



Two Mountains

Exodus 19, Hebrews 12:18-29

The greatest need we have is to be in relationship with the God who made us. To know God and to be known by God.

And when I say God, I don't mean "your true self."

It seems that one of the biggest lies we are believing these days, if internet memes are any indicator, is that the ultimate quest we should all be on and the ultimate goal is to discover and please your true self. Be true, first and foremost, to yourself.

"The greatest challenge in life is discovering who you are...The second greatest is being happy with what you find."

"No matter what your mind thinks, it's time for you to reconnect and begin living from your true self."

"Wouldn't it be powerful if you fell in love with yourself so deeply that you would do just about anything if you knew it would make you happy?"

These are memes passed around by Christians, but aren't Christian ideas, they're essentially new age ideas, but they aren't new.

Aristotle said, *"Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom,"* and he got thousands of likes on his instagram meme that said that.

We can come to believe that any sentimental, quasi-religious nice thought must be Christian. But it is a very different religion from biblical Christianity.

And Christians will even counsel their friends to do whatever seems like the most authentic thing for you to do - and it can be incredibly destructive false teaching.

When Christian Smith, a sociologist, surveyed Christian youth he said their faith was more of a “moralistic therapeutic deism” than it was Christian.

We have created a feel good religion that makes the most of me, peddled it in churches, and substituted it for Christianity. We’ve created a mirage that has a lot of people chasing it but isn’t satisfying anybody’s thirst in the long run. When we live with the self as ultimate, there are moments where we feel freedom, moments of feeling unburdened, but in the end it is death.

There is a night and day difference between the idea that, “knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom” and

(Proverbs 9:10) “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”

Seek self, care for self, please self, find self, worship the self is the religion of our day. But this could not be more contrary to the Christian faith. The Christian faith has God at its center, and the life of following Jesus looks like denying self to keep God and his commands central and to give ourselves to others. It is more about taking on great responsibility and laying down our preferences so that God can be glorified. Jesus said this:

Matthew 16:24-26 “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”

How different is this than instagram religion that says, “Gain the whole world for yourself.” How different is this from the counsel that says, “Do whatever makes you the best you.”

Christianity is not the search for the true self. It says we must abandon the search for the true self. And follow Christ. But there find what we were really after anyways.

So often, when we say we are following God, we are actually just pursuing an idealized version of ourselves. We define God so that “God” is just like me only perfect and powerful. God is a powerful version of me on my best day. He thinks the same things I

think, He loves the same things I love, He wants for me exactly what I want for me, He *is* me, just an idealized version of me.

But again, this is not God. That isn't real. The Christian definition of God is not "the idealized self."

Christianity says that God is altogether other. He isn't us. He doesn't think like us, act like us, He isn't motivated like us. He's other.

And the Christian faith is about meeting God, who is not us, and then because He has pursued us, we give up the pursuit of self for the pursuit of God.

So in Exodus 19, the Israelites have continued in their journey in the wilderness and now they are camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai - the mountain where they'll soon receive the ten commandments, the law of God. Chapter 19 is the preparation for what happens in chapter 20, which is the most important chapter in all of the Bible for Jews, the most pivotal moment in their history. So we are ramping up to a very big event - because here the people will meet God.

God is going to come down and prescribe the terms for a relationship with him. He is going to make a covenant with them, where He says, "Here is how to be in a relationship with God." Not how to be the truest you, but how to be in relationship with the God who is other than you.

So they are at Mount Sinai, and if this is the mountain we think it is, its peak is about 7300 feet above sea level, and at its base is a plateau where the Israelites are camped that is about 5000 feet above sea level. So it's about 2300 feet from top to bottom.¹

Exodus 19:1-6 "On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. 2 They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, 3 while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: 4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and

¹ Chester, Tim. Exodus For You: Thrilling you with the liberating love of God (God's Word For You) (p. 153). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and 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.”

So God calls Moses up onto the mountain and says He is going to give him his words, and if the people obey those words, then they will become God’s treasured possession, a unique and holy nation, priests to God.

They would be uniquely God’s - but that wouldn’t be so God could bless them and curse everyone else. They would be the priests of the world, representing God to the world, and bringing the world to God. They would be an example of what it is to be a people whose king is God. They would know God’s word and instruct the world with it. They would offer sacrifices on behalf of the world to God. They would have a unique role as representatives of God in the world, as missionaries of God, if they would keep the covenant.

So this relationship with God would give them purpose and identity. And if they perfectly kept God’s law, they could be in right relationship with Him.

So Moses goes down the mountain and brings this word to the people.

Exodus 19:7 So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. 8 All the people answered together and said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD.

The people say, “You’ve got yourself a deal, God, all that you’ve spoken we will do.”

God gives commands, they say we will do them, and then God says, “OK, then buckle up, I’m going to come near:”

9 And the LORD said to Moses, “Behold, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever.” When Moses told the words of the people to the LORD, 10 the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments 11 and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. 12 And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to

death. 13 No hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.’ When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain.” 14 So Moses went down from the mountain to the people and consecrated the people; and they washed their garments. 15 And he said to the people, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman.”

So Moses tells the people to wash themselves, wash their clothes, and not engage in sexual relations. Which is not to say dirt is bad, or that sex with a spouse is bad, but it is saying that this is an occasion for prayer and focused attention on the Lord, which will mean giving up even non-sinful pleasures for awhile.

And the people are commanded not to even touch the mountain or they’ll be killed.

So notice what’s happening here: the people want a relationship with God. And God is coming to the people. But when God comes near, He says, “stay away.” He says, “go to the extreme to purify yourself.” Already there’s this sense that their impurity will separate them from God, while God is the One they truly need.

They want to get near Him, but they’re not worthy. So when God does come near, it’s an occasion for fear:

16 On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. 17 Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. 18 Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. 19 And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. 20 The LORD came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the LORD called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

As God comes near, there is a loud and growing trumpet blast. There’s smoke on the mountain that obscures God. Hebrews 12:18 says there is gloom and a tempest. God speaks in thunder. The mountain is shaking. And the people are trembling in fear.

God has come for a relationship with his people, and you need to have communication to have a relationship, so they will need to hear His voice, but His voice is terrifying.

It's so terrifying, that soon the people will ask Him to stop speaking. In Exodus 20, just after the commandments are given, this happens:

Exodus 20: 18 Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off 19 and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." 20 Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." 21 The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

God is giving them His words, but they people say, "No more words! This voice is terrifying." There is terror, and fear, and a God who comes near but can't be approached.

And they only talk to God through Moses, the mediator. Now the people could hear God speak to Moses, at least at first, according to verse 9. God wasn't asking them to take Moses' word for the fact that God talked to Him on the top of the mountain. That would seem like a scam all day long. God speaks, and the people hear Him speak to Moses.

But over and over you see Moses go up to God for the people, and then down from God with God's word. 7 times Moses climbs up the 2300 feet, then climbs down. So here's this 80 year old man going up and down the mountain, climbing to heaven, returning to earth, climbing to heaven, returning to earth because that's how they'll communicate with God.

And over and over the scene is one of fear and danger and trembling and shaking and a God you can't approach.

God comes near and says "Stay away."

EXODUS 19:21 And the LORD said to Moses, "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through to the LORD to look and many of them perish. 22 Also let the priests who come near to the LORD consecrate themselves, lest the LORD break out against them." 23 And Moses said to the LORD, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for you yourself warned us, saying, 'Set limits around the mountain and consecrate it.'" 24 And the LORD said to him, "Go down, and come up bringing Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break

through to come up to the LORD, lest he break out against them.” 25 So Moses went down to the people and told them.

So God comes to His people. God is their biggest need. But the encounter is terrifying.

We sometimes sing about desiring to be in God’s presence. But here, the people are in God’s presence, and they say, “Make it stop.”

The relationship with God that we all want just can’t happen - not on Sinai’s terms.

It’s like they’re dying of thirst, but the only water around is behind a giant dam in front of them that is about to break. The only thing that can quench their thirst will also kill them.

God is too much for them.

They need His holiness, but He is too holy. They need his justice, but He is too just and knows their guilt. They need His nearness, but it will incinerate them.

And while we might have sentimental notions of God that say otherwise, this is the God who has revealed Himself to us. He is a God who is holy, who is other, who is perfect and pure. And we are so far below him as creatures and so corrupt compared to him as sinners that it’s only gloom and a tempest for us in his presence. To really encounter him is to tremble.

He is a God to be feared by people like us, who didn’t keep his commands.

And God doesn’t change.

Malachi 3:6 ““For I the LORD do not change...”

James 1:17 says “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

All of this talk about God’s anger at sin, about our inability to approach Him because of our defilement, about the absolute necessity that people take his covenant seriously and obey Him is not just from a primitive understanding of God that has evolved (and now we know He’s nice.) We have an unchanging God who is the One we need, but Who is far too Holy to be approached.

But aren't we under grace?

Hasn't there been a change so that obedience doesn't matter anymore, and so we can approach God freely without any fear at all?

Now that Jesus has come, aren't we free from the call to obey, aren't we free from commands, and from having to see God as a fire, aren't we free from trembling?

God hasn't changed. But He did come and made a new covenant, a new way to relate to Him. The problem was not in God, and it wasn't in His commands. The problem was in the people. Their hearts were hard and they couldn't obey, so they couldn't be pure enough to enter His presence that they needed.

So God promised a new covenant - one that isn't just external in commands carved in stone, but internal, written on hearts. And under this covenant, God would be known with the closeness we need.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 “31 “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. 33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

God said there is a new covenant coming where those commands will be written on their hearts- and this is the covenant that Jesus said He was making before going to the cross.

And Hebrews 12 talks about this covenant, and He talks about it as another mountain, Mount Zion. The covenant at Sinai revealed God's nature but the laws couldn't change hearts. And on this side of the cross, we are made part of a new and better covenant:

Hebrews 12 :18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

So he says that, as Christians, we have not come to Mount Sinai. That was the mountain of the Old Covenant. That covenant is replaced with a better one. God has made a New Covenant, symbolized by Mount Zion, and this is what it is like:

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Our relationship to God is not one where we're at the base of the mountain, trembling with panic, but a festal gathering: a feast. It's an assembly with all of God's people from all generations, where we have been sprinkled with blood that cleanses.

And under this covenant, at this mountain, we are near to God (23). And the reason that we can be in God's presence with joy is because there's a better mediator.

Moses had to go up and down the mountain. Over and over. And he was a frail and sinful man himself, so even Moses was fearful on that mountain. But Jesus came all the way down to earth: so far down that they crucified Him and put Him in the grave. And he rose, and went up to the right hand of the father.

And because He truly cleansed us, He calls us all the way in. Now we can drink and not be destroyed. Now we can be in His presence but not be incinerated. Now in Jesus we can have what our hearts are after - a real relationship with a holy God.

So the right response to this is for us to receive the news with joy and a sense of relief.

Now we have a hunger to hear His voice in the scripture, because the penalty has been taken away. Now his voice speaks, and Romans says His Spirit speaks to our spirit and tells us we are sons and daughters of God.

Our guilt has been taken away. We're at a better mountain, we're part of a better covenant.

But here's a mistake we make. We say, "Therefore, I don't need to be concerned about obedience, and now I can approach God really flippantly like He's my homeboy."

But the author of Hebrews says we should draw the opposite application from all of this:

25 See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. 26 At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." 27 This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. 28 Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.

He doesn't say, "We are under grace so don't worry about obedience."

He says, "How much more should we strive for obedience because we are under grace."

The people at Sinai had a warning from God to repent, but that was a God they couldn't get close to. And they had hearts that ultimately couldn't obey.

Here at Zion, we also have a call from God to repent. But now we see Him as a God who gave his son, who died for us. He showed his love. He contained his powerful holiness that was bursting the dam in His approachable son so we could know him. He broke that dam open on Jesus on the cross so the wrath could be satisfied. He gave all in tremendous love.

And the author of Hebrews says, "It is far worse to refuse Him now than it was then."

And God hasn't changed - He is still holy - He is still a consuming fire.

We are warned against treating this covenant of Grace that we are under as the grounds for disobedience, for the lack of vigilance, or for a passive approach to holiness.

And in the passage right before this he makes it very specific. (Verse 18 begins with the word “for”, connecting it to the previous passage.)

Hebrews 12 Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, 13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. 14 Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

He says there is a striving for holiness in the Christian life. We have been given the holiness of Christ so we can come near to the God in a joyful feast. And all those who have been given the holiness of Christ strive for holiness without which we can't see the Lord. Saved people strive to obey.

He says they strive for peace with everyone. Christian people aren't divisive - they don't love the drama - they work toward peace and unity, the covenant was given to a community, not just an individual, so that wholeness of the community matters. Gossips are giving evidence that they don't know the Lord. They call it venting, and we think we're helping by listening to it, but he says they should just be pursuing peace. Tell them to go to that person.

15 See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;

Usually when we talk about bitterness we talk about resentment. And that's certainly a destructive emotion we should be striving to be free from as part of our holiness and living at peace with everyone.

But this root of bitterness is a quote from Deuteronomy 29.

Deuteronomy 29:18-20 “18 Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, 19 one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.’ This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and

dry alike. 20 The LORD will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the LORD and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven.

So notice what the root of bitterness is. It is someone who says, "I'm safe because of the covenant, even if I stubbornly walk in my sin."

Hebrews says that same deadly attitude is possible in our day.

We so often hear the word "grace" thrown around like it makes me doing whatever I want to do OK. Come on, we're under grace. Its OK if I gossip, I get drunk, I neglect gathering with God's people. Its cool if we sleep around. I'm fine. **I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart**

New covenant, under grace, Hebrews says, people who live like that don't know the Lord. And He is a consuming fire. You're neglecting an even bigger thing than the covenant at Sinai, and He is even more to be feared.

He says it is possible, in this age of grace, for people to feel secure when they're not secure. We can think we're safe, we can think we're Christians because we had some spiritual or emotional experience in the past, or because we are around Christians and in church. But still walk in the stubbornness of our hearts.

Hebrews warns again and again against drifting. Drifting back to thinking keeping the law makes us ok, or drifting the other way into thinking we're OK even if there is no repentance and fruit in our lives. Both ways of drifting: legalism and laxity, are terrifying things because when they persist they show we haven't trusted Christ.

And then he applies this to sexual immorality:

16 that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 17 For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears. 18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest...

He warns us, under grace, not to engage in sexual immorality. Sex outside of marriage, he says, persisted in without repentance, is evidence of not knowing God. And he warns us with an example of a guy who got so resistant to God that he couldn't repent later.

He says, "don't be like him." So that's a possibility today. Under grace.

Now I know this is a very heavy message.

But I want you to know why I think it needs to be preached sometimes. I spend much of the week talking to people in our church about issues that arise from the very things he warns against here. Frequent gossip. Adultery. Sexual immorality. Divisiveness and criticism.

And the most concerning issue is not that a Christian would ever commit these sins. Because Christians certainly do.

But Christians repent and confess and renounce and strive for holiness.

What troubles me most is how we gossip and almost don't feel it anymore. Or move in with a girlfriend and call it good. Or have critical divisive spirits and treat them like personality traits. Or pursue exactly what we want and call it self-care and righteous because we are being our true selves. Or we see sin in others, and we celebrate it - as if it would be great if they hardened their hearts against righteousness.

And those things are all to be signs, not that we have this great salvation that can bless us doing whatever we want. But that we are neglecting this great salvation.

There are two things it is important to make clear here: persisting in known disobedience is evidence that we don't know God, and if that's the case, He isn't less to be feared than at Sinai, but more.

But two, and this is really good. Christians sin in any of the ways I've described here. But they confess and repent and renounce. And when they do, they don't have to scrub up, deny themselves pleasure, punish themselves, avoid hearing the voice of God, do penance.

Because we have a better mediator who endured all of the wrath we deserve.

And Christians who confess and repent are welcome to the feast. Welcome to hear the voice of God, the voice we need, and to hear it with joy. Because you're not at Sinai, you're at the mountain of a better covenant, with Jesus as the better mediator, a covenant of forgiveness and promise and grace.

And if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The final word for Christians is forgiveness and life. Jesus's blood speaks a better word than Abel's. Cain killed Abel and the blood showed his guilt. Christ was killed and his blood absolves our guilt.

Two Mountains

Exodus 19, Hebrews 12

I. Mt. Sinai

II. Mt. Zion

III. Implications

For Discussion in small groups:

- 1) What does it mean to fear the Lord?
- 2) Is fear of the Lord a valid response to Him for a Christian?
- 3) How do we hear the voice of the Lord?
- 4) What does it mean that God is "entirely other" than us?
- 5) How does the Christian life differ from the life lived in pursuit of self?