

“The Good Laws of a Loving God”

There have been too many times in my life when I thought I didn't need anyone to instruct me or tell me what to do. I've wasted a lot of time trying to put things together before finally, in frustration, going back to read the instructions. I've busted things because I didn't learn the right way to use them. I've hurt people when I didn't need to because I didn't listen to the instruction that would have helped me to do better.

Let me ask you a question: *Do you like instruction?* It's a trick question because the Bible, in the book of Proverbs tells us only a fool hates instruction. The wise person loves instruction, longs for it, seeks it out and submits to it. This weekend we come to this famous passage of the Bible in which God gives us crucial instruction on how to live life well. The Ten Commandments are tremendously influential, not only biblically but also historically. And yet, there are often only understood superficially. To understand them correctly and to grasp their relevance for our lives today there are three things we need to see. If we understand these three truths we will treasure these commands.

The first is that ...

I. THERE IS A GREAT LOVE THAT LIES BEHIND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS.

Exodus 20:1-2 begins by stressing that God speaks *all these words*. He says, *“I am the LORD your God.”* And, I am the one *“who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”* Do you hear what God is saying? He says before I give you laws that will guide you let me remind you of the love that has redeemed you.

A. We will never understand much less treasure the laws of God unless we see them as coming from the God of love.

There is a story of redemption that leads up to the giving of God's law. At this point in the story it has been three months since God had demonstrated his power over the gods of Egypt and delivered his people from their slavery. The memory of the Passover night when they were saved from judgment by the blood of the sacrificed lamb should have still been fresh in their minds. It had been less than three months since they had seen God destroy the pursuing Egyptian army. It had also been less

than three months since the crowd of redeemed people, liberated from slavery, stampeded and grumbled their frustration at God.¹ They grumbled about water, and God provided water and promised to go on providing for them if they listened to him. It was right after hearing these clear promises from God that they got hungry. Instead of asking God to provide for them, loud grumbling broke out again against God and against Moses. God patiently and graciously met their needs. He sent quail and manna (a bread-like substance) to feed them.² The next time they found themselves without water God provided in a way that everyone could see. Moses was told to strike a dry rock with his staff and water gushed out, and everyone drank deeply.³ In the chapter before this, **Exodus 19:4** God gave Moses a vivid image – He told Moses to tell the people *"you yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles wings and brought you to myself."* What takes place in the Bible is so real and relevant to us all. It is showing us that we can be given repeated and reassuring evidences of God's care for us and still respond to God with a scary hardness of heart. So God reminded us of his love as he gives us his laws for life.

There was a cartoon that showed Moses giving the Ten Commandments. With a look of dismay the people say, *"We were hoping to be accepted as we are."* The amazing thing is they had been accepted as they were. God didn't say, "If you keep these law, *then* I will redeem you." They had already been redeemed! Now God was going to give them instructions for their new life with Him

B. We will never treasure the laws of God unless we see that they are given, in love, for our good.

There is a place in the book of Deuteronomy, **Deuteronomy 6** where God gives believing parents instructions about passing his laws on to their children. It pictures a child coming to a mother or father and asking what is the meaning of these rules the Lord has commanded? Moses says when that question comes up you are to tell the story of how we were slaves and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And he showed us signs and wonders. He brought us out to bring us to the land he swore to give to our fathers. Then **verse 24** says this: *And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day.* God's law is not an arbitrary list of rules to prove our loyalty. God's laws are an expression of his love. We are made in his image and likeness, so the laws that reflect his integrity and goodness also serve our wholeness and flourishing. When a loving parent catches their 18-

month-old on hands and knees curving their back down like the cat to lap the cat food from the bowl. What do they do? They say, *"Stop that, darling. You are a little girl, not a kitty. You have to learn about who you are and all the differences between a little girl and a cat. Sit up here with me and I'll give you something better."*⁴ God says he, more than anyone, knows who we are, how we're made and what will cause us to flourish. So the God who redeems us in love reveals his will for us because of the same love. ***If we are wise we will see that and if we believe we have been redeemed by a loving God we will treasure the revelation of his will for our lives and want to obey him.***

*There's a great love that lies behind the Ten Commandments.
The second thing is that...*

II. THERE IS A DEEP WISDOM THAT RUNS THROUGH THE TEN COMMANDMENTS.

The English word "law" or "commandment" is traditional in our translations, and it is natural for us to use. But it might not help us grasp what God is doing for us here. The Hebrew word *Torah* is derived from the word which means "to teach." The laws of God are his teachings – it is like the teaching a wise parent gives a beloved child for their well being. God's teachings convey deep wisdom.

A. The Ten Commands give wisdom, and they require wisdom.

Scholars that there is a big difference to the way laws were written in the ancient world and in the modern world. We try to create exhaustive law codes in which every activity regulated or prohibited is specifically covered in a separate law. I found out this week that in 1982 the justice department tried to determine the total number of laws on the book in the United States and after two years it proved to be a failed effort. In a *Wall Street Journal* article on this, it said at this time no one knows how many thousands of laws are on the books in America. With this approach, everything is permitted that isn't explicitly forbidden, and that's why criminals often get off though so-called a "loophole" in the law. Ancient laws didn't work this way. They didn't have the paper for it for one thing. So ancient people were expected to figure out from the principles and examples in the laws what was the true intention of the law and to use wisdom in applying to life. That's the way it is with the Ten Commandments. They require a little thought and wisdom. If you were to say, *"I didn't bear false witness against my neighbor I just told a lie about the goat I sold."* All those listening would have said, *"who do you think*

you're fooling?" They would have felt you insulted their intelligence and were guilty of both false witness *and* stealing. ⁵

In the book of Psalms, you often find mention of *meditation* on the law of God. If the Bible clearly says thou shalt not murder or commit adultery, what is there to meditate on? Well, Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that behind the law against murder and adultery is a concern to treat people with love and respect so that if you hate a man or lust after a woman, you have violated those commands in your heart. There is more to the Ten Commandments than meets the eye. There is a deep wisdom about living life in harmony with God. So we should treasure the deep wisdom that runs through the Ten Commandments and reflect on their deeper meaning with wisdom. **Psalm 119:14-16**, *In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. (He treasures them) ¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. ¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.*

B. The Ten Commandments offer wisdom that connects relationship with God with care for people.

1. The first four commandments - sometimes called the first table of the law - are vertical, spiritual, God-focused.

1.) The first commandment calls us to put God first – to make him our highest priority and give him our greatest love and loyalty.

2.) The second is to worship God as he has revealed himself to us. We are not to make an image that reflects our own limited imagination. To follow the imagination of your heart and to worship some idea or image of God that you prefer is to remain ignorant of God as he has revealed himself. We might prefer a visible image but we must worship in awe of God's transcendent greatness.

3.) The third is to reverence God in the way we use his name. We are not to use it in vain, flippantly, irreverently or inappropriately. Jesus said, out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. Our words too often reveal a lack of reverence for our Holy God.

4.) The fourth was to honor God by keeping the Sabbath day. We acknowledge God's lordship over our time and the humble dependence on him that allows us to rest. The fourth commandment is the only one not explicitly repeated in the New Testament. After the resurrection of Jesus, Christians worshipped on Sunday, which was called *The Lord's Day* but the principle of a rhythm of work, rest and worship acknowledges that our whole life and all time belong to God.

2. The last six commandments - sometimes called the second table of the law - are horizontal, social, people-focused.

5.) The fifth commandment is to honor your mother and father. God cares about what goes on in families, but this also takes wisdom. The more complicated your story, the more deeply you need wisdom and most often help with that. Honoring isn't the same as obeying or trusting. When an injured adult child commits to learning what it means to honor an abusive parent it is the beginning of healing journey because it requires you to find your joy, strength, and identity from the deep well of love your heavenly father has for you.

6.) The sixth: You shall not murder. "Murder" is a good translation of the Hebrew word used here. It is talking about taking human life out of anger or selfishness. We are to love and care for the lives of others.

7.) The seventh, *You shall not commit adultery*. In **Matthew 5:27** Jesus says this commandment calls us to heart-deep sexual purity.

8.) The eight, You shall not steal. There are many ways to do that.

9.) The ninth, You shall not bear false witness is a call to be truthful.

10.) The tenth: You shall not covet. Takes us to where it all begins.

James 1:14 says sin begins when we are drawn away by evil desires.

Nothing is to be more important than grateful trust in a loving God.

C. The Ten Commandments offer wisdom that connect our inward life and our outward life.

There is a pattern to the commandments.

First – The God focused commandments

- Thoughts (1-2)
- Words (3)
- Deeds (4)

Second – The People – focused commandments

- Deeds (5-8)
- Words (9)
- Thoughts (10)

It begins and ends with your inner life, putting God first. Because you put God first, the conclusion is not coveting what others have. Everything is integrated from the inside out beginning with God.

There is a great love that lies behind the Ten Commandments and a deep wisdom that runs through the Ten Commandments. And then...

III. THERE IS A HIDDEN BLESSING TO BE FOUND IN THE TEN COMMANDMENTS.

In **Exodus 20:18-19** After God gives the Ten Commandments the people were afraid. Sure there was sensory overload from the thunder, lightning, and smoke on the mountain. But it seems likely that their fear was also the fear that comes from knowing God is holy and majestic and we are flawed and have transgressed his laws. The blessing is hidden in that it doesn't seem obvious but it is this: If you let the law convince you of your brokenness and sin, it can then lead you to the Savior whose grace can forgive and empower you.

A. The good laws of a loving God show us our sins.

1. The law cannot save us. Romans 3:20 *For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*

A helpful analogy is that the law of God is like a mirror. If you look in a mirror and see your face is dirty you don't try to rub your face on the mirror to wash it clean. The mirror shows you're your need for soap and water. In the same way, the law of God shows your need for the cleansing grace that comes through Jesus.

2. The problem is not the law but us. There is a verse in **Romans 8** that says: *“What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did, in sending his son....”*

Picture a large roast cooked in the oven until it is tender. You open the oven and stick a fork in it and try to lift to the counter and what happens? The fork pulls through. The problem isn't the fork. It is the weakness of the flesh. To lift it you need to get under it with a spatula or lift the whole pan. The problem is not the law but the weakness of our flesh.

3. The law orders life but it does not give life. **Galatians 3:21** says: *For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.* If there was a law that God could have given, that you could have obeyed, and that would have meant God could just give you life, and you wouldn't end up under the judgment of the law, would have been the plan! The plan would not have been bloody sweat in the garden with Jesus crying *“let this cup pass from me nevertheless your will be done”*. The plan would not

have been the betrayal, the scourging, the crown of thorns and the cross. But no law could do what he did.

He perfectly kept the law that we have repeatedly broken. Then he offered his righteous life as a sacrifice for our sins. He bore, for us, the judgment that we deserve for our failure to obey God's law.

B. The law shows us our sin. Christ saves us from our sins.

By faith alone you receive him as your Savior. There is a place in the book of Philippians where the apostle Paul talks about his own impressive struggle to keep God's law before he came to rely on Jesus and then he sums up his conclusion this way. In **Philippians 3:9** he says *I want to be found in him (Christ) not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.* When you receive Jesus, when you turn to Him in repentance and trust in him as your Savior, the Bible uses strange and strong language, it says you are found *"in him"*. God looks at you and no longer sees your blemished record of wrongdoing. He sees Christ's perfect life of obedience. The moment you trust in him you are found in him with the righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ. That redeems you, saves you and frees you.

Conclusion

Believing in Jesus and the gospel transforms how you think about the Commandments of God. You can appreciate the wisdom in the commandments – all of them - without being condemned by them. Faith in Jesus Christ brings a renewed trust in God's love for you. You can try without fearing failure. You come to see that in the revelation of his will for us the God who redeems and loves us has given us deep wisdom. And you can treasure his commandments. In **John 14:15** Jesus said, *if you love me keep my commandments!*

The poet and songwriter William Cowper wrote a hymn he titled: *Love Constraining to Obedience*. The chorus says:

*"To see the law by Christ fulfilled,
To hear his pard'ning voice,
Transforms a slave into a child,
And duty into choice."*

Amen.

A Prayer of Response

Father in heaven, the beauty; the breadth and the depth of your commandments leave us humbled. Our need for Christ could not be clearer. When we see him, keeping your law for us and suffering on the cross to pay for our transgressions we are stunned. What is amazing is not the severity of the law but the depth of your love. Teach us to so thoroughly rely on Jesus that we are set free to love you, to meditate on and treasure your laws of life and to want to live in harmony with them because you are our God and we want to have no other God before you.

¹ Exodus 15

² Exodus 16

³ Exodus 17

⁴ I adapted this illustration from the introduction to Edith Schaeffer's book on the Ten Commandments: *LifeLines*, p. 7-8

⁵ There is a helpful excursus on *The Paradigmatic Nature of Biblical Law* in Douglas Stuart's commentary on Exodus, p.p 442-445.