

God's Law: Love or Legalism?

Exodus 19:1-9; 20:1-3; 18-21

Sermon for February 20 2022

Introduction

Today we are looking at Question 8 from the New City Catechism.

I will read the question, and then let's read the answer together.

Question 8: What is the law of God stated in the Ten Commandments?

You shall have no other gods before me.

You 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 - you shall not bow down to them or worship them.

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

Honor your father and your mother.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not give false testimony.

You shall not covet.

We are looking at the 10 Commandments for a few weeks. Next Sunday Clement will preach about the first three commandments. For today, I want to spend some time looking at the historical context of the 10 Commandments.

Let's look at today's scripture reading.

Exodus 19:1–9

- 1 Exactly two months after the Israelites left Egypt, they arrived in the wilderness of Sinai.
- 2 After breaking camp at Rephidim, they came to the wilderness of Sinai and set up camp there at the base of Mount Sinai.
- 3 Then Moses climbed the mountain to appear before God. The Lord called to him from the mountain and said,
"Give these instructions to the family of Jacob; announce it to the descendants of Israel:
- 4 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians. You know how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.
- 5 Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me.
- 6 And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.' This is the message you must give to the people of Israel."
- 7 So Moses returned from the mountain and called together the elders of the people and told them everything the Lord had commanded him.
- 8 And all the people responded together, "We will do everything the Lord has commanded." So Moses brought the people's answer back to the Lord.
- 9 Then the Lord said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, Moses, so the people themselves can hear me when I speak with you. Then they will always trust you." Moses told the Lord what the people had said.

Exodus 20:1-3

- 1 Then God gave the people all these instructions:
- 2 "I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery.
- 3 "You must not have any other god but me.

(Verse 3 is Commandment number one. I am not going to read the other nine commandments right now. We just read them in Catechism Question 8. Listen to what happens after God gives the 10 Commandments to the people, in verses 18-21.)

Exodus 20:18-21

- 18 When the people heard the thunder and the loud blast of the ram's horn, and when they saw the flashes of lightning and the smoke billowing from the mountain, they stood at a distance, trembling with fear.
- 19 And they said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen. But don't let God speak directly to us, or we will die!"
- 20 "Don't be afraid," Moses answered them, "for God has come in this way to test you, and so that your fear of him will keep you from sinning!"

21 As the people stood in the distance, Moses approached the dark cloud where God was.

Together we read Isaiah 40:8:

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

Let's pray together.

Father, please send the Holy Spirit to give me wisdom and truth as I preach. Please open our hearts and minds to your truth, so we can glorify you in everything we do. We ask this in the name of Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

People around the world recognize the power and truth of the 10 Commandments. Even people who don't believe in God will tell you that it is wrong to murder, steal, lie, or commit adultery. Jews, Muslims, and Christians all believe these 10 Commandments were given by God for all people. However, there are a lot of differences in how we understand their purpose and application. Even within Christianity, the 10 Commandments can be misunderstood and misused.

Do you know why God gives us laws? Why doesn't he allow us to do whatever we want? Because he loves us. The 10 Commandments are given to us for freedom, my friends.

Look at James 1:25 with me.

25 "But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it."

Obedience leads to blessing. That is what James is saying here. I'm going to ask Naomi to come up and share a short story about this.

Naomi: When I was a girl living on a small island in the Pacific, there was a popular girl in my class named Joanne. Joanne made fun of me as often as she could. This started when we were 10 years old. She once hid my bicycle so I couldn't find it, and I had to walk home from school. Joanne invented lies about me to turn friends away from me. I remember crying after school many days. When we were 16 years old, Joanne began to tolerate me, a little. One night when we were 18 years old we were at a party. Joanne was extremely drunk and sick. Many classmates tried to help her, but she yelled at everyone to leave her alone. Then she asked them to go find me. I was the only person she would allow to help her. Joanne asked me, "Do you know why I hated you so much? Because you did everything right. Your family loved you and God loved you. My parents let me take alcohol from the house, while they were getting drunk with their friends. They just told me to have a good time. They didn't care what happened to me. But

your parents didn't let you do whatever you wanted--because they cared about you." My heart was so sad for Joanne in that moment. I remembered my mother's words to me when I would cry after school. My mom once said, "Those girls are mean to you because they are jealous of you." I did not think my mom knew what she was talking about! Because I couldn't imagine that Joanne might think my life was better than hers. But my mom was right.

Did you hear what Naomi's friend said? "Your parents didn't let you do whatever you wanted--because they cared about you." Children of God, I want you to remember that your Father cares about you. His love for you is the reason behind the 10 Commandments.

There are two mistakes we can make with the 10 Commandments. We can have zero fear or misplaced fear. Many people today have rejected faith in God and his Word. They want to live without rules, like Joanne's family. They have zero fear of disobeying God because they don't believe he exists or has authority over their lives. That is one danger.

Legalism is the other danger. Religious people can very easily fall into the mistake of legalism. The definition of legalism is trying to earn God's approval or blessing through our obedience. Legalism looks like obedience, but it is motivated by fear. There is, of course, a proper place for fear in our relationship with God. Look again at Exodus 20:18-20.

19 And they said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen. But don't let God speak directly to us, or we will die!"

20 "Don't be afraid," Moses answered them, "for God has come in this way to test you, and so that your fear of him will keep you from sinning!"

Did you notice that God spoke directly to the people? That's amazing. The 10 Commandments were so important that God did not speak through Moses this time. Instead, the people heard the voice of God, just as Adam and Eve, and Abraham, and Moses did. But the voice of God was terrifying to the people. As sinful people, we should have a healthy fear of God's power and holiness. God's law is an expression of God's character. Our fear of God and our obedience to the law are connected. That's what Moses meant in verse 20. God gave the first law to Adam and Eve to protect them, so they could enjoy all the other blessings of creation in freedom. But Adam and Eve didn't trust and fear God enough, so they broke that one law. God gave the 10 Commandments for the same reason, to protect us so we can enjoy all the other blessings of creation in freedom.

But legalism turns that freedom into slavery. Exodus 20:2 said, "I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery."

God rescued us from slavery for freedom. But legalism uses the law to put chains of slavery on us once again.

Legalism is unhealthy because it starts with the law, it doesn't start with love.

Maybe this is a good way to illustrate how legalism misleads us. Legalism begins with us and requires God to respond to us. Legalism believes that I can win or lose God's blessing because he responds to my behavior. That is not the gospel. The gospel teaches us something much more beautiful and hopeful. The gospel puts God in the first position, and puts us in the position to respond. God calls himself our Father for good reason. A good parent does not say to a child, "I want you to do the dishes and sweep the floor, and then I will love you." Instead, a good parent says to a child, "I love you and I want to teach you to be a responsible adult. Therefore, I want you to do the dishes and sweep the floor." The child is not doing the chores in order to earn the status of a child. Instead, a child should obey because she is a member of the family, and responds to the love of her parents.

Twice in our passage God reminds us that he is in the first position, and we are to respond to what God has done for us. Before God tells his people what he wants them to do, he first reminds them what he has done.

Look at Exodus 19:4-5 again with me.

4 "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians. You know how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

5 Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me."

In verse 4 God reminds his people that he is their rescuer and protector. They could not free themselves from slavery, so God did it for them. Maybe you noticed that in verse 5 God said "if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure." Perhaps this sounds like legalism? Is God saying that he will stop loving his people if they disobey? No.

The entire Bible is full of evidence that legalism is not the purpose of God's law. God does have expectations for his people. He warned them through Moses that there will be consequences and curses for disobedience. But when the people disobeyed, (and they disobeyed frequently just like we do), there was always a covenant of grace that flowed beneath the surface. You can read about it in Genesis 15, but we don't have time to look at it now.

I want you to hear what God said about grace through the prophet Hosea, around 750BC. At that time the people of Israel had abandoned God and were worshipping false gods like Baal. They were committing spiritual adultery. God spoke to the people like a husband to his unfaithful wife.

Listen to what God said in Hosea 2:13.

13 "I will punish her for all those times when she burned incense to her images of Baal, when she put on her earrings and jewels and went out to look for her lovers but forgot all about me," says the Lord.

That's the law at work. God said he must punish his people for breaking the first and second commandments. And God did punish them. Israel was conquered by Assyria and the people were scattered far away. But God's heart of mercy always provides a path back into relationship with him.

Listen to what God says next in Hosea 2:14–16.

14 "But then I will win her back once again. I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her there.

15 I will return her vineyards to her and transform the Valley of Trouble into a gateway of hope.

She will give herself to me there, as she did long ago when she was young, when I freed her from her captivity in Egypt.

16 When that day comes," says the Lord, "you will call me 'my husband' instead of 'my master.'"

Do you hear the heart of God in those verses? Listen to his deep desire to bring sinful people like us back to himself. Please understand what I mean when I say that God's law is about love not legalism. God's mercy is not a result of him forgetting to enforce the law. God does not simply ignore our disobedience.

God takes obedience to the law very, very seriously. If we are ever tempted to think that God doesn't care about obedience, we must look at the cross. God must punish disobedience because of his justice. But because of his mercy, God punished his son instead of us. The perfect, holy Son of God was sacrificed for our sin. Therefore God's mercy and forgiveness are available to us because of the obedience of Jesus Christ. God cannot ignore the law, that's why he sent Jesus to fulfill the law for us.

Galatians 4:4–7 says it this way:

4 "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,

5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"

7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."

In salvation, God always acts first. God sent his Son, who was born under the law. That means Jesus had the same obligation to obey the 10 Commandments as everyone else. But Jesus fulfilled the law and died to redeem us. That is what God has done for us. Next, God's children respond to their salvation. Not as slaves, but as sons and daughters, like we see in Galatians 4:7.

Maybe this slide will help you see the pattern of God's gracious work in our lives.

1) God acted first. He created human beings in love and gave us good laws to bless us with freedom when we live according to God's design.

- 2) But all human beings fail to obey these laws. Even the best examples of humanity, like King David, committed terrible sins. No one has ever kept God's law perfectly. Except one person, Jesus.
- 3) God responded to our failure by sending his Son to save us through his sacrificial death.
- 4) When we trust in Jesus the Father blesses us with the perfect record of Christ, freeing us from the burden of the law. And we respond with obedience, although we always respond imperfectly and inconsistently.
- 5) However, God continues to act in our lives. He corrects, guides, punishes, encourages, and guides us forward on a path to becoming more like Jesus.
- 6) And one day in heaven there will be no more pain, no more tears, because there will be no more sin.

Here are those six points again:

- 1) *God made people in love and gave us the law for our good.*
- 2) *All people break God's law.*
- 3) *Jesus obeyed the law, and died in our place to pay the penalty for sin.*
- 4) *We trust in Christ, receive his perfect record, and respond with imperfect obedience.*
- 5) *God continues to forgive, correct, and guide.*
- 6) *In heaven, we will never sin again.*

That's the Christian journey, my friends. Where are you on that journey? I hope you have made it to step 4, where you trust in Christ and begin to follow him. Remember that obedience to the 10 Commandments will not bring you to God, because we all break the commandments regularly. Instead, the 10 Commandments are a moral compass leading God's people through this broken world. They provide guardrails on either side of the road, to guide us as we walk along the Way. We do not journey alone., however We have each other, and the Holy Spirit to encourage and strengthen us.

Let's pray together now through that same Spirit: Jesus, you rescued us from slavery to our own sinful desires and habits. You brought us out of darkness into the light of your love and truth. But we are a lot like the people of God in the desert 4,000 years ago. We sometimes want to go back to the old ways. We need a fence of love to keep us on the right path. Father, thank you for the 10 Commandments. Thank you that you love us enough to provide us with rules for godly living. Holy Spirit, please help us to love and obey the law. We want to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength; and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Help us, Jesus, to do this. We ask in your name.

Amen.