



The Ten Commandments (3)

Introduction (3)

The Law and New Testament

Matthew 5:17-20

Rev. Jerry Hamstra
Riverside ARP Church
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This is the third sermon of introduction to our study on the Ten Commandments. Next week we will begin looking at the actual commandments. The reason that I am taking so much time to introduce the Ten Commandments is that it is very important to understand the way that God intends for the law to function in our lives. The law of God has a lot to do with our relationship with God and there are number of ways that we can misunderstand the role that God intends for his commands to play in our relationship with him.

So, we saw in the first sermon that God gave the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel after he had saved them from slavery in Egypt. He introduces the Ten Commandments by saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." First God saved them. Then he gave them his law. The order is very important. It means that the law is not intended to function as the way to a relationship with God. The relationship came first. Then came the law. And that pattern continues in the NT in connection with Jesus Christ and his mission of salvation. A relationship with Jesus Christ is not the result of keeping the law. Keeping the law is the result of a relationship with Jesus. Keeping the law is still important. But it is just as important that we do not think of the law as the way to salvation. We do not obey in order to be saved. We obey because we have been saved. We are saved by grace not through law keeping. But at the same time, we are saved unto law keeping.

In the second sermon we looked at one of the key purposes of the law according to the Bible and that is to show us that we can't keep the law apart from salvation in Jesus Christ. We saw that the very first thing that Israel did after God gave them the law was to break it and we saw that the rest of their history is a powerful demonstration of the fact that human beings are not able to keep the law. God had chosen Israel to be his people. God had delivered his people from Egypt. God had given them his law as a treasure to show them how to live a life of blessing and flourishing. But all of that was not enough and eventually God had them removed from the land of Canaan, just as he had had the people before them removed from that land because of their wickedness.

It was at that point that God through the prophets began to promise that he would send a Saviour who would not only forgive them but, change their hearts. This is one of the key ways that the OT prepared the way for Jesus. The OT story showed that in order for anyone to be saved from sin, they needed to be renewed at the very core of their being and that is what Jesus came to do. One of the great affects of salvation in Jesus Christ is a profound inner change that makes it possible for his followers to begin to keep the law and will one day make it possible for them to keep the law perfectly.

We must understand these things in order to profit from a study of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments must be understood in the light of the gospel message. First, they show us how radically sinful they are so that we will understand our need of salvation in Jesus Christ and then they show us a way to live that is only possible through that salvation. In the gospel, God not only shows us the only good way to live to be truly blessed, in Christ he also gives us the ability to begin to live that way and to gradually grow in obedience until we are finally made perfect when God's plan for the renewal of all things is completed.

Today we are going to look at a number of issues that are raised by the way that the NT speaks about the law of God. Our Bibles are divided into the OT and the NT. The OT teaches us about the problem of sin and the first steps in God's plan to rid the world of sin. The NT tells us of the coming of Jesus Christ and his significance. Jesus Christ is the most important figure in the story that the Bible tells. He is as important as

God because he is the Son of God. And his coming and mission brought about certain changes in role of the law and we need to think about those changes. Specifically, we need to deal with some of the things that the NT says about the law. This is a complex topic and we can only scratch the surface, but it is important that we do so to understand how we are to think of the law and how it applies to our lives.

First, there is the question of whether the law is still binding for us after the coming of Christ. There are passages which make it sound like the law is no longer binding for NT Christians. So, we have a passage like Ephesians 2:14-15. Unless you are familiar with this passage you probably won't understand it when I read it, but I will explain it and the meaning is actually quite simple. So, Ephesians 2:14-15, "For he himself [Jesus] is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility **by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances**, that he might create in himself one new man in the place of two, so making peace...."

Paul is saying that Jesus abolished the law of commandments. You take those words all by themselves and you might think that Jesus canceled the Ten Commandments. He abolished the law of commandments. But we will see from other places that both Jesus and Paul and other NT writers treat the Ten Commandments as continuing to apply. What we have to understand is that the term "law" is used in different ways in the NT. There are lots of laws in the OT. There are the Ten Commandments. But there are also laws that related to the worship in the temple having to do with priests and sacrifices and the like. And then there are laws that related to the civil life of the nation of Israel. The laws relating to the temple worship were no longer necessary after Christ had completed his work on earth because his sacrifice actually atoned for sin. The OT sacrifices were no longer necessary after Christ had given his life for sin. And so those laws were no longer literally binding. They are still relevant to us because they help us to understand the significance of the sacrifice of Christ, but we no longer have to keep them by making animal sacrifices or maintaining the worship of the temple.

It is the same with the laws that pertained to the civil life of Israel. Once Jesus came, the people of God were no longer restricted to one nation. The followers of Jesus consisted of people from many nations and so the laws that had applied to Israel as a nation were no longer in force. These laws are still relevant because they embody important principles, but we are no longer required to literally obey all the many laws in to OT that were intended only for the nation of Israel. So, we have one example of this in the verses that I just quoted from Ephesians 2. In that passage Paul is taking about the fact that Jesus mission' did away with the distinction between Jew and Gentile. It says that Jesus created "one new man in place of the two." And so, the OT laws that were given to maintain that distinction were abolished. And that is what Paul is talking about when he speaks of Christ "abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of two, so making peace...."

There is one more example from Paul's letters in the NT. The NT makes a very big deal of the fact that we are free from the law as a way to be right with God. This theme is so prominent in the NT because many of the Jews thought that they could be saved through law-keeping. This is not what the OT teaches, but it is what many of the Jewish people came to believe. This is more or less what the letter to the Galatians is all about. Listen to what Paul writes in Galatians 2:16, "¹⁶yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."

When Paul here speaks about being justified, he is speaking about our standing before the law. We can be guilty before the law and we can be justified before the law. If we are justified our sins are forgiven and we are declared right with God. Paul says here that we are justified through faith in Jesus Christ and not through the works of the law. This is a wonderful part of the gospel message. This is a wonderful part of what Jesus accomplished by his life, death and resurrection.

This means that we are free from the law as far as justification is concerned. The way to be right with God is not through keeping the law,

but rather through faith in Jesus. Paul uses the language of freedom and slavery to the law in Galatians 5:1 where he says, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” The whole idea of thinking that we have to keep the law in order to be justified, Paul calls slavery. And the wonderful truth that we are justified through faith in Jesus Christ means that we are free from the law as a way of salvation. We are free from the curse of the law because in Christ our sins are forgiven, and we are right with God.

So, there are a number of ways that we are free from the law according to the NT. We are free from the laws that governed the worship and the ceremonies of OT Israel and we are free from the laws that governed the national life of Israel. And we are free from the law as a way of salvation. The way to be right with God is not through keeping the law, but through believing in Jesus. These principles explain many of the NT references that say that NT Christians are no longer under the law or are free from the law.

But what does all this have to say about the relevance of the Ten Commandments? Are the Ten Commandments still relevant to us today? If we are going to spend a number of months studying the Ten Commandments, we better be sure that it's God's intention that we use them as his will for our lives as believers in Jesus Christ. We will now look at a few passages that teach that that God still wants us to view that Ten Commandments as the key summary of his will for our lives.

The first is the story in the gospel where a rich young man comes up to Jesus and asks him what he had to do to gain eternal life. Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. Now this seems to contradict what we just saw from Paul in Galatians that keeping the commandments is not the way to salvation. But that is not what Jesus is teaching here. Jesus' point in the passage is that following him requires that we put him first in our lives and he wanted to demonstrate that the rich man was not willing to do that. The point for our purposes, however, is simply the fact that when Jesus used the word “commandments” here he is referring to the Ten Commandments. When the rich young man asks which commandments he must keep, Jesus lists a number of the Ten Commandments and it is clear that he considered them to be binding.

Matthew 19:18 says, "¹⁸He said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, ¹⁹Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The point is that when Jesus uses the term "commandments" in this context he is referring to the Ten Commandments. He does not list all ten of them, but he lists some of them as examples of the whole.

Then we have Jesus' summary of the law. We find this in Matthew 22:34-40. A lawyer asks Jesus which is the great commandment in the Law, and Jesus replies with his famous summary, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Now this is clearly a summary of the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments deal with our relationship with God and the last 6 commandments deal with our relationship with our neighbor. The first four commandments show us what it means to love God and the last 6 show us what it means to love our neighbor. This passage shows very clearly that Jesus considered the Ten Commandments to function in the NT church as a authoritative summary of God's will for his people.

Next, we come to Romans 13:8-10. Here the apostle Paul writes, "⁸Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

Here Paul uses the terms "law" and "commandments" and as examples of what he means by these terms he lists a number of the Ten Commandments. Again, we have a NT author using the terms "law" and "commandments" to refer to the Ten Commandments. This is one more indication that it is God's will that the Ten Commandments

continue to function in the NT church as a summary of his will for our lives.

One more example, this time from James. A number of times in the epistle that bears his name, James uses the term “law.” For instance, in 2:10 “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” Then he gives examples, “Do not commit adultery,” and “Do not murder.” Both of these examples come from the Ten Commandments. So again, we have an example of a NT using the term “law” to refer to the Ten Commandments.

I make a point of this because not all Christians believe that the Ten Commandments are binding upon us today. Some branches of the Church teach that when the NT says that the NT Christians are not under the law, it means that the only laws that still bind us are those that we find in the NT. They acknowledge that 9 of the Ten Commandments are clearly reaffirmed in the NT, but they deny that the 10 Commandments as a unit still apply. The Reformed tradition has believed, however, that the passages that I have just mentioned teach that it is God’s intention that the Ten Commandments as a whole continue to function as the summary of his will for the lives of his people. In the Reformed tradition, the Ten Commandments are sometimes referred to as the moral law of God. And so, we confess in our Westminster Confession of Faith, 19:5, “The moral law binds all people at all times to obedience, both those who are justified and those who are not. The obligation to obey the moral law is not only because of its content, but also because of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. In the gospel, Christ in no way dissolves this obligation, but greatly strengthens it.”

This is why we will be studying the Ten Commandments. This is a rather Reformed thing to do. We believe that they are God’s summary of his will for our lives even after the coming of Christ. This is also why the standard Reformed catechisms, the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms and the Heidelberg Catechism, contain expositions of the 10 Commandments to guide the lives of followers of Jesus Christ.

Finally, this evening we will spend a little time thinking about the relationship between our Lord Jesus and the law. Jesus speaks of this in

the passage that we read as our Scripture reading. I will read the first two verses again. Matthew 5:17-18. "¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”

Now Jesus here is speaking about the whole OT. When he speaks of the Law and the Prophets it is a way of speaking about the whole OT which was the Bible of the people in Jesus day. And Jesus is saying that he had come to fulfill the whole OT. Now Jesus fulfills the OT in many different ways. The most obvious way that Jesus fulfills the OT is by being the fulfillment of the promises of the OT. The OT is full of promises that God was going to come and save his people and defeat their enemies. Jesus is the fulfillment of those promises. So, you will read quite often in the gospels that this or that happened in order that a certain OT promise might be fulfilled.

But you will notice that Jesus goes on to speak about the Law in particular. “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all his accomplished.” Now the law covers more than just the Ten Commandments, but it does include the Ten Commandments and I want to focus on that for a moment. What does it mean that Jesus came to fulfill the Ten Commandments?

From the immediate context of these verses, there are two ways that Jesus fulfills the law. Jesus fulfills the purpose of the law by making it possible for his people to obey the law. In verses 19-20 Jesus talks about obedience to the law. In verse 20 he says, “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The scribes and the Pharisees were very nit-picky about keeping the law externally, but Jesus will show then that they did not understand the heart of the law which was love. Jesus’ mission was to enable his followers to keep the law in a much deeper sense than the Pharisees ever did because he would enable them to keep it out of love.

And then Jesus fulfills the law by bringing out the true meaning of the law. That is what we see over and over again in the Sermon on the Mount and in the rest of Jesus' teaching. Jesus by his teaching and example brings out the true meaning of the law and in that way, he fulfills it.

As we saw when we looked at the story in which God gave the Ten Commandments, God gave his law to his people so that they might keep them and in that way, glorify him and experience great blessing from living as God has designed them to live. That purpose was only fulfilled in a very small measure because of Israel's inability to keep the law. Jesus was going to fulfill the law not only by keeping it himself, but also by releasing his people from the bondage of sin so that they would finally be able to keep the law and so glorify God and experience the blessedness of living according to God's law.

Jesus would fulfill the law by making it possible for the law to function as God had intended it to function in the lives of his people. This was a huge part of Jesus' mission. He lived and died and rose again so that we might be freed from the curse of the law. But he also lived and died and rose again so that we might be able to keep the law. Jesus hints at that here because he assumes that the righteousness of his followers will exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

The scribes and the Pharisees did not keep the law according to the true meaning of the law. Throughout the story told in the gospels, Jesus shows that the religious leaders of the Jews did not really understand or keep the law at all. He accused them of keeping the law outwardly, but not loving God and others from their hearts. He accused them of "practicing [their] righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them" (Matthew 6:1). He taught that law keeping included forgiveness and that if they would not forgive others, God would not forgive them (Matthew 6:14-15). He taught them "[W]hatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). The Jews had not fulfilled the law. The scribes and Pharisees had not fulfilled the law. But Jesus would fulfill the law by teaching what it really meant, by showing in his life what it really meant and by saving his people so that they would be able to keep it.

Jesus would fulfill the law by teaching and demonstrating that the heart of the law is love and by enabling his followers to live that life of love. In John 13:34 he said, "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." Paul would write in Romans 13:8, "Owe no one anything except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

So, as we will consider the details of the Ten Commandments we are considering something that Jesus came to fulfill. He came to fulfill the whole OT in all kinds of ways, but that certainly includes the Ten Commandments. Because of Jesus, these commandments do not only show us our sins, they also show us how to live the abundant life that Jesus came to bring all of his followers. Jesus fulfills the law by making it possible for us to fulfill the law. He does that by making it possible for us to love and that is rooted in his love for us.

As long as we are in this life, we will not be able to keep the law perfectly, but because Jesus came to fulfill the law in us, we will like the apostle Paul, "delight in the law of God, in [our] inner being" (Romans 7:22). May we experience that delight as we study the Ten Commandments in the coming months.