

Studies in Exodus No. 23

Exodus 20:1-21

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We come this evening to the ten commandments. Some years ago now, I preached a series of sermons on the ten commandments and this past week wondered briefly if I should pause and, once again, take each of the commandments in turn. But I decided that I would not do that. The ten commandments, as we shall see, form a kind of introduction to the law of God and there is value in viewing them together, as a whole. That is, after all, how Israel first heard them. Besides the laws that follow the ten commandments are, in every case, an elaboration of them and we can consider the obligations of God's law as we come to the various sections of case laws. Finally, we have been taking the text paragraph by paragraph and, by this means, getting a sense of the flow of the narrative. That would be rudely interrupted if we were to stop now and take the text verse by verse.

Text Comment

- v.3 One thing to remember as we read through the ten commandments: they are all cast in the second person singular. They are addressed, that is, to each and every person in Israel. The English "before me" could suggest that what is being meant is that Yahweh must be the first among the gods. But what is meant by the Hebrew is that there must be no other God beside Yahweh or instead of Yahweh.
- v.4 There is, as you may know, a disagreement as to how to number the commandments. Roman Catholics and Lutherans typically combine vv. 3-6 into a single commandment; other Protestants typically make v. 2 the first commandment and vv. 4-6 the second. We know there are ten because the Bible itself refers to the *ten* commandments. So the Catholics and Lutherans reach the number ten by dividing the commandment against coveting into two commandments. It has often been alleged by non-Catholics and Lutherans that this system of numbering is due to the fact that both those churches employ images in worship and it behooves them to minimize the commandment against images by burying it as it were, making it only a sub-section of the first commandment. There may be something to that by the time of the Reformation, as replete with images as medieval worship had become (cf. MacCullough, *Thomas Cranmer*, 192), but, in fact, this division of the ten commandments was known to the Jews very early and to early Christian theologians such as Augustine and does not seem to have been invented to serve a purpose. The Reformation renumbering of the commandments was very definitely a protest against the use of images in Christian worship. Having said that, it is extremely unlikely that we should divide the commandment against coveting into two in order to get ten. The numbering we are used to is certainly the proper numbering.
- v.6 You will notice the emphatic reiteration of the solidarity of the generations in both judgment and, especially, grace that has already been a feature of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Take note of the contrast between the three or four generations in judgment and the thousand generations in grace!

It is worth pointing out, all the more because this continues to be a controversy even in our own Reformed circles, that what is forbidden in this commandment is not the making of images of things, not visual art *per se*, but the making of such images for the purpose of worship or to suggest the presence of the deity, which, of course, was a common use of images in the ancient world and remains so still today. There is no “and” between v. 4 and v. 5 in either the Hebrew or the English translations of the Hebrew. What is forbidden is making an image to bow down to it. It is worth pointing out that the prohibition here is absolute and universal. If the making of images *per se* is forbidden, then the making of any image of *anything* is forbidden. A still-life of flower and fruit on a table or a statue of a general on his horse – things that are found in the earth beneath – are forbidden just as surely as some image that is designed to represent God or to serve as the focus of our devotion toward him. Fact is, when Solomon built the temple, all kinds of images were employed in the construction – from bulls to pomegranates – and no law was broken. This consideration applies as well to pictures of Jesus in Sunday School material or in the magnificent paintings of Reubens or Rembrandt. There is no commandment of God’s law that forbids such artistic representations, so long as there is no intention to put such a representation to work in worship. There may have been things to like or dislike in Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion*, but the claim by some that it was *intrinsically* a violation of the second commandment – because it provided a physical representation of Jesus in the form of the actor who played him – was, I believe, rather clearly a misunderstanding of the second commandment.

- v.10 It is interesting to find here, embedded in the Bible’s great summary of human righteousness, a concern for the welfare of animals. As we read in Prov. 12:10: “A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal...” Much as we may be dismayed by the false theology, the idolatry of much that passes for the environmental movement in our day, no Christian should have any difficulty believing that we are to be good stewards of the world God has made and, in particular, to be particularly kind to sentient creatures. One of Jonathan Edwards’ resolutions as a young man was not to be angry at animals. [Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards*, 51] David McCullough, in his great work on John Adams mentions that Thomas Jefferson, though he tended to be quite even tempered and was even usually placid in argument, not given to anger, was very different with his horse. He was famous within his family for how he would give vent to his anger by whipping his horse. That is a moral defect; it is sin to treat an animal cruelly and we should all accept that!
- v.12 The equal recognition of the mother is a striking feature of the law of Moses as the respect and recognition given to the woman is of the entire Old Testament. The ancient world was a male dominated world and such recognition here and elsewhere is exceptional if not unique.
- v.13 Commandments 6,7, and 8 in Hebrew each require just six letters. The NIV correctly renders the Hebrew verb as “to murder,” though that is a contextual translation. The word (רצח) taht gnillik ot srefer netfo tI ”.llik“ rof sbrev werbeH lacipyt eht fo eno ton si (רצח) is murder, but it can also refer to killing that is unintentional, manslaughter, or even the

execution of a criminal. One scholar concludes that it is a word of “specialized application,” and refers only to certain types of killing. Here in the sixth commandment it would refer to those types of killing that are forbidden. In that sense “murder” is the proper translation. “All killing is not murder anymore than all sexual intercourse is adultery.” [Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 106-107]

In any case, in these four commandments – 6 through 9 – the Lord bestows four fundamental rights: life, home, property, and reputation.

- v.17 The prohibition of desiring what is not yours (for “desire” is what it means to “covet”) is a commandment, the tenth, to be sure; but it is also a witness borne to the spiritual demands of the nine commandments so far listed. Each one of them reaches into the heart and requires obedience there, not only obedience of the hand. Remember it was the tenth commandment that was Paul’s undoing as an unbelieving but zealous church member. He could indulge the illusion that he was righteous so long as he took the commandments to be prohibitions of precise sins of behavior. If I have not taken another human life, if I have not slept with another man’s wife, if I have not broken into his home to steal his property, then I have kept the commandments of God. Such was the thinking of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus, you remember. When asked about the commandments he could say, with a straight face, “all these I have kept from my youth.” But the tenth exposes us as men and women with hearts full of festering evil desires and these too are forbidden. One must be righteous in his heart. That we *are not* and *never will be* in our own strength.

Remember now that we are in the midst of the formal covenant making ceremony that was begun in the previous chapter. It is important to remember this as we begin our consideration of God’s law, because the surest way to mistake the meaning and the purpose of God’s commandments is to forget their place in God’s covenant with his people. Before we ever get to the ten commandments we have the exodus, the redemption of Israel from bondage in Egypt, accomplished as it was by the mighty power of God and in furtherance of God’s love for and election of Israel. We have also his wonderful provision for his people in the wilderness: water and food, safety from enemies, and guidance through a wilderness through which Israel had never passed before. The law comes only after all of this. It directs Israel in her life with and before the Lord, a life that has already been given to her as a free gift, a life that becomes possible for her to live only because God has loved her and redeemed her. God’s people are to obey his commandments not in order to be saved, but because they have been saved. The law, as the old writers used to say, is for living *from* life, not *to* life. It is not for getting you out of bondage in Egypt, but for telling you how to live between Egypt and the Promised Land. Or, to put it another way, when Ebenezer Erskine writes, in one of his *Gospel Sonnets*:

A rigid master was the law,
Demanding brick, denying straw;
But when with gospel-tongue it sings,
It bids me fly and gives me wings.

Erskine is saying that it makes all the difference where you place your obedience to God's law, whether in Egypt as a means of making do, or in the wilderness as a means of loving and thanking God for his redemption; whether you view obedience as your own effort to achieve whatever you mean by salvation or as the means Christ and the Holy Spirit have given you to live your life in communion with God your savior, serving him, and pleasing him.

The importance of the context or setting of the law, its place in the covenant, has been wonderfully confirmed in modern times. As I have already mentioned, it has now for a generation and a half been known that the covenant material in Exodus and Deuteronomy has been presented in a form that was conventional for suzerainty treaties in the Ancient Near East. Suzerainty treaties were treaties imposed by a suzerain, or great king, upon a conquered or vassal king and his people. They were treaties of sovereignty, very definitely not mutual compacts or treaties between equal partners. The covenant God made with Israel was obviously a treaty of sovereignty – God did not ask whether Israel was interested; he saved her; brought her to himself in the desert and imposed upon her his covenant. It is grace to be sure – grace to a people enslaved and downtrodden – but it is sovereign grace! And so, not surprisingly, the covenant material in Exodus and Deuteronomy uses the form used in the Ancient Near East for treaties of sovereignty, or suzerainty treaties. The conventional literary form of such treaties or covenants included six principle parts:

- 1) A preamble; 2) an historical prologue; 3) the stipulations; 4) provisions for the deposit of the text of the treaty in the sacred shrines of the two nations being bound by the treaty together with provisions for the public reading of the treaty; 5) a list of the divine witnesses to the treaty; and 6) a list of the blessings to be bestowed on the vassal and the curses that will be visited upon him should he betray the treaty.

All six of these common features are unmistakably present in the covenant material in Exodus and Deuteronomy and often in language nearly identical or identical to that used in the ANE treaties. We are, for example, familiar with the lengthy list of blessings and curses in Deut. 27-28. Of course, some features of this conventional covenant form had to be modified to accommodate the fact that one of the partners in this covenant is the Living God! This is not a covenant between two nations but between God and his people. By the way, it is generally accepted in Old Testament scholarship that the concept of a covenant between Yahweh and Israel, so central to biblical religion, is unique among the nations of the Ancient Near East. But changes were required.

For example, two copies of the covenant are placed in the same place, because the tabernacle and later the temple were both Israel's sacred shrine *and* the place of Yahweh's presence. There was no way to put a copy of the covenant both in heaven, God's temple, as it were, and in Israel's temple; so both were put in the ark which was put in the sanctuary. By the way, when you read the old writers talking about the two tablets or tables of the law, they mean the first four commands having to do with our relationship to God and the last six having to do with our relationship to one another. That is what they thought the Bible meant when it spoke of two tablets. They thought it must refer to two sections of the ten commandments. We now know that each tablet held all ten commandments: one copy was for God, as it were, and one for Israel. Both were put in the ark for the reason I mentioned. That is a great example by the way, of a

longstanding and innocent mistake of biblical interpretation being corrected with new information. Similarly, there could be no appeal to a long list of gods as witnesses to the covenant as was common in the ANE suzerainty treaties, so a variety of substitutes serve as witnesses (memorial stones; Moses' song; even the people themselves). But, even with these necessary changes, the similarity in form and order between the ANE treaty material and the material in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Joshua 24 is unmistakable.

We have a short but typical preamble in v.1: "And God spoke all these words..." "All these words..." is very typical language. You will notice that Deuteronomy begins with a similar phrase: "These are the words..." An ancient Hittite treaty begins:

"These are the words of the Sun Mursilis, the great king, the king of the Hatti land..."

The introduction of the suzerain in the preamble of Exodus 20 is short but all the more powerful for its understatement. In the ancient Near Eastern treaties the identification of the king typically went on and on – the idea was to maximize prestige – but here it is the more imposing for its simplicity: "I am the Lord, your God..." Without a doubt, the reason why so many people have so little regard for the law of God is that they have no adequate conception of the law-giver!

Our v. 2 is the treaty or covenant's "historical prologue," an account of previous dealings between the suzerain and his vassal or the vassal's kingdom, an account which is supposed to supply the reason why the vassal should be glad to be made a treaty partner with the great king and glad to keep the stipulations about to be listed in the treaty. For example, in one such historical prologue, we read:

"When your father died, in accordance with your father's word I did not drop you. Since your father had mentioned to me your name, I sought after you. To be sure, you were sick and ailing, but although you were ailing, I, the Sun, put you in the place of your father..." [Cited in D. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea*, 30-31]

Historical prologues are typically longer than here in 20:2. For example, we have a much more extended historical prologue in Deut. 1-4. Here in v. 2 we have a précis of such a prologue, perhaps because the material that would be included in such a prologue has been reported in detail in the preceding 19 chapters. Still v. 2 is obviously just such an historical prologue as we find in the ANE treaties: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." Centuries ago our Puritan forbears asked in their Westminster Shorter Catechism: "What doth the preface to the ten commandments teach us?" The preface they are talking about is our v. 2. And they gave this answer: "The preface to the ten commandments teacheth us, that because God is the Lord and our God and redeemer, therefore we are bound to keep all his commandments." Well, long before anyone knew anything about ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties, the 17th century Westminster divines got the meaning of the historical prologue exactly right. It summarizes the past relationship between the great king and his vassal as a basis for the loyalty and continued obedience of the vassal.

Now, something else needs to be said about the stipulations that immediately follow the historical prologue. They will go on for pages, for chapters, of course. They will include the whole of the book of Leviticus as well as much of the rest of Exodus. In Deuteronomy, they will fill up 15 chapters. But first they are given a summary, an epitome. That is, the ten commandments are not simply the first ten stipulations of the covenant God made with his people; they are not merely some of, or even the most important of the laws God revealed for the obedience of his people; they are a summary of all of them. They are the covenant in a nutshell. This is made very clear in the covenant material itself.

In Exodus 34:28 we read that, before descending from the top of the mountain where he had received the law from the Lord, “he wrote on the tablets of stone the words of the covenant – the ten commandments.” Now while he was atop the mountain Moses had received from the Lord many more than ten commandments, but these ten with which the law begins are called “the words of the covenant,” which is to say they are the covenant in sum.

A similar point is made by Moses when, forty years later, in Deut. 4:13 he recalls that at Mt. Sinai, “God declared to you his covenant, the ten commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets.” By the way, as I just noted, the literal translation is not ten *commandments* but ten *words*. Perhaps that also indicates the special place these laws have as a revelation of the will of God.

We might, therefore, liken the ten commandments to the constitution and all the other commandments in the law to the legal code which arises out of it and is built upon it. We have the constitution and then many, many laws which apply that constitution – the basic principles of God’s law – to specific cases. Another scholar suggests that we should think of the ten words as an introduction to the covenant, a prefatory declaration by the Lord that establishes the basic principles on which the covenant will be founded: what the relationship of the Israelites must be to their Lord and what it must be to one another.

That role the ten commandments play, as a summary or epitome of the covenant, may explain why they are all that the Lord speaks directly to the whole people. The remainder of the law God gave to Moses and Moses then imparted the revelation to the people. But the ten words were given directly, orally, to the people by God himself, speaking from the mountain. This also indicates the special place, the unique place the ten words have in the revelation of God’s covenant. That place is confirmed still again in the New Testament when on several occasions the apostles make clear that the ten commandments are a summary of God’s will.

Indeed, perhaps it is truer to say that they are, even more than a summary of God’s will, a definition of reality. Therefore, people must live their lives in conformity to these commandments *if they would match reality*. As has been well said,

“The Bible is not first of all a book of moral truth. I would call it instead a book of truth about the way life is. Those strange old scriptures present life as having been ordered in a certain way, with certain laws as inextricably built into it as the law of gravity is built into the physical universe. When Jesus says that whoever would save his life will lose it and whoever loses his life will save it, surely he is not making a statement about how,

morally speaking, life *ought* to be. Rather, he is making a statement about how life *is*. [Frederick Beuchner in Plantinga, *Not the Way it's Supposed to Be*, 116]

Well, here the ten commandments are, in another way, an account of how life works and how people must live if they are to fit into this God-made reality.

The *first and second commandments* in this understanding mean that God defines reality because he made it. He and he only. In the ancient world the three-fold universe that we have described in v. 4 (“heaven above, the earth beneath, the waters under the earth”) was divided up between various gods. Aton was the greatest god in the Egyptian pantheon, but he was still a solar deity. In Canaanite mythology, different gods presided over different regions: Baal over the land; Yamm over the sea; Mot over the underworld. But Yahweh is the living God who made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in it, as we read in v. 11, and he and he alone defines reality and rules over it. There are no other gods and there is no part of the created order that does not belong exclusively to him. Exclusive loyalty to him is thus the first responsibility of human beings. [Alter, 429; Cassuto, 246] What is more, he is a God far above us, spiritual in his nature, not like the gods of the pagan pantheons. We must worship him as he is and according to his nature.

The *third commandment* continues and enlarges this theme. Taking Yahweh’s name in vain is to treat him as one of the pagan gods, a god that can be manipulated, a god whose name does not require reverence in the heart and in the mouth. It is to treat Yahweh as if he were not the God that he is. And given the close approximation in ANE thought between a person and his name, to treat his name disrespectfully, to misuse it, is to belittle God and his nature. That is to strike at the very center of reality.

The *fourth commandment* teaches us that our lives as human beings are defined and determined by their relationship to God and are to be lived in response to what God has said and done. Remember, in the second giving of the ten commandments – in Deut. 5 – the reason given why we must keep the Lord’s Day holy is not the Lord in making the world in six days and resting the seventh, but his having redeemed his people from bondage in Egypt. God’s creation and redemption shape and define our time and the right use of our time. We are not like the animals. Animals’ lives are the same seven days a week, but not ours. We take our pattern of life from the revelation of God’s works and ways. We have higher purposes and are to live in recognition of God’s gifts to us. Our lives have been set apart to God and reach their fulfillment only when we offer them to God.

The *fifth commandment* teaches us that our lives are not independent; they are shaped and our duties are defined by our relationships with others. You have a father and a mother, like it or not. You are not independent of others. What is more, our relationship with God has an organic connection with our relationships with others, especially our family (a point also emphasized in the fourth commandment).

In the *sixth commandment* we learn that life does not belong to us and we have no rights over it. We also learn that there is a great difference between life and death; they are not the same – a point much needing to be relearned in our modern culture. In the *seventh* we learn that God

made marriage to be a certain thing, a permanent, faithful relationship and that all assaults on this relationship, either before, during, or after marriage, are high crimes against human life as God made it. In the *eighth* we learn that nothing exists that does not belong to someone and that God has made human beings under-owners, stewards of what he entrusts to them. He counts every violation of this stewardship a crime against him as well as against others. In the *ninth* we learn that we live in a world of truth and falsehood, of clear definitions, and of the obligation to be faithful to the truth. God is truth and we must reflect his nature in our behavior. And, in the *tenth* we learn that it is the whole man that must serve the Lord, the inner and outer man; the invisible parts of him as well as the visible. God looks upon the heart; he knows what is in a man's heart and our obedience to God must reflect both that perfect knowledge God has of all our ways *and* that complete and unqualified loyalty we owe to him.

It is precisely the fact that the ten commandments define an absolute, unchanging, and inescapable reality that explains why those who deny that reality or wish to escape it find the commandments so offensive. "The best thing about the ten commandments," wrote H.L. Mencken, "is that there are only ten." But this opposition is finally futile. Either God will make it clear to a mind and heart that he is, in fact, the only true God, the Maker of heaven and earth – in which case the commandments immediately become not only clear and convincing but beautiful – or the mind will persist in its rebellion until it is brought into judgment, unable at the last to escape reality because that is precisely the nature of reality, it is what *is*.

Variety in many things is wonderful: in personality and appearance, in food, in clothing, in art, music, and the like. God has created a wonderful variety, an explosion of variety. But variety in morality is chaos precisely because this world has been built to run according to one moral vision; it doesn't work according to any other ethic, any other system of right and wrong. Nowadays people look for the truth *within* themselves with little reference to the larger, objective reality. But in fact there is an objective moral standard to which all human beings must conform or else. And that standard has been built into the world and into human nature. It cannot be ignored; it cannot finally be denied. It will reassert itself sooner or later precisely because it is reality. You can't flaunt God's law with impunity any more than you can jump off a building and defy gravity.

The post-modern world in which we live is highly privatized. There is a wholesale rejection of a revelation of reality from the outside, a reality to which everyone must be subject. But this reality already exists and modern protests against it will not avail to make it go away. Man's task is not to determine what he would like to be true, but to discover what reality is and live accordingly. And reality is summarized in the ten commandments.