

What the Torah is Not – The Torah Series

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MAIN VERSES

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Welcome to Founded in Truth

Do you ever find yourself searching for something bigger than you? For a community to be a part of? A place founded on truth and love? A place to worship the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and the Son of God? Welcome to Founded in Truth, where we're more than just a fellowship. We're a family, so welcome home.

What Is the Torah?

All right, great. So we're continuing our Torah series right now, and we're still laying some groundwork for how we look at the front of the Bible. Has anyone ever read the Torah and been like, this is awesome, but at the same time been like, what do I do with this? And the Torah is amazing. It changed my life when I realized that the Torah was not simply a divine list of commandments that fell out of heaven, but that it actually had effort and intention in the way it was written, the patterns that it had, the narrative that was strung through it actually mattered.

It changed my life completely when I realized that this thing is not just a daily checklist that we check off to somehow appease God, but that it actually has power to cultivate God's kingdom on earth. It was meant to go forth out of us, not sit inside of us.

And so, what is the Torah, if you've never heard this word before? The Torah is another name—the Hebrew word for the first five books of the Bible that we have. It's also known as the Pentateuch in Greek. It comes from two Greek words—really fancy words that mean the five books. I get humor out of the simplicity of the Bible sometimes. So: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

And they contain the launching pad for the story of Israel and God's mission to dwell with man. That's what it is.

And it's unfortunate that many Christians, many people in the world may have never really heard or understood the word Torah before. They're not really sure what that is. It's part of the Bible that typically goes ignored, dismissed, or considered fully irrelevant. Which I understand.

The first time I read through the Torah, you get to Leviticus, and you're like, what am I supposed to do with this? If I sin, I get a goat, and then it gets killed. I never killed an animal before. I've never been hunting. Goldfish once. Oops. Kill the goat and then the blood—they do what? And then they manipulate it and they put it in the horns of the altar. And what is this talking about? I totally get it. We can empathize with that. What is it? Why is this here and what is it doing for me?

And so it's considered irrelevant. And that's a tragedy, I feel, especially when we read the Bible to learn about God's plan and just how big a deal Yeshua is and everything the Torah has to do with that.

Instructions, Not Merely Laws

Torah is a significant part of the entire story of Israel, of course. And traditionally, the Torah is referred to as the law, due to the large, dense sections of conversation where God and Moses are telling Israel the do's and don'ts on how to cultivate a way to live as a God-ordained community.

In reality, the word Torah means instructions. Instructions. And some would be quick to say, well, yes, instructions are law. And I could see how you could beeline to that conclusion, but instructions are more intimate than law.

It's there to teach us. It's there to instruct us. It's not simply legislation. It's breathing. It's alive.

And although the Torah may very well have laws in it, it is far from simply a law code.

And today's message, I hope, will be edifying. We're going to be discussing what the Torah is and what the Torah is not. And when we spoke about what the Bible is not a few weeks ago, I felt that went pretty well. No big complaints. A lot of people felt like it was edifying. That's good. I wanted to kind of do the same thing for the Torah. We're Christians, and because of that, we love the whole of the Bible.

Misusing Torah Today

We love the Torah. And so on one side of the believing body, you might have people who view the Torah as irrelevant, don't really know what it is, aren't familiar with it. And then on the other side, you have messianic churches or messianic fellowships that love the Torah. I mean, we love the Torah. We do. We yearn to keep the Torah in whatever scope, in whatever capacity we possibly can because we believe it brings honor to God.

But sometimes in that mindset, we end up making the Torah into something that it's not, that it's not supposed to be. Sometimes instead of viewing the Torah as a way to instruct us to show the world of God's love, we end up using it as a weapon to cut the world down and make ourselves look more righteous and more holy or better than everyone else.

We make the Torah about us instead of about the mission of God. And as Yeshua followers, that's a problem when that happens. It's unfortunate when we end up using the Bible more as something that puffs us up instead of putting the spotlight back on God because it goes against the very ethic of the kingdom of God that Yeshua preached.

We read about the entire ministry of Yeshua being surrounded by people who made the Torah into something that it wasn't supposed to be in order to lift themselves up above others. People who kept the Torah for their own gain and not to cultivate an attitude of God's mercy, grace, and love to others. A people who minimized the greatness of the Torah into a simple divine checklist that if they can check off enough things in a day, then it shows the world how much they love God.

And I hope to show that the purpose of Torah throughout the entire Bible was for us to embody its spirit to show the world how much God loves them. That's my hope.

Torah Is Not a Complete Code

And so when we look at the Bible, sometimes we look at the Torah and we're like, "Look at all these laws. This is the law of God and there is a law and a circumstance for everything. There's an answer for every situation in my life in this book somewhere. Right? There's got to be a law somewhere."

I've viewed the Torah like that before. I'll go back and think, "Yeah, I got this situation here in 2019 that ancient Israel never dealt with, but I'm going to find a commandment in here that deals with this situation. Maybe it's [Leviticus 4](#), goats and stuff. [Leviticus 16](#), putting blood all over the altar. No. Atonement. No. Where is it?" And the fact of the matter is, that's just not the case. Torah 17 sets itself up to help clarify what it is and what it isn't. The Torah tells us right there that it's not a checklist for every situation in your life. It's not black and white—stuff is

going to happen that you will not find a law or a statute regarding. And so are you supposed to go to the leadership of the community if there's a situation you need help with and do what they say? Anyone ever notice that before? I come from a much more conservative viewpoint. So for me, I'm like, what? So if there's something not in here, you just go to the leaders and they make the decision for you? Well, where does leadership get their answers from if not the Torah? Well, they get their answers through wisdom. Hopefully, God placed them in leadership.

Torah sets the groundwork for you to develop divine wisdom so that you will know what to do in every situation, even if there's something in there that doesn't specifically say it. The Torah was meant to cultivate a community of God that thrives and grows together, not create a bunch of robots that do a daily checklist to appease God.

Remember Amos and Isaiah—we talked about Isaiah a few weeks back. Israel thought that they were appeasing God by keeping Torah as a checklist. Isaiah chapter 1 is brutal. The whole monologue of Amos is just wrenching. And they're keeping this checklist, and they're doing the Sabbaths, and they're doing the feast days, and they're tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, "I'm doing everything, and this is why I've satisfied God." And [Isaiah 1](#) says it made God want to vomit. It made him sick. Because they totally missed the spirit of what he wanted to do and what his intention of the Torah was to do in them.

Navigating Vague Commandments

Many times in the Torah, when we read it, there's a problem—sometimes in the way that we view the Torah. Many times commandments are vague. Has anyone ever read a commandment and thought, that's pretty vague? In the Torah, how do you handle those? What do we do with these? What are some of the ways that we have looked at the Torah, at the Old Testament, and tried to justify the absence of details?

The Sabbath is a great one. Keep the Sabbath. So in Exodus, it says to remember the Sabbath in [Exodus 20](#), in the Ten Commandments. And then over in Deuteronomy when the Ten Commandments are given, it's actually different. It says to keep it. So you have "remember" in this book and then "keep" in this book. There's a little bit of a difference. But all the same, how do we do that? Don't work on the Sabbath. Well, yeah, okay, that's pretty clear-cut. Don't kindle a fire on the Sabbath. That's pretty clear-cut. How do we do these things?

Understanding the Intention

These aren't necessarily black and white. Here's a great one that I love to use. It's [Deuteronomy 22.8](#). When you build a new house, make a parapet or a wall, a safety wall around the roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed onto your house if someone falls from the roof. How many of you have ever read this verse before? How many of you went home and built a wall around your roof? How many of you felt compelled to build a wall around your roof? Nobody. Like nobody. We went through this verse and we're like, "That's probably a good idea."

So if you notice that this commandment, this commandment is not concerned with OSHA safety regulations. There's no instruction here of what kind of wall to build. It's not like—is it 36 inch or 24 inch or five feet? There's none of that in there. This verse, the intention of this verse is what? Don't bring blood guilt onto your home. Don't be stupid and kill somebody because of neglect, right?

So if we look at this verse as being completely—we can't mess with it, this is how it is, it's a checklist, we're going to check it off—then who does it extend to? Does it extend to a burglar who climbed on your house and was trying to break in and fell and hurt himself? Is that blood guilt on you? Has someone climbed up the roof to jump off to commit suicide? Is that blood guilt on you? I wouldn't think so.

We can see the intention of the commandment has to do with not being negligent. The commandment makes no attempt to include specifics about the situational circumstances. That comes with wisdom. That comes with an understanding. That comes with a heart that wants to do God's will—knowing what this commandment says and what its intentionality is.

Many of us, many of us, do you ever look at this commandment and think you're sinning? Are we all in sin right now because we don't have walls on our roofs when we get home? Have you ever thought that you're a sinner because you're breaking this commandment? No. No. We've never thought that. We would never think of this as sinning if we didn't do this. Why?

Well, because our roofs aren't accessible, and they have a pitch that's really high, so who's going to get up there anyway? And it's not like we have kids running around our roofs. That's just not applicable to us in this regard, even though its intention is. What is the intention of this commandment? To avoid blood guilt on your home. We don't have flat rooftops with people partying on them. How is this commandment still applicable today?

The Story and the Law

That's a good way of putting it. How is it still applicable today? When we read the commandments of Torah, we need to first come to the intention of the commandment. What is

the intention so we can better understand this and keep it adequately with all of our heart? Well, the intention is not to be negligent. The intention is don't be negligent and get someone killed or hurt.

So when you hop in your car and tell everyone to put their seatbelts on, is that avoiding blood guilt? When you're doing work in your backyard and you've got kids and you've got a big old saw up there, you unplug it because your kids are playing out there. Is that avoiding blood guilt? What if you have little kids that are crawling into open cabinets so you put the little locks in the cabinets so the kids don't get in the chemicals? Is that avoiding blood guilt? Are you keeping this commandment today in 2019? You very much so are.

The intention of the Torah stays alive and transcends all generations and all cultures. Not so if we look at the Torah as a simple checklist. It's interesting because the Torah has law in it, which is how it's got its little nickname. But it's fascinating because when the Torah starts off, it doesn't start off looking like any type of piece of legislation. What does it start off with? It starts at the beginning. It starts off with a story, with narrative. The entire book of Genesis is an action-packed, progressive story with conflict, drama, betrayal, tons of cool stuff.

And the reason why I impress that, and why I hope this lands—too many times we view the Torah as simply a bunch of stuff that we don't need to do or do need to do, and we miss out on the invitation that it extends to us to become part of the story of God. So when we read the story of Genesis, all we can see is, "All right, all this stuff happened, and dang, they messed up, and thou shalt, thou shalt not. Okay, here we go. And no, it's all relevant. It's all part of the story."

The Narrative Within the Law

You have the creation of the world, the creation of man, the serpent, mankind choosing autonomy from God. You have the great flood, Noah's Ark. You have the Tower of Babel, Nimrod, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Egypt, dreams. You have interpretation of dreams. You have promises, covenants. You have prostitutes. You have shame, fathers and brothers that go to defend their sister only to end up bringing complete and utter shame onto their family. It's intense. It's 50 chapters of not ancient law code, but intense narrative that's riveting if you can actually sit down and commit yourself to saying, "You know, I want to read this story and I want to be involved with this story and I want to see if I can see what the authors are telling me. Why did they write these stories this way? Why did God give us these stories this way?"

You enter into the book of Exodus, the Exodus story, with Israel thriving. But then there is a Pharaoh that knew not Jacob. He rose and he turned the Israelites from a prosperous people into what? Slaves. They cry out to God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God hears their cries. God commissions Moses to lead his people out of slavery. He sends all these plagues, lots of face-offs against Pharaoh and Moses. Finally, a lamb is killed. His blood provides the way out of slavery. You see the big messages that we miss when we're not paying attention to the story?

Israel walks through the Red Sea. They go through the waters to a new life of inheritance and relationship with God. And then they start complaining. Nobody can relate to this part of the story, I know. But they start complaining that God's not doing enough for their life, or their life is still stressful. Or, "Man, we really liked them watermelons back in Egypt." It's a quote. And then there's that quail incident in chapter 16 of Numbers. God talks about, "I'm going to send you so much quail, it's going to come out your nose." So you chuckle, and that's good. If you feel it, that's meant to be kind of like, yes.

The Law Breaks the Story

And then you have Mount Sinai. They end up at a mountain, at the foot of this mountain, and in chapter 20 of Exodus, the narrative abruptly stops. The exciting, riveting story of action-packed drama just hauls to a stop, very slow. But before the Ten Commandments are given, God says, "You're going to be my people. Here is the law. Here are the Ten Commandments."

Before that, we have 70 chapters of a story that God was hoping for us to read and be involved in that we miss. Did you ever think about it that way? I hope I'm speaking to someone because for me it was always like I didn't like the Torah at all. Then I got invited into the Torah, and the only thing I saw the Torah as was the daily checklist of commandments, so that's the only thing I paid attention to. Then I'd fight with people about how they're not doing the commandments like they should, like building a roof parapet. And I totally miss the story of God that is so engulfing and consuming that you're a part of. The commandments are part of that. I'm not minimizing commandments. I'm just trying to bring up the story of which is emphasized at the very beginning. 70 chapters.

You have the Ten Commandments. In Hebrew, the Bible actually refers to them as the Ten what? The Ten Words. The Ten Statements, if you will. And they're called the Ten Words. And the reason why is because the very first thing—here's Exodus chapter 20, verse 1: "God spoke all of these things." So He's speaking. This is the Ten Commandments. And the very first thing He says is, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." I'm

the Lord your God who did what? Brought you out of Egypt and the land of slavery. Great. It's important.

Because at another part of the story, this gets revisited in a perverted way. So the very first thing that God says is not even a commandment. It's a statement. So hence, this is the start of the ten statements: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself any image in the form of anything in heaven above, the earth beneath, the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. Don't make something and worship it. God's saying, I already have an image. You shall not bow down and worship them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the parents and the third and fourth generations, all who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."

Counting the Commandments

So it's fascinating because how many of you guys grew up in church, probably Protestant church, where you had your ten commandments, Protestant ten commandments, and the very first commandment was, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." That's number one. So in Jewish tradition and even Catholic and Anglican tradition, that's not so.

The Ten Words

Like their first commandment is or includes the statement in verse two. So in Judaism, the first commandment is, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt and led slavery. And of course, Protestants over here were like, but that's not a commandment. And they're like, yes it is. It's a command to believe. I thought that was neat. We'll talk about that in a minute.

So the ten words are spoken, and then for like four more chapters, everyone thinks that after God spoke the Ten Commandments, God just stopped talking. No, he keeps on going for four chapters. There's another 40-something commandments that just keep rattling out. It's interesting. So God gives the commandments, but if we read it as narrative, as part of the story of God and the story that he wants us to be invited into, which it was designed and has patterns for that, what do we see?

What's the big event that we see that happens next in the story? Does Israel do the commandments that they were just given? It's not a hard, no, they don't. They agree to, and then what happens? He says, "I am the Lord your God that brought you out of the land of

Egypt. Don't worship other gods. Don't make a graven image. Don't do it." [Exodus 32:4](#). "He took what they handed him and made it into an idol, cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'" Like, it was totally everything that he just said. "Don't do this. Don't worship other gods. I am the one who brought you out of Egypt. Don't make a graven image." Yes, sir.

The Pattern of Rebellion

You're supposed to see that and be like, how can they be so stupid? That's my commentary—why would they do that? How could they? They just saw this, and it's amazing how God responds in the story of the Torah. God does what as a response? He gives more laws. All right, I guess we need to just dump some more laws and then Israel rebels again. And so God gives more laws, and they rebel again. And it's really, if you go into it, if you dare to read the Torah as narrative, not dismissing the commandments that are applicable to us today and that we do need to keep and are valuable, but reading it as the story that it's written to be, you will find, you will see stuff that's so interesting in this story.

Like when Aaron's sons go into the holy place and they offer strange fire. They're trying to do something that only their father was positioned to do. They encroached. And so they got zapped in the story. They died. And the reason why the story gets so intense is because where did they die? In the holy place. Like, you're not supposed to have dead bodies in the middle. So what are we supposed to do with this? And you have these other laws that are coming out, and then it's like, don't drink any liquor before you come in there and try to do the temple. I mean, just all these little things just start getting added on.

When Laws Multiply

Then finally, after this pattern of up and down, up and down, more laws and more rebellion, more laws and more rebellion, it's as if the Torah is just too hard for us. We know that's a lie because the scripture says that. Finally, Moses has a chat with Israel in chapters 27 through 34 where he encourages Israel. They're about to go into the land. We're finally here at the end of the Torah. We're about to go into the land. Moses, like the whole Deuteronomy is just a summary of everything that's happened. We're about to go into the land. And so he sits down and has a chit chat and he encourages them.

And then while he's encouraging them, he predicts their exile into a foreign land because of their disobedience. He predicts that you guys are going to botch it all up. Like you're going to

botch the job and you're going to rebel again. And actually, God's speaking to Moses in this section, and he's saying, after you die, they're going to whore themselves out to the world. And they're going to sin. They're going to rebel. They're going to do everything that I've told them not to do. And that's when the whole curse is sectioned. All these things are going to happen. They're going to go into a foreign land. And that's in chapter 31.

A Matter of the Heart

And it's amazing because something that Moses is trying to portray to them is that, guys, this is not the Torah's fault. These commandments are not too hard for you. They are not far from you. They're very near to you. Listen to the voice of the Lord. Listen to the Spirit of God. Keep yourself pure. Stop worshiping idols. This is not the Torah's fault. It's the problem with what? Your heart.

So [Deuteronomy 5](#) is kind of a flashback. He's lamenting. He says, Oh, that there were such a heart in them that they would fear me and keep all of my commandments always. So we already see the commandments. Some of them are very vague. When you see keeping the commandments, I don't want you to think checklist. I want you to think, yes, the commandments that God told them to keep, but also manifesting their vocational calling to be the people who show the world who their God is. That's why the Torah was given, so that the world would see God through a people. Light to all nations. It's an issue with the heart.

And it wasn't God's Torah, it wasn't the commandments, it wasn't the statutes that brought death or sin or curses into the world. No, it was meant to bring blessing. It was the greatest gift in the story. But because of Israel's hearts, they became enslaved to the Torah instead of reaping the blessings of it. That's what Paul says. They became enslaved to it. Their heart.

And after this, Moses places his hands on Joshua, and the spirit of wisdom is imparted into Joshua, which is something the commandments and the Torah are supposed to foster and cultivate in a believer's life. And then Moses, in this very climactic scene, he climbs to the top of this mountain. Old man climbs to the very top. And he's alone. And he sits. And he looks out to see the promised land that he will never enter. And he dies. And it's a very, very big scene in the story.

The Story We're Invited Into

And then, that's where the story ends. You turn on the page. That's where it's going to end? Yeah, that's where it's going to end. And sometimes we pick up the Torah with... with this

mindset that this is a piece of legislation only, and we never take the invitation to become part of the story and to be consumed by the story that God's trying to tell us. All we see is a bunch of boring commandments. When there are stories that are intertwined with them, we skip over them. We ignore them. There are commandments in the Torah. These commandments are more than a checklist that fuels arrogance in the form of self-righteousness.

There's something more that the Torah is wanting to give you, and that is a heart that wants to seek after God. Don't murder. It's a good one. Has anyone murdered today? Please don't raise your hand. Good. For some of us, it's difficult. Do not murder. How many of us have checked that off our list today? Feel pretty good about ourselves. Yes, sir.

The Spirit of the Law

It's a foundation for developing a character reflecting God's image in your life. You didn't murder. Good job. But did you have hate in your heart for a brother? Oh, no. You got me. Oh, man, we're going back to the Sermon on the Mount and the whole thing that Jesus said. Did you foster hate in your heart for your brother or sister? Because if you did that, remember the intention? Yeshua, he can back me up on this because this is what he said. You've broken the commandment of murder if you've done that.

No, I haven't. I didn't kill him. I just hated him, which, okay, is like that. No, you've broken the commandment of murder. Like, that was the intention of the commandment. You've broken the commandment. Like, you can't check that off your list today. You're a murderer. Because that's not an ethic that's part of God's kingdom. There's an underlying spirit within the Torah that we sometimes intentionally dismiss. And that's what Yeshua came to show us. Like, no, this is about something bigger than that. Your heart was not aligned with God and his kingdom.

The 613 Commandments

Hey, let's get geeky for a minute. How many commandments are there in the Torah? Did you count them? Everyone's like, oh, what? 613. Did y'all count them? Like, I've seen the list that Maimonides wrote out. I didn't read the whole list. This is like 10 years ago. Like, yeah, it looks like them all.

613. Where did we get that number from? I got it because someone told me. I didn't go through and count. That's too much work. And there's actually a great disagreement on that number, by chance, if you're interested. So if you study Torah or read commentaries on the Torah before, you know that 613 is considered the standard count today. But that count was not a widespread

standard in the ancient world, by any means. So we have the history of how this number came into being. You guys want to see it? It's kind of neat. We have this history through an ancient document known as the Jewish Talmud. And maybe you've heard of it. So the Talmud is a collection of recordings and conversations between sages and rabbis that was finalized somewhere around 780.

Imagine getting together and arguing about the Bible. Has anyone ever done that? Now imagine doing this as a community, like a city. And imagine collecting all of the different opinions and disagreements and fights and arguments and canonizing it. This is what Judaism did. They canonized their arguments. I think that's kind of neat. This is a historical document. It's kind of neat. And it was really like a community's way of hashing out how they're going to keep the Torah. What does it mean when it says to keep Sabbath? Like, as a community, how do they do that? And so this is an ancient document that testifies of an attempt to do that. And it kind of became the standard in Orthodox Judaism today.

Canonizing Their Arguments

So everyone good? Okay. They canonized their arguments. It was so funny. So you'll have one rabbi try to pitch an idea and say he believes this, and then you have like another rabbi that comes in and be like, yeah, but I disagree with the way that you phrase that, and I say this. And then you'll see this common pattern where you have one rabbi that just comes in the congregation like a cannonball—just bam—in the name of rabbi Simeon, I disagree with all of that, and I say in his name... this is what I think this commandment is interpreted as. So there's a lot of really wacky, kind of cool, neat arguments that happen in this big old collection concerning the Sabbath.

It's a good question. So what is work on the Sabbath?

What is Work on the Sabbath?

So a bunch of rabbis got together and they said, well, let's hash this out. What is work? What is not work? And they hashed it out and the conversation is very extensive. And finally they went to Scripture and they said, well, here's like 40 different precepts when the Torah is talking about the building of the tabernacle and it says don't do this on the Sabbath. So every principle, like carrying a bunch of stuff around, like working the tabernacle, that's against Sabbath. And that's how they defined working on the Sabbath for their community.

Neat way of thinking, I guess. We do the same thing today, actually. Did you guys know we do the same thing today? We hash out things. We keep Sabbath by going to church. It's one of the ways that we keep Sabbath. We keep Sabbath by reading the Bible. We keep Sabbath by singing worship music. We keep Sabbath by not mowing the lawn and doing housework. Like, same thing. It's different ways that we're hashing out how to live out God's Word. But we get to read it from this community that was written like 1,500 years ago.

What the Talmud Is

So yeah, if you ever hear the word Talmud, you know what it means. That's pretty much all it is. Canonization of people's hashing out what's best for their community.

And with that said, I have to give that big disclaimer because there's a lot of misinformation out there. We're going to look at a tractate called Makot. It's a section of this community's writings that deals with law. How do they do law in their community? How do they set up a court system? And what are the punishments for different things?

The 613 Commandments

And for some reason, for some reason, in the midst of their discussion and disagreeing and arguing about how they're going to set up a court system in their community, they start talking about 613 commandments.

Okay, you everybody caught up?

My coat 24A. Rabbi Simlay taught, there were 613 mitzvot stated to Moses in the Torah, consisting of 365 prohibitions, responding to the number of days in the solar year.

Breaking Down the Numbers

Okay, just stop for a moment. Some of you are doing the same thing. Like, what? So there's 365 commandments that are negative, thou shalt not. And he's like, do you know why there are 365? Because that's how many days are in the solar year, of course. So if you ever read this stuff, this is what I do. I'm like, what is he talking about? He's blowing smoke. What's he doing? And this is how they communicated, right?

So solar year, that's how many prohibitions are in the Torah, he claims. And 248 positive mitzvah commandments. So 248 commandments that are thou shalt, you should do this. And they correspond to the number of a person's body or limbs in their body. And we're just going to

stop for a second. It's a great footnote. That somewhere 1,500 years ago, it was a common thought that there are 248 pieces of your body that can be identified.

Is anyone intrigued? At least this is kind of neat and interesting. Like, I want to be in that Bible study. What are you talking about?

Okay, I'll continue.

The Numerical Mystery

But Rav Hamnuna said, oh, here we go. What is the verse that alludes to this? Where'd you get that from? It is written, Moses commanded us the Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob. In Jewish Bible, it's [Deuteronomy 34.4](#). In our Bible, it's [Deuteronomy 33.4](#). It's a quote of a verse there.

The word Torah, he says, in terms of its numerical value, is 611. The number of mitzvot that were received and taught by Moses, our teacher. So if you don't know this about Hebrew, the numerical system and the alphabet kind of run together, they cross over. So every letter can have a numerical value. And so if you take the word for Torah, add up the gematria and numerical value, it equals 611.

So Hamnuna is over here like, yeah, you want to know why we have so-and-so commandments? Well, we got 611 because the word equals that numerical value. The number of mitzvot that were received and taught by Moses, our teacher.

Adding the Foundation

In addition, there are two more commandments. They are, I am the Lord your God, and you shall have no other gods. And this is the first two of the ten sayings. The first two of the ten commandments that we heard from the mouth of the Almighty. So you take the 611, the numerical value of Torah, and you add these two, and you get 613. And it's written in a way that it's like, ta-da. Right? And that's kind of neat.

And there's other rabbis that came in, and they have different commentary. So there are lots of different commentaries—some of them are logical, some of them are okay. And this was even argued back and forth. This wasn't necessarily a standard.

No End to the Mitzvot

So a Jewish scholar, a Jewish sage, Abraham Ibn Ezra, son of Ezra, he says this in his writings—I think from the 1200s. Some sages enumerate 613 mitzvot in many diverse ways, but in truth there is no end to the number of mitzvot contained in the Torah.

So what he's saying is that if you're just looking at the commandment to keep it as a checklist, you can try to count something, but that's not how it was written to be. It was meant to instill wisdom of how to actually walk out and be thoughtful in this world as God would be. So, for instance, you build a wall around your house, but don't stop there. Make your kids buckle their seatbelt and put locks in the cabinets. And there's no end to the amount of things that we do to cultivate the kingdom of God. Because every generation has different things, different cultures, different times. There's always new avenues of things that we can do to impart the wisdom of God and his love and his mercy in different ways to do this work.

So I love that quote. I love that.

The Deeper Purpose

So there's no end to the number of mitzvot. And if we were to count only the root principles, the number of mitzvot would not even reach 613.

So they go back and forth. There's an argument here about this. It wasn't until the 1200s—it seems—that there was a famous rabbi, Rabbi Moshe Mamonides, also known as the Rambam. And he wrote a very famous commentary on the Torah about the intentionality of the commandments and it kind of became a staple in Judaism even today. But in that book he sided with the 613 thing and he wrote out the 613 commandments. But what's kind of neat is that at least a hundred of those commandments are repeats.

Counting the Commandments

So how many commandments are in the Torah? I've never counted. 613 is a good number, but that's the history.

So I thought that was neat, but it's also neat in the next section of the tractate. And this is really what I wanted to get at. I just wanted to go through that too because I thought it was neat. It's an ancient discussion here between rabbis about boiling down the Torah from over 600 commandments into its foundational principles.

Beyond the Checklist

And the reason why I'm quoting this specifically is to demonstrate that even in ancient Judaism... The 613 was not a simple checklist that you can just mark off to make yourself appease God. It was never viewed that way. It shouldn't have been viewed that way. And at least some of them understood this when they wrote. No, there's more expected from you than just a checklist. You're supposed to evolve into the image of God on earth. That's your calling. As Christians, we find this ability in the new creation found in Yeshua.

Distilled to Eleven

But you keep reading this chapter and you go down a little bit in the tractate and this is Rabbi Simlai again. Here we go. Our man. He continues, So he's saying the 613 can be summed up in 11. 11. As it is written in Psalm chapter 15, a psalm of David, Lord, who shall sojourn in your tabernacle? Who shall dwell upon your sacred mountain? He who walks wholeheartedly, works righteousness, speaks truth in his heart, has no slander upon his tongue, nor does evil with his neighbor, nor takes a reproach against his relative, in whose eyes a vile person is despised, and he honors those who fear the Lord. He takes an oath with his own detriment and changes not. He neither gives his money with interest nor takes a bribe against the innocent.

The Eleven Attributes

He who performs these shall never be moved. These 11 attributes are the ones that facilitate one's entry into the kingdom of God or the world to come in this list. So here they've summed up the Torah. They've summed up the checklist. Listen, if you can do these 11 things, you'll be doing good. This is what you need to do to experience the kingdom of God, to usher in the world to come.

Narrowing Down the Commandments

Rabbi Simlai's exposition continues saying, Isaiah came and established 613 mitzvot upon six. He got smaller. He who walks righteously and speaks up rightly, he who despises the gain of oppressions, who shakes his hands from holding of bribes, who stops his ears from hearing blood and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil. So here, he's claiming that Isaiah is saying, now there's six things. If you can do these six things, you are cultivating the heart of God on earth. You're cultivating the spirit of an image bearer of God.

He continues, Micah came and established the 613 upon three as it is written, it has been told to you, oh man, what is good and what does the Lord require of you? Only to do justly and to

love mercy and to walk humbly before your God. So in this perception, he's arguing that, look, in Micah, these are the only three things, if you can do these three things, you're cultivating the image that keeps the entire Torah. This is the heart and the wisdom that will allow you to do everything else. You'll do everything else, but this is what's actually going to manifest God's will on earth.

And then it reverts back to Isaiah again. Isaiah then established 613 mitzvah upon three. As it is written, it has been told to you, O man, what is good and what does the Lord require? Isaiah then established the 613 commandments upon two. As it is stated, so says the Lord, observe justice and perform righteousness. If you can do those two things, is the argument here in these Jewish writings, in this Jewish community. The argument is if you can just do these two things, listen, this is the Torah. You're going to do everything else. But if you can just do these two things, that's the Torah.

Amos came and established the 613 mitzvah upon one. As it is stated, so the Lord says to the house of Israel, seek me and live. Seek me. If you can just seek the Lord, then you'll be able to flourish. And so like a good Hebrew rooter, here comes Rav Naaman here. Rav Naaman bar Yisuk objects to this. He runs in the scene. There's no proof that the verse in Amos is establishing all the mitzvah upon one verse. What are you talking about? Here we go. Here it is. What are you talking about? There's no proof of that. Say that Amos is saying, seek me throughout the entire Torah. As the verse does not specify the manner of which one should seek the Lord. Rather, and now he's having a platform. He's asserting his own opinion. Rather, Habakkuk came and established the 613 mitzvah upon one as it is stated, but the righteous person shall live by faith. Not a checklist. Something more than that. Something that actually requires a change within you to be the image bearer of God. Something you can't fake. These were seen as the essence of the Torah when you keep the commandments. This is what you're doing. If you're keeping the commandments without doing these, you're not keeping the Torah according to Judaism.

Yeshua Distills It Further

Now, everybody already knows Yeshua did the same thing. And of course, these guys I'm sure were really smart. I side with my king. And Yeshua came in and he said this. It's a conversation. He said, teacher, what is the greatest commandment of the law? What is this? What is it? And Yeshua responds, he says, listen, love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest of all commandments. The second, so they asked him for one, and he's like, it's two. I'm going to give you one and then another. And the

second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself. All of the law, not just the law, and all of the prophets. So engulfing all of the future Jewish commentary that was going to come out about the prophets saying what Torah meant, Yeshua just overwrote. Oh, I love that. It's all of the law and all of the story of Israel hang on these two commandments. Yeshua takes it a step further. It's not just the law at this point. It's the prophets. It's the fullness of the message of God that was overwritten that has a foundation in these.

If you can do these things, you're manifesting the wholeness of all of the Old Testament, is basically what he's saying. All of the commandments. All those things the prophet said. All of it finds its purpose in one thing. And what is that one thing, according to Yeshua? It's love. Love.

The Heart of Obedience

And the thing is, when we love God and when we love people, we embody the fullness of the ethic of God's kingdom according to Yeshua. Without it, it doesn't matter how many check boxes you mark. Paul has something to say about that. You're not keeping an ounce of Torah if you're not embodying the love of God that's manifesting it. You're not. It's that simple. That's what the king says. You're not keeping an ounce. How are you loving the world around you right now? Got all geeky. Let's bring it home. How are we loving the world around us right now? Are we truly showing God the love with all of our heart? Are we truly showing the world around us the love that God has instilled within us? Because if we're not, if we're not, what are we doing? We are meant to be a receptacle for God's love for creation.

You keep kosher. That's awesome. Yeah, I keep kosher. I don't eat that pig. That's good. Yeah. So do vegans. That's special. It doesn't make you special. You didn't do any yard work. I don't do yard work on Sabbath. Wow, that's real good. That was real. You had to work hard not to push that lawnmower. It's what? Neither did any lazy person. I mean, that does not make you special. It doesn't make you special to check off a few boxes here and there. It only makes you feel special, and it distracts you, and it causes a type of idolatry that turns your back on the one that you're supposed to be focusing on.

The thing about obeying the ethic of the Torah is it's not about you. As followers of Yeshua, we know it's about everyone else. That's what Yeshua said. It's about serving others. It's about having mercy on others. It's about being a slave to all. Oh, we hate it when he says that. A slave to all. A slave to God? I can do that. No, no. A slave to all. Everyone else. It's about forgiving others. It's not about you. Your obedience is ultimately not about you as much as it is about

God impacting the world through you. [Genesis 1](#). Image of God. It's about showing the world that God does exist through your obedience to his Torah.

The Foster Care Ministry

Because we're doing the foster care fundraiser. It's great. It's been almost a year since we started our foster and adoption ministry. And it's been awesome. We've had a lot of people involved. We currently have two families that are licensed to foster in our fellowship, which is amazing. And I think we have a few more. A couple moved down to South Carolina to start that process. We have a few more that have intentions of doing that. I guess the question is, why is there only two? Why is there only two?

I was thinking about something the other day. I saw someone become very upset, and this is an older development in our politics. It's been like this for a while. But they were still upset that homosexual couples were allowed to adopt and do foster care. And they were really upset. And I had to wonder, were they upset because of religious reasons, or were they upset because they were guilty? You have a problem with certain people being foster parents with kids, where if we didn't have any kids in the foster care system that needed a home, maybe that wouldn't happen. Why are there only two families currently registered in this fellowship?

When we come to sensitive topics like this and other sensitive topics, gosh, we're quick to say things and find excuses. I know I am. I don't know if I could do it. I don't know if I could do foster care. Golly, that sounds hard. What if? Man, I feel like I would just get too attached. And we say these things sometimes without even realizing that they didn't have a choice. They didn't have a choice. And maybe they need someone to get attached to them.

Meanwhile, the secular world is showing off, doing a better job at stepping up to the plate, doing the things that we say we are obedient to God for. And it's not just foster care. Gosh, there's so many opportunities of ministry. Leadership here, vision of fit, gosh, we got big visions for where this community, where we feel God drawing us. Sometimes the visions I look and I'm like, gosh, God, enable us to be able to make that big of an impact in our local community, not just with foster care, the housing community. Goodness, that would just be amazing for us to actually be a fellowship that God uses to do things.

Making Excuses

And people say, and I've said this too, whenever an opportunity for me to sacrifice of myself comes, we say things like, oh, I need to pray about that. Anybody? Is that anyone else's favorite?

It's one of my favorite excuses. I'll come out and say it. I need to foster care. I need to pray about that. And I mean to tell you, no, you don't. No. Do you want to know why?

[Psalm 68:5](#) speaks about God, our God that we serve. It says, a father to the fatherless, a defender of the widows. He is a God in his holy dwelling. He is a God that sets the lonely in families. God sets the lonely in families after they get done praying about it. There's a need.

We want to follow the Torah as a type of checklist in our life. We want to follow the Torah in a way that shows the world who our God is and the character of our God.

[James 1:27](#) is a good one. Religion that God our Father accepts—so do you want to be part of a religion that our God our Father accepts? I know I'm putting all you guys in the spotlight right now. I'm with you.

Because it's not just about foster care. This is every aspect of what we're called to be and do as the hands and feet of Jesus in our life. I want to be a part of a faith—or at least I signed up to be a part of a faith—that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless. And this is what James says: to look after the orphans and the widows in their distress. The people that don't have choices. The people who don't have choices. You look out for them. The people—the slaves in Egypt, like God did for them. You look out for the people who don't have choices. And keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

And I love that. So James makes sure he groups pollution of the world together with looking out for the widows and the orphans. And we always love to separate that—like to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. We see that and we're like, yeah, don't do drugs, right? Yeah, that's bad. Don't listen to secular music. Don't hang out with the wrong people. I remember when we were growing up, we were going to a Baptist church, and there was a lot of pollution in the world. Simpsons off the table. Like, never saw an episode in my life like that. Hell-bound. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. There was a window where those were satanic and demonic. I remember this. Smurfs—I think a very small window. Smurfs of the devil. I don't know. Maybe I'll believe that. It's been a while.

Pure Religion and Pollution of the World

You know what being polluted by the world actually looks like? That might be part of it, but it means convincing yourself that you don't actually have to be an active part of God's kingdom, and you can just live for yourself. That's what being polluted by the world means. It means convincing yourself that you're better off being like the priest and the Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan. You're too righteous to help. You're already close with God. You already work

in his temple. I don't need to go over there and mess with it. He might be dead, be made unclean. That's just not worth it. It would be an inconvenience for me to serve someone else in any capacity. The cost is too great. That's what being polluted by the world looks like: turning your back on the ethic of the kingdom we're called to be.

When the Cost Is Too Great

And if we find ourselves saying that the cost is too great, I'm too righteous to help, I don't need to do that—I feel like the only response would be asking ourselves if we knew what we were signing up for when we pledged allegiance to Jesus. Did we truly know what the depth of that meant?

Maybe if we're going back to foster care, because that's something we do here—maybe you can't open your home due to regulations, you rent an apartment, I don't know. You can still be involved in actually impacting the kids in this local community. We have a ministry that's set up around that. Talk to Ben and Catherine Cohen. They're kind of amazing. We have a whole group here. They organized school supplies for the foster kids.

The Reality Foster Children Face

So just so you guys know, when a child is taken into foster care, they are taken from the family that they know, from the home that they know, the friends that they know, and they're taken from their school. Everything in their life routine is stripped from them by the state for the betterment of the child, as is justified, and most of the time it is. And then within a week, the foster parents have to get them signed up for a new school that's closer to them.

So you're ripped away from your parents, you're ripped away from your friends, you don't have your bed anymore, you don't have your teddy bear, you don't have your mommy, you don't have your daddy, your brothers and sisters may or may not be with you. You're stripped from your school, your favorite teacher that you saw every day, and now—now you get to walk into a new school. Oh, your backpack's at home and it didn't get packed. Oh, so you don't even have your backpack and your notebook and your pencils anymore.

The supplies that we put in that box back there will arrive at children in that situation, in this community. And I'm very, very proud of the ministry that we have here and the people who led it. You can still be involved in the things that we're doing and trying to impact the foster care system here. If you want more details on that, Ben and Catherine Cohen—they're amazing. That needed to be said. It is what it is.

Checking Your Heart

The thing about keeping Torah is it isn't just about the outside. The Bible tells us that we need to check what? Check what? It's our heart. Where's your heart at? That's what Israel didn't get. That's what Moses was telling them before he died. I know you're going to mess this up because you have not checked your heart.

And then what happened? The book of Joshua tells us about a people who struggled onward because they weren't listening to the voice of the Lord. And then the book of Judges is when Israel hit rock bottom. The book of Judges is what it looks like when you have forgotten the character of your God.

The story of the whole Old Testament is about human beings that struggle with their flesh so much, and they cannot get their hearts in the right place to actually consume the will of God, His Torah, and become the image bearers they were meant to be. The prophets understood this. They speak of this.

The Prophets Saw It Coming

[Ezekiel 36:25](#) is a prophecy. It says, I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all of your impurities and all of your idols. I will give you a new heart and a new spirit. And I will remove the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. So my spirit will be in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Actually do it.

And this wasn't talking about Sabbath. We'd love to go to that. No, [Isaiah 1](#) says Israel was keeping Sabbath just fine, and them thinking that all they needed to do was keep to the way they were was detestable to God. This is speaking about something bigger than just these things. Jeremiah speaks of the same direction—about a time when the hearts of people would finally bear God's Torah, that his people would live out his Torah and his will. This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and I will inscribe it upon their hearts. Their heart will change. I will be their God and they will be my people.

Again, this isn't talking about feast days. Isaiah and Amos both testify that Israel was doing just fine with their external ritual practices. No, this is speaking about something bigger. They were not showing God's justice and love and mercy in the world. Their hearts were bound up like stone.

Yeshua Showed Us What It Means

Isaiah speaks of a king who would come, a suffering servant, through whom Israel, the people of God, would be reconstituted in an eternal reign of God's goodness and his kingdom. This is all flowing and building to this ultimate climax that we find in the New Testament, where we see Yeshua, the visible glory of God, the perfect image of God on earth, showing us what it looks like to actually keep Torah.

And the religious hated it. Now, those sinners, those Gentiles, they need to stay outside the camp, outside our group. Now, the checklist of commandments is how we show we are righteous and who our God is. Look, we tithe our mint every single day in our herb garden. Check this out. We're faithful to Torah. Yeshua looks at him and is like, "Good job on these really minor things. You tithed your herb garden. You're missing out on the weight of your matters, the things that actually matter, like the love of God being manifest. Are you ignoring those? The foundational principle that if there is a checklist gives it vitality in life?"

Yeshua said no. Yeshua said the meek will inherit the earth. Yeshua said that we need to have faith as a child—someone who does not determine good and evil for themselves. Yeshua said, God's kingdom is now, and we're the representatives of it, and we need to humble ourselves and be a slave to all, everyone. And Yeshua said, follow me in my example to show you how God's love is manifest. Yeshua said, follow me to the cross. That's what our king taught.

Yes, we're supposed to keep the commandments of God, of course. Yeshua did. But sometimes, yes sometimes, we forget about the foundational principles that make God's Torah perfect, as David claims it is, and we make it something it's not.

Shalom. I'm Matthew Vanderels and I hope you enjoyed this message. Founded in Truth exists to build a community that bears the image of God and lives the redeemed life only Yeshua gives. If this message impacted you or if this ministry has been a blessing to you, we would love to hear from you.

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