

## **“God’s Law and Redemptive History”**

Exodus 19-20

Several years ago, there was an article that appeared on Reuters website entitled, “Americans know Big Macs better than Ten Commandments.” The article began by asking a question:

*“How many of The Ten Commandments can you name? Put to the test, Americans recalled the seven ingredients of a McDonald's Big Mac hamburger and members of TV's "The Brady Bunch" more easily than the Bible's Ten Commandments. A survey by Kelton Research found 80 percent of 1,000 respondents could name the burger's primary ingredient -- two all-beef patties -- but less than six in 10 knew the commandment "thou shalt not kill." Less than half of respondents -- 45 percent -- could recall the commandment "honor thy father and mother" but 62 percent knew the Big Mac has pickle. Bobby and Peter, the least recalled-names from the fictional Brady Bunch family, were remembered by 43 percent of respondents -- topping the 34 percent who knew "remember the Sabbath" and 29 percent recalling "do not make false idols.” ([www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com), 10-12-07)*

Such news is not surprising to us, and I would even venture to guess that the research findings would not be that much better even within the church.

My people perish for lack of knowledge!

Perhaps we are so familiar with the events of this text that we are really not familiar with it at all. We fail to understand the law of God in its context and main purpose. If we've reduced the ten commandments to a moral code to live by in order to gain favor with God, than we've really missed the point.

The context of the events of Mt. Sinai is extremely important to understand. We need to read both chapter 19 and 20 to see how God is revealing His holiness and righteous character to His newly redeemed people.

**Proverbs 1:7 - “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”**

That is exactly what we see here in these chapters in the book of Exodus. God has led His people to Mt. Sinai where He reveals to them just who He is. Chapter 19 could well be described as the fear of the Lord, and chapter 20 could be described as the beginning of wisdom.

The Lord God gives His people these commandments as an expression of His will and a testament to His character. If Israel was to worship Him as His covenant people, they needed to know Him personally as well as what He expected from their lives. In His law, God gives us a glimpse of what He is like, what He expects from us, and shows us how we as sinful people come up woefully short. God gives His law in order to reveal and expose. It is like a mirror.

In the next few minutes, I want to show you what these commandments ultimately reveal about our need for grace, the nature of our relationships, God's character, our own sin, and Christ Himself.

### **1. What the commands reveal about grace (20:1-2)**

*“And God spoke all these words saying, I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”*

We are often quick to jump to the first commandment found in verse 3 while neglecting these first couple of verses, which are really essential for understanding the context of the law that follows. God wanted His people to know that their obedience to Him was to be the result of their redemption.

#### God's authority

These are not the words of Moses, nor are they the words of some other person. Verse 1 says that God spoke all these words, and He did so in the hearing of the people. God took the initiative in revealing truth about Himself to His people. This was a frightening experience as they heard the voice of God for themselves.

**Exodus 20:18-19 - “The people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.”**

This was a God who was not to be trifled with. He is a holy and an awesome God who communicates to us. God has taken the initiative in communicating with us what He wants us to know about Himself. Creation was on the basis of His authoritative Word, and now the same thing is true about the covenant nation.

God’s activity

The Lord wanted His people to know that their redemption from bondage was only because of His gracious activity in their lives. He says, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and out of the house of slavery.”

Thus, the context of the ten commandments is God’s gracious activity on behalf of His people. Their redemption preceded the law, and it was not the result of having followed it.

God brought them out of bondage so He could bring them into blessing. This is the very heart of the gospel. Those who are Christians have been freed by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. They have been given new life in Christ and are now called to be faithful disciples who love and obey Him.

God did not take His people out of Egypt because they kept the ten commandments; they were to keep the ten commandments because God had taken them out of Egypt.

This is grace. Thus, the ten commandments are rooted in the activity of God on behalf of His own.

This means that God’s law was never given as a way to earn salvation. Salvation is not a reward for good behavior, but rather it is a gift that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. The law reveals God’s righteousness, and it demands God’s righteousness, but it can’t provide righteousness.

## **2. What the commands reveal about relationships (20:3-17)**

There is a very important order to these commandments that reveal something about the nature of our relationships.

The first four commands pertain to our relationship with God, while the last six commands deal with our relationships with other people. The commandments are both vertical as well as horizontal. There is a Godward relationship as well as a manward relationship.

This is what Jesus said when He summarized the law of God as being all about loving God and loving others.

**Matthew 22:37-39 - “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”**

This doesn't mean that Jesus was doing away with all the rest of the law and reducing it to only two commandments. Instead, He is simply summarizing the intention behind the whole law. The law is about right relationship that involves loving God with all that you are and all that you have, and demonstrating it by loving those around you who are made in His image.

## **3. What the commands reveal about God**

He says to them, “I am the Lord your God.” He is referring to Himself through His covenant name, the same name that He revealed to Moses much earlier in chapter 3. This phrase is used no less than five times in this chapter alone to remind the people of the identity and authority behind the commands.

**James Hamilton** - *“[The Lord] is the most significant thing about the Ten Commandments. When He gives voice to the inauguration of this covenant, the first thing He does is announce His own identity.”*

God is essentially saying to His people, “I am the Lord your God, and this is what I am like.” When we look at each one of these ten commandments, we discover that each one uniquely reveals truth about God’s nature and character. Notice how they reveal His identity.

Commandments 1-4 (Godward)

God is One—He is to be worshiped exclusively

God is Revealed—He is to be worshiped objectively

God is Holy—He is to be worshiped reverently

God is Preeminent—He is to be worshiped corporately

Commandments 5-10 (Manward)

God is Father—We are to honor our parents

God is Life Giver—We are to value human life

God is Faithful—We are to reflect His faithfulness in marriage

God is Provider—We are to trust Him for our needs

God is Truth—We are to be honest and truthful

God is Sufficient—We are to be content in Him

No gods before Him. No graven images of Him. No misuse of His name. No work on the day that He set apart. The centrality of God’s character is apparent in these first four commands, but seems somewhat less apparent in the six that follow. Yet His character is seen in them as well. Fathers and mothers are to be honored by their children because God is a Father to His people. No murder because God is the author of life and man has been created in His image. No adultery because husbands and wives are to be joined together in one flesh, a picture of God’s unity. No stealing because God own the cattle on the thousand hills. No false witness because God is

truth and does not lie. No coveting because God alone satisfied, and at His right hand are pleasures forevermore.

#### **4. What the commands reveal about us**

These ten commandments reveal the righteous and holy character of God, but they also reveal the unrighteous character and sin that is in us. In this way, the law of God convicts and exposes our sin and lack of righteousness. It is God's way of stripping us of our self-righteousness so we cry out to Him for mercy and grace.

This is what the psalmist says:

**Psalm 19:7-11 - "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules 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 Your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward."**

God's law serves great benefit in our lives, and according to the psalmist, God's law:

- revives the soul
- makes wise the simple
- rejoices the heart
- enlightens the eyes
- endures forever

The commandments of God point us to His righteousness, but they also present us with His requirements. Thus, the law shows us how far we fall short of His glorious standard.

#1—Do not have any other gods before Me

Can any of us rightly say that we have not made an idol out of our career, our children, or our possessions?

#2—Do not make any graven images

This means that we are prone to reduce God to the sum of our opinions and subjective ideas that are not worthy of Him. We are guilty of trying to approach Him on our terms rather than on His. We attach ideas to Him that are not true of His character.

#3—Do not take God's name in vain

Moving on to the next one!

#4—Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy

You think, "Alright. Finally something that doesn't apply to us anymore!" God has worked into created order rhythms of work and rest. Sin has got that all out of balance.

#5—Honor your father and mother

The epic breakdown of the home in our society is proof positive that we are lawbreakers.

#6—Do not kill

This is a reference to murder, or the taking of human life in a purely subjective sense. Life is precious to God, and as the One who gives life, it is up to Him to decide when it should end.

#7—Do not commit adultery

Websites exist nowadays that provide affairs and rendezvous for those seeking them. Our adulterous hearts are filled with lust and every sort of impurity.

#8—Do not steal

This means that we are not to take for ourselves what does not belong to us. Money, possessions, time, etc.

#9—Do not bear false witness against your neighbor

This has to do with lying and misrepresentation. It is the idea of not having a truthful testimony, but of dishonesty. Included here would be hypocrisy.

#10—Do not covet

To covet is to desire something or someone. It is not being content or satisfied. The whole HGTV network is built off of the propensity in people to covet...

When you look at these commandments from merely a surface perspective, you may think that you are overall a fairly decent and good person. But remember the fact that God doesn't grade on the curve.

**James 2:10 - "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it."**

You really can't break one of the commandments without breaking them all. To steal is to make an idol of something. You can't steal without also coveting something that is not yours.

**Colossians 3:5 - "Put to death what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness which is idolatry."**

To break one of God's laws is to be guilty of breaking the whole law. To commit adultery is to worship someone other than God. To take the life of someone else is to usurp the authority of God who alone is life giver. The law reveals that we are prone to worship ourselves. In fact, that is real the essence of sin—self worship.

## **5. What the commands reveal about Christ**

To know God demands that you keep His law and possess His righteousness. You can't come into the presence of God without righteousness. God's law as set forth in these ten commandments shows us what the righteousness of God is, and yet it also shows us how we are bankrupt of righteousness.

To have eternal life means that you have to be righteous and keep God's law perfectly—but you can't do it. You need a Substitute who did it for you.

This is why Paul said that the law is our schoolmaster that brings us to Christ.

**Galatians 3:24** - **“Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.”**

**“Schoolmaster”** - word is *‘paidagogos’* in Greek; refers to a tutor, guardian, leader, or guide

In Greco-Roman culture, the ‘pedagogus’ was the household servant who was responsible for taking the children in a Roman household to school. Paul draws on this analogy and uses it to describe the function of the law of God in our lives. Like a tutor, the law takes us to school and brings us, wayward children that we are, to the nail scarred feet of Jesus Christ.

**Martin Luther** - *“As long as a person is not a murderer, adulterer, thief, he would swear that he is righteous. How is God going to humble such a person except by the Law? The Law is the hammer of death, the thunder of hell, and the thunder of God's wrath to bring down the proud and shameless hypocrites. When the Law was instituted on Mount Sinai, it was accompanied by lightning, by storms, by the sound of trumpets, to tear to pieces that monster called self-righteousness. As long as a person thinks he is right he is going to be incomprehensibly proud and presumptuous. He is going to hate God, despise His grace and mercy, and ignore the promises in Christ. The gospel of the free forgiveness of sins through Christ will never appeal to the self-righteous. This monster of self-righteousness, this stiff necked beast, needs a big axe taken to its ugly head. Accordingly, the proper use and function of the Law is to threaten until the conscience is scared stiff.”*

God's law confronts us with our sin and our desperate need of a scarlet thread. It is here in the law that we meet the holiness of God and see the sinfulness of ourselves and our need for God's intervening grace and imputed righteousness. In this way, the law is God's axe with which He chops at the root of our pride.

The law is a window through which we see the radiant holiness of God. The law is a mirror through which we see the sinfulness of ourselves. It brings me to my knees and drives me to the cross of Christ where my sins were atoned for by the blood of my Passover Lamb.

**Martin Luther** - *"I fear that after our time the right handling of the Law will become a lost art."*

The law sends us to the gospel so that we might be justified through faith in Christ. The gospel sends us to the law again to enquire about what is our duty in being justified.

Ralph Erskine, an 18th century Scottish preacher, once said:

*When once the fiery Law of God  
Has chased me to the Gospel Road,  
Then back unto the holy law  
Most kindly grace will draw my soul.*

*A rigid matter was the Law,  
demanding brick, denying straw;  
But when with the gospel tongue it sings,  
It bids me fly and gives me wings.*

In other words, the law informs me of God's requirements, the gospel transforms me through faith in Christ, and now the Spirit conforms me to Christ's image as I now obey God's law as loving worship that I render to Him.

The beauty of the gospel of God's grace is that now I am free to obey God's law, where once I was condemned by it.

**James 1:25** - **"But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does."**

We don't begrudgingly obey God because He will zap us from heaven if we don't. Instead, we lovingly obey God because He is our King who came to rescue us from our sinful pride, and we long to know Him more and more. We love and worship this God who has redeemed us in Christ, and we demonstrate this through obedient discipleship.

In his book, "My Heart's Desire," David Jeremiah tells the story of a woman who lived in London on the top floor of a tenant building. One day, the building erupted in fire. As the fire raged out of control, she was spotted in an open window, weeping and pleading for help. Every door, every route of escape was cut off by the flames. To the crowds that had gathered below on the street, it seemed that the young woman only had minutes to live. Suddenly, a ladder shot high into the sky. It came to rest against her window, and a courageous young fireman took the young woman in his arms and carried her down to safety. Seconds later, the roof of the woman's flat collapsed. The scene was a chaotic commotion. Neighbors were crying, people rushed the young woman into the back of an ambulance and on to the nearest hospital. In no time, the fireman had seemingly vanished and she never even had an opportunity to say thank you. During the next few days, she called the local fire department and tracked down the name and address of her lifesaver. She happened to reach him by phone one day and expressed her gratitude. The two began to chat on a regular basis, and a friendship soon developed. Both happened to be single. Friendship grew into love, and love led to proposal and eventual marriage. In time to come, the young woman would tell her friends that she could never forget how her husband had saved her life. Without him, she knew that she would have died in flames. The fireman had become more to her than a lifesaver. He had become her object of adoration.

This is what the gospel does for us, men and women. The law tells us that we are in a burning building, one breath away from the flames. It is a siren that directs my attention to a ladder that was stretched toward heaven—the cross of Christ—one that my Rescuer climbed for me. In grace, He scooped me up in His arms and saved me from the law's demands. In faith I look to Him. Now, He is the object of my adoration.

Grace frees me to pursue obedience!