

## The Law of God, and the Fear of God

Exodus 20:18–20

We conclude our series on the 10 Commandments with God's people trembling at the foot of a mountain supernaturally shaken, with thunder and lightning, sounds of the trumpet, and smoke — all of which are indicators of holy God. As we've worked through them, it is true for all of us, as we have discussed, that we've been confronted with our inability to keep even one of them.

When we look at the first four **vertical** commandments, our rebellious idolatry is exposed in that we attempt to usurp God and act as sovereign over our own lives, serving idols that we think will satisfy. We misuse the Lord's name. We have not set apart the Lord's day to honor and worship him as ought. If that weren't bad enough, we have resisted God's established authority and not honored our parents in a way that submits to God's commands. We've become aware of **how deep the root of pride runs** as it allows us to justify anger without realizing the same root produces murder. We defiantly misuse God's gift of sex, not just with acts of the body, but with the lust of the heart and mind. We've taken money, objects, resources, and time that did not belong to us, all while not generously sharing with others. We have not been thorough and total truth-tellers; we've slandered, misrepresented others, and outright lied to get what we wanted. We've been silent when we should have told the truth in love. And finally, we saw that our problem is not just what we **do**, but what we **are** at the core as we desire what God has not given and long to advance our war of cosmic treason against God. We've doubted his goodness, been ungrateful, and demanded that he re-evaluate how he provides and rules over us.

And as I've talked to several of you, you've come to the same conclusion that I have: I'm far worse off than I thought. I haven't kept a single Commandment for one minute. And if left to stand on my own before a holy God, **it's absolutely hopeless**. Now when we get **there**, we realize a high view of the Law of God has done exactly what God ordained for it to do. He has exposed our inability to live up to the holy standard established by the very essence and character of God. In his book, **What Is Faith**, J. Gresham Machen wrote, "A low view of the law always brings legalism in religion; a high view of law makes a man a seeker after grace." In other words, if we regard God's law as something passé, something outdated — 10 moral notions with old fashioned values — if that's the way we understand God's moral purity, we imagine we can come up with our own parallel standard to what God has commanded — a standard that we can meet. But when we see the law, as reflective of God's high holiness, we realize it's hopeless. We must be given grace. We must have a Savior.

If we stop there, it is a dark and dreadful picture. That's where the people of God were at the foot of the mountain. They had received God's law, and realized that this mountain-shaking God is who they must answer to. But hear the words of Moses: Do not fear. Do not fear. Let's read and pray and see life-giving, grace-filled intentions toward us through his law.

**Exodus 20:18–20 — <sup>18</sup> Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.” <sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, “Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.”**

## PRAY

Moses, you speak to us. If God speaks to us— if we encounter this holy God... Look how the mountain shakes and all the dark clouds and lightning. If the mountain shakes, we won't survive that.

In a similar way Isaiah was convinced that he was going to come apart at the very seams and disintegrate when he saw the Lord, high and lifted up, who is holy, holy, holy. And it is not the omnipotence and overwhelming majesty of God that would've destroyed Isaiah. It was holiness. That's what he realized about God, as he identified his unholiness: “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” Holiness obliterates sin. All sin. Our God is a consuming fire. (Heb. 12:29)

The people have received his law, they see who God is — and they are terrified. ***Which law is the one they broke that would cause them to die?*** Any of them. All of them. One of them. With Isaiah, God took the initiative to atone for, and cleanse him from his sin so that he would not disintegrate. In a similar way God is taking the initiative through the 10 Commandments to expose our sinfulness so that we realize our sinfulness, just as Isaiah did, and turn from sin and cry out for salvation.

“Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin.” God exposes what will kill us. The white-hot fire of holiness consumes sin. If that is how we live, what we embrace, and refuse to turn from, we will likewise be condemned and consumed by his holy wrath. **But God is gracious.** He is ***testing*** — he is ***revealing*** and ***proving*** and ***exposing*** what is in

### 3

your heart **that you may know its deadly danger**. The way of sinners is hard. **But his plan is not to destroy you, but to save and purify you.**

The Law is gracious and merciful, and even purifying in the same way a diagnosis of a disease is gracious and merciful. If I have a sickness that will kill me, but it is discovered and diagnosed while there is time to treat it, I do not want the doc to say, “Well, it’ll be bad news and he won’t like it. So I’ll ignore it, and he’ll be dead in a year.” As opposed to, “You have a deadly disease. If you do nothing, you will get worse and die in a year. But I can treat the disease and you will be saved.” The CAT scan of God’s law has shown us what’s inside of us. Or as Luther put it, the mirror of God’s law shows us what we look like. God revealed his holiness that we may repent and slay whatever is not compatible with holiness. **This is life. This is blessing!** Tis mercy all, immense and free.

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who practice it have a good understanding.** (Psalm 111:10) Fear of the Lord yields wisdom for living **now**, it produces wisdom that saves us **then** — in the coming Great Judgment, and it establishes justice and righteousness in the nation that is governed by his law.

The wisdom it produces now is a life of obedience that leads to God’s blessing. We are not under the law as a covenant of works required for justification, but as a rule of life and standard of righteousness. God made the world and established it, the way that it runs. He created **us** in his image. He established **human relationships and spheres of communion**. He established seasons and natural law for human flourishing. Creation has baked into it his good ways, his righteous standards. When we obey his commands, we experience his blessing. Indeed, blessing follows obedience. Would you not agree that it is silly to violate God’s laws, to walk in disobedience and then expect God’s blessing? When I work, rather than steal, I am provided for, my family is provided for, and the people of God are helped through my generosity. When I seek first his kingdom, he provides what I need. Gratefully submitting to God’s sovereignty and Providence in my life, reduces anxiety and allows me to sleep well and serve well where I am. Fearing God and keeping the Commandments produces blessing now.

Fearing God because his Law exposes my moral bankruptcy produces eternal blessing as I cry out to God for mercy and salvation. **2 Timothy 3:15** teases that out a bit telling us that the wisdom of God’s word makes us **wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus**. That’s Paul’s way of describing this

## 4

process of God's law revealing our disease and driving us to the Savior for a cure. It makes us wise and salvation through faith in Christ. The law is a whip, says Luther, that drives us to the cross. There we meet our Savior who pays our debt, and enrobes us in his righteousness.

In the same way that the fear of the Lord leads to wise living for an individual, embracing God's Law as a nation establishes the enduring, unchanging standard of justice for her citizens, leading to blessing on the nation, just as the individual. Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people. In the same way that an individual is thwarted and judged as he defies God's laws, so a nation is thwarted and ultimately consumed by chaos as that nation refuses to submit to the immutable laws of God's justice and holiness. A people who reject God have rejected what God provides for life and blessing. A culture that has stripped God's law from the walls of the school room, and the walls of society in general, will have no peace, no safety, no security. Those things are what come through submitting to God's laws. Whenever man does what is right in his own eyes — and let's remember that the eyes of those who resist God are darkened to truth — then we live in darkness. If we will not have God as our provider and King, we will have a darkened, godless government. Woe to those who put darkness for light. As the current catchphrase goes, it's Christ or chaos.

God gives us this oxymoron: Do not fear; yet God has come that you might fear. Fear him now, submit to his instructions, and look away from yourself to the Savior who fulfills everything perfectly on your behalf. Fear now and you will not have to fear him then, on the Great Day. The Savior absorbs your condemnation.

It is not God's intent to destroy them at the foot of the mountain. He comes to prepare them for the meeting that is written down on his calendar. At that meeting, they will not be separated by the distance of a mountain, but they will meet face-to-face.

The day is coming when we will be judged by the righteous standard of his law. Jesus is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. He will judge the world with equity, as we read in the Call to Worship. There will be no partiality, and we will all be measured by his righteous standard.

## 5

The good news of the gospel — the greatest news you will ever hear is that Jesus himself has come to pay the penalty for every violation of God's law. Not only that he has perfectly kept the righteous law. He has become the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. (Heb 5:9) The price for sin, he paid on the cross when the Father poured out his wrath against all sin. And the perfect righteousness that God requires Jesus provided – and he provides it for those who turned to him in faith.

To those standing at the foot of the mountain they see that God is holy, his ways are holy. But he has not come to destroy them in their sin, but show their need of a Savior. To those in the sound of my voice, God says, Today is the day of salvation. Today is the day of grace, to turn away from a sin-loving life — such a life that will be destroyed by God's consuming holiness. Look to Christ, turn to him in faith, trusting his atoning sacrifice, which God has provided. Submit to the Lord and live.

Rejoice in glorious hope! Our Lord and Judge shall come.