

October 4th, 2020

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 “A Pathway to Freedom”

The Ten Commandments is one of the most familiar passages in the Hebrew Bible, if not the *whole* Bible. Everyone seems to know that's where we find the 10 commandments, but not everyone actually knows all 10. I always got a kick out of Jay Leno's "Man on the Street" spots on the Tonight Show where he'd go out into Times Square and ask people questions that they *think* they know, but really they don't. One week he asked people if they knew the 10 Commandments. Not surprisingly, most folks remember the "thou shalt *nots*" more so than the "thou shalt," but that's to be expected. A lot of folks say religion is a big list of "don'ts" anyway. Even religious leaders present the commandments as a list of rewards and punishments to keep people in line and society from crumbling. Of course we shouldn't steal. Of course we shouldn't commit murder or bear false witness. It's good that we have laws about those kinds of things.

But where the commandments get confusing is when we start asking, "How on earth could we ever police things like whether someone 'remembers' the Sabbath, or wishes they had something that belongs to their neighbor? Could you imagine what it would be like to try a case in court where someone stands trial for wishing they had a pickup truck like their neighbor's? So what's the *purpose* of these commandments? Are they a divine moral checklist that we use to police our own behavior? Are they like a divine self-help book that allows us to live a respectable life in an orderly society?"

Here's what I want you to consider this morning – The Ten Commandments are not about creating a system of law and punishment. They are a window into what it means to be a part of the culture or Kingdom of God. What I'm *not* going to do today is try to preach a sermon about all Ten Commandments. That's a 10-week series for another day. What I do want to do is look at these commandments as

ten invitations to live life in all its fullness in the presence of God. Because remember – Exodus is a turning point in the story of God’s people. This is where they go from being a loose band of nomads, to slaves in Egypt, to a free people hoping to fulfill their destiny as a great nation that bridges the gap between God and humans. How do we know that’s what they’re destined for? Because that was part of the covenant between God and Abraham back in Genesis 12. That’s where God told Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Exodus is the fulfillment of this.

So what does this have to say to us in our time and place in history? First, let’s put ourselves in the position of the Israelites. And to do that, I’ve got to shine a spotlight on something that I don’t always like about the lectionary we use. We tend to look at the Ten Commandments as a list of sort of bland universal principles. But there’s so much more here! But the lectionary has us read verses 1-4, then we skip to 7-9, then over to 12-20. Why? Because that’s the way we memorize them. That’s the way we fit them on a little brass plaque that we hang in our office, or the way we display them at a court house. ABC, 123.

The first words we see on our little 10 Commandment office plaque is, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Ok. Makes sense. But the biblical version says, “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.” That gives this commandment some context now doesn’t it? Now we’re dealing with a God with a resume! Now we know why we shall have no other little “g” gods before the God of Israel. Because God is the one who brought you out of slavery. And this is what shapes the first half of these commandments. These aren’t about “shall nots.” These are about how you relate to God and how God relates to you. This is about connecting us into the story of a specific

group of God's people at a specific moment in their history, and saying "this is our story too, this God is also our God for the same reasons."

When we consider how this relates to *us* ... when we think about how Israel's story is *our* story too, it's because God continues to act in the same ways in *our* lives and *our* contexts. So what having no other God but this God looks like in *our* context begins with coming to terms with how *we* have been enslaved by legalism. See, God works hard to set us free from slavery. And when we start taking an honest look at where we've been enslaved, we see that sometimes we've taken these Ten Commandments and used them to demonstrate how God is watching over our every move just waiting for us to make a mistake so God that can smite us. Because we all know God *loves* to smite, right?

"Smite makes right?" So then the message becomes, "You better straighten up and get your act together, because this is how God works." But later Jesus comes along and has to remind us that God is compassionate, merciful, and leads us *out* of slavery! So as weird as this sounds, we become slaves to a toxic and legalistic version of God because we forget that the reason we should only have one God is that God doesn't want us to be enslaved! I know! Mind-boggling isn't it?

And that's *very* important when it comes to understanding the Ten Commandments as a whole. Because one of the ways that so many people have been enslaved is by subscribing to a legalistic religion that portrays God as a two-dimensional punisher who's watching our every move looking for mistakes. So much of Jesus' ministry was spent setting people free from that kind of portrayal of God.

Now let's see how this relates to the commandment about remembering the Sabbath. As we are learning in Bible Study, this commandment about keeping the Sabbath has a pretty specific meaning in the context of the Hebrew people's escape from slavery. Why should we remember the Sabbath and keep it holy?

"Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—

you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.”

This is where the version of the Ten Commandments found in the Book of Deuteronomy comes in handy. And you might say, “What? There’s another version of the Ten Commandments?” Yup. I wouldn’t call it a “version” so much as I’d call it a different listing with some additional explanations about why they’re important commandments. This is from Deuteronomy 5:12-15 –

“Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. ¹³For six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁴But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.”

Okay, sounds pretty much like the Exodus version. But listen to verse 15 - “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”

Again, there’s the reminder about what it was like to be slaves. In Egypt, slaves worked seven days a week. If you gave the slaves a day off, that would put them equal with the privileged class. And we can’t have that now can we? Not in a place like Egypt where everyone was expected to know their place. And what happened when the Israelite slaves complained about being forced to work every day of the week? Pharaoh and the slave drivers made their work even harder. Can’t build an empire if your slaves are always wanting concessions. But God’s

kingdom defeated Pharaoh's Empire, and now the people of Israel are learning about what that looks like. Sabbath is a reminder that you are now free people, and now you can demonstrate your freedom by taking the time to relax and experiencing the freedom of knowing that the world can get on perfectly well without being a slave to the 24/7 workaholic grind. There is enough. Sabbath shows us that an attitude of abundance is far superior to the Earthly Kingdoms' attitude of scarcity.

I hope you can see what a huge difference that makes to the way this and the rest of the Ten Commandments are heard. If all you have is "thou shalt not do any work on the Sabbath," then the Sabbath can become an oppressive, burdensome weight that makes your day off a joyless experience where you may even have to be fearful in case you *accidentally* do something that might be *interpreted* as work!

Listen, God was able to sit back and enjoy what had been accomplished in six days. God was able to sit back and rest without feeling the need to keep giving orders, exercising control, and producing more. And this restful, non-anxious God invites us into the same freedom and the same restfulness. No wonder we are called to worship no other God than the God who sets us free from anxiety and fear, and who invites us to rest and enjoy the fullness of freedom and rest. Jesus came along many generations later and reminded God's people of this principle when he said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." The Ten Commandments aren't ten more burdens to add to our "to-do" list. They are ten invitations into the gracious culture of God and ten vital signs of life in all of its fullness.