

“INTRODUCTION TO THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, I.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Deuteronomy 5:1-6; Psalm 19

Introduction.

The Ten Commandments have fallen on pretty rough times these days. They are being voted off courtroom walls and out of city parks all across our country. But that isn't such a great loss since they have been ignored in human hearts all across our country for a long time now.

But then why should we care about some 3500-year-old rules written by hand on some stone and given to an old shepherd in a time and culture completely different than ours and in a language completely foreign to ours? Why are they any better than the texts of Nag Hammadi or Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar?

We are told religion doesn't belong in the classroom or the stateroom and then we can't figure out why there is so little morality anymore. We mock God and His laws but then still think everyone should do what is right.

But what's right? And who gets to decide? Now days we are under the spell of situation ethics where what's right depends on the circumstance or situation. What is wrong for one might be OK for another.

One of the strange ironies of our present day is that the more we throw off the Ten Commandments the more laws we need and the more lawyers there are.

The Ten Commandments in the original Hebrew are 173 words long. I read there are 30,000 words in the European Unions regulations for the importation of cauliflower.

Ancient Tacitus of Rome once wrote, “The more corrupt the state, the more numerous the laws.”

God's law library fits in one book on a very short shelf. Our law libraries are so huge because we don't keep these ten simple ones. Think of the staggering costs of this simple disobedience, lawsuits and litigation, courts, judges, lawyers, police, prisons, alcohol, violence, greed, hatred, vengeance, abuse. The cost of sin and disobedience in human lives and emotions and cultural chaos is incalculable.

We are in full scale moral meltdown and picking up speed. Every year we push the doors of sexual immorality and tolerance open even farther. The judgment of God is not coming, it is already on us. He has handed us over to our own sinful desires.

We try to talk about values, virtues and ethics toward one another and wonder why it doesn't work. But without the first tablet of the law, the second can't stand. Without love toward God we won't have a basis for love toward one another.

The mess and confusion in the church among Christians is not much better. Bring up the Ten Commandments and Christians start to hem and haw. Either we end up in the ditch of legalism or we over steer and end up in the ditch of antinomianism, no law, just love and tolerance.

It's either too binding or it's dismissed as irrelevant.

We are going to need God's help and the guidance of the Holy Spirit through His Word to help us. We are a long way off the path of love and liberty that under gird God's original intent in giving us His covenant law. The law comes to us out of God's loving purposes for us, they are His guide to peace and freedom from the bondage of sin. And behind all of this is the sheer undeserved grace of God.

To show just how confused we are concerning the law and how much of our thinking about the law is off base, all we have to do is turn to Psalm 19 and 119 and hear how the OT saints thought of the law.

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible is devoted to praising the law of God. The law is a delight, a source of joy and peace, it is loved. It is revered as the truth, as the means of liberty. It's a treasure to be sought more than gold and silver and earthly wealth.

They loved the law and revered it, held it in highest regard. All through the OT reverence for and obedience to the law of God is the path of life and joy and freedom from bondage.

Psalm 1:1 Blessed is the man whose ... delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. **3** He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

Law vs. Legalism.

One of the biggest reasons for our error in thinking is that we have identified the law with bondage, with what the Pharisees of the NT did to the law, but that is a perversion of the law.

Let me give one example of how we get confused.

Romans 6:14 You are not under law but under grace.

But

Romans 3:31 Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

So which is it? Well, it's both, but you have to know the meaning and context in order to understand how the word law is being used so that you can rightly understand God's Word.

When Paul speaks negatively about the law he is referring to how the law was twisted into legalism and made into the means of salvation, what one must do in order to be saved. It would have helped us if Paul would have used a word like legalism, but there isn't a word for that in Greek, so Paul just called it "works of the law" as in,

Romans 3:20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Galatians 2:16 We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

But other times Paul just uses shorthand and only uses the word "law" rather than "works of the law" to refer to this legalistic notion of works of the law like we read earlier in

Romans 6:14 You are not under law but under grace.

This helps us understand how in one place he can say we are not under the law, but in another place we uphold the law.

Law as freedom from bondage.

Our text is a helpful introduction to give us the context for understanding how we should view the law in general and the Ten Commandments in particular. Are they bondage or grace?

Exodus 20:1 God spoke all these words, saying, **2** "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Notice God gives the law to His people whom He has led out of slavery and bondage, not into bondage. The law is not bondage, obedience is freedom. There are only two choices, live in bondage to Egypt and Pharaoh, or live in freedom with Yahweh, the one who personally delivered you from Egypt.

Notice the Ten Commandments are not what Israel must do to be saved, God already saved Israel. This is what a grateful community does in response to God's grace.

If I were to ask you which came first, law or grace, how would you answer? Law right? But we answer that way because we have fallen into a false dichotomy between the OT and the NT

or between the law as a means to salvation in the OT and grace as a means to salvation in the NT.

Think about it, when was the Law of Moses given to the people of Israel? On Mount Sinai. But what came before the giving of the law on Mount Sinai.

Before they got there, God did something else, and you see it in the particular way in which the Exodus story is told. The people of Israel became the people of God when they took shelter beneath the blood of the lamb at Passover and by doing that were saved from the wrath of God and initiated into the life of God. They who were once outcasts, in bondage of the worst kind, were rescued, redeemed and delivered from death to life by grace by the blood of the lamb.

Do you see that? Grace came before the law. Keep this clear in your mind. Grace precedes law. If we misunderstand law, we will misunderstand grace.

The law shows us our sinfulness and our need for grace and redemption in Christ. The law convicts us of our sin and drives us to Jesus. Apart from Him we break them all. The law shows us what love and obedience looks like. The law reflects the character of God and to obey it is to become more like God.

Let me show you one other way we can know that the covenant is based on grace from what happened on Mt. Sinai. After the summary of the covenant in the Ten Commandments, God gave many more detailed laws and then the requirements for the priest, the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant. The last thing God did with Moses on the mountain was give him the two tablets of stone (Exodus 31:18).

But while that was happening, Aaron was making a golden calf and the people were breaking the very covenant they had just made. When Moses comes down and sees it, he breaks to two stone tablets to show they have broken the covenant. Now if the covenant was based on works, that would have been the end, Israel would be destroyed because of God's justice. But the covenant is based not on works but on grace, so instead, God in His mercy renews the covenant.

Exodus 34:6-10, 27-28 The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, **7** keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." **8** And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped. **9** And he said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, please let the Lord go in the midst of us, for it is a stiff-necked people, and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."

10 And he said, "Behold, I am making a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been created in all the earth or in any nation. And all the people among whom you are shall see the work of the Lord, for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you.

27 And the Lord said to Moses, “Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” **28** ... And *he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.*

Where does this grace come from? How can they be forgiven? Based on what?

This grace comes from the cross. God forgives their sin by looking forward to the sacrifice of His Son for the forgiveness of sin. Every sin ever committed, from Adam to Abraham to Moses to now is laid on Christ and He suffered and died to pay it all. Christ’s future sacrifice purchased and paid for all past sins.

If you accept Jesus Christ as your savior from sin by faith then you are a child of the covenant and the same promises made to Israel in Exodus 19:5-6 will also be yours as is promised in I Peter 2:9-10.

Exodus 19:5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; **6** and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

I Peter 2:9-10 You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. **10** Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

So as a people who live under grace and not the law are we still required to keep the moral law?

Yes and no.

The moral law is abolished as our means for justification. The source and hope for justification is not in the keeping of the moral law. Of course, it never was the source of our justification, but rather the source of God’s justification for His wrath against us, in that we did not and could not keep the law.

Also the moral law is abolished as our curse. We are now freed from the curse and condemnation of the law.

Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. **2** For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. **3** For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, **4** in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

But yes, we are more bound and obligated than ever to keep the moral law. We are bound to show in every way our obedience out of deep gratitude and thanksgiving in due proportion to the measureless greatness of God's benefits and blessings given to us.

But while we are more bound than ever to keep the law, we are more strengthened and enabled than ever by the power of the Holy Spirit generously given to all who are in Christ and have received the grace of regeneration and justification.

“The law of God is not a system of merit where by the unsaved seek to earn divine favor but a pattern of life given by the Redeemer to the redeemed so that they might know how to live for his good pleasure” (EDT, p. 624).

This is why the discussion of the Ten Commandments in the Heidelberg Catechism is not in the section concerning our salvation but is after it, in the section concerning gratitude and thanksgiving.

John 14:15 If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

When a holy God makes for Himself a people of God He sets out to make them holy as He is holy. The path or way to that holiness is through obedience. The law is our guide to holiness. It is our response to the grace of God which has delivered us from the misery of our sins. It becomes our joyful duty, our grateful obedience. We don't keep it out of fear that our salvation may be at stake, but out of sheer joy for the salvation that has already been secured and freely given to us. The law of the Lord revives our souls, brings wisdom to our minds and joy to our hearts, and enlightens our eyes. It makes us righteous.

It is Jesus Christ who has fulfilled and kept the law and it is Jesus Christ in us that enables us to do the same. Glory to God in the highest for His gracious covenant with us.

Prayer:

God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God of the OT and God of the NT, God of the New Covenant made for us in the blood of your Son, we praise your glorious name that you are faithful to a thousand generations, that you are a promise making and promise keeping God. Our prayer tonight is that by your Word and your Spirit you would do a new work in our hearts to make us respond to your law the way the saints of old did.

Cause your law to be more desirable to us than gold and sweeter to us than honey. And may we know the great reward there is in keeping your covenant Word. May we become like that man who delight in your law and meditates on it day and night, that we too may be called blessed.