

The Beauty of God in the Beauty of the Law
 Exodus 19-20
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Exodus 19:1-6 "In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt--on the very day--they came to the Desert of Sinai. ² After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

^{EX 19:3} Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴ 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵ Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

Exodus 20:1-3 "And God spoke all these words:

^{EX 20:2} "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

^{EX 20:3} "You shall have no other gods before me.

With those words, God begins the statement of the Decalogue – the ten words which we call the Ten Commandments, the summary of the moral law of God.

I want to start today where I finished last week when I quoted King David in Psalm 119.

And by the way I consider last week's sermon the most important sermon I have preached in many months, if not years.

If you did not hear it, I encourage you to do so either on-line or by CD.

Now again from the Psalmist David:

"Oh, how I love your law!

I meditate on it all day long." Psalm 119:97

Do we love the law of God?

C.S. Lewis, at first, found David's remark a bit over the top.

It's one thing to know something is good for you like the dentist's drill, but it is quite another to say you love it.

"Love" is not only an emotion of warmth but of beauty.

We might look at the beauty of a sunset and say "I love it" meaning I'm in awe and I'm captured by the color, the pattern, the imagination, and the magnitude of it.

But there is not only visual beauty there is moral beauty.

Lewis wrote of Psalm 119 where David says he loves the law, "The **order** of the Divine mind, embodied in the Divine law, is beautiful. (Therefore) what should a person do but try to reproduce it, so far as possible, in his daily life? His 'delight' is in those statutes (v16); to study them is like finding treasure (v14); they affect him like music (and become) his songs (v54); they taste like honey (v103); they are better than silver and gold (v72). As one's eyes are more and more opened, one sees more and more in them, and it excites wonder (v18). This is not priggery (overly exacting); it is the language of a man ravished by a **moral beauty**. If we cannot at all share his experience, we shall be the losers." (Reflections on the Psalms 54-65)

When David read the law he saw the beauty of God in it.

No one familiar with the Bible can deny that it claims that the primary purpose for which humanity exists, as the Westminster Catechism states it, is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Jesus quoting the OT and summarizing it said, Matthew 22:37 "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

Today I want to talk again about the purposes of the law of God.

Much of our Bible is Old Testament but unfortunately we too often dismiss it as for another people and time.

At best we look for principles that we can apply today.

But it is so much more.

In the next few weeks we will look specifically at the law as summarized in what we call the Ten Commandments BUT I want you to see that they are indeed a summary of the much more extensive “law.”

We usually think of “law” as merely rules and regulations.

But the Bible often uses the word differently.

- The word “law” is sometimes a reference to the entire Old Testament.
- The word “law” more often is a reference to the first five books of the OT.
- Or to all the commandments or even the 10 Commands.

I. What I want you to note is that the “law” is not simply the lists of dos and don’ts found in the Bible but **the law is a reflection of the very person and work of God.**

The Bible is not a rulebook but a story.

And the central character in the story from beginning to end is God.

Even here in Exodus where the commandments of God are first spelled out, they are done so in the midst of story.

When we outline the book of Exodus, by the way the material is presented, we find the following:

Exodus

1:1 – 20:2 Narrative

20:3-21 Law

20:18-26 Narrative

21 - 23:19 laws

23:20-24:15 Narrative

25:1-31:18 Tabernacle and sacrifices

32-34:9 Narrative – Israel’s golden calf

34:10-28 More laws

34:29-36:7 Narrative

36:8-39:42 Tabernacle constructions plans

40:1-38 Narrative

God not only **tells** his people how to act but he **shows** them how they should act– they are to act as he acted and acts.

In the story we see God acting.

We see God living out the very character of his nature – we see him acting the way he is.

Exodus 19:4 “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

Exodus 20:2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

He acts lovingly because he is love; he acts justly because he is just, etc.

The story and the commandments together show us who God is.

King David understood this when he wrote:

Psalm 78:1 “O my people, hear my teaching (“Torah” – law)

Psalm 78:4-5 “The praiseworthy **deeds** of the LORD, his power, and the wonders **he has done**. He decreed **statutes** for Jacob...”

When you read the Old Testament you are not merely reading stories about other people a long time ago or about codes of conduct that they had to follow – you are reading the story of God.

Might I call the whole Bible the autobiography of God?

Now more to the point of the Ten Commandments; when we look at them we see not only how we should act (which I will talk about later) but we first of all see **who God is and how he acts**.

What I have already begun showing you is the first of four uses of the Law of God.

The Law:

Reflects the character of God;

Teaches us how to be like God in our character and conduct;

Restrains sin in society;

Reveals our need for the Savior.

What I have already said about how the law reflects the very character of God is not only true of the whole law (the stories and commandments) but is also true of the Ten Commandments themselves.

I'm indebted to Philip Ryken, pastor of the 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for these specifics.

The **first** commandment reveals the "unique sovereignty" of or God when he says, Exodus 20:3 "You shall have no other gods before me."

The **second** commandment says, in Exodus 20:4-6 "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You 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 fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

This reveals that God is spirit not physical body, that he is the creator and that he is a God of justice and mercy.

The **third** commandment reveals that God is "honorable," holy; everything about him including the name by which is known is holy and again that he is a God of justice.

Exodus 20:7 "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

The **fourth** commandment reveals that God is "sovereign over all the events of daily life." He is Lord of each week and each day.

Exodus 20:8-10 "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God."

The **fifth** commandment says, Exodus 20:12 "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you."

It reveals God's authority as our Father and his generosity.

The **sixth** commandment reveals God as the giver of life and his “sovereignty over life’s end.”

Exodus 20:13 “You shall not murder.”

The **seventh** commandment reveals our God as “pure and faithful.”

Exodus 20:14 “You shall not commit adultery.”

The **eighth** commandment is Exodus 20:15 “You shall not steal.”

It reveals our God as the great provider who is trustworthy.

In the **ninth** commandment God is revealed as truth.

Exodus 20:16 “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.”

And in the **tenth** commandment we read, Exodus 20:17 “You shall not covet...” revealing a God of providence who will provide everything we need. (Philip Ryken in prepublished commentary on Exodus, p525-27)

The commandments God set forth are not arbitrary; they reflect the very character of our God.

Whether we are reading the entire law or just the summary of the moral law in the 10 Commandments, we must realize we are **seeing God himself** – this is about him before it is about us!

That brings me logically to the next use of the Law of God:

II. It teaches us how to live.

Said more precisely – it teaches us how to reflect in our living the character of our God.

In both the OT and NT we are called to be holy because God is holy.

To Israel God said, Leviticus 19:1 “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

To us, the church, he said, 1 Peter 1:15-16 “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶ for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.”

We are his children, we bear his image, and we are to reflect his character in our words and conduct.

As I mentioned last week, some would say we don't need the law to help us know how to live because now the law of love guides us.

I want to again warn us against setting up law and love as opposing ideas.

If we continually remember that the law is an expression of the very nature of our God we won't see love as opposed to law but as complementary.

Therefore quite simply the 10 Commandments show us in part how to be and act as our God is and acts.

There is a great need for God's people to be brought back to the instruction of the commandments.

Several years ago writers Patterson and Kim wrote the book, The Day America Told the Truth.

They said, "Everyone is making up (his) own personal moral code – his own Ten Commandments.

Here are some of those commandments in our day.

I don't see the point in observing the Sabbath.

I will steal from those who won't really miss it.

I will lie when it suits me, as long as it doesn't cause any real damage.

I will drink and drive if I feel I can handle it, I know my limit.

I will cheat on my spouse – after all, given the chance he or she will do the same.

I will cheat on my taxes – to a point.

I will procrastinate at work and do absolutely nothing about one day in five. It's standard operating procedure.

One woman said, "To be perfectly honest, some laws seem to apply to me, some I disregard... I don't need the (clergy), the press, or some lowly cop to tell me how to live my life."

Patterson and Kim went on to write that in America today, "When we want to answer a question of right and wrong, we ask ourselves." The Day America Told the Truth Patterson and Kim p25-27

“Several years ago, during his Supreme Court nomination hearing, Clarence Thomas was closely questioned about whether he subscribed to Natural Law doctrine – the universal knowledge that some things are simply wrong while others are obviously right.

“Having just finished law school, (one man wrote) “I was surprised not to be more familiar with what the Senators, doing the questioning, thought was a terribly dangerous theory.

“Even more astonishing was that Al Gore voted against Mr. Thomas **on the basis** of the judge's belief in Natural Law.

“Imagine then my astonishment when I realized that all they were worrying about was the notion, seemingly obvious to most Americans, that the justness of our laws ultimately depends for its foundation on the universal moral code that God” has written on our hearts and given in the law.

www.brothersjudd.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/reviews.detail/book_id/1270/)

George Orwell wrote, "We have now sunk to a depth at which re-statement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men." J.

Budziszewski, [What We Can't Not Know](#), p15

Yes, we need to look again at the obvious – we need to see again that the laws of God, reflecting the character of God, are given for us that we might be like him.

The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:1 “Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God.”

And in Ephesians 4:1 “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” – you are God’s children.

In the NT every one of the moral imperatives of the Ten Commandments are reiterated in many ways.

Only one example: In Ephesians 6:2 “Honor your father and mother”--which is the first commandment...”

For those who think the law of God is not binding on believers today, I would ask them to notice Paul’s unembarrassed direct reference to the original statement of this moral imperative in Exodus 20.

We recognize there are two kinds of obedience to the law of God.

There is a **legal** obedience; thinking that by law keeping we earn our relationship with God. That is damning theology.

But there is also an **evangelical** obedience; responding to the grace of God as now free to follow and serve our Lord by reflecting his character as revealed in the law.

In the weeks to come we will look at each of the Ten Commandments and see in them a reflection of our God and instruction as to how we can be more like him.

But there is a third use of the law that I must mention.

III. The law restrains sin in a society.

I speak first of the society of the church – God’s own people.

I spoke of this briefly two weeks ago.

In Exodus 20:20 following the giving of the Ten Commandments, “Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”

In both the Old and New Testaments the commands of God are given with a warning about the seriousness of the commands because they reflect the character of God.

There is a healthy “fear” of the Lord that rightly motivates us.

Yes, God calls us to love him, but when we fail to love there is still this one aspect of the “fear of the Lord” that keeps us.

The Apostle Peter said it this way, 1 Peter 1:14-17 “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.”

I want us to take seriously the law of God and the warnings of God that we may become more like Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 “It is God's will that you should be sanctified (set apart to be more like Jesus): that you should avoid sexual

immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God... The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.”

Not only is the law given to restrain sin in the society of the church but also to restrain sin in the larger society.

It is not pleasing to God to see a world become increasingly destructive.

God’s loving purpose is the salvation of his world not the condemnation of it.

He has given his law for the good of all mankind.

The question is how can the law have an impact for good when many reject it?

And how do Christians carry out their mandate from God to be salt and light in a world that rejects the law of God?

How do we exert the right influence in a pluralistic culture?

There are ways in which our country seems very divided:

One author said it this way, “On the one side are those who treat the merest scintilla of religion in our public and political life as an offense against the American idea. On the other are those who believe it to be the responsibility of government to use its power to enforce as law the moral truths of their religion.” Stephen Carter [God's Name in Vain](#), 1

For us as Christians, it is bad enough when other views of reality such as naturalism and secularism are being promoted by the state (through its schools) but then the state also decided to make it very difficult for people of faith to have any representation.

It is one thing to be pluralistic (allowing for many ideas) it is quite another when one idea (a belief in God) is rejected.

It is not simply that the state and schools aren't helping teach the parents' values but that the state and schools are actively working **against** the parents' values.

The author I mentioned before, went on to write, "I am not sure why it is more 'fanatical' for parents to tell their children that the creation story in Genesis is literally true than for the public schools to tell the same children, required by law to attend, that the religion of their parents is literally false." (ibid, 3)

In a religiously pluralistic society, all we want is for the government and its schools to remain neutral on the subject of religion.

What we object to is the strongly anti-religion shift in our courts and schools.

So what do we do?

Do we try to get enough votes to demand that the 10 Commandments be placed in every classroom and courtroom?

In a democratic society I don't see anything wrong with trying to persuade more people to see things our way than the way of others as long as it is done in a manner that reflects the character of our God.

Theologian Richard Muow has written a book entitled Uncommon Decency that ought to be required reading for any believer who wants to engage others on these subjects.

But I am convinced that power politics, done ever so civilly, is not the way Jesus invites his followers to engage the culture. (see context of 2 Corinthians 6:7 and 10:4)

I fear that posting the Ten Commandments in classrooms and courtrooms will bring a hollow victory.

It will be meaningless at best and at worst it relegates the living law of God to an historical relic.

I do not think that monuments and placards will slow the decline into relativism that grips our nation's courts and education system.

We need a very different approach.

Our lives are the way God intends to change society.

I want you to see this as God's purpose for Israel then and the church now.

Exodus 19:3-6 "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ⁴ `You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

God is saying that because the **whole** earth is his, He is choosing Israel to carry out his purposes in the whole earth

For God has in mind that the Israelites be priests **to the world** and that their holiness be a means to attract the world to their God.

It is not first of all about Israel, it is about God and his glory.

God said in Isaiah 49:6

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

And the language of Exodus and Isaiah is used of the church in the NT.

Notice the terms used (priests and holy nation) and the purpose given.

I Peter 2:9 "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, **that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.**

Much American Evangelicalism has reduced religion to a private affair of getting saved and getting to heaven.

And in that vain we think of being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation as being most of all about our own access to God (“the priesthood of believers” we call it) and living lives that comply with God’s laws so we won’t miss out in the end.

But the Bible says in Acts 13:47-48

“For this is what the Lord has commanded us (just as he commanded Israel:

“I have made you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”

We are to die to sin in order to witness to those still dead in their sins.

We are not merely legalists and moralists – we are new creatures in Christ with a mission from God to live such holy lives that others may see your good works and glorify God.

1 Peter 2:12 “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Many years ago Francis Shaeffer said that the way we live our lives and particularly how we love each other is the final apologetic for Christianity.

We will never convince people of the truth of God, of a Moral law, of the gospel, and of Christianity if it is not true in us.

But I’m impatient. I want to see faster change in me, in you and in our culture.

Richard Muow whom I mentioned earlier titled one chapter of his book: “Serving a Slow God.”

I must remember God is in charge of timing, and while it appears slow to us, it is perfect.

I know that is not even close to the final word on the role of the Ten Commandments in a pluralistic society but in our desire to rescue our culture from its decline I urge you to consider the weightier matter of BEING salt and light.

Finally I come to the fourth use of the Law.

IV. The Law reveals our need for the Savior!

The Bible makes it very clear that God never intended for anyone to be saved by keeping the law.

Romans 3:19-20 “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

Phillip Ryken wrote, “Why did God give his people the law?.. The answer is that he gave them his law so they would believe his gospel.” (ibid,542)

- The more we look at the law of God the more we realize how incapable we are of keeping it.
- The more we see God’s character reflected in the law the more we realize how far short you fall.
- And when Jesus takes the bare laws of Exodus 20 and explains them in the Sermon on the Mount he gives the far deeper meaning that gets to our very hearts and motives.
 - We realize all over, how incapable we are of meeting the just demands of a holy God.

That is what God wants.

He wants to drive us to his grace in Jesus.

- Augustine wrote, “The usefulness of the law lies in convicting man of his infirmity and moving him to call upon the remedy of grace which is in Jesus Christ.”
- Martin Luther said, “Therefore we do not abolish the law; but we show its true function and use, namely that it is a most useful servant impelling us to Christ. After the law humbled, terrified, and completely crushed us...(it) drove us to Christ.”
- Calvin wrote, “Moses had no other intention than to invite all (people) to go straight to Christ.”

- Spurgeon said, “As the sharp needle prepares the way for the thread, so the piercing law makes a way for the bright silver thread of divine grace.” (cited in Ryken, 542)

And so when we read the 10 Commandments we realize how incapable we are of keeping them.

It is that that drives us to Jesus for his mercy of forgiveness when we fail and his grace to empower us by his Spirit to increasingly obey and reflect his life in ours.

Jeremiah prophesied a day when the law of God would be written on our hearts.

By the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit that is now true – by his power we may obey, we may reflect God’s life in our.

As we look at each command over these coming weeks, we will again see our need for Jesus’ mercy and grace.

The four uses of the law:

- Reflect the character of God
- Teach us how to live like him
- Restrain sin in the church and society
- Reveal our daily need for Jesus’ mercy and grace.

Pray