

Laying Down the Law

Does it matter how we live? How many of you would say yes, it does matter how we live? And how many would say no? (If only all votes were this easy! ☺)

My next question is, why does it matter? I'm going to give you several options. (So this will be a multiple choice question. You can only choose one answer. And, I'm only going to go through them once, so grab your answer while you can! ☺) It matters how we live, 1) Because the Bible tells us so; 2) Because God tells us so; 3) Because if it didn't matter, and we could do anything we want, life would be complete chaos; 4) Because we want to go to heaven when we die, and not hell.

Here's a third question. Do we need laws to live by? How many of you would say yes? And how many no?

And fourth, why do we need laws? 1) Because the Bible tells us so; 2) So we can know what's right and what's wrong; 3) Because without laws, life would be total chaos; 4) To help us live the way God wants us to live.

We all grew up with the Ten Commandments. Some of you may have even memorized them as a kid, so let me test you. What is the first commandment? (And Doug, you're not allowed to answer. ☺) "You shall have no other gods before me," which is verse 3. What if I told you that the first commandment was verse 2? Which says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." There's no imperative, no command, no "shall" (or "shalt not"). How could that be the first commandment?

We are so lucky to have our very own Old Testament scholar in our congregation. I learned from Doug this past week that Jewish scholars refer to this section of the Hebrew bible not as The Ten Commandments but "The Ten Words" (or Decalogue, in Latin). And they consider verse 2 to be the first "word." Doug also sent me some additional information, and the writer suggests that verse 2 is implicitly a commandment to "believe." As in, "I am the Lord your God. Believe in me." Or, "thou shalt believe in me." which makes a lot of sense.

And by the way, this is another case where the word "LORD" is all in capital letters. Which means that in the original Hebrew it's actually the word Yahweh, which is God's own, personal (and very holy) name. Almost as if God is saying: "I am Yahweh, your God. Pleased to meet you. Now, believe in me.

But that's not all verse 2 says. It says, "I am the Lord Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." God is reminding them, in case they had forgotten, what he has done for them. Which then makes verse 3 their response to what God has done for them. "I am the Lord Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . therefore, you shall have no other gods before me." (Except the "therefore" is implicit rather than explicit.)

Why does this matter? Because in the Bible, grace always come first. (You can write that down. It's Shades of Grace #17.) Grace always comes first. Even here, where we would least expect it. The Ten Commandments, God's law, how we are to live, is a response to God's grace, to what God has already done for us.

Let's remember the story (because "Grace is a story," Shade #1; and "Grace is a monument asking us to remember," #9). The children of Israel had become slaves in Egypt. (That was long after Joseph and his brothers and of course Israel or Jacob himself had died.) The Israelites cried out to God. God heard their cry. God rescued or delivered or liberated them. (Grace liberates us; that's another new one, #18.) Then, God chose to become their God. God established a relationship with them. (And "Grace is a relationship," #2) This relationship was based on a covenant or arrangement. I will be your God, he said, and you will be my people. I will love you, and I want you to love me in return. Oh, and by the way, I also want you to love one another. That was equally part of the covenant.

There we have it. The Ten Commandments. They start with God's love for us (Verse 2); they continue with our love for God and what that looks like (verses 3-11, which are the first four Commandments: no other Gods, don't worship idols, don't make wrongful use of my name, remember the Sabbath); they end with our love for one another and what that looks like (verses 12-17 and the last six Commandments: Honor your father and mother, don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't bear false witness, don't covet).

But what happens if we break one of the Commandments? Is it [motion of slitting throat]? Call down the curtain? Time to meet our maker (figuratively and literally)?

Because this God is scary! Did you catch that? Verse 18? Thunder and lightning? Trumpets blaring? Mountain smoking? No wonder "they are afraid and trembled and stood at a distance." No wonder they only wanted to deal with Moses and not God at least not directly.

But what does Moses say to them? "Do not be afraid." Right, Moses. But can we please turn the movie off now? (And is it just me, or does Moses look a lot like Charlton Heston?)

Charlton—I mean Moses—goes on to say that "God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin." So then are we supposed to fear God, or not? To which Moses would say. "Yes." and "No."

Let me put it this way. When you were growing up, were you afraid of your parents? Hopefully, the answer is no. But did you honor and respect your parents? Hopefully, the answer is yes.

The relationship between us and God is not a relationship between equals. Because God, by definition, is sovereign. Greater than us. Make that far greater than us. God gives, and we receive. That's how grace works. But in return, as a way to say thank you, God wants us to live a certain way. So that we can stay in relationship with him. So a good fear of God, a healthy fear of God, a "pure" fear of God, as the writer of Psalm 19 names it, will keep us from sinning. But what if we do sin? Is it [throat-slitting motion]? Not necessarily. But when we sin, our covenant relationship with God and with one another is damaged. And will need to be made right again, which God has also taken care of later in this same law, through a complex system of sacrifice. And still later in the Bible, much more fully, in the new covenant God made with us. Otherwise known as the New...what?...Testament.

Let me ask again. Does it matter how we live? Yes. Why? Right living, or righteousness, or living the way God wants us to live is our response to God's love for us. It's our way of loving God in return. Right living, or obeying the law, is our way of saying thank you to God for God's prevenient grace. ("Prevenient," by the way, is a seminary word, which simply means "coming before," or "comes first.") Grace—God's grace—always comes first.

Can I hear a hallelujah? And how about an amen? ☺

Questions for Pondering and Discussion

- 1) What is your answer to the question, “Why does it matter how we live?” And how about “Why do we need laws like The Ten Commandments?”
- 2) Does it make sense to you to call Exodus 20:2 the first Commandment? Why or why not?
- 3) What difference does it make that “Grace always comes first?”
- 4) If you could subtract one Commandment, which would you choose?
- 5) If you could add one Commandment, what would it be?
- 6) In what ways are we called to fear God? When is that a good thing and when is it not a good thing?
- 7) What does God want us to do when we break one of the Commandments?