

Covenant and Commandments | | Exodus 19:3-9; 20:1-7

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Introduction

When I looked at the scheduled text, I'll admit I wasn't very excited about preaching on the Ten Commandments. I think I have, perhaps an unfair assumption that most people don't want to sit in church and have a pastor reiterate what you're supposed to do or not do. But the more I studied the Ten Commandments, and their context, the more I saw freedom rather than restriction. The more I saw faithfulness rather than obligation. The more I saw love rather than strict rules. The Ten Commandments, along with the other laws and the words of the prophets, all point us to the two great commandments Jesus taught: love God with everything you are and love your neighbor as yourself.

The Ten Commandments provide structure not so that we are subjected to them in a negative way but so that we can thrive. I'll give you an example. When Cassie and I moved here, we wanted to join a gym. We ended up joining a gym, and with the membership we were given a free session with a trainer for a fitness consultation. When I heard that part, I scoffed a little in my head. Psh, I know how to work out. So I'd go to the gym and wander around and lift a little here and run on a treadmill over here and then wander some more aimlessly. Honestly, I would waste time because I didn't have a plan in place. So I finally go to this silly fitness consultation and I tell the trainer what I've been doing and he says, that's fine, but it's not very effective. He gives me a work out plan, with stretches and lifts and cardio that will carry me through the next five months. Now when I go to the gym, I know exactly what I'm going to do. I had the structure and plan to efficiently work out. Thank you, fitness consultation. Today I want to tell you that the Ten Commandments give us similar, though much more serious, structure in our lives. It gives us a structure and plan for how to live.

Before we jump in, let me bridge the gap between where we are and where we left off in Genesis. Remember Joseph? Joseph saved Egypt, saved his brothers and family, forgave them, and his father Jacob and their whole nomadic family moved down to Egypt. After Joseph died, the Israelites were in Egypt for about 400 more years. At some point in their stay, Exodus 1 tells us there was a Pharaoh who rose to power in Egypt “who did not know Joseph.” Meaning, he did not remember the blessing that Joseph had brought Egypt. Now during this time, the Israelites had become numerous, and so this new Pharaoh saw them as a threat. To suppress this threat, Pharaoh oppressed the Israelites with slavery. From slavery, we get the story of Moses. That Pharaoh ordered all Hebrew boys to be killed, that Moses’ mother built a basket to float him to safety, that he was saved by Pharaoh’s own daughter and raised in the palace. That Moses grew up, somehow knowing his Hebrew background, and murdered an Egyptian overseer when he became violent. That Moses ran away, got married, and that God spoke to him in the burning bush telling him that God would use Moses to save God’s people. That Moses went, begrudgingly, to Egypt, and God sent 10 plagues that finally broke Pharaoh down to allow the Israelites to leave. God parted the waters of the Red Sea, and the Hebrews began their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness toward the Promised Land. In this midst of this 40 years, they spent 11 months at a special place called Mt. Sinai.

Covenant

What we are all likely most familiar with at Mt. Sinai is the Ten Commandments. This is the place where God gives the law that would come to define Israel. But the Ten Commandments are a part of something greater between God and God’s people: a covenant. A relationship. We’ve seen covenants before in the last month or so: Noah and God’s covenant with all creation that he would not destroy

the earth again with a flood; then God makes a covenant with Abram saying that Abram's descendants would be special. Now we get to Abram's descendants rescued from Egypt, and God creates another covenant – the most important so far. God makes a covenant with God's people and uses special covenant language to do so. This covenant statement has three parts: the cause, effect, and results. God says this to God's people through Moses: Exodus 19:5-6, "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶ but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."

Cause: Salvation. God rescues his people. Effect: Obedience. Salvation causes the response that God's people *should* have when saved: obey my voice and keep my covenant. Result: holiness. The result of obedience is that God will make God's people a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.

So, we start with God saving God's people, God's people called to obey, and in doing so, God will make them special. Too often, we think of this cause and effect in opposite ways. We think, if we obey, God will save us. Wrong. God *has* saved us. Now we obey. And if we obey, God will make God's people a great nation.

Once in a Bible study with friends, I remember one friend passionately talking about how we are saved by God's grace through faith, and not through the law. Now, of course, this is true. In fact, it's always an important reminder. You cannot earn salvation. You cannot earn God's grace. Just having faith is enough for that. But he said something to the effect of "I don't have to follow any laws, I just have to live by faith." I would argue against that. Yes, God's grace saves us, but once we are saved, the laws God has given us guide us on how to live life after salvation. Jesus said, after all, that he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. The law does not *save* us, but once we are saved, the law

helps us to live as a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. Our works do not save us, but when Jesus does save us, we are called to do good works. That is the covenant relationship which we have with Jesus.

Effect – Commandments

Now, let's focus on the commandments. Remember, this is the effect, not the cause. This is our response to *already* being saved, not a prerequisite to be saved. God saved the Israelites from Egypt, God has saved us from sin and death through Jesus. We are saved. Now how do we *live*? "If only you will obey my voice and keep my covenant..." The Ten Commandments create a foundation for how we obey God's voice and keep God's covenant.

The commandments give us a guideline for how to live in covenant relationship with God and with each other. These are relational laws. Jesus told us that all the laws and prophets can be summed up in two commandments: love God, love your neighbor. The Ten Commandments help us love both God and neighbor.

The first four help us love God. Worship God alone. Do not create idols. Do not use the Lord's name in vain, or use the Lord's name falsely. There are a lot of false uses of God's name being thrown around today, as there has always been. Remember the Sabbath and keep the Sabbath holy. These four remind us to love God. We show God love by worshiping him, and we worship him by living true to his name and resting.

The next six help us love our neighbor. Those six are honor your mother and father, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not lie, and do not covet anything your neighbor has.

The law helps us to see the God who wrote them. It helps us see how to live in right relationship with God and with one another. The Ten Commandments are not irrelevant, and Jesus did not come to abolish the law but fulfill it. Jesus was the perfection of what the law pointed to. We're still called reference the Ten Commandments to know how to live as people saved by God. As people who belong to God.

We might have the temptation to think that salvation is the end goal of Christianity. Believe in Jesus and you're saved. Again, if you do not know Jesus and the salvation that Jesus offers, know that through Jesus God loves and saves you from sin and death. But for Christians salvation is not the end game. Salvation is the *beginning* of a new life. Once we are saved, we are called to be disciples. We are called to learn how to live in a way that glorifies God, points others to Jesus' salvation, brings God's mercy, justice, and love to the world. The Ten Commandments, and all of Scripture, helps us do so.

Results – Holiness

We are not saved by the law. But, the law helps us to live as saved people. And once we live like this, God promises to make us holy. Look at Exodus 19, the third part of that covenant statement is the result of the cause (salvation) and effect (obedience): “you shall be my treasured possession”; “you shall be to me a kingdom of priests”; “you shall be a holy people.” Well over a thousand years later, Peter, Jesus's disciple, wrote this in a letter to new Christians. 1 Peter 2:9 says this, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” See the parallel? Treasured possession in Exodus, a chosen race and God's own people in 1 Peter. A kingdom of priests in Exodus, a royal priesthood in 1 Peter. A holy people in Exodus, a holy nation in 1 Peter. Peter was no dummy, he studied the Scriptures. He knew the calling God gave the Israelites at

Mt. Sinai, and he knew the calling God gave Christians after Christ's death and resurrection.

Let me focus on that word "priest" or "priestly". A priest's job is to mediate between God and the people. So what does it mean for us to collectively be a kingdom of priests or a royal priesthood? It means that we stand between God and the world. We are called to live a life worthy of demonstrating to the world who God is and what God stands for. Love, justice, mercy. After Peter calls us a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people...he says that we are all these things "In order that..." There is a reason God makes us holy, and it's not for us. It's for others. "In order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

Can we proclaim Christ's mighty acts if we are not worshiping God alone? No.

Can we proclaim Christ's mighty acts if we create false idols? No.

Can we proclaim Christ's mighty acts if we use God's name falsely or in vain? No.

Can we proclaim Christ's mighty acts if we do not rest on the Sabbath? No.

Can we proclaim Christ's mighty acts if we do not honor our mother or father, or if we murder or commit adultery or steal or lie or covet? No.

We cannot pick up the call to be disciples, to be Christians, to be a royal priesthood, if we are not willing to obey that which God has commanded. But always remember, that *all* God commands, according to Jesus – and I consider him an expert on this – all God commands

should be seen through the lens of the two highest commandments: Love God with everything you are, and love your neighbor as yourself. The Ten Commandments follow that model.

These Commandments help us grow as disciples. Remember that silly fitness consultation I did, and the structure they gave me. I've lifted before, but I've never gained strength before as effectively as I am now. It's not that I'm just no longer wandering around aimlessly. It's that the structure I have now makes me thrive. Put another way, I've told you before my admiration for the 12-step program. Part of getting out of any kind of addiction is structure and boundaries. The Ten Commandments provide us structure and boundaries. There is great freedom within the structure and boundaries God provides. There are plenty of things in our lives that will make us wander aimlessly or get us addicted, but if we hold fast to our relationship with Jesus, we will thrive. The Ten Commandments are a part of that covenant relationship. They are not some old set of laws, they are the foundation of how we live once we are saved. They give us the structure to love God and to love our neighbors. They are not, and were never, the way to salvation. Rather, they are our response to God's salvation. This is all a part of our relationship with the living God. And when we live into that relationship, when we respond this way to God's salvation, we will be a royal priesthood that declares through word and action the goodness of God.