

Message #39**Exodus 20:18-26**

Now let's remind ourselves of the context of all of this because it is very important. We may remember that Moses had gone up on the mountain and met with God and went back down to the people of Israel and told them that "if" they would obey God; He would bless them in some remarkable ways. Israel would be known as the possession of God by all the peoples of the earth. Israel as an entire nation would be a kingdom of priests leading the world into a right relationship with God. Israel would be a holy nation, known as the most set apart nation of God in the entire world (**Ex. 19:5-7**).

When Moses went back down and told the people that, they did not recognize their own sinfulness and said, "all God tells us to do we will do" (**Exodus 19:8**). They did not recognize that they could not ever do everything God wanted them to do because ever since the Garden of Eden, no one chooses God. In fact, had any Israelite been thinking in a theologically right way; he could have reasoned Adam and Eve only had one command and they couldn't keep that, so there is no way we are going to be able to keep all of the commandments of God.

Well, after making that statement, God decided to make His presence known to these people and then He decided He would start the process of the Law off by giving them 10 simple commandments. As we will see from **verse 19**, they could not take it anymore. They did not want God to speak to them anymore. It was too much.

THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN CONNECTION WITH THE TEN COMMANDMENTS CAUSED THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL TO BE SO AFRAID THAT THEY DID NOT WANT GOD TO EVEN SPEAK TO THEM EVER AGAIN.

Most people do not realize how holy and righteous God actually is and most people do not realize how far short of the glory of God they truly are. Here was one moment of time when Israel seemed to have a true sense of that, but it was short-lived.

There are five main observations we want to make from this text.

OBSERVATION #1 – All of the people who saw the presence of God when He gave His Law trembled and stood at a distance. **20:18**

Notice this affected "all the people." Now some have said that this only refers to the presence of God. In other words, it was the presence of God that caused the people to want to keep their distance. However, we agree with those commentators who say that it cannot be a coincidence that this response occurs after God gave those Ten Commandments.

Now this would seem to imply that they were keeping a further distance than what God had actually prescribed. The language here is that they were not getting as close to God as they could, but they were keeping their distance.

Probably it was a combination of God's presence and then the realization of what God had just commanded them that caused an anxiety so say, "we don't want to hear anymore" and "we don't want to get any closer to God."

God is holy and God's Law is holy and the relationship people have with God on the basis of the Law will always be at a distance. In other words, no one will ever have a close relationship with God based on the O.T. Law. The O.T. Law cannot ever give a righteousness that will make one close to God.

But here is what is so sad. Probably there is no moment in all of history when God was closer to Israel as He was here. There was not another moment in history when the presence of God and the Word of God were so powerful. Instead of the people saying, "How close to this God can we get?" Their thought is we need to keep our distance and we don't want to hear His Word.

Have you ever asked the question—"I wonder how close to God I can really get?" Or is our attitude "let's keep our distance?"

OBSERVATION #2 – All of the people perceived they could not listen to God speak anymore of the Law for fear they would die. **20:19**

The presence of God and the giving of just 10 commandments were so intimidating that the people could not stand it and they thought they would die. Now the fact is God never told them this. He told them not to touch the mountain. He did not tell them that hearing Him would kill them. But they were beginning to sense the reality that there is a great gap between the Holy Righteous God and sinful finite man. Just listening to those Ten Commandments left these people with the attitude we are going to die.

All the people are saying we are willing to listen to the word of a man like Moses, but we do not want to listen to the Word of God that comes from God. It is too intimidating, it is too authoritative, it is too convicting.

If a person understands those 10 commandments properly, he will realize that those commandments are all you need to hear to get the death penalty from God. This is exactly why Paul called those commandments "the ministry of death" and "the ministry of condemnation" (II Cor. 3:7, 9).

OBSERVATION #3 – Moses told the people that the presence of God was in order to test them to see whether or not they would keep on sinning in His presence. **20:20**

Fear of God is a good thing to have especially when it curbs disobedience and sin. We know this principle well. For example, there is a sense in which a fear of death and injury keeps people buckling their seatbelts and trying to drive safely. Fear of heart attacks keeps people exercising and also trying to keep their cholesterol levels low.

Being terrified by the presence of God is a good thing. In fact, the “fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.” When people think in terms of the fact that God’s presence is with them and in view of this do not want to sin or do anything that could anger God, that is a good thing. The “fear of the Lord” should be a help to us to deter us from sinning.

Now it is quite obvious that God’s presence here caused Israel to fear. They are so afraid they are trembling. So is this the test? If so, they have passed. That is not the test. The test would be in the following days. Would the people actually fear God and obey God when His presence was not so visibly on display? The answer is “no.”

This presence of God to keep people from sinning would seem to be a simple enough test. After all, Israel promised that she would do everything God wanted her to do. So they should be able to pass this little test with flying colors.

Now that you have 10 simple commandments given by God to test you, this test should be a breeze. Israel can fear God and reverence God and His Word and not keep on sinning.

Of course the problem is the presence of God has never stopped anyone from sinning, including the nation Israel. She won’t make it past the first commandment. The sad reality is Israel is going to flunk this test just as we have flunked it ourselves many times.

It is one thing to get all emotional and fear God and promise God things, but it is quite another to follow through with what you promised God.

OBSERVATION #4 – People stood at a distance while Moses approached God. **20:21**

All the people wanted to keep their distance from God, but they were all in favor of Moses getting close to God. That is until Moses will come and tell them exactly what the Word of God says.

This is so much like many churches. Many people go to church and like it as long as they can keep their distance from God. They don’t want responsibility and they sure don’t want accountability. They don’t mind if someone else is closer to God, just as long as they don’t bother them or thunder forth God’s Word with authority. Not much has changed since this scene with Israel.

In all reality what we have here are all of the people not wanting to be close to God, but one man, Moses, had the privilege and responsibility to be right with God.

OBSERVATION #5 – God tells Moses what to remind Israel. **20:22-26**

There are three simple reminders that God gives to Israel here:

(Reminder #1) - Remind Israel that they saw Me speak My Word from heaven. **20:22**

Now let's think about this for a moment- God's word comes out of God's heaven. No one had better think lightly of the Word of God.

It is an absolute abomination for some religious place to take the word of God lightly. God's word has been given to us from His heaven and we must go to work on carefully understanding and applying it.

(Reminder #2) - Remind Israel that they shall not make any idols for themselves. **20:23**

That seems plain enough. In fact, that was the first of 10 simple commandments. This group has promised they will always do every thing God wants, so this will be no problem. Truth is, they won't last long on this point; they will disobey it in the very near future.

(Reminder #3) - Remind Israel to build an altar for Me where you may offer blood sacrifices.
20:24-26

This altar would be a place where God's name could be honored and where Israel could have a relationship with God through blood sacrifices. By virtue of the fact that there was to be one central altar, we learn that worship was designed to be carried out in one place.

So what we learn here is that in the context of the Law of God, an altar was to be constructed where the people of God could shed the blood of an animal because no one would be good enough for God by their works.

Remember Israel said they would obey everything. Now if Israel is going to obey everything; why would they need an altar for blood sacrifices? Well, the answer is Israel will never have a relationship with God based on obedience. She will only have a relationship with God based on grace through shed blood.

The same is true for us. As Dr. J. Vernon McGee said, "The altar speaks of the cross of Christ and the blood that he shed" (*Exodus*, p. 269). We will never have a relationship with God based on our works or our attempts to keep the O.T. Law. There is only one way and that is through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is His blood that "cleanses us from all unrighteousness."

Now there are four legal requirements that needed to be followed about making this altar:

Requirement #1 - The altar needed to be made of dirt. **20:24a**

Now altars and shrines made to false deities were elaborate. They were made of rich minerals and they were carefully built and constructed by men. God did not want His altars to be made of expensive metals such as gold and silver.

Some soil and sod and some rocks would do just fine for the worship of God.

Requirement #2 - The altar was to be the place where burnt offerings and peace offerings were offered. **20:24b**

Now this would immediately suggest that if we are going to be at peace with God, it will have to be through a sacrificial offering of a lamb or ox. Any who think accurately about this realize we are not at peace with God on our own. To be at peace with God, we will have to rely upon a sacrifice and the Apostle Paul would say, "Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through or Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).

Requirement #3 - The altar was to be made every place God designated. **20:24c**

It is clearly stated here that God causes certain places to be places where He would have an altar and would actually come and bless the people there. We may conclude from this that God will come to these designated places and bless Israel at these designated places.

Now you could build one of these altars any place, but that didn't mean God would come and bless at that located.

Requirement #4 - The altar, if made out of stone, must be made of uncut stone. **20:25**

God would not accept any altar made by or engraved by the hands of men. In fact, it profanes God's altar to put man's works in it in any way. Now most men who would build an altar would want it to look nice. They would want an altar to be appealing and attractive. They would not want some altar made of uncut stones.

But God says this is My altar and this is what I demand. There is nothing pretty about the cross of Jesus Christ. There is nothing glamorous or appealing about looking at an old rugged cross. But the demand of God is that this is His sacred altar and on that cross was His sacred Son and this is where people must go to be saved.

Now we are living in a time in which it is fashionable to make the place of worship attractive and frankly there is nothing wrong with that. We are building a new sanctuary and we want it as nice as we can have it because it is something we are doing for God. However, we must never lose sight in the building of the Lord who died on that cross and we must never lose sight of the importance of the Word of God.

Many liberal churches have been beautifully built by the hands of men and they are ornate and exquisite, but the Word of God and the power of God is nowhere near those churches.

God said build my altar out of uncut stones.

Requirement #5 - The altar was to be unapproachable by the steps of any human. **20:26**

You cannot work your way up to God because your sinful nakedness will be exposed. Most people like to think of themselves as climbing up steps in life toward heaven. There are no steps that will take you to heaven.

Back in the days of Moses, the religious shrines and altars tended to have elaborate steps. The Israelites had been delivered from Egypt and the Egyptian altars and even pyramids had elaborate steps on them. God did not want that for His altar or His people.

In fact, if one were to walk up steps to the altar and was wearing a typical robe, nakedness would be exposed on it. People at this time did not wear “Fruit of the Loom” underwear. God would not tolerate His altar displaying the nakedness of any man. Later the priests will be forced to wear undergarments (Ex. 28:42; Lev. 6:10).

The point is that no one in his flesh can go up an altar and be accepted by God. Nothing you do in your flesh will be acceptable to God. In fact, based on this text, I would be so bold as to say that if you try to reach God by your flesh works you profane God and the work of Jesus Christ.

I don't care how good you think you are; none of us have ever been good enough to get to God on our own merit. But there is a sacred altar where you may meet God and that altar is Jesus Christ.