



The Ten Commandments

(1) Introduction

Exodus 20:1-21

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This evening we begin a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments. I wanted something practical. The Bible has a lot of teaching about God and about our relationship with God and about the nature of things and about God's plan of salvation and all of that is important and practical in its own way, but the Bible also has a lot of teaching about the nitty-gritty of how to live our lives and I felt it was time for us to spend some more time on that. And so, I chose the Ten Commandments. They are the key summary in the Bible of how God wants us to live.

The Bible itself gives them prominence. They occupy a very prominent place in the story of God's relationship with Israel. God delivers his people from slavery in Egypt and gathers his people before him at Mount Sinai and the first thing he does is give them the Ten Commandments. These are the only words that he speaks to them directly. The rest of his instructions for the people come to them through Moses. They are written on tablets of stone by God's own finger. The tablets are kept in the ark of the covenant. They are given twice, once in Exodus and once in Deuteronomy, as well as being summarized a number of times. When Jesus is asked what is the greatest commandment, he gives a summary of the Ten Commandments. They are a summary of the all the instructions that God will give to his people about how he wants them to live. They are the basis of the ethical teaching of Jesus and the apostles. So, the Bible itself points to the Ten Commandments as the essence of the ethical teaching of Scripture. They are God's summary of how he wants us to live.

The importance of the Ten Commandments in Scripture has been reflected in the important role that they have played in the history of the Church. In an essay called "The Ten Commandments in the Church in a Postmodern World," Philip Turner has written, "Through most of the course of Christian history, this summary of the law, and Christ's summary of this summary ... would have required little introduction. They lay at the heart of Christian piety" (*I Am the Lord Your God*, loc. 50). We see this reflected in the confessions of the Church. Many of them contain detailed expositions of the Ten Commandments. This includes the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms and the Heidelberg Catechism. The Ten Commandments have been a significant part of these teaching tools that summarize the main teachings of the Bible.

They have also been very influential in western society. Patrick Miller writes, "It is widely recognized that the Commandments have had 'a significant impact on the development of the secular legal codes of the Western World'" (*The Ten Commandments*, p. 2). The Ten Commandments, for much of the history of the West, were held in high esteem and have had a shaping influence on the laws of many nations. Of course, that is changing. There is much less respect for them in the secular world than there used to be, and over time their influence has decreased.

But for us, they remain a key summary of God's will for our lives because we accept the Bible as the Word of God and it teaches us that they come to us from God. So, we will spend a number of months considering them during our evening worship services. But, before we begin to look at the individual commandments, we will first spend some time thinking more generally about how they are to function in our lives. This is very important. It is crucial that we understand the biblical teaching on how God intends for the law to function in the lives of his people. If we get this wrong, it affects our whole relationship with God.

With the Ten Commandments we are dealing with the category of law. And it very possible to think of law as an onerous burden and how we think of God's law is a reflection of how we think of God. We can think of God as a nitpicking tyrant who is just waiting to punish us if we step

over the line. It is possible to hate the law and to view it as something that restricts our freedom and our enjoyment of life. It is possible to think of the law of God as oppressive and constricting. Thou shalt not ... thou shalt not ... thou shalt not ... spoiling our fun and condemning our pleasures.

I don't know if you have every had this thought, but I remember sometimes as a teenager half-wishing that I had not been raised in a Christian home so that I did not have all these restrictions that kept me from so much that looked inviting and fun and pleasurable. I say "half-wishing" because I knew that the end result of rebelling against God is hell and I did not want that. But I think that all of us know what it is like to feel that God's laws are oppressive and burdensome and perhaps to dream of what it would be like to be free from at least some of them.

But notice of the way that the godly in Israel sang of God's law. We heard it in our call to worship this evening from Psalm 19. "The law of the LORD is perfect reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart..." This is quite a different perspective on the law of God. The law of God gives joy. The law of God is a delight. The law of God is precious and sweet. "More to be desired are they then gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb." This is the biblical perspective on the law of God. It need not be a burden and an onerous weight. Rightly understood it is something to be treasured and celebrated and enjoyed and enthusiastically obeyed. And I want us to get a good sense of why that is before we get into the specific commands.

This evening we will consider the prologue to the Ten Commandments, the words of introduction that the Lord speaks before beginning the ten "thou shalt nots" and "thou shalt." Exodus 20:1-2, "And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." These few words of introduction are extremely important for our understanding of the significance of the commandments in the lives of God's people, both OT Israel and the Church today.

Notice that God places the commands in the context of the story of what God had just done for the people of Israel. The people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt. God, through Moses and a number of miracles, had recently delivered his people from the bondage that they had been in as slaves of the Egyptian Pharaoh. The people had been slaves and God had rescued them from that slavery and brought them to Mount Sinai and now he is going to tell them what he expects of this people that he had rescued from Egypt.

The commandments must be understood in the light of this story. It is not that God found a people wandering about in the wilderness and dropped these commandments on them from the sky and left up to them to figure out what significance they should have in their lives. It is not that Moses sat in his tent and pondered the philosophy of ethics and came up with these ten principles of morality built into the fabric of reality. The significance of these commandments comes from their meaning within the history in which they were given, and it is the story that gives the motivation for keeping the commands.

Listen to how this idea is expressed in Deuteronomy 6:20-24. ²⁰“When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ ²¹then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²²And the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. ²³And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. ²⁴And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day.”

Isn’t that interesting. Israel is being instructed how to teach their children the meaning of the commands that God had given them. It is very significant for us and our understanding of the function of law in Scripture that parents in Israel were to explain the meaning and significance of the law by telling the story of how the Lord had delivered them from being slaves in Egypt.

Now this principle applies to us as well. We will see next week, why the Ten Commandments are still valid for New Testament Christians, but at this point I want to show how we too are to understand the significance of God's law for us in the light of the whole story that is told in the Bible. You see the meaning of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is described in the New Testament as following the pattern of God delivering his people from Egypt. In the story of Jesus' transfiguration as told in Luke 9, Jesus is speaking with Moses and Elijah, and Luke tells us that they were talking about Jesus' departure. The Greek word that is translated "departure" is literally "exodus."

Luke understood that what Jesus was going to do by his death would follow the pattern of what God did in the original exodus when God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt. Jesus by his death was going to deliver his people from the ultimate slavery, the slavery to sin and Satan. The whole ministry of John the Baptist to prepare the way of the Lord uses the imagery of the exodus about making a way through the wilderness. And Jesus, in John 8, talks about setting his people free from the slavery of sin and Satan. In verse 36 he says, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

It is in the light of the story of Jesus and what he did to free his people from the slavery of sin that we must understand God's law and his commands in our situation. Listen to the way that Jesus speaks about keeping his commands towards the end of John's gospel. In John 13:34 he says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." We will learn as we proceed that the heart of the Ten Commandments is love. But here Jesus puts the new commandment to his disciples in the context of his love for them. "[J]ust as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." By speaking of his love for his disciples, Jesus is speaking about their history together. Jesus has loved them by choosing them to be his disciples, by instructing them, and he was soon going to seal his love for them by dying for them. It is in the light of that story of his love for them that Jesus tells his disciples to keep his commandments.

Again, it is the story that gives us the significance of the commandments. God delivers his people from the slavery in Egypt; then gives them the Ten Commandments. Jesus loves his disciples. He shows that love by dying for them in order to deliver them from slavery to sin and to Satan and in the light of that story, he gives them his new commandment that they are to love one another. The Ten Commandments are not abstract principles that stand alone. They are to be understood in the light of the story in which they were given. They take their significance from the story of which they are a part. And we see that in the giving of the Ten Commandments by the way the God introduces them. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Then come the Ten Commandments.

Now, let's take this one step further. In the prologue by which he introduces the commands, God identifies himself as "the LORD your God." There is two points that we must see from this. The first is that God identifies himself as Yahweh. The name LORD is all capital letters. Whenever you see that in most of the modern English translations, it is a translation of the four Hebrew consonants that are represented in English script by the letters YHWH and the pronunciation that is accepted today is Yahweh. This is a very significant name by which God revealed himself to Israel.

We read of this back in Exodus 3. This is the story where God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush. This some of what God says to Moses. Verse 6, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." That means that he is the God who had called Abraham out of paganism to be the father of the nation through whom he was going to bless the whole world. He is the God who is working out his plan of salvation for the world through Abraham and his offspring. He is the God who has revealed himself in the story told in the book of Genesis. Then God says in verse 7, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them up out of that land...."

Then further in Exodus 3, Moses asks God to tell him his name and we read in verses 14-15, "14God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I am has sent me to you.'" 15God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations."

God calls himself "I am who I am." That is what the name Yahweh means – I am who I am. I'm not going to get into all that that name means, only this, that is the name by which God reveals himself to Israel as their God who is also the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who has seen their affliction in Egypt and was going to deliver them from it. Yahweh is the name that God reveals to Moses in connection with the fact that they are his people and he is going to deliver them from slavery in Egypt.

So, when in the prologue to the Ten Commandments, God refers to himself as Yahweh, he is referring to himself as this God who has revealed himself in the history of his dealings with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and in his deliverance of Israel from Egypt. He is the God of their ancestors and he is the God who heard their cry in their suffering and who has acted to deliver them.

What this means is that the God who gives the Ten Commandment is not just some generic god, but he is the very specific God who in his dealings with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and later with Israel has revealed himself. His character has been revealed in the way that he has interacted with their ancestors. He is a God who makes promises and to keeps his promises. He is a God who is gracious for he has showed that in all kinds of ways in his dealings with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is a faithful God for he has stuck with this family and the nation they became for centuries already. In other words, this is the God of the Bible.

So that is the first point that we learn from God referring to himself as "the LORD your God." He is a God who has revealed himself in the prior history with the ancestors of this people. The second point is implied in what I have been saying, but it needs to be emphasized. He is their God.

“I am the LORD, your God.” This is covenantal language. It is the language of a covenant relationship.

God is their God and they are his people. This is a relationship that is somewhat like a marriage relationship. It is a formal relationship. It is a relationship that is defined by promises and obligations like marriage is. It is a loving relationship. In this case it is initiated by God and agreed to by the people.

Listen to how God describes his relationship with his people back in Exodus 19:4-6. God speaks these words to Israel through Moses, ⁴“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Notice the love. Notice the intimacy. “I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.... If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples ... you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

The Ten Commandments were given to a people in the context of a very warm and intimate relationship with their God. He had heard their cries. He had delivered them from slavery. They were his treasured possession. And his goal for them was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This is the context in which we must understand the Ten Commandments. The people were to obey the Ten Commandments because God had chosen them to be his people – he had taken them to be his treasured possession. This is what it would mean for them to be the people of this God. These commandments spelled out how they would live as the people of the God who had taken them to be his people. This is why they had been delivered from the slavery in Egypt. They had been given freedom. But that freedom would be experienced in the blessedness of keeping the law of the God who loved them as his treasured possession. This is what they had been saved for. The Ten Commandments defined the life they would live now that they were no longer slaves of Pharaoh.

You see the Ten Commandments define the life of salvation. Salvation in the Bible is salvation **from** slavery, **to** obedience to God's law. The contrast is the slavery in Egypt. God saved his people so that they might live the life that the Ten Commandments describes and requires. They were given by God to his people out of his love. They were given by God to his people because of his desire to bless them. They were given by God to his people because they are the way of life.

So, the Ten Commandments must be understood in the light of the story in which they are imbedded. They are not some abstract laws to which we give meaning. Their meaning is understood in the light of the story which is the story of salvation. They are given by a God who reveals himself in the story. He is the God who is working towards the salvation of the world. He is the God who has revealed himself as holy and gracious. He is the God who has made promises and who fulfills them as the history of his purposes unfolds. He is the God who is invested in this people.

And he is their God. The Ten Commandments are given to a people who are God's treasured possession. They are given in the context of a relationship of love as the way of life and blessing for his people. The people of God had been set free from slavery so that they might know the freedom of keeping God's law.

All of that gives the Ten Commandments a very specific meaning as a part of the relationship between God and his people. Their meaning is "This is what salvation looks like." Their meaning is "This is the way of life and blessing." Their meaning is, "This is a gift from the God who loves you and treasures you and is mightily invested in blessing you." Their meaning is "This is the way that you can fulfill your purpose in God's plan to make you a blessing to the nations." It was through keeping this law that Israel could fulfill her calling to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." By keeping that law, she could demonstrate to the nations the blessedness of belonging to God. The idea of a kingdom of priests is that Israel was called to be a mediator between God and the nations. It was through law keeping that she could fulfill that purpose.

All of this is true for us in Jesus Christ. We have seen how Jesus and what he did is the fulfillment of the exodus. This is God's way. He works in patterns. The deliverance of Israel is the first instance of this pattern of God delivering his people from slavery. The deliverance of Israel from exile is the second. But the deliverance of his people from the slavery of sin in Jesus is the culmination of the exodus pattern.

And so, the Ten Commandments have the same meaning for us as they did for Israel. The way of life that they prescribe is the way of life and blessing. They give definition to our calling as God's people within God's plan to bless the world through us. They are given to us by the God who has shown us what he is like in the story that the Scripture tells. They are given to us by a God who is our God and who has invested greatly in our wellbeing. They are how we show our love and thanksgiving to God. Jesus delivered us from sin and Satan so that we might know the blessing of loving and keeping the Ten Commandments.

There is much more to be said. We will continue this discussion next week. But for now, let us just savor the wonderful meaning and purpose of God's law – the Ten Commandments. Let us enter into the delight that the godly in Israel felt as they contemplated and celebrated the law of God. I will end with a few of the words of Psalm 1.

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”
(Psalm 1:1–3, ESV)