

BENDING OUR LIVES TOWARD GOD

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Exodus 20:1 – 17 - The Ten Commandments
Psalm 19 (responsive reading) *Voices United* p. 740

Martin Luther in *The Large Catechism* writes “anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire Scriptures”.

That’s a large claim to make about today’s first lesson, the Ten Commandments. Just by knowing them, we know all we need to know about the Bible.

A judge in Alabama fights to have the Ten Commandments on the wall of the courtroom in order to say that the law enacted in his court is based upon the law of God. Yet in a US courtroom, the commandments so displayed are not the Ten Commandments of God whom Christians worship as Creator, Son and Holy Spirit.

Others defend the commandments as a means of calling humanity back to basic morality, a universally valid code of conduct, the absolutes upon which all people of good will can agree.

While one can understand such desperate acts in the face of this morally chaotic society, this may be a misuse of the commandments. It is very difficult to take the Ten Commandments out of the context of Sunday morning here in our church.

Recall the context. Israel is in slavery in Egypt. Before Moses, a felon minding his own business in Midian, a bush bursts into flame. There is a voice:

“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land” (Ex. 3:7-8).

Here is no deistic “unmoved mover” of a God. Here is a God who hears, intrudes, acts, calls. God says to Moses, “I am going to deliver my people and guess who is going to help me?” Moses protests: God insists. Moses is told to go to Pharaoh and tell this most powerful man on earth to let the Hebrews go. Why? Because God us against

slavery? No. God demands freedom from Egyptian slavery so that the Hebrews might go out into the wilderness and *sacrifice* (Ex. 3:18).

The hard hearted Pharaoh resists. There are negotiations, confrontations, frogs, plagues, gnats and much death. Finally Pharaoh relents saying, *Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone*” (Ex12:32). Israel hastens toward the desert. There, at last they are liberated, free!

Well, not quite. The Hebrews have been liberated from slavery in order to worship in the wilderness. But it has been so long since anyone has worshipped the true God, we have forgotten how. Is the liturgy of the God of Israel high church or low? Should incense be used? What about vestments? “*God summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up*” (ex. 19:20).

There God opens the conversation by reminding Moses of what has been done for Israel, thus indicating who God is: “*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me*” (Ex. 20:2-3).

This is a not so gently way of reminding Israel, “I paid dearly for you. You have been brought out of slavery, not in order to be free from all attachments, but rather in order that you might more fully belong to me, that you might worship me.”

How to worship? Here begins the enumeration of the commandments. “Don’t have idols.” “Don’t steal.” Don’t commit adultery.”

Moses surely thinks, “This doesn’t sound like any service I’ve ever attended”.

But this God has a peculiar notion of worship, in comparison with other gods. Some gods are into war, or physical relationships or gold. Here is a God who wants a holy people, a family where everyone is clergy: Tell the Israelites: *You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation*”(Ex.10:3-6).

The important word here is therefore. Because a people have been saved by God, therefore this people is to be a nation of priests and priestesses. When Exodus says that Israel is to be a “holy nation” it means a people set apart, “resident aliens.” When it says

“priests,” it means that Israel exists for the whole world, to intercede, to make sacrifice, and to mediate, to live in such a way, in obedience to the commandments, that other less enlightened and obedient peoples will say to themselves, “*Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!*” (Deut. 4:6).

Thus evangelism has its basis in joyful obedience and worship of the true God by a people who, despite ourselves, are being made truthful by our worship. The Ten Commandments are made for all people, but the way we discover that is by seeing their embodiment in the people of Israel and the church.

This is the very same language picked up by the first epistle of Peter when it claims that, by the grace of God, even us Gentiles have been put into Israel’s vocation to minister to the world in the name of the God of Israel and Jesus: “*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of the one who called you out of darkness into the marvelous light*” (I Peter 2:9)

The Ten Commandments must be read and lived within this background as a vocation of a saving God. Today we love as those who have been chosen by God, called, claimed, possessed, owned by God that we might proclaim, in word and in deed, what God has done. We live by the commandments as a way of worshipping the true God. When we thus worship the true God, we show forth to the world the sort of people God is able to produce. Our little lives are caught up in the great purposes of God for the world. We are called for purposes beyond ourselves. We become people of truth.

We, who were slaves, have become free. But that does not mean that we are free from all attachment, free to “do our own thing.” As one of the Jewish prayers puts it, “We are freed from being slaves to Pharaoh so that we might become slaves to Torah.”

The commandments are not general guidelines for humanity in general. They are a counter cultural way of life for those who know who they are and whose they are. Their function is not keep our culture running smoothly, but rather to produce a people who are, in our daily lives, a sign, a signal, a witness that God has not left the world on to its own devices. We have the Decalogue because we have been delivered and set free by God. We are delivered and set free by God because we have the Decalogue.

These “ten words” both constitute Israel and the church and critique us in our common life. They are both a gracious reminder of who we are and an abrasive prod to be who we ought to be.

When Christians talk about morality, we begin by talking first about the church, by what it means to worship God. Apart from this community, the commands of God appear heroic, impossible, idealistic or odd. Church, a community of the forgiven, a people who keep coming together to worship God, makes the commandments intelligible. In fact, we might put on the Decalogue a warning. *Don't try and obey any of the commandments on your own.*

But before the Ten Commandments are about us, they are about God. You know someone by the way that person speaks. We know the true and living God because this God has refused to say aloof, unconcerned and uncommunicative. Our God could have stayed on Mt. Sinai, hidden in the clouds, silent. Instead the true God called Moses to come and had him write down what would please God. Our relentlessly self-revealing, well spoken God has given “ten words” to us and is thereby known to us. Before the words, and behind each of them, is the sort of God who tolerates no rivals like Pharaoh, a God who does not leave us alone to stumble aimlessly in the wilderness but graciously gives us the law “*for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive*” (Deut. 6:24).

Furthermore the commandments signal to us that this thing between us and God matters. God needs us, enlists our aid in reclaiming a lost creation. Wellness and wholeness of the world turns on our obedience, on how we enter into relationships, how we handle property, and how we watch our words. Although it is clear that we are addressed as community, a “nation,” a “people,” in the plural, each of the commandments is put to us in the second person singular: *you*. A claim is made on each one of us. This God speaks to each of us in simple, direct words we can understand, addressing us where we live, where there are real issues about property, relationship and speech. Here is a God who loves like spouses love one another in marriage. God gets jealous for us. The relationship between us and God is not one of abstract, high-flown principles and ideas, it is a relationship between a God who loves and a people who are loved enough to be told how, when, and where to return that love.

The Ten Commandments are also an affirmation that, thank God, God has not done everything that needs doing in this world but has left plenty for us to do as obedient and faithful people. God, having been creative, faithful, and just, now gives us the means to act the same. God needs us to do what needs to be done in this world. God uses us to bring life out of death, order out of chaos, light into the darkness. Whenever we are obedient, it is called worship. Where we work Monday to Friday becomes an altar and we get to minister to the world.

These commandments were given to Israel after liberation from slavery, right after they had entered the wilderness, as a gift. However, that they were given these directives was also a sign that Israel was still being redeemed, was still on the way. Exodus keeps happening among the obedient and the faithful. God keeps coming to us in the commandments and we keep coming to God. The commandments are terse, concise, with not much detail. That means there is much room for us to ponder and to argue their application, lots of space for us to keep growing in what it means for us to be faithful, room still left for another book like this one.

So obedience and knowledge of the commandments begin in the Sunday worship of the church by focusing not on the commandments, but first upon the God who says, “*I am your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.*”

The commandments are a chief means by which our lives are bent toward the way and the will of God. This isn't a bad definition of our worship this morning – *bending life toward God.*