

## A Life Without Adding or Subtracting

### Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-8 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. <sup>2</sup> Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you. <sup>6</sup> Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." <sup>7</sup> What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? <sup>8</sup> And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

When is something perfect and shouldn't be messed with? For the twentieth anniversary of the release of the first Star Wars movie, George Lucas re-released the original trilogy with more than just cosmetic improvements to the film. He added scenes; changed others. Probably the most controversial change was the Han Solo and Greedo scene in the original Star Wars. Greedo forces Han at gunpoint to sit and talk, threatening to kill him throughout the conversation. The original cut of Star Wars had Han Solo delay Greedo with his smooth talk until he secretly drew his blaster and shot Greedo under the table before Greedo could shoot him. This helped establish the character of Han Solo as a bit of a scoundrel who would shoot first if it would save his skin. But in the special edition, computer effects added Greedo shooting first, hitting about three feet to the right of the Han Solo who was three feet in front of him while Harrison Ford's neck unnaturally shifts to the left and then Han shoots Greedo. George Lucas defended his additions as helping to keep the character of Han Solo from being portrayed as a cold-blooded killer. And the angry memes have not stopped. George Lucas might have been better off leaving that scene the way it was.

God knows that we as sinful human beings like to tinker. We like to be constantly be improving on things by adding to them or subtracting from them. We keep doing this because it's never perfect; we think there's always room for improvement.

Deuteronomy is the last of the first five books of the Bible written by Moses around 1400 B.C. It serves as a reminder to the people of what God expects of them and what he has promised them. "Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you." (verses 1-2)

Over the last forty years, the Israelites had tried to improve God's Word by adding to it. They thought that they could add worshipping other gods as something good for them like when they made the golden calf or when they followed the Midianite people into worshipping their false gods. They subtracted from God's Word when many men committed adultery with the Midianite women instead of honoring God's gift for marriage and his command that explicitly stated not to commit adultery (the sixth commandment).

This wasn't a problem only while the Israelites were in the wilderness for 40 years. The Pharisees and teachers of the law in Jesus' day had added traditions on top of God's laws and followed them as if God himself had commanded them. Jesus called them out on their addition and subtraction of God's Word, how their tradition stated that once they had set aside a gift for God that they would not use it to help their parents if they needed help. They had added this tradition of this gift devoted to God, a rule they came up with, and made it more important than God's command to honor their father and mother.

Where have we added to God's Word or subtracted from it? Have we added more laws to God's Word with the idea that more laws will make us holier, better, more God-pleasing people, that if we just have more do's and don'ts that this will improve our spirituality, our faith lives? Do we subtract from God's Word by cutting out the things that cause controversy, that if we leave out the hard to accept truths or the things that condemn certain actions and mindsets Christianity will become more attractive?

A 2016 study revealed that teens and young adults aged 13-24 believed that not recycling (56%) is worse than viewing pornography (32%). Now, God commands us to be good stewards of this world that he has given us. So, recycling becomes one way that we can do that. It's an application of a biblical principle. However, Jesus explicitly says, "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:28) It is a direct command from God not to look at a woman (or man) lustfully, which is why someone views pornography. Our culture has elevated an application of a biblical principle higher than an actual command from God. We had added and subtracted from God's Word.

We add to and subtract from God's Word because it makes us feel better about it. We want God's Word to be molded into what I think it should be, into what I think people will want to hear and be comfortable with. I don't want to have to change my way of thinking or my way of living. God's Word is easier and better if I add where I think it is needed or I subtract where I think it is necessary. Ultimately, this attitude reveals that I think that I know better than God and that I am, in fact, making myself God.

God knows that we like to make ourselves gods, that we think we know better than him and can improve his Word by adding to or subtracting from it. But God did not submit his Word to us for review, critical critique, or for improvement. No, he gave us his laws and decrees for our betterment and for the betterment of the world, as a guide for living for him. He did not want to leave us directionless as we ask, "What should I do with my life?" He gave us the Ten Commandments, a universal law of morality, which benefits all of us if we all live by it.

Step back for a minute and consider what it would look like if we all followed God's commands all the time. What would this world be like if when people wronged us, we would turn the other cheek and then forgive them as Christ has forgiven us, never holding a grudge but instead actively praying for the one who wronged us? What would it look like if all husbands selflessly served their wives, that people loved one another in the way that God loved us: unconditionally, that everyone went out of their way to protect the weak, those without voices for themselves? What if everything we said always built people up, never slandered them, never tore them down? What if every child always honored and respected their parents, their teachers, all those in authority over them? What if everyone worked to improve and protect this world, everyone's property and business? What if everyone gave generously to those in need? Would anyone ever go hungry? Be homeless? Lack clothing? Sounds like a pretty perfect world if we all did what God commanded instead of adding to it or subtracting from it and doing it how we think it should be done. Wouldn't everyone want this?

This is why God says through Moses, "Observe [the decrees and laws] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'" (verse 6) How we live is a testimony to our God and his perfect Word. When we live as God directs us, others take notice. You may not want a nametag actively marking you as a Christian or have the church logo plastered on the side of your car as you drive down I-15, but God has called all of you as his ambassadors, his representatives.

What's more is that as you represent God in this world by not adding or subtracting from his Word, others will want to know what makes you act the way you do. They will want to know about this God and this Word that he has given to you, why you live by it. This is where we remember that we are not just people who follow commands and laws, as if that is what makes us "Christian." This "body of laws" that is mentioned in verse 8 refers to all the words that he has given, which includes all the promises of God and the gracious actions of our God as well as the decrees and laws.

This is when we get to share why we follow God's decrees and laws – not because we earn anything by it, but because he has been so good and gracious to all of us. He came down from heaven as the offspring of the woman who would crush Satan. He would do this (and has done this) by taking on our human flesh and living under his own decrees and laws. Where we falter and fail to stop ourselves from adding to or subtracting from God's Word, he kept it. Even as the Pharisees and the teachers of the law saw, there was no fault with Jesus. He kept God's Word perfectly. He did this for us in our place and then shed his blood as the Lamb who takes away our sins and save us from death. All of this we know because this is what God's Word testifies to without adding to or subtracting anything.

When it comes to keeping your decrees and laws, forgive us, Lord, when we play God and add to or subtract from your Word. Remind us again by your Word that you have kept all the decrees and laws perfectly for us in our place without adding to or subtracting from them. Give us the desire to study your perfect Word so that we know it and live by it. Because you have clothed us with your perfect obedience to your decrees and laws, guide us to live by your Word without adding to it or subtracting from it. Help us to be your ambassadors in this world so that other people will come to know you. Amen.