

The Laws of a Holy God

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Date: 17 May 2020

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- [0 : 0 0] Well friends, do turn back to Exodus chapter 20. We are continuing our series in this second book of the Bible. Well, we can tell, can't we, what you think of someone by the way you treat them.
- So take your parents, for instance. If you really hold them in high esteem, then you would show them respect. Particularly when you've grown up and are independent, and so you're no longer needing them to feed you or to drive you around as your Uber driver.
- How do you treat them then? Will you ignore them? Will you still take their calls? Of course, as they grow old, they might even start depending on you.
- What then? Will you do for them what they did for you? Will you be their Uber driver? Drop them essentials, particularly during social isolation.
- If you look around, it's the same with other relationships. How bosses treat their employees, how husbands treat their wives, and vice versa. Observe them closely, and how people treat one another says a lot about what they think of each other.
- [1 : 1 5] And so we come tonight to the laws of a holy God. These Ten Commandments, which are familiar to many of you, are given by God to Israel, together with the other laws, so that His people will know how to treat Him, to honour Him as He rightly deserves.
- As I've mentioned before in past weeks, one key aspect of God's character is His holiness. They are reflected in His laws, reminding us that God isn't like us.
- God isn't like the gods of the other nations. And so if you look on the screen, or in the handout on the website, at the outline today, we'll find that if we recognise God's holiness, then we'll keep His commandments.
- First, in verses 1-7, we will keep them by honouring His character and name. That's how I've grouped the first three commandments. Then in verses 8-17, with the 4th to the 10th commandment, if we recognise God's holiness, we'll honour His creation.
- Verse 18-21 gives us more displays of God's holiness, like in chapter 19 from last week. It's as though God's Ten Commandments, His laws, are sandwiched between displays of God's holiness, to reinforce that God's laws are holy.
- [2 : 4 1] So let's begin with the first point, where God teaches us how to honour His character and name. So look there with me in verse 1, and God spoke all these words, I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.
- You shall have no other gods before me. Now, the Ten Commandments can be divided in various ways, but I take this one as the first commandment. It's a general and all-encompassing one.
- It's the basis, if you like, of every other law. It simply states that God alone is to be their sole authority. He's the only one to whom they should pay allegiance.
- Now, the reason for this, if you look on the outline, are twofold. First, because there is no other god but Him. All other gods are false man-made, formed out of human imagination with wood and stone.

Only one true God exists, and He created everything. But the second aspect of this is that for Israel, God rescued them. He reminds them of it.

[3 : 49] He's the one who brought them out of Egypt, out of love for them and grace to them. And so, they belong to Him. They owe Him their freedom.

And so, we look on the next slide, in verse 4, the second commandment follows closely from this one. It says, You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

He's jealous because He's rescued them, as I said, and He's rescued them for relationship with Him. They are set apart for Him. Now, in terms of image-making, as it says in that verse, there are two possible sins.

First, they could make gods out of creation to worship them, like the sun or the moon. And other nations in the ancient cultures did this because that's who they thought were responsible for their crops, for their prosperity, for their fertility.

[5 : 06] Well, God forbids this kind of worship because it's the worship of creation rather than the Creator. It's attributing to mere objects within creation the honor and glory that belongs only to God.

But Israel could also make these images as representations of God. That is, while not worshipping them, they use them as symbols of God. Again, though, God forbids this because they don't do justice to His character.

His spirit, He sits outside creation. No object or thing within it can accurately represent Him. Rather, He's ordained that only His word, which is now speaking and giving to Israel, can truly reflect His character.

Now, of course, we don't bow down to His word, but what we do is honor Him by reading, hearing, and then keeping it. Nowadays, we might think that we don't worship other gods.

We don't bow down to images. We're in the West, particularly. Certainly, as Christians, it's easy for us to look at these commandments and dismiss them as irrelevant. And yet, think about what the principle behind these commandments are.

[6 : 27] It's to look to things other than God, isn't it? To provide for us, and therefore we worship. It's to give them greater allegiance because we think they hold our fate in their hands.

So, for example, to give our loyalty to our employer before God, or to fear our boss more than Jesus, or to strive our hardest to please friends because we think they hold our happiness in their hands.

We may not physically bow down to them, but it's similar, isn't it? We put them before God. We place what is created above the Creator.

Now, some of you might keep on reading to the punishment and be troubled by this. Sure, you think, punish the one who did the wrong thing, but why to the third or fourth generation?

Seems a bit too punitive, isn't it? Well, first, I want you to notice the asymmetry, though. Yes, third or fourth generation if they sin, but look at the blessing.

[7 : 42] A thousand generations to those who keep His commandments. That's disproportionately gracious, don't you think? Of course, I think we're meant to see here that God is talking in hyperbolic language.

That is, it's not meant to be precise or prescriptive. You know, is it three or four? Well, it's not important. Rather, God is simply showing us that our sins impact others down through the generations as well.

we like to see ourselves as individuals, but God is telling us that we're all connected as people. And I think we've seen this in families, haven't we?

How it plays out. Some of you have grandparents who are faithful Christians. And even now, you benefit from that. You've not wondered aimlessly, not knowing the truth.

Because they love God, they love you too. And because they love God, they've taught your parents to love you and to teach you about God. Conversely, poor parenting can affect children across the generations.

[8 : 55] That's why they've talked about this concept called intergenerational poverty. That's why you see often that the children of convicted criminals end up going down the same path.

God may be using the word punish, but often it's simply the consequences of their poor choices. It's what happens when God leaves them to their own devices.

Now, none of this I'm saying is to say that God cannot intervene graciously. In fact, God does that time and time again. He rescues people out of what they do deserve.

And so, if you're among us today and you don't know the Lord, then this grace can still be extended to you through Jesus today. There's nothing fatalistic about suffering for the sins of your parents or your forefathers.

No, come to Jesus now and experience God's grace and blessing today in Christ. Now, these laws were actually given to those who have already received God's grace.

[10 : 04] They know God already and that's why God is saying this to them. They are meant to take these laws so that they realize how holy God is. What God is doing is trying to warn them how seriously He takes this relationship for which He's so jealous with them.

The fact that God says He's a jealous God in verse 5 is not a bad thing. It's actually a good thing. It shows how much He loves Israel. He doesn't want them to throw themselves onto other gods, false gods which are not going to be any use to them anyway.

Now, in commandment 3, coupled with honoring God's character is honoring God's name. So, verse 7, you shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His name.

Again, nowadays, we think of it immediately, we think of God or Jesus' name being used as a swear word. People do that now because they don't know Him. But actually, in times past, this was the exact opposite.

People then knew the importance of God's name and they misused it in the sense of trying to give weight by invoking God's name or Jesus' name to what they were saying so as to perhaps as well increase the chance of it coming to pass.

[11 : 32] it's like when some people might use their father's name when they were young to get their brother to do what they want, for instance. Dad told me that you need to do this.

That's sort of how it works, to invoke that authority. That's why, for example, you can see Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount teaching that, which I've got on the slide.

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made. But I tell you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is God's throne, or by the earth, for it is his footstool.

And on and on he goes. So what he's trying to say is, don't use the authority of God to get what you want. Jesus warns against this, because what we're doing when we do that is to call on God's reputation, which is what is tied to his name, to achieve ends which are not his will.

And so this commandment isn't primarily about swearing, rather it's about claiming to speak with God's authority when we have none. And this is sadly something that pastors and Christian leaders can be guilty of.

[12 : 44] Or we can use it to invoke God's name, perhaps in prayer, so as to achieve our selfish agenda. So recall again in Matthew, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, how?

Matthew chapter 6, he says, Our Father in heaven, hallowed be, hear this, your name. That's right. Your kingdom come, but then it's your will, not my will, be done, isn't it?

So God's name is honoured when his will is done. And we should only invoke his name in the sense of wanting to then see his will be done, praying for that and asking for that to occur in our lives.

And so if you look at all these three commandments, they're all tied to God himself, his character, his name, and his holiness. Now, there's a lot more I could say under this.

In fact, Andrew Reed, previous vicar here, preached one sermon on every commandment. We're not going to do that tonight, so we're just going to keep moving on. So in the next few commandments, we want to see how God teaches us to honour him by honouring his creation.

[13 : 57] So verse 8, the fourth commandment, says this, Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.

On it you shall do no work, neither you nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.

Therefore the Lord blessed the seventh day and made it holy. Here we see that God has wired into time a constant reminder of his hand in creation.

Did you realise, for instance, that all the markers of time, be they the days, months, years, what have you, of all, only the week is the one that bears no relationship to the physical world.

It's not related to the earth's rotation, which is the day, or the orbit, which is the year, or to the moon's orbit around the earth.

[15 : 03] Instead, the only reason why we have a week, seven days, is because of creation. And so the principle here is that our pattern of working and resting need to be shaped so that we can honour God as creator.

Now, this is a rather interesting section of the Ten Commandments. We often find people debating what it means to keep the Sabbath holy. Like, is it Saturday or Sunday?

Is it strictly one day a week? What about me as a pastor, because I'm working on Sunday? What is work anyway? For example, how can a nursing mom like Steph even take a few hours off each day to rest, let alone one day a week?

All very interesting, but again, because of time, I'm not going to dwell on the details tonight. But as Christians, our relationship to the law, as Paul says in Galatians, isn't the same as Israel.

We are freed from obeying the law to keep covenant with God, as it were. God. We now keep covenant by faith in Jesus. And yet, it's still relevant for us.

[16 : 13] For John says in our New Testament reading tonight, it's on the slide again, but you would have heard it earlier. John says, we know that we have come to know him, that is God, if we keep his commands.

So our motivation now is not to earn favor with God, but our motivation is out of love for God. We keep his commandments because we know him.

It reflects that we truly honor God when we keep his commandments. And so we don't keep the Ten Commandments now to be in relationship with God, as I've said, as Israel had to do.

Rather, we strive to keep it because we love God. And so we can keep it in the sense of keeping the spirit of the law so that it reflects our honor and love for him.

And we don't have to slavishly or legalistically keep the letter of the law, as it were. And so if we come back to this principle then of the Sabbath, how do we apply it then?

[17 : 21] Well, as I said earlier, it's to rest in life as a way to honor God. That's how we can keep the Sabbath. Rest in a way as to honor God. Now, if you remember a few chapters back with the manna and quail, God taught Israel not to gather on the seventh day and that was to show them that he would still provide for them.

It was their weekly act of trust in him for providing. And so that's the same for us. When we rest, we express faith in God that he would provide for us.

We trust that as creator and provider, he will look after us. And so when we do that with rest, we remember that aspect of him.

And so again, I want to say that without being legalistic, we ought to rest, if we can, one day a week. That includes those of us who are students. If possible, make it Sunday so that you can attend church and be with God's people to honor God together.

But also use the time not just to physically stop work, but mentally as well. That is to stop worrying and thinking about work. And I have to say that for those of you who are looking for work right now, I know it's hard, but can I encourage you actually to rest from looking for work as well?

[18 : 43] Why? Because you want to remember that God will provide. You want to be reminded that God as your creator is in control.

So while it's good to keep looking for work, it's also good to take some time away from it to realize that you don't have to be anxious, that you can trust that God will provide.

Now commandment five is also related to honoring creation. And this one I see as honoring God-given relationships. A few weeks ago I said authority is God's gift.

It's the gift that God gives to us in relationship and the principal authority structure in the family is that of parents over children. So here in verse 12 we read, honor your father and your mother so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

Now in Ephesians Paul says that this is the first commandment with a promise. And again just as with the warning earlier, the promise of living long in the land I think is largely a consequence of doing what's right.

[19 : 52] You see when we align ourselves with God's creation design, we learn what is truly right and wrong from our parents. And so we end up being blessed because we're doing right not wrong.

Of course later in Deuteronomy God warns that he'll intervene if they don't keep his commandments by withholding rain for food and eventually sending them into exile.

That's why I think there's a reference to the land in this promise, in this commandment. But again because Paul teaches that this still applies in Ephesians, we as Christians need to apply this, don't we?

We apply perhaps the principle of it and maybe not the detail in relation to the land. And so I encourage you again to think how this applies to you.

Depending on your age and where your family is from, it will be different for each of you. The younger you are, the more it will tend towards obedience. The more godly your parents are, then the less conflict there will be between what they teach and what the Bible says.

[21 : 02] But we still need to think hard about what honouring looks like. Even me, as a father of teenagers, I need to think about it as well. Earlier this week, some of you might have seen my post about my bike ride to church.

I was feeling rather proud of it. But you may also have seen one or two comments later on from my parents and in-laws, pleading for me not to ride on the main roads.

Well, the truth is, I mainly stick to the bike paths and side streets anyway. But you know what, I decided to honour them and to stay off the main roads completely from now on.

So, mum and dad, if you are listening, that's what I decided to do. So, are we honouring our parents though? You know, if you find it hard to answer that question, you know that's an easy way to find out?

Do you know how? Just ask your parents. Ask them to tell you if you're honouring them. Or perhaps, I don't know, you might be afraid of what they'll say.

[22 : 09] Now, I'm not saying, of course, that they have the final say, that if they ask you to go against God's word, that you do it. But if they said that, you know, to honour them more, you could help around the house more, or you could not leave it in a mess, or you could be less rude to them, well, will you do it?

Will you do it not because you have to, but because you want to please God? It's easy, isn't it? I find it's easy to appear godly at church, but it's actually really hard, isn't it, to do it at home.

We often don't like to do what we're asked to by our parents. But as I said, do it anyway, because you're doing it out of love for God.

Now, hopefully, you're seeing the pattern of what I've been trying to do with each commandment. And so the remaining ones are not very different. So I'll treat them as a group, and sort of, in the interest of time, move quite quickly over them.

So verse 13, you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

[23 : 29] Now again, we see here how these laws teach us to honor people, don't we, who are part of God's creation. First, these laws are about integrity, faithfulness, and honesty.

They're all aspects of God's character. When we do them, we reflect God's own character in our lives. But when we do them, we also recognize that God's people are, people in general, are all made in God's image.

We treat them like we would treat God. And so we honor God's creation, God's creatures, as it were. But again, when we look to Jesus, and in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus ups the ante, doesn't he?

Most of us don't murder, we don't commit adultery, we don't steal, I hope. But now Jesus says that if you hate someone, you've murdered him in your heart.

Or if you lust with your eyes, you've committed adultery. Now of course, even in the Old Testament, God has never meant for people to just keep the law externally. But back then, Israel was a physical nation.

[24 : 38] So without God's spirit, it was kind of a bit hard to see into people's hearts, and they only had external actions to go. But even then, if you notice the Tenth Commandment, it's all about coveting, isn't it?

So even there, God has pointed to the heart as what really matters when it comes to obeying God's word. But now, as Christians, who now belong to the spiritual kingdom of God, well, God sees into our hearts, doesn't He?

We will have to answer to God. We can't hide anymore. God's spirit is right there, convicting us. Now thankfully, of course, we know that it's not by our own deeds that we gain favor in God's sight.

We have Jesus, because we know we simply can't keep God's laws fully. We know what's really in our hearts that is less than pure and perfect. And thankfully, like Israel, God has brought us out of slavery from sin through Christ's death for us.

And so again, like Israel, we're not obeying God's laws to earn our place in His kingdom. We are already in it by grace. Rather, we now do it because we love God and we know Him.

[25 : 55] Just coming back again to that verse in 1 John 2, chapter 3, we want to keep His commandments, not because we have to, but because we know Him and revere Him.

Well, look finally with me at verse 20 of Exodus 19. Because in the midst of the display of God's holiness, Moses tells the people, do not be afraid. God has come to test you so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.

You see, it's easy to tune in to church on Sunday, to sing about God's holiness even. It's easy to think about your walk with God simply in terms of how your quiet time is going, how regular you are at, you know, HTY or young adults.

It might even be easy to think of yourself as following God by how moved you are by the singing or the preaching. But what does Moses say here? The true fear of God, the true love of God, comes when we keep from sinning.

And God's laws help us to do that. It comes down to the rather mundane things of whether you would obey God more than your boss, whether you would honor your parents, whether you would talk behind people's back or lie about them, whether you would fantasize sexually about someone who is not your spouse, whether you would download movies or whatever without paying for them.

[27 : 28] It comes down to those nitty-gritty things, does it not, that you live out each day obeying God's laws, the spirit behind those laws because you love Him.

If we truly recognize God's holiness, then we will long to keep His commandments and He will help us. He will keep us from sinning and allow us to truly honor Him.

Let's pray. Father, forgive us when we fall short of your holy laws. We may sometimes keep it outwardly, but our hearts betray us.

Thank you that we are forgiven because of Jesus. But help us not to presume on His grace, but to respond to it, respond to this amazing grace by desiring to keep your laws.

Help us by your spirit to keep them. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.