

What a massive task to preach ONE sermon on the Ten Commandments! What was I thinking? I know I’ve preached series of sermons on the commandments, spending much time on each word of each successive commandment. The old grade school joke could apply: “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.” I’m asking you to take three bites today: 1) 19:16-20, which ends with, “*The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up...*” 2) Verses 1-3 in chapter 20, which emphasize the divine origin of all that follows. Verse 3 gives a big hint of the comprehensiveness of God’s claim on our lives that these commandments stake out. 3) Then, if we move all the way down to verses 18 and 19 we’re brought back to where we started with thunder and lightning and how we tremble with fear when God speaks to us. And it also gets us thinking about how to bring these ten words into the real world.

All modern scholars emphasize that these verses follow the format of ancient Near Eastern covenant treaties in which the covenant Lord outlines the conditions of his agreement with his subject people. That is a helpful insight, unless it is used to suggest (as some do) that Israel has simply borrowed this material from surrounding nations. The first two verses make it very clear that while God may have used a well-known *form* to give his law to his people, it was definitely God who spoke these words. In a day of almost universal relativism in morality and nearly unanimous agreement that Israel’s monotheistic religion evolved over a long period of time, it is crucial that a Christian person assert what verse 1 so clearly says.

“*And God spoke all these words:*” They are not the words of Moses, or of Israel. They are the very words of God to Israel through Moses. That, of course, is a startling and offensive claim to make in our polytheistic/atheistic world. This Scripture text claims that these words came from the one true God to a particular people, whom God had chosen to be the possessors and communicators of his words to the rest of the world. Why would God do that? As C. S. Lewis so wryly and offensively put it, “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” That’s not anti-Semitic; it’s just an acknowledgment of the strange and wonderful ways God reveals himself and his will to the world.

Lest we have any doubt about who the one God is, God is very specific in verse 2: “*I am the LORD (Yahweh) your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*” God has a name, a unique name, that reveals much about his character as we found out in Exodus 3. This law-giving God is the covenant making God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This law-giving God is the liberator of Israel from Egypt. We could

spend the whole sermon on those introductory words, but at the very least they assure Israel—and us—that these words come from the God who has reached down into history, entering into an unbreakable covenant with a particular people, and acting historically in powerful ways to redeem them.

Thus, these negative sounding words have a very positive intent. God has just liberated them from a terrible bondage and now he tells them how to avoid falling back into bondage again, how to enjoy their liberty. Did you hear that? They might have gone out into the wilderness and simply imitated the lifestyle of the Egyptians who had been their masters for so long. That was all they knew. Or they might have gone on to the Promised Land and fallen into the customs of the peoples who lived there, which, sadly, they often did (and found themselves in bondage again). To help them maintain the liberated life, God gave them this set of simple rules. Here is a good God, the Father of a new family, trying to help them learn to walk in a safe and healthy way.

*“And God spoke all these words:”* And these words cover all of life. Their covenant Lord lays a comprehensive claim on their lives. As his subjects, his covenant people are to render total submission, allegiance and obedience to him out of gratitude, reverence and complete trust in his continuing care. Yahweh lays this comprehensive claim on them, not as a hard hearted, heavy handed tyrant, but as a loving Father who would do anything to save his people, as he so powerfully illustrates centuries later when his only Son is given for the sin of the world.

Having said that, however, there is no doubt that this “law of liberty” is life encompassing and strict—from every dimension of their relationship with God to all aspects of their relationships with fellow humans. God’s people have always talked about the two tables of the Law, focusing on how we are to love God properly and then learn what it means to love our fellow humans.

The First Table is the basis for the Second; loving God is the condition and source of loving each other. If we choose not to serve the One True God as we should, we aren’t able to care for each other as God directs. I know, there is a whole movement today that insists we can be “good without God,” and there are many people who do good even though they have no faith in the God of the Bible. But the sheer order of the commandments shows us that loving God is our primary duty as God’s children. If we don’t first love God, how on earth can we ever begin to love his children?

Properly relating to God means that we must worship only one God, the God who calls himself the LORD/Yahweh, that we worship him as he has commanded, not using images or idols to represent him; that we use his name only in praise and petition, not trying to manipulate him by uttering the magic word of his name; and that we devote one day each week to focus on God, not working all the time as though our lives depended solely on our work, rather than on our God.

I suppose I could preach on each of the first four commandments, pointing out, for example, that Israel's great temptation, and ours, was to have other gods besides Yahweh, to trust other deities in addition to Yahweh, demonstrating that they didn't really trust him completely. Or we could explain that God's aversion to images counters the human desire to make God visible, so that we can hold onto him or manipulate him at will. But God is our Lord and Master, not our servant or serf. If we need or want an image of God, God has provided a perfect image in Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Lord.

In the Second Table, God begins with the family, the foundation of human society. When the family falls apart, all of society will do the same, as we are seeing in our world today. Strong families are based, not on obedience (because there are times when children should *not* obey their parents), and not on love (because we all go through moments when we *do not* love those closest to us), but on *honor*, giving weight and importance to the authority God has placed over us. When respect and honor for those in authority are lost, the family and society will disintegrate, as we have often seen.

God goes on to address the value of human life, the sanctity of the marriage bed, the right to hold property, and the importance of truth telling in a society. Each of those commands is filled with implications and difficulties. At the very least these commands show us that God cares deeply about every dimension of human life. Thus, loving God means that we must help other people flourish in their lives by guarding their right to life, by keeping sex within the bounds of marriage, by protecting the property rights of others, and by speaking the truth in love. So, how are we to deal with these commandments in a day when living a humane life is exceedingly challenging and fragile?

That question raises all kinds of issues. God gave his Law in the setting of a terrifying theophany, a personal revelation designed to plant "the fear of God" in their hearts, as verse 18 says. It might sound as though only fear can keep the people from sinning. Is that the deterrent that ensures their obedience?

Well, we cannot and do not keep the commandments by ourselves. If the law is to be helpful for us, we must have another to help us keep it. Which, of course, God has taken care of by giving us the Holy Spirit, “*so that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature, but according to the Spirit*” (Romans 8:4). And Paul can boldly say in Galatians 5:18 “*But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.*” That doesn’t mean that the Law is abolished. It means that we are not under it as a tyrant; it is in us as because the Spirit empowers and directs us to live by the “law of liberty.”

When we don’t live by the Law of God, we have a mediator, even as Israel did at the foot of Mt. Sinai. The appearance of God on top of the mountain so terrified the people that they begged Moses in verse 19 to stand between them and God: “*Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.*” And so, he did. Jesus did more than that. He spoke to us in the role of the great Prophet who would take the place of Moses. But even more, he died for us when we couldn’t keep the Law of God. When we submitted again to the bondage of sin, he gave his life to set us free.

The notion that a law can make us free goes against the lawless instincts of anyone who lives by the motto, “do whatever feels good.” Here in “the land of the free and the home of the brave” we may think that personal freedom is ours to define—individually (apologies to all other citizens of the world). Our beloved hymn, “America the Beautiful,” points us to an appropriate appreciation of the Law that Moses received on Mt. Sinai: “Oh, beautiful for pilgrim feet, whose stern impassioned stress a thoroughfare for freedom beat across the wilderness! America! America! God mend thine every flaw, confirm thy soul in self-control, *thy liberty in law.*” In the law we find freedom.

And in the end, I believe the Ten Commandments can uniquely point people to God’s amazing love in Christ that sets us free to live as God always intended when he first gave the Law to Moses. In Jesus Christ and by his Spirit, we can be free indeed. Amen.

(Thanks to Stan Mast for much sermon help)