

7) 20:1-7: THE 10 COMMANDMENTS: PART 1

1) Background and Introduction

- The 10 Commandments are the most influential moral code of all time. They are a strong symbol of what is enduring and just in a world of changing values and shifting moral sands. Human life should be lived within a framework of eternal moral values that transcend the moment and endure for all time and circumstance. These values are “written in stone” and, therefore, are permanent and absolute, not temporary and relative.

- But how are they to be interpreted in different contexts and different situations? Here there is variance among Jewish and Christian writers alike over the centuries beginning in the bible.

- The context within which the 10 Commandments were given, was the ancient world of Mesopotamia, a world pervaded by a sense of law. Centuries before Moses and even before Abraham and Sarah, there were the famous codes of law associated with the ruler Hammurabi (beautifully carved in stone and housed today in L’Oeuvre museum in Paris). These codes make similar legal provisions to the 10 commandments (against murder, etc.), but there are also important differences.

A) The emphasis in Hammurabi’s codes is on the greatness of the king and the importance of his political achievements. The 10 commandments focus solely on God and their basis is the saving and gracious call of God to a people. “I am the Lord who brought you out of the house of slavery” Ex. 20:2).

B) The 10 commandments are framed as a covenant agreement between God and Israel, not as legal decrees by a human king.

C) The laws are framed differently as well. Hammurabi’s code declares that if such and such a crime is committed such and such a punishment is to be meted out. The 10 commandments are unconditional in nature. They are the inflexible and timeless words of God to Israel and through Israel to humankind.

2) The importance of the 10 commandments in the Bible.

- Deuteronomy repeats the 10 commandments and calls them the “10 words” of God Deut: 4:13 (“Decalogue” in English). They are believed to be written by the finger of God.

- The prophets recall the 10 commandments to the people as a means to bring them to repentance and restoration (e.g. Hosea uses the commandments as a measure of the sinfulness of his own generation 11:1,12:13).

- Psalm 81 celebrates the Exodus experience and quotes the prologue to the 10 commandments (Exodus 20:2).

- In the New Testament, Jesus frequently sums up the 10 commandments as love of God and neighbour which turns the negative “thou shalt not” into the positive “thou shall love”. Jesus also uses this interpretation of the intent of the 10 commandments to counter the interpretation of the religious leadership of his day (e.g. on the Sabbath or about punishment upon 3rd and 4th generations).
- Paul follows Jesus in the gospels by emphasizing the essence of the law as love, and love as a spiritual fulfillment of the law. This allows for a large variety of people, Jew and Gentile, to fulfill the law without having to fulfill all the ceremonial, ritual, and daily regulations surrounding the 10 commandments in the rest of the Pentateuch (i.e. the 5 books of Moses).

3) The 10 commandments themselves.

1. “You shall have no other gods before me.” v.3

The ancient world was teeming with deities. The Egyptians had Ammon, the Canaanites had Baal, the Babylonians, Philistines, etc., all had their gods. Gods were also believed to be territorial, confined to a given place and over a certain people. In Exodus, God is not confined to national borders or any other political or cultural configuration. God is sovereign over the whole world. God is first and foremost. But is God only one? Ancient Israel believed their God was the greatest, but not that there were no other gods. The imperative here is that allegiance is owed to God alone for God is both their saviour and the sovereign God over all that lives.

2. “You shall make for yourself no graven image or likeness.” v.4-6

- The NRSV translates the Hebrew ‘*pesel*’ as “idol” whereas the older RSV translates it as “graven image”. The latter is more inclusive and can refer to a neutral carving or statue. Any likeness of God is forbidden. There is no room for worshiping God by artistic or representational devices. Why? The image may fall short of the mark. It may confuse God with the image and therefore becomes an idol. It reduces God to space and limits the metaphorical imagery necessary for experiencing the mysterious presence and movement of the divine. It also reduces God to human imagination. And yet, is there no room for human creativity in expressing God without it being idolatrous? How could God be represented and expressed as energy, and especially as the energy of love?

- Another reason for rejection of idols is that God is jealous (or zealous). There is no room for sharing loyalties or affections with other gods. Nor is there room for false or mixed loyalties. God’s will and the human will can never be confused. Once again, though, may we not consider whether if God is truly love may God not be known and experienced in other faith traditions and expressions of deity (so long as they express and inspire a greater compassion)?

- Calvinists (Presbyterians in Scotland, and Reformed in Holland) were particularly insistent on the importance of this commandment. God’s sovereignty alone has been a motto of Calvinists and it is spoken against any form of idolatry that would confuse our

sole loyalty to God alone or reduce God's will to our human will or its causes. Calvinists also rejected any form of artistic or iconographic representation of God over against Catholic and Orthodox traditions. "God is spirit and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24)

3. "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God." v.7

The name of God was given to Moses from the burning Bush. Not even Abraham was given knowledge of the name. The name implies closeness and intimacy, and people who know the name have a measure of the power of God given to them. Swearing by someone or something means something to the degree that the person or object has some authority, sanctity or trustworthiness. In Genesis 24 Abraham asks another to swear an oath. Swearing oaths in God's name has always been quite common, and is so today. Jesus, on the other hand, looked forward to the day when oaths would not be necessary - let your yes be yes and your no, no, anything more comes from evil (Matt: 5.33-37). The 3rd commandment recognizes that humans have not yet reached a point of trustworthiness and so the swearing of oaths is, by implication, warranted, but with the serious warning that perjury in the name of God is unacceptable. Any reference to God that fails to do justice to the reality of God inflicts injury on God and God's relation to the world.

8) 20: 8-20 - THE 10 COMMANDMENTS: PART 2

The first 3 commandments address the quality of Israel's relationship to God.

The last 6 commandments deal with interpersonal relationships within the covenant community.

The 4th commandment is a bridge between the two. It addresses obligations to God but also the ordering of priorities within the family.

4. "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy..." (V.8-11)

- Along with the 5th commandment, this one is expressed in positive terms. It is the longest commandment. In Deuteronomy 5:6-21 the Sabbath is linked to the peoples' slavery in Egypt; in Exodus it is linked to the creation of the world.

God is holy and God demands that one day in seven be "set apart" for God.

- God "rested" (*Shabat* or Sabbath) - held back, desisted from work. Why? Because the work was complete. No other creative act was needed until the ugly reality of human sin intruded into the world.

- The Sabbath was not just a day of rest. It was a holy festival in honour of a holy God. The Christian version of the Sabbath is not the last day of the week but the first day (the festival of the Resurrection) or the "Lord's Day." Because Christ is "Lord of the Sabbath", Christian adherence to the Sabbath has tended to emphasize more a spiritual rather than legalistic adherence to its essence. While Calvin understood this, later generations of Calvinists put the kind of emphasis and adherence to the Sabbath at the

same level as Israel of old. How do you honour the Sabbath? Is it a particular day for you, or also a time and practice you commit to outside a particular day?

5. "Honour your father and your mother." (v.12)

- Unlike modern society, ancient society linked family solidarity with the economic and social wellbeing of the people as a whole. Children were the pension guarantee of parents when they got old. Typically the land was the most valuable possession a family held, and it was passed along generation to generation beginning with the eldest male. Thus, the health and wellbeing of parents and the societal generations depended on children taking responsibility and caring for their parents. There is also a good sense that parental abuse was as common then as it is today (and therefore the urgency of this commandment). But may honouring also mean being truthful about justice when there is injustice? Finally, there is also an equal treatment demanded for both father and mother and this is especially precious given the inequality between males and females in ancient society.

- Does this commandment discourage the revolt of children against parental abuse? Even though it has often been used as a club by parents against their children, this commandment is not intended to enslave children to oppressive parenting. Rather it is focused on the responsibility of the young to take care of the old.

- this commandment is about commitment to family: respect, esteem, affection, consideration, appreciation. By honouring our families we honour God. How may we do so with integrity, honesty, truthfulness and compassion for flaws and imperfections?

6." You shall not murder." (13)

- The Hebrew word *ratsach* is translated "to kill" in the RSV or "to murder" in the NRSV. When is killing murder? Is any kind of killing murder? The Old Testament uses *ratsach* in different ways suggesting some ambiguity. But in most cases the word is used to describe killing as retaliation, motivated by animosity and a wish to do harm.

- What constitutes murder in the biblical sense? Is it murder to kill another in defense of one's own country or household? Is it murder to have an abortion even if a mother's health is at stake? Is it murder to terminate the life of a person by withdrawing life support even in the face of a person's intense suffering and inevitable death? Some would say no to all or some of the above. Some believe in a just war, abortion, and euthanasia. But technology is provided us with more choices in life or death options. Also, the right of one over their own bodies, especially women whose bodies have been dominated by men historically and today as well in terms of abuse, is a counter to any abstract application of this law.

- The essential meaning of this commandment is that life is sacred (the commandment does not make distinctions) and it deserves special reverence with special safeguards for its protection and respect.

- Jesus takes this commandment one step further by focusing on the heart. Any form of hate becomes a form of murder, and this must include things like suspicion, animosity, manipulation, ill will and so on.

7. "You shall not commit adultery." (14)

- Like the 5th commandment, the 7th is intended to protect the solidarity and sanctity of the family unit. In the OT view of sexual conduct, there is a distinction made between married and unmarried persons, as well as between male and female (non-binary are not recognized at this point). Sex outside of marriage is less severe (fornication) and entails less severe punishment. The man who so commits it must either marry the girl or pay her family appropriate compensation. Adultery on the other hand, is a lot more serious. But married women suffer worse punishment than married men. This is because, legally, a woman is the property of the male and violating her is violating another male (Deut. 22: 22,28-29). The man who commits adultery with a married woman must be killed along with the woman.

- Jesus on his part, not only does away with killing, but also thinks of the obligations of men and women as the same. Moreover, Jesus attacks the kind of hypocrisy that refrains from outward adultery but practices it in heart and mind. Of course, at this level most everyone is indicted. But Jesus seeks to draw all people into the sphere of God's forgiving grace as humble and repentant human beings.

- Adultery may also be understood as disloyalty or untrustworthiness in any relationship. Moreover fornication (as we have seen it in Revelation) may be interpreted in this way spiritually speaking as unfaithfulness to God's love in our relations with other people or mother earth.

8. "You shall not steal." (15)

- This commandment is related to the 10th. The 10th is about motivations while this one is about actions. One of the concerns is theft as kidnapping (Exodus 21:16). In the ancient world, property was a valuable commodity not least because there was little of it to go around. To steal from another is to rob them of dignity, worth and disrespect them fundamentally.

9. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour." (16)

- In the pre-modern world, there was virtually no physical or scientific evidence, and thus, the testimony of a witness was critical. The integrity of the justice system depended on the integrity of witnesses. This is why lying, especially under oath, was severely punishable. Deuteronomy 19:19 declares that the witness caught lying must receive the punishment of the accused himself.

- Jesus taught that a person's yes or no should be enough and oaths should not be

necessary. This is what is expected of those who call themselves followers of Christ.

10. You shall not covet your neighbour's house...." (v.17)

- The concern here is not just with external activity, but the inner motivations that lead to theft. Honesty before God demands that we must not even want to lay hands on another's possessions. If there is no covetousness there will be no theft.

- But what if we want to build a house like our neighbour's? This commandment has often been used to attack our modern unbridled greed and opulent consumerism. I Timothy 6:10 says that the love of money is the root to much evil. But without a certain level of covetousness or desire, economic progress would not be possible. The 10th commandment is intended to complement the 8th. Not only theft but the impulses behind it are proscribed.

- Jesus taught that what matters is not just the deed but the condition of the heart that leads to a deed. We must examine our motives and consider where they are beneficial and where they are corrosive to our spiritual wellbeing and the wellbeing of others.

Summary

The 10 commandments form the bedrock of the law in the Old Testament (Exodus 21-23, Leviticus 17-26, etc). The word *Torah* can stand for "law" but also for "leading" or "instruction". It sets a standard of conduct and a lifestyle for a people specially chosen and set apart.

The law is celebrated in the Old Testament (good examples in Psalms 1,19,119). Obedience to the law brings true freedom. If obeyed not under constraint but by willing consent, it leads to an inner joy and fulfillment of our created destiny as human beings. It's about building communities where you can trust and respect your neighbour and where everyone's property is respected because everyone has something to protect. And ultimately, it all belongs to God.

Jesus spoke about having come not to abolish but to fulfill the law. Jesus' concern was to get at the heart of the law and then to work outwards. If the heart of the law is love then individual laws need to be changed or adjusted in different contexts of human life. Jesus was sensitive to how "law" can become manipulated and used as a tool to oppress and enslave rather than guide and liberate. Also, one can follow rules but one's heart may be full of hate and resentment about those rules. Obedience must come from deep within or else it is not worthy of God or the life God gave us to live.