

Basics of the Faith: Ten Words: The Law of God (1)
Exodus 20: 4-6
June 28, 2020

Here in Exodus 20 and again in Deuteronomy 5 we read the law of God given to Moses at the mountain. These ten words are probably the most well-known words in English. Decades ago, one had to memorize these words in Sunday School and confirmation classes. They hung on banners in church halls and schools and government buildings. Laws are important for all societies to maintain justice and social cohesion. It protects us.

God's law was given to Israel to help bind them into a civilized society. Newly liberated from slavery in Egypt they were a rag tag group with little that bound them together other than a vague connection to Abraham's family. To function as a newly formed nation they needed a code of conduct and law to maintain order and justice.

Long before Moses offered these ten words to Israel, other civilizations had developed law codes. One of the most famous was the Babylonian law code of Hammurabi. The Code of Hammurabi was one of the earliest and most complete written legal codes and was proclaimed by the Babylonian king Hammurabi, who reigned from 1792 to 1750 B.C. Hammurabi expanded the city-state of Babylon along the Euphrates River to unite all of southern Mesopotamia. The Hammurabi code of laws, a collection of 282 rules, established standards for commercial interactions and set fines and punishments to meet the requirements of justice. Hammurabi's Code was carved onto a massive, finger-shaped black stone stele (pillar) that was looted by invaders and finally rediscovered in 1901. Today the stele sits in the Louvre in Paris. The U.S. Supreme Court building features Hammurabi on the marble carvings of historic lawgivers that lines the south wall of the courtroom.

You might ask why is this important? Because it reminds us that the Old Testament writings didn't come down from heaven; they emerged out of the historical place and time of ancient civilizations. Long before Israel crossed the Jordan and set about conquering Canaan, the people of the land had laws passed down to them from ancient civilizations like Babylon and the Sumerians. These codes were already being used before Israel arrived. And one can see many reminders of the similarities of Israel's law codes set out in Exodus and Deuteronomy in this ancient code. For example, the Hammurabi code says: *196. If a man destroys the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye. 197. If he breaks another man's bone, they shall break his bone.* Israel will repeat this code in Exodus 21:23-25

Obviously, Israel's laws borrowed some of the laws out of this ancient code and set them within their scriptures. So as far as economic, social, personal laws that protected individuals and families, there are many similarities between the Hammurabi code and Israel's writings. But on the issue of the deity Hammurabi says little. This is the great dividing point when we come to the Exodus and Deuteronomy texts.

The first word of the ten says: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them;*

This sounds like such a strange commandment for us today. Here we enter a very different world from Hammurabi. The God of creation chooses to reveal laws that pertain, not simply to our everyday relationships, but to the big questions about life, deity, death and the future. To be sure, worrying about making a graven image to represent God seems such a remote issue on the landscape of our lives today. Our lives are concerned about much more everyday issues: keeping jobs, paying mortgages, raising children, caring for aging parents

and sick relatives, keeping love alive in relationships, or simply trying to find love. Down a peg or two at street level our lives are occupied with less personal, but yet important concerns: safety on our streets, healthcare, globalization of the economy, corporate takeovers which close businesses and leave people without work, standards of education in our schools and colleges, and so on and so on. Where does this strange ancient code about idols fit into our busy modern lives?

I suppose we can understand God's concern about idols given that there were plenty of idols in the ancient world. Among this throng of folks who had been led out of Egypt by Moses there was always the temptation to turn to visual representations of God. After all they had never heard God's voice or seen God. It had been over four hundred years since they had found themselves slaves in a foreign land. No word from Yahweh had been heard in all this time. All they knew was that their leader, Moses, kept disappearing up Mount Horeb to talk to the God who called himself Yahweh. One day, after a long absence up the mountain, the people grumbled that Moses had abandoned them. Next thing you know Aaron allows them to make a god out of the gold they had plundered out of Egypt. They pointed at this golden calf and said this was the god who had brought them out of Egypt, not this Moses and his strange God who had no name except "I am who I am". Before you know it, they were all carried away in their reveling and wouldn't you know it Moses dropped in on them. Well we all know how that story ended. So, idols were a constant menace for Israel from the very beginning and remained a problem throughout their history.

Israel obviously needed this prohibition, but surely we don't. We're not the kind of people who go around thinking up new images of god that we want to rush home and carve out and set out on our front lawns, are we? So what does this, "You shall not make for yourself an idol..." have to do with us? Perhaps it would help us if we asked another question. What is the warning against idols addressing in all human nature, past and present? In what way would obedience to this law

lead us into the good life? In a nutshell what this law asks of us is to put God first.

The first idol ever created by humanity was a representation of god, namely we ourselves. That is what the Garden of Eden story is all about. It's not only about loss of innocence, but about humanity's fall into idolatry, or substitute gods. The devil told them that eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil would open their eyes to the real world. And in that new world they would become little gods. Putting ourselves first, being ego driven, considering ourselves the only little gods on planet earth has been a popular idol since day one.

We learn from our bibles that God has no beginning or end and in God's eternal present all history is seen at a glance. God is a living God, not static, not an idol that takes a fixed position in time. The plot of our lives is viewed by this living God, from the end to the beginning. All the in-between days, the lazy days of summer and all the cold, unwelcome days of the winters of our lives, all of this is seen by God in an eternal present. God knows that last moment of our lives before the reel of film winds to a close. God sees our lives backwards and forwards, and all the in-betweens.

So, I suggest that the problem with idols is that they limit us by their very nature. They are products of our human condition. We create them. They define our lives within time and ask us to ignore the sense of eternity that is alive in us.

A picture I have of this phenomenon is that of an GPS electronic tracker placed under a car, or on a person, that acts as a receiver. Through the signal it emits one can track the person's location. It continues to go "beep, beep, beep," on the screen of the one following the person. The sense of the eternal within us, placed there by God in our creation, keeps going "beep, beep, beep," within us. It won't go away. Idols try to silence that signal. They seek to divert us from worshiping the true, living God who alone offers us the good life. These idols ask us to focus our lives within the narrow confines of the

present. Idols of our choosing are markers set in time. They are in a real sense simply projections of our selves.

The idols of our lives are meant to control the chaos of life. It's our way of nailing the gods down, fixing them in time with us. There is nothing more frightening to us than the God presented in the bible. God is revealed as free, unrestrained, powerful, uncontrollable, a God who lives in an eternal present. Idols fixed within time provide us with gods that can be controlled. This is the danger of idolatry. The gods we look to for hope and happiness are static, unthinking, unrelating, deaf and dumb. They don't speak or truly love us back. They are always demanding, never giving. These idols are ultimately false.

Some of our idols are chosen because we think they will cushion our path through life. Some because we think they will bring us closer to happiness. Some because we think they will resolve our inner disquiet. But always they are idols which disappoint. They do not lead us through the gate that leads to the good life, however loud their claims to do so. But they successfully help us avoid the dynamic presence of the true God in our lives. These other gods we pick up from Western culture, unlike the living God of Scripture, don't ask us to be changed or transformed by grace. They don't demand that our lives be disciplined by law and grace. There is no narrow road marked out, as is the case with the living God disclosed in Jesus Christ. These gods are ultimately false in that they seek to represent God in ways that contradict the very essence of the God Yahweh of the Bible. Yahweh never shows himself; God is known only through his Word, and in these last days, only through God's final Word to us, Jesus Christ.

I don't think I have to outline what these false gods might be for you. I know the ones I struggle with. I'm sure you do too. What keeps me on track with the living God who spoke through Moses so long ago is that God's grace found in Jesus satisfies my deepest longing. By God's Spirit my emptiness, my sins, my restlessness, are all answered by the presence of this strange, dynamic, timeless God of this law. God gave us this commandment for our freedom and for our good. One of

the last words written in the bible is the little phrase in 1 john chapter five which goes, "keep yourself from idols." This is, I believe, really good advice if we want to enjoy the good life God has promised. Choose life, choose the way of Jesus.

Amen