

STUDY NOTES

Lesson 8: Exodus 20-23

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The Ten Commandments are the moral foundation of not only the Judeo-Christian culture of the Western world, but an influence on the whole ethical sensibility of our planet. They are one of the ways that the prophecy made to Abraham has come true: "In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (Gen 12:3) You might say they become the most important instructions ever given to the human race! The Jews call them "The Ten Words" (The Decalogue). It is written in the first verse of Exodus 20 that "God spake all these words." "These words the Lord spake...in the mount out of the midst of the fire, of the cloud, and of the thick darkness, with a great voice: and he added no more. And he wrote them in two tables of stone, and delivered them unto me [Moses]...Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice... Did ever people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as thou hast heard, and live?" (Deut.5:22;4:36,33)

These basic building blocks of human morality did not originate in the mind of Moses or trickle down to Israel from ancient Sumerian law codes. It was God who wrote them with His own finger on stone—a symbol of permanence—so that there could never be any doubt of their origin. When a person breaks one of them, he is not breaching a human rule, but setting himself in opposition to the Creator's own laws for mankind. They are simple, spare and powerful—a remarkable gift to the world. Though the godless today try to tear them down as outmoded and useless, they form the basis for the laws of every society based upon a system of justice; they are as true today as ever.¹

I BROUGHT YOU OUT OF THE HOUSE OF BONDAGE

"I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." (Exodus 20:2) After the mighty blasts of the trumpet, God's first words were to remind them of His deliverance, and thus engender *gratitude for all that had been done for them*. God did not want them to covenant obedience to Him as slaves did to a pharaoh. Rather, he had brought them out of Egypt with a great show of his care and power and concern for their welfare. They were no longer slaves but free men and women, and he wanted free men and women to choose to covenant to obey his law. Even today God wants men and women to be in a relationship with him, and not simply obey a set of impersonal rules out of fear.

WHY ARE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS SO NEGATIVE?

Eight of the Ten Commandments are expressed in the negative ("Thou shalt not..."), the simplest, sparest form of moral directives. Some criticize the Ten Commandments for not being more positive and have even rewritten them into what they imagine they should be. But the list of eight things that one should *not* do provide the perfect framework for clear civil laws that do not infringe upon our personal freedoms or moral agency.

For example, what if instead of "Thou shalt not commit adultery," the command was something like "Thou shalt be the best husband or wife you can be." That may be a good personal goal, but it is no basis for laws. Who will judge or enforce whether you are being a good spouse? The Ten Commandments don't say: "Thou shalt speak well of all people," or "thou shalt always speak truth." Rather they command: "Thou shalt not bear false witness." False witness can be determined in a court of law; but it would be dangerous territory for government authority to make laws requiring positive speech. We certainly would not want government to start determining if we were in proper compliance with positive

commands to speak well of each other². We keep government interference to a minimum when the basic moral strictures of our society are framed in the negative, and held to a bare minimum of those things that will ensure civil order and be easily enforced.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THE MOSAIC LAW: TWO DIFFERENT THINGS

The words spoken by God from Mt. Sinai and known as the Ten Commandments (Deut. 10:4) are not to be confused with what we call the Mosaic Law or the Law of Moses. The latter are civil statutes and legal judgments that Moses wrote down per God's instruction on Mt. Sinai. In the following scripture in Deuteronomy, you can see the separation:

"And he declared unto you *his covenant*, which *he commanded you* to perform, even ten commandments; and *he wrote them* upon two tables of stone. And *the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments*, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go over to possess it." (Deuteronomy 4:13-14)

WHY THE MOSAIC LAW?

The Law of Moses was given by God to the Israelites to do them good. It consisted of moral and civic laws and instructions governing everything from what they ate to how their courts were supposed to function. For the 400 years they had been slaves under the whip and abuse of the Egyptians they had not been responsible for their own government, but were governed by Pharaoh. Such a state of dependence tends to create laziness and irresponsibility. God's goal in giving the people a law code was to help them move beyond this learned helplessness to a state of responsibility for their own lives.

This would not come all at once. God did not wave a wand over them and instantly change their personal and social sense of morality; but he did give them a system of laws to help them learn to live together in a productive and equitable fashion. The guidelines such as those in chapters 21, 22 and 23 lifted them from thinking like slaves to a new awareness of themselves as a nation. New standards of behavior were created by the law. Over time, as they reached upward towards these standards, the whole society would be lifted and advanced toward a more just society.

THE MOSAIC LAW CODE

Chapter 21 begins with the impressive declaration: "Now these are the judgments which thou shalt set before them." (Exodus 21:1) The word here translated judgment is elsewhere translated "justice" and "rights." God is going to give to the people a system of justice, based on their rights as free men and women that will lead to a more just society. It is impressive that the legal code begins with law concerning the rights of slaves and women, two groups of people that typically had no rights whatsoever in ancient cultures.

SLAVERY

Anti-religionists today love to criticize the Bible for not abolishing slavery; so let us see if this is a legitimate criticism. The Israelites had been for 400 years slaves in the culture of Egypt, a society whose economic base was slave labor and one in which slaves had not a single right or recourse to a justice system. This was not very different from the vast majority of ancient civilizations of the times. War was the political system of the day, and slaves were the spoils of war. And it was the slaves that did the work of the world.

Out of a company of former slaves God began building the nation of Israel. Slavery was there to stay in that day and age. But the first thing God says to them at the foot of Mt. Sinai is "I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." (Exodus 20:2) They had been slaves themselves and not only should they of all people appreciate the meaning of freedom, but they should have compassion on

those who found themselves in bondage. That is why their law code begins with the rights of slaves.(!) Servants were to be treated as human beings and given actual legal rights, and though their labor was owned by another, they themselves were men, not animals.

The typical slavery of Israel was bond servitude. Without the sophisticated institutions of our own day, such as welfare and social security, to provide a safety net against poverty, the poor who couldn't pay their debts could forfeit their own freedom and become a servant of someone in return for their labor. They could also sell their children as servants for the payment of a debt. One other case was that of a thief who might be indentured to pay back what he had stolen.

No bond servant could serve more than 6 years (Ex. 21:2) unless the slave voluntarily forfeited that right and declared he wanted to stay with his master indefinitely. This provision may have been invoked by older servants who preferred security in their old age in their master's home, rather than freedom in a world in which they had little hope of financial success. As for young women being sold by their families, it must be remembered that every young woman of that time could look forward to an arranged marriage. If a girl came from a poor family that could not provide a dowry for her marriage, the option of being sold into a family to be someone's wife, was much better than the alternative of begging or worse. And the Mosaic Law prevented her from being misused and treated deceitfully. She still had robust rights that protected her position. (Ex. 21:7-11) These laws were truly revolutionary for their day, and nothing like them exists in any of the earlier law codes that have been discovered in ancient world cultures.

CIVIL LAW CODES

If the 21st chapter of Exodus is a kind of Bill of Rights, the 22nd and 23rd chapters are like case law for the civil magistrates to consult when dealing out justice. They concern what constitutes criminal actions and what should be the appropriate consequences of such crimes. They are notable for their clarity and fairness. For example, even a thief has rights in the merciful code of Israel's law. Typically, as in Hammurabi's code that governed in ancient Babylon, a thief was executed or maimed. Under Mosaic Law he had to repay double what he had stolen, or more if he had sold the stolen thing. If he broke into a home at night and was killed by the owner, the homeowner was not charged with a crime. But in the day, the homeowner must not exert deadly force, presumably because he can more easily get help or at least identify the thief so he can be apprehended.

The laws also provided for penalties for criminal negligence to prevent the selfish and thoughtless from causing harm to innocent neighbors. For example, if a man dug a well or pit, and left it uncovered, he was liable for damages if someone's animal fell in. If he kindled a fire that burned his neighbor's property, he must pay. Human nature being what it is, such laws made for an orderly, predictable environment in which to earn a livelihood and interact with the neighbors. The laws were humane and reasonable, reflecting the fact that they came from a just and merciful God.

MORE LAWS FOR A HUMANE SOCIETY

In Exodus Chapter 23 we find illustrations of the "blindness" of justice. These verses tell the magistrates not to pervert justice for the poor, the weak in society who often had no one to speak for them, but neither to favor the poor man because he is poor. Justice demands that one seek the truth of a matter regardless of the economic status of the parties involved. No judge is ever to take a gift because that would pervert justice. The command is not to *take* a bribe; presumably if there were no bribe takers there would be no

bribe makers. A society is seriously compromised when the wheels of justice are routinely greased with expected corruption money.

Three commands go together. You shall not follow a crowd to do evil; you shall not put your hand with the wicked; and you shall not circulate a false report. When you hear a false report and do nothing, you by default have put your hand with the wicked and followed the crowd to do evil. A righteous man has the obligation to put a stop to gossip.

Another law is remarkable in that it heralds Jesus' later command to love your enemy. When one finds a lost animal belonging to an adversary, "you shall surely bring it back to him again." (Ex. 23:4) This sets up a clear standard for right behavior; you do not act justly toward someone because you like him or owe him something, but because it is the right way to act. Similarly, the people of the nation of Israel were obligated to treat strangers and foreigners well, remembering the time when they had been strangers themselves. All these laws about how to treat one another can be summed up in the Savior's broad rule, "*You shall love...your neighbor as yourself.*" (Luke 10:27)

SABBATHS, FEASTS AND HOLY DAYS

Exodus the 23rd chapter also establishes ceremonial days that will teach and remind the people of the truths God has established. The gift of the Sabbath that God gives here was the first time in human history that gave men and women a break from daily labor. Every seventh day was to be a rest for men, women, servants and even animals. Mankind cannot be free if they must labor every day without ceasing.

The seventh year was to be a Sabbath as well, meaning that the fields were to lie fallow every seventh year. This, God says, will provide for the poor. They will be allowed to take the fruit and produce that grows of itself in the seventh year. These Sabbath years were not observed in the whole country at once; a farmer could rotate his holdings, so one year his vineyard would take its Sabbath rest, and the next year his wheat acreage would rest, and the third year his fruit orchards, and so on. The poor, by their labor, would be provided for and the rich would sacrifice something that contributed to the general welfare.

There were three national feast days on which able adult males were obligated to present themselves for temple worship in Jerusalem. The first of these was the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which connects with Passover. This corresponds to our Easter time in the spring of the year and Christians find obvious symbolism in these holidays to the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ who was the ultimate Passover Lamb. So while the Jews still celebrate Passover as the time God saved them from slavery in Egypt, the Christians celebrate Pesach, or Easter, to commemorate the atoning blood of Christ that saves them from slavery to sin.

The second feast is called in Exodus 23, "the feast of harvest, the firstfruits." (Ex 23:16) The reason the Jewish feast days can seem confusing is that the same festival can have so many different names. This one is no exception. Its most common name among Jews today is Shavuot. *Shavuot*, the plural of a word meaning "week" or "seven", alludes to the fact that this festival happens exactly seven weeks (i.e. "a week of weeks") plus one day after Passover. Though not explicitly connected in the Bible, Jewish tradition says that on the first Shavuot, the people were camped at the base of Mt. Sinai, and received on this day the Ten Commandments and Mosaic Law. If Passover commemorated God's freeing them from slavery, Shavuot commemorated God's making them a true nation by giving them Law to live by. This is also a harvest festival, corresponding to the early wheat harvest and the giving of thanks for God's provision. That is why this festival is sometimes called Firstfruits, as in Exodus 23, or Day of the First Fruits. (Numbers 28:26)

The New Testament calls this festival Pentecost, which is from the Greek word for *fiftieth*. Shavuot means “weeks” because by counting 7 weeks of 7 days each, you have counted 49 days from the second day of Passover, and then you add one day to make 50 days. This was the formula for designating the day of the First Fruits festival.

Confused? Of course you are, but stay with us. This festival has amazing tie-ins to Christian symbolism and the Christian story. When Christ appeared to his followers after his resurrection, he told them to stay in Jerusalem until they received the promise of the Father to send them the Holy Spirit. So they stayed. They were following Jesus’ directive to remain in town on the day when the rest of Jerusalem was celebrating First Fruits, or Pentecost, as it is known in Greek. Here is the account from Acts:

“And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. ²And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. ³And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. ⁴And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. ⁵And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. ⁶Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. (Acts 2:1-6)

What was the result of this amazing occurrence? Thousands of Jews came running to see what all the fuss was about. Peter preached the message of Christianity to them and as a result 3,000 people were converted that very day to Jesus Christ! They became the first fruits indeed of a harvest that would grow to encompass the whole world.

Another remarkable connection between Jewish and Christian views of this day is that for Jews, Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Law. For Christians the day celebrates the giving of the Holy Spirit. For followers of Jesus, the Holy Spirit became the defining characteristic of the Christian life, as the Law of Moses remains the defining characteristic of Jewish life. It is surely no coincidence that both are celebrated on the same day.

The final feast day that required attendance at Jerusalem is called in Exodus “In-gathering.” Jews call it Sukkot today. This word means booths, referring to the temporary shelters the Hebrews lived in during their sojourn in the desert. It is the final celebration of the agricultural year, coming in the fall when “all is safely gathered in” as we sing of our own Thanksgiving. It is also called the Feast of Tabernacles.

Jews today make booths or erect tents in yards and on patios, and take meals there to commemorate the way God provided for them during their time wandering in the wilderness and by extension, to commemorate the way in which he continues to provide for them still. Christians look forward to the day Christ will dwell with his people again.

These festivals were holy days—days set apart from the usual routine, reminding them of God and what he had done for them, and also foreshadowing Christ’s future mission. An understanding of the Old Testament feast days opens the door to a richer understanding of the New Testament. Each one pointed back to a remarkable experience in the Israelites’ history, and each foreshadowed a future part of Christ’s great work.

BATTLES AWAIT

The final six verses of Exodus 23 refer prophetically to what God will do for the people when they arrive in the Promised Land. It is inhabited by other nations, such as the Canaanites, Hittites and Hivites. God promises he will drive these nations out as by “horns” in order to make room for the nation of Israel to flourish. This he will do “by little and little,” for if they disappeared all in one year, wild beasts would overrun the land since

there were not yet enough Israelites to possess it all. A final warning is given against the pagan gods of those nations. Make no covenant with them or their gods!

KEEPING THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

Before leaving these chapters we need to say something about what in Mosaic Law is still binding upon us as Christians. Most of us instinctively feel that the Ten Commandments are not out of date and acknowledge that keeping them is the basis of an orderly society. The problem comes with the 4th commandment. Most Christians acknowledge that they are still constrained not to murder, lie, commit adultery, etc. But the vast majority of Christians today do not feel any obligation to "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." Go to church, maybe, but certainly not keep the *whole* day "set apart." I have good friends that go to a Saturday evening church service so they will have all of Sunday for activities of their choosing. People who disregard the command to keep the Sabbath day holy commonly quote Romans 6:14: "For [we] are not under the law but under grace," to excuse ignoring this commandment.

They feel that the new covenant in Christ's blood supersedes the old covenant based on obedience to God's commandments in the Mosaic Law and animal sacrifice to atone for sin. This is surely true. We find a direct prophecy in Jeremiah that pointed to this new covenant:

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that *I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel*, and with the house of Judah: ³²Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt;... ³³But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, *I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts.* (Jeremiah 31:31-33)

Ezekiel prophecies of the same thing: "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. ²⁷And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

But how much of the old can be tossed out once the new has come? It is an interesting question. Did the new covenant come so that we could sin freely but be forgiven for it all through the atoning blood of Christ? "God forbid!" as Paul would later say. (Romans 6:15) Or did the new covenant come to change our hearts and minds such that now we *could keep the law*, instead of failing again and again as the dismal record of the Israelites attests. And if having the Holy Spirit to dwell in us—which seems to be the thing that makes the difference—now enables us to keep law which before we failed to keep, what exactly are the laws that God wants us to obey under the new covenant?

Christ answered these questions to the Nephites when he appeared to them.

"Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets. I am not come to destroy but to fulfil; ¹⁸For verily I say unto you, one jot nor one tittle hath not passed away from the law, but in me it hath all been fulfilled. ¹⁹And behold, I have given you the law and the commandments of my Father, that ye shall believe in me, and that ye shall repent of your sins, and come unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit. Behold, ye have the commandments before you, and the law is fulfilled. ²⁰Therefore come unto me and be ye saved; for verily I say unto you, that except ye shall keep my commandments, which I have commanded you at this time, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." (3 Nephi 12:17-20)

When Christ speaks in this passage of “my commandments which I have commanded you at this time” he is speaking of The Law of the Gospel. These are the new commandments that Christ added during his earthly ministry. They are found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6) and the Sermon at the Temple (3 Nephi 12-14). Christ did not take law out of the lives of believers, but actually “upped the ante” on God’s laws, making them harder to live. His commands required righteousness on the inside, not just outward observance. An example is changing the command “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” to “thou shalt suffer none of these things to enter into thy heart.” (3 Nephi 12:29) Keeping a pure heart is a lot harder than refraining from adultery.

LAW IS ETERNAL

There will always be laws and commandments to keep. But those who want with all their heart to keep them now have the grace of God to make it possible. Those who think the atonement of Christ somehow gets them off the hook of having to obey God, are those who Christ identifies as *lawless* and he says of them: “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.’” (Matthew 7:23 NASB)

THINGS FULFILLED

What then are the fulfilled parts? If we ask for what purpose all the features of the old law were given, we can decide what to abandon and what to keep. Many ceremonial functions of the old law were given to point ahead prophetically to Christ. The Passover celebration is an example. Once Christ had come and fulfilled his role as the ultimate Lamb of God slain for the sins of all mankind, the Passover was “fulfilled” and no longer an obligation for God’s people. This is likewise true for all the rules and regulations concerning animal sacrifice. They too pointed to Christ, were fulfilled in him and can be done away.

Dietary laws of the Old Testament had the purpose of keeping the people of God separate from neighboring nations. Those Jews who “keep kosher” today, find these laws still have that effect. But for the Christian, we are no longer to keep ourselves separate from the non-Christians. We are to “go into all the world” and “let our light shine” so that others will desire to have what we have. Those laws are fulfilled and can be done away.

When you read the various legal codes in Exodus you find that their purpose was to build up a nation with institutions of just laws and ways of living. Concerning these one need only use common sense. A law that instructs the people not to pass on vicious gossip would have the same uplifting effect on our own society that it did for Israel. Common sense says that we should continue to live this way. A law concerning how a bond servant could poke a hole in his ear with an awl to signify that he wanted to stay for life under the protection of his master, is simply not needed in modern society. Its purpose has been fulfilled and we can safely ignore it, and many other things like it.

THE SABBATH-STILL A SIGN OF THE COVENANT PEOPLE

As for the Sabbath day, it was one of the Ten Commandments. That of itself should tell us how God viewed it. This is an important issue because we are increasingly alone in our commitment to the 4th commandment, honoring God’s Sabbath day. In Exodus 31:13 the Sabbath’s importance is renewed: “Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations.” With the passing away of circumcision, only baptism and the Sabbath are said to be signs between God and his people. The Sabbath also serves as a sign between God’s people and the world in which they live, since people who keep the Sabbath thereby make themselves different—make themselves stand out and become visible—thus creating a sign that can be seen by the surrounding commu-

nity. If a person or a family wants to be entitled to “the blessings of the covenant,” they should do all in their power to keep *the sign of the covenant*.

¹ Jewish social commentator Dennis Prager has a marvelous set of short animated video clips (3 & 4 minutes each) on the continuing importance of the Ten Commandments in modern life. Can't recommend these highly enough!

<https://www.prageru.com/courses/religion-philosophy>

² Oh wait! Now we *do* have governments that are trying to enforce “positive commandments” and keep us from hurting each other's feelings by what we say. The standard is no longer the simple and easily determined “is it false?” but rather, “does it offend someone?” or even worse, “Does it make her/him/it uncomfortable?” The more government gets involved in making sure you keep their positively framed commandments, such as “be inclusive” or “be loving and non-judgmental,” the more intrusive governments and their laws will become and the less freedom you and I will have. This is where the laws of many countries today are going with their “hate speech laws” and “campus speech codes.” God knew exactly what He was doing when he put the important elements of the world's legal codes in such spare, economical, and yes, negative terms.