



The Ten Commandments

Introduction (2)

The Law and our Predicament

Exodus 31:18 – 32:14

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This evening we are going to see what the Bible teaches about the law and our predicament. But before we get that I want review what we learned last week and say a bit more about something that I only mentioned in the sermon last week.

So, we are going to be looking at the Ten Commandments, but before we look at the specifics it's very important that we are reminded of significance of the Ten Commandments as a whole. It is not only important to know what the Ten Commandments are commanding, it is just as important to know how they fit in our relationship with God. And so, we are spending a few weeks dealing with the subject of the significance of the 10 commandments in the story that the Bible tells or what role they place in the salvation that is the subject of the biblical story.

Last week we saw from the prologue to the Ten Commandments that they must be understood in the light of the story of God delivering his people from the slavery in Egypt. We also saw from that prologue that they were given to Israel by the God who had revealed himself in the story thus far and that he refers to himself as their God. The order is that first God saves them and takes them to be his people and then he gives them the Ten Commandments. The point that this makes is that the law of God is not intended as a way to a relationship with God, but rather that they describe the way of life that the people are to live in the relationship that has already been established by God's choice of them and by his act of delivering them. This is perhaps the key idea

when we are trying to understand the significance of the Ten Commandments. Keeping them is not the way to a relationship with God. The relationship comes first. Obedience to the Ten Commandments follows from the relationship. That is the significance of the words of the prologue. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

I just want to say a few words about something that I only mentioned last week. I quoted Exodus 19:4-6 which makes the same point as the prologue but adds some very significant details. In Exodus 19:4-6 God says this to Israel: "⁴You 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."

I want to say just a little bit more about the idea that Israel had been delivered from Egypt so that she could be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Israel's role in God's plan of salvation for the world was to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." She was to be a holy nation by keeping God's law. And as a holy nation she was to be a kingdom of priests. Now priests were mediators between God and man. They represented God before the people and the people before God. This was the role that Israel was to play in the world by being a holy nation. Her mission had to do with representing God to the world. Her mission was to be a blessing to the world in line with God's promise to Abraham that he was going to bless the world through his offspring. Israel was to demonstrate to the world the blessedness of being the people of God and she was to do this by keeping the Ten Commandments and the other laws that were elaborations and applications of the Ten Commandments. As a kingdom of priests Israel was to show the world the goodness of God largely by keeping the commandments.

So, there is a missional aspect to the law of God. Israel was to demonstrate the blessedness of being the kingdom of God so that the nations would see that and be drawn to the one true God and she was to do that by keeping the law. This principle allies to us as well. We see

that from the fact that NT Christians are to let their light shine before men. Following Jesus, we are the light of the world. And a key part of the way that we are to be the light of the world is by keeping the law. So, law-keeping is not only for our own wellbeing as people saved by God's grace, it is an important part of our mission to the world. We are to demonstrate to the world the blessedness of loving God and keeping his commands.

But there is a problem and we have to consider this problem. God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt. God gathered the people before him and told them that he was their God and they were his people. The Ten Commandments seen in this light are the way of blessing and witness for this chosen and treasured people. The future looks bright. They know how to live the abundant life to which God was calling them. But in this story, that we just read, before God has even finished giving the detailed elaboration of the law to Moses on the mountain, the people break the law in a particularly egregious way. They make a golden calf and the worship this idol as the one who had brought them out of the land of Egypt.

And so, God says to Moses, "⁷ ... Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. ⁸They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them." "They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them." And God threatens to destroy them. He says to Moses in verses 9-10, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you." Moses pleads for the people. And verse 14 tells us, "¹⁴And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people."

This is a problem. As it turns out, this is a very big problem. As it turns out, the rest of the OT is largely about this problem. God has chosen Israel to be his people. God had delivered his people from the slavery in Egypt. God had given them the law as the way of salvation and blessing and mission. But before God has even finished spelling out the details of the law, Israel is already breaking it. It was a wonderful plan. A chosen

and saved people living a life of blessing and flourishing through keeping God's law. It was a wonder vision. But it did not come to fruition because Israel was a stiff-necked people, unable to keep this wonderful law which God had given them as a way to life and blessedness. This point is made powerfully in this story of the golden calf. The very first thing that Israel does after receiving God's law is to break it. And the rest of the story told in the OT is a further demonstration of the point this story makes. The rest of the OT is largely the story of Israel's inability to keep God's law. This is one of the major themes of the OT.

And part of that is the theme of the curse of the law. God's relationship with Israel could only continue if Israel obeyed God's law. Failure to do so would result in the God's curse for law-breaking.

What we see in the rest of the OT is how Israel failed to obey the law that God had so graciously given to them on Mount Sinai. In the journey through the wilderness towards the promised land, there is story after story of Israel's failure to keep the law. And this pattern does not let up in the rest of the story. There are short periods of time when things are slightly better, but for the most part the OT is the story of how the people of Israel were incorrigible law-breakers.

In the passage that we read as our Scripture reading, God calls Israel a stiff-necked people. That is a term that God used often to describe his people. It means that they were stubborn in their refusal of keep God's law. Just before his death, Moses would say to the people in Deuteronomy 31:27, "²⁷For I know how rebellious and stubborn you are. Behold, even today while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the Lord. How much more after my death!"

Jeremiah would write in Jeremiah 5:23, "²³But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away." And in Jeremiah 17:1 we have these striking words, "¹"The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart...."

So, the law of God exposed a very serious problem. The Bible as a whole is about God's mission to overturn the curse of sin in his world. The world was perfect before Adam and Eve sinned. Their sin brought all

that is wrong with the world. God's mission from that time on to the end was to deal with the problem of sin. That is why he had chosen Israel to be his people. That is why he had rescued them from the slavery of Egypt. That is why he had given them his law. The plan was that they serve him by keeping the law and that in that way they would experience the blessedness of living as servants of God under his rule. But in this story, we see that plan hit a huge roadblock. That roadblock had to do with the depth of the sin problem. What the law of God ended up doing is exposing how serious the sin problem was and is.

Think of all that God had done for this people! Think of his history with their ancestors and the wonderful promises that he had made! Think of their exalted calling as the people of God to be a blessing to the nations! Think of God's attentiveness in hearing their cries when they were suffering and his compassion in delivering them from their slavery in Egypt! Think of the tenderness with which he speaks to them – calling them his people and his treasured possession! Think of the kindness to them in giving them his law as a blueprint for them for a life of rich blessing and fruitfulness! What a hopeful story! If they will but obey the Lord and serve him, their blessings will be unimaginable! Why would they not do that? Why would they not walk the road that God was pointing out for them as a road leading to fruitfulness and prosperity and delight and shalom?

It is irrational! It is self-destructive. It is suicidal. And yet they turn away from God again and again and again. And though telling us their story God is demonstrating for us something of the depth of our sin problem. Israel's failure to keep the law of God exposes the serious nature of the corruption of human nature. "[T]his people has a stubborn and rebellious heart." "The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart."

The apostle Paul would later apply this point to the whole human race. In Romans 3:10-18 he strings together a whole list of OT texts and applies them to all people not just Israel. I'll just read the first few. ¹⁰as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹²All have turned aside; together they have become

worthless; no one does good, not even one.”” And then in verse 20 of Romans 3 he writes, “[T]hrough the law is the knowledge of sin.”

The law exposed the depth of Israel’s sinful condition. It exposed the fact that all that God had done for them so far was not enough. Delivering them from Egypt. Embracing them as his people. Giving them the law as the way of life and blessing. All of that was not enough. It did not accomplish what God had wanted it to accomplish. What it did instead was expose the fact that human beings are sinful to the very core of our being. It exposed the fact that we have sinful hearts. It exposed the fact that we are anti-God at the deepest level of our being. Jeremiah summed it up when he said in 17:3 “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick; who can understand it?”

So, one of the purposes of the law was and is to expose the sinfulness of our hearts. As Paul wrote, “Though the law is the knowledge of sin.” Just as the law exposed Israel’s sin, so the law exposes our sinful hearts. If there is one thing that is clear from the Bible, it is that in our natural condition, we cannot keep the law of God. In fact, the law condemns us. It exposes our sin and it informs us of the consequences of sin, the wrath of God. In the 10 commandments God says, “I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me...” And Paul in Galatians 3:10 quotes from Deuteronomy and applies to everyone, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”

By looking at this subject in the way that we have in the light of the whole history of Israel as told in the OT and then how Paul applies the lesson of the OT history to all of us, we see how big of a subject this is in Scripture. This is not just some secondary truth that we can bring out once and a while. This is a massive subject in Scripture. It is a massive emphasis in Scripture. And so, it must also be a massive emphasis in our thinking about life and our relationship with God. The law of God exposes our sin. The law of God exposes our guilt. The law of God exposes our danger because the law comes with curses for disobedience. And if we trace this theme through the Scriptures, the

law of God exposes the fact that not only are we guilty, but that our hearts are bent towards evil and away from God and the good.

And an important part of receiving the message of the Bible is receiving that message. It is acknowledging that in our natural condition, we have hearts that are disinclined to obey God's law. In our natural condition, we are corrupt at the very core of our being. Like OT Israel we are law-breakers and we are powerless to change that. That is our predicament according to the Bible. And to expose that predicament is one of the purposes of the law of God. By the law is the knowledge of sin.

Now the message of the Bible is ultimately good news. It is the story of how God dealt with the horrible reality of sin. And what we have seen so far that just saving Israel from Egypt and just taking them as his people and just giving them the law was not enough. That is a big part of the message of the OT. But the OT also points to God's solution. Through the prophets, towards the end of the OT, God spoke of a time when he would deal with the problem of the incorrigibly sinful hearts of his people.

He spoke of a new covenant that he would make with his people. In Jeremiah 33:33-34 God promised, "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.... For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

God promised that in the future (after those days), he was going to forgive his people and write his law on their hearts. He was going to change their hearts so that his law would be written on them.

He said something similar in Ezekiel 36:25-27, "²⁵I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

This is the next step in God's plan to deal with the curse of sin and its devastation in the human race. God promised that in the future he was

going to change the hearts of his people to enable them to obey. He promised that he was going to give them new hearts. He promised that he was going to put his Spirit within them so that they would finally be able to obey. God promised to finally deal with the fact that fallen human beings have sinful hearts. God promised that he was going to change the hearts of his people so that they would then be able to obey.

And you see this is what Jesus came to do. Jesus is the fulfillment of these promises and indeed he is the fulfillment of the whole OT. You see the whole OT was a preparation for Jesus and a big part of that preparation was to demonstrate the seriousness and the depth of our sin problem. It is not enough that God chooses us to be his people. It is not enough that he gives us his law to show us how to live a life of blessing and peace and fruitfulness. In order for us to live the blessed life that the law describes, we need to be changed at the very core of our being. We need the law written on our hearts. We need new hearts. We need the Holy Spirit to dwell in us and cause us to keep God's law. And that is what Jesus came to do.

First, he came to bring forgiveness. The promise of the new covenant included the promise of forgiveness. Just before Jesus went to the cross he told his disciples that he was giving his blood for their forgiveness. When he instituted the Lord's Supper he said, "[T]his is the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." But he also came to give the renewal of heart that the OT had spoken of. John the Baptist had promised that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and Jesus himself in John 7 spoke of the "Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive." The NT in explaining the significance of Jesus and his mission made it abundantly clear that Jesus through his Spirit would make it possible for his people to keep the law of God. In Romans 8:3-4, Paul wrote, that God, "by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, ... condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

All of this is crucial for our understanding of the Ten Commandments and their significance in the biblical story. The Ten Commandments are

God's blueprint for the good life. They are an incredible gift. They are a treasure. They are the way of life and peace and blessing. But because of our sinful natures, we are born with anti-God hearts and therefore we are anti-law at the core of our being. Israel's story is a profound demonstration of that. Israel's story made clear the need for Jesus to come to do what the law of God alone could not do. Jesus came that we might be forgiven, but also that we might be enabled to keep the law of God and experience the blessedness of doing so.

And so, one of the purposes of the law is to give us the knowledge of our sins. It exposes our sin. It exposes our inability to keep it. But the good news is that Jesus came to save us from our sins and part of what that means is that those who believe in Jesus are now given the inner renewal by the Holy Spirit that makes them willing and able to begin, at least, to keep the law. Perfection will not be ours until heaven. But believers have the beginning of that now so that they begin to enter into the blessedness of obedience.

All of this highlights the mercy and the compassion of God. For law-breaking is rebellion against God. Law-breaking is a refusal to submit to the authority of God. The sinful hearts that I have been describing are hearts that are set against God. When you think of the provocative nature of our sins and our sinfulness, it is amazing that God does not leave us to ourselves to reap what we have sown.

But the Bible shows us God patiently and graciously persisting in his purpose to save us from ourselves and from Satan's malicious desire to see us destroyed. And so, after he had shown, through Israel's incorrigible disobedience, the radical nature of our sinfulness, he promised to renew us and give us new hearts and he sent Jesus to accomplish that mission by his life, death and resurrection.

And you see it is in the light of this whole story that we must understand the law of God and its purpose in our lives. First of all, it shows us our sin and our need of Jesus Christ. It shows us that without him we are lost. But then we learn that through Christ we can be forgiven and renewed so that we can be right with God and experience the blessings of living for him by keeping his law.

In the light of the gospel, we learn that God has not only given us his law as the blueprint for a life of blessing and fullness, but he makes it possible for us to begin to keep that law. We need both. We need the law to show us the way. But we also need Jesus and his salvation so that it is possible for us to walk in that blessed way.

What love has the Lord shown to us! Through Jesus Christ it is possible to love God's law and to know the blessedness of keeping it. It is true that we cannot keep it perfectly in this life. But as John teaches us in 1 John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

So, let us look at the law of God in this light. The law of God is a treasure. It is God's blueprint for a life of blessing and joy. And while we are not able to keep it because of our sinful nature, Jesus Christ has come so that we might be forgiven for all our sins, but also to write that law on our hearts so that by his transforming power that comes through the Spirit of Christ we begin to keep the law and so begin to reap the blessings of that law.