

Exodus 20:1-17 (Part III)

Introduction

We've seen how misleading it *can* be to think of the Ten Commandments as the public sign in the front yard, standing there all by itself. The Ten Commandments were *written down* and *given to God's people in covenant*. Separated from covenant, God's law can **only** condemn and kill as it reveals our guilt. But embedded within the covenant as the terms governing and shaping a relationship that God graciously initiates, God's commands can be transformed into the pathway of **life** – of true happiness, and peace, and joy. If this is true, then we should want to love God's commands and treasure them above all earthly treasures. We should want to **study** God's commands and **know** them intimately.

Over the last couple of weeks, we've seen how the Sabbath commandment has a very unique place in the Ten Commandments. The Sabbath is the only commandment that functions as the "sign" of the covenant. The Sabbath commandment is sandwiched in between the first three commandments (which are vertical and focused on our relationship with God) and the last six commandments (which are horizontal and focused on our relationship with each other). And so the Sabbath is the perfect outward sign of both these categories of commandments. It was the Sabbath commandment—and its *special placement within* the Ten Commandments—that actually united God's holy and unchanging law together with this temporary and passing covenant. Now that the covenant is obsolete, I would suggest that the 4th Commandment (which was tied to the covenant as its "sign") is also obsolete.

The Sabbath is the *only* commandment that functions as a "**sign**" of the covenant, and it's also the *only* commandment that we find **fulfilled** in the New Testament by the *substance* of which the Sabbath was only the *shadow*. As long as the **offspring (singular)** was experiencing their "rest" only in terms of the symbols and types and shadows (temple, Mount Zion, Canaan), the weekly Sabbath remained the sign of God's plan that they should be the people who would one day share in God's own eternal "day" of rest. Of course today, under the New Covenant, everything has changed. As the offspring (singular) we no longer experience our rest in terms of earthly types and shadows (temple, Mount Zion, Canaan). Through Jesus' shed blood, the way has been opened for us into the heavenly tabernacle, which stands on the heavenly Mount Zion within the heavenly land of promise. As those who look back now to the finished work of Jesus Christ, we have already entered into our eternal rest. "Already," but "not yet." The "already" is now our guarantee and promise of the "not yet," and so the Sabbath sign has been fulfilled – in a way that none of the other commandments ever were. As the sign of a covenant now obsolete, the Sabbath "**commandment**" is no longer binding on us as that which governs and shapes our relationship with God. And yet especially as we look back now at this commandment in light of its fulfillment, it's still a reminder to us today that God's commandments are not meant to be a heavy weight and burden, but rather the gateway to **life** – to freedom, and joy, and rest. So here's another reminder of why we should want to love God's commands and treasure them above all earthly treasures. Here's another reminder of why we should want to **study** God's commands and **know** them intimately.

So what about the “other” *nine*? The traditional total of all the laws and commandments within the covenant is 613. But there are only nine other commandments that made it onto the tablets of stone. Why? What is it that’s so special and unique about *these* commandments?

I. The “Ten Commandments” and the “Book of the Covenant”

We find the Ten Commandments in Exodus chapter twenty. Skipping ahead to chapter 24, we have an official covenant ceremony where the covenant is confirmed and ratified in blood. In between the Ten Commandments in chapter 20 and the covenant ceremony in chapter 24 we’re about to come to three chapters containing various miscellaneous rules and laws. So what are these rules and laws that are all collected here *in between* the Ten Commandments and the final ratifying of the covenant? When we get to the covenant ceremony in chapter twenty-four, we read this:

- Exodus 24:3–4, 7 — Moses came and told the people *all the words* of the LORD and *all the rules*. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “*All the words* that the LORD has spoken we will do.” And *Moses wrote down all the words* of the LORD... Then he took the *Book of the Covenant* and read it in the hearing of the people.

The Book of the Covenant is obviously bigger than just the Ten Commandments. No doubt it *includes* the Ten Commandments in chapter twenty, but it *also* includes the collection of laws and rules in chapters 21-23. So what’s the relationship of the Ten Commandments to the rest of the Book of the Covenant? And how will this help us to *know* God’s laws more intimately, and treasure them above all earthly treasures?

II. The Ten Commandments and the “Criminal Code”

When we think of a “criminal code” we think of laws that explain very clearly what you’re not allowed to do, and then *attached* to those laws there are always *specific penalties* for the cases where those laws are broken. So later on in the Book of the Covenant, we’ll read things like this:

- Exodus 21:12 — *Whoever* strikes a man so that he dies *shall be* put to death.
- Exodus 21:16 — *Whoever* steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, *shall be* put to death.
- Exodus 22:1 — *If* a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, *he shall* repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep.
- Exodus 22:6 — *If* fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, *he who started the fire shall* make full restitution.

A criminal code has to be practical. It has to actually “work” and be enforceable – something that can keep a nation and a society “working” and functioning. But one of the things we notice about the Ten Commandments is that there are never any *punishments* attached to them. That’s our first clue that the Ten Commandments were never intended to function as Israel’s criminal law code. In other words, in and of themselves, the Ten Commandments can’t really be *fully enforced* by any human court of law.

III. The Ten Commandments and the HEART

Look at the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” The point of this commandment isn’t just to prohibit a specific “act” like building or bowing down to an idol. The point of this command is to require an exclusive *heart* loyalty to Yahweh.¹ Now, at least on the surface level, you could enforce a commandment like “You shall not make for yourself a carved image... you shall not bow down to them...” But how do you ever fully enforce or attach penalties to the first commandment in a human court of law (“You shall have no other gods before Me”)? How can any human judge fully enforce heart devotion, and heart loyalty, and heart trust? *And yet* this first commandment is no less *binding* on God’s people than any of the rest.

When we come to the fifth commandment (which begins the “horizontal” section of the commandments), we have a similar problem: “Honor your father and your mother.” That’s a pretty open-ended commandment, and it obviously assumes and requires a *heart attitude*. It would be easy to enforce a commandment like this: “You shall not strike your father or your mother,” or, “You shall not curse your father or your mother.” So later on in the Book of the Covenant that’s just what we see:

- Exodus 21:15 — Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death.
- Exodus 21:17 — Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.

These crimes are outward and visible, and so the penalty can be enforced by a human court of law. But how do you really fully enforce the law as we have it in the 5th commandment: “Honor your father and your mother”?

We’ve looked at the first commandment and the 5th commandment, so now let’s look at the 10th and last commandment: “You shall not covet.” Coveting is a selfish, illegitimate *desire* or *craving* of our hearts for something that may or may not be bad in itself. But since coveting is obviously an invisible matter of the *heart*, how can any human court of law ever enforce the 10th commandment? It’s impossible; and there’s no evidence that anyone in Israel was ever actually punished for coveting. Nevertheless, “You shall not covet” is still a commandment, and it’s still no less *binding* on God’s people than any of the rest of God’s commandments.

But now we see something even more surprising: This 10th and last commandment is actually meant to guide how we read all the rest of the commandments. In other words, *before* a person steals (breaking the 8th commandment), he *first* has to covet (in his heart) what he steals (breaking the 10th commandment). *Before* a person commits adultery (breaking the 7th commandment) he *first* has to covet his neighbor’s wife in his heart (breaking the 10th commandment; cf. Col. 3:5). The breaking of the 6th commandment (murder) is very often preceded and motivated by coveting.

¹ As one commentator says, this first commandment is the only commandment that prohibits [*and requires*] a “relationship.” (Hamilton; quoting Patrick)

- James 4:1–2 — What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.

Bearing false witness against a person is very often preceded by selfish, illegitimate cravings and desires (coveting). Or think about the command not to bow down before any physical representations of the invisible God. As we'll see in the coming weeks, idols and images are usually our way of reducing God to something that can be manipulated for our selfish purposes – so we can get Him to do and be for us whatever we want. So the breaking of the 2nd commandment was also almost always preceded and motivated by a covetous heart (the breaking of the 10th commandment). Listen to what Paul says in Romans chapter seven:

- Romans 7:7–8 — If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.

Out of all the Ten Commandments why does Paul single out the law that forbids coveting? Because this 10th and last commandment was commonly understood even then as a summary of all the rest of the commandments.² And so this helps us understand what Paul means by “all *kinds* of covetousness.” In other words, in the end every different kind of law breaking can always be traced back to its own brand and variety of forbidden *desire* and sinful *craving*. (cf. Mat. 15:18–19).

By putting the commandment that forbids coveting in the tenth and last spot, God teaches us that the commandments that come before it are all so far-reaching that they *order* and they *command* even the *thoughts and motives and desires* of our hearts.³ This is what explains how Jesus can look back to the 7th commandment and say:

- Matthew 5:27–28 — “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

As the authoritative “law-giver,” Jesus isn’t giving a new law, but rather an authoritative interpretation of the 7th commandment. Things like lust and coveting so often remain hidden, and invisible in the heart. And yet if lust *is* adultery in the eyes of the only Judge that truly, ultimately matters, and if coveting *is* actually the equivalent of theft and bearing false witness and making idols, then we see how impossible it is for the Ten Commandments to ever be fully enforced by any human court of law. In the end, since the Ten Commandments govern even the thoughts and motives of the heart, they can *only* be fully enforced—and any penalties can *only* be finally meted out—before the judgment seat of God, who faithfully sees and records every

² In Jewish thought, the 10th commandment sometimes “stands as a representative summation of the Mosaic law... Jewish writers could do this because they tended to view ‘coveting’ as the root of all sins.” (Moo)

³ “This commandment deals with man’s inner heart and shows that none of the previous nine commandments could be observed merely from an external or formal act. Every inner instinct that led up to the act itself was also included.” (Kaiser)

motive, and weighs every thought of our hearts.⁴ So the Ten Commandments differ from Israel's criminal law code as the revelation of the standard by which *we* will all be judged when we're exposed and laid completely bare before the eyes of God.

Conclusion

If this is true, then shouldn't it cause us to *fear*? Jesus said:

- Luke 16:15 — You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

If, *for a single moment*, we stopped justifying ourselves in the sight of men—based on how we look to ourselves and to others—and began to honestly, seriously consider that the holy God *knows* our *hearts*, should we not be immediately overcome with trembling?

- Proverbs 21:2a — Every way of a man is right in his own eyes.

Think about that. That's a really scary commentary on each and every single one of us in this room.

- Proverbs 21:2 — Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the heart.

And so this is where the Ten Commandments come in. The Ten Commandments reveal to us the holy, binding *law* of God – the standard by which He *judges* not just our outward actions, but our *innermost* thoughts, motives, and desires.

- Proverbs 20:27 — The spirit of man is the lamp of the LORD, *searching all his innermost parts*.
- Job 25:2–6 (cf. 4:17-19; 15:14-16) — How then can man be in the right before God? How can he who is born of woman be pure? Behold, even the moon is not bright, and the stars are not pure in his eyes; how much less man, who is a maggot, and the son of man, who is a worm!

But are we still complacent? Are we still apathetic? Will we tell ourselves that our *hearts* are not *really* “deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9) We have so many layers of justification and excuse, and even self-congratulation and praise, that we can be completely and totally blinded to the true condition of our heart. In the end, only God can open our eyes to see it; and so this is what we should always be *asking* Him to do. But one practical thing we can be doing with God's help is to be always *tracing* our words and our deeds (even our “good” words and our “good” deeds) back to their source in our hearts, and so letting

⁴ “Adultery, or murder, or false witnessing are punishable, but how does one punish people for what they are thinking? ... ‘There is no evidence that liability for mere intention was ever applied in a human court... the idea did exist that merely to intend a wrong was itself wrong. It was a principle employed in God's justice, but not... in the jurisprudence of man.’ That is to say, the last commandment is more about a sin than about a crime.” (Hamilton; quoting Jackson) “The absence of clearly stated sanctions from apodictic law suggests that the Decalogue was never intended to function as Israel's criminal code.” (Hamilton)

even our *smallest* words and our *smallest* deeds serve as **windows** into the true depravity of our hearts. Jesus said:

➤ Matthew 12:34–37 — “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks...”

In other words, when even the smallest trickle comes out of our mouth, it means that the heart was already full to overflowing. If we ever just momentarily lash out in anger, that’s not the result of a sudden flash flood in the heart, but a window into what was already there, in our heart, all along.

But are we still complacent, even now? We know there aren’t any *penalties* formally, or officially attached to the Ten Commandments. So if I’m never sentenced to death by the criminal code, or if the criminal code never requires that I be whipped, or pay a fine, or make restitution, then I might begin to believe that any penalty for breaking the Ten Commandments “only” in my heart will certainly not be as severe. But, in fact, this is a deceit of our enemy, and the *opposite* is actually true. Jesus said:

➤ Matthew 5:21 — “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’”

Notice how Jesus quotes first from the Ten Commandments (“You shall not murder”), and then goes on to give a summary quote not from the Ten Commandments, but from the Criminal Code (“and whoever murders will be liable to judgment”). This is what the people had heard: They had heard the Ten Commandments being limited and reduced to *only* their application in the criminal code (“You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment”), and so they believed that if they were never sentenced to any *penalty* by the criminal code, then they had happily escaped the judgment of God. Do we think that breaking God’s law in our hearts is *less* dangerous and *less* condemning than when we break God’s law in our outward speech or action? Do we think that being angry with someone in our heart makes us less deserving of death than if we had pulled the trigger? Jesus went on to say:

➤ Matthew 5:22 — “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother [in his heart] will be liable to [the same] judgment [death]; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ [in the heat of anger] will be liable to the hell of fire.”

The penalties of the criminal code enforced by human courts were only **warnings** of the *far more severe and eternal penalties* that can only be enforced by the one who sees, and knows our hearts. And so the first thing the Law does, even when it comes to us in Covenant, is to shine a searching spotlight into our souls – revealing, exposing, and laying bare our **hearts**; stripping us and forcibly wresting from us every last excuse and justification that we hide behind.

Have you felt in your heart that you have been **convicted** by the law as a transgressor? (cf. James 2:9) Remember, we don’t have to “agree” with the Law in order to be convicted by that Law. So have I felt in my heart that I have been justly **convicted** by the law as deserving the *penalty* of eternal death”? And have we, then, lifted up our eyes in faith to gaze with adoration, and wonder, and love, and praise upon the Savior – who *fulfilled* all the law by His perfect obedience and then

died the death of a law-breaker in *our* place? If so, then we can know that we have been *justified*; we have been declared righteous by the holy Judge and law-Giver Himself – forever *set free* from the condemning power of the Law.

- 1 Corinthians 15:56–58 — The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers [and sisters], be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

So why weren't the Ten Commandments “enough”? Why was there any need for the rest of the Book of the Covenant? The criminal law code was required in order to govern the outward actions of a people—*of an offspring (singular)*—who were unregenerate – who didn't yet have the law of God written on their hearts. Today, under the New Covenant, we have no parallel to this criminal code under the Old Covenant. And the reason is because today the offspring (singular) have all been *born again* – from the least to the greatest. Today, we have *all* received the writing of God's *law* on our hearts. This wasn't something *we* could do. We couldn't write the commandments on the tablet of our hearts. Think about this!

- Jeremiah 13:23 — Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.
- Job 14:4 — Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one.

There's no hint here of self-reform – of us “turning over a new leaf.” The writing of God's law on our hearts had to be wholly and entirely the work of God. But now that *HE* has done it, there's no longer any need for a criminal code to be posted on the walls of the Church enforcing the Ten Commandments. **Instead, now we can *all together know and understand, and study and love God's law precisely as that which governs and shapes our relationship with Him at the very deepest level of the heart.***

Is your relationship with God an external façade, or is it the true covenant relationship brought about by a transformed *heart*? Jesus said:

- John 14:21 (cf. 1 John 2:3; 3:24) — Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.
- 1 John 2:3 — By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.