



A PEOPLE FREED: A LAW FOR GOD'S PRESENCE

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Exodus 18-40, Leviticus
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We are in the middle of a very political time as a country. There have been campaigns, debates, polls, and articles all focused on a very big event that will happen in a few weeks: the election of a new President of the United States.

People have very strong opinions about this election. There is a lot on the line as there always is. And the reason why we get so worked up over who is going to be our president is because it affects us as a nation. It changes who we are. The question that will be decided in part on November 6 is who America will be as a nation.

I'm not a political scientist, but my basic understanding of government is this. The government establishes, defends, and upholds laws. You can tell a lot about a group of people by the laws they follow. I would even argue that law defines a group of people. It tells you who they are. Since the president has a lot to do with what laws get enacted and upheld, the president has a huge say in who we become as a nation.

As you probably know, we are in the middle of our church-wide series called *EPIC: The Astonishing Story of God and the World*. We have divided up the story that the Bible tells into ten eras. Today we are in the middle of our third era called *A People Freed*. Our first era introduced us to the story of creation: God's good intentions that were marred by sin. Our second era introduced us to the family of Abraham, through whom God promised he would save the world and restore things back to what he intended.

Now we're looking at the time when Abraham's family becomes God's people. They go from being an enslaved and oppressed ethnic group in Egypt to being a nation of their own. Last week we saw the leader God worked through to bring them out of Egypt. Next week we'll see God preparing them to receive the land that he has prepared for them. This is what any nation needs: a leader, a law, and a land. This week we see God define his people by giving them a law.

This has been the most difficult sermon to prepare so far. There is so much to say about law. There are so many questions and so much confusion. I've had about five different versions of this sermon. It is tempting to focus on the theology of the law because there is so much to

say. But that isn't exactly what we're trying to do in this EPIC series. We want to understand the story. We don't just want to understand the law; we want to understand the giving of the law.

The problem is that in this section of Exodus and Leviticus, the story can get easily buried. From Exodus 19 through the end of Leviticus, there are 613 different commandments given to God's people. There are the famous Ten Commandments. There is a detailed architectural rendering of the Tabernacle. Many commandments are repeated or restated. This section is more like a legal code than a story.

But there is a story. There is a story of when the law was given, how it was given, and how it was received. The story often gets lost, but this morning we are going to try and recover it. That means we will leave some questions about the law unanswered. But we will see something else. We will see God's people prepare to receive his law. We will see how that law defines them. And we will see how their response reveals a lot about what we really want from God and what he really wants from us.

Enter God's Presence

Last week we left Moses and God's people on the other side of the Red Sea after Pharaoh's army had been washed away by God. They were free, but where should they go? Moses knew exactly where he was going to take them.

When God first appeared to Moses it was at a place called Mount Horeb. God spoke to Moses from a burning bush. God revealed himself to Moses. God revealed his name for the first time. God gave Moses instructions and he promised Moses that once he delivered the Israelites from Egypt, they would worship God in the same place. At Mount Horeb, also called Mount Sinai, Moses experienced the presence of God in a powerful way.

Have you ever seen a great movie? What do you say to people afterwards; probably something like, "that movie was awesome—you have to go see it?" When you have a good experience, you want other people to have it too. That's what it was like for Moses. He had experienced

something profound on Mount Sinai: the presence of God. Then he watched God in amazing ways freeing the Israelites from Egypt. Now he wanted to give all of them the experience he had enjoyed. He wanted to bring them into the presence of God.

So Moses leads the Israelites back to Mount Sinai. And God meets them there. The story of the giving of the law begins at the foot of that mountain.

Exodus 19:1-6:

¹In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. ²After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

³Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

Notice how carefully this passage describes the day that this happened—“on the very day.” Notice how carefully he describes the path the Israelites take to get there. Notice how Moses starts to go up to the mountain to meet God, and the Lord calls out to him from the top—before he’s even gotten there. In the next few verses, God says that he will come down and be with all his people. This rendezvous between God and the Israelites is clearly a significant moment. It’s as if God has been waiting eagerly for his people to come to him and now they finally have.

In fact, that’s exactly what has happened. There is a kind of movement in the story that begins with God appearing to Moses at the top of this mountain and reaches its finale in this moment. The whole story of the Exodus isn’t just about the Israelites leaving Egypt. It’s about them arriving here. When God describes what just happened he doesn’t say that they were freed from Egypt. He says that he brought them here. The focus is on this place as the destination, not the release from Egypt. This has been the moment that God and his people have been waiting for—the long-anticipated arrival at Mount Sinai.

This sounds like a lover’s reunion. It sounds like two people who have longed to be with each other that finally arrive together and collapse into each other’s arms. That’s not exactly the setting that we would automatically picture for a complex listing of legal code. But that is the setting for the giving of the law that follows: God’s people in God’s presence.

We’ve recently added a little puppy to our family. She weighs about four pounds and is ridiculously cute. It’s been a while since we’ve had a dog in our family and I had forgotten how wonderful dogs can be. We also have two outdoor cats, but I have to apologize to all the cat people and go on record as saying that I am a dog person.

What I love about dogs is how excited they get to be in your presence. When I come home after being gone for a while, this new puppy, who has only been a part of our family for about a month, will run to greet me. She will jump up on my leg, which isn’t annoying since she only weighs four pounds. She will lick me. Her little nub of a tail will wag ferociously. It is incredible. I have to admit—I love being greeted that way. Someone told me recently that “no one deserves a dog.” And that’s exactly true. I don’t deserve to be greeted with such enthusiasm. But I’ll take it and enjoy it.

That’s what this picture of God and his people meeting together reminds me of. God is thrilled to receive his people into his presence. And they are thrilled to be there.

As we follow along with the story of the Israelites, we go from being freed from Egypt to being in the presence of God. God gave the law to his people once they were in his presence. This is a significant part of the story. Our first invitation is to enter God’s presence as his people did at Mount Sinai. Enter God’s presence.

Have you ever wondered what it must have been like to be in the presence of God? The text describes thunder and lightning and smoke rising from the mountain. We had thunder earlier this week for the first time in a long time and it reminded me how powerful that experience is even when it just occurs as part of a rainstorm. Can you imagine being at Mount Sinai in God’s presence?

Most of us won’t experience God’s presence in this way. There are some times when we might experience the presence of God in a powerful, supernatural way. But that’s more the exception than the rule. So what does it mean for us to enter into God’s presence?

As it turns out, that is one of the things that dominates the law that God gives his people. God gives Moses detailed

instructions for building the Tabernacle. The whole point of this building was to allow God's people to experience his presence in a unique way at specific times. Leviticus contains detailed instructions for what kinds of sacrifices you are supposed to offer God in different circumstances. God is teaching his people how to be with him.

One of the ways he did that was to give them special moments that were different from their regular routine. Those times were set apart and they helped God's people to experience the presence of God. They were unique moments of being with God that punctuate normal experience.

We have similar things today. In fact, you're doing one right now. You're coming to church every Sunday, meeting in a small group, praying with friends, and praying on your own. All of these are opportunities to recognize the presence of God in unique ways. And they are critical for the Christian life. That's one of the reasons that we are encouraging the *EPIC Bible* reading plan. That is another way to build into your schedule a separate time that is distinct from your daily rhythm to recognize and enter into the presence of God.

So this is the context that the law was given. God's people are excited to be in his presence. Now we're prepared to look at the law and find out what it actually says. What is at the heart of the law that God gives his people?

Rest in God's Presence

The Ten Commandments are probably the most well known set of laws in Western history. They have formed the basis for millennia of legal systems that have followed. And they are a great representation of the entire Jewish Law. The Jewish Rabbi Rashi from the 11th century called them the categories under which all the other commandments can be grouped.

So we'll use the Ten Commandments as a summary of all of God's law. Let's start out by reading them.

Exodus 20:1-17:

¹And God spoke all these words:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

³You shall have no other gods before me.

⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on

the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵You 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 fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

⁸Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. ¹¹For 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 Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹²Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

¹³You shall not murder.

¹⁴You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵You shall not steal.

¹⁶You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

We don't have time to go into all the details of each of these commandments. Our goal is to understand the heart of what God wants for his people. There are several ways of grouping and understanding the essential message of the commandments. I've encountered one way in my recent study that I've found particularly helpful. It's based on the observation that there are three different types of commandments. The first one is unique. The next eight share something in common. And the last one is unique in a different way. Here's how it works.

The first commandment is about God. "You shall have no other gods before me." At the heart of God's promise that he made to Abraham and has frequently repeated

is that he will be God to his people. Now he has come to them and has been present with them. So the first commandment is about that relationship. It isn't really an action. It's asking for a type of relationship: worship. This is at the heart of all the commandments. God wants worship.

The next eight commandments describe behavior that flows from proper worship. Most of them describe actions that are incompatible with worship. Some of those have to do directly with God: setting up an image of another God definitely isn't compatible with worshipping the true God. Some of those have to do with other people: murdering someone else whom God has created is not consistent with worshipping God.

The first commandment is about worship. These commandments are about behavior. They are all action oriented. The primary issue is still the first commandment. But in case you don't know what actions go along with true worship, here are some examples. If you're breaking these, you know you're breaking the first commandment.

Finally, the last commandment is unique. The other eight are all external actions. The last one is internal. It is something you feel; something that happens within you. The last commandment is an attitude: coveting. The Hebrew word used is translated "covet" and is the word to desire something. But the way it is used in this commandment is to desire something that someone else has. You shall not desire something that belongs to someone else.

This command is significant because it is the internal state that leads to breaking any of the previous eight commands. If you want your neighbor's car, you might steal it. Or kill him and steal it. If you want your neighbor's wife, you might have an affair with her. If you want what another culture seems to enjoy, you'll worship their gods in hope that they can deliver it.

So the commandments build on each other. The first is what God wants: worship. The next eight are the actions that demonstrate or fail to demonstrate worship. The final one is the attitude that leads you to the actions that means you aren't worshipping God. Worship is the goal. Coveting is the first step away from that goal.

James expresses it this way in James 1:14-15, "Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

Sin begins with desire, matures into action, and eventually ends up making you break the first commandment, the

most important commandment, the heart of the law. Eventually you stop worshipping God.

Incidentally, this is what we saw when we looked at the first sin. That first sin didn't start by eating. It started when Eve coveted the tree because of the serpent's lie. She shifted her focus from what God had provided to what he had prohibited. She coveted. She ate and she stopped worshipping God.

So the heart of the law is worship. It all points back to staying in a worshipping relationship with God. And what is worship except being in the presence of God in the right way. In fact the Hebrew word for worship is literally "to bow down." It is a posture. It is how you act when you are in the presence of someone. Worship is about being in someone's presence in the right way.

The law tells God's people how to stay in his presence. It was given to them once they arrived in his presence and the heart of it is guidelines for how to properly stay in his presence. If our first invitation is to enter into God's presence, then the follow-up invitation is to stay in his presence; to maintain that sense of his presence by what we do and by what we think. First we enter into God's presence. Then we rest in God's presence.

If God is everywhere, aren't we always in his presence? In a sense, yes, but not really. There is a difference between being near someone and being with someone. Proximity isn't the same as presence. Presence is a mutual attitude between two people. You are with me and I am with you.

Imagine you are at a party or in a room full of people and you're having a conversation with one other person who starts looking around the room; looking at his watch; shifting his feet. That is conversational coveting. He might be talking with you, but you can tell that he'd much rather be talking to someone else.

How different is it when a person is engaged with you? They ask you questions. They listen to you. They tell stories that connect with your experience. They laugh. They seem comfortable. That's being content in the presence of someone else. That's what it looks like to rest in God's presence.

At the heart of the law is God's desire to be with his people. Not just to be near them, but to be with them. What he wants from his people is that they are satisfied with him, accept his provision, and rest in his presence.

I'll admit that I have a really hard time with this. I am constantly wondering what is next. I am always

looking forward to something new, something different. I am fascinated by what isn't mine. I am drawn to the experiences of other people and wonder if they have it better than me. It's easy for me to look at what other people have and covet it. I sometimes have a hard time resting in who God has made me to be.

Our culture doesn't make resting in anyone's presence very easy. We are surrounded by distractions and opportunities. Our schedules move too fast to rest with anyone. To me, the most surprising commandment in the Ten Commandments is the command to rest. What a curious morality that requires rest! But we need to be told because we have such a hard time with it.

But we aren't the only ones. It's not actually unique to our culture. God's people in the Old Testament do too. They didn't even have iPhones and they still had a hard time resting. They are always looking around at some other experience that they might have.

Go With God

After God gives Moses the Ten Commandments, he follows up with more instructions, mostly about the Tabernacle. Moses stays on the mountain for 40 days.

That's too long for God's people. They get impatient and they do something stupid. There's great irony here. God is in the middle of telling Moses how his people can continue to experience his presence. But it's too late. The excitement of being in the presence of God had faded. God's people no longer felt the powerful presence. They look around and conclude that he has gone. So what did they do?

They built a statue of a golden calf. They even had the audacity to proclaim in Exodus 32:4, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." What had happened? They wanted to be in the presence of a god. They didn't feel his presence. So they created something that they could be present with.

And once they had a god they could be with, they partied. They stopped resting. They started grumbling. They built an idol. Step by step, they worked their way backward and ended up breaking the first commandment, along with several others along the way.

When God finds out, he does what he often does when his people turn away. He lets them. Listen to what he says.

Exodus 33:1-3:

¹Then the LORD said to Moses, "Leave this place, you and the people you brought up out of Egypt, and go up to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants.' ²I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ³Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way."

This is an incredible offer that God makes. He says, "I'll give you everything that you want. I'll give you the land. I'll give you descendants. I'll even send an angel ahead of you. But I'm not going."

To a lot of people this might sound like a great deal. You get all of the benefits of a relationship with God without actually having to relate to him. You get the inheritance without having to deal with your parents. You get the fun without the responsibility. You get the gifts without the God. I think that if some of the Israelites would have heard this, then they would have jumped on the opportunity.

But Moses didn't. Listen to what he says in response to God's offer.

Exodus 33:15-17:

¹⁵Then Moses said to him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. ¹⁶How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?"

¹⁷And the LORD said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."

Moses has an incredible answer to God's offer. He says no. He says if you don't send your presence with us, then it's not worth going. We don't care about the gifts. We don't care about the land. All we care about is being with you.

Moses gets it. He understands that the whole point of the law is about being with God. The whole point of everything is about being with God. He recognizes that even if they have the land, even if they have everything they ever wanted, it doesn't matter if they don't have God.

We need to understand this. First, we enter God's presence. Then we rest in God's presence. But when we go out, when we are sent out from here, do we want God to go with us? Or do we just want his benefits? Do we realize that everything we have is meaningless if we don't have the presence of God? This is our final invitation. To see our whole lives as taking part in the presence of God. Go with God.

Even more amazing than Moses's response to God is God's answer to Moses. He says "yes." He agrees to go with his people and he never again changes his mind about that. The reason he gives in is because he knows the name of Moses. He knows his people so he will go with them. Never again does he threaten to take away his presence.

And we realize that the point of the law is not the rules. The point of the law is to be with God. We can get so focused on rules and regulations that we often think they are there for their own purpose. We sometimes think that what God cares about is whether we are obeying his rules. But the law is only a tool. It is a tool to allow his people to be in his presence. What he cares about is being with his people. He cares about being with us.

This helps to partly explain why Jesus said that he fulfilled the law. Jesus is the Immanuel. He is God with us. He gave the world the presence of God in an entirely new way. He gave us the experience of God in the flesh; God as a man. God present with us.

And when he left, he said this in John 14:26, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." Jesus made the presence of God in this world real in a new way. And he left us with God's presence by sending the Holy Spirit.

We talked earlier about unique ways that we experience the presence of God. Those are important. But because we have the Spirit, we live our whole lives in the presence of God. God goes with us everywhere. The curtain of the "Holy of Holies" broke when Jesus died. God's presence went from filling the Temple to filling his people. This is the incredible way that we are able to live. We live in the presence of God.

So we go out with God's presence. We walk with God every day. We talk to him. He comes with us when we go home, when we go to work, and when we lie down at

night. He is with us when we'd rather him not be with us. He is with us when we've forgotten that he is with us.

When God gave his people the law, his purpose was so that they could continue to experience his presence. We have that same gift through a different means. We have the Spirit of God, living within us. We go with God and we make God known wherever we go.

Conclusion

After November 6, we will know some more about how the character of our country will change. We are constantly redefining who we are by the changing laws that we enact and enforce. The laws of our country have to do with presence as well. Our county enacts laws with the goal of helping us to live in each other's presence in positive ways. It's complicated because there are a lot of different opinions on how to do that.

The law that God gives his people is different because it's about helping them to live in his presence. Their law defines them just as our law defines us. They are simply those people who live in the presence of God. They are defined by worship. They are defined by their heart, not by their actions. But a new nation needs to know what actions are consistent with worship and so God gives them a law. He helps them to understand what worship looks like. This makes them distinct from the nations around them.

We've been tracing the story of God's people during this era that we've called *A People Freed*. Last week we saw God provide a leader who brought the people into freedom. This morning we've seen God provide a law that would define who this people is at their core. Next week, we'll see God preparing them to live out the presence of God in a particular place: the land of Promise.

As we leave here, may we rest in God's presence. May we recognize the coveting that leads us out of his presence and the actions that result. Most of all, may we continue in worship, not just here, but everywhere. God's people are those people who worship in his presence. That's who we are. Don't forget it.