, are repeated.

Proposition: The very best way to live this life is in Christ, who alone enables willing wholehearted obedience to God’s covenant law.

**Introduction**

Are you living your best life? The phrase ‘live your best life’ sums up in 21st century terms the search for fulfilment, happiness, and contentment. It is the idea of living a balanced existence which maximises your personal potential, enabling you to be all that you can be.

When God created this world, His desire and purpose was for each person to ‘live their best life’ in relationship with Him. He had provided the perfect environment for human flourishing, making the whole universe ‘very good’ (Gen 1:31). He had set tasks for our first ancestors which would enable them to ‘live their best lives’ with one another in complete harmony with the natural environment being fully satisfied as they did so. They were to “*be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it*” (Gen 1:28). Adam and Eve had distinct roles in their union with one another, the man being the ‘head’ of his wife (Eph 5:23) and the wife being her husband’s helper (Gen 2:18). God designed marriage so that a man and woman in union with one another could live their best lives together.

The relationship between a husband and his wife is an image used by the Lord God to reveal His covenant bond with His people. For example, in Isaiah 54:5, Israel is reminded that “*your Maker is your husband*” (also Hosea 2:16; Jer 3:14; 31:32; Eze 16:8). In our text today from Deuteronomy 5, the Lord God is renewing His enduring covenant with His people Israel. His key covenant promise is, “*I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God’* (Exo 6:7).

The central terms of the covenant relationship between God and His people are found in the ten commandments. These covenant obligations are sometimes referred to as the ‘decalogue’ (which literally means “ten words” in Greek). They were first spoken by God to His people Israel at Mount Sinai and then written by Him on two tablets of stone (Ex 31:18). Called ‘the testimony’ these tablets were placed in the Ark of the Covenant (Num 10:33) which travelled with the people as they journeyed to the Promised Land.

These divine commands can be divided into the first four and the remaining six. This is how the Heidelberg Catechism unpacks the meaning of the decalogue (Q&A93): commandments 1-4 teach us ‘what our relation to God should be’, and commandments 5-10 teach us ‘what we owe our neighbour’. The first two points of this sermon follow this structure, focusing now on commandments 1-4 under the heading ‘*your best life with God*’.

1. **Your best life with God**

The exact wording of vows made by a groom and bride during their wedding ceremony vary, but under New Zealand law they must say ‘I {name} take you {other party’s name} to be my legal wife/husband “ or similar words to these. The Lord God had literally taken Israel to be His own people when He rescued them from their slavery in Egypt. In the land of Pharaoh they were helpless and vulnerable, living under a heavy burden of oppression, exploitation, abuse, violence, cruelty, suffering and injustice. The ten commandments cannot be rightly understood apart from these Word of the Lord in Deuteronomy 5:6: "*'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*”.

God’s covenant law is not designed to rescue, redeem, deliver, save His people, but to specify their **right response** to His love; willing heartfelt obedience to the One who has set His love upon them. Marriage vows also express the right responses of a husband and a wife to the binding covenant relationship between them. For example, a bride may promise to the groom in her vow to “*love and cherish you, comfort and honour you, submit to you in all things lawful, for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, and be faithful to you, as long as we both shall live*”.

The first four of the Ten Commandments are the right response to God, not only for those who have been rescued from their slavery to sin and death, but also for all people created in His image. The broad ethical/moral scope of the decalogue is helpfully expressed in these words from the Westminster Larger Catechism (A99.4) “*where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded*”. As we look at each of the ten commandments in this sermon I do not intend to try to explain and apply these foundational laws in detail.

**The first commandment** (verse 7) “You shall have no other gods before me” calls for a radical choice – a wholehearted choosing of God above all else. It is not possible to have two top priorities in life. In practice one will always be higher than the other. Jesus expressed this timeless truth in Matt 6:24 saying: "*No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other*”.

The Heidelberg Catechism (HCLD94) summarises what God reveals in His Word about how we are each to respond in our relationship with Him in these words: *‘trust Him alone, look to him for every good thing, humbly and patiently love him, fear him and honour him with all my heart. In short ‘that I give up anything rather than go against his will in any way’*.

The clearest question to ask people today with respect to the first commandment is "*What do you think about the Christ?*” (Matt 22:42). He alone has made the Father known to us (John 1:18). To live your best life, you must know Christ as your Lord and Saviour.

**The second commandment** (v8-10), not to make any images of God, has its root in the idea which ancient peoples held that having the image of a deity was a way for them to control divine power. God created images of Himself in the persons of Adam and Eve who were themselves glorious evidence of His majesty (Ps 8:5). They both represented Him and were His representatives on earth. To see and know Adam and Eve before their fall into sin would have been to see living images of God. His ‘communicable attributes’ – that is the aspects of His nature which He shares with human beings (e.g. love, wisdom, kindness, justice and goodness) – were evident in His image in mankind. This image has been damaged by sin and will not be fully restored in this age before Christ’s return. In Christ alone, God’s image is revealed in a perfect and unique way; more completely than would even have been possible with the perfection of Adam and Eve before the fall. Uniquely in Jesus Christ “*dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily*” (Col 1:19).

A wise husband and a wise wife can learn how to communicate with each other using the ‘love language’ of the other person. These have been suggested by author Gary Chapman as ‘words of affirmation, gifts, acts of service, quality time and physical touch’. We could say that God has revealed His ‘love language’ to us in the second commandment. We are to love Him by worshipping Him not with images which we have created (either physically or in our minds) but according to Christ, the Word of God (John 1:1).

**The third commandment** prohibits misuse of the divine name YHWH. Notice that the Lord does not say ‘My name’ but focusses on His covenant, relational name which He revealed to Abraham (Gen 15:7) and to Moses (Ex 33:19). The Ten Commandments cannot rightly be understood apart from a living relationship with God. In the Ancient Near East, a ‘name’ referred, not so much to what a person was called, but to who and what they were. For example, Solomon’s name spread to the surrounding nations because his name was associated with his great wisdom (1 King 4:31).

The essence of the prohibition in the third commandment is much more than the careless use of the Lord’s name in cursing and blasphemy. It is thinking, speaking and acting without regard for the greatness of the Lord God Himself. There is a parallel in the covenant of marriage. A husband or wife should not think, speak or act in ways which disregard the honour and reputation of their marriage partner. Gossip, together with other careless words and actions, weaken a marriage relationship. Living your best life with God includes upholding His glory, honour and greatness in all that you think, say and do.

**The fourth commandment** is a call to regularly remember the great work of the Lord, observing a weekly rest day which was set apart by Him from the other six days of the week for this purpose. When this law was first given by the Lord to His people it was connected to the seventh day on which He rested from His mighty works of creation (Ex 20:8-11). In this covenant renewal with His people, as preparation for their entrance into the Promised Land, the fourth commandment is linked to the Exodus from Egypt by the Lord’s power of deliverance.

For married couples it is good to for them to celebrate their wedding anniversary each year, but also to regularly remember the goodness of the Lord’s mighty works in their lives together. Today we follow the fourth commandment remembrance of our Lord’s mighty works as we commemorate the resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week. True life is only found in relationship with God, which is grounded in His amazing grace in Christ; ‘*we love because He first loved us*’ (1 John 4:19). Living your best life includes regularly remembering and celebrating the source of your life in the Risen Christ.

Are **you** living your best life with God?

The first four of the Ten Commandments reveal how to live ‘your best life’ in covenant relationship with Him. The remaining six commandments reveal how to live ‘your best life’ with other people.

1. **Your best life with other people**

Helping couples through pre-marriage counselling is one of the great privileges of being a pastor. There is much joy and anticipation as bride and groom look forward to their wedding day and to their future lives together in a relationship in which they each commit to remaining ‘*for as long as we both shall live*’. One of the definitions of Christian marriage which I discuss with couples in pre-marriage counselling is this: “Marriage is a God-ordained covenant in which a husband and wife find completeness, fulfilment, and companionship in each other **as they serve God together”**. The marriage covenant is to be a kingdom and gospel partnership. Whilst a marriage between a husband and wife should be the closest human relationship they each have, it is not to be so exclusive as to isolate them from other people.

We are called by God in His covenant of grace not only to live in right relationship with Him, but **also** in right relationship with others. Loving other people because you are loved by God is an essential part of living your best life. This is revealed in commandments 5-10 and also in the summary of this law which Jesus gave “*you shall love your neighbour as yourself*’ (Matt 22:39).

**The fifth commandment** is a call to ‘give weight’ to the role of parents – as those who are in authority over us whilst we remain at home under their care. The principle of this commandment extends to the honour and respect of those who have authority over us either in civil government (Rom 13:1-7; Titus 3;1; 1 Peter 2:13-17), or as bosses at work (Eph 6:5-8) or as church leaders (Heb 13:17) in their respective realms. Our best life is lived with others when we live willingly under God’s ordained human authorities. On this earth Jesus honoured his human parents and submitted to the authority both of the Jewish Council under Caiaphas (Matt 26:57-68) and to the local Roman Government under Pontius Pilate (Matt 27:11-14). Submission to human authorities (when this does not conflict with obedience to God’s higher law) does not mean agreement with their methods, laws, purposes or attitudes nor does it mean we will not suffer, but it is the way to live our best life under God’s ultimate authority.

**The sixth commandment** prohibits killing other people. The Hebrew word used here never appears in Scripture where God puts a person to death or where the life of an enemy is taken in war. Nor does this word prohibit the taking of a life when ordered by a civil court as with ‘capital punishment’. This commandment not to unlawfully kill a person includes murder in cold blood, manslaughter with passionate rage, negligent homicide resulting from recklessness or carelessness. God cares for all living things (e.g. Psalm 104:11-30; Matt 6:26-30). However, He gave permission to mankind to eat the meat of animals after the one-time global flood (Gen 9:3). As people, we are fundamentally distinct from animals as we are all made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27), uniquely ‘*crowned with glory and honour*’ (Ps 8.5).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus equates murder with anger (Matt 5:21-26). Anger can be ‘hot’ and confrontational or ‘cold’, resulting in withdrawal and loss of close communication. Unresolved anger destroys relationships. Living your best life with others includes living peaceably with all other people, as much as it depends on you (Rom 12:18).

**The seventh commandment** – ‘you shall not commit adultery’ (Deut 5:18), explicitly prohibits sexual intercourse of a man with a married woman or of a woman with a married man. At the core of this commandment is the sanctity of marriage in which both partners are called to be faithful to one another. There are many implications of the seventh commandment including all sexual activity outside of marriage, homosexuality, prostitution, and pornography. Living your best life with others includes respecting and protecting the honour of the marriage union (Heb 13:4) and keeping control of any lust in your heart for others apart from your own spouse (e.g. Matt 5:28) whether than be for people you meet in person or those viewed on media.

**The eighth commandment** – ‘you shall not steal’ (Deut 5:19), prohibits the taking of something which does not belong to you. The Word of God does not speak against personal wealth and possessions themselves, but does call for generosity towards others, especially those in need. All that we ‘own’ in truth belongs to God, our role being that of ‘stewards’. The desire to steal is rooted in discontentment with what we already have and can arise from an unwillingness to work conscientiously for what we need. Living your best life with others includes respecting their property without envy or a sense of personal entitlement to what they have.

**The ninth commandment** – ‘you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour’ (Deut 5:20), focusses primarily on the testimony of a witness in a court of law but has broader applications in the call to treat others justly and always to speak the truth. It also includes upholding the reputation of others in so far as is possible whilst not concealing that which should be rightly revealed. Living your best life with others includes being a speaker of truth, not gossiping, slandering, or condemning anyone without a hearing or without a just cause (HCLD43). Upholding this commandment means ‘*guarding and advancing my neighbour’s good name*’ (HCLD43). Are you living your best life with other people?

**The tenth commandment** – ‘you shall not covet’ (Deut 5:21), focusses exclusively on wrongful desires of the heart. All our plans and actions arise from within us, originating in the centre of our being – referred to in Scripture as ‘the heart’. As we heard earlier, Jesus identified this with both the six and seventh commandments during His Sermon on the Mount. The tenth commandment captures the evil desires of the heart before they find any outward expression in our lives. That is when they are destructive thoughts and motives which have not been made visible to others. The Heidelberg Catechism (LD44) summarises the broad scope of this commandment this way “*not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God’s commandments should ever arise in our heart*.” Willingly obeying the tenth commandment is the way to live your best life with God, with others and within yourself, which brings us to our third point:

1. **Your best life with your heart**

What is the pathway to true happiness, fulfilment and meaning in life? This is the question which people down through the ages have sought to answer. Who does not desire to ‘live their best life’? It should not surprise us that the true answer to this question does not come from human beings, but from our Creator who knows us better than anyone else (ref. Ps 139:1-2). The answer lies not in our own circumstances, nor in our own abilities, nor in the state of the world around us, but in the orientation, the attitude, of our inner self. This is the very core of who we are, referred to in Scripture simply as ‘*the heart*’.

To live your best life is to have a circumcised heart (Deut 10:16), a new heart (Eze 11:19). This is because it is out of the heart that evil finds expression in life (Matt 15:19). The desire to kill starts with anger in the heart (Matt 5:21-26). The desire to be unfaithful starts with lust in the heart (Matt 5:27-30). The tenth commandment reveals that first and foremost your heart must be a heart which desires to live your best life for God, or else you will look elsewhere for happiness, fulfilment and meaning in life.

The Apostle Paul, who was very well trained in the Old Testament Law, understood the heart orientation of the 10 commandments: ‘*If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness*’. God’s perfect law of liberty (James 1:25) naturally provokes us to desire not freedom but the bondage of sin, just as in the liberation of the Israelites in the wilderness, they desired to return to Egypt.

There is a natural heart response inside us all that when we are told not to do something. We desire to do it and when we are commanded to act in a particular way we resist. I have never met anyone for whom this is not true in at least some situations. You can spot it most easily when the command is contrary to your own wishes and desires. Perhaps when your parents tell you not to eat any of that yummy cake in the fridge. Or when you are in a hurry, but the speed limit is only 70km/hr, and you know it should be at least 90 if not 100. Or when you know that movie or website is sexually explicit, but you go there and keep watching. Or when you know that you are called to worship the Lord in a congregation of his people, but you are absent from church worship when you could be there. Or when you are discontent because you don’t have as much as you think that you are entitled to.

The only solution to the problem of harmful desires like these is to have a heart that loves God’s law, His Word, because you love God Himself. This is the vital connection which Jesus revealed when He said: "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*”. Love for the good commandments of God is repeatedly expressed throughout Psalm 119, for example: “*In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches*” (Ps 119:14); “*I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word*” (Ps 119:46); “*I find my delight in your commandments, which I love*” (Ps 119:47).

Our duty and our delight line up together when the law of God is willingly and gratefully obeyed (John 4:34; Ps 112:1; 119:14, 16, 47, 48, 97-113, 127, 128, 163-167). This results in what has been called our ‘highest happiness’. The Bible frequently refers to this as ‘joy’. To live joyfully according to the good commandments of the Lord God is to live your best life.

Why then do more people not discover this universal truth? The answer is because to see this liberating truth and to live this wonderful reality a changed heart is necessary. This is the inner transformation which Jesus spoke about to Nicodemus, explaining that a spiritual rebirth is necessary for a person to have a changed heart (John 3:3). The Holy Spirit alone can bring about this radical re-orientation of the human heart.

When your own heart is changed in this way, you begin to see how profoundly you have broken God’s law of liberty and how you continue to do so. Do **you** see this?

You see how much it cost for Christ to buy back your freedom which had been lost to sin. Do **you** see this?

Then your heart desires, above all, to live this life according to commandments of God because you love Him. Your heart knows that you continue to fail as you strive for greater Christlikeness and freely admits this reality both to God and to others.

When your own heart is changed you also see how wonderfully Christ has perfectly fulfilled the law of God on your behalf. By faith you believe that you are fully acceptable to God the Father through Christ His Son and that His love for you does not depend on up how well you have obeyed His good commandments. This is true freedom which leads to true joy. This is truly the way to live a balanced existence which maximises your personal potential, enabling you to be all that you can be.

Go then, and live your best life in Christ according to the pathway laid out in His Word! Christ died to give you the freedom to do this!

AMEN.