

Pastor Jeremy M. Thomas
Fredericksburg Bible Church
107 East Austin
Fredericksburg, Texas 78624
830-997-8834 jthomas@fbgbible.org

C0629 – August 9, 2006 – Ex 20:1-3 – The Decalogue - Part 1

Open your Bibles to Exodus 20:1

“We now reach the climax of the entire Book, the central and most exalted theme, all that came before being, as it were, a preparation for it, and all that follows, a result of, and supplement to, it.” – Cassuto, 235.

Introduction to Mosaic Covenant

There are two kinds of laws in the Mosaic Law. First, *apodictic* law which is always a positive or negative command (e.g. “Thou shalt not...”). Second, *casuistic* law which comes in the form of case law (e.g. “If...then...”). God graciously gave the Israelites general laws and then a body of case law which they could judge detailed cases. The 10 Commandments are apodictic and form the foundation and heart of the covenant. The case law that follows gives details concerning the general areas covered in the 10 Commandments. So, for example, we have the general command “You shall not murder” and then, in the following chapters we have case law which distinguishes between willful murder and accidental homicide.

603 Commands

10 Commandments

The 10 Commandments are known as the Ten Words in Hebrew (Exod 34:28) and the Decalogue in Greek.

The OT teaches that the 10 Commandments were etched on two stone tablets and were written on both sides of each tablet. The one who etched the words on the stone tablets was not Moses but God Himself and both tablets were small enough for Moses to carry “in his hand” (look up Exod 32:15-16; or “hands” Dt 9:15, 17). This much is clear. What is not clear is whether the 10 Commandments were written on each tablet—as ancient suzerain-vassal treaties of that period required—or whether some of the words were written on one tablet and some on the other. For example, some expositors claim that the first four commandments, which deal with Israel’s relationship to the God, were written on the first tablet and the last six commandments, which deal with Israel’s relationship to one another as human beings, were written on the second tablet. My opinion on the matter is that God wrote the 10 Commandments on each tablet. My reason for this is because the literary form of the Mosaic Covenant is strikingly similar to the literary form common to suzerainty-vassal treaties of that time, particularly the Hittites. God’s purpose was to be instructive not creative. Using a treaty form already well known to the Israelites was the clearest way God could communicate what He expected of Israel in entering a suzerainty-vassal treaty.

Suzerain-vassal treaties were commonly made between the kings of two nations. The suzerain was the greater king and the vassal was the lesser king. Usually the greater king provided military protection for the lesser king and his nation as long as the lesser king and his nation provided certain services agreed upon and recorded in the treaty. Two copies of the treaty would be made. Each king would have a copy of the treaty so each could review the terms of the treaty and make sure they were fulfilling their requirements. Copies were also made as a double check so tampering with the terms of the contract would be avoided. The very essence of ancient suzerainty-vassal treaties was that they were conditional. If one king failed to fulfill his requirements then the other king was not required to fulfill his end of the bargain.

Scholars have recognized that the Mosaic treaty follows the Hittite form of suzerainty-vassal treaties. These treaties required two copies of the treaty so both the suzerain and the vassal could easily access the terms of the treaty and make sure they were following their requirements. In the case of the Mosaic treaty God is the suzerain and Israel is the vassal. If Israel obeyed then they would enjoy God’s blessing. If they disobeyed then they would be under God’s cursing. If this treaty follows the form of ancient suzerainty-vassal

treaties as many scholars suggest then two copies of the Ten Commandments were made, both by the hand of God.

Prologue

Exodus 20:1-2 Then God spoke all these words, saying,

² "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Exodus 20:1 Then, that is, once the purpose of the Mosaic Covenant was revealed, the proper preparations respecting the people's sinfulness and God's holiness were in place so that God had descended upon Mt Sinai and the people were at the base of the mountain respecting the borders, **Then God spoke all these words.** The speaking of God has doctrinal significance for the Doctrine of Revelation.ⁱ

The Doctrine of Revelation has two categories: 1) General Revelation in Creation and Conscience and 2) Special Revelation in Propositional Language. This verse refers to the latter. First, God has not left us without verbal witness. Second, God condescends to man by using human language. Third, God speaks into space and time so that it can be heard by men and could be captured in written form or, if a tape recorder had been present it could have been recorded and played back later. Fourth, God speaks in propositional language. That is, God makes statements of fact through which we can know the mind of God on a given subject.

In Exodus 20 God spoke, in the ancient Hebrew language, the 10 Commandments so that all the people at the foot of Mt Sinai heard God's voice (Exod 20:19). The giving of the Decalogue is absolutely unique in one sense; men did not record God's words but the very hand of God Himself etched vv 2-17 on two tablets of stone in ancient pictorial Hebrew. This is the only section of Scripture that does not have dual authorship. All other sections of Scripture have both divine and human authorship. God is the primary author and man is the secondary author but God is the sole author of the 10 Commandments. We should also note that the Bible claims that angels somehow mediated the giving of the Law (Dt 33:2; Acts 7:38, 52; Gal 3:19; Heb 2:2). But this probably only refers to the laws given after the 10 Commandments (God→Angels→Moses→Israel).

“The Ten Commandments are an excellent summary of 10 divine rules for human conduct. They might be called rules of (1) religion, (2) worship, (3) reverence, (4) time, (5) authority, (6) life, (7) purity, (8) property, (9) tongue, and (10) contentment.”ⁱⁱ

The first thing God reveals is His name, **I am YHWH your elohim**. Remember that one's name reveals one's character. YHWH means the eternal and immanent One (Exod 3:14ff). Second, YHWH identifies His works; **I...brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery**. Judaism takes verse 2 as the beginning of the first commandment. I take it that verse 2 is the basis for the 10 Commandments and the motivation for the Israelites to obey Him. Since God brought about the salvation of Israel from Egypt whom they served in fear, then they ought to obey Him out of love and gratitude. The law was not given to save people but to a people already saved!

PRINCIPLE: God never asks us to do anything for Him before He has first done an immensely greater thing for us.

- We love because He first loved us
- We should consider ourselves dead to sin because Christ freed us from sin making us alive in Him (Rom 6)
- We forgive others because He first forgave us. Believers forgiving other believers. (salvation forgiveness; vertical fellowship forgiveness; horizontal fellowship forgiveness) I can't forgive him for that! Why not? If God forgave him why can't you? You have a problem with the cross. Did Christ die for all sin on the cross or not?

God never puts any burden or necessity upon us before He has done something immensely greater for us.

I. The First Three Commandments: Relationship Between the Israelites and God (vv 3-7)

What are the 10 Commandments? There are three different lists proposed. These differences have played a significant role in the public display of the 10 Commandments in America. Typically the Protestant list has been displayed.

Tradition	1st Commandment	2nd Commandment	9th Commandment	10th Commandment
Ancient Judaism, most Protestants & Eastern	Exodus 20:3	Exodus 20:4-6	Exodus 20:16	Exodus 20:17

Orthodox				
Current Judaism	Exodus 20:2	Exodus 20:3-6	Exodus 20:16	Exodus 20:17
Roman Catholics, some Lutherans	Exodus 20:3-6	Exodus 20:7	Coveting of neighbor's wife in Exodus 20:17	Rest of Exodus 20:17

A. The First Commandment (v 3-6): Idolatry

This commandment answers three questions: “Who am I to worship?” “How am I to worship?” and “Why am I to worship Him only?”

³ **"You shall have no other god(s) before Me.**

⁴ **"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.**

⁵ **"You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me,**

⁶ **but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.**

This commandment forbids idolatry. Idolatry can take two forms. *First, you shall have no other god(s) before Me.* That is, you shall place no other *elohim* before My face. The personal God YHWH is to be worshipped directly and not through any object between the worshipper and YHWH. YHWH demands personal worship unmediated by any created object. You can't put up icons, crosses, pictures of God, stained glass creations, golden calf's and use these as objects through which YHWH is worshipped. The emphasis here is not in worshipping the objects themselves but putting them before Him, in between the worshipper and YHWH Himself or identifying the object with YHWH. YHWH forbids being identified with or worshipped through any part of creation. The phrase **other god(s)** refers to the god(s) of the pagan Gentiles made from created materials like wood, stone, or precious metals who are really not gods. The text is not admitting that other gods exist but simply that other nations worship wood, stone, and precious metal idols that represent their gods. In reality they don't represent gods but demons. Pagans don't have a problem identifying their gods with parts of creation and worshipping parts of creation. The Israelites were not supposed to do this, yet they did anyway. For example, in Exod 32 God said,

“They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!’” (Exod 32:8; cf Neh 9:18).

In this they were not worshipping a different god but they were identifying YHWH with the golden calf. This violated the first commandment.

Christians are not supposed to do this either. In the Middle Ages the iconoclastic controversy where it was debated whether God could be worshipped through various icons such as crosses, pictures of saints, statues, etc... This practice is condemned in the NT for the Church. God cannot be worshipped through created objects.

A modern example that violates this commandment is the philosophy of Hinduism which identifies the universe as God. Yet this commandment is saying that God cannot be identified with any aspect of creation. To make God in an image of anything in creation is to reduce God below part of creation.

Second, this command **you shall have no other gods before Me** forbids polytheism, the worship of many gods. There is but one God and He alone is to be worshipped. Historically, pagans worship multiple gods but the Israelites were forbidden to do this. Christians are also forbidden to worship multiple gods. In the early Church, under the Roman Empire, the Caesars were considered gods and worship was mandatory under the penalty of death. Since Christians believed there was only one God they refused to worship the Caesars alongside God. The Romans had a difficult time understanding why Christians refused to worship Caesar alongside YHWH since everyone else worshipped multiple gods and goddesses.

The reason for this commandment is the unique theology of the Torah which stands in sharp contrast to the other religions of the ancient world. The other religions had no difficulty identifying their god(s) with nature or parts of it. The Israelites lived among such thinking for 400 years in Egypt. But the Torah teaches the absolute distinction between the Creator and the creation. Therefore, the first form of idolatry is identifying YHWH the Creator with any part of creation. So, who am I to worship? YHWH and YHWH alone.

¹ Divine Revelation comes in two basic categories. First, general revelation in creation. The Doctrine of General Revelation in Creation demonstrates the necessary relationship between the Creator and

his creation, i.e. that which a creator makes bears the marks of the creator, that is, the creator leaves an indelible imprint upon his creation so that the object bears witness to the maker's character. Within general revelation there are two subcategories; man and nature. Both are creations but they are distinct and serve as distinct witnesses to God. First, God made man distinct from nature and placed within man a witness. This is the witness of the conscience. What is the conscience? It is an immaterial part of man which judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart infallibly according to the standard it has received (through the world, the flesh and the devil). Notice, the standard of the conscience is not infallible but the conscience does infallibly judge according to the standard it has received. In other words, the conscience alerts the person whether they are acting in accordance with its accepted standard or not. The standard according to which the conscience judges is in the mind and since the mind can be darkened or transformed then the standard can be changed. It is a fallible standard, but the conscience always judges infallibly with reference to the standard in the mind at any particular time. The key for the Christian is to be transformed by the renewing of the mind so that the standard in the mind which the conscience judges according to will be in line with the standards of God. When the standard in the mind has been transformed to the standard of God then both the mind and the conscience are infallible. This is taught in

Romans 2:14-16 For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, ¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

In any case, when a person's standards come in line with the Law of God and they follow the Law of God the conscience serves as an inner witness to their knowledge of God. Second, we have another aspect of creation; nature. And nature serves as a clear witness of God. Because nature came from the hand of God it necessarily bears the imprint of God's attributes. So that the invisible attributes of God are seen clearly through what He has made. This is taught inⁱ

Romans 1:20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

So, we have general revelation in man's conscience and in nature.

ⁱⁱ Bible Knowledge Commentary.

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