

No God, But God

Exodus 20:1-3

1/17/2021

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CPC, friends of CPC, and those who are visiting with us this morning, we are grateful to have you join us this morning as we are in this new year and in this new series. This morning, we continue in this series *Renewal in the Wilderness* by looking at the first commandment of Exodus 20 which is the first giving of the Ten Commandments. Before I do this, I want to explain what we will do each week as we look at a portion of the law, and that is it will always be prefaced with verse 1 of Exodus 20. We will repeat that, and I will explain this morning why that is the case.

As we consider God's law and the first commandment, there is no god but God. Exodus 20:1-3.

And God spoke all these words, saying, "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." [ESV]

Will you pray with me?

Gracious and heavenly Father, we come to you, and we ask for your Holy Spirit. We ask for your presence. We ask for your power. We ask, Lord, for your renewing strength to receive your word as your children, to rejoice in your salvation, and to rejoice that you show us how to live. Lord, I pray as we continue in this series that you would renew your people with a great sense of rejoicing, for the glorious is our God and worthy of all praise, that you, O Lord, have redeemed a people because of your goodness and glory, and you have shown us how to live. Lord, do this we ask in this moment, in this season, in this place for your glory and your glory alone. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

As we look together at this first commandment, we will do so in considering how we are also to understand why in the world a church in 2021 would be looking at the law of God. Isn't that just for the Old Testament? Why would we go and understand how the law of God is to be understood? Isn't that done?

This morning it is not just understanding how we are to understand the law in and of itself, but it is how do we even begin to understand what God is saying through His servant Moses? What is this first commandment that there is to be no god but God? Literally, there is to be no other gods against me, meaning there is no other god that precedes. There is nothing else that should be before or put into the face of God as something that is more worthy of worship than He alone. How do we understand this?

This morning as we work together through this verse and understand its broader context, we're going to be looking at the principle and use of the law to answer the question why in the world are we studying the Ten Commandments? That's the principle and use of the law. The second is the nature of God. Thirdly, the nature of things. The principle and use of the law, the nature of God, and the nature of things.

The principle and use of the law, and first, the principle. The nature of what the Bible teaches of how God has revealed Himself, if we are willing to take the Bible on its own terms and what it says about itself, what it declares about God, and what God says through His word, we understand that God is eternal and unchangeable. Therefore, every expression of God, of His character, of His righteousness, of His rule by which the law of God is to be understood is an expression of His righteousness, of His purity, of His glory that He is above all things glorious and honorable, it is an expression of His justice. It is an expression of how He means to do all things by His own character.

Therefore, if He is unchangeable and eternal and all of His character is unchangeable and eternal according to His word, then His law is eternal. It stands forever because it is an expression of His eternal

character, His purity, His glory, and His goodness. But that's the principle of the law. Because it is an expression of His goodness and character, it will never go away.

How are we to use the law? In some sense, how were the Israelites to use the law? And then even more importantly for our context as the church of Jesus Christ in light of the cross and resurrection, how are we to understand the use of the law?

Here, I have a quote from Dr. Vern Poythress. Before it's put on the screen, let me explain. This comes from my earliest days in seminary when I had the opportunity to read Dr. Vern Poythress's book *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*. This work I commend to all of you, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*. It was the first way in which I finally had a context for understanding the law of God. Without a proper understanding of its context, not only in the immediate context of Exodus as we looked at last week but how we also understand the use of the law while understanding the work of Christ, the law of God can do nothing but crush. If it is an expression of God's character that is holy, righteous, just, and pure, to hear the law of God outside of the context of what God has done, all the law can do is show us how we are not like God.

As Paul says, that we have all "fallen short of the glory of God." What is Paul saying? That before this perfect righteous display of who God is, who are we? We are broken and sinful, and we are not righteous. We are not pure. We are not always just, and we are most certainly not always good.

When we hear these things, it can do nothing but crush us. Is that what God intends? There are many still today who claim to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, who hold out the law of God outside of the context of what Christ has done, what God has done. I've come up against those folks even early on in my Christian walk. Frankly, I have found it distasteful, and now I find it utterly and absolutely worthy of rejection. The law of God outside of the grace of God can do nothing but crush.

But hear this summary from Dr. Vern Poythress when he says,

"The Ten Commandments are not moralism or a legalistic way of salvation, but a call to life motivated by gratitude for God's compassion and deliverance. We can retrieve the correct use of the commandments only by invoking a typological analogy between the redemption from Egypt and redemption from sin by Christ."

What is Dr. Poythress pointing to? It is this. I have always found distasteful those who would call for just a bare display of the law of God out in public without putting it in the right context of a God who delivers, a God who redeems, a God of compassion and mercy, a covenant God who has set His love on those who hear His word. That is to say the only way that we can use the law of God either in its Old Testament context or now in the light of Christ is we must understand that for Israel to hear the law of God, they had to first hear what He says in verse 1. "And God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'" They had to hear first that the God of this law, the God of this righteousness, the God of this purity and glory is a God who has redeemed.

While the redemption and restoration of Israel out of the house of slavery in Egypt is a great and historical event, it pales in comparison to what Christ has done for us. Yes, for what Christ has done for us. Hear the words of Paul when he writes this in Ephesians 2. He says the following,

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith.

And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [ESV]

You see, the use of the law of God as it displays His righteousness and glory and purity is to be understood and preached in the context of looking at what our God has done in Christ Jesus. Moses and what God did in Israel is a historical type of what God has done in history that was to be fulfilled ultimately and what God has done in the world through Christ Jesus, through His death and resurrection.

As God has redeemed, as God has poured out His grace, as God has delivered, it is then and only then that He says, "You shall have no other gods before me." This commandment and all of the commandments begin, are a display, and are summarized in our God of redemption and salvation. This is why we cannot merely put a display of the law of God in hopes that somehow people will figure out that our God is a God of redemption unless we tell them of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

You as a Christian if you profess Christ know this, that the law of God isn't meant to shame. It isn't meant to tell you how you are to work your way towards God. Never. It is always to be a display of His righteousness which can be seen in how He has redeemed.

Then He says, this is how I want you to live. If this is the case, then let us consider when He says, "You are to have no other gods before me." What is being expressed there by God? I think God is revealing His nature, and that is the nature of God. First, when He says, "You are to have no other Gods before me," meaning no other thing, no other being whether it is yourself or anything in all creation is to be raised in priority, raised for worship, raised for glory and praise before or above me.

Why would God say this? It is because God has already said by His very nature that God is good. To hear God say, "You are to have no other gods before me," is absolutely infused with this invitation to see that there are no other gods before Him because He is God who is good.

What do I mean? In God, there is no malice. There is no indiscriminate hatred. There is no unfaithfulness. There is no untrustworthiness. Rather what God displays in this part of His word and throughout is that He promotes His goodness and giving His goodness away in His redeeming hand towards a people who did not acknowledge Him or know Him or seek Him. The picture of what God does in Israel is a picture of what God does in all humanity and what we ourselves worship at the time of Christmas. The incarnation is God breaking into time and space with His Son Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, as a display that God does not expect man to rise up to understand Him. Rather God has descended and become like us yet without sin.

Consider Christ Himself. There was no bitterness. There was no rage. There was no fear or anxiety. There was no indiscriminate hatred or shame that He cast on others. Rather He displayed empathy and kindness, beauty, and goodness that He would make Himself known to those who were the least expected to understand who God was. With faithfulness, and kindness, forgiveness, and mercy, and compassion, God in Christ displays that His very character is one of goodness.

But not only when God says that He is to be the God above all things and there is to be no other god before Him, it is not just that God Himself is good, but it is that this very goodness drives and shapes His mission. Remember what I just read from the apostle Paul when he says in Ephesians 2:4,

For God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. [ESV]

This is what Paul is declaring as the heart of the character of God's goodness but also the heart of God's mission, that it is His goodness that shapes His mission.

This is what Michael Bird says in his work *Evangelical Theology* when he says, "This is why we can agree with Paul when he writes in the letter to the Romans that 'in all things, God works for the good of those who love him,' Romans 8." Michael Bird then says,

"The death and resurrection of Jesus is the proof that the proposition, the proof that God is for us, proof of the goodness of God's power and the power of God's goodness, proof that sin and death do not have the last word, proof that in all things we, who have received that goodness, are more than conquerors. But let's be honest. It doesn't always feel that way. We don't always feel the wisdom and jubilation of God's goodness toward us amid chemotherapy, at a grave side, in anxiety or unemployment, divorce and depression. But the promises of God given in the gospel are steadfast because of God's unsearchable character and assured by Christ's resurrection. Indeed, his promises are an anchor for the soul which is why we hold on to them and keep them precious."

Although we do not always feel God's goodness, we are called again and again to be reminded of His promises of the mission of God as a statement of the character of God's goodness which is why God says to us, "You shall have no other gods before me." Why? Because my face towards you is one of goodness, and my love towards you is shaped by goodness that you might find rest in my goodness, that you might find strength in my goodness, that you might find a foundation in my goodness towards you.

This is why the Westminster Larger Catechism, when speaking of this first commandment, asks the question, "What are the duties then required of the first commandment?" And they are,

"The knowing and acknowledging God to be the only true God and our God, and to worship and glorify him accordingly by thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honoring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him, believing him, trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in him, being zealous for him, calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks and yielding all obedience in the mission to him with the whole of our persons, being careful in all things to please him and sorrowful when he is offended, or walking humbly with him."

The very first commandment when He says, "You are to have no other gods before me," is a call for His people and now in Jesus Christ for the church itself to stop and to take one gigantic corporate breath and to say, how great is our God. Whether we find ourselves in a difficult time, a hard circumstance, it is precisely there where God invites us to call on Him alone. I want to do that right now.

God of goodness, God whose mission towards us is shaped by your goodness, hear the cries of your people in the midst of our individual and corporate desert and forest. In a place where oftentimes we cannot see what is to come, we call on your goodness above all things. Lord, in your goodness, visit us with your renewing power that we might worship you above all things, rejoicing, trusting, adoring, walking, and humbling ourselves before you alone. Hear your people, O Lord, that the nature of your goodness might flood our souls and that in a God of goodness we can rejoice and say there are no others above you. Renew us, O Lord.

Not only is this first commandment an expression of the nature of God, but it is also to be reminded of the nature of things. When God pronounces to them what He has done and then He says, "You are to have no other gods before me," He is saying to beware of the nature of any other thing. And all other things, be they people, physical things, being abstract things like success or striving, food or water, homes or life itself, in any other thing, all of it can be raised to be greater than our God. To be

called to a right worship that there is no other God but Him is to be reminded that embedded within this commandment is a call to remember the nature of things.

First, if God is good and goodness drives His mission, then that means all other things that can be experienced, seen, touched, or known, all of them have derived goodness. What do I mean? If we are allowing the Bible to speak on its own terms that God says through His servant Moses that God created all things and called them good because He has created them, this means every other thing has goodness only because it is derived from the goodness of who God is. And that is good which means rain and snow, sun and wind, houses, birthdays, children, jobs, mundane or glorious, whether we be in a low place or in an exalted place, all things are good, but that goodness is derived. Because things have a derived goodness means we are reminded, called, and are to be renewed into reception of these things as opposed to inception.

What do I mean? Aided by God's goodness, we can find rest in physical life, and we can take all material things such as our material existence, all the things that we experience with our senses, things that we have in this life be they jobs, families, friends, all of these things can be and ought to be received with their derivative goodness. We can find rest and joy, and we can find things worthy of praise, but always to be reminded that we are doing so as those who have received these good things. And these good things are good because they have received their goodness from the ultimate source of goodness.

You see, if we forget that, then we think that goodness is sourced from those things, meaning that goodness finds its inception in these things. If we forget that, then we are tempted to praise those things and find our goodness and joy and peace from them. And we begin to worship the gift over the giver. If this is who the nature of God is, of His goodness and the goodness of His mission, and if all things He has created are good and find their goodness because they have derived it from His goodness, then they are meant to be received as gifts, not as the thing to be worshiped.

When we invert the gift to be the thing worshiped, then we might find temporary joy. We might find temporary peace and rest. But things which have been received can easily be removed. And when they are removed, and when we feel threatened in an inverted world where things become that which is our worship, then we will not be full of peace and rest but rather their opposite.

Here are some good questions. Are you individually experiencing imaginative desires of malice towards those you believe have taken something from you? Are you feeling frustration or anger? Have you allowed anger to go undealt with which has turned to bitterness? Are you experiencing anxiety? These things are indicators that we feel out of control, that the things which we had hoped would give us goodness and a sense of righteousness or a sense of being are not doing so, and so we begin to shake our fists. These can become yellow and red flags that we have inverted the gift for the giver, that we think these things are our source of goodness and life and not God Himself. This is a place for renewal. This is a place to have our worship reset and to understand that all of these things can be enjoyed and rejoiced and celebrated, but never in and of themselves but only as a gift from a good God.

And for the church corporately, we are called to be witnesses to the goodness of our God and all that that means, His goodness and grace, His mercy and love. We are witnesses to Him who is the source of those things. What that enables us to have in the world is a corporate witness. Therefore, the church corporately must be aware. Is the church feeling a sense of malice, frustration, anger, bitterness, or anxiety? It's not just for the individual but also corporately. The church of Jesus Christ whether it is here in Maryland or in the United States or wherever she is found, what is our corporate witness to the world? Does the world see by our witness that our God is good, and that goodness has shaped His mission? Is

our desire for mission in the world to make this good God known shaped by that goodness, or is it shaped by a rival desire of frustration or malice or fear?

We are called to be corporate witnesses and never corporate warriors. Because of what God has done in Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection, He has displayed His goodness to the church who He has drawn to Himself to be corporate witnesses in the world to make the goodness and mercy and love of Christ known, knowing that He has all things in His hands and that we can trust Him in His goodness and not doubt or grow frustrated and feel as though we have to be warriors to take back the world for Him. For all of it belongs to Him. He is a God of goodness and grace.

This is why the church is to be known as a church of corporate witnesses, never a Christian nationalism. All of these things are a gift, and we are mere receivers of those gifts. We give those gifts away in love and mercy and grace to make His gracious love in Christ known.

This is our call. This is our mission. But it begins through remembering He is the Lord who has redeemed us although we were dead in our trespasses and sins, and He has made us alive in Christ. That is a God of goodness. Everything we have is a gift of His goodness. And now we go forth as witnesses in the world to every nation and every person with humility and love in our hearts to say look how good our God is. May this be our witness in the world. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for your grace and mercy. We thank you for your goodness and that you call us again and again to be reminded that you in your goodness have brought redemption and salvation, and that when you call us to put no other gods before you it is to remind us that you are truly that which is good. And in your goodness, you have redeemed us and freed us from the slavery of sin, and that all things are to be received as gifts. Lord, help your church. Help us individually and corporately to be witnesses to your goodness, not in fear or in malice, but in a humble and faithful display of your mercy and kindness. Do this, O Lord, and renew your church, and make your name great. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.