



14. Ten Words Exodus 20:1-17

The story is told of Moses who spoke to the people after coming down from Mount Sinai. He said "I've got good news and I've got bad news". The good news is that I've got him down to 10; the bad news is that adultery's still in!"

It's strange about how sometimes our attitude to law makes us feel that whoever has made the law is somehow unreasonable and a kill-joy. *"Why put double yellow lines outside my favourite shop so I have to walk 50 yards to get my shopping? How dare they – and all just because a few children have been run over because parked cars obstructed people crossing – pedestrians should be more careful. And isn't it disgraceful that the council make us drive 20 mph past schools. My reactions are lightning fast and my car has ABS. Besides, children should be taught to run faster across the road!"*

Actually those points make it clear why we need law, anywhere any time. Because it shows us the limits of where our exercise of freedom diminishes the quality of life of others. Yet when people speak about the 10 commandments, God is made out to be a killjoy. Why should we have all these moral rules spouted at us? Why don't we enjoy ourselves? Yet what we find about even what we think as trivial traffic laws show us; that law is usually put there for the wider benefit.

God created us to be community, as He is community. It's true we were also created individuals, but it's our ability to act socially that makes us grow and flourish as human beings. And there must be a balance between individual desires and social needs – personal freedom and social responsibility - for us to grow and flourish as individuals and as a race. God built that sense into us but God has also set those boundaries between freedom and responsibility – and here we have them spelt out quite explicitly in his first covenant between God and a people He has made His own – the 10 Commandments.

And the 10 Commandments are so often quoted as the moral basis of human society. Go back 50 years and we would have found them having a prominent part of teaching in schools and in church – not so now. The Jews took them seriously too as I have mentioned on a number of occasions to the point where they took something that came from the perfection of God and turned it into the idiocy of man. The Pharisees so didn't want to break the commandments that they had laws, hundreds of them to amplify and explain them to make sure God was not displeased by them accidentally breaking a law. So they came up with all sorts of silly laws. And if they thought a law was particularly hard to keep, they looked for loopholes and technicalities to excuse themselves. So it was bad to cheat a Jew, but OK to cheat a Gentile. You shunned Gentiles but favoured Jews. It was unlawful to work on the Sabbath, but OK to get a Gentile to do it for you. That's still the case for many orthodox and ultra-orthodox Jews. What they were left with was a raft of silly practices which were sort of based on the commandments but easy enough for a religious Jew to keep and not feel he's broken God's law. The rich young ruler could boast that he kept the law and probably did. Of course until Jesus told him the story of the Good Samaritan which of course cut right across their rule-bending and exposed it for its stupidity. And in other places we know Jesus amplifies the law by saying it isn't the literal keeping of the rule that's important, but what's in your mind. So murder isn't just killing, but that disregard for others that has its expression in murder. Adultery isn't an act, but the lust that gives birth to it.

In fact for most of them, righteousness with God came through law. People pleased God through keeping the law, so they thought and their version of it. But of course, we are new covenant people and we believe that righteousness comes through grace, not works of righteousness: *Eph2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.*

Why do I say all this – we know it already don't we? It's because it's been a long held view that the church consists of people under grace, but the Jews were people under law. Well, that's what they made themselves, and many still make themselves: people that are in God's favour because they religiously keep law. But Exodus 20 doesn't actually about that.

So let's start at the beginning. Interestingly, to Jews ancient and modern, the 10 Commandments aren't the 10 Commandments – they are the 10 Words. Ten things are said in Exodus 20:1-17 but it doesn't start with commandment one about worshipping God only. To them word one is a statement: *"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you were slaves."*

It's again that statement we looked at last week – it's a statement of grace without the word grace there. They were to be the people of God because God had been gracious to them. God made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and confirmed these through bringing them out of Egypt. God in His grace and mercy had made them His people – and now he was entering into a covenant with them. And that covenant is not vastly different to the covenant He's made with us in Christ. He decided that they were to be His people and if they wanted the benefit of that, they had to say yes to it. Which of course they did.

But in entering into that covenant, they entered into God's way of doing things – and the other 9 words set out where the boundaries of responsibility to God and to one another were in order to make them morally function as a nation.

So rather than law being a means by which they became the people of God – all they had to do was accept His favour, accept His terms and follow His ways. Sound familiar. In Christ it's exactly the same. God has shown His favour to us without merit on our part. All we had to do is accept His favour, accept His terms and follow Jesus.

The new covenant is different from the old, not in the grace which underlies it, but in its scope. The old covenant was a temporal covenant that applied to the people of Israel and was one of land and kinship. But it was also supposed to be a prophetic covenant that pointed to another day and another covenant which had a scope that covered eternity and all men. The law given to Moses in the following chapters of Exodus – the ceremonial law which looks forward to Christ – is prophetic and has been fulfilled in Christ.

The favour for the Jewish nation looked forward to a greater nation, and eternal nation, an eternal city and saw that eternal salvation was only through what God was going to supply by grace – which is why there are so many great Messianic passages in the OT. The found righteousness by realising what grace was and looking forward to something better that God was going to provide in the future.

Some saw it in the time prior to Jesus and it is there in the OT to see – but many Jews fell into religiosity and idolatry and the judgement of God fell on them and that's there to see too. But now the new covenant has superseded the old and as Peter says in Acts 2 – God calls on all men to be saved. The only eternal way both for Israel and now for the Gentile branches grafted in, is through Christ. Israel were supposed to be the light to the Gentiles. They weren't very good at that but salvation was indeed of the Jews as the new covenant was the ultimate fulfilment of the old in one person – one Jew – Jesus Christ.

That said, many contemporary Jewish people understand grace. Most are Messianic and realise that God will provide a way for eternal salvation through Messiah – the only trouble is, God has already provided that way and no amount of worship or law keeping in synagogues or elsewhere is going to find them salvation – they need Jesus. There are many Christians in the world that are pro-Israel. There's nothing wrong with that provided we remember, there is only one name in heaven and earth under which men and women can be saved – Jesus. The only way any Jew will find their way into heaven is by the blood of Jesus. Full stop. I say that because over the years I have found lots of foggy thinking about Israel, but the NT makes it clear – the Old Covenant is made perfect by the New.

So here we have 10 words and I've already covered one. Let me give an overall picture and next week I'll deal with them in more detail. The nation of Israel was product of grace so rather than making them the people of God, the commandments allowed the people to live in a way that honoured God and honoured one another. To come back to what I said earlier, by keeping the commandments, people could develop individually and build themselves up whilst recognising that they had responsibilities to God and one another.

In the first set of commands, they had a responsibility to God – to worship Him alone and not worship idols, to not take His name in vain and to keep the Sabbath.

Then they had a responsibility to their families – to honour their parents and finally, they had a wider social responsibility. They showed the limits of their freedom.

Most of them are brief and self-evident, but God labours two of them, their worship of Him alone and keeping the Sabbath and we'll explore them next week.

The question for us is: do the 10 words apply to us? One of the reasons that you'll have learnt the 10 words as the 10 Commandments is that Christians have acquired these as Christian commandments. Get rid of the first because it isn't a command, split the second and what you're left with are 10 Commandments – all rules. But is that out of context because in doing that, grace is gone? We're in danger of law and going down the road of legalism – and that's precisely what Christians have done with style down the years – taken the law and amplified it. And it comes out in all sort of silly rules we think honour God – how we dress, how we speak, how we pray, what version of the Bible we use, how we behave. Rules and taboos.

The commandments were there to make sure the people of Israel benefited from their grace by knowing what honoured God. Are they ours. Strictly speaking no – not at all. We are under a different covenant. But under our covenant the rules are much the same in terms of defining our obligation to God and responsibility to others. Yes we have commandments – they come from and they're from the Torah and Jesus quotes them heavily in the NT: *34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: " Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

For your reference, these two commands come from Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18 and were sum-ups of the basic principles of the Torah. It part of what's known as the Shema Yisrael and it was regarded as the bedrock of Jewish belief in Jesus' time – and it still is in Judaism. Look at the 10 commandments and you'll see what Jesus means. And Jesus gives it to us as the bedrock of our moral lives as His people.

You put the honouring of God and the needs of others before yourself. In just doing that, you cover the 10 commandments in one swoop and rather than seeing the law as something you need to find loopholes for, it makes good judgement in any situation without resort to daftness.

So do we keep the 10 commandments – strictly speaking no, but in actuality we keep the moral law of God summed up by what Jesus has said – it is the rule of agape. Rather than try to keep laws and find loopholes to cover every situation in a rapidly changing world we have the rule of agape – you act in a way that puts the honouring of God and the needs of others before yourself. In truth it's an easy rule to follow – it both defines our freedom in Christ and our responsibility to others. Like the gospel, it's easy to make judgements on it's basis, but like a set of commandments, easy to not follow if we so desire to follow our own way and in doing so sin – in fact the 10 commands make sin easier to define too and therefore easier to recognise.

And we understand therefore how we are people of grace – and how much we needed the blood of Christ and still need the forgiveness it provides to keep on following Jesus.

Let's pray