

“I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD”

SERIES: LOVE GOD, LOVE PEOPLE



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Exodus 20:1-2
1st Message
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The best known line from the epic poem, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” is a statement of desperation: “Water, water everywhere; nor any drop to drink.” In the tale being related by the mariner a sailing ship is immobilized on calm seas. The stores of fresh water are gone and the sailors aboard ship are mocked by a vast ocean of water as they die of thirst.

We live in a culture that is dying of thirst spiritually—a culture desperate for living water that is gripped by numerous false alternatives. Consider, for instance, so called experts who deny the existence of right and wrong. For them freedom means the absence of structure. The immature are beckoned to follow every whim and celebrate all emotions. These ‘authoritative voices’ offer salt water to the thirsty.

This study begins a series on the Ten Commandments. The ‘ten words’ were written on stone by the finger of God. They reveal the heart of the Creator and point the way to life in abundance for his human children. The commandments are a source of living water for souls made thirsty by the salt water of human self-promotion and flavor-of-the-month morality.

We can begin by noting the Old Testament language that delights in God’s law. Pentecost, was established as a week-long festival to celebrate the giving of the law to Israel on Mt. Sinai. And commandments are praised in song. Consider: Psalm 119:163, 164, *I hate and abhor falsehood, but I love your law. Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous rules.*

But questions arise quickly. How can ‘righteous rules’ be a source of blessing? We are born with an aversion to being restricted. The earliest assertion of most children is a loud ‘No.’ The Ten Commandment’s repetition of “thou shalt not” is irksome. We don’t want to hear it. Barriers are, at best, an acquired taste.

In addition, readers of the New Testament discover that Israel’s efforts at law keeping often led to hypocrisy that distanced them from God. The Greek word *nomos* is translated law in the New Testament, frequently with negative implications. In some contexts it refers to merely external behavior or empty ritual. Sometimes *nomos* is the

counterpoint to grace.

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (Galatians 5:18). *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.* (1 Corinthians 15:56). But the law itself is not the core problem—its misuse is. ¹⁰*The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.* ¹¹*For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.* ¹²*So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.* (Romans 7:10-12).

The commandments cannot save us. They cannot break the reign of sin. We must be joined to God to be set free from sin’s deception and the death that results. However, the goodness of the law remains in force. When we submit to the Spirit the law becomes a guide to lead us to that which is *holy and righteous and good.*

The law of the LORD is perfect . . . the precepts of the LORD are right . . . the commandment of the LORD is pure . . . the rules of the LORD are true . . . more to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb (Psalm 19:7-10).

Our goal in these studies, therefore, is to look carefully at the wisdom of the Ten Commandments and to ask God to make them *living water* for us.

So, we turn to the commandments as they are listed in Exodus. An important prologue is stated first.

Exodus 20:1-2—

And God spoke all these words, saying,

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

The statement, *I am the LORD (Yahweh) your God*, is a critical starting point. Yahweh is the personal name of God, setting him apart from other ‘so-called gods.’ It is the name he used in binding himself to Israel by covenant. When God discloses his name he invites his hearers into a vital,

person-to-person relationship with him.

Modern English speakers commonly use names in a casual fashion (nicknames, twitter handles, etc.), but in Hebrew a name carries weight. The articulation of a personal name binds the speaker and hearer to one another. 'I am Yahweh, your God' and when you call to me I will answer.

Second, the prologue points out that the nation receiving the commandments had been rescued *out of the house of slavery*. It is natural to think of God's law as a restraint on freedom, yet the commandments are introduced here in the context of liberation. And each of us shares Israel's history in this regard. We start out in bondage from which God rescues us. We are hemmed in by passions that are too strong and convictions that are too weak. We're trapped by our own excesses and inadequacies. We're beset by hard consequences and personal shame.

And, like Israel, we must be clear that our rescue occurs before commandments are given. The law is not given as a test we must pass in order to become worthy of divine intervention. He saves us because he loves us in all of our inadequacy. The gifts of God always precede his requirements.

As this study series unfolds, each message will focus on one of the 'ten words.' However in this introduction I want to make note of four perspectives that apply to the list of Ten Commandments in their entirety.

First, in these verses we discover what we were made for. The commandments can be understood as an owner's manual for humanity. Having been made in God's image we are given righteous directions for human flourishing that are not dependent on circumstances. They apply to everybody and do not change over time. True worship of God is always right. Faithfulness in marriage is always right. Lying and theft are always wrong. In these matters there is no distinction between Aborigines, Eskimos, and Silicon Valley CEOs. That is why the Ten Commandments were written in stone, and why Jesus said, *Not a stroke of the law will pass away*. The commandments declare God's good purpose for the children he made in his image.

Second, the commandments insist that all human beings are equal to one another. There is no favored caste. Kings and slaves have the same standard applied to them. Nathan was an ordinary man but the indictment spoken by him had full, convicting authority when he brought David's adultery and murder into the open. Therefore, equality before the law should break down barriers and encourage community.

Knowing that all of us fall short of God's design at the same rate and for the same reasons can help bring us together for mutual healing and help.

Also, the fact that the commandments apply to everybody can enable us to say "No" to peer pressure. We are all familiar with the pressure to cover up misdeeds in a family, a church, and a business. But the majority doesn't determine what is right, God's word does. He will honor the one who speaks the truth, refuses a bribe, and upholds wedding vows even when those choices must be made alone.

A third observation that applies to the whole list of commandments: the law addresses motives not behavior alone. Jesus makes this point very clearly in the Sermon on the Mount. We can be guilty of murder and adultery because of what is harbored in our hearts (hatred and lust) even if those twisted convictions are not acted upon.

Our flesh wants to make the commandments small in scope, 'doable' without dependence on God. The Spirit expands and deepens the message of the 'ten words.' Each negative 'thou shalt not' has a positive implication. We are first forbidden to bear false witness against a neighbor and then discover that God intends us to speak words of blessing to our neighbors (even our enemies). We begin with a call to honor our parents and then follow the Lord into care for family brokenness in the wider world. We turn away from coveting and are led into generosity.

Finally, we note the commandments, taken together, reinforce the fundamental reality that, *God is love*. The commandments proceed from God's heart and give us guidance in how to love our Creator and the children he has made. Recall the interaction of Jesus with one of the Pharisees.

³⁶"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"
³⁷And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."
³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:36-40).

Jesus' call to love God and our neighbor is pure water that exposes the deadly brine of self-absorption promoted everywhere in the world around us. But we must be freed from the slavery into which we were born in order for the commandments, once co-opted by sin and death, to become a source of life. Paul's instruction makes this clear:

³For 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, ⁴in 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 (Romans 8:3-4).

The Son's sacrifice and the Spirit's presence redeem the law to fulfill its glorious purpose in us. May we drink deeply.