

The “Ten Commandments” is a Misnomer

World Communion Sunday—October 4, 2020
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
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Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-17

Then God spoke all these words: 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 make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Philippians 3:4-14

even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press

on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

In our readings we come to the Ten Commandments, and here we find the heart and soul of the Law. “Thou shalt!” God’s “shoulds”, or perhaps it should be said, God’s “musts”. These are heavy teachings. How are we Christians to respond to the Ten Commandments? For many, this is the heart of their faith. Their thinking is along the lines of “This is what God says, so this is what we are to do,” and that makes up the whole of their religion. Others wonder if Jesus’ coming and dying for our sins makes us less responsible for obedience to these laws. What are we to do in response to the Commandments? The Commandments still stand as law for us. They are commands, and this is not to be escaped, but in our general understandings of the Ten Commandments, most of us are confused. In fact, to call Exodus 20 the Ten Commandments is really something of a misnomer.

Our first thought of the Ten Commandments is that these are the rules. Here we find a standard of righteousness presented to us. These ten laws show us God’s character and His desires for his Creation to reflect that character. We see righteousness and justice. The psalmist delighted in how the character and wisdom of God is revealed through the Law. There is so much to learn in studying the Law, and here the psalmist speaks of the whole writings of Moses, and not merely the Ten Commandments which summarize God’s laws so fully. We find a sound foundation for a society. When Moses received this Law in the wilderness God was just beginning to build the Hebrew people into a nation, and any nation requires laws.

Having seen the rules which God has given, the natural response is simple. Do them! Israel was much in need of a few rules and some guidance, for as the Scripture reveals us to them, we find a rather unruly rabble. There is much positive to be said for a lawless people learning to embrace and follow a set of laws, but sadly this became for many the whole of their religion. To this day there are many Christians who point to the Ten Commandments as the heart of their faith. One hates to speak critically of the Commandments, but something is seriously wrong when this happens.

The Ten Commandments became the center of the Jewish faith, and tragically this evolved into legalism. For many the Law came to be seen as something like a ladder to be climbed to attain contact with God. Paul was once quite the legalist who believed that in keeping the hundreds of various Jewish laws God would be pleased and he could make himself acceptable before the Almighty. From an earthly perspective, legalism makes all the sense in the world. This seems to be the very definition of human religion. But Paul and many others like him would learn that this ladder of legalism could not reach God. The law became burdensome and extremely difficult, indeed impossible, to fully obey. This led to a deep frustration, and as legalism failed

to truly please and to reach God, it ultimately led to death! The Law might have shown the purity and righteousness of God, but it was a standard of goodness so high that humans could not reach it by their own strength. This high standard did succeed, however, in showing us our own sin and inability to live up to holy standards. The Law was used as a ladder in hopes of reaching God, but it was a failed effort. God cannot be reached by a ladder of human efforts, no matter how sincere and energetic the climbers may be. But if the Law was never intended to be the ladder by which we can reach God, what was the purpose of this Law?

A fuller reading of Exodus 20 shows us a very different purpose for the Law, and this true purpose becomes apparent when we read the whole contract and not just the commands. And lest you think I am searching for some obscure fine print in the contract, you are quite wrong, for I refer to the very opening words of the Lord which are written large for all to see, though for some reason we don't take notice. Hear these first words from God as He speaks to Israel as an introduction to the commands: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* The matters of first importance come first! There are two glorious assurances. First, that God has claimed them as His people, and second that He is the One who delivered them from their former slavery. *Before* the call to obedience comes first the promise and assurance that God has *already* saved them. Israel was not to earn this. It was a gift. It was purely by grace. Their salvation, the rescue from Egypt and their status as God's people, was not earned, nor would it need to be earned. It was all grace! When we speak of grace and the gift of salvation, we immediately think of the New Testament message of free salvation through Christ, but this is found early in the *Old* Testament. Perhaps we miss this message of grace because we are not expecting to find it there.

Israel's relationship with God, and ours as well, starts with grace, and not with our obedience. I once heard a preacher tell how true faith could be discerned by considering the claims upon us that were made. Human religions demand that we **do** a whole list of things that we might make ourselves acceptable to God. True Christian faith begins with what God has **done** for us already, and not human works. We love human religions because they satisfy our human pride. We take real joy and satisfaction in the belief that we have worked hard and earned our place in God's plan, but God wants nothing to do with such foolishness. It may feel odd to find such a message of grace in the Old Testament, as we commonly think of the Old Testament as a religion of law and the New Testament as a religion of grace, but God has *always* been a God of grace!

If our life of faith is to be a ladder of upward striving, then it is a ladder, not of law but of grace. On this ladder of grace, we strive upward for nearness to God and higher service, but we do so in a very different way. The ladder of law is planted in the commandment and ascended in false hopes of our thereby reaching God. The ladder of grace is planted in the Good News of our salvation and our place in God's heart. We have already won the game before it even started! Then with hearts full of gratitude

we press onward and upward in service and joyful exploration of the things of God. We are propelled by grace. This life of grace is celebrated in the popular chorus which we will be singing at our service's conclusion. *O, how I love Jesus. O how I love Jesus. O, how I love Jesus, **because He first loved me!*** As the scriptures gladly affirm, *We love because He first loved us.* (1 John 4:19) We dare not turn this equation around!

The legalist will be quick to condemn those who trust in grace. We may be called lazy, but such is not the case. We too strive toward God, but it is a very different kind of striving. Paul's testimony in the Philippian Letter tells a beautiful and helpful story of his striving toward God. As an observant Jew he was a vigorous legalist who strained to keep every imaginable Jewish law and tradition he could, in hopes that he would win favor with God. After encountering Christ and receiving the free gift of salvation Paul gladly threw out his former striving. The third chapter of his letter tells how Paul strove toward God, but this was a totally different kind of striving! Paul sought to please God and to keep the commandments as we all should, but he did not do so thinking that by these efforts he could attain salvation. Verse 12 summarizes his striving quite well: *Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, **because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*** We press on toward God, knowing that God has already taken hold of us, and this is a most joyous striving. I love to tell of the first time I ran the big race in Philly. For some reason which I cannot recall I was inspired to draw a cross on the back of my running shirt, and with it the caption: *Jesus won my race for me. This is just a victory lap.* It is a special joy to run the race knowing in advance that we are already winners. I can also report that many along the course were encouraged by those words.

When the Catechism speaks of why the Christian obeys the law and commandments it speaks in terms of our *gratitude*. We gladly seek to honor all the commandments, not to impress God nor to prove we are more holy than others, nor to earn our way. We do so out of thankfulness for all that God has already done for us. This is not just a New Testament understanding of the Law. This is God's intention for the Law from the beginning. (And while grace and gratitude are wonderful things, this still does not make obedience to the Law easy or fully doable, but we gladly try.) To summarize Exodus 20 by calling it the Ten Commandments is something of a misnomer. There is much more there than mere commands, and the Law is not a ladder by which we are to work our way into God's good favor. Perhaps we should start calling them the "Ten Gratitudes." God's commands in Exodus 20 are meant as an invitation and guide to living out a wholesome life in light of our already being saved. The next time you hear any of the Ten Commandments spoken, remember that they are more than just commands. Remember the beginning and grace-filled foundation of that great pronouncement by God: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*