

The Ten Commandments

DAVE BAST

We tend to think of polytheism or idolatry as something that was a problem for people only in the Bible, or that maybe that exists today only in primitive, pagan cultures; but the fact is that in contemporary North America, we are rapidly becoming a society with not just dozens or even hundreds, but millions of gods, as individuals increasingly define God according to their own taste or inclination. Our need today is identical to Israel's need at Sinai. In the midst of a chaos of pagan ideas and claims, we need to hear from an authoritative source, both who God is and what He demands of us. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, today we are moving on through Exodus, and we are going to come to one of the great mountaintop chapters, I guess, not just of Exodus, but of the Bible – Exodus 20 and the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai; but just to refresh our memories: Israel now has plunged into the wilderness. They are actually only about three months into their journey since their deliverance through the Red Sea, and in our last program we saw how they had reacted to God – as soon as the going got tough the tough got grumbling. They did not get going, they got grumbling; and they began to doubt, and God responded graciously to them. He met their needs. He healed their suffering, their hunger, their thirst, and what He was really saying to them in that is: Do not doubt Me. Do not test Me. Do not ask, “Are you really real, God? Are you really there?” The whole Gospel is really these two wonderful phrases: God is for us; and God is with us; no matter what the circumstances; no matter how desperate our situation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So we are coming in this program, the sixth program in this eight-part series on Exodus, to the exact middle of Exodus. Exodus has 40 chapters and we are now at the 20th chapter. We find the people arriving at the holy mountain of God at Mount Sinai, where they are going to hear from God, and this is, of course, the famous chapter from which we get the Ten Commandments. They will get repeated later in the book of Deuteronomy, but this is the first time. So, let's just remember and refresh our memories as to what those words were.

DAVE BAST

Well, why don't we read them responsively, commandment by commandment, shall we do that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sure.

DAVE BAST

As if we are in church.

¹So, God spoke all these words saying, ²“I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

SCOTT HOEZEE

³“You shall have no other gods before Me.

DAVE BAST

⁴“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath, or in the waters below. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, ⁶but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁷“You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His name.

DAVE BAST

⁸“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work; neither you nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹²“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

DAVE BAST

¹³“You shall not murder.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁴“You shall not commit adultery.

DAVE BAST

¹⁵“You shall not steal.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁶“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

DAVE BAST

¹⁷“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁸And when the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear; they stayed at a distance, ¹⁹and said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen, but do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

Kind of interesting that the first time the Ten Commandments came that it scared them silly.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. They said, “We do not want to hear any more from Him. You handle it, Moses, for us.” It really is an interesting twist at the end, isn’t it? Somehow, I got the long ones, too, in that responsive reading.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It always went that way in church: who is going to get the long lines?

But what is interesting here – while there is some much to talk about, and we will be talking about this throughout this program, Dave – but one thing to point out, which is really important because it goes to some really significant issues of theology, it is important to notice when God gives the Law. Was it before He rescued the people from Egypt; before He saved them? Did God come to them in Egypt and say: Okay, here are some laws for you and when you follow these – when you have a good checklist and you can get a straight-A score – then I will save you. No; He made them a nation first in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham; He saved them from Egypt first and then the Law comes as: Now, how do you live? That is very important theologically because sometimes we think that the way to get saved is by keeping the Law and making God like you; but in the Bible it is consistently just the opposite. The Law comes after salvation as the Charter for how you live as saved – already saved people.

DAVE BAST

Right; and that is why it is significant to notice the introduction before we even get to the Ten Commandments. God announces who He is and what He has done. “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Past tense.

DAVE BAST

“I am the Lord *your* God; Lord – I am Yahweh – your God.” His covenant name; His relational name that He has revealed to them; His personal name. It all has to do with His promises to them: The covenant; salvation begins with God’s promises, with God’s action; and He reminds them: Yes, I have already brought you out of the land of Egypt. I have already delivered you; now, if you want to be My people, you need to respond to Me. You have a choice, too. You can walk away from this relationship, but if you want to be in relationship, here is what I am going to ask of you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And there is actually – if we were to back up, Dave, just one chapter to Exodus 19 verses 4 through 6, a very, very lovely thing – this is sort of the preamble, the run-up to God’s giving of the Law, and of the Ten Commandments in particular, where God says through Moses to the people:

⁴You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagle’s wings and brought you to Myself. ^{5b}Out of all nations, you will be My treasured possession; although the whole earth is Mine, ⁶you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Lovely image there: You will be My treasured possession; you already are. So again, that has already happened. Now, in gratitude to God, here is how you become a holy nation for Me.

DAVE BAST

Well, God is choosing Israel. This is election right here, plain and simple. He elects Israel to be His special people; out of all the nations of the earth, God chooses Israel and leaves the others be. He does not choose them. So Israel is in a double sense His. He is the God of all the earth – the Bible clearly makes that point over and over – He is the creator of all, but some belong to him in a double sense because He has also redeemed them – He has chosen them. Now, we also know that the reason He is choosing Israel is not so that He can ultimately leave all the other nations be and let them go to hell in a hand basket...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, right.

DAVE BAST

He is choosing Israel to be His agency, really; His means of saving the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The starting point; the beachhead.

DAVE BAST

Right; and ultimately that will go out, and we will see that happen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, creation and redemption – those are the two great themes of scripture – and as you just said, Dave, they are both on display here. The people are His by virtue of His being their creator, but also their redeemer, but because He has redeemed them, He wants them to live in certain ways, and when we come back we will dig a little deeper into some of the specifics of what we see the shape of life is supposed to be as reflected in these Ten Commandments.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are continuing in our series in Exodus. We are up to the 20th chapter – the midpoint of the book of Exodus – and we have just heard in the first segment of this program the giving of the Law, which God thundered from Mount Sinai in ways that scared the people silly, so they are going to want Moses to go get the rest of the Law for them from here on out. God has redeemed them; He has saved them; they are already saved, and now as a response to that salvation, the people are being called to live in a certain way.

DAVE BAST

And as the story unfolds, it is maybe a story you are familiar with, we have only just touched on it. We did read all of the Ten Commandments, but the story says that God actually wrote these on two tablets of stone and gave them to Moses, and that has led commentators, beginning with the ancient rabbis, to talk about the two tables of the Law, or the two tablets; and the Commandments are historically divided into two groups: the first four and then the last six – as Protestants number them – having to do with our duty, our relationship with God – those first four – and then our relationship with our neighbor or with our fellow creatures – those last six commandments.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This gets to the heart of it. Many of us are familiar with a story from Matthew Chapter 22, where the Pharisees, in an effort to trip Jesus up and get Him in trouble – they were always trying to ask Him some tricky questions that if Jesus gave the wrong answer He could get in trouble – but they came up one day and said, “What is the greatest commandment? What is the greatest commandment? And of course, by the time of Jesus’ day, they had – the Jews and the Pharisees had come with as many as 613 distinct commandments to live by, and so, a huge list, over 600; which one was the most important one? I think the effort there was to make Jesus pick one, and if He had picked one then they would have accused Him of downgrading the others and that was blasphemy; but Jesus neatly sidesteps it, and I think we mostly all remember what He said, quoting from Deuteronomy – from later in the Bible – that you are supposed to love the Lord your God with everything you have: heart, soul, mind and strength; and your neighbor as yourself; and that gets at those two tables of the Law. So, what Jesus is saying is that the whole Law is about love.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Love for God and then love for each other flowing out of that love for God, and you see that in both – as we call it – the two tables of the Law; the first four commandments and the second six.

DAVE BAST

You ask yourself: All right; what does it mean to love God with everything that I have? And the answer is, well, to have no other Gods before Him; that is the first commandment – to put Him first and foremost. There is nothing more important than that; nothing perhaps more difficult than that because all kinds of other things intrude and try to displace God from the center point in our lives and our hearts; And then the second commandment has to do more with how we worship God: Do not make idols for yourselves, and an idol, as has often been said – Luther said, “Whatever you give your heart to, that is your idol.” Honor His name and His day – keep them both holy and treat God with reverence – the reverence that is His due. Now, the Sabbath day, that is something we could talk about there. We could probably devote a whole program to each of these commandments, and maybe someday we will; but for Christians, Christ is our Sabbath now, and that idea of a day of rest being the seventh day has been fulfilled in Christ. The book of Hebrews makes that clear, so to enter God’s Sabbath, to keep God’s Sabbath is to rest from our striving for salvation by works and to rest by faith in Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

As most people know, the Ten Commandments get repeated in the book of Deuteronomy – in Deuteronomy 5, I think it is – when the next generation – 40 years later the people are getting ready to enter the Promised Land, so Moses holds a massive review session, and during that review session, for the people who were not originally at Mount Sinai, he repeats the Ten Commandments, and they are identical, in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, they are identical except for one part, and it is in that fourth commandment. In the fourth commandment in Exodus 20, remember the Sabbath day, and then it says: For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them. So, in other words, keep the Sabbath day because of creation; but in Deuteronomy 5 it says: Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy, for remember you were slaves in Egypt, but the Lord led you out of there with a mighty arm and an outstretched hand. So, there it roots it in redemption, and so the Sabbath becomes the middle point of the Law; it is about creation, it is about redemption, it is about the whole shooting match, in other words. We keep the rhythms of God because of both creation and redemption; and so, that is a great way to honor the way God set up the universe.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely, and as a reminder that we are not saved by our own efforts, by our own feverish work, whether that is work at a job or work at morality.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We did not make the world; we did not save the world; that is God’s work, and we live in the cradle of all His gifts.

DAVE BAST

So, the Sabbath is another important commandment; it is another way of honoring God; although for Christians, our day of worship, of course, is the day of resurrection, it is Easter day.

But then, let’s talk a little bit also about the second table – about how do we love our neighbor – and that is really spelled out in the last six commandments, isn’t it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and what God does here is – again, if we fast-forward to the New Testament and realize this is really about the *love* of neighbor, as Jesus said, it means in respecting family and authority; it means respecting our bodies and our sexuality; respecting property and the truth; and being content and not trying to despoil our neighbors of their good gifts. So often, because many of the commandments are: Do not, do not, do not, people think it is negative, but as one of the great documents in the Reformed tradition, the Heidelberg Catechism, repeatedly points out when it pulls the Ten Commandments apart, these are all actually positive

things.

DAVE BAST

The catechism of our churches always asks in connection with its exposition of the Ten Commandments, what does this require me to do; not only, what does it forbid me to do? And actually, that comes from Jesus; because again, if you think about the Sermon on the Mount – if you are familiar with the Sermon on the Mount, at all – it is basically, much of it is Jesus’ riff on the second table of the Law. “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ I say, if you look lustfully...” So, one of the things Jesus does with the commandments about love of neighbor is to internalize them. He points out the profound truth that the breaking of the commandment actually begins with our internal attitudes, our thoughts, our thought life... not with our actions.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It starts in the heart.

DAVE BAST

Exactly, it starts in the heart; so, why do you kill someone? Because you hated them already; because you are filled with rage.

Then the other thing He does is to spiritualize and positivize them. (That is a terrible word, isn’t it?) But, turn them positive.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

You can kill your neighbor with your words. You can kill them metaphorically.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Kill them in your mind.

DAVE BAST

Right; hatred is a form of murder.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes commentators have said that in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus goes through the commandments and says things like you just said; just looking at someone lustfully is like adultery, people have said that Jesus seems to be radicalizing the commandments, but what they really mean by that is He is getting at the *radix* of the command, which is the Latin word for *root*. So, Jesus is going to the root of the commandments, which is love in your heart above all; and that is really what the Ten Commandments are about; they are about love.

DAVE BAST

Well, let’s talk about what they are about, and what the Law, in particular, is for. I want to pick up on something you said in the first segment, Scott, that ultimately the Law comes after salvation to guide us; but there are other things that it does as well, and we are going to look at that next.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork. We are at the 20th chapter in the book of Exodus; the midpoint, Dave, where the Law is given, and we have talked about that, but now, as we conclude this program, we want to talk a little bit more about some of the why of the Law and how it fits into our lives today.

DAVE BAST

There are classically in Christian theology three purposes for the Law. We, being Reformed Christians, will focus most on the third purpose, because that is the one we like the best and like to talk about; but we should also pay at least some attention to the other two.

One of them is, there is a civil use for the Law; that most laws in human society in some way or other trace their authority back to God's Law; so, all societies recognize that murder is evil – it is an evil act and should be outlawed, and theft is an evil act, and there are certain sexual practices that should be outlawed that are predatory. That is one purpose for it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

A second use of the Law is it is sort of the mirror in which we see our own sin; the Law calls us to confession. We hear what God expects; we look at how we act and say, "Oh, there is a disconnect there." So, the second use of the Law is to lead us to confession; but then, particularly in the Reformed tradition, there is a third use.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes. The Lutherans love to draw attention to the second use. Luther called the Law a hammer that breaks us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, which it is.

DAVE BAST

Paul calls it a schoolmaster that leads us to Christ, and he uses an image that is rather harsh. Schoolmasters in the ancient world were not so nice. They would beat their pupils; so, yes; the Law shows me how far I fall short, but it also has a more positive purpose and use, and there it comes under the heading of gratitude. One of the great things that we do in our tradition is talk about guilt, grace, and gratitude; and the Law guides us in what it means to live gratefully before God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This, as you said, Dave, goes back to what we talked about in the first segment of this show: The timing of when God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel is so theologically and spiritually important. It was not before they got saved; it was not the prerequisite for their getting saved; it was not something they had to achieve in order to get saved or to make God love them. The Law comes after salvation, and that is where it comes for us Christians today, too. After we have been baptized; after we have died with Christ and been raised with Christ; after all of that is so, then Jesus says, along with the God of Sinai, here is how you should live.

DAVE BAST

Well, another way of thinking about is to say that the Law really guides us into a path of true human flourishing. It will, if we follow it, if we seek God's help and grace and strength through the power of the Spirit to begin more and more to keep His Law, we will find that we will be becoming the human beings we were meant to be; and we come back to this idea that love is really the summation of the whole Law. It is not God wagging His finger and saying: Do not do that. Do not do that. Do not do... It is not like a scold. It is rather a way of helping us to see this is what it means to be human. This is how you love.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think we have mentioned this before on Groundwork, but it bears repeating, particularly in this context in Exodus 20, and it is something that many people have said, but I remember reading it in the author Frederick Buechner, where he said: When you think of the word *law*, there are two ways to think of law; there is a speed limit; that is the law. There is a *no trespassing* sign, that is the law; but those kinds of laws are arbitrary. Somebody could take down the *no trespassing* sign someday and say, "You are free to walk on my

property.” The speed limit could change from 55 to 70 miles per hour. So, there is one kind of law that is arbitrary, and we just sort of decide that is how we want to do it; but there is another sense of the word *law*, Buechner says, and that is like the law of gravity, and you cannot change that. If you do not like the law of gravity, stepping off a cliff to show your dislike is not such a good idea; and Buechner says: God’s Law – often we think it is the first type – it is just hoops – arbitrary hoops for us to leap through, but that is not true, Buechner says. God’s Law is more like the law of gravity. It reveals how things are, and if we want to flourish, as you just said, if we want to be fully human – a great quote from Irenaeus: The glory of God is a human being fully alive. If we want to be fully alive, this is how we live because this is the owner’s manual for creation.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a great analogy, too, that some have used. It is like the owner’s manual of your car. You are free to ignore it; you are free to even contradict it, but do not be surprised when your engine seizes up.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right. If you put gasoline in the oil slot, it is not such a good idea.

DAVE BAST

So, you are free to lie, steal, kill, murder, commit adultery, hate God, slander God, create idols and worship them. You are free to do all those things, but do not be surprised if your life is a mess and a wreck and a disaster as a result.

But, let’s get back to the positive. When we are talking about the Law of God, what we are talking about is what does God most want me to be and do? Sometimes people obsess over that. What do I have to do? The answer is love; just love Him; love your neighbor.

There is a wonderful passage – maybe this is a great way to wrap up this whole topic. Paul writing in Romans Chapter 13 talks about the one debt that we have. What do we owe? Well, here is the only obligation we have:

⁸Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another; for whoever loves others has fulfilled the Law. ⁹The Commandments: You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not covet, and whatever other command there may be are summed up in this one command: Love your neighbor as yourself. ¹⁰Love does no harm to its neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfillment of the Law.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is, indeed, a great way to end because for all the negative associations people have with the Law or how the Ten Commandments seem only like a big scold, that is just not the idea at all and it was not in Exodus 20. It really is about love, and we know that because when God became flesh that is what He told us. Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you dig deeper into the scriptures; so, we have a website: groundworkonline.com. Visit the website and tell us topics and passages you would like us to dig into next on Groundwork.

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