

Introduction to the Ten Commandments

Exodus 20:1-3; Luke 12:48

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Something quite unprecedented is happening in our text. Never has God so clearly, comprehensively and categorically expressed the duties he requires of his covenant people in all the areas of their lives until now. Beginning from this section and continuing through the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, God will set down specific laws and regulations as guidelines for various aspects of Israel's covenant life as citizens of a new theocratic nation; specific laws and regulations concerning their relationship with God as well as specific laws and regulations concerning their relationship with one another and with other nations. Through the law, Israel will know clearly how to worship God, both in public and private arenas; how to build the tabernacle, ordain priests and offer sacrifices; what religious festivals and holidays to celebrate and how to do so; how to deal with one another as fellow citizens through codes of private, socio-political, judicial and religious ethics--codes covering everything that happens between the birth and the death of man both socially and individually.

The laws given at Mount Sinai (what is popularly called the Mosaic laws) are usually divided into three categories: the ceremonial, the civil and the moral. The ceremonial laws are those which are connected with the Old Testament worship at the tabernacle and temple. They include those regulations

concerning all types of animal and grain sacrifices and temple rituals performed by the Levitical priests. The civil laws are those which are particularly connected with the government and maintenance of the theocratic nation that Israel once was. As the civil laws of the theocratic nation of Israel, they were unique and applicable only to Israel--despite many who insist on implementing the ancient Jewish civil laws in modern non-theocratic nations. The uniqueness of these civil laws stems from the fact that Israel was a theocratic nation in which the state and the church were united. Thus we see in the Mosaic laws many penal codes imposing corporal punishments upon "religious" and moral offenses as well as criminal offenses. We also see provisions made for the executive branch of the government to oversee cultic practices and even to initiate religious reforms. Both the priesthood and the imperial court had the Mosaic laws as their common standards.

The third category of the Mosaic law is the moral laws. What distinguishes these from the ceremonial and civil laws (which were temporary in nature) is their permanent and universal application: they are not unique to Israel, but universally applicable to all peoples of all ages. These moral laws, however, must be divided into two categories: there are some which are permanent temporally; there are others which are permanent eternally. The former deal with human relations; the latter deal with man's relationship with God. For example, the commandment to love God and worship him alone is eternally true, abiding and effective, since our relationship with God is eternal. However, the commandments to honor our parents and love our spouses will not be in effect in heaven because those human relationships, being temporary and temporal in nature, will not be present there: we will all be brothers and sisters. And yet we can talk about even these temporal moral laws as being permanent because they remain valid for all people (whether they are Jews or not) so long as this world continues.

However, we must remember a very important fact. The moral, ceremonial and civil laws are not completely separate, unrelated categories of law. As they all come from the same divine Lawgiver, they are all interrelated. And they are interrelated in this way: *the ceremonial and civil laws are temporary, situational applications of the eternal moral laws to the specific religious and social context of the theocratic Israel.* After all, the ceremonial laws are concerned with our relationship with God--more specifically, how

we may approach our holy God. Our relationship with God is the central concern also of the moral laws (namely, the first four of the Ten Commandments). Yet, the Mosaic ceremonial laws were temporary in nature because they revolved around the physical temple which was only a type and shadow of the eternal, heavenly temple. This is true for the civil laws as well. The civil laws deal with our relationship with one another--also the main concern of the moral laws (namely, the latter six of the Ten Commandments). The Mosaic civil laws were temporary because the context in which they were applied (the theocracy of Israel) was also temporary: the theocratic Israel was also a type/shadow of the eternal kingdom of God.

What must puzzle you at this point is how God's laws can be subject to situations and be only temporarily applicable. This may sound to you very much like situational ethics. However, there is a fundamental difference between situational ethics and what we are talking about. Situational ethics does not believe in any absolute standard for human morality. Each situation calls for a different code of ethics, fully determined by pragmatic concerns of that particular time and situation. What we are talking about, however, is different. We are not talking about changes; we are talking about a progressive revelation of God's law. And this progression we are talking about is not an evolutionary process--a gradual process of the formation, maturation and perfection of ethical codes and principles through trial and error. The progression we are talking about is of an organic nature--like a butterfly going through different stages of organic growth--going through the egg, the caterpillar and the larval stages to finally become a beautiful butterfly. In each ensuing stage, the preceding manifestation of life is replaced by the new through a wondrous metamorphosis. However, through all the different stages and forms, the essence of the butterfly remains the same. Such is the nature of the progressive revelation of God's law in redemptive history. The eternal law of God is given to his people in different organic stages. Even the displacement or replacement of certain portions of the law (such as the ceremonial laws) does not indicate any change in the fundamental principles. This is so because the law of God is not merely a code of ethics arbitrarily devised by God just for man. The law of God is more importantly God's own self-expression of his holy character given in the form of commandments to his covenant people. As such, the law of God, though given in a progressive manner, is firmly

anchored in the absolute, eternal holiness of the unchangeable, immutable God. As God cannot change in his holiness, neither can the eternal principles from which God's commandments come. And these eternal, immutable principles, emanating from God's holy character, manifest themselves progressively throughout redemptive history. We can say then that the nature of this progression in the revelation of God's law does not consist in any change in essence and principle, but in the increasing clarity of expression and the heightening demand of obedience.

Why such a progression in the first place? you might ask. Why didn't God give us his eternal law from the very beginning? This is a legitimate and important question. This question can be answered only when we reaffirm the law as a divine self-expression of God's holy character. We realize that the full, unrestrained self-expression of God's holiness was impossible in the fallen world, without destroying sinful humanity. We all know too well the destructive power of God's holiness in relation to sinful man. Many, who encountered the theophany of God throughout redemptive history, cried out with fear and despair, "Woe is me, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Due to this total incompatibility between God's holiness and man's sinfulness, the divine self-revelation of his holiness had to be keeping in step with his redemptive work. And the divine redemptive program was progressive in nature--to go through the process of promise and fulfillment--the typological fulfillment first and then the real fulfillment in the end. Thus, the self-revelation of God and his holiness through the law had to come in a progressive manner. There is indeed an intimate and directly proportional relationship between the law of God and the redemptive work of God. *The degree and extent of the revelation of God's holiness through the law is directly proportional to the quality and magnitude of God's redeeming work.*

Therefore, we are not surprised to find this relationship at work at the beginning of the Ten Commandments. In v. 2, we have what we call the preamble to the Mosaic law: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." This preamble provides the historical background and the theological rationale for the giving of the law and for the obedience required of God's people.

Notice, first of all, the redemptive-historical character of this preamble. The Lord declares that he redeemed Israel by bringing her out of the bondage in Egypt. God is asserting his rightful authority to be obeyed by his people as their Redeemer-Lord. Second, notice the causal relationship between God's redeeming work and the giving of the law: it is because the Lord redeemed Israel that she must obey the commandments. Even at the inauguration of the Mosaic covenant, it is made clear that redemption is given freely by God's grace and not by man's own meritorious works. Israel was to keep the commandments because she was already delivered by God, not in order to be redeemed by God.

In the light of this causal relationship between God's redeeming work (the cause) and the giving of the law (the consequence), we may assert that such a clear, comprehensive elucidation of God's will for his people (given through the law) was possible only because of the great redemption which God accomplished in the exodus of Israel. The validity of this claim is not difficult to see. The law had always been present in God's covenantal dealing with man—even in the garden of Eden. There, the cultural mandate to populate the earth and rule over other creatures was given. Also, a prohibition concerning the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was decreed. Although in the garden of Eden before the fall, God's redemption from sin (*per se*) was not necessary as a provision for the giving of the law, the "law" and its sanctions were given in the garden in accordance with the sinless condition in(to) which God created man.

We also know from God's words to Abram that a certain moral standard was imposed on him (even before the giving of the law at Mount Sinai): "I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1). Though God's specific act of redemption is not clearly stated here, we know from the context that God's demand for Abram to walk before God in a blameless manner was indeed based upon his act of redemption--calling Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans. Yet God's redemption for Abram--the fulfillment of God's promises--was limited, though a son was given in his late age. Abram did not come into the possession of the land in his life time; Abram did not see his descendants become as many as the stars in the sky; Abram did not see all the families of the earth being blessed because of him. This limited fulfillment of

God's redemption in his life was the very reason why Abram received a version of the law which was sketchy at best, falling far short of the comprehensiveness of the law given at Mount Sinai. The Israel at Mount Sinai, on the other hand, experienced a far greater redemption of God: their number became as many as the stars in the heavens; they were delivered out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt by God's great and mighty power; they were about to receive the promised land as their inheritance, etc. Through God's redemption, the conditions necessary and conducive for a higher level of spiritual living were created; accordingly, a higher and greater demand for covenant obedience is placed upon the redeemed people of God through the fuller revelation of God's law.

Thus, the law begins with a clear affirmation of God's great and mighty work of redemption: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The Lord through the preamble declares that the conditions for the next stage of redemptive history have been prepared by his redemption. Then he proceeds with the giving of the law, starting with the first commandment. We may paraphrase the beginning of the Ten Commandments in this way: "Because I have brought you out of the Egyptian bondage, you shall have no other gods before Me."

However, it is precisely this inseparable connection between God's redemption and the self-revelation of God's holiness through the law, which makes the Mosaic law far from being a complete expression of the holy standard of God. Here, we are not only referring to the imperfections and limitations of the ceremonial and civil laws, but also of the moral laws represented by the Ten Commandments. The exodus of Israel from Egypt was not the ultimate, full redemption of God for his people. The ultimate salvation could not be just an external liberation from physical bondage, as the exodus of Israel was in the Old Testament. The ultimate salvation had to deal with the inner, spiritual corruption of man. For the external, political bondage to which Israel was subject, both in Egypt and later in the promised land as well, was only a physical indication of the inner, spiritual bondage to sin and death. Indeed, Israel's bondage to sin was the very cause of all their miseries. Unless this problem of sin was fully dealt with, man could never experience the true redemption. And this ultimate redemption was what was in God's mind from

the very beginning. All of the redemptive acts of God in the Old Testament, with all of their externality and attending limitations, pointed to the ultimate, perfect salvation to be brought to God's people in the fullness of time. Therefore, the Mosaic law, connected with the imperfect, merely typological salvation of Israel from Egypt, could not be a full expression of God's holiness and of his holy demand from his people. The full expression of God's holiness had to wait until the fullness of time when God's full redemption of his people was accomplished.

Many hundreds of years later, Paul triumphantly declared in Romans 8:3-4, "What the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." In the atoning death of Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, the requirement of the law was fulfilled for us. And we know that the requirement of the law, which was fulfilled in Jesus Christ goes far beyond the requirement imposed by the Mosaic law. All that the Mosaic law requires for the forgiveness of our sin is the sacrifices of bulls and goats. This should have been a clear indication of the terrible limitation of the Mosaic law. For the atoning death of Jesus Christ clearly tells us that our sins require something far greater than mere sacrifices of animals. Doesn't the sacrifice of Jesus Christ--God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God--show us what the ultimate law of God requires for the forgiveness of our sins? Did Jesus himself not say that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it? He meant more than meeting the requirements of the Mosaic law. In Jesus Christ, the full expression of the law of God in all of its holiness was given--far beyond the Mosaic law. Isn't it clear that the Sermon on the Mount outshines the Mosaic law in its surpassing righteousness? Isn't it clear that Jesus on that mountain is the One who is far greater than Moses at Mount Sinai? Consequently, what Jesus had to deal with was not the demands of the Mosaic law. He had to deal with what the Mosaic law was a faint reflection of--the absolute standard of God--without any compromise or diminution.

That is why the true nature of our sin in all of its ugliness and repulsiveness could not be exposed until the death of Jesus Christ. The first function of

the law is to bring in the knowledge of sin. Yet, the knowledge of sin brought out by the Mosaic law was not complete. It gave an impression that all that was required for the atonement of our sins was animal sacrifices. However, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross showed that sin, being an offense against an infinitely holy God, is a crime deserving an infinite, eternal damnation. No blood of bulls and goats--though they may be thousands and tens of thousands in number--can atone for our sins. Not even myriads of angels with their deaths could pay for a single sin of ours, for they are finite beings and as such insufficient payment for our infinite sin. Nothing less than the blood of Jesus Christ, the infinite God himself, can pay for our infinite sins.

On the other hand, we must understand that the death of Jesus Christ acquired the full remission of our sins. None of the judgments of God in the Old Testament--as terrible as they might have been--were ever a full expression of God's wrath. That means that there could not have been a full remission of sins in the Old Testament. (This doesn't mean that no one in the Old Testament was saved. Though they were not saved by the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, they were saved through their faith in the coming Messiah, represented in the sacrificial system.) For the divine justice requires the full punishment of our sins for their perfect forgiveness. The horrible death that the generation of Noah died in the flood was not a sufficient punishment for their sin against the infinite God; the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone from heaven was not even close to the full punishment which they deserved from God. Those who perished under the sword of Joshua still have to undergo the eternal punishment of God in hell. The full wrath of God was never unleashed in the Old Testament because the full release of God's wrath would have burned up the whole universe in its consuming fire. This full wrath of God is reserved for the time of the final judgment and eternal damnation in hell. But we know that this full wrath of God against the sins of his people was fully unleashed upon Jesus Christ hanging on the cross. What made Jesus pray at the garden of Gethsemane that the cup be passed from him was not the physical pain of crucifixion--as excruciatingly painful as it might have been. He knew full well that, for the first time in eternity, God the Father would look upon him with eternal wrath and pour out on him all that the heinous sins of his people deserved! All of God's righteous wrath against the sins of his people would be concentrated upon this Lamb of

God and Christ would experience, while he hung upon that cross, all the damnation of eternal hell!

In Jesus Christ, the full redemption could be accomplished because the full wrath of God was unleashed and satisfied in the once-for-all sacrifice of the eternal Son of God. How does this affect the law? Did Christ's redemption abolish the law? Of course not! We know that the ceremonial laws were fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; as we come, not bringing bulls and goats but fully trusting in the all-sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins, the ceremonial laws are fulfilled. We also know that the civil laws administered through the power of the sword are replaced with the laws of church discipline administered by the moral, spiritual authority of the church. But then, what about the moral law?

The Sermon on the Mount shows clearly what is demanded of those who received their salvation in Jesus Christ. And there we find that far greater is God's demand for New Testament believers than for Old Testament believers. The reason is very simple: the greater the grace, the greater the demand. Because God's grace abounded to the fullest in Jesus Christ, God's demand for holiness from his people becomes perfect as well. Jesus himself said in Luke 12:48, "And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more." This must be understood in terms of redemptive-historical progression, not just in terms of individual gifts. No matter what your individual spiritual gifts may be, all the believers of the New Testament have been given much much more than the believers of the Old Testament--because of Jesus Christ. All of you are to live in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called: to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

There is a radical reversal in Jesus Christ, however. First of all, a higher demand of holiness does not come any more through a greater volume of commandments. Our life is no longer to be tied up in the web of rules and regulations. Christ told his disciples in John 15:15, "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father, I have made known to you." We can no longer mindlessly follow the commandments out of fear; now we are called to understand the very heart of God and live in

union with him and his will. This, of course, does not mean that we do away with the law. The law provides for us a framework and boundaries so that we do not become antinomians and heretics. (The antinomians would say that, as long as they have good motives and sincerity, whatever they do for God is good and acceptable. Not so! Our sincerity is not enough unless what we do out of sincerity of our love for God is also according to God's own way prescribed for us in the law. The law provides the boundaries for our actions.) However, when Christ calls us friends, he is calling us to a relationship of love and understanding which no law can express perfectly nor do full justice. A slave does what is required of him--no more nor less. That is why clearer and more detailed directions need to be given to insure that the assigned task be properly executed. A friend motivated by love and understanding, on the other hand, will use all that is at his disposal to bring pleasure and delight to his friend beyond what is required of him. In the same way, if we love our Lord, we will obey his commandments--this is the least we would do for the Lord whom we love dearly. However, to love the Lord is more than just obeying his commandments--that is what slaves do. We go an extra mile to fulfill the spirit of the law.

Second, the demand was already perfectly met in Jesus Christ through his perfect righteousness. The death of Jesus Christ did not just bring us back to the garden of Eden for a second chance. Through faith, we have been brought into a union with Jesus Christ. We now live by the very resurrection power of Jesus Christ--to die to sin and to live to God. In Jesus Christ, God's promise given through Ezekiel is fulfilled: "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes." (Ezk. 36:27). The difference of the new covenant from the old is not the absence of the holy demand from God, but the presence of God's effectual help for you to walk in the law--God's effectual and gracious help in Jesus Christ (in his perfect righteousness) and in addition through the Holy Spirit (for our sanctification).

However, we must remember that *the law itself has been perfected in Jesus Christ*. The Ten Commandments, given in the context of the theocratic Israel, could not fully express the law of God. For there is an inseparable relationship between the law and the environment in which the law must be executed. The law of God could be given its full expression only with the inauguration of the true, heavenly kingdom of

God. This kingdom is the kingdom of God's beloved Son, Jesus Christ (Col. 1:13). That is why the true meaning and the full extent of the Ten Commandments can be seen only in and through Jesus Christ. This is exactly what Paul meant in 2 Corinthians 3:15-16 when he said, "But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a man turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away." Apart from Jesus Christ, the Ten Commandments can no longer stand as some kind of independent, absolute moral standard: without Christ, there can be no true understanding of the Ten Commandments; neither can there be true obedience without Christ. That means that even the most pious Jews cannot obey the Ten Commandments. Here, we are not just talking about their inability to perfectly obey the commandments. No one can. But the Jews, to whom the Ten Commandments were originally given, cannot even begin to obey them. As a matter of fact, their very (genuine) efforts to keep the commandments result in sin. We know this to be true with regard to their sacrificial system: offering any cultic sacrifices would be a downright rejection of the all-sufficiency of Christ's atoning sacrifice. But this is true even in the moral law. Take the first commandment, for example. The monotheistic faith of the Jews in YHWH is now terribly deficient. No one can come to the Father except through the Son (Jn. 14:6) because the full revelation of God came through Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:2). It is impossible to observe the first commandment without knowing God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. To continue to worship YHWH without acknowledging Jesus Christ is nothing less than idolatry.

Brothers and sisters, let us rejoice that the kingdom of God has dawned upon us. And in and through Jesus Christ, we have been brought into the kingdom of God to receive all the riches of our heavenly inheritance. That means that we have been given a call to holy living, worthy of being citizens of the heavenly kingdom of God's beloved Son. God's high calling is a testimony to the great redemption accomplished in Jesus Christ, which makes our obedience possible and real. So we may compose a new preamble for the new covenant.

"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the bondage of sin and death. 'Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members

as instruments of righteousness to God Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.” (Rom. 6:12-13; 12:1).

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