

Basics of the Faith: *Ten Words: The Law of God (4)*
Exodus 20: 12-21
July 19, 2020

The first four commandments we have looked at over the last few weeks concern our relationship with the creator. The next six concern our social relationships. Honoring parents, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, don't covet any of your neighbour's possessions, including their husband or wife. All of these prohibitions are designed to protect the newly formed nation of Israel from collapsing into chaos. For purposes of this sermon I want us to view these commandments in the wider context of nationhood.

After Sinai Israel will wander in the wilderness for forty years before crossing the Jordan and engaging in a campaign of conquest under Joshua. They will eventually be successful at claiming the land of Canaan and carving out their territory, with their capital in Jerusalem won by David. It will be an entirely new generation in Canaan, born of enslaved parents from Egypt, that will form this new society, this new nation in Canaan. In order to protect that new nation God gives them the book of the covenant which included the ten words, a set of instructions that will protect that newly formed society. So, the Ten words are part of that, but there will follow in Exodus a whole set of instructions on how to organize themselves into a people of God.

Let us remember from a few weeks ago that Canaan already had laws long before Israel came on the scene. We saw this in 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.

This is an important reminder that Israel's law code was not disconnected from laws already in place by Hammurabi. 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.

And so borrowing no doubt from Hammurabi Israel provides laws concerning slaves, violence, prosperity, economic relationships, restitution, social and religious laws, festivals, Sabbatical Year, how to worship, the nature of sanctuary: Israel is given a blueprint of what it means to be God's people in the world. At the heart of these laws is the demand for obedience and love to the Creator. At the heart of it all is worship: they are to build a tabernacle, one that will have very specific dimensions and restrictions. This will be the symbol of God's presence with them as they travel in the wilderness, a cloud by day and fire by night.

Most of us remember what it was like in a past generation when parents laid down the law for us children. Things have relaxed a bit since those days but there are still rules that are set out by parents for the protection and well being of their children. I remember some of the laws we had to obey. We were to obey all those in authority: teachers, police, adults, coaches, aunts, uncles, the list was endless. Most of the time we lived in some fear of these authority figures, especially our fathers who would quickly impose the deserved penalty for our misdeeds. My father would no sooner be in the door from work when my mother would inform him of the misdeed, and encourage the penalty. The penalty for disobedience, breaking the law code of parents and society, was some form of punishment, either physical or deprivation. Usually it didn't make us better persons, or more likely to be obedient, good boys and girls.

I remember at high school we used to delight in challenge our teachers' authority. One of the ways was to rile them enough so they would punish us with the strap; the class competition was to see who could get the most lashes with the belt on the hands during the period. It's hard to imagine that world of class rebellion in today's classroom.

Well I hope that those of you who were here last few Sundays have appreciated the nature of the first four commandments and have seen that these Ten Words set out in Exodus chapter 20 are to be interpreted in a broader framework. What we have learned from the first four commandments is God's desire to establish a loving

covenant relationship between God and the newly redeemed people brought out of Egypt. In short, to ignore this relational language is to miss entirely the intent of these Words.

As one commentator comments: *the negative formulation indicates that the primary concern is not to create the human community but to protect it from behaviours that that the potential of destroying it.* (Exodus, T. Fretheim) In short, these commandments, especially the second set of six, serve to keep order in the world and help restrain the forces of disorder from leading us into chaos.

Sometimes I think we in church and certainly people in society think of the Ten Commandments in a similar way. We think of them as negative, restrictive, and punitive. Our normal reaction to them is that God is a big bully, an authoritative figure whose delight is to keep us in line with his rules. It's **don't do this, don't do that, or else!**

What we realize by reading this chapter in the context of the entire sweep of Israel's narrative, beginning with the promise to Abraham, is that God seeks through it all to establish a loving relationship with this people. And all of the book of the covenant is for the purpose of cultivating Israel's relationship with God. They are people called out of Egypt to worship God at the mountain. This was Moses initial instruction to Pharaoh to let his people go. Their origins go back to Father Abraham with whom God had made a covenant that his seed would be his people. Through Abraham the whole world would be blessed. This is who they are, children of promise. Moses is called to lead them out of slavery to be God's people. Exodus is the record of that journey from slavery to the land of promise. It is also, along with Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the setting out of the laws that will help to secure their place in the world as God's people. This is how they are to live, to act, to relate to each other and to the neighbor. First, worship God only, and second, live out that relationship with neighbor.

So, the commandments as part of this much longer book of the covenant are not given to secure that relationship. Or put another way, they are not given as a basis for Israel's acceptance or rejection by God. They are given to protect this community from the forces of evil that would seek to sow disorder and chaos. Israel will find it

difficult to keep to these ten words, as do we. And throughout their history God will send prophets to remind them of their straying from the covenant laws. They are repeatedly called back by the prophets to the first commandment, that they are to love God first and not have a whole lot of gods they give allegiance to.

Ultimately, the law is a matter of the heart, not just legal correctness. I think Psalm 19 expresses their meaning rather well. Notice the language of the heart. The Psalmist sings: *The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:7ff)*

The law serves to open our heart to God, gives us wisdom, encourages freedom and brings truth to each individual and to society. These laws express the love of God for us. Israel needs, as we and as the society need, a code of conduct that will serve to hold it together. Loving God first, keeping Sabbath, honouring parents, avoiding greed and lust, and covetousness: all serve to keep society healthy.

These commandments were embraced within our social institutions in the West and at least their **form** is kept within the courts, education, and civil society and maintains the intent of the commandments. In reality, however, these institutions and society at large really only pay lip service to this Law as we have drifted far from the religious significance and meaning of it for us. That is probably one of the reasons, in a complicated mosaic of reasons, why our society has gone down the path it has over the past few decades. In short, God's intention in giving these commandments to Israel is to protect it from the destructive forces within itself. Disorder so easily erupts as we see every day in our world: political strife, racism, war, terror, refugees fleeing for their lives, civil war, political takeovers by the military, despotic leaders, the rule of law abandoned, unjust distribution of wealth, poverty; all of these forces are at work in the world reducing people's lives to chaos, to bondage, and to death.

This is the sad consequence of our sins at a political and social level. Similar dysfunction occurs at a family and personal level.

My hunch is that our natural response to law is to believe that our attempts to keep them as best we can is pleasing to God. We want to think of ourselves as law abiding, socially caring people, who try not to break the speed limit, don't drink and drive, always recycle, and generally try to be good neighbours. Do we believe that our attempts to be good, keep the laws as best we can, is enough to secure our ticket to heaven? Do you feel confident that when we do our best, be a good neighbour, avoid the big sins outlined in the last six laws, will achieve our justification before a Holy God? I suggest that this was never the purpose of the ten words!

As we will see next week when we address the topic of Law and Gospel, the New Testament provides clear arguments against such a notion.

I suggest that the New Testament says it is our natural response to avoid submission to God's true law of the heart. Romans 13 reminds us as follows: ***The commandments, "you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder" ...and any other commandments are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbour as yourself" ...love is the fulfilling of the law.*** We remember Jesus' comments on the law when he said that loving God (first 4) and loving our neighbor (second six) is to keep the entire law code.

In short, the law is a matter of the heart and is ultimately the expression of a relationship between a loving God and his creation. Our desire to keep the ten commandments flows out of our love for God, not in order to justify ourselves before a holy God.

Amen