

Much More Than Mere Rules

The Third Sunday in Lent—March 7, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Exodus 20:1-17

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 bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

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. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

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.

Our Old Testament lesson is a very familiar one as we have been taught the Ten Commandments from our childhood, and these ten laws make up the core of our moral understanding. We are also blessed to have the 19th Psalm (printed at the end of this message) to introduce our lesson. This precious psalm begins with praise for the Creation and delight that the beauty of the world testifies to the beauty and glory of God. Midway through this song the focus makes a dramatic shift. The psalmist begins praising the beauty of the Law! We don't often think of the Law as being beautiful. We think of it as rules that we must follow. But the psalmist leads us beyond our shortsightedness and invites us to rejoice in this law which, *revives the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, is pure, eternal, true and righteous!* We are quick to look at this Law as mere rules, but the singer reminds us that there is much more to the commandments of God. This morning I want us to consider the Commandments, not so much individually, but as a whole and as a structure. We are wise to take a broader and fuller look at the Commandments, and with the psalmist we will be delighted as we do!

As we examine the Commandments according to their arrangement, the first item of note is that they appear to be organized into two groups, or tables. The Bible does mention the Law being received and recorded on two stone tablets, and we have seen the movie verifying that Charlton Heston—I mean Moses—brought down to Israel a Law in two parts. Though the Bible clearly states that there were two tablets, it says nothing of the actual division of the Ten Commandments between the two. It seems highly likely, however, that the first table contained the first four while the second the remaining six, and the reason for this is the nature of their content. The commands of the first table all address our direct relationship with God. We are to have no other gods, worship no idols, honor God's name and set aside a day of worship. It is interesting to observe the Great Commandment of the Jews which Jesus wholeheartedly affirmed. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Here again we find a two-part law with the first part directed toward God and the second toward our neighbor.

The second table of the Law is directed toward our treatment of others on this earth. We are to honor our parents, to respect life, not to commit adultery, not to steal or to lie, and not to covet. The distinction between these two tables is obvious. What is of particular interest is the Fifth Commandment which serves as a transition from the first to the second table. Honoring our fathers and mothers is the commandment with a promise—*so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you*—and while it deals with interpersonal behaviors, it has a special tie to our relationship with God. It is our parents which teach us our relationship to higher authority. If one does not learn to honor any higher authority, beginning with Mom and Dad, then their days are not likely to be long in the land!

So we see the Commandments are made up of two tables, one heavenly focused and the other toward earth, with a special transitional command in the middle. It is also

worthy of note that they end with something of a curveball: the commandment against covetousness. By and large the Commandments, and the wider Hebrew Law, deal with outward behaviors. Each of the Commandments instruct us as to how we shall behave and what we are to do. Some have challenged the validity of the Hebrew Law because of this and have suggested that obedience to this law can lead to a kind of hypocrisy which behaves a certain way with little thought toward inner attitude. One could, for instance, be showing great outward respect to parents or toward one's neighbor while harboring all sorts of hatred in their hearts. I once heard a rabbi give an interesting perspective on this. Yes, this teacher conceded, this could lead to a certain type of hypocrisy, but isn't this outwardly kind hypocrisy much better than expressing a sincere hatred? Even more importantly this rabbi stressed that outward kindness can lead to an eventual change of heart. This rabbi pointed to many groups in America who loudly complain that many harbor bad feelings toward them (and being a Jew, this rabbi certainly would have qualified as a part of such a group), and demand that people feel more respect for them. Wouldn't it be better, this Jewish teacher argued, if we asked for nothing more than outward kindness? This is a behavior which we can more easily control, it can go a long way toward a peaceful society, and in time outward behaviors change hearts. This rabbi is onto something!

We see a great difference between commands regarding behaviors and those involving attitudes and feelings, but the two are not as separated as we may think. Isn't it odd that counselors and agencies that deal with helping people with their mental health issues are often referred to as "Behavioral Health" agencies. Though they address people's struggles with their most inward feelings and thoughts, they are just as much a ministry to help with outward behaviors, for the two go together.

The Ten Commandments primarily speak to outward behaviors, until one comes to the last of the commands: *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.* Covetousness—the strong desire for something which is not yours—is very much a sin of the heart! Because of this it is probably the most difficult of all the ten. And how are we to change our attitudes? Behaviors can be changed with comparative ease. Attitudes require much more work, but God is glad to help us with this work, as it is God's ultimate desire to purify our hearts. The Tenth Commandment is a cry from God for us to come to Him in prayer and seeking, and to ask to be made new from the inside out.

This commandment is like a bookend which complements the First Commandment. Early in the Commandments we are told to have only one God, meaning that God should be our first and highest desire. By the end of the Commandments, we have wandered into the rules of inter-human engagement, yet this last command echoes the first, for when we desire that which is not ours, we are defying God who has assigned us our lot in life. To covet is to turn against God's plan. The opposite of coveting is to delight in God's plan for our lives and to worship God alone.

The Ten Commandments are in two parts, with a hinge verse in the middle. They also have two complementary commands at the beginning and end to serve as bookends, each directing us to full devotion to God. Finally, let us remember that the Commandments are a part of something much larger than a set of rules. They are part of a covenant, a contract, a treaty between God and His people. Archeologists have pointed out that Exodus 20 has the form of an ancient Middle Eastern treaty. It begins with the two parties being recognized: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* God first identifies Himself as Ruler and God who rescues. We are the people who have been rescued. Then the conditions and requirements of the treaty are laid out. These are the Commandments. When we see Exodus 20, all we tend to see is a list of rules, but these rules are a part of something much greater!

To hear God announced as *our* God who has rescued us when we were completely enslaved and helpless should cause us to shout with joy. This peace treaty between ourselves and God begins with God rescuing us. God is a saving God. That is God's nature, and just as we were being rescued from Egypt God was looking ahead toward a greater and more complete rescue which would come through Jesus Christ. In Christ God would save us from sin and death and give us eternal life. As short-sighted and selfish humans we look at Exodus 20 and all we can see are rules. All we can do is groan with disappointment at this long list of rules with which God has saddled us! In our selfish blindness we cannot see the real meaning of it all, that God saved us when we were lost and helpless.

The Law serves a number of purposes, and the one which the Heidelberg Catechism stresses is the Law as an avenue of gratitude. The world looks at the Law and they see "stuff that God wants us to do, or else He will get mad at us." Indeed, the Law does express God's desires for our lives and behaviors, but the believer should not be looking at the Law in such a way. The lover of God delights to obey the law as an expression of gratitude for all that God has done for them. It is too easy for us to look at Exodus 20 and see only rules and laws, and turn them into a contest to prove who is the most righteous and obedient. We fall into legalism and convince ourselves that we can earn God's approval if we only obey enough of the Law. We have it all backwards. As believers we obey out of gratitude for God who first loved us. Yes, it is like the old chorus:

*There is a Name I love to hear, I love to sing its worth.
It sounds like music to my ears, the sweetest sound on Earth.
O how I love Jesus, O how I love Jesus,
O how I love Jesus, because he first loved me.*

Even when we look at the heart of the Law, we find that our walk with God is not based upon rules, but upon grace! God graciously saved us. The rest is gratitude, and this is clear even as we look at the Ten Commandments.

Ours is a God of grace. The Law is not always a pleasant study, for the closer we look at the Law, the more we see the utter perfection and glory of God, and the more we see our own impurity and waywardness. The Law shows us our sin. But this sad news is meant to turn us toward the Good News of God's rescue. God knew exactly the kind of people that He was rescuing when he delivered the Hebrews. They were not a particularly obedient or loving people, and neither are we, but God deliberately chose us for rescue. *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* We have proven ourselves unable to keep the Law. Over and over again we have proven ourselves unworthy, but God's promise of rescue stands. Let us live grateful lives in praise of God.

In a few moments we will come to the communion table. The world looks on and supposes that "these good boys and good girls have obeyed God's rules, so now they are allowed to come to God's table." They could not be more wrong! Let us do all we can to obey the Commandments, but let us never fool ourselves. We are not worthy, and have broken all the Commandments, but God is a rescuing, loving God who keeps on calling us to the table, for God wants to meet us there in love and to refresh us. These are not mere rules which we study this day. This is a grand peace treaty from the Almighty, an outpouring of grace, and an invitation to life!

* * * * *

Psalm 19

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

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.

Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.