

Scripture

Exodus 20:1–17

The Ten Commandments

20 Then God spoke all these words:

2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;
3 you shall have no other gods before me.

4 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. 5 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, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 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.

8 Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 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. 11 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.

12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

13 You shall not murder.

14 You shall not commit adultery.

15 You shall not steal.

16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

17 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.

John 2:13–22

13 The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. 15 Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. 16 He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's

house a marketplace!" 17 His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking of the temple of his body. 22 After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Sermon:

We're now into the third week of Lent, and in our scripture there is slight change in direction – a bit of a different tone.

The past two Sundays have been about covenant: God's covenant with Noah and his descendants, and God's covenant with Abram and his descendants. Both of these are, of course, still in effect; God's word is eternal and does not change.

This eternal aspect of the covenants has been a key focus of the past two sermons. The covenants do not change, and they do not depend upon us. God's promise to Noah was entirely self-limiting – God made a promise to not destroy humanity, even though it be evil in his eyes. Nothing was required of Noah in this covenant, nor of us.

The second promise, made to Abram, was similarly self-directed. God pledged to give Abram a land and a lineage that would be a blessing to the entire world. Abraham did little: he was to mark his blessed lineage through circumcision, and he did have to get off the couch and walk to his inheritance, but in a similar fashion to the first promise, this covenant also depended upon God for fulfillment, not upon humanity.

God is the faithful partner in all his covenants, and God's faithfulness is not contingent upon the obedience of his people.

But this week we see something different; this week we are presented with a list of rules. Suddenly we find requirements and obligations placed upon us.

One would think that this would cause us some consternation, maybe a little resentment even, but in fact the opposite is true. Somehow these concrete guidelines make humanity breathe a collective sigh of relief.

Freedom and grace sound good in principle, but the reality is that this makes us more than a little uncomfortable. I always found it odd in university that after an assignment was given we would have to endure an unnecessarily long Q & A with certain students asking the professor questions about exactly how many words the paper should be, how many marks would be deducted for spelling mistakes; there were questions about fonts, margin sizes, or the number of works that must be cited. The frustrating part to me was that there were rarely questions about the content of the paper, only nitpicky concerns about the form.

The point is, most of us crave rules and structure in the same way that we crave air. Give us some rules, let us know what is what and suddenly we feel much more secure. Certainly this was true of the people that Moses delivered the law to – they were terrified of a direct relationship with God and both the freedom and responsibility that entailed. They preferred Moses to act as an intermediary between God and them, and the law served this same function – it was an intermediary.

Moses received this law, which for you techies out there was the very first document downloaded from the cloud onto a tablet, and when it was presented to the people, they embraced it.

Now, when I say that the people embraced the law, I don't mean that they followed the law. That would be too simple. When I say that people embraced the law, what I mean is that they loved the law. They loved the structure of it, the orderliness of it, the straightforward predictability of it.

And over time they 'improved' upon the law; they built fences around the rules so that they wouldn't accidentally stumble over them. Not speaking the Lord's name in vain became a prohibition against saying God's name at all. Refraining from work on a Sabbath inspired lengthy debates about whether making breakfast counted as work, or whether saving a life on a Sabbath was lawful.

Around this core of ten commandments sprang up an entire superstructure of cautionary rules and prohibitions. The people loved the law; in fact, they idolized the law, and in idolizing the law they missed the entire point of it.

Walter Brueggemann wrote that the ten commandments should be taken 'not as a set of rules, but as a proclamation in God's own mouth of who God is and how God shall be practiced by his community of liberated slaves.'

What this means is that the commandments express the will of God for God's people. The will of God is not to dominate – remember those first two covenants - God wants us to thrive and prosper. We follow the law, not because God is standing over us with a hammer, but because these teachings describe God's way of life. To ignore them is to wander out of the way of life into the ways of death, where God's covenant faithfulness is of little help to us.

Instead of using the law to guide us into a godly way of life, in many ways we have used it to beat down our neighbour. Living within the law should free us to live in a society in which we do not worry about being murdered or robbed, where honesty and love dictate our actions. Instead, the law has been perverted into a cudgel with which to control others. The law is not used to liberate ourselves, but to condemn those around us.

Our tendency to idolize the law is what led to the trouble in our New Testament reading. The reading opened with a chaotic scene in God's temple - cattle bellowing, sheep bleating, turtledoves cooing, people yelling, coins clanging.

It sounds like a zoo – quite literally. Now, it is important to understand that things didn't get this way overnight – the brouhaha in temple was the outcome of many years of incremental changes.

The temple in Jerusalem was a site of pilgrimage – people would come from all over Israel on holy days to worship and offer sacrifices, and this presented some logistical challenges.

Law number two on Moses' tablet concerned graven images and idols – these things were unacceptable. But, there were also rules about paying a temple tax. Since the coin of the empire was embossed with Caesar's image it was considered to be unholy, unfit for an offering. Therefore, special imageless temple coins were needed, and with them came the need for moneychangers.

Along with monetary offerings, animal sacrifices were required. For people who may have travelled many days or weeks to worship bringing along a goat or lamb without blemish could be a significant challenge, so there needed to be people who could provide these animals to the worshippers – at a price, of course.

Now, these services were necessary for the orderly operation *of* the temple, but the question to ask is 'were they necessary *in* the temple?'

Did the logistical apparatus of upholding the various laws become more important than the law giver – the God of the covenant? Was the method of worship displacing the object of worship?

In this case, the answer is yes. All the money changers and animal vendors were in the temple courtyard – the largest open air area of the temple. This is also the only area of the temple where Gentiles were permitted.

This melee of merchants effectively robbed the Gentiles of the one area that they were allowed to enter and pray. There was no place for outsiders to worship, no place for new people to come before God. Remember, the seed of Abraham was meant to be a blessing for all nations, not only the Jews.

Does this same situation also apply to us today? Do we have practices that get in the way of people coming before God? Do we value orderliness and the smooth operation of this institution more than God himself?

I have been in churches that charged an admission fee and had a giftshop; also churches with a gourmet coffee bar, a book table in the narthex and other marketplace type activities.

But this issue goes beyond mere buying and selling. The problem was that the marketplace in the courtyard displaced the Gentiles – the ‘unchurched.’ Are there things that we do here that unintentionally push out those very people that we are commissioned to reach?

While we enjoy the space that we have built here over the years, we also need to remember that neither this organization nor this building exists for our benefit – this worship space exists to provide a place for the people out there to come in here and come before God. Do our customs and practices work toward that goal, or do they frustrate it?

The ways of the world invade the church gradually and subtly. The marketplace in the temple didn’t happen overnight as an evil plan to exploit God’s good name – it began as people sought to provide services that would help the worship flow more smoothly. They were trying to contribute to the good order of the institution and at some point, without anyone being able to pinpoint exactly when, things just got out of hand.

The marketplace became so ingrained, so much a part of the temple, that it was beyond the point of fixing in a committee meeting. Jesus had to physically drive those people out. There was no negotiation, no compromise. It was simply time to kick over some tables.

Have you kicked over any tables lately? Are you consumed with so much zeal for God’s house that you will risk ruffling some feathers and upsetting a few people? We need some people like that. Not because we’re bad, but because habits set in, and after a while we don’t see things the way that a newcomer might. We get blind spots.

Jesus has made clear that anything that we do that becomes a stumbling block to those young in the faith has to go; our rules are to lead to life – not turn people away. It may come as a shock to some of us, but God does not primarily desire his creation or his church to be neatly kept and in good order, but rather God says that ‘my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.’