

Homiletics Analysis: Deuteronomy 5

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Deuteronomy 5 is Moses' rehearsal of the Decalogue to the second generation of Israel standing on the plains of Moab, poised to enter Canaan. Moses does not merely recite the Ten Commandments — he frames them with covenant theology, addresses the new generation as direct participants ("not with our fathers... but with us, who are all of us here alive today," v. 3), and grounds the entire law in the Exodus event ("I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt," v. 6). The Ten Commandments are then given in full (vv. 7-21), followed by a narrative recollection of the Sinai theophany — the fire, the darkness, the voice — and Israel's terrified request that Moses mediate the word of God on their behalf (vv. 22-27). God commends Israel's response and appoints Moses as covenant mediator (vv. 28-31), closing with the charge to walk in the way God has commanded so that they may live, prosper, and long endure in the land (vv. 32-33).

The structural logic is critical: the commandments are not given in a moral vacuum. They are embedded between two covenant acts — the Exodus redemption that precedes them (v. 6) and the promise of life in the land that follows them (vv. 32-33). The law comes to a redeemed people as the pattern of life fitting their status, not as the mechanism of their redemption.

This Text — Intent

God, through Moses, is seeking to bind the second generation to the covenant their parents received — not as inheritors of a tradition but as living participants in a living relationship. The intent is not information transfer (they would have known the Decalogue) but covenant renewal and motivational reorientation: *You are the LORD's redeemed people — now live like it*. The passage aims to produce in Israel — and in every reader — a wholehearted, grateful, covenant-shaped obedience that flows from knowing who God is and what He has done, not from fear of punishment or desire for reward. The closing command is not "obey or perish" but "walk in the way... that you may live" — life as the shape of obedience, not its wage.

Subject Sentence: The LORD renews His covenant with redeemed Israel, binding a new generation to His commandments as the pattern of covenant life.

Primary Claim: God is calling His redeemed people — in every generation — to receive His commands not as burdens imposed by a distant deity but as the life-giving way of those who belong to the God who rescued them; the Ten Commandments are not the ladder by which Israel climbs to God but the pattern of life fitting a people God has already claimed as His own.

Interpretive Evaluation

The relationship between law and grace in Deuteronomy 5

The most significant and recurring interpretive issue in this chapter is the relationship between the commandments and the Exodus salvation — i.e., the function of law in the life of God's redeemed people. This question divides expositors across traditions, and how it is answered determines almost everything about the passage's homiletical use.

A **Lutheran** reading, following the classic Law/Gospel schema, will rightly insist that the commandments function to expose sin and drive the hearer to the gospel. This is a genuine use of the Decalogue and the Lutheran tradition recovers something essential: the law cannot be preached as though obedience to it is the ground of standing before God. However, the Lutheran reading risks flattening the passage's own rhetorical structure. Moses is not preaching the law to produce despair and then pointing to a Savior — he is preaching the law to a *redeemed* people as the way of life fitting their status. The Exodus precedes the commandments in v. 6 — not as context but as ground. The Lutheran tradition rightly captures the law's exposing function but may underweight its third use (the law as guide for the redeemed), which is precisely what Deuteronomy 5 foregrounds.

A **Dispensational** reading typically distinguishes Mosaic law from the New Covenant and may conclude that the Decalogue as such is not binding on the New Testament church — except where its specific commands are re-affirmed in the New Testament. This reading raises a genuine canonical question that must be addressed (see Canonical Support below) and is not simply wrong to observe discontinuity. However, it underweights the extent to which the Decalogue is itself embedded in the moral law written on the heart (Romans 2:14-15) and re-received in the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:10). The Reformed reading does not collapse Mosaic administration into the New Covenant but does insist that the moral content of the Decalogue is permanently binding as the expression of God's own character, now written by the Spirit rather than on stone.

A **Wesleyan/Arminian** reading will tend to emphasize Israel's responsibility to choose obedience and may apply the passage primarily as a motivational appeal to human decision. This is not wrong — Moses is clearly appealing for a decision — but it risks reading the passage in a voluntarist direction that the text does not fully support. The emphasis in vv. 29 and 32-33 is not on Israel generating obedience from within but on walking in *the way the LORD your God has commanded* — a way that is received, not constructed.

The Reformed reading holds that the Decalogue here functions in its *third use* — as the gracious guide for the redeemed, the pattern of life fitting a people the LORD has already delivered. The commandments are not the basis of the covenant but its *shape*. They are God’s gift to His delivered people: “Here is what it looks like to live as mine.” This reading best accounts for (a) the placement of v. 6 before the commandments, (b) the corporate nature of the renewal address in v. 3, (c) the motivational structure of vv. 32-33, and (d) the Westminster Confession’s careful distinction between the covenant of grace and the law as the rule of life within it. The Lutheran tradition’s insistence on exposing function is retained — the commandments do expose sin — but does not exhaust the passage’s homiletical purpose here.

The identity of “our fathers” in verse 3

A secondary interpretive issue concerns v. 3: “Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today.” Does Moses mean that the Sinai covenant bypassed the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob), or that the Horeb covenant is being renewed with this generation rather than applied to them secondhand through their parents who died in the wilderness? The Reformed reading follows the latter: the contrast is between the wilderness generation that perished and the Moab generation now being addressed — Moses is insisting on the present, living claim of the covenant on *these people*, not arguing that the Abrahamic covenant was separate and superseded. This is confirmed by vv. 2-3 read together and by the consistent Deuteronomic rhetorical strategy of direct address (cf. 4:4; 6:1). Dispensational readings that use v. 3 to argue for a clean break between covenants misread the rhetorical situation.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 20:1-17** — The original Decalogue at Sinai; Deuteronomy 5 is Moses’ covenant-renewal rehearsal, not a verbatim repeat — the Sabbath command notably grounds rest in Exodus (creation, 20:11) while Deuteronomy grounds it in Exodus redemption (5:15), demonstrating that both creation-order and redemptive-history carry the command.
- **Jeremiah 31:31-34** — The New Covenant promise: God will write His law on the hearts of His people — not abolish it, but internalize it; this passage confirms that the Decalogue’s moral content is permanent and its problem is not the law itself but the stone-tablet modality; the New Covenant fulfills Deuteronomy 5:29 (“Oh that they had such a heart...”).
- **Romans 3:19-20; 7:12** — Paul’s dual affirmation: the law produces knowledge of sin (its second use) and the law is “holy and righteous and good” (its permanent character); the commandments of Deuteronomy 5 are not Mosaic debris but expressions of God’s own nature.

- **Matthew 5:17-20** — Jesus does not abolish the Law and the Prophets but fulfills them; His exposition in the Sermon on the Mount treats the Decalogue's commandments as penetrating to the heart (anger = murder; lust = adultery), which is precisely what Deuteronomy 5:29 longed for ("Oh that they had such a heart to fear me...").
- **Romans 13:8-10** — Paul grounds love of neighbor in the second table of the Decalogue, citing several of Deuteronomy 5's commandments directly; the Decalogue's relational commands are not dissolved in the New Covenant but are fulfilled in love — confirming their ongoing moral force.

Aim: To confront the reader with the redeemed life as a life given a *shape* — and to show that the Ten Commandments are not the ladder by which we climb to God but the pattern God graciously hands to those He has already claimed, so that they may live as His own.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Moses summons all Israel to hear, learn, and carefully observe the statutes and rules	"Hear... learn... be careful to do" — three stages of covenant engagement; not intellectual assent alone
2-3	The LORD made the Horeb covenant with "us" — not with the dead fathers but with this living generation	Covenant renewal strategy: direct present-tense claim on the new generation; rhetorical urgency
4-5	The LORD spoke "face to face" at the mountain; Moses stood between Israel and the LORD because they feared the fire	Establishes mediation as structural reality from the beginning; anticipates Christ as ultimate Mediator
6	"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"	The preamble/prologue to the commandments; redemption grounds law; this verse is architecturally essential
7	First Commandment: No other gods before the LORD	Exclusive covenant loyalty; "before me" = in my presence, in my face
8-10	Second Commandment: No	Worship must match the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	carved images or idols; the LORD is a jealous God visiting iniquity and showing steadfast love	nature of God; jealousy here = covenant zeal, not pettiness
11	Third Commandment: Do not take the LORD's name in vain	Name = person, character, reputation; misuse includes false swearing, casual invocation, empty profession
12-15	Fourth Commandment: Keep the Sabbath holy; rest as servants and animals rest; <i>because</i> you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD brought you out	Note Deuteronomy's distinctive grounding of Sabbath in redemption (contrast Exodus 20:11: creation); rest as participation in freedom
16	Fifth Commandment: Honor father and mother so that days may be long and it may go well in the land	Bridge commandment between love of God and love of neighbor; family structure as covenant community foundation
17	Sixth Commandment: Do not murder	Life belongs to God; the prohibition is not merely legal but covenantal
18	Seventh Commandment: Do not commit adultery	Covenant fidelity in marriage mirrors covenant fidelity with God
19	Eighth Commandment: Do not steal	Property and provision are under God's governance; theft denies His provision
20	Ninth Commandment: Do not bear false witness	Truth-telling in community; the judicial context is primary but extends to all speech
21	Tenth Commandment: Do not covet your neighbor's wife, house, field, or possessions	The only inward commandment; addresses the heart; precedes all transgression of other commandments
22	The LORD spoke these words to the whole	"No more" = the Decalogue is complete and self-

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
23-27	assembly and added no more; He wrote them on two stone tablets Israel's elders approach Moses; the people fear they will die if they hear God's voice; they ask Moses to mediate and promise to obey	contained; tablets = permanent, authoritative, divine origin The terror is appropriate and spiritually honest; their request for a mediator is not cowardice but self-knowledge
28-29	The LORD hears Israel's response and affirms it; He expresses longing that they would always have such a heart to fear Him	One of the most poignant moments in the Pentateuch: God's expressed longing for Israel's wholehearted devotion; points directly to Jeremiah 31
30-31	The LORD sends Israel to their tents and keeps Moses to receive all the commandments, statutes, and rules	Moses' mediation role confirmed and extended; the Decalogue is the foundation, but the full Torah follows
32-33	Moses charges Israel to walk carefully in the way the LORD commanded — not turning aside left or right — so that they may live, prosper, and long endure	The closing charge connects obedience with life — not as merit but as the way life works in God's world; covenantal vitality

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1-5	Covenant Renewal Address — The Living Claim of the Horeb Covenant
2	6	The Redemptive Preamble — Salvation Grounds the Law
3	7-21	The Ten Commandments — The Shape of Covenant Life

Division	Verses	Label
4	22-27	The Sinai Theophany Recalled — Terror, Mediation, and the People’s Request
5	28-31	God’s Response — The Longing for a Devoted Heart and the Appointment of the Mediator
6	32-33	The Closing Charge — Walk in the Way, That You May Live

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD renews His covenant with redeemed Israel, binding a new generation to His commandments as the pattern of covenant life.

Primary Claim: God is calling His redeemed people — in every generation — to receive His commands not as burdens imposed by a distant deity but as the life-giving way of those who belong to the God who rescued them; the Ten Commandments are not the ladder by which Israel climbs to God but the pattern of life fitting a people God has already claimed as His own.

Applications (Five)

1. Receive the commandments as a gift, not a gauntlet. (*Mind/Belief*) The architecture of Deuteronomy 5 is deliberate and must reshape how the reader approaches the Ten Commandments: verse 6 precedes verse 7. The LORD’s self-identification as Redeemer comes *before* the first commandment. This means that every person who encounters the Decalogue is meant to encounter it as someone already addressed by grace — either as Israel addressed after the Exodus, or as a New Covenant believer addressed after the cross. The commandments do not tell you how to earn God’s favor; they describe the life fitting someone who already has it. If you have been reading the Ten Commandments as a performance standard rather than a covenant gift, this passage requires you to reorient entirely. The same God who delivered Israel from slavery hands you His law. It is the law of a Father to His children, not a judge to the accused.

2. Let the Decalogue expose where your heart has made other gods.

(*Affections/Worship*) The tenth commandment — “do not covet” — is the hinge on which all the others swing, because it is the only command that reaches past behavior into desire. Moses does not close the commandments with a ceremonial requirement or a social

regulation; he closes them by going after the interior. What you covet reveals what you worship. The husband you envy has the life you believe would finally make you secure. The neighbor's house you want is the stability you believe God has failed to provide. Every act of theft, adultery, and false witness begins here — in the heart's displacement of God with something that promises more. Sit with the tenth commandment long enough to be honest: what do you covet? Name it. Then ask what that desire reveals about where you are actually looking for life.

3. Recognize that you need a mediator — and that you have one. (*Mind/Belief*) Israel's response at Sinai is not a failure of nerve — it is an accurate theological diagnosis. They heard the voice of God from the fire and said, in effect, "We cannot survive this proximity." They were right. God affirms their response: "You have spoken well" (v. 28). The terror of the theophany is not solved by Israel becoming holier; it is solved by the appointment of a mediator. Moses stands between Israel and God. Every reader of Deuteronomy 5 should feel the weight of what this means for themselves: the God whose voice shook the mountain is the God you must stand before. You cannot negotiate your own terms. The good news of the New Covenant is that you have a better mediator than Moses — one who does not merely relay the word but is Himself the Word, who has gone into the fire on your behalf and come out the other side. You have a mediator. Stop trying to approach God on any other terms.

4. Stop treating obedience as the burden of the religious life and start treating it as the shape of the free life. (*Will/Behavior*) The closing charge of Deuteronomy 5 does not read, "Obey so that God will reward you." It reads, "Walk in the way the LORD your God has commanded, *that you may live*" (v. 33). The commandments describe the grain of the universe — the way things actually work in God's world. The person who honors father and mother is not earning a blessing from a capricious God; they are walking with the grain of God's design for human community. The person who refuses to commit adultery is not performing a feat of religious asceticism; they are protecting the covenant structure that makes love between persons possible. Concretely: identify one commandment you have been treating as an inconvenient restriction on your freedom, and spend this week asking instead what freedom it is actually protecting.

5. Hear God's longing for your wholehearted devotion — and let it move you. (*Affections/Worship*) Verse 29 is among the most tender statements in the entire Pentateuch: "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!" God is not a cold Lawgiver tallying compliance. He is a covenant God who longs for His people's wholehearted love — and who says so. The text puts longing on the lips of the Almighty. He is not indifferent to whether you love Him with your whole heart or merely comply with His commandments in a transactional, minimum-viable way. He wants more than your behavior. He wants *you* — your fear, your trust, your affections, your loyalty. Let that longing undo whatever cool religious distance you have maintained between yourself and the God who calls you His own.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Deuteronomy 5 establishes the permanent relationship between redemption and law — a relationship that runs through the entire canon. The Decalogue does not stand alone as a moral code; it stands on the foundation of the redemptive preamble (v. 6) and points toward the covenant life of those who have been delivered. This passage teaches that God’s law is not separate from His grace but is the form His grace takes for a redeemed people — the shape of life fitting those who have been set free. God here reveals Himself as simultaneously transcendent (the theophanic fire that terrifies Israel) and relentlessly covenantal (the One who longs for His people’s wholehearted devotion in v. 29). The jealousy of v. 9-10 is not a divine character flaw but the moral seriousness of a God who has given Himself to His people in covenant and will not share what is His. The law, rightly understood, is a revelation of God’s own character — not an arbitrary standard imposed from outside but the pattern of how God Himself is and how His world is designed to work.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Deuteronomy 5 is a foundational text for the Reformed understanding of the third use of the law — the law as the gracious guide for the redeemed. The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 97) and the Westminster Confession (XIX.6) ground this third use precisely here: the law is given to believers not to condemn but to direct. The passage also anchors the Reformed insistence on the unity of the covenant of grace across both testaments — the same God who redeemed Israel from Egypt has redeemed the church from sin and death, and gives His law to both as the pattern of covenant life, not the mechanism of salvation. The Sabbath command’s dual grounding (creation in Exodus, redemption in Deuteronomy) anticipates the Reformed understanding of the Lord’s Day as simultaneously a creation ordinance and a resurrection-redemption celebration. Most profoundly, vv. 23-31 — the appointment of Moses as mediator — establishes the typological pattern that points to Christ: the people cannot survive direct exposure to holy God; they need one who stands between them and the fire. The Reformed tradition reads Moses’ mediatorial appointment as a type of Christ’s unique, perfect mediation, the fulfillment of what Deuteronomy 5 could only anticipate.

Main Takeaway

The LORD does not begin with the commandments — He begins with the Exodus. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out.” *That* comes first. The law is handed to a delivered people as the shape of their delivered life. You are not reading the Ten Commandments to find out how to get right with God — you are reading them as someone Christ has already

gotten right with God, discovering the form your freedom was made to take. Walk in this way. Not to earn the life. Because you already have it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching the Decalogue as a ladder rather than a gift.** The single most common misuse of Deuteronomy 5 is to preach the Ten Commandments as the standard Israel (and the hearer) must meet in order to secure God's favor. This reverses the structure of the text. Verse 6 precedes verse 7 for a reason. The preacher who begins with the commands and reaches the Exodus only in application has inverted the passage's own logic. The commandments come to a people already redeemed; they must be preached to people who are already addressed by the gospel — either by anticipation (Old Testament audience) or by fulfillment (New Covenant audience).
- **Skipping verse 6 entirely.** In a hurry to get to the familiar commandments, many expositors treat the preamble as merely formal and move quickly past it. This is a serious omission. Verse 6 is not throat-clearing — it is the theological load-bearing wall of the entire chapter. Remove it and the commandments become a free-floating moral code with no redemptive foundation. The preacher must dwell here.
- **Moralizing the individual commandments without the covenant framework.** Each commandment taken individually can be preached as a moral lesson ("don't lie," "don't steal," "honor your parents"). But Deuteronomy 5 presents the Decalogue as a unified covenantal whole — the complete shape of life fitting a delivered people. Exposing any one commandment without the covenant framework tends to produce guilt-based behavior modification. The Keller idol-diagnosis lens applies powerfully here: the question is not merely "are you obeying?" but "what does your disobedience reveal about where you are looking for life?"
- **Treating verse 29 as sentimental rather than structurally significant.** "Oh that they had such a heart as this always..." is frequently read as an aside — God's wistful wish — rather than as the theological center of the passage's intent section. This verse is the clearest statement in the chapter of what God is actually after: not compliance, but wholehearted devotion. The preacher who misses this preaches a passage about rules when the passage is actually about a relationship.
- **Underreading the mediator narrative (vv. 23-31) as merely historical background.** Many expositors treat the Sinai theophany recall as narrative context for the Decalogue rather than as a theological claim about what human beings need to stand before God. Israel's terror is theologically accurate — they are right to say "we cannot survive this." Moses' appointment as mediator is not an accommodation to Israel's weakness but the pattern of how sinners can receive

God's word. The passage should not be closed without pressing the question: you have a mediator. Do you know Him? Are you approaching God through Him?

- **Applying the chapter only to Israel's historical situation and failing to press its present claim on the congregation.** Moses' opening move in vv. 2-3 is precisely to refuse this escape hatch: "Not with our fathers... but with us, who are all of us here alive today." The preacher must make the same move with the congregation. The covenant of grace is not a historical artifact — it presses its claim on living people in every generation. The Ten Commandments are not museum pieces; they are the living address of the covenant God to His covenant people now.

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