

“God’s Top Ten or Way Back When?”

Exodus 20

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I wonder if you think that the Ten Commandments are relevant to your life – today, any day, most days – do the Ten Commandments intersect with, have a say in your life? Now if your immediate response is ‘well of course!’, then I would like you to not be too indignant and at least give me a chance to express why I might wonder about that; and if your answer is ‘well, no, not really’, I want you to know that I am not going to shame you for that, but that I would also like you to consider how the Ten Commandments could be relevant for you.

But to speak to both the affirmations and hesitations about relevancy, I’m not going to deal with all or any of the Ten Commandments specifically (if you want that – I can give you a good price on a 10-sermon series on the Ten Commandments that I preached in 1993 – I’ll give it to you free!). Instead what I want to focus on today is the broader idea of commandments – of law – of how we perceive it and respond to it and use it.

And the Ten Commandments are a great test case for that, simply because they are so well known – known at least in our western, American, Judeo-Christian culture as a basis for society. People may not know what all of them are, but most everyone could likely name a few. There was an epic/blockbuster movie made about

them, right? – Charlton Heston. You’ll find that the Ten Commandments are often displayed at courthouses – they are seen as a basis for our civic laws. They’re part of our social/cultural fabric.

But my sense is with all that, that the prevailing perception of the Ten Commandments is a negative one. And I don’t mean negative as in disagreeing with or being opposed to them – but negative in the sense that they are seen primarily as prohibitions – as restrictions – as grounds for judgment and enforcement of punishments. I think that perception is there in us whether you say these commandments are relevant to you or not: generally people would describe the Ten Commandments as a set of prohibitions imposed on us. And that is an idea I want to take issue with today.

And to do that I want to say four things – which means I need to be succinct! – so here goes:

1) The first thing is this: I wonder when you hear this passage of the giving of the law – and then if you had one word to describe it, what would that word be? Well, my hunch is that of the many adjectives that we could come up with among us for the law, that “GIFT” would not be the one most often mentioned, and maybe it would not be mentioned at all. But what if that is a good word? What if that is even the best

word to describe what is happening here? GIFT - the Law as a gift from God for the good of God's people...

I expect that you took some notice this morning of where the Old Testament lesson was in our liturgy – right? – read after the confession and assurance as the law. It seemed particularly fitting today to put that passage there – but something for us to take notice of in our liturgy is that the law is ALWAYS there, that is, the law always comes AFTER confession and assurance. I've said here before and will I'm sure again, that in the Reformed tradition, one of our great theological strengths is a view of the law that sees it as a gift that follows after grace to help shape our gratitude to God. Other traditions speak of the law as pointing out our sinfulness or of keeping a restraint on society – and that has its place – but the Reformers emphasized the aspect of the law as a gift for grateful and redeemed living. It's what our liturgy says if you look: "LAW AS A GUIDE TO GRATEFUL LIVING". Try that on once: when you hear LAW, you think GIFT...law as a life-giving gift –it's a whole different feeling than is often present with Law.

The law is a gift – and that leads to the second thing:

2) ...which is to receive/to see the Law as a revelation – as a wisdom from God that is beyond our own making or capacity. I don't know if this is true for you, but what I realize is that I can easily tend toward seeing these 10 commandments as a kind of

conventional wisdom or assumed standard for life – they are so familiar that they may seem obvious. But if you, or I, or a community, were to make up a set of rules for life – these laws are not necessarily is not the obvious choice. I'm not saying that the human mind and culture has no capacity for good law or justice or order other than this Sinai revelation, but I am saying that there is also the human capacity for being self-serving and downright evil. So what we find here is not an easy off-the-top-of Moses'-head list, but a unique revelation from God that describes worship of God and life for community in a way that is beyond human capacity to invent. This is revelation – the wisdom of God to be treasured.

3) and that leads to the 3rd thing...which is that this gift, this revelation from God is not just words – or even more not just antiseptic assertions. It is a connection to God's own self – it is a way of being in relationship with God. That is – in good biblical and Reformed language – it is about covenant: about God's love for us and our love for God – God's commitment to us, and ours to God. Which means we not only see some of who God is here, but there also is even an intimacy to what happens here. This is a God who wants the best for God's people – and ultimately for humanity – and in being given the law and seeking the life-giving fullness of following it, we are put into a deeper and deepening relationship with God.

4) which leads to...the last thing. Which is that this law leads us also into a deeper relationship with one another and our world. This is not just ‘God commanding you – God judging you – God keeping track of your points’: this is not your personal pass/fail test from God. This gift/revelation/ relationship from and with God is what enables and empowers and calls and guides us in how to be a blessing to others. This is not God as the ultimate killjoy – this is the framework for living that makes space for the fullness of life for all.

I said at the start that I wasn’t going to say much about the specific commandments themselves – and I haven’t – although there is much to study and learn from each of them. But there are many more laws too – in scripture – in the life of the church as a community – even in our society...to sort through and discern how to follow.

But as we do so, it makes a difference what it is to us – from the beginning commandment in Genesis through the Ten Commandments at Sinai through the commandments of Jesus – are these prohibitions or requirements imposed on us as a burden for us to bear? No – they are gift and wisdom from our God – they are a relationship with our God – they are life for us that leads us to be a blessing to our world. Thanks be to God. AMEN.