

# Do Not Add or Subtract (Deuteronomy 4)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy

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## I. Background / Review

- a. **Deuteronomy** captures Moses's final speeches to the people right before his death at the age of 120 after leading the Israelites for 40 years in the Wilderness.
  - i. Sometimes this is broken down into three speeches given by Moses, with the first one ending at the close of **Deuteronomy 4**. If that understanding is correct, Moses' second address would begin with his recounting the story of the 10 Commandments given at Mount Sinai, in **Deuteronomy 5**.
    1. Therefore, in **Deuteronomy 4** we are now at the end of Moses' first address to the Israelites.
  - ii. Thus far, he has reminded them of their journey from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh Barnea (when the 12 spies were sent out) and their recent interactions with five other nations. The last time we were together, we looked at the defeat of Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings. Two and  $\frac{1}{2}$  tribes would settle in their land, on the east side of the Jordan River.
  - iii. Moses also recounted the story of God telling him sternly that he would not cross the Jordan River and enter Canaan with the rest of his nation. Instead, he would die on Mount Nebo.
  - iv. Moses was told to strengthen and encourage Joshua, who would lead the people onward after Moses' death.

## II. The Call to Obey God's Commands

- a. Many people consider the part of Deuteronomy we are about to enter (**chapters 4-8** or so) to be the *very heart* of the Old Testament, containing the essence of what God is looking for from the people. There is a lot packed into these chapters. Therefore, let us pay close attention!
- b. Later, in **Deuteronomy 18:15-19**, we will encounter the great prophecy about Jesus, that in the future, the Lord would send "a prophet like Moses". Let us consider the unusual role of Moses as well as the details of his life, all of which point to Jesus who would come about 1400 years later.

c. Read **Deuteronomy 4:1-2**.i. In **Deuteronomy 4:2** it says:

1. Do not *add to* the word I give you; and
2. Do not *take away* from it (some translations render this phrase “do not *subtract from* it”).

ii. **Question:** Could anything be simpler than that? Don't add to it, but don't subtract from it either!

1. Bear in mind that the Israelites had been given a high priest and the Levitical priesthood.
  - a. Could the Lord have just said, “Follow whatever the priests tell you to do”? Would that have been simpler for everyone?
  - b. Why do you think Moses insisted that every individual in the community be called to understand the requirements of the Law and follow it without adding to it or taking anything away from it?

iii. **The First Danger:** *Subtracting from* the commands of God. In the case of the people Moses was speaking to, there was immediate danger of idolatry, worshiping the ‘gods’ of the nations around them (Egypt, Canaan), which would pull them into all kinds of other sins. In our case today, that would correspond to:

1. Omitting, ignoring or downgrading the hard commands (for example, on materialism, selfishness, unity, gossip, fits of rage, drunkenness, immorality, and purity).
2. Omitting the commands that are *unpopular in the culture around us*. (For example, on the role of men and women in the church and home, head covering, permanence of marriage, nonresistance, homosexuality, prayer and fasting, absolute honesty and integrity, honoring our elderly parents, giving generously to others in need, and evangelism.)
  - a. There is tremendous pressure to do this, from within and from the world around us. Churches all around us are caving to the culture and subtracting the unpopular commands of God.

iv. **The Second Danger:** *Adding to* the commands of God.

1. While most Christian churches today go “off the rails” by subtracting from what Jesus taught, there are others who make the opposite error. They *add to* what was handed down.
2. **Questions:** What is so bad about doing everything the Lord said, but just adding a few ingredients to make it a little better? Certainly, the first problem is much worse, isn't it? What do you think?
  - a. Let us consider what Jesus had to say about that.
3. Read **Mark 7:1-23**.
  - a. **Question:** Why was Jesus so upset about the Jews following rules handed down from their elders, which did not come from Moses? What's wrong with washing your hands, utensils, etc? That sounds like a good hygiene practice!
  - b. **Answer:** According to Jesus and Isaiah, this is worshiping God “*in vain*”!
    - i. It does not please God. Over time, it takes the focus away from the commands of God.
    - ii. When in conflict, the commands of God will suffer.
    - iii. It focuses on the external things (that other people can see) rather than on the real problem: sin embedded in our corrupt hearts.
4. Consider that the commands of God are not easy to follow. Why should anyone try to make things *even more difficult*?
  - a. The New Testament teachings of Jesus are extremely challenging, at least for those who take those commands seriously and strive to follow what Jesus and the apostles taught.
  - b. Even in the Old Testament, in the Law of Moses, these commands are not easy to follow. For example, in the 10 Commandments, in **Exodus 20** and **Deuteronomy 5**:
    - i. Honor your mother and father (applying also to those who have elderly parents who may need a great deal of care).

- ii. You shall not bear false witness (you need to tell the truth all the time)
  - iii. You shall not covet anything your neighbor possesses (including his wife, servant, house, livestock, etc.)
5. **Questions:** What is a religious “*tradition*”? And are such traditions *good, bad* or *neutral*?
- a. A “tradition” is simply *something that is handed down*. It could have been handed down from Moses, Jesus, the apostles, the local elders... or anyone.
  - b. Consider passages in the New Testament that hold up or criticize various “traditions”:
    - i. “Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the *traditions just as I delivered them to you.*” (**1 Corinthians 11:2**, NKJV)
    - ii. “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the *tradition of men*, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.” (**Colossians 2:8**, NKJV)
    - iii. “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the *traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.*” (**2 Thessalonians 2:15**, NKJV)
    - iv. “But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to *the tradition which he received from us.*” (**2 Thessalonians 3:6**, NKJV)
  - c. **Bottom Line, from Paul:** Something handed down from Jesus or the apostles, whether by letter or by word of mouth, should be followed. This is “apostolic tradition”. Something handed down from their Jewish forefathers or from some other source was another matter entirely (certainly not to be bound on any Christians).

6. The apostles handed down our Christian faith complete. No one should be adding to nor subtracting from it. Let us review some New Testament passages that touch on this concept.
  - a. “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father’s who sent Me. These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He *will teach you all things*, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.’” (**John 14:23–26**, NKJV)
    - i. **Question:** If the apostles would be taught “all things”, could anyone in the future be in a position to add anything more to the original deposit of the faith?
  - b. “O Timothy! *Guard what was committed to your trust*, avoiding the profane and idle babblings...” (**1 Timothy 6:20**, NKJV)
  - c. “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.” (**Galatians 1:8–9**, NKJV)
    - i. Not even Paul or an angel could change the original deposit of the faith.
7. From early Christian writer Irenaeus (who In his youth had learned from Polycarp, who in turn had learned from the apostle John), writing c. 180 AD:
  - a. “For it is unlawful to assert that they [the apostles] preached before they possessed ‘perfect knowledge,’ as some do even venture to say, boasting themselves as improvers of the apostles. For, after our Lord rose from the dead, [the apostles] were invested with power from on high when the Holy Spirit came down [upon them], were filled from all [His gifts], and had perfect knowledge: they departed to the ends of the earth, preaching the glad tidings of the good things [sent] from

God to us, and proclaiming the peace of heaven to men..."

- i. (Source: Irenæus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 1; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 414)
- b. "True knowledge is [that which consists in] the doctrine of the apostles, and the ancient constitution of the Church throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the successions of the bishops, by which they have handed down that Church which exists in every place, and has come even unto us, being guarded and preserved, without any forging of Scriptures, by a *very complete system of doctrine, and neither receiving addition nor [suffering] curtailment [in the truths which she believes]...*"
  - i. (Source: Irenæus, *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 33; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 508)
  - ii. Note: No additions, and no curtailments (subtractions). That reminds me of what Moses said in **Deuteronomy 4!**
- v. The challenge that is before us as Christians today, related to this concept.
  1. How do we hold on to what Jesus and the apostles handed down, without wavering? Is there any secret? Is there any short-cut or easy way to make sure we do it right?
  2. Many churches want to add to the Scriptures to avoid slipping in the other direction. They insist you CAN'T maintain a church that is growing in holiness and will not be infected and destroyed by worldliness unless you add and enforce extrabiblical rules.
  3. The problem (for me): We are told not to do that. We are commanded not to add to the Scriptures. Not a pope, not a council of bishops in the third or sixth century, not a group of bishops/elders coming up with rules today.

4. I have been told by some: “Without adding extra-Biblical rules and standards, you won’t be able to sustain having a church devoted to holiness.”
  - a. They warn: “Every time a group we know has let up on the extrabiblical rules, the group immediately becomes worldly”
  - b. However, I believe *there must be a way* to stay on the path that does not require us to bind anything that goes beyond the Scriptures.
  - c. I believe we can find some of the key principles Moses lays out in **Deuteronomy** to help us face similar challenges today.
- d. Read **Deuteronomy 4:3-13**.
  - i. Moses reminds them of two terrifying encounters with God during their time in the Wilderness: at Baal Peor (near the end of the journey) and at Mount Sinai (near the beginning).
  - ii. The fear of God will help them to stay on track.
  - iii. Re-read **Deuteronomy 4:3-5**.
    1. Review the story Moses is referring to here, from **Numbers 25:1-13**.
    2. 24,000 Israelites died in that plague. That is about *eight times* the combined death toll from the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks in the US, the largest terrorist attack in history.
    3. This happened to teach the Israelites a lesson they would never forget (and which we also should never forget, as Paul explained in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**).
    4. That provided a sober reminder of the dangers of idolatry and sexual immorality, of blending with worldly nations and picking up their wicked sins. It also is a reminder of the wrath of God, and His zeal for righteousness.
    5. The reason that “only” 24,000 died is that Phinehas took action to stop the plague. He took the initiative and dealt boldly with sin by driving a javelin through the bodies of a man and woman involved in sexual immorality. For that action, Phinehas ends up receiving the “covenant of peace”. Is that your idea of a peacemaker who is blessed by God?

- iv. Never forget that following God's commands will make us the wisest people on the face of the earth: much wiser than the nations around us. (**Deuteronomy 4:5-7**)
- v. Don't ever forget. Teach these stories and commands to your children and grandchildren. (**4:8-10**)
- vi. Fear of God burned into them at Mount Sinai. Never forget that encounter (those hearing would have been under the age of 20 at the time, or perhaps not yet born at the time of **Exodus 19-20** events).
  - 1. Re-read **Deuteronomy 4:9-13**.
  - 2. Fear of God from that terrifying encounter.
  - 3. In my opinion, *Jesus was the greatest preacher of the fear of God of all time*. More on this topic (the fear of God) will be in a future lesson in this series.

### III. Dangers of Idolatry

- a. Recall the events of Baal Peor, Egypt, and the golden calf at Mount Sinai. Idolatry continued to be a major problem for the people until the Babylonian captivity.
- b. Read **Deuteronomy 4:14-24**.
  - i. Make no carved images, worship no other 'gods'. Don't worship created things (including the sun, moon and stars).
  - ii. Read **Romans 1:18-32**.
    - 1. Idolatry, worshiping created things rather than the Creator, is the gateway to all kinds of human depravity. Still a problem in much of the world.
  - iii. Covetousness (worshiping money, lusting after the wealth of others) is described as a form of idolatry, by Paul.
    - 1. "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and *covetousness, which is idolatry.*" (**Colossians 3:5**, NKJV)
  - iv. God is described as being like "a consuming fire" (**Deuteronomy 4:24**).
    - 1. In the New Testament, we are reminded of the same thing.
    - 2. "For *our God* is a consuming fire." (**Hebrews 12:29**, NKJV)



c. Read **Deuteronomy 4:25-31**.

- i. This passage shows the mercy of God in a very practical way. Moses reminds the people that in the future, when they rebel against God and sin against Him, He will punish them. But when they repent, He will be merciful to them.
  1. "... for the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not forsake you nor annihilate you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers, which He swore to them."
- ii. We don't need to wait until the New Testament to see God's mercy. It is revealed right here, in the Law of Moses!
  1. God had previously revealed his merciful nature to Moses in **Exodus 34:4-9**, when Moses first asked to "see" the Lord.
  2. The character of God is unchanging. He has always been a merciful God, who is ready to forgive and restore His people when they turn back to Him.
  3. It is very important for us to have a healthy and accurate understanding of God's merciful nature. Those who claim you need to get to the NT and to Jesus to learn about God's mercy are mistaken. God's nature does not change. He has been merciful from the beginning. We see it all the way back in **Genesis 3**, at the Fall of Man.
  4. He wants all to be saved, even the wicked who are willing to repent.
  5. He explained all that to the Israelites in the beginning, through Moses.
- iii. **Deuteronomy 4:29** is a wonderful promise of God. This is Who He is.
  1. "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." (**Hebrews 11:6**, NKJV)
  2. Same Greek word in both places for "seek Him out" or "diligently seek Him".

#### IV. Inspiring Words: the Big Picture

a. Read **Deuteronomy 4:32-40**.

- i. Nothing like that had ever happened in human history (the exodus from Egypt, God descending on Mount Sinai and speaking out of the

fire, miraculous signs and wonders, the defeat of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, etc.).

- ii. God did this (delivering the Israelites) out of His love for their fathers (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc.)
  - iii. He is the only God. There is no other besides Him.
  - iv. They (and we) must never forget these things. And they (and we) must keep His commands!
- b. Summarize the concluding verses of this chapter (**Deuteronomy 4:41-43**).
- i. Three “cities of refuge” are set aside on the east side of the Jordan River, where someone guilty of manslaughter (not the same as murder, which involves a different degree of intent) can flee and be spared from being killed in return.
    1. There is more on that in **Deuteronomy 19** and **Numbers 35**.
- c. Read **Deuteronomy 4:44-49**.
- i. The end of Moses’ address. Some of the people will inherit land on the east side of Jordan (land of Sihon and Og), while the rest will inherit land in Canaan, on the other side of the River.
  - ii. However, Moses’ instructions, (to fear God, keep all His commands, add nothing, take away nothing, teach them to their children and grandchildren, never forget, and remember God’s merciful nature) apply to all of them.