

UNIT 34

THE DECALOGUE

(Exodus 20:1-17)

INTRODUCTION

Text and Textual Notes

EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

You will have to decide if you want to cover only the ten commands or include the following section about the fear of the people and the signs of the LORD's presence. Perhaps it would be easier to treat verses 18-21 as a postscript to the Decalogue, rather than to have a parallel major point. It would be easier to outline with the ten points (or subdivide into three parts, laws 1-3, then the sabbath sign, and then 5-10).

There is so much literature on this section it is almost impossible to say anything briefly. But in the exposition you must point out that this will be the charter of the nation of Israel. These ten “words” will be followed up by legislation on cases, i.e., situations that can arise. They will be the “decisions.” The Ten commandments are deliberately broad to give the general philosophical principles of the society. Their constitution as a theocracy is based on these.

Early on in the discussion you will have to settle to your own satisfaction the purpose of the Law and what the New Testament means when it says that Christ is the end of the Law. We would probably say something like this: The Law was the constitution for Israel as a nation under the rule of God. It was specifically given for them in a time and in a place. Yet, since God was the ruler in their midst, the individual laws reflect the nature of God's will for righteousness. Since the church is not a nation living in Palestine as a political unit under God's rule, much of the Law could not apply. The New Testament attests that Christ is the end (i.e., the goal) of the Law. It pointed to Him, it led to Him as a schoolmaster. We are not under the Law of Israel given at Sinai, but we worship and serve the same God. Many of the laws are simply expressions of His holiness and righteousness. These the New Testament confirms as instructive in righteousness. One learns how God expects His servants to live and deal in righteousness, but the New Testament saint must discover New Testament instructions that correspond.

The following exposition provides a sample of one way that this very important passage can be developed for the Church. Many people in the churches simply discard the Law, but say they follow the Ten Commandments. But they don't, certainly not the law of the sabbath, not the way it was legislated. And, since the New Testament presents a much higher standard than the letter of the law, people need to include that.

“The Ten Commandments”

A Sermon Preached at Christ Church, Jerusalem

Introduction

My first visit to Israel included a car ride I shall never forget. Our friend Baidun picked some of us up at the hotel late at night to take us to his antiquity shop in the old city. What a trip! He drove up alleys, through narrow passages, along walkways, up and down steps, until we landed at his shop. That ride made Mr Toad's wild ride seem very tame. And since then I have been fascinated by the way people drive over here. I have actually seen drivers out on the side of the road yelling and arguing with the police. It has been explained to me that the traffic

laws here are considered to be suggestions.

That may work with some traffic laws, but not the Law. Contrary to popular opinion, Moses did not come down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Suggestions. He did not bring an optional plan for Israel to consider. No, he brought the Law of God, the absolute standard of righteousness.

That Law revealed the righteous will of God--what He required of His people.

But in doing so it also revealed the sinfulness of people. The Law both taught people what God required, and made them aware of their need for forgiveness.

In that Law we have the Ten Commandments. These ten sayings, or “ten words” as they have come to be called, form the foundational principles of the whole Law to follow.

But to understand these ten commandments properly, we have to think about them within the context of ancient Israel. On the one hand we need to be familiar with the religious beliefs of Israel’s pagan neighbors, for these laws distinguished the people of God from them; but on the other hand we need to be familiar with Israel’s literature prior to this, namely, the Book of Genesis. It is in Genesis, especially the account of creation, that we find the theological basis and starting point for the Law. The Rabbis saw this in the parallel structure, for just as there were ten commands, there were ten words of creation, ten “and God said” in Genesis 1. All of creation exists because it obeyed God’s ten commands of creation; so all of God’s people should obey the commandments in order to live and enjoy the blessing of God.

The Ten Commandments can be divided into two halves, or two tablets if you like. The first few laws deal with loyalty to God, and the last laws deal with loyalty to other members of the covenant. We may use the labels that Jesus used. When he was asked what the greatest commandment was, he answered by saying “You shall love the Lord your God.” The he said the second was like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The first summarizes the first few commandments, and the second summarizes the last six commandments. And, there is a deliberate relationship of cause and effect. If people love the Lord, they will love their neighbor as a result. If people do not love their neighbor, then there is something wrong with their devotion to the Lord.

I. The First Tablet

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart:
The LORD demands absolute loyalty and devotion.*

A. God prohibits all other gods.

God prohibited the worship of other gods! Just what were those other gods the ancient worshiped? Stars, the sun, the moon, forces of nature, rivers, oceans, animals and spirits of every kind, and even some humans. In other words, everything they worshiped was made by our God.

Genesis 1 then forms a polemic against every pagan deity--they were all made by the Lord God. How foolish to have any other gods before the Lord--there were none before Him--He made them all. To put any other deity before Him is as Paul says to the Romans, to worship the creature rather than the Creator.

Even today in our enlightened society, the gods may change but the principle is the same. If the gods are money, power, lust, people-idols, or human enterprise--these are all part of the created world. They are man-made; they cannot save man because they are produced by man and therefore inferior to him.

B. God prohibits the worship of images.

God prohibited the making and worshiping of graven images. The images the ancients made represented the deity; they were replicas that could be identified and manipulated. But this was out of harmony with creation.

God made man as His image: "And so God made man in his image; in the image of God made he him, male and female made he them." Human beings were made to represent God on earth, to rule in his stead, to reflect His sovereignty. How foolish to make an image of God when you are the image of God. He gave you the capacity to worship and serve Him; it is the reverse of creation for you to make an image after the form of a human. That is turning creation into chaos.

Jesus was asked once whether or not they should pay taxes. Remember? He asked for a coin, and asked whose image was on it. Caesars. So, "Render to

Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." There are two sides to this equation. Caesar's image is on the coin, so the coin is his. But what do you render to God? Well, where do you find His image? Human life! Jesus was saying, give your money to Caesar, but give your life to God.

So not only are people to give absolute allegiance to the Lord as the one true God, they are also to give their lives to Him to serve and represent Him on earth.

C. God prohibits the irreverent use of his name.

God prohibited people from using his holy name in a false or foolish way. This certainly would cover false-swearing, using the divine name in an oath and then not keeping the oath, not intending to fulfill it. But it also would rule out the foolish rituals and incantations of the day.

You may be interested in the cure for the toothache in ancient Mesopotamia. The patient would be smeared with honey at first, ostensibly so that the exorcised demon would slip when he came out. Then the priest would start cursing every deity and demon they knew, and when the toothache left, that was the god responsible. In this way deities were manipulated by people. God said no.

The mariners on the ship in Jonah are the same ilk. They all cry out to their gods to see which one is responsible for the storm. God does not want His name bandied about like that, like one of the pagan deities.

The holy name is the name Yahweh, a name that God explained to Moses to mean "I Am that I AM." The name, and this explanation, are from the simple verb "to be." He is! He is the eternal Being. And this is His personal covenant name.

Interestingly, it also figures prominently in creation with word plays on the verb. This God, who calls Himself "I Am," in creation says, "Let there be," and immediately "there was." The name is the essence of creation.

And so it comes as no surprise that the Gospel of John refers to Jesus as the Word, the one who created everything.

But this holy name has been tarnished in the world; and so God will have to rescue His reputation by fulfilling His promises. Believers pray to that end:

“Hallowed be your name.” The people of God must preserve the holiness of the name of God.

These three laws, therefore, form the foundation of the faith. And, when Jesus was asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” He summarized the first tablet of the Ten Commandments by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God.” That love expresses the absolute loyalty that is to be given to God in worship and service.

But Jesus said, “The second is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” By this he was summarizing the last six commands that deal with one’s relationship to other people. And there is a cause-effect relationship. If your loyalty to God is correct, it will be displayed in your faithfulness to others. Conversely, if there is anything wrong with your allegiance to God, it will show up in violations of the second part--lying, stealing, committing adultery, and the like.

II. The Second Tablet

You shall love your neighbor as yourself:

God requires covenant members to be loyal to each other.

The last six laws, the second tablet of the Decalogue or Ten Commands, form the mainstay of any society.

A. God’s laws protect the rights of his people.

These five laws are fairly easy to understand:

First is the command to give parents their rightful place of authority. This comes with a promise: a nation that has this propriety in the home will endure in the land. If it crumbles, the nation will not endure long. That is why the promise of the coming of Elijah in Malachi has with it the promise of turning the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers. The apostle Paul, therefore, carried this forward to his instructions for Christians.

The next four have to be seen as prohibitions against violating the rights of others. Committing murder would be depriving another person of his right to life. Committing adultery would be ruining at least one family, depriving a man or a

woman of a family. Stealing deprives people of their property. And perjury would take away their reputations, and perhaps their freedom. These violations had to be prevented if Israel was to survive as a nation.

Not only are they still valued in most civilized societies, Jesus explained that there was a spirit for the law as well as the letter. One might get away with a crime in society, but not with God. Now, one may not actually commit the crime, but if the intent is there, Jesus said, the crime has been committed. He said, you only need to lust, you only need to hate, you only need to desire, and you have broken the Law of God in your heart.

B. God law against coveting safeguards the laws.

This is why the last commandment is added to these five: You shall not covet. Now, how is anyone going to know if you covet? They wouldn't, except for the fact that the word "covet" does not simply mean "desire," but means a desire strong enough to overstep a boundary. To desire a new car is not necessarily coveting; but to desire your neighbor's car and setting about to get it is coveting. The violation of another law, such as theft, shows that there was coveting.

The first time we meet this critical word in the Bible is in the Garden of Eden, then Eve saw that the tree was "**desirable**." So she **took**, and ate. In fact, the verb "desire/covet" in the biblical narratives is almost always followed by the verb "to take."

This first great sin flies in the face of creation. God had given Adam and Eve everything their hearts could desire, everything they needed. But He also gave them dominion over all creation. But they still desired more. This theme is repeated throughout the Bible, as with God's rebuke of the sinful David: "I gave you all this, and if that were not enough, I would have given you more. Why did you take Bathsheba?"

The story of sin is therefore a story of human desires out of control. This is how society fails. The wise man is always calling people to remember the Creator in their youth, and not to crave and desire what is beyond what He has given. In fact, the instruction in the Book of Proverbs is to a large extent designed to train people in desiring the right things.

But as you read Genesis you see this trail of sin that has crossed the boundaries of the Creator. So, Cain kills Abel, and God must rule, “You shall not kill.” And then he denies any knowledge of the sin and any responsibility for it, and God must rule, “You shall not commit perjury.” Then, ancient powerful despots begin to take all the women they want, and God must rule, “You must not commit adultery.” In fact, God warns Abimelech, “Touch that man’s wife and you are a dead man.” So Ham violates the honor of his father and the family code, and finds his line cursed. God must rule, “Honor your father and your mother.” And so it goes through the accounts of Genesis. Deception, hatred, murder, rape, and the like, until the family is in bondage in Egypt. That is where slavery to sin ends up.

But the Law was revealed to show that there was a better way. The Law came in to set the standard. And still, the history of Israel throughout the Bible is the history of disobedience to that Law, a history of unrighteousness. No one obeyed the Law –except One, Jesus Christ the Righteous. Jesus perfectly obeyed both the letter and the spirit of the Law. Not only did He obey it, He fulfilled it by becoming the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, making complete atonement as the Law prescribed. And because He fulfilled the Old Covenant made at Sinai, He alone was able to inaugurate the New Covenant, which He did by His death and resurrection. And this New Covenant brought with it the Holy Spirit, who enables the people of God to live righteously.

III. The Sign of the Covenant

God establishes a sign to remind people of their covenant responsibilities.

Covenants have signs. These are ritual acts or observances by which the members of the covenant attest to their compliance with the stipulations of the covenant. Keeping the Sabbath Day holy, that is, Saturday, was a sign of keeping the Law. It was a reminder as well as a witness.

God instituted the Sabbath to remind Israel that they were in covenant with the Creator. God created the universe in six days, but on the seventh he rested. Israel was to order their lives in compliance with the God of creation, and so by imitating the sabbath rest of God they attested to that.

But that seventh day, that sabbath rest was to continue, for creation had been

completed. But something happened to the sabbath rest--sin interrupted the fall, and the race was expelled from that holy Presence. The way back would be long and involved. The people held the sabbath up as their sign, and as their hope; but through disobedience and unbelief, they were not allowed to enter into that rest. They had to live in hope, a hope of rest that the New Covenant promised.

When Jesus began to minister, He claimed to be able to give that rest to people: "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He was claiming to be able to restore all that was lost by sin. And in setting about to do this, he healed people on the sabbath day in order to show what the real hope of the sabbath was. When he was criticized for doing this, He said, "Hitherto my Father works, and I must work also."

That work, the work of restoring a fallen race, was completed at the cross, when on the sixth day, Good Friday, Jesus cried, "It is finished." He then rested on the sabbath, a sabbath rest that would be eternal. And, as if in response to the Father's, "Let there be light," on the first day of the week the Light of the world came forth from the grave to guarantee the work of redemption.

The writer to the Hebrews thus explains that we who believe in Jesus have ceased from our works, and have entered into that rest. The sabbath rest we enjoy is eternal, not one day out of a week. We keep the sabbath day every day if we are in Christ, for we are not trying to earn our salvation by works. And yet, the writer adds, there still remains a sabbath rest for the world, for, as Paul says, the whole world is waiting for the day of redemption.

So with the New Covenant comes a new sign, the **cup**. Jesus took the cup and said, “This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood.” We drink from this cup to attest that we are members of this covenant. If the sign of the sabbath reminded Israel of the Law, the sign of the cup reminds us how we entered into the sabbath rest, the eternal sabbath rest--by the blood of Christ and the sealing of the Holy Spirit. And by drinking from it we proclaim that we love the LORD with our whole heart, and that we love our neighbors as ourselves. If we do not, then we must not take up the sign of the New Covenant.

Conclusion

The Ten Commandments, therefore, must be interpreted now through the fulfillment of the promises in Christ.

The Law said there should be no other Gods before the Lord. So why do we worship this Jesus of Nazareth? Because He is One with the Father. He is God manifested in the flesh, Immanuel. He is the Creator and sustainer of the universe. To worship Jesus is to worship God. This is the absolute starting point of the Christian faith--who Jesus is.

The Law said that there should be no graven images. The human race was created as the image of God, but it has been tarnished with sin, and not always recognizable as God’s image. But Jesus took on human form to restore the race; He became the second Adam. And now to understand what God intended for all creation, we look to Jesus, whom Hebrews says is the “express image of God.” He represents the nature and the dominion of God, and we must be conformed to Him.

The Law prohibited any incorrect use of the name of God. But because the Son of God humbled Himself and became obedient, even to death, He has been highly exalted, and has been given a name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus of Lord. So we

can praise Jesus as our divine Lord and our God, as well as our Savior.

And because Jesus has brought us into a better covenant, the New Covenant, our loyalty to Him will be evident in the way we treat other people. Jesus said, if you love me, keep my commandments. And the one major commandment he gave to us is, "Love one another." This too summarizes all the laws concerning our dealings with one another. If in Christ we have been given eternal rest, if we have been given dominion over all things, if we shall reign with Christ, then it is utter folly to live on such base human levels of envy, malice, strife, which find expression in a type of murder, stealing, and adultery.

When I, as a Christian, read the Ten Commandments, I am reminded of the standard of righteousness that God revealed. It reminds me of my sin. But it also reminds me that Christ has made the debt. By His blood He has paid the debt and brought me into eternal rest in Him.

Because He is God in the flesh, I worship Him. Because He is the express image of the Father, I conform to Him. And because He was obedient, and was given an exalted name, I can rejoice in that name as all my hope and glory.