

## **“GOD’S LAW AND GRACE.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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**Heidelberg Catechism: Lord’s Day 43**

**Scripture Texts: Exodus 20:1-21**

### **Introduction.**

Brothers and sisters, this evening we come to the end of our sermon series on the Ten Commandments. Now what? What difference do these ancient laws make? What should our response be? What did the children of God do with them when they heard them for the first time?

Scripture says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We see both in our text.

### **Exodus 20:18-19, the fear of the people.**

Israel is encamped around Mt. Sinai, having escaped Egypt and the fury of Pharaoh’s army through the waters of the Red Sea and having endured weeks or months of trekking across the Sinai wilderness.

They are at the foot of the mountain of God and have experienced a multi-sensory display of power, glory, majesty of the glory of God. There was loud thunder and flashes of lightning, thick dark clouds, great billows of smoke, like the mountain was on fire. There were earthquakes causing the earth to tremble, loud trumpet blasts. The people trembled. Everything about this place shouted holy, holy, holy.

This was a true theophany, a palpable experience of the living, holy God in His majesty, splendor, power and glory. The Israelites were seeing the visible manifestations of the glory of the invisible God.

They trembled, they feared for their lives, they stood far off. This was sensory overload. They are overwhelmed by the presence and power of a holy God. He is too much for them.

What is the point of this sound and light show? What does it suggest? God wants us to tremble, to have a sense of the seriousness of all these realities, to have the same reaction today, as the people did then. This is why this is recorded for us to hear, read, and understand.

Theophanies of God are always very intentional and purposeful. They reveal God to us in a way that is meant to change us, to transform us into the people of God, into people who know God, fear God, worship God, obey God.

It is right, even necessary for us to tremble and feel threatened by God's Word and God's presence for at least two reasons.

**First**, they have just received the righteous commands and demands of the holy God, and it was overwhelming. God has required total allegiance from His people in every aspect of their lives. He has required them to love Him and worship Him alone, and He has required them to love one another in everything they say and do.

God was making an absolute claim on their worship, allegiance, time, relationships, possessions, bodies, speech and desires. This was God's righteous standard for the people to keep all the time. In chapter 19 the people had declared to Moses, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do." They had made an oath to keep the covenant of God.

But now that they hear what is actually required they trembled. Does it not demand our attention? Does it not call forth reverence and awe and humility in the presence of so great and mighty and holy a God?

The Word of God is holy, it is a reflection of the glorious majesty and wisdom of God. God says:

**Isaiah 66:2** This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

We are so easily dazzled by so many earthly things, why are we not overwhelmed by the power and presence of so great a God who has revealed Himself in such displays of His glory?

Why don't people tremble at the Word of God today? What excuses do people make today for not knowing the Word of God? They didn't hear Him, they didn't know He was talking to them, they don't think God is personal, or cares about our individual lives; they say they can't understand God or that what He says is too hard.

God takes away every excuse. God spoke with a loud voice. His brevity takes away every excuse for disobedience. This is not hard to understand. You can count all God's instruction required for life on the fingers of two hands, and if that is too difficult, they can be summarized in just two commands.

God has spoken, let all the earth keep silent, and tremble before Him.

The **second** reason they trembled was the threat of God's fearful judgment. Fire and smoke, thunder and lightning, earthquakes and loud trumpet blasts, all of these things are signs of judgment and will be present at the final judgment. Loud trumpet blasts will accompany the great and final judgment when the archangel of God sounds the alarm.

The people trembled in the presence of the great and living Judge of the universe. This is a very real life-threatening encounter with the wrath that is to come.

It is interesting to hear how people will say they want a direct encounter with God. “If only God would speak directly with me, if only God would show Himself to me then I would believe.” How foolish. People who say that don’t know what they are saying or what they are asking. They have no clue what the awesome glory of God is like. His holiness is the terror of every sinner.

Even the righteous and holy prophet Isaiah trembled and recoiled in fear when he encountered God in a vision. He was utterly undone.

There is a sense in which an honest response to any theophany of God is to be overcome with dread, fear, trembling. God is a consuming fire. Any encounter with God has the real possibility of being deadly. In many encounters with the living God in Scripture, people were afraid they were going to die. That’s what the people of God felt at Mt. Sinai.

So what do they do? What do they say?

When you are in big trouble with the law, the best thing to do is hire a really good lawyer. So they turn to Moses and ask him to be their advocate, their mediator, to stand between them and God. “You speak for us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (20:19).

They don’t want a direct encounter of the holy God. They want Moses to be their intermediary, their intercessor, their advocate, their priest.

They didn’t know it in that moment, but it was the exactly right thing to ask. They needed a mediator, someone to stand between heaven and earth, someone to bridge the gap between God’s deity and their humanity, someone to represent them before God and represent God to them.

God knew what they needed and had already prepared and provided Moses to be the one.

### **Exodus 20:20-21, the wisdom of Moses.**

So Moses took up the mantle of mediator and did two things.

*First*, he spoke to the people on behalf of God, then he went to God on behalf of the people.

Moses says something remarkable. Don’t fear God will destroy you. Receive the fear of God as a gift to keep you from sinning against a holy God. Sin is the truly fearful thing, fear sin and fear sinning against God.

**Deuteronomy 5:5** I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the Lord. For you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain.

Moses explained the purpose of God's law.

**First**, it was to prove us, to test us. Do we love Him? Then keep His commandments. God has made Himself heard. You are without excuse, what will you do?

It was a test of obedience. God didn't give the law to crush the people, but to create a covenant people who belong to God.

**Second**, that we will have a fear of God that leads to a fear of sinning against God. This is actually a positive purpose of the law. God is giving us the means of obeying and keeping ourselves from sin.

**Deuteronomy 4:10** ... on the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, the Lord said to me, 'Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children so.'

This is a key verse and a key commentary on Exodus 20. The purpose of fear is not just to create an emotion, but to lead us to action, to our duty. It is not to create a fear that drives us away from God, but to flee to Him. Fear running away from God, rather turn toward Him.

The **second** thing Moses did was become their mediator. First, he spoke to them on behalf of God, and now he goes before God on their behalf. While the people withdrew and distanced themselves from God, Moses drew near to God.

Who can dare approach the holy, living God? Only the mediator. As mediator he intercedes with God on their behalf. He later offered sacrifices for their sins and sprinkled them with saving blood. Later he was willing to lay down his life for the Israelites when they sinned by worshipping the golden calf.

All of this anticipates the coming of Jesus Christ as the mediator between us and God. Jesus bears the fearful wrath and curse of God. Jesus stands between us and the life-threatening presence of the holy God.

### **Implications and application.**

We have considered each of the commandments in some depth. We have considered the duties required by each of the commandments. We have also considered the sins forbidden by each of the commandments. We have been made aware none of us has the power to keep the law or to keep from sinning, we are guilty of breaking each of the commands. We are not law-keepers, but law-breakers.

When God gave the Ten Commandments He knew everyone to whom He gave them had already broken them, and He knew no one would ever be able to keep them.

If we learn nothing else from our study of the Ten Commandments, we learn none of us ever has or ever can keep them all. We have broken all of them many times over. We break them daily in our thoughts, words and actions.

If we cannot keep them, then the Ten Commandments are not good news, but bad news, they are a threat to us. They should fill us with trembling.

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

If man has no power or ability to keep the whole moral law, why did God require him to keep it? Is this just?

*First*, God is God. God can require anything; it is entirely in His right and authority.

*Second*, God did give us the ability to keep the law, but Adam threw that away when he sinned against God. But the requirement remains.

*Third*, God does this to humble us, to remove any boasting about self and self-righteousness. It especially humbles all those who think we can be good or righteous by our own willpower or natural abilities.

*Fourth*, the law prepares us for the Gospel. God's requirement drives us to Christ.

Jesus fulfills all of the law for us, and God accepts His perfect obedience on our behalf. He imputes Christ's righteousness and obedience to us as if it were ours. God puts His wrath, His curse on Christ.

As one wise old pastor put it: "It is the sharp needle of the Law that makes way for the scarlet thread of the Gospel" (Earnest Kevan, *Moral Law*, p. x).

The commandments are not and never were a way of salvation. They were a way of increasing the sinfulness of sin, a way of exposing and showing us our sin and how sinful we are. They were given to take away every excuse, every boasting, every sense of self-righteousness.

The parallels with Moses and Jesus should be clear to you. We need a lawyer, a mediator.

**I Timothy 2:5-6** There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.

Through faith in Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit we receive the enabling grace to keep the law. The law no longer condemns us, but it still commands us and our obedience.

The law drives us to the Gospel for our salvation and justification. The Gospel points us back to the law for our path of righteousness, path of sanctification, path of living by faith.

We don't keep the law in order to be saved, but we do keep the law because we have been saved.

With Jesus in our hearts, the law becomes a gracious gift of God's grace, to point us to the path of life and true happiness and eternal joy. Now the intention of the law is to show us how to love God and love each other. It is about love.

After the preaching of the gospel, then comes the preaching of the law again but with an entirely new purpose, that it may be our guide for worship, thankfulness, gratitude, love and life.

So the law is not just a list of our sins, but a list of how we can love God. We don't have to guess or make it up. God clearly shows us what love and the good life look like.

**Jeremiah 31:33** This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Law breakers become law keepers because of Christ and by the enabling power of His Holy Spirit in our hearts. Behold the glory of God and tremble at His mercy and goodness.

### **Prayer:**

Holy Father, your holy law exposes us to the truth that we are unholy and justly deserving of your justified wrath. Your law shows we stand before you only condemned and no amount of work or willpower or self-righteousness or self-justification will in any way change our guilt or remove our sentence of death. We are without excuse.

But most amazing of all, you did not forgive us by overlooking your Holy Law but by enforcing it in Christ. He has perfectly kept and fulfilled it for us and paid our moral debt. All we can do is bow in worship and gratitude, and with a new heart and a new and right Spirit, strive to live the law of love by grace through faith.

Thank you for your indescribable gift and the immeasurable riches of your glorious grace you have lavished upon us in Christ Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.