

LESSONS FROM EXODUS
YAHWEH: THE GOD OF LAW
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Some time ago, in one of the religious journals I read, there was a cartoon that gave me quite a chuckle. It depicted a church building with a large signboard out front. The signboard read, “Home of the Lite Church: 7.5% tithe, 15 minute sermon, 9 of the 10 Commandments—your choice!”

Speaking of signs, there is a series of billboards that I am sure many of you have seen while riding in your cars. White letters against a black background offer a thought-provoking statement which is attributed to God. Recently, I saw this billboard: “What about ‘Thou shalt not’ do you not understand? God.”

The Ten Commandments . . . It is hard for me to imagine that you or I would meet someone who had never heard of the Ten Commandments. At the least, it is an old movie starring Charlton Heston. To others, the Ten Commandments are that list of “Thou shalt nots” which, to them, is the essence of the Old-Testament-God. For many Christians, the Ten Commandments are the “CliffsNotes” for the Old Testament. Although there is so much more to God and the Old Testament than the Ten Commandments, and—as I emphasized in last Sunday’s lesson—obeying the LORD and having a covenant-relationship with Him involves more than obeying a set of laws, these are not the issues that I want to talk about today.

To portray Yahweh as *The God of Law*, is to paint a picture that is not very appealing to most Americans. The Modern Western World tends to think of laws as a necessary evil which must be endured for the sake of social peace. There is no great value in laws since they are restrictions of our personal liberty; but, we do need laws to keep in check murder, theft, and similar undesirable behaviors. So, we tolerate laws even though we do not like them. This way of thinking would have seemed strange to the Hebrew mindset of the Old Testament. For in the Old Testament, the establishment of order is good, the

control of actions permits freedom, and social restraints which work for the benefit of the whole community are viewed as great gifts to human existence.

When we turn to Exodus chapter 20, we find in most of our Bibles the heading “The Ten Commandments.” This title is derived from the traditional, although inaccurate, translation of a Hebrew phrase that appears in Exod 34:28, Deut 4:13 and Deut 10:4.¹ The Hebrew phrase means “The Ten Words,” and this—by way of the Greek translation of the Old Testament²—gave rise to the more accurate English alternative “Decalogue.”

The Ten Commandments . . . When we compare them to the wisdom writings and the ethical literature of the Ancient Near Eastern World, we find many similarities. But we also discover that, in many ways, they are incredibly unique. First, one of the most distinctive characteristics of Old Testament law is that it is embedded in a narrative context from which it cannot be separated and from which it derives its meaning and significance. The law is part of a story. Allow me to suggest three important implications of this fact. (1) Law is more clearly seen as a gift of God’s graciousness when tied to story. Law becomes another part of the larger story of God’s goodness and mercy. If I may be so blunt, the legalist clings to the law and ignores the story. The libertarian clings to the story and ignores the law. Law and story—they must not be divorced from one another. (2) The story keeps the personal nature of the law front and center. The story reveals a vibrant and vital relationship between God and people, and it is in this context that law is given. The law must be understood in personal and interrelational terms. (3) The motivation for obedience to law is found in the story: the Israelites were slaves in the land of Egypt, therefore they are to shape their lives toward others in ways that are compassionate and just. Furthermore, the Israelites were rescued by Yahweh. They are to love others as Yahweh has loved them. Our vision statement here at the Plymouth Church of Christ is, “Loving others as Jesus loves us.” Loving as we have been loved has always been and should always be the reason for living as the people of God. The law is a part of the story of a living and loving God.

A second unique feature of the Ten Commandments is that they are expressions of the divine will. No biblical law is ever attributed to Moses personally or to any prophet.

¹עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים (*'asereth hadevarim*).

²δέκα λόγους (*deka logous*).

This is in striking contrast to the situation in the ancient world where the legislators are kings, princes, and sages. The king and the state constituted the source of law, its sanction, and the authority behind it. The role of the gods in law is to serve as the source of wisdom, to implant in man the discernment of truth and the perception of justice, and thereby to enable the king to make good laws. Not so in Israel. The Ten Commandments are not the fruit of God-given wisdom or reason; they are the actual spoken words of Yahweh Himself.

Third, another outstanding feature of the Ten Commandments is the very nature of the stipulations: simple, absolute, positive and negative imperatives without qualification and—for the most part—without accompanying penalties or threats of punishment. “You shall” and “You shall not”—in the words of the billboard, what about that do you not understand? Here we have certain God-given values and standards that are absolute. Morality is the expression of the divine will. Furthermore, the motivation for obeying the law is not to be the fear of retribution but the desire to conform to the will of God. Understood in this light, the Ten Commandments become a self-enforcing code of conduct.

A fourth and final important aspect of the Ten Commandments that I wish to highlight is the interweaving of what today would be called the “religious” and the “secular” obligations. Our modern habit of distinguishing between the sacred and the secular, and then compartmentalizing each of these so that they do not interfere with one another is meaningless in a biblical context. This reminds me of those folks that when they eat, they do not allow the different foods on their plate to touch each other. Each type of food has its own distinct space and never shall there be any intermingling of the different foods. Far too often, we practice this procedure with regard to our lives. We separate the sacred from the secular, and we see to it that the two never intermingle with each other. Several years ago, in my wife’s workplace, a heated discussion was taking place concerning a publicized sex scandal. There was, of course, much talk about right and wrong, moral and immoral. Finally, in apparent frustration, one individual—not my wife!—blurted out, “What does religion have to do with sex anyway?” The biblical answer is straightforward: absolutely everything! The law of God treats life holistically; it does not compartmentalize life. If the will of God is not valid for all of life, then it is

worthless for any of life. This same sentiment is often stated in today's churches when it is said of Jesus Christ that He is either Lord of all or Lord not at all.

Ok, now let's look at the very words of God in Exodus chapter 20, beginning with the first two verses.

**Then God spoke all these words, saying: “I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery
(Exod 20:1-2).**

This introduction is of extraordinary significance. It keeps the law personally oriented; obedience is a matter of an attachment to Yahweh rather than an adherence to a legal code for its own sake. “I am Yahweh, *your* God”— obedience takes place within a relationship with Yahweh. The law is God's gift to a redeemed people. In the act of deliverance from Egypt— and this connects the law with the story—Yahweh has already rescued and ransomed His people. Those who are given the law are already God's people! The law, then, is not a means of salvation but it is instruction on how the saved are to live-out their everyday lives. The Ten Commandments teach God's people how to live as God's people.

You shall have no other gods in My presence (Exod 20:3).

The command is to be absolutely loyal to Yahweh, rejecting all other gods. This commandment is the basis for the building of the covenant community. Yahweh had opened Himself to a special relationship with Israel, but that relationship could develop only if Israel committed themselves to Yahweh alone. This commandment is the foundation for all the other commandments, which draw out what loyalty to Yahweh means in terms of everyday life. In this sense, the first commandment is the most important of all.

You shall not make for yourself an idol (Exod 20:4-6).

Having required that the focus of worship must be Yahweh, now the forms of worship are regulated. Unlike images, which are lifeless and immobile, deaf and dumb,

unfeeling and unthinking, and fix God at a point in time, Yahweh is a God who can speak and feel and act in both nature and history. To use images for the worship of Yahweh is to deny the very nature of His being and is to deny the nature of His relationship to the world.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of Yahweh (Exod 20:7).

Yahweh's reputation must be protected. A central concern of God in Exodus to this point has been "that My name may be declared throughout all the earth" (Exod 9:16). The divine name must not be used in any way that brings disgrace to God or to God's purposes for the world. Whether by words or deeds or both, the individual who gives Yahweh "a bad name" will answer to the God they have insulted.

Remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy (Exod 20:8-11).

To keep the Sabbath Day holy is to keep it separate from the other six days as "a sanctuary of time." People are not to live as if all time were their own, to do with as they please. The God of all time retains the right to determine how one day shall or shall not be used. And Yahweh has said that six days allotted for the "business as usual" of life must be made to suffice.

Honor your father and your mother (Exod 20:12).

The first four commandments set forth the principles guiding Israel's relationship to Yahweh; the last six commandments set forth the principles guiding Israel's relationship with the covenant community, and more broadly, with humankind. Just as the relationship with Yahweh is the beginning of the covenant, so the child-parent relationship is the beginning of society, the point of departure for every human relationship. The fifth commandment is as foundational to commandments six through ten as the first commandment is to commandments two through four. It is also the bridge from the relationship with God to the relationship with one's neighbor. By the way, at no age do we cease to be children of parents.

You shall not kill (Exod 20:13).

The Hebrew verb translated “kill”³ is used in the Old Testament to refer to both murder and manslaughter; however, unlike other verbs for the taking of life, it is never used in the administration of justice or for killing in war. Other than these two exceptional situations, this command prohibits any act of violence against an individual out of hatred, anger, malice, deceit, or for personal gain, in whatever circumstances and by whatever method, that might result in death—even if killing was not the intention.

You shall not commit adultery (Exod 20:14).

Adultery is not only a crime against another person or persons, it is also a sin against Yahweh Himself. It violates God’s intention in creation, which places human sexuality in the context of a covenant-relationship between a husband and wife.

You shall not steal (Exod 20:15).

Don’t take what don’t belong to you. (Please pardon my grammar.)

You shall not bear false witness (Exod 20:16).

In legal proceedings, the giving of false testimony not only hinders the administration of justice, it also undermines public confidence in the integrity of the judicial system. At stake is justice for anyone who uses the judicial system.

You shall not covet (Exod 20:17).

The tenth commandment serves as a summary commandment, the violation of which is a first step that can lead to the violation of any one or all the rest of the commandments. Its focus is an attitude rather than an action. After all, sin really lies in the heart and not in the hands. True obedience involves avoiding not only certain actions, but also avoiding certain attitudes towards others—attitudes perhaps best captured in such words as envy or greed or lust. The secret to *doing* what is right is first *desiring*

³רָצַח (ratsakh).

what is right. I believe that this is precisely the point Jesus is making in The Sermon on the Mount. When, in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus says, “But I say unto you,” He is not radically reinterpreting the commandments; He is drawing out their meaning in terms of the coveting root of all disobedience. We should also note that the tenth commandment demonstrates the Godward focus of all the law. Coveting cannot be observed or regulated or policed. Only Yahweh can look upon the heart and can see the presence or absence of obedience within the human spirit. So then, sin against one’s neighbor is not simply an interhuman matter; it involves God. When we, as human beings, fail in our relationship with the God who made us, we will inevitably fail in our relationships with one another. Human society falters when God is forgotten.

Yahweh, the LORD God, has spoken. He gave to Israel the Ten Commandments, not the Ten Suggestions. And the Ten Commandments are not multiple choice. More than anything else, I hope that you will see God’s laws as the gracious gift of His love—they are given for our benefit and our welfare. Just imagine, what would our world be like if everyone lived in loyalty to the Lord and faithfully followed His ways? . . . Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? Such a world begins with you and with me. When you leave this building today and go out into the world, what kind of world are you going to create?

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