

COVENANT AND COMMANDMENTS

Exodus 19:3-7, 20:1-17

PENTECOST 20

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When Moses and his brother, Aaron, first stood wobbly kneed
before Egypt's mighty monarch, Pharaoh, they made a
three-part request:

To free the Hebrew people from their bondage,

To take them out into the wilderness,

To free them to serve and worship their great God, Yahweh.

One can also say that the Torah and the Old Testament's second
book, Exodus, had been organized along Moses' requests:

The departure from Egypt,

The giving of the Ten Commandments, and

The building of the Tabernacle.

Today's Narrative Lectionary reading opens with Moses leading
the Israelites to Mount Sinai fifty days after their departure
from Egypt.

This area was the scene of Moses' commission by God at the
burning bush.

On his first trip up the mountain, Moses received a message from
God to give to the people.

He reminded them of the grace and status God had granted to
them in these memorable words:

***"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore
you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself"*** (19:4).

On the foundation of grace, God imparted His law to them:

***"Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant,
you shall be my treasured possession out of all peoples"*** (19:5).

When I first read today's scripture passage, I was pleasantly surprised that Chapter 19 was included.

What is often overlooked is the covenant God makes with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai.

It does not replace the previous covenant God made with Abraham with the promise and provision of future descendants and land.

The pattern of grace, law, reward/punishment is a hallmark of the Exodus covenant.

Another important thing to notice in this reading is the inclusion of the preamble to the Ten Commandments, which reads:

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (20:2).

Though short and simple, God's statement is to the point.

The Commandments, which immediately follow, flow from an act of grace.

Israel's relationship with God is not initiated by observance of the law, but by God's actions to free them from their bondage.

So, Israel's obligation to keep the law is not to form a relationship with God, but rather to show gratitude and to maintain their relationship with God.

As we will see, the Commandments offer God's people both boundaries and blessings.

If the law comes from God, then the best place to start understanding the law is with God.

This is precisely where the Book of Exodus begins its presentation of the Ten Commandments, also known as the Decalogue, meaning **"ten words:"**

"And God spoke all these words."

And if the law comes from God, then it also reflects God's true character and nature.

This is true of rules and regulations in general.

They reveal something of the rule-maker.

To give one example, consider the extensive federal regulations that govern handicapped access to public buildings.

What do these laws tell us about the society that made them?

They tell us that the American people want to include disabled people in public life.

Likewise, the law always reveals the character of the lawgiver.

This was especially true at Mount Sinai, where every one of the

Ten Commandments is stamped with the being and attributes of the God who rescued the Israelites from slavery, and who will sustain them in the wilderness.

So what does each Commandment tell us about the God who gave it?

The First Commandment is ***“You shall have no other gods before me”*** (20:3).

Obviously, the God who gave this command will not share glory with any other god.

Rightly so, because Yahweh is the one and only True God.

All the others are imposters, as the plagues upon Egypt demonstrated.

Each of the Egyptian gods was defeated by God through Moses.

The First Commandment announces the unique sovereignty of the God, who alone is able to say, ***“I am the LORD, there is no other”*** (Isaiah 45:18).

The Second Commandment, according to Martin Luther’s numbering, is ***“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God”*** (20:7).

This Commandment is about honoring God’s name.

The threat attached to this Commandment, ***“The Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses His name,”*** demonstrates that God expects to be obeyed.

Those who break this law will be charged with guilt.

The Commandment itself shows that God is honorable, and, therefore, deserves to be treated with due respect.

Even God’s name itself is holy, and should only be addressed in prayer, blessing, and worship.

The Third Commandment is, ***“Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy”*** (20:8).

To keep this Commandment, it tells believers, ***“Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God”*** (20:10).

For the early Christians, Sunday, rather than Saturday, became the day of worship, because Jesus was risen on that day.

However, today we live in a 24/7 society, and many people worship sporadically, if at all, because they are too busy, or need to rest. This Commandment reminds believers of God as the Creator, who is the Lord of every day of the week.

The first three Commandments speak to our relationship to God. The last seven concern our relationships with one another. The Fourth Commandment is about respecting authority.

“Honor your father and your mother” (20:12).

What stands behind this Commandment is God’s own authority as our Father.

This is also the first command with a promise — the promise of long life in a good land, which shows how generous God is to provide for His people.

The Fifth Commandment is ***“You shall not murder”*** (20:13).

This serves to remind us that God is the LORD and giver of life, and that life is a gift.

God forbids the taking of innocent life, because God is a life-giving God.

Furthermore, this Commandment preserves God’s sovereignty over life’s end.

God is the Lord over death as well as life.

The Sixth Commandment is one that everyone knows.

Many think it is all right to break it.

“You shall not commit adultery” (20:14).

What does this tell you about God?

It tells us that God is a God of purity and faithfulness, a God who expects covenants to be kept.

The prohibition of adultery is the foundation of sexual ethics in the Scriptures.

The Seventh Commandment is ***“You shall not steal”*** (20:15).

The God who gave this Commandment is our Creator and Provider.

To keep it is to recognize that, ultimately, everything belongs to God.

Therefore, we do not have the right to take what God has given someone else.

The Eighth Commandment says to tell the truth:

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (20:16).

This Commandment is worded in a way that points to court hearings.

It is also worded to reflect the profound consequences of lying in a court or relationship, and the damage it can do to one’s reputation.

Our nation witnessed such a spectacle, and even the breaking of this Commandment during the recent hearings to confirm a new Supreme Court Justice.

The Ninth and Tenth Commandments were separated according to Luther’s numbering.

Up to this point, the Ten Commandments required only external behavior.

However, with the last two Commandments not to covet, the entire law is internalized.

Obedience requires more than simply restraint from murder, adultery, and stealing.

Hate wants to take a life, or destroy another person’s reputation.

Lust wants to have sex with another woman who is not your wife, or another person’s spouse.

Desire is to have something that belongs to another person.

Note that Luther divides this Commandment with regard to property and living creatures, to remind us that God is the Creator of both.

God is our Provider, and keeping this Commandment requires faith in God’s providence toward us.

One further divine attribute is revealed by the Ten Commandments as a whole, and that attribute is LOVE.

When Jesus summarized God’s law, He said:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment.

And a second is like it.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-38).

In other words, the Ten Commandments can be reduced to two:

Love God and love your neighbor.
So, they are all about love.

We love God by worship and the proper use of God's name in prayer, praise, and thanks.

We love our parents by honoring, obeying, serving, respecting, and loving them.

We love our spouses by being faithful to them, and living pure and decent lives together in word and deed.

We love our neighbors by protecting their lives, helping and supporting them in all of life's needs, respecting their property, and telling them the truth.

Beloved people of God,

the God who gave these Commandments is a God of love, who wants our love and asks us to share God's love with others.

As Jesus said, "***Whoever has my Commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me***" (1John 5:3).

If that's true, then we cannot separate God's law from God's love.

To summarize, then, the Ten Commandments display the character of God.

They reveal God's sovereignty, justice, holiness, honor, faithfulness, providence, truthfulness, care, and love.

The Ten Commandments express God's will for our lives, because they are based on God's divine nature and character.

The law, then, is good, because it originates from the goodness of God, and God's goodness penetrates every aspect of God's law for us.

AMEN